

LANGUAGE OF A BARRIER-FREE SOCIETY: THE EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to provide a better scientific understanding of a “barrier-free language”, the concept of which has been developed by Ukrainian politicians, public figures and journalists, and to interpret it as a linguistic phenomenon. The subject of scientific interest is the handbook and the dictionary of the barrier-free language introduced in Ukraine as a part of the strategy for the formation of a barrier-free society, and its object is the suggested linguistic means of implementing the principles of the barrier-free language and argumentation of their expediency.

The compilation of the dictionary of the barrier-free language and the suggested changes in nomination demonstrate a number of important developments: overcoming depersonalisation, rethinking the role of linguistic means that were previously unconditionally perceived as acceptable and desirable (in particular, euphemisms) in communication, understanding affixal derivatives not only in linguistic dimension in terms of word-forming meaning, but also taking into account their social connotations fixed by usage, raising the issue of objectification of a person's sexual and gender identity in the Ukrainian language, etc. In a broader sense, it demonstrates changes in perception of language as a social phenomenon that not only serves the communicative needs of society but also affects the way people live in it, and the gradual formation of a type of speaker who understands freedom of expression as inseparable from the responsibility to respect the rights and guarantee the freedom of others.

KEYWORDS: language of a barrier-free society, hate speech, language policy, democratization of language, intellectualization of language, barrier-free guide, linguistic stigma

Introduction

Building an open and inclusive society where everyone is an equal participant in social life and overcoming hatred are among the main aspirations of modern democracies. The issue of inclusion has been the focus of numerous studies in various fields, including linguistics. Language is one of the dimensions of society. By verbalising their experience, people objectify rejection and stereotyping in language, which often become a common linguistic stigma, or, on the contrary, silence certain phenomena, “erasing” entire social groups. Thus, overcoming social exclusion and creating equal opportunities for representatives of different social, ethnic, age, gender, and other groups requires the elimination of not only spatial, economic, and legal barriers, but also language ones. A barrier-free society is impossible without rejecting the language of exclusion, hence the deep interest in the lingual manifestations of discrimination and hostility. At the same time, it has to develop its own approach to the lingualisation of reality, so the issue of the principles and means of the barrier-free language is relevant.

The study of these issues is only gaining momentum in Ukrainian linguistics. So far, they have been partially touched upon in the studies of sociolinguistics and communicative linguistics, but mostly not in terms of inclusiveness or non-discrimination, but rather in terms of the speech culture and linguistic and communicative category of politeness: the structure of speech etiquette, acceptable speech behaviour, the use of euphemisms, ethnolinguistic features and cross-linguistic comparison of these phenomena, etc. These issues have been studied by Svitlana Bohdan (Богдан, 1998), Alla Bolotnikova (Болотнікова, 2017), Svitlana Yermolenko, Nataliia Dziubshyna-Melnyk, Kateryna Lenets (Єрмоленко, Дзюбишина-Мельник, Ленець, 1990), Yaroslav Radevych-Vynnytskyi (Радевич-Винницький, 2006), Oleksandr Styshov (СТИШОВ, 1999), etc. Speaking about the nature and lingual manifestations of politeness and political correctness, the researchers sometimes touched upon the way Ukrainian society refers to people of the older age group (*літні люди* (*elderly people*), *старші люди* (*older people*) or *люди похилого віку* (*people of advanced age*), and later drew attention to the nomination of people with physical disabilities (*інвалід* (*invalid*), *людина з обмеженими можливостями* (*a person with limited capabilities*) or *людина, що може* (*a person who can*), which was popular in the Ukrainian media for a while. The increased focus on multiethnicity and interethnic interaction has drawn attention to the issue of the correct naming of representatives of certain ethnic groups (e.g. *Roma* and *Jews*). Having secured the neutrality of femininitives and freed them from the

usual dictionary labelling of “colloquial” and “diminutive”, the new edition of the Ukrainian spelling (2019) paved the way for these numerous and rather old derivatives in the Ukrainian language into public discourse, which caused a heated debate in society and made us think more deeply about the objectification of a woman in the Ukrainian language (Alla Arkhanhelska (Архангельська, 2019), Mariia Brus (Брус, 2019), Zoia Valiukh (Валюх, 2013), Anatolii Neliuba (Нелюба, 2011), Tetiana Nesterenko (Нестеренко, 2021), etc.). However, the entire groups of people who were subject to social exclusion were still left out of the discussion (homeless people, LGBTIQ people, orphans, victims of violence, etc.). For some, it was due to the taboo nature of the topic and its linguistic erasure, for others, because expressing emotions was seen as a kindness rather than something that could cause discomfort.

In recent years, the growing attention of researchers has been drawn to hate speech. Overcoming it is one of the strategic priorities of the civilised world. This issue has come to the attention of the world's leading organisations: OSCE, UNESCO, the European Court of Human Rights, etc. (European Court of Human Rights, 2023; United Nations Strategy, 2019). In 2019, the UN Secretary-General approved a UN strategy and action plan to combat hate speech. In Ukraine, the scientific understanding of the issue is currently gaining momentum, with media speech and social networks attracting particular interest among scholars (Tamara Isakova (Ісакова, 2016), Olena Lvova (Львова, 2018), Iryna Bohdanova, Olena Lepтуha (Богданова, Лептуга, 2020), Vira Savonchak (Віра Савончак, 2011), etc.). Countering with the spread of hate speech in public discourse has become part of Ukrainian state policy. One of the steps in this regard was an attempt to develop a Barrier-Free Handbook (Довідник, 2021) that would not only show manifestations of unacceptable language behaviour, but also offer an alternative to the usual clichés. The purpose of this article is to provide a scientific understanding of the “barrier-free language”, the concept of which has been developed by politicians, public figures and journalists, and to interpret it as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. The subject of scientific interest is the dictionary of the barrier-free language introduced in Ukraine as part of the strategy for the formation of a barrier-free society, and the object is the suggested ways and means of implementing the principle of barrier-free language. We tried to achieve the purpose by analysing the register of the dictionary and the nominative variants suggested in it in the linguistic (structural-semantic, derivational, etc.) and sociolinguistic dimensions, taking into account the described motivation for the replacement and its linguistic adequacy and consistency.

Theory, results, and discussion

Democratisation, intellectualisation and the concept of the barrier-free language. The spread of democratic principles in the political system encourages members of society to strive for more freedom and authority in other areas of life, including language. Not only freedom of speech, but also freedom in the choice of words is one of the lingual manifestations of this process, which intensified in the late twentieth century and attracted the attention of a number of researchers. Live speech with its desire for economy and expressiveness, variability, colloquial, vernacular and obscene elements was allowed into written communication, which, on the one hand, contributed to the renewal of the means of expression, and on the other hand, caused a number of ambiguous phenomena. The emancipation of a language personality often borders on the absence of linguistic self-censorship, the growing variability of the language norm prompts linguists to speak of the undermining of the language standard, and the colloquialisation of speech can result in the transformation of low-level speech into mainstream speech.

The barrier-free language is directly related to democratisation, however, not to the increased linguistic freedoms and self-realisation of a language personality, which are usually discussed when it comes to democratisation of language, but rather to linguistic responsibility and speaker's duties. This refers to a conscious attitude to one's own language behaviour, which should not violate the rights of other members of society, and, accordingly, to linguistic self-censorship as a social norm. The phenomenon of the barrier-free language is therefore associated with shifts in the understanding of the nature of democracy and personal freedom: from focusing on one's own freedom to the responsible freedom.

In Ukraine, the barrier-free language has become part of the state language policy. In 2021, the National Strategy for Barrier-Free Environment in Ukraine up to 2030 (Міністерство розвитку громад і територій України, 2021) was adopted, which envisages an approach whereby everyone can have free access to any sphere of life: education, career, travel, information, etc. The goal of the strategy is to eliminate restrictions, overcome discrimination and social exclusion of representatives of different

social groups. Since social rejection and stereotyping are actively manifested in nomination, the policy of the barrier-free language aims to eliminate discriminatory clichés of language behaviour, making it the basis of the concept of the “barrier-free language”. As part of the implementation of the strategy, the Barrier-Free Handbook and dictionary were compiled, which provide recommended equivalents to words and phrases that “demonstrate a biased, stereotypical or discriminatory attitude towards certain people or groups...” (Довідник, 2021). At the same time, the barrier-free language is defined as one that “does not alienate people – whether intentionally or unintentionally... It is a language the principle of which can be summarised in one phrase: to respect the dignity of another person.” (Довідник, 2021).

The barrier-free language should primarily apply to the sphere of public communication. “Hate speech is used in political and public environments against certain groups of the population, and the level of responsibility for hate speech and sexism among politicians and civil servants is rather low,” (Міністерство розвитку громад і територій України, 2021) reads the document, which is intended to change the situation that has developed due to the colloquialisation of formal speech.

One of the important features of the barrier-free language is the intellectualisation of language. This phenomenon was discussed in the first half of the twentieth century by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle as a level of language development at which statements become more definite and precise, and, if necessary, more abstract and capable of expressing the complexity of thought (Пражский лингвистический кружок, 1967). While at that time the impetus for such considerations was the rapid increase in the level of education and its accessibility, in the twenty-first century, the issue of intellectualisation of language has again come into focus in the context of the issues of inclusion due to the need to ensure neutrality of expression, the possibility of avoiding evaluations and expressing oneself more precisely (the barrier-free language manifests this in the growing number of internationalisms and terminological units and the structural complexity of nominathemes).

Barrier-free dictionary: analysis of principles and language solutions. The barrier-free language is based on several key principles (Довідник, 2021):

1. Adhere to the “person-first language” principle in naming, i.e. name representatives of different groups in a way that does not reduce a person to a single characteristic – mental or physical disability, age, sexual orientation, etc.
2. Avoid euphemisms, figurative meanings and metaphors that have appeared due to the speaker's attempts to express themselves correctly.
3. Refrain from using medical terms to describe a person's mental and physical condition that have become colloquial and have acquired an evaluative meaning or have become swear words.
4. Refrain from generalisations and stereotyping.
5. Use femininitives to refer to women.

At present, the Ukrainian dictionary of barrier-free language has 5 thematic sections (Словник, 2021): Illnesses, disorders and syndromes; race, ethnicity and nationality; disability; various social groups; LGBTIQ+.

The principles underlying the dictionary determine the structural and motivational features of the nominations suggested in it. The focus on overcoming depersonalisation in naming people who, for example, have certain illnesses or disorders, has led to the rejection of one-word affixal derivatives derived from the name of the illness or disorder. They have been replaced by multi-word descriptive names with the generic term *person* (*child, teenager, man, woman*). For example: *людина із суїцидальними думками* (*a person with suicidal thoughts*) instead of *суїцидник* (*a suicidal person*); *людина з діабетом* (*a person with diabetes*) instead of *діабетик* (*a diabetic*); *людина, яка хворіє на рак* (*a person who has cancer*) instead of *ракохворий, онкохворий, онкоодужуючий, метастазник* (*a cancer patient, cancer survivor*); *людина з епілепсією* (*a person with epilepsy*) instead of *епілептик* (*epileptic*); *людина з паралічем (яка має параліч)* (*a person with paraplegia (who has paraplegia)*) instead of *паралітик, каліка, паралізований* (*paraplegic, crippled, paralysed*); *людина з ампутованими кінцівками* (*a person with an amputation*) instead of *однорукий, одноногий, безруки, безногий* (*one-armed, one-legged, armless, legless*); *людина з ВІЛ-позитивним статусом, людина, яка живе з ВІЛ/СНІД, людина з ВІЛ/СНІД* (*an HIV-positive person, a person living with HIV/AIDS, person with HIV/AIDS*) instead of *вілнфікований* (*HIV-infected person*); *людина, залежна від психоактивних речовин / алкоголю / наркотичних речовин* (*a person addicted to psychoactive substances/alcohol/drugs*) instead of *наркоман, наркозалежний, алкоголік, алкозалежний* (*a drug-addict, a drug-abuser, an alcoholic, an alcohol-dependent person*), etc. The largest number of such one-

word derivatives are units formed using the highly productive word-formation type in Ukrainian with the suffix *-nyk* (*-yk*) (*-nyk* (*-uk*)). From a purely linguistic point of view, this is a typical way of naming people according to a certain characteristic, which is fully consistent with the language system and has a long historical tradition; however, from the point of view of the barrier-free principles, such derivatives actually reduce a person to one characteristic (illness or disorder). The model suggested as a replacement is much more complex: structurally, alternative nominathemes correspond to a phrase, and more often to a sentence. The replacement of a more structurally complex name with a one-word name in the dictionary is much less common (and occurs in other thematic groups), for example, *бісексуал* / *бісексуалка* (*a bisexual woman/man*) instead of *той, що не визначився із сексуальною орієнтацією* (*undecided*).

The barrier-free language requires more effort from the speaker not only because of the need to overcome the inertia of previous language practice and the more complex, multi-word structure of nominathemes, but also due to the increasing role of terms in it, as one of its important features is the use of correct names of illnesses and disorders: *людина з розладом харчової поведінки* (*a person with an eating disorder*) instead of *анорексик, булемик* (*an anorexic person, a bulimic person*); *людина з розладами / порушеннями аутистичного спектра* (*a person with an autism spectrum disorder*) instead of *аутист* (*an autistic person*); *людина з біполярним афективним розладом* (*a person with bipolar affective disorder*) instead of *барник, біполярник* (*a bipolar*); *людина з ПТСР, людина з посттравматичним стресовим розладом* (*a person with PTSD, a person with post-traumatic stress disorder*) instead of *ПТСР-ник, травматик* (*a PTSD sufferer, a traumatized person*). The barrier-free language determines the need for a deeper knowledge of medical terminology and the rejection of the desire to shorten, simplify, and overcome the tendency to save linguistic and cognitive efforts. At the same time, we should refrain from using some of the medical terms that have become colloquial and acquired negative evaluative meanings, and in some cases have become units of obscene vocabulary: *шизофренник* (*schizophrenic* (a person with schizophrenia)), *паралітик* (*paraplegic* (a person with paraplegia)), *маразматик, божевільний* (*demented, insane* (a person with cognitive impairment, a person with dementia)), *імбецил, олигофрен, дебіл, кретин* (*imbecile, oligophrenic, moron, cretin* (a person with intellectual disability)), etc.

The concept of the barrier-free language determines the need to reassess the role of some linguistic means in speech, in particular, metaphorical euphemisms. Euphemisms are commonly defined as mild or disguising units of naming that are used in place of words that are deemed undesirable, unacceptable, vulgar, disparaging, etc. Thus, avoidance and undesirability are defining conditions for their functioning, while modern society, speaking of equal opportunities, means acceptance of diversity. Euphemisms stem from taboos and social prohibitions, and the purpose of the barrier-free language is to detaboo and speak openly and neutrally about illnesses, disorders, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc., phenomena that are part of everyday life but still face hostility or stereotypical perception. Moreover, the use of euphemistic nominathemes can lead to a distorted representation of a person's life situation (the speaker may say more than is actually true), expressing an undesirable evaluation or being overly expressive, which draws increased attention to things that should be perceived in a neutral way. For example, the nominatheme *людина з обмеженими можливостями* (*a person with limited capabilities*), which is traditionally seen as a manifestation of political correctness, firstly, ignores the fact that everyone has natural limitations (physical and intellectual), and secondly, by using the lexeme *обмежений* (*limited*), it emphasises that something is inaccessible to a person compared to others, and therefore speaks of his/her discrimination. The correct name in a society that tries to create equal conditions for all people is *людина з інвалідністю* (*a person with a disability*). The euphemism *особлива людина* (*a special person*) is often used instead, which, on the one hand, does not provide information, and on the other hand, instead of including a person in society, it separates him/her from it (*special* – ‘standing out among others, unusual’). *Дитину з бульозним епідермолізом* (*a child with epidermolysis bullosa*) is often euphemistically called *дитина-метелик* (*a butterfly baby*), *людину з порушенням аутистичного спектра* (*a person with autism spectrum disorder*) is called *людина дощу* (*a rain man*), and *людина із синдромом Дауна* (*a person with Down syndrome*) is called *сонячна людина* (*a sun man*). Such figurative and poetic names attract attention by emphasising the avoidance of direct nomination, thus highlighting their lexical unacceptability, and by attempting to embellish them through comparison with something that is

traditionally evaluated as positive. But in the end, it speaks to the rejection and undesirability of the “disguised”.

The acceptance and neutrality should manifest themselves in avoiding excessive expressiveness, which reveals and creates an elevated emotional background, and evaluations. Therefore, the barrier-free language avoids the use of inherently expressive lexemes such as *страждати, вада, прикутий, жертва* (*suffer, defect, bedridden, victim*), etc. For example, the dictionary suggests replacing the nominatheme *людина, яка страждає на психічні розлади* (*a person suffering from mental disorders*) because suffering excludes the possibility of being happy and means feeling constant pain, yet despite the diagnosis, people with certain types of disorders can live a happy life, so the correct name is *людина, яка має психічні порушення* (*a person with mental disorders*). The dictionary replaces all names based on the lexeme *страждає* (*suffer*) with the corresponding units with *має* (*has*) or *живе з* (*living with*); nominative units with the base word *жертва* (*victim*) with the equivalent *постраждала/постражданий від* (*who suffered from*), and with lexemes *проблеми* (*problems*) or *вади* (*defects*) with *порушення* (*disorders*). It also means the rejection of evaluative attributives such as *важкий, нетрадиційний, неблагополучний* (*difficult, unconventional, troubled*), etc. (*гомосексуальна орієнтація* (**homosexual** orientation) instead of *нетрадиційна сексуальна орієнтація* (**unconventional** sexual orientation); *підліток з девіативною поведінкою* (*teenager with deviant behaviour*) instead of *важкий підліток* (**a difficult teenager**); *сім'я у складній життєвій ситуації* (**family in a difficult life situation**) instead of *неблагополучна сім'я* (**a troubled family**), etc.) and diminutive derivatives such as *сирітка* (*syritka* (an orphaned child)) or *інклюзятко* (*inclusiatko* (a child with special educational needs)).

The barrier-free language aims to “avoid saying more than is necessary” (Довідник, 2021), and therefore focuses on precision and semantic certainty of wording, hence the attempt to eliminate generalisations. For example, speakers tend to absolutize: *німий, сліпий, глухий* (*mute, blind, deaf*), etc. The barrier-free dictionary stresses the need to change such wording, since a person with visual or hearing impairments does not always completely lose these senses. Besides, such nominathemes have acquired negative evaluative meanings (e.g., *mute* – ‘silent, quiet; speechless; not communicating anything’; *blind* – ‘not noticing, not understanding what is happening around; unable to properly assess, comprehend anything’). The suggested alternative in the dictionary is *людина з порушеннями зору / слуху* (*a person with visual/hearing impairments*).

With regard to the names of peoples and ethnic groups, the initial principle is to rely on the endoethnonym. For example, the use of ethnonyms such as *циган* (*Gypsy*) and *жид* (*Zhyd*) is often justified by the long tradition of their functioning in the language with an allegedly neutral meaning from the speaker's point of view. However, the barrier-free dictionary stresses the unacceptability of these names and the need to replace them with ethnic names such as *ром* (*Roma*) and *євреї* (*Jews*), and the need to abandon names that representatives of the respective ethnic groups consider offensive.

With a focus on precision, the dictionary mainly emphasises the need to contract overly broad or specify abstract wordings; examples of transformations involving semantic expansion are much less common, and occur mostly in the LGBTIQ+ thematic group. This is largely due to the fact that Ukrainian society has only recently begun to openly discuss issues of sexual and gender identity in public, and the issue of wording is only beginning to emerge. For example, the name *одностатевої шлюби / партнерства* (*same-sex marriage/partnership*) is suggested instead of *гей-шлюби* (*gay marriage*), as the latter nominatheme excludes other members of sexual minorities who are not expressed in the language. Many wordings in this thematic group have been revised due to a gradual deepening of understanding of sexuality and gender, and attempts to overcome stereotyping or silencing as a social norm. This includes the nominathemes *бісексуал / бісексуалка* (*a bisexual woman/man*) instead of *ті, що не визначилися із сексуальною орієнтацією* (*undecided*); *квір* (*queer*) instead of *не він, не вона* (*neither he nor she*), etc. A number of affixal derivatives have also been redefined. For example, the dictionary suggests the terms *інтерсекс-людина* (*an intersex person*) and *транс-людина* (*a transgender person*) instead of *інтерсексуал* (*intersexual*) and *транссексуал* (*transsexual*), as derivatives with the suffix *-уал* (*-ual*) are traditionally used to refer to people with a particular sexual orientation (*бісексуал, гомосексуал, гетеросексуал* (*bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual*)) rather than biological characteristics or gender identity. Another example is the change of the derivative *гомосексуалізм* (*homosexualism*) into *гомосексуальність* (*homosexuality*). The affixes *-изм* (*-ism*) (*-изм* (*-izm*)) and *-ість* (*-ist*) (*-ість*) have a derivational meaning of abstraction and are productive in Ukrainian,

but the suffix *-ysm* (*-изм*) mostly forms the names of ideological trends and illnesses. Changing the word-forming affix puts the term *гомосексуальність* (*homosexuality*) on a par with the similar concepts of *гетеросексуальність* (*heterosexuality*) and *бісексуальність* (*bisexuality*).

Considerations and conclusions

As part of the strategy of creating a barrier-free society, the barrier-free language is a way to overcome lingual manifestations of discrimination and stereotypical attitudes towards people who differ from the established concept of the norm in society, primarily in public speech. The dictionary of the barrier-free language suggested as a guideline still needs to be improved in several areas. The register of the dictionary should be expanded both in view of modern achievements in the study of sexuality, gender, ageism, etc., and due to the fact that one of the manifestations of hostility towards certain social groups for a long time was silencing or linguistic appropriation, which resulted in the lack of means for their nomination. The “person-first language” principle should be applied to the nominathemes of the LGBTIQ thematic group, while some of the suggested transformations of the grammatical structure of the names require linguistic expertise. These and other issues, including ones related to overcoming language habits and changing language behaviour, should be the subject of further research. The compilation of the dictionary of the barrier-free language and the suggested changes in nomination, however, demonstrate a number of important developments: overcoming depersonalisation, rethinking the role in communication of linguistic means that were previously unconditionally perceived as acceptable and desirable (in particular, euphemisms), understanding affixal derivatives not only in the linguistic dimension in terms of word-forming meaning, but also taking into account the social connotations fixed by usage, raising the issue of objectification of a person's sexual and gender identity in the Ukrainian language, etc. In a broader sense, it demonstrates changes in the perception of language as a social phenomenon that not only serves the communicative needs of society but also affects the way people live in it, and the gradual formation of a type of speaker who understands freedom of expression as inseparable from the responsibility to respect the rights and guarantee the freedom of others.

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