

“I Will Understand You, Brother, Just Like You Will Understand Me”: Multilingualism in the Songs of the War in Donbas

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Abstract: *This article considers the use of multiple languages in the songs of the ongoing war in Donbas, in eastern Ukraine. In examining how and to what end different languages are employed in these songs, I seek to shed light on the underlying assumptions about the languages involved and about the communities using them.*

The key language combination examined in this article is that of Russian and Ukrainian, which are the two languages most commonly used in the songs under study. I compare the strategies of multilingual songwriting utilized by predominantly or originally Russophone Ukrainian artists to those used by their Ukrainophone Ukrainian counterparts, revealing significant differences between the two. While Russophone artists employ multilingualism in their songs as a way of signaling a pro-Ukrainian position in the war, their Ukrainophone counterparts largely resort to multilingual expression to cast the Russian language as the language of the enemy. This divergence makes it possible to speak of at least two distinct strategies or varieties of multilingualism in the songs of the War in Donbas.

I explore these key trends both through the corpora of multilingual artists and through individual songs written in more than one language. While my primary focus resides in the lyrics of the songs, I also consider, where necessary, visual material (particularly music videos) as well as the musical elements of the songs in accordance with the methodological principles of multimodal discourse analysis.