

Losing *one's* Language, or Creating *one's own* Dialect?

The reflexive possessive pronoun, свой- , *svoj-*, is a hallmark of most Slavic languages, including Ukrainian. As it is gender and number-neutral, the only direct English translation for it can be “one’s own.” In 1st and 2nd person, this makes *svoj-* interchangeable with regular possessive pronouns.

(1) “Я вмиг своє авто”

Ja	vmy-v	moj-e / svoj-e	avt-o
1sg.NOM	wash-sg.M.PAST	POSS-sg.N.ACC	car-sg.ACC
<i>I</i>	<i>washed</i>	<i>my / one's own</i>	<i>car</i>
"I washed my car"			

In the 3rd person, however, *svoj-* provides a disambiguation from the regular pronoun. In Standard Ukrainian, *svoj-* can only refer to the subject of the clause, while the regular pronouns *joho* and *jiji* can only be used to refer to someone else.

(2) “ВІН ВМИВ ЙОГО АВТО”

Vin	vmy-v	joho	avt-o
3Sg.M.NOM	wash-sg.M.PAST	3sg.POSS	car-ACC
<i>He</i>	<i>washed</i>	<i>his</i>	<i>car</i>
"He washed his (someone else's) car"			*"He washed his (own) car."

This study asks whether use of *svoj-* has declined in Heritage Ukrainian in response to English contact, and if so, what effect that has had on the grammar. Earlier studies have shown that even “Ukrainian-only” homes in Toronto have pervasive exposure to English (Chumak-Horbach, 1987), and that phonetic variables in heritage languages, including Ukrainian, move closer to English levels across generations (Nagy & Kochetov, 2013).

Using sociolinguistic interviews from 30 speakers across 5 generations of Toronto Ukrainians, I have shown the decline of *svoj-* in the variable context, compared to regular possessive pronouns. Nine internal and external factors were examined in 120 tokens using a multivariate analysis in GOLDVARB. In addition to loss across generation (Factor Weight 0.89 for Gen 1 vs. FW 0.18 for Gen 3), syntactic factors condition its use. As the cognitive load of a sentence increases, measured by the distance between subject and object, use of *svoj-* decreases. When the possessive pronoun is separated from the subject by another object, it is much less likely to be *svoj-* than if it is adjacent (FW 0.13 vs. 0.49)

In addition to a decline in the use of *svoj-* in the variable context, a shift has begun for some speakers in the 3rd person contrastive context. Some 2nd generation speakers use the regular possessive pronoun where *svoj-* would normally go, resulting in sentences that are ungrammatical with respect to Standard Ukrainian.

While these speakers use this regular pronoun alongside *svoj-*, one 5th generation speaker uses this innovative form exclusively. The increased use by females (FW 0.67 vs. 0.30), of the regular possessive pronoun in new contexts suggests this is an incoming change from below.

References:

Chumak-Horbatsch, R. (1987). Language use in the Ukrainian home: A Toronto sample. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 1987(63), 99-118.

Nagy, N., & Kochetov, A. (2013). Voice onset time across the generations: A cross-linguistic study of contact-induced change. *Multilingualism and Language Contact in Urban Areas: Acquisition–development–teaching–communication*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 19-38.