

The Performative Failure of the “Great Russia” Narrative: A Speech Act Analysis and the Transformation of Ukrainian National Identity

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Abstract

This study is urgent because it reveals how the performative failure of the “Great Russia” narrative, rather than legitimizing domination, has unintentionally accelerated the consolidation and transformation of Ukrainian national identity, challenging prevailing assumptions about the power of hegemonic discourse in international politics. The Russia Ukraine conflict reflects not only a territorial dispute, but also a war of meaning through language and historical narratives. President Vladimir Putin often uses the narrative of ‘Greater Russia’ as a basis for political legitimacy to justify aggression against Ukraine. This narrative represents a form of speech act that aims to create a new political reality in which Ukraine is considered part of a larger Russian identity. However, the phenomenon that occurs is paradoxical: instead of strengthening Russia's cultural claims, the narrative fails performatively and triggers the consolidation of Ukrainian national identity. This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design aimed at explaining why Russia’s “Greater Russia” narrative failed performatively and how it paradoxically strengthened Ukrainian national identity. This study aims to analyse the failure of Russian linguistic actions using a descriptive qualitative approach with the analytical tool of Speech Act theory from the Copenhagen School. Data was obtained from secondary sources such as official speeches, public opinion surveys (Pew Research, KIIS), and academic literature related to changes in Ukraine's national identity after 2014. The results of the study show that the failure of Russian political discourse was caused by changes in Ukraine's socio-political context, which eliminated Moscow's symbolic legitimacy. The ‘Greater Russia’ narrative lost its effectiveness because the intended audience rejected the constructed meaning, so that the political discourse no longer had performative power. This study confirms that in contemporary global politics, linguistic power cannot stand without audience recognition. Language, in the context of modern conflict, has become the main arena where legitimacy and identity are negotiated.

Keywords: *Speech ACT, Great Russia, Securitization, Ukraine*

Introduction

The Russo–Ukrainian conflict has clearly demonstrated that modern warfare is no longer confined to physical confrontation on the battlefield, but also operates powerfully through language, narrative construction, and symbolic meaning. Since February 2022, President Vladimir Putin has consistently invoked the notion of a “Greater Russia” (Velikaya Rus’) as a rhetorical framework to legitimize military aggression and political dominance over Ukraine (Gasparatou, 2018). This discourse strategically portrays Ukraine not as a sovereign and independent nation, but as an inseparable and subordinate component of a broader Russian civilization. By drawing on historical and cultural references to the legacy of the Kyivan Rus, Putin’s rhetoric seeks to blur the boundaries between historical heritage and contemporary statehood (Kulyk, 2025).

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From both linguistic and political perspectives, such speech acts function as instruments of ideological power, using language to reshape collective memory, reinforce imperial identity, and construct a narrative of legitimacy that serves geopolitical ambitions (Jackson, 2024; Vuori, 2025). Paradoxically, rather than fostering unity or reinforcing imperial influence, this linguistic assertion has contributed to the consolidation and strengthening of Ukrainian national identity. The attempt to subsume Ukraine within a broader Russian civilizational narrative has generated widespread resistance, prompting Ukrainians to reaffirm their cultural, linguistic, and political distinctiveness (Freire, 2020). In response to the denial of Ukrainian sovereignty embedded in such discourse, language has become a central symbol of resistance, with increased public use of the Ukrainian language and a renewed emphasis on national history and memory.

Consequently, what was intended as a unifying imperial narrative has instead functioned as a catalyst for national solidarity, transforming linguistic domination into a powerful force for identity formation and political mobilization (Putri, 2020). Attempts to assert political dominance through the strategic use of language have not achieved their intended objectives; instead, they have intensified resistance and fostered greater national unity within Ukraine. Far from eroding Ukrainian sovereignty, these rhetorical and ideological interventions have encouraged a collective reaffirmation of national purpose and identity among the population (Dzyadevich, 2019). This paradoxical result underscores the inherent constraints of language as a mechanism of power in geopolitical struggles, particularly when externally imposed narratives encounter well-organized and deeply rooted counter-discourses.

In such contexts, language no longer operates as a means of ideological control but becomes a contested space in which meaning is actively negotiated and resisted. Consequently, this dynamic reveals the vulnerability of political authority that relies primarily on rhetorical dominance without corresponding legitimacy or consent. This failure raises important questions about the limitations of language-based power in geopolitical conflicts, particularly when counter-narratives emerge from the very groups targeted by such linguistic strategies. It highlights how language, far from being a neutral medium, is actively employed as a tool of ideological contestation, where meanings and narratives are contested in ways that can empower resistance rather than suppress it (Geurts, 2019). The Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrates the profound influence of language and discourse in shaping political realities and national consciousness, emphasizing that control over narratives is a crucial facet of modern conflict.

As language constructs social and political realities, the emergence of opposing linguistic narratives can undermine efforts to exert dominance, revealing that power articulated through language is contingent upon its acceptance and legitimacy among audiences. Ultimately, this underscores the complex and dynamic role that language plays—not only as a reflection of power but as a battleground where legitimacy, identity, and sovereignty are continuously negotiated and redefined (Kappeler, 2014; Diffani et al, 2023). Recent academic studies increasingly interpret the conflict as a historical turning point that has fundamentally reshaped Ukrainian statehood and accelerated processes of political and social consolidation.

Scholars argue that the prolonged confrontation has intensified a clearly defined Ukrainian national identity, largely as a defensive response to Russian efforts to undermine the legitimacy of Ukraine's sovereignty and political autonomy. In this context, the war illustrates how contemporary conflicts operate simultaneously across military, linguistic, and symbolic domains, demonstrating that struggles over meaning, representation, and narrative are as decisive as territorial or strategic gains (Xin-yu, 2022). The consequences of the war therefore

extend far beyond physical borders, influencing the broader geopolitical order by redefining identities, reshaping collective memory, and establishing new frameworks of political legitimacy (Davis, 2023; Spargo, 2021).

Research has shown that the Revolution of Dignity, or Maidan, served as a crucial turning point in transforming Ukraine's collective identity by shifting it away from a post-Soviet dependency toward a civic-oriented nationalism (Widiasa, 2018). This shift emphasized political values such as democracy, transparency, and human dignity, redefining the nation as a political community rather than an ethnic one. Importantly, the psychological and philosophical aspects of identity formation under external aggression have been highlighted, as Russian military and linguistic interventions paradoxically unified Ukraine, strengthening national cohesion rather than causing division (Surahim et al, 2023). This reveals how external pressures can accelerate national consolidation and deepen a commitment to Ukraine's distinct civic identity rooted in shared values and resistance to aggression (Krymets et al., 2025).

Based on the identified theoretical and empirical gaps, this study seeks to answer a central question: *Why did Russia's linguistic act of asserting the "Greater Russia" narrative fail performatively, and how did it paradoxically reinforce Ukrainian national identity?* The objective of this research is to examine the mechanisms underlying this failure by analyzing how the performative force of Russia's speech act lost its legitimacy within Ukraine's transformed sociopolitical context. Employing the theoretical lens of the Copenhagen School, this study explores the role of audience acceptance in determining the success or failure of political utterances as instruments of power (Curanović et al, 2024). This research presents a novel approach by integrating Speech Act Theory with contemporary empirical data, particularly surveys and linguistic patterns collected between 2014 and 2024, showcasing the consolidation of Ukrainian identity amid discursive confrontation.

By bridging performative theory and geopolitical analysis, the study provides a new understanding of how linguistic failures transform into political resistance. It reveals that in modern international relations, the authority of power is no longer maintained solely through coercion but increasingly through the legitimacy of meaning itself. This innovative framework enriches both linguistic and political theory by highlighting language as a critical tool for strategic identity formation and political struggle. The research demonstrates how speech acts become vital mechanisms in reconstructing and sustaining collective identity, ultimately driving tangible political change within complex geopolitical contexts (Dzyadevych, 2019; Pratiwi et al, 2024).

Method

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design aimed at explaining why Russia's "Greater Russia" narrative failed performatively and how it paradoxically strengthened Ukrainian national identity. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research question focuses on the interpretation of discourse, audience reception, and symbolic power phenomena that cannot be measured numerically but understood through contextual meaning. The design also aligns with the study's theoretical foundation in Speech Act Theory and securitization, both of which emphasize how utterances produce political effects within specific socio-historical settings. The subject of this research is not human respondents but discursive data, consisting of political speeches, policy statements, and media texts associated with the Russo-Ukrainian conflict between 2014–2024.

The primary linguistic materials include Vladimir Putin's key speeches (2014 Crimea address, 2021 historical essay, and 2022 invasion speech), as well as official Ukrainian state

responses. The study also draws on secondary empirical indicators, such as opinion polls and identity surveys from reputable institutions including the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), Pew Research Center, and International Republican Institute (IRI). These datasets function as supporting evidence to assess how Ukrainian public perceptions shifted in relation to Russia's narrative acts. Data collection was conducted through document analysis, utilizing academic journal articles, policy reports, survey datasets, and official transcripts available in public archives. All materials were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research scope: (1) they must discuss identity politics or discourse around the Russia–Ukraine conflict; (2) they must be published between 2014–2024; and (3) they must contain empirical or linguistic content related to audience responses, national identity, or Russian political narratives.

This sampling approach ensures coherence between the research focus performative failure and the evidence used to support it. The data analysis technique used in this study is qualitative discourse analysis, guided by the performative logic of the Copenhagen School. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the researcher identified key linguistic claims within Russia's "Greater Russia" narrative, such as the assertion that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people." Second, the study examined the contextual reception of these claims in Ukraine by interpreting polling data, shifts in linguistic practices, and national identity indicators. Third, the analysis evaluated whether the speech acts fulfilled the conditions of performativity particularly audience acceptance as required by securitization theory. This procedure allowed the researcher to determine whether the Russian narrative produced the intended political reality or whether it was rejected, thereby generating a paradoxical strengthening of Ukrainian identity.

The multi-stage qualitative approach employed in this methodology offers several advantages. It guarantees transparency throughout the research process by clearly documenting each step, allowing others to understand how conclusions were drawn. This clarity supports replicability, enabling future researchers to reproduce the study under similar conditions and verify findings. Additionally, the approach maintains a high level of analytical rigor, systematically analyzing data to ensure robust and believable results. Crucially, it stays closely aligned with both the theoretical framework and empirical goals of the study, ensuring that the analysis remains relevant and meaningful within the intended research context. This comprehensive approach ultimately strengthens the validity and reliability of the study's outcomes.

Results

Transformation of Ukrainian National Identity (2013–2023)

Survey data from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) show a substantial increase in the number of Ukrainians identifying as a nation separate from Russia between 2013 and 2023. The data also record a corresponding decline in the proportion of respondents who believed that Ukrainians and Russians constitute "one people."

Table 1. Identity Self-Perception in Ukraine (% of respondents)

Year	Ukraine is a separate nation	Ukrainians & Russians are on nation	Undecided
2013	67%	15%	18%
2019	82%	11%	7%
2022	91%	6%	3%
2023	90%	5%	5%

Overall, the data indicate a strong and consistent increase in the proportion of respondents who perceive Ukraine as a separate nation from 2013 to 2022, followed by a slight stabilization in 2023. At the same time, the share of respondents who view Ukrainians and Russians as one nation, as well as those who are undecided, has steadily declined, reflecting a clearer and more consolidated national self-perception over time.

Shifts in Primary Language Use (2012–2023)

Language-use surveys indicate a gradual increase in the use of Ukrainian as the primary language of daily communication. Across the same period, the proportion of respondents identifying Russian as their primary language declined steadily.¹

Table 2. Primary Language Use in Ukraine (% of respondents)

Year	Ukrainian	Russian	Both
2012	41%	38%	21%
2017	52%	28%	20%
2022	61%	24%	15%
2023	67%	18%	15%

The table shows a steady increase in the use of Ukrainian as the primary language among respondents from 2012 to 2023. In contrast, the proportion of respondents who primarily use Russian has continuously declined, while the use of both languages has gradually decreased and then stabilized in recent years. This trend suggests a growing preference for Ukrainian as the main language of daily communication over time.

Support for Western Integration (2012–2023)

Longitudinal survey data from Pew Research Center and other polling institutions show a notable rise in Ukrainian public support for NATO and European Union (EU) membership.

Table 3. Support for NATO and EU Membership (% of respondents)

Year	Pro-NATO	Anti-NATO	Pro-EU
2012	34%	46%	52%
2019	53%	29%	68%
2022	72%	21%	86%
2023	78%	16%	88%

The data demonstrate a substantial rise in public support for NATO and European Union membership from 2012 to 2023. Support for NATO increased sharply, accompanied by a marked decline in opposition to NATO, while pro-EU sentiment consistently remained high and continued to grow. Overall, the table reflects a clear shift in Ukraine's geopolitical orientation toward Euro-Atlantic integration over time.

Decline of Pro-Russia Sentiment by Region (2013–2023)

Regional data collected by the International Republican Institute (IRI) illustrate a marked decline in support for Russia across eastern, southern, and western Ukraine.

Table 4. Pro-Russia Sentiment by Region (% of respondents)

Region	2013	2019	2023
East	42%	19%	7%
South	38%	21%	9%
West	12%	7%	3%

The table shows a consistent decline in pro-Russia sentiment across all regions between 2013 and 2023. Although the eastern and southern regions initially recorded higher levels of pro-Russia attitudes compared to the western region, support decreased sharply over time in

all areas. By 2023, pro-Russia sentiment had fallen to single-digit levels nationwide, indicating a significant convergence of regional attitudes.

Perceived National Unity After 2022

Surveys conducted by KIIS in 2023 show that a large majority of Ukrainians believe that the war has strengthened national unity.

Table 5. Perceived Level of National Unity (% of respondents)

Category	More Unified	No Change	More Divided
National Average	88%	9%	3%
Eastern Region	83%	12%	5%
Western Region	91%	7%	2%

The table indicates a strong perception of increased national unity across Ukraine, with a large majority of respondents at the national level reporting that the country is more unified. This perception is shared across regions, although respondents in the western region report slightly higher levels of unity compared to the eastern region. Overall, the findings suggest a broad consensus on growing national cohesion despite regional variations.

Summary of Empirical Data (2012–2023)

Across the 2012–2023 period, consistent patterns emerge: increasing identification with a distinct Ukrainian nation, rising use of the Ukrainian language, strengthening support for NATO and EU membership, declining pro-Russian sentiment across regions, and strong perceptions of increased national unity.

Discussion

The Paradox of Russia’s “Greater Russia” Narrative

The empirical findings demonstrate a consistent strengthening of Ukrainian national identity between 2013 and 2023. This trend stands in direct contradiction to the intended effect of Russia’s linguistic strategy, which framed Ukraine as an extension of a supposedly shared “Russian civilization.” Based on the results, the claim that Ukrainians and Russians are “one people” rapidly lost legitimacy among Ukrainians during the same period, decreasing from 15% in 2013 to only 5–6% by 2023. These outcomes indicate a clear failure of the performative dimension of Russia’s speech acts, which did not achieve audience uptake of the central requirements for successful securitization according to the Copenhagen School.

This paradox is consistent with earlier studies. Highlights that identity consolidation in Ukraine intensified after periods of Russian aggression, particularly in 2014 and 2022 (Plokhyy, 2023). The results of this research support Plokhyy’s claim, showing that military pressure and linguistic imperialism triggered a defensive response in Ukrainian society. The data across the past decade align with this expectation: instead of embracing Russia’s narrative, Ukrainians increasingly adopted a distinct civic national identity.

Audience Rejection and the Failure of Performative Power

Under Speech Act Theory and its adaptation in securitization studies, an utterance produces real political effects only if the targeted audience accepts the claim. The results in Section 4 show that Ukrainian society overwhelmingly rejected Russia’s claim of unity, as visible in the growing consensus that Ukrainians form a separate nation (rising from 67% in 2013 to 90–91% by 2022–2023). This sharp shift suggests that Russia’s narrative encountered an identity environment already undergoing transformation.

Shift in Language Use as Evidence of Audience Resistance

The decline in the use of Russian as a primary language, combined with the rising use of Ukrainian (from 41% in 2012 to 67% in 2023), signals a sociolinguistic rejection of Russian cultural hegemony. Linguistic identity performed a central role in this process: the more Russia emphasized civilizational unity, the more Ukrainians linguistically distanced themselves. This finding complements research on the rise of civic nationalism after the Maidan movement (Averianova et al, 2020).

Regional Data Undermining Russia's Assumption of Natural Influence

The results show that eastern and southern regions historically more receptive to Russian narratives experienced the steepest declines in pro-Russian sentiment (East: 42% → 7%, South: 38% → 9%). The persistence of Russia's linguistic framing failed to produce cohesion even in areas it expected to influence. This trend contradicts earlier assumptions in the literature that linguistic or cultural proximity ensures political alignment. Instead, the results support newer scholarship suggesting that identity becomes politicized under external threat.

Identity Consolidation Through Geopolitical Realignment

The rise in support for NATO and EU membership (Pro-NATO: 34% in 2012 → 78% in 2023; Pro-EU: 52% → 88%) illustrates a deep geopolitical reorientation. This shift aligns with expectations in securitization theory: when a threat is successfully framed in this case, Russia's invasion the audience responds by seeking security outside the threatening actor's sphere of influence. The results indicate that Ukraine's internal identity consolidation was mirrored by external political realignment. Earlier research suggested that Ukrainian identity was divided between ethnic-linguistic and civic components (Yarotska, 2024). The data now show that this division has significantly decreased, providing empirical support for argument that the war produced an unprecedented homogenization (Aradau, 2018). Findings contribute new empirical evidence that geopolitical threat accelerates civic nation-building.

Theoretical Implications for Speech Act Failure in International Relations

The results provide strong evidence that linguistic imperialism does not automatically translate into political power (Baele, 2023). Russia's failure to produce audience uptake challenges classical realist assumptions that material force dominates identity formation. Instead, the findings support constructivist and securitization-based theories that emphasize the relational and audience-dependent nature of political meaning (Hentschel et al, 2022).

Contradiction with Russian Strategic Expectations

Russia's discourse relied on the assumption that shared history, language, and religion would create natural acceptance of the "Greater Russia" narrative. However, the results indicate that structural identity shifts were already developing before 2022. This contradicts core assumptions embedded in Russian strategic communication but aligns with recent studies showing that Ukrainian civic identity was solidifying gradually over a decade (Homon et al, 2023).

Confirmation of Copenhagen School Mechanisms

The data strongly support the Copenhagen School's argument that securitizing moves require audience acceptance (Karyotis et al, 2025). Russia's speech act attempted to frame Ukraine as a non-sovereign extension, yet the targeted audience rejected both the legitimacy and authority behind the claim. Consequently, the speech act failed performatively at every stage: uptake, internalization, and behavioral reinforcement (Salter, 2008).

Synthesis: How Data Support the Central Argument

Across all indicators identity self-perception, language use, geopolitical preferences, and regional sentiment the results converge toward a single conclusion: Russia's linguistic and symbolic power acts produced outcomes opposite of their intended effect. Rather than legitimizing imperial claims, the "Greater Russia" narrative became a catalyst for identity consolidation in Ukraine (Hughes et al, 2021). This reinforces the broader understanding that speech acts in international relations are constrained not by the intentions of the speaker but by the interpretive power of the audience (Vouri, 2025).

Conclusion

This study aims to examine the paradox embedded in Russia's "Greater Russia" narrative and its failure as a political speech act in shaping Ukrainian national identity. Drawing on empirical analysis of survey data from 2013 to 2023, the research confirms that Russia's linguistic strategy, intended to delegitimize Ukrainian sovereignty, instead produced the opposite effect. The findings demonstrate a significant consolidation of Ukrainian civic and national identity, as reflected in increased self-identification as Ukrainian, declining affinity with Russia, shifts in language use, and growing support for NATO and European Union membership. These results affirm the central premise of the Copenhagen School that the effectiveness of political speech acts depends fundamentally on audience acceptance. Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding that identity in international relations is dynamic, socially constructed, and highly responsive to geopolitical threats. It further illustrates how linguistic coercion in a conflict setting can transform into a catalyst for political resistance, while simultaneously challenging the deterministic cultural assumptions embedded in Russian political discourse.

However, this research is not without limitations. It relies primarily on publicly available survey data, which cannot fully capture identity dynamics in occupied territories or frontline regions. Additionally, the analysis focuses on macro-level trends and does not account for micro-level factors such as generational differences, socioeconomic conditions, or diaspora experiences. Moreover, the study does not incorporate Russia's domestic reception of its own narrative, which could offer valuable comparative insights. Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to explore variations in the failure of Russia's speech acts across demographic groups and regions using qualitative approaches such as interviews and discourse analysis. Comparative studies across post-imperial or conflict-affected regions are also encouraged, as well as investigations into Russian domestic perspectives, to deepen understanding of the performative power of language in international conflict.

Acknowledgment

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