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Abstract

The study focuses on the linguistic means employed by Russians in online political message boards to position both the political self and the political other in a time of crisis. It investigates how insults and the prepositional choice of either v/na + Ukraine were used to demarcate socio-political identity boundaries. The paper highlights the typologically different insults used by each group to position the other politically and then proceeds to examine how prepositional choice is employed to position the political self. Data were gathered from two online news platforms dating from the beginning of February 2014 to the end of March 2014 and focus on the discourse of two polarised political groups of commenters– pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin. It is a mixed methodological approach drawing on comments posted in response to 361 articles by 476 separate posters. The data are subsequently analysed according to positioning theory within the paradigm of computer-mediated discourse.

Key words: Political identity; Insults; Online discourse; message boards; Russian

LARD-EATERS, GAY-ROPEANS, SHEEPLE AND PREPOSITIONS: LEXICAL AND SYNTACTIC DEVICES EMPLOYED TO POSITION THE OTHER IN RUSSIAN ONLINE POLITICAL FORUMS.

Background

The final months of 2013 and the first few months of 2014 proved an extraordinarily tumultuous time in Russo-Ukrainian relations. As a result of increasing displeasure with the pro-Russian regime in Ukraine, civil unrest ensued leading to the eventual ousting of President Yanukovich on 22 February 2014. A month later, Crimea was annexed - or reunited with Russia. Not only was the political fallout from this huge – western countries imposed sanctions on Russia and eastern Ukraine fell into civil war, but the divisions in socio-political outlook amongst Russians rose to the fore in online comments in response to articles posted by established news platforms. The ensuing debates amongst the Russian nationals commenting was emotionally charged, polarised and divisive with participants either viciously defending the need to 'reunify' Crimea with Russia or condemning the action as an illegal annexation of a separate sovereign state. The present study is set against this turbulent background.

Introduction

The paper explores how politically interested lay members of a society utilise the micro-domain of the comment sections of online news platforms to engage in a single focus whist simultaneously demarcating faultlines and engendering a sense of otherness vis-à-vis political stance despite sharing a common national and socio-cultural background. Such platforms or Public Internet Message Boards (PIMBs) (Kleinke, 2008: 49) move away from the traditional view of political media as being simply 'the presentation of politics' (Fetzer & Lauerbach, 2007: 5) and allow lay participants the opportunity to challenge the hegemony of an omniscient presenter or journalist by constructing an intertextuality not only with the presenter but also with other commenters and thus position themselves and others as political identities. The commenters become not only consumers of political discourse but also creators and negotiators of it. By adopting such roles, the participatory model devised by Blumler & Gurevitch (1995) is subverted and the traditional audience – i.e. consumers of political media are permitted to assume the roles of moderators, information providers and actors – i.e. roles previously held by media personnel and politicians within mediated political discourse. It is precisely such a blurring of the traditional roles which renders PIMBs a rich source for investigating the positioning of political identities.

In order to explore how political identities are constructed and positioned within this micro-domain, the study looks at two linguistic phenomena: insults and prepositional choice. For the purpose of this study, three typologically different, yet heavily intertwined insults were identified: overtly political; national/ethnic and sexual/moral. Insults or slurs are particularly salient within the micro-domain of computer-mediated discourse where the perceived anonymity of the virtual world and asynchronous interaction can act as a catalyst for toxic communication strategies which can in turn facilitate the exchange of insults and derogatory language intended to attack the legitimacy of receivers, thus positioning them as delegitimised political others. The second linguistic choice being explored, i.e. prepositional choice, is a phenomenon specific to the interface between language and social psychology within Russian speakers. It refers to variation in the choice of locational/directional preposition collocating with the word Ukraine. There are currently two possibilities *'v'* and *'na'* both of which embody strong political and socio-cultural connotations.

Constructing a Political Identity

The linguistic positioning of political identities by laypeople is an under-researched area especially within a single speech community. Prior research has tended to focus on the presentation of political identities by providers of political content such as bloggers (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011),

mainstream media (Bassiouney, 2012), politicians (Johansson, 2008) or the impact of online political content on participation in politics (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006). That is not, of course to imply that the discourse of politics or resistance has been ignored. On the contrary, it has a long and established history; however, a specific focus on the layperson's enactment and assigning of a political identity to the other has not received much attention.

From a general sociolinguist perspective, research into this phenomenon has focused on the phonological indexation of political identity in American English. There have been only three papers, all of which explore phonological variation in the second vowel in the word Iraq(i) by speakers of American English. These are studies by Hall-Lew, Coppock, & Starr (2010); Hall-Lew, Starr, & Coppock (2012) and Silva et al. (2011). The two former papers highlight the speech of members of The US Congress in the House of Representatives; whilst the third investigates its variable use outside the political forum. What the research shows clearly is that politicians and laypeople alike, when engaged in political discourse, can and do index their political identity phonologically; however, outside political discourse – i.e. when enacting other strands of a compound identity, speakers may position themselves with the other variant if more appropriate. Thus, results from the three papers give a clear indication that speakers have agency over their choice of variant. It is not simply a habit or a feature of a local accent. They are in fact making deliberate phonological choices to position themselves as distinct political entities in such a way that it will be immediately understood within a culture. They are capable of style switching either to align themselves with the opinions of their constituents (Hall-Lew et al., 2012) or to enact a greater range of social identities (Silva et al., 2011).

The paucity of data on the enactment of political identities from a specifically linguistic perspective is very surprising especially since it has long been an area of research from a social identity framework. According to Huddy, this has centred around the 'questions of national identity, patriotism, and multiculturalism' (2001: 129) as well as ethnicity, race and affiliation with political parties. Ross , exploring political identities during the marching season in the north of Ireland, has noted a very strong correlation between ethnic and political identities. He documents how narratives from the two opposing sides can be used to show 'how participants think about and characterize a conflict'(2001: 166). This paper is an attempt to add to the very small body of literature within this area.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the comments made to 317 articles posted on the news platforms svoboda.org and slon.ru over a two month period spanning February and March 2014. This amounted to 12,487 comments made by 476 separate commenters. Before continuing, it is necessary to say a few words about the aforementioned platforms. Svoboda.org is the Russian language version of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – a private, non-profit corporation funded by the US Congress with the aim of providing 'objective news, analysis, and discussion of domestic and regional issues crucial to successful democratic and free-market transformations.' [1] As a consequence, svoboda.org is an anti-Kremlin platform which nevertheless attracts large numbers of often irate Kremlin supporters to its comment section. Slon.ru is a well-established, independent Russian owned site which focuses on business, economics and politics. It aims to provide a critical overview of all that concerns Russia.' [2] As such, the content is less anti-Kremlin than svoboda.org; however, it does frequently question decisions made by the Kremlin and as a consequence, its readership includes both a pro and anti-Kremlin audience.

Analysis

[1] http://www.rferl.org/info/mission/169.html
[2] http://slon.ru/about/

The study is a mixed methodological study which uses a qualitative approach with regards the investigation of insults. Drawing on the typology of insults devised by Korostelina (2014) the study explores how legitimacy and identity insults are used differentially by each group to position the political other within this particular micro-domain. Each post was firstly analysed for political view point. In general, the viewpoints were binary in nature: either pro the actions of the Kremlin or anti the actions of the Kremlin with regards events in Crimea. Political viewpoint was determined by a blend of factors including overt statements such as Крим наш (Crimea is ours – pro-Kremlin) and Руки прочь от Крима (Hands off Crimea - anti-Kremlin). Also taken into consideration was code-switching from Russian to Ukrainian or English within a single comment. Code-switching from Russian to Ukrainian normally involved ending the comment with the pro-Ukrainian rally cry 'Слава Україні' (glory to the Ukraine). Other examples include the writing of the word Ukraine in Ukrainian orthography – e.g. … а Путлер говорит: нет русских в Україні. С неба что ли падает? (… and Putler says: there are no Russians in Україні.So, have they been falling from the sky?). On the other hand, code-switching from Russian to English often had the intent of conveying covert messages. This was manifest in posts such as 'Now I tell this in English'. It was also used to insult as in the following comment 'вы типичное russian говно!' (You are a typical russian piece of shit). Despite the fact that code switching refers to words/phrases which have been written in a different language and alphabet, it is nevertheless accepted as an integral element of a shared socio-cultural and linguistic background. As evidenced from the preceding examples, commenters who code-switched into either Ukrainian or English were ascribed an anti-Kremlin political stance. The final clue which could help identify the political standing of the comment was the commenter's avatar. It has been well documented that online discourse is defined not only through language but also through multimodality (van Leeuwen, 2004). Those with a Ukrainian flag or the Ukrainian colours of blue and yellow were deemed anti-Kremlin and those with a Russian flag or colours were considered pro-Kremlin.

Once the political viewpoint of the post was established each post was then analysed for the presence of out-group political insults. As the micro-domain of computer-mediated discourse is characterised by virtual space and asynchronous interaction, the opportunity to think before posting has undoubtedly had an impact especially with regards 'toxic disinhibition' which Suler describes as including 'rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats'(2004: 341). Therefore, within this particular micro-domain, social boundaries which may be found in face to face conversations have been dismantled and engagement in toxic linguistic behaviour in the form of out-group political insults is facilitated. However, for the insults to retain effectiveness 'the sociocultural meaning [must be] accepted in the specific society and culture(s'). (Korostelina, 2014: 218). A typology of political insults was subsequently established and the differences in use between both groups explored.

The second phase of the study provides insight into how prepositional choice between *'v/na'* + Ukraine is being used as a means of positioning the political self. To accomplish this, the study focuses on the 100 separate commenters who used *'v/na'* + Ukraine in their posts. The political stance of the commenters was established by the means mentioned above and a chi sq test was conducted to test for a quantitative correlation between political viewpoint and use of preposition. This was complemented by qualitative data regarding the meta-sociolinguistic discussions into the socio-psychological connotations of each preposition which the commenters engaged in. Rather surprisingly for online political commenting, the commenters engaged in frequent arguments regarding the implications of prepositional choice which is an extremely strong indicator of how deeply rooted this linguistic phenomenon is in the socio-cultural psyche of Russian speakers.

Positioning the Political Other

In brief, insults intended to position the political other proved frequent and vitriolic and can be framed within the concept of 'flaming' or 'messages showing attributes such as hostility, aggression, intimidation, insults, offensiveness, unfriendly tone, uninhibited language, and sarcasm' (Turnage, 2007: 44). The insults encountered in the discourse fall into three overlapping categories. These are: political; national; and sexual/moral. (See table 1)

Table 1 Typology of Insults

Typology	Original	Explanation/translation
Political	Фашистский	Fascist
	Фюрер	Fuhrer
	Путлер	Putler
	Дерьмократия	Shitocracy
	Бандеровцы	Banderovtsy (followers of a Ukraine who sided with the Nazis in WW2)
	Совки	Sovki. (short for soviet)
	стадо	Herd
	Быдло	Pack
	Ватник	Old timer
	Манкурт	Lackey
Ethnic	Раша	Rasha (Derogative for Russia)
	Хохлы	Khokhli (derogative for Ukrainians)
	Пиндосы	Pindosi (derogative for Americans)
	Салоеды	Lardeaters (derogative for Ukrainians)
Sexual	Гейропеец	Gayropean
	Проститутки	Prostitutes

In table 2, there is a breakdown of the insults used according to the political view point of each group to position the other politically and construct a fractious interface between the competing views of political and national ideologies.

Table 2 Insults according to political viewpoint

Positioning Kremlin Supporters	Positioning Kremlin Opponents
Фюрер (fuhrer)	Дерьмократия (shitocracy)
Путлер (Putler)	Бандеровцы (banderovtsy)
Дерьмократия (shitocracy)	Хохлы (khokhly)
Совки (Sovki)	Пиндосы (pindisy)
Стадо (herd)	Салоеды (lardeaters)
Быдло (pack)	Гейропеец (gayropean)
Ватник (old timer)	Проститутки (prostitutes)
Манкурт (lackey)	
Раша (Rasha)	

The analysis of the various insults employed by each group to position the other indicates that they are unequivocal and binary. In fact the only insult used to question the legitimacy of both groups is the term Дерьмократия (shitocracy) which highlights the disdain with which both groups view the other's understanding of political ideology. However, major differences are in place regarding the typology of insults used to construct the illegitimacy of the other's political and in some cases national and sexual identity. Turning first to the positioning of Kremlin supporters as politically illegitimate others, two categories of insults are found. They are political and national. Of the nine insults identified eight are political and only one national. The political ideology is positioned as a fascist dictatorship ruled by the new threat to European and world democracy – Putler (an amalgamation of Putin and Hitler). This is evidenced through comments such as:

> Один народ, один фюрер, один черт (One people, one fuhrer, one devil)
>
> Как только Путин издохнет, все зти 90 процентов сразу забудут, что был такой фюрерок Путин (as soon as Putin croaks, all 90% will immediately forget that such a fuhrer even existed)

The remaining political insults pertain solely to the followers of the regime. All five words refer to those who unquestioningly follow a system without thinking – i.e. what could be termed *'sheeple'* in English. *'Sovki'* is a slur against those who followed the Soviet system and *'vatnik'* refers to someone who will not let go of the past with *'bydlo'* and *'stado*' referring to a herd or a pack and *'mankurt'* a

more general terms for those with no mind of their own, who simply follow orders in short a lackey. Examples of this include:

> Совки очень желают одного: чтобы у соседей было хуже. (The Sovkis want just one thing: that things are worse for their neighbours)
>
> Сволочь ваш кумир ватники! (Your idol's a bastard, vatniki!)

With regards the nationality insult, it is truly entwined with politics and an attempt to de-legitimize Russia as a modern European state. It is the derogatory form Rasha and its derivatives Rashka and Rashastan. Rasha is an insult directed towards the Soviet Union. It was coined in the USA in the 1970s during a period of mass immigration from the Soviet Union and is based on the pronunciation of Russia by the immigrants. Many of those who immigrated to the USA at that time where characterised as poor with little comprehension of how the western world worked never mind what it looked like. It characterises the country of origin as a backward, undeveloped third world state. It is demeaning to Russian people and denies the followers of the Kremlin a political and national identity compatible with a modern civilised society. This is furthered by the addition of the suffix 'stan'. Opponents of the Kremlin are positioning the political system as a non-European, backward dictatorship supported by fundamentalists. This is demonstrated by the following comments:

> раша-стада (Rasha is a herd)
>
> Куда бы рашка не влезла своим рылом, везде после этого разгром (No matter where Rashka has poked its nose, defeat has always followed)
>
> Раша -параша никак не хочет отпустить Украину (Rasha – shithole just doesn't want to let Ukraine go).

Turning now to the positioning of the opponents of the Kremlin and a very different typology of insults addressing their legitimacy as political identities is played out. The insults are primarily attempts at invoking otherness vis-a-vis national identity and sexuality/morality. With regards political/ideological, opponents of the Kremlin are positioned as Nazis, ruled by Banderovtsy (followers of the Ukrainian nationalist who fought on the side of the Nazis in World War II).

> Бандеровские фашисты не смогут удержать власть (Banderovskii fascists will never hold power)
>
> Сволочь бендеровская! (you're a benderovskii (sic) bastard!)

This is an insult deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural psychology of many Russians who position themselves as having defeated Nazism. WW11 still has a deep impact on many people and positioning their opponents as Banderovtsii not only denies them a legitimate political identity but likewise positions them as enemies of the people. Such positioning as an enemy of the state is furthered by a refusal to position the opponents of the Kremlin nationally as Russian. They are positioned as lard-eaters (*saloyed*i) or *'khokhli'* – both derogatory terms for Ukrainians; or *'pindosi'* – a derogatory word for Americans. In such a way a schism has been opened up between traditional Russian values including political ideologies and non-Russian/patriotic identities and this is further underpinned by insults directed at the sexuality/morality of Kremlin opponents which are tightly bound with the positioning of the opponents nationally and politically. The insults used to conflate political identities with nationality and sexual morality concern homosexuality and prostitution.

> У вас чего то с ориентацией Если весь мир это Голубая европа и лживые пиндосы , то нам с вами не попути! (What is it with you and orientation If the whole world is Gay Europe and the lying pindosi (Yanks) then we are not with you)

вам в гейропе пригодится... (you'd be good in gayrope)

Русофобские проститутки (Russophobe prostitutes)

А отдыхать летом тоже в Крым поедете? Или тянет в клятую Гей-ропу? (So are you spending your summer holidays in Crimea? Or is depraved Gay-rope calling?)

Gayropa and its derivatives is a neologism coined to capture the representation of European values as being overly concerned with the promotion of homosexuality and thus an anathema to modern Russia where the state and church have moved closer together and 'President Putin stressed the importance of collaboration between the government and the church. He called the Orthodox religion a ''state-building'' religion and stressed that ''we must inculcate ethnical norms in the consciousness of each our citizen''(Korostelina, 2014, 225). The ethical norms embedded in the consciousness of a legitimate Russian citizen must therefore be in line with those of the Orthodox Church which does not approve of homosexuality or what might be viewed as sexual depravity.

Taken together, the insults build up a compelling representation of how each side positions the other politically and how the paradigm shifts from political to a conflation of political with national/sexual traits. Supporters of the Kremlin are positioned primarily according to their political views. The insults draw on representations from a shared socio-political past firmly steeped in Soviet ideology. Kremlin supporters are positioned as relics of that past – as 'Sovkis' or 'vatniki' or more generally as 'sheeple' blindly following an increasingly dictatorial leader (Putler). While not being denied their Russian identity, the national identity in which they are framed is not a modern Russia, a country which is an equal in geo-politics or one that is even equal in terms of development, but a backward place, a country from which people flee in search of a better life. It is an unknown 'stan'. On the other hand, the political identity of opponents of the Kremlin is positioned primarily in terms of nationality and sexual morality. To be against the actions of the Kremlin is to be denied a legitimate national identity. Opponents are not considered Russian; they are not represented as sharing a common past. They are positioned as enemies of the people (banderovsty), as deviating from idealised Russian moral values. Sexual depravity is positioned through references to prostitution and homosexuality which are in turn linked specifically to Europe. This is an example of what Korostelina, (2014) refers to as a 'shift of discourse from a political to a moral sphere' and as has been demonstrated here there is an intertwining relationship between political, national and sexual identity which is being used to position the other.

The insults therefore highlight the growing gulf between Russia and the west, in particular Europe and the polarising of society between those who wish to uphold the belief of O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, & Kolossov (2006) that 'the words "Europe" and "European" have stable and deeply-rooted positive connotations in Russian public opinion.' This positive view of Europe as a place that Russians have long cultural and historical ties is certainly being undermined. Europe seems to be losing – at least with some commenters, its connection with Russia which is alternately seen as positive by the pro-Kremlin commenters or negative by the anti-Kremlin commenters. This is underpinned by comments such as:

Европа пытыется все решить мирным путем.Украина не член Нато и по этой причине у них связаны руки.Путлер хитрый и подлый убийца и при этом шизофреник с ядерной кнопкой.Не легко этого психа остановить. (sv) (Europe is trying to solve everything peacefully. Ukraine is not a member of Nato and for that reason their hands are tied. Putler is a sly and crass murderer and on top of that a schizophrenic with a nuclear switch. It's not easy to stop this psycho.)

Prepositional Choice and Political Positioning

In the previous section, the study was focused on political positioning of the other. In this section, it progresses to investigate political self-positioning and blends both quantitative and qualitative data. Out of the 476 commenters, 100 commenters used the collocations v or na + Ukraine. Based on these data a quantitative study was conducted to establish the correlation between prepositional choice and political self-positioning. The findings were subsequently mapped to the extensive qualitative data present in the discourse of commenters which allowed insight into the deeply rooted socio-political implications of prepositional choice.

The Variable

With a view to shedding light on why the choice of preposition provokes such hostility and can be used to position oneself politically, it is necessary to provide some background information regarding both prepositions. Within the Russian language both *'v'* and *'na'* act as locational and directional prepositions correlating with *'in'* or *'to/into'* in English. For example:

> Ya idu v shkolu (I am going to/into school)
>
> Ya v shkole (I am in school)
>
> Ya idu na kukhnyu (I am going to/into the kitchen)
>
> Ya na kukhne (I am in the kitchen)

'Na' differs from *'v'* insofar as its meaning of in(to) does not imply 'limited three-dimensional space' (Krivoruchka, 2008: 191) and is more commonly used in a manner similar to the English 'on' – i.e. as a means of expressing location on a surface. However, the distinction in Russian is not so clear-cut and the choice of *'v'* or *'na'* to correlate with the English 'in' can be unpredictable.

When it comes to the correlation with countries, *'v'* is the unmarked variant. *'Na'* is generally reserved for distinct islands – e.g. na Kube (in/on Cuba) and geographical regions such as na vostoke (in the east). As highlighted by Gusejnov:

> на подразумевает географическое положение части «единого политического пространства» (на горе, на острове, на окраине), а в — самостоятельную политическую единицу (в Англии, в Грузии) (2003: 68).
>
> (na implies a geographical location of a section of 'a single political space' (na mountain, na island, na outskirts), but v implies an independent political unit (v England, v Georgia).

In fact, of all the 15 former Soviet Republics, Ukraine was the only one to correlate with *'na'* (Ryazanova- Clarke & Wade, 199: 304). Although the rules governing the use of *v/na* and countries can be applied haphazardly (Krivoruchka, 2008: 195), it can be clearly seen that the country Ukraine is in some way marked; it is treated differently from other countries. That leads to the question of what renders Ukraine different from other countries from a socio-psychological perspective. To illuminate this issue, it is necessary to turn to the etymology of the word. It is generally believed that the word Ukraine originates from the Russian (and Ukrainian) term *okraina* (outskirts).

> само имя страны — Украина (Украйна) может быть исторически конструировано как «окраина [России]»
>
> (the very name of the country – Ukraine (Ukrajna) can be historically constructed as 'outskirts (of Russia)(Gusejnov, 2003: 67).

As the word *'outskirts'* does not invoke a shared image of a sovereign country, rather a region of a country, *'na'* would be the natural collocation. The first implication of the use of *'na'* with Ukraine is

that Ukraine was not considered a separate state, but rather a region and therefore the use of *'v'* would be semantically wrong. Krivoruchka proposes a further explanation by exploring the notion of 'folk etymology'. She argues that for many Russians, the word Ukraine is transparently broken down into two main morphemes *'u'* and *'kraj'*. Starting firstly with *'kraj'*, this is the Russian word for 'edge' and the grammatically correct preposition with 'edge' is *'na'*. The preposition *'u'*, on the other hand is polysemic meaning either 'at' or 'away from'. Thus, for many Russian speakers, the word *'Ukraine'* may conjure up a socio-cultural image of a region at the edge or cut off from a sovereign country which presumably is Russia. However, it is imperative to state again that it is the same in the Ukrainian language. What the above does clearly demonstrate is that, from a socio-psychological perspective, in neither version of the etymology is Ukraine truly considered a sovereign state – it is either a region or a nebulous place at the edge or cut off from a bigger state.

The Politicisation of the Prepositions

Although we have seen that *'na'* can be used for regions, this did not really become an issue of ideology until Ukraine gained independence in 1991, despite the fact that Gusejnov (2003) notes variable use dating as far back as 1917. After gaining independence Ukraine embarked on a process of desovietisation and derussification. This applied not only to the elimination of Soviet artefacts but also to the establishment of Ukrainian as the sole official language of the newly sovereign state. One aim of this was to strengthen 'official monolingualism' and resist 'the high degree of russification' (Bilianuk & Melnyk, 2008: 76). Derussification included the 'elimination of Russian from official paperwork, official communication, the state-sponsored media and public signage' (Pavlenko, 2008: 8). The objective was to make Ukrainian as distinctive as possible from Russian in an attempt to create what Molchanov describes as a 'self-other relationship' (2002: iv) thereby constructing a means by which a newly formed state could re-create a distinctive national identity. The Ukrainian rejection of Russian became an essential part of the arsenal employed to permit 'Ukrainians to identify themselves as Ukrainian' (Pavlenko, 2008: 1). As an extension of this, the Ukrainian language itself was subjected to extreme derussification, which Krivoruchko refers to as 'linguistic retaliation' (2008: 197). One of the most notable indices of derussification is of course the formal change in locational/directional preposition collocating with the word 'Ukraine'.

In the Ukrainian language the prescribed preposition was changed from *'na'* to *'v'*. This was a symbol that Ukraine had at last been able to establish itself as an independent, sovereign state. As argued earlier, the preposition *'na'* was used to imply regionality or somewhere on the edge. Thus, shaking off the traditional preposition allowed a new, independent, post-Soviet, post-Russia Ukraine to emerge. In line with expressing independence, language ideology did not stop with Ukrainian. In 1993, Ukraine made a formal request to the Russian government to change the preposition in official documentation in Russian from *'na'* to *'v'* thus cementing its distinctiveness from Russia.

> Украина как бы получала лингвистическое подтверждение своего статуса суверенного государства, поскольку названия государств, а не регионов оформляются в русской традиции с помощью предлогов *в* ...»
>
> (It seems as if Ukraine received linguistic confirmation of its status as a sovereign state, insofar as the names of states, and not regions are formulated in the Russian tradition with the help of the pronouns 'v' …[ii] (Graudina et al., 2001: 69).

Russian Reaction

Official Russian reaction to what Ryazonova-Clarke and Wade refer to the use of the 'politically correct pronoun'(1999: 304) *'v'* proved to be ambiguous. While recognising *'v'* as a legitimate variant, officials were nevertheless not so enthusiastic about what could be seen as meddling in the linguistic policies of another country. Ryazanova-Clarke and Wade note

'unfavourable Russian reaction' (1999: 305) and the official response denies any connection between the assertion of a national identity and choice of preposition and states that this is merely a question of linguistic tradition:

> результат исторического развития языка на протяжении нескольких столетий. Сочетаемость предлогов *в* и *на* с определенными словами объясняется исключительно традицией.
>
> this is the result of the historical development of the language across several centuries. The collocation of the prepositions 'na' and 's' with certain words is explained solely by tradition (Graudina et al., 2001: 69).

They continue by stating:

> Литературная норма не может измениться в одночасье из-за каких-либо политических процессов.
>
> A literary norm cannot be changed overnight because of some political processes or other (2001: 69).

Surprisingly, the change did indeed take place much quicker than would be normally expected with regards grammatical change. This process was accelerated due to 'momentous social or political changes' (Ryazanova- Clarke & Wade, 1999: 245). That is to say, that the acceptance of *'v'* as a variant progressed at such a speed because of the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union. The variant *'v'* very quickly found its way into the Russian language being used by Russian speakers in both Ukraine and Russia as a possible means of shaking off the restrictive remnants of the Soviet Union and adopting a more outward looking perspective. Despite the speedy assimilation into the discourse, both Krivoruchka (2008) and Ryzanova-Clarke & Wade (1999) posit that most Russians prefer to use *'na'* thus, without citing quantitative data, hinting at Russians' resistance to the new variant either from linguistic or political perspectives.

Results

Having determined political stance, the informants were subsequently assessed for their preference for *'v'* or *'na'*. This preference was consequently analysed for correlation with political stance. It is necessary to stress at this point that no intra – informant variation was found. That is to say that all informants invariably chose either *'v'* or *'na'*. The following provides a statistical breakdown of the informants in terms of political stance and prepositional choice. (See figures 1 and 2)

Figure 1 Breakdown of Political Views

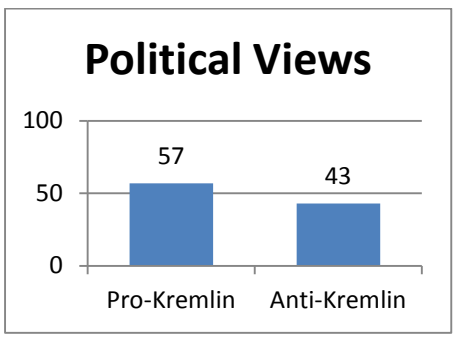
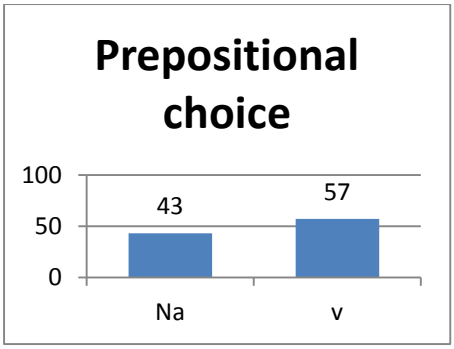


Figure 2 Breakdown of Prepositional Choice



In figure 1, we can see that out of the 100 commenters who used either *'v'* or *'na'*, that 43 proved to hold anti-Kremlin views whilst a small majority (57) were pro-Kremlin. Prepositional choice followed the same patter with 43 commenters using *'na'* and 57 opting for *'v'*. However a further analysis of the raw data indicates that the correlation is not direct, that there is in fact a differential pattern of use (See table 3)

The raw data point strongly towards an effect for political stance in the choice of variant with 67.5% of pro-Kremlin informants choosing *'na'* and 75.4% of anti-Kremlin informants preferring *' v'*.

Table 3 Pattern of Use According to Political Viewpoint

	V	Na
Pro-Kremlin	32.5% (N=14)	67.5% (N=29)
Anti-Kremlin	75.4% (N=43)	24.6% (N=14)

In order to assess the significance of the above data, statistical analyses were carried out using chi sq. (See table 4)

Table 4 Chi Sq

Actual			
	PK	AK	Total
na	29	14	43
v	14	43	57
	43	57	100
Expected			
	Pk	AK	Total
na	18.49	24.51	43
v	24.51	32.49	57

	43	57	100
p=	1.80252E-05		

Results of the chi square test (p= .0018) provide clear evidence that there is an indisputable correlation between political allegiance and prepositional choice with pro-Kremlin supporters expressing a strong preference for the more conservative preposition *'na'*, whereas anti-Kremlin participants enact their political identity through a preference for the post-Soviet variant *'v'*. However, it must be stated that this is a correlation. In order to explore a possible causation factor between prepositional choice and political viewpoint, I draw upon qualitative data which arose during the data collection period. That is to say that I will now investigate the considerable instances of meta-(socio)linguistic discussion that took place amongst the participants.

Firstly to put this in a broader context: the question of *'v'* vs. *'na'* has become a highly contentious issue of debate amongst Russian speakers to the extent that 'v/na Ukraine appears first in a drop-down menu of topics *not* to be discussed in the community *Pishu Pravil'no* (I write correctly) and has been regularly banned from other internet forums'. (Krivoruchka, 2008: 195). Moving on to how this is viewed and used within the Russian speaking community by large, I will first discuss and exemplify how the dispute between *'v'* and *'na'* has become a political football in the public discourse and in the social psychology of users in both Ukraine and Russia. Dr. Komorovskii is a Ukrainian celebrity paediatrician who is the author of a large number of books and regularly appears on television. He is a Ukrainian nationalist despite being a Russian speaker. On 3 March 2014, he made an appeal to Russian parents on his blog[3] to stop hostilities against Ukraine and to make them aware that Ukraine would not punish them for being Russian speakers. As part of this appeal, he said the following:

> Мы, жители Харькова, Луганска, Донецка, Крыма, Ивано-Франковска, Львова, — мы хотим жить в Украине. И мы сами решим, «в Украине» или «на Украине», мы сами разберемся, не надо нам навязывать мир.
>
> (We, the residents of Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Crimea, Ivano-Frankovsk, Lvov, - we want to live in (v) Ukraine. And we will decide ourselves if it's 'v Ukraine' or 'na Ukraine', we don't need to get the world involved.)

The above discussion provides an indication of how deeply embedded this discrete syntactic feature is within the socio-psychological outlook of Russian speakers from both Russia and Ukraine. It is not a mere preposition but rather a mutually accepted marker of a political or ethnic faultline.

Turning now to the discourse of the informants. During the online debates regarding the annexation of Crimea, *'v'* and *'na'* was a strongly contested area and the informants displayed high levels of meta-(socio)linguistic awareness. There are comments addressed directly to the website. These include:

> во всех ваших статьях на Украине пишите в Украине
>
> (In all your articles, it is 'na' Ukraine, please write 'v' Ukraine)
>
> уважаемый Slon в Украине а не на Украине мы же не говорим на России

[3] http://video.komarovskiy.net/obrashhenie-k-roditelyam-rossii.html

(dear Slon, it is 'v' Ukraine and not 'na' Ukraine after all we don't say 'na' Russia

Comments are likewise directed towards other responders, such as the following:

В Украине,ватник НА бывает только НА х.й!!уяснил-манкурт?

(It's 'v' Ukraine, old-timer, you only use 'na' when you're telling someone to go to f.k!! Have you got it – lackey?)

The three examples presented above demonstrate a strong preference for the new version 'v'. The former two addressed to the news platforms are polite in highlighting that 'na' is not acceptable. The latter in particular alludes not just to a possible grammatical mismatch but also to a socio-cultural inaccuracy insofar that if *'v'* is relevant for a sovereign Russia, then it should also be the default position for a sovereign Ukraine. In the final example – addressed to a fellow commenter, the correlation between choice of preposition and political stance is much clearer. In correcting the preposition from *'na'* to *'v'*, the commenter engages in flaming hurling the political insults 'vatnik' (old-timer) and mankurt (lackey) at the commenter thus cementing the link between *'na'* and out-dated Soviet and imperialist political views.

An exploration of the following interaction furthers the hypothesis that prepositional choice is closely correlated with a mutually understood positioning of the political self. It is in reaction to a photograph posted of a sign reading 'на Украине – братья, в Кремле – фашисты'(Brothers *'na'* Ukraine, fascists in the Kremlin) which had been erected on the Crimean Bridge in Moscow.

X: хоть бы уже В Украине написали

Y: блеать ну сколько можно, В УКРАИНЕ В В В В все время через В

Z: Y, правила русского языка же

Y: Z, в стране на окраине, нее

Y: Z, я Вам объясняю, всегда пишется В стране, т.е. В Украине, где на окраине на Донбассе на Луганщине, но никак не НА Украине

(X: If only they had written 'V' Ukraine

Y: how many times do we need to bleat on about it, 'V' Ukraine V V V it's always V

Z: Y, they're the rules of the Russian language

Y: Z, it's 'v' plus country, 'na' and it's outskirts

Y: Z, I'm explaining it to you, it's always V plus a country, i.e. V Ukraine, where it's the outskirts it's 'na' – 'na' Donbass 'na' Lugansk, but never 'na' Ukraine.)

Of interest in this exchange is firstly the initial comment despairing of the Russians' inability to understand the implications of their words and therefore fully empathise with the situation. Resonating with the thoughts of Dr Komorovskii, this is an example of Russian or even Soviet linguistic norms being foisted on an independent Ukraine. Therefore the use of *'na'* together with *'brothers'* may not actually be considered an act of solidarity but rather an act of not understanding. It is solidarity on Russian terms. The remaining comments raise the topic of the relationship between language and imperialism and thus political identity as embodied in the norms of the language. The perception is that *'na'* should only be used for regions of a country or outlying areas and never for a sovereign country. This strengthens the view that by using *'na'* with Ukraine that the speaker is stripping the country of its independence and positioning it as a region, presumably of

Russia and simultaneously positioning themselves as pro-Kremlin. Conversely, there is one commenter who expressed the opposing view of prepositional choice – i.e. that *'v'* is invokes an image of imprisonment; whereas freedom is evoked through the use of *'na'.*

И по поводу ,,на" или ,,в" Украине. На - воле. В - клетке. (anti-Kremlin)

(On the subject of 'na' or 'v' Ukraine. 'Na' is used with free will. *'V'* is used for a cage.)

Although dissenting views of the relationship between prepositional choice and its socio-political implications exist, there is no doubt that each preposition embodies more than simply a directional or locational value, but for the majority of users, within this micro-domain the prepositions symbolise deeply rooted socio-political outlooks and pasts.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to explore how Russian lexical and syntactic features are used in the micro-domain of online political discourse to position the self and the other politically. The lexical features focused on insults. Insults were employed primarily to position the other negatively and deny legitimacy to the out group. The use of such slurs or insults directed by each group drew upon deeply embedded socio-psychological images emanating from a shared political background; yet demarcating faultlines with regards diverging views of the present and future. Moreover, results indicate that the insults directed by each group proved to be typologically differential. Insults directed at pro-Kremlin commenters can be perceived primarily as an attack on the politically legitimacy of Kremlin supporters. In other words, Kremlin supporters are denied a post-Soviet political identity. The shared socio-historical background of the commenters, i.e. the Communist era, was invoked and Kremlin supporters were positioned as remnants of a past political system which no longer has a role to play in a modern globalised society (vatniki/sovki) or as mere sheeple (stado/bydlo/mankurt) unable to think for themselves and finally as people who blindly follow the tyrannical Putler leading a third world-type dictatorship (Rasha (stan)). By creating this sense of otherness, the anti-Kremlin commenters were able to question the legitimacy of the current regime in Moscow and position the Russian government and their supporters 'as a third world dictatorship similar to regimes of Muammar, Gaddafi and Kim Jong-un'(Korostelina, 2014: 225).

On the other side of the faultline, the political positioning of anti-Kremlin commenters brings into play a broader range of typologically different insults. The insults fall into two main categories: nationality and sexual morality. The difference between the insults addressed to pro-Kremlin commenters and anti-Kremlin commenters is immediately obvious. Whilst those supporting the Kremlin are positioned according to the perceived illegitimacy of their political views and are cast back to a previous era, those who oppose the Kremlin are being denied a national identity due to their perceived outward looking views regarding the conflated issues of nationality and sexual morality. With regards national identity, they are specifically denied a Russian identity and positioned as direct enemies of state (Banderovtsi) or referred to using derogatory terms for Americans or Ukrainians (pindosi, khokhli, saloedi). This is what Korostelina (2014)terms an identity insult, an insult intended to create a chasm between opponents of the Kremlin and the traditional values of Russian society. Such nationality insults are deeply enmeshed with intended slurs on the sexual morality of Kremlin opponents. The frequent use of the insults 'gayropa and prostitutki' bring to the fore recent paradigm shifts in Russian society – i.e. the increased influence of the Orthodox Church and national insularity. Growing insularity is expressed through the negative positioning of Europe and an indication that Europe no longer 'attractive […] to all social and regional groups of population' (O'Loughlin et al., 2006). In fact, a more secularised Europe concerned with providing equality to all is considered by some to be in direct opposition to the ethical norms of an 'ideal Russian'. As noted by Korostelina, 'In the past decade, the Russian Orthodox Church has increasingly played an important role in politics, routinely consulting with government officials on policy'.(2014:

224). With the state and church becoming more fused, sexual morality can be considered by supporters of the Kremlin as synonymous with national traits; thus to have non-traditional sexual values is to be a non-Russian.

Moving now to the second area of research, results clearly indicate that the political self is being constructed through prepositional choice. As noted by Krivoruchka 'for the average Russian speaker who is not directly involved in Ukrainian political affairs, it may be difficult to understand how an apparently contentless grammatical feature, deemed acceptable for generations could possibly hurt someone's feelings' (2008: 203). However, due to the crisis brought about by the annexation/re-unification of Crimea, the Russians under scrutiny for this paper have become even more sensitised to the political and social implications of prepositional choice and the construction of a political identity. As noted by Ross, 'A striking feature of many identity-based ethnic conflicts is the parties' emotional investment in what outsiders may view as unimportant matters'(2001: 162). This is precisely the case with the *'v'/'na'* distinction. As Ross continues, 'The fact is, however, that any matter invested with emotional significance is no longer trivial, and intransigent intergroup disputes quickly become characterized by perceived threats to group self-esteem and legitimation' (2001: 162). Therefore, it can be said that the use of *'v'* is seen as a threat against a Russian national identity – an identity that re-enforces the notion of Russia as a strong nation on an equal footing with Europe and the USA, yet one with a distinct, lengthy and proud identity with its own set of ethics. On the other hand, the use of *'na'* is considered a relic of the past, a sign that the user is backward looking, still clinging onto an imaginary past full of Soviet glory.

Finally, Krivoruchka (2008) notes, *'v'/'na'* is a socio-cultural variable and research suggests that *'v'* is in the ascendency. This supposition was borne out in the current paper for the first time quantitatively. More importantly, what this paper has definitively shown is that the choice of either *'v'* or *'na'* is being used to index a political identity. The statistical analyses show that anti-Kremlin supporters are not only significantly more likely to opt for *'v'*, but also are statistically more likely to use *'v'* more often than their pro-Kremlin counterparts. The opposite is also true for pro-Kremlin supporters insofar as they are statistically more likely to use *'na'* than *'v'* and statistically more likely to use *'na'* than their anti-Kremlin counterparts. In addition, an exploration of the qualitative data showed how deeply embedded the socio-political connotations of each preposition were in the minds of Russian speakers. Frequent, highly sensitive and controversial debates regarding the socio-political implications of choice of variant among the participants were evident in the data. When the heated meta-(socio)linguistic debates surrounding the variables are taken together with the quantitative findings, it can be surmised that responders were very much aware of the socio-political implications of using a particular preposition, that they do indeed in this particular micro-domain of discourse have agency over their choice. This very much supports the theory that *'v'* and *'na'* when collocating with Ukraine are indeed being used to index a political identity.

In conclusion, it can be stated that in the highly-charged domain of political, social-media platforms, in a time of deep division and conflict, commenters position the other and the self not only through insults, but also deliberately in the form of prepositional choice. However, at this point, it is necessary to acknowledge the shortcomings of the research. One area of concern is that the data did not allow for the collection of complete socio-biographical data from the commenters. Of particular note is the impossibility of ascertaining the ages of the commenters. This would have proved illuminating as it may help to explore changing patterns in political identities and language use. Another area which must be acknowledged in relation to computer mediated discourse is the presence of trolls or deliberate provocateurs and political 'bots' – those directed by political parties to infiltrate comment sections. It goes without saying that both trolls and bots could have had an impact on the data, but there is no accurate way of assessing this.

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