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THE PREFACE TO "WEB DICTIONARY OF FEMALE NAMES OF THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE": LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES VS. REVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES

REVIEW ARTICLE OF OLENA SYNCHAK 2022. *VEBSLOVNYK ZHINOCHYKH NAZV UKRAJINSJKOJI MOVY. PEREDMOVA [WEB DICTIONARY OF FEMALE NAMES OF THE UKRAINIAN LANGUAGE. PREFACE]*. LJVIV. URL: HTTPS:// R2U.ORG.UA/HTML/FEMIN_DETAILS.HTML.

1. Introduction

The Leipzig University website states that the Ukrainian philologist Dr. Olena Synchak is conducting research as part of the DAAD-funded project "Women in Ukrainian Dictionaries: Lexikographische Aktualisierungen des Web-Wörterbuchs der ukrainischen weiblichen Personenbezeichnungen und des Ukrainisch-Deutschen Wörterbuchs" (Feminitiva im Ukrainischen 2024). In particular, her study concerns words that refer to women – such as "міністерка" 'female minister', "політикиня" 'female politician', etc. It is noted that the main problem of the study is the lack of clear rules and regulations for constructing female-marked concepts and that traditional academic linguistics is against such things. The study aims to update the "Web dictionary of female names of the Ukrainian language" and the "Ukrainian-German dictionary".

Research conducted under the prestigious DAAD academic exchange program requires nominees to possess deep professional knowledge and the ability to achieve results that contribute to the proper development of the scientific worldview. At the same time, the Leipzig University notice points out that Olena Synchak, a candidate of philological sciences, holds a position that

contradicts the prevailing opinion in academic circles. Indeed, the leading contemporary Ukrainian linguists Oleksandr Taranenko (2020), Alla Arkhan-gheljsjka (2019), Kateryna Ghorodensjka (2016), Pavlo Ghrycenko (2024), Iryna Farion (2023), and others demonstrate a striking unity in opposing such experiments on the Ukrainian language – although their opinions on other issues can be quite different. This raises already questions about the scholarly merits of Olena Synchak's research.

It is noteworthy that Synchak's foray into the Ukrainian lexicographic field coincided with the large-scale military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022. In this context, it is crucial to understand to what extent her work contributes to Ukraine's victory, which requires the consolidation of the Ukrainian people and the strengthening of the scientific and social positions of the Ukrainian language.

If the stated aim is greater visibility for Ukrainian women, one potential starting point could be feminizing their surnames – especially those ending in "-ишин" or "-iв" and with zero endings like that of the grantee – because gender characteristics are best expressed by the names (see Vakulenko 2018; Vakulenko 2025a; Vakulenko 2025b).

Given all of that, it is important to assess what the "Web dictionary of female names of the Ukrainian language" represents. On this topic, there is a rather cautious review by Cyghvinceva (2022), which primarily summarizes the structure and content of the dictionary but does not provide a critical analysis of it. Therefore, it is worth analyzing this dictionary from the perspective of contemporary linguistics and terminology studies. Unfortunately, only the preface to the dictionary is available at the provided link. Thus, we will examine it in light of the current state and needs of the Ukrainian language.

2 General remarks

Any research into the Ukrainian language requires now not only special qualifications but also a responsible public attitude, because the Ukrainian language is still under threat of destruction or degradation. Not the last ideological motive for Russia's open-armed aggression against Ukraine was and remains the thesis about the artificiality and secondary nature of the Ukrainian language. This is a challenge for Ukrainian linguistics because it requires not only a thorough coverage of the historical heritage of the Ukrainian language but also a professional, balanced use of this heritage for its further successful development.

A formal measure of credibility for a Ukrainian linguist is their affiliation with the Institute of Linguistics (*Instytut movoznavstva*) or the Institute of the Ukrainian Language (*Instytut ukrajinsjkoji movy*) of the National Academy of

Sciences of Ukraine. However, these institutes, regrettably, have a minimal presence on the international stage. This limited visibility often prompts Ukrainian linguists to pursue independent initiatives, which, in turn, places even higher demands on their qualifications. On the global level, these qualifications must include, among other skills, the ability to effectively communicate complex scientific ideas and concepts to an international audience.

The field of feminine personal names is one that positively distinguishes the Ukrainian language from other European languages. Since at least the 12th century, favourable socio-economic conditions existed on the territory of modern Ukraine that contributed to the emergence of motivated female personal names. The Old Rusj criminal and civil laws protected the life and honour of women on an equal basis with men, as well as the property rights and dignity of a woman (Kryvoshyj 2004: 10–11). Many examples of respect for women in the Middle Ages can be found in Ukrainian folk songs and Cossack legends. Kryvoshyj explains the relative equality of a Ukrainian woman with a man by the ancient right of a woman's personal freedom. Although during the 17th and 18th centuries the Ukrainian woman was deprived of a significant number of rights, for a long time the main factors of attitude towards her were her education and equality in managing the economy (Kryvoshyj 2004: 16–18). Compared to other European states, the Ukrainian woman's position in the traditional society of the 19th century was characterized by her more democratic status in the family and in the community (Borysenko 2004: 21). This serves as a striking contrast to the renowned German phrase "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" (Paletschek 2001). These material prerequisites provided an advantageous foundation for the development of grammatical resources for the formation of Ukrainian feminatives, as well as the consolidation of appropriate linguistic practice.

The absence of artificial extralinguistic barriers to the development of feminine personal names contributed to the fact that the corresponding tradition of using Ukrainian feminatives is based on the general linguistic principle of forming names according to the semiotic triangle, which schematizes and integrates social, mental, and linguistic aspects of the formation of names (see Fig. 1). This triangle has been known since the time of Aristotle (Magoulas 2007) and is described, in particular, in the German national terminological standard DIN 2342.

In the semiotic triangle, the ***object***, or ***referent***, is a part of the perceived or imagined world that receives its name. The dashed line between the ***referent*** and its ***designation (linguistic sign)*** means that these objects are not named directly, but first conceptual categories are built – ***concepts (thoughts of reference)*** – and then names are assigned to them. So, the name as a cognitive category encompasses a set of objects that have certain common characteristics: a concept is a unit of thinking that is formed from a set of such objects by determining the properties common to these objects using abstraction (Drewer and Ziegler 2011:
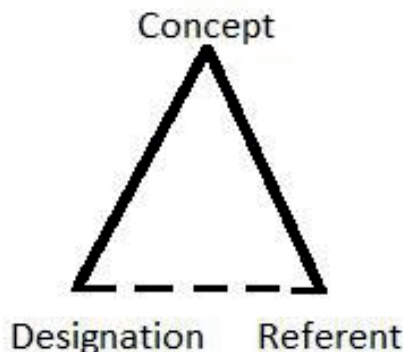
Fig. 1. Semiotic triangle

158–159). This ensures the fulfillment of the linguistic and general scientific principle of **economy** (see Serebrennikov 1988: 86).

The recommendations of Sulyma to use a generalizing noun to denote persons of different genders (1928) – adhered to by "traditional academic" Ukrainian linguistics – embody precisely this mechanism. This usage is also supported by sociological studies. According to the 2018–2019 survey, in which 580 respondents from different regions of Ukraine took part, the greatest part of women (38.56%) does not use feminatives for naming women and prefers traditional masculine forms, such as *професор* 'professor', *міністр* 'minister', *філософ* 'philosopher' (Arkhangheljsjka 2019: 234–238, 260–265). In line with this trend, proposals have also been put forward to consider the generalizing noun as one of general grammatical gender (Vakulenko 2018; Vakulenko 2025a; Vakulenko 2025b).

These are the "clear rules and regulations for constructing female-marked concepts" that the Leipzig University claimed as "lacking".

Thus, dictionaries such as the "Web dictionary of female names of the Ukrainian language" present a great opportunity to showcase the historical and grammatical features of the Ukrainian language, which distinguish it favourably among other languages. So what do we see in the preface?

3 Analysis

At the very beginning, the author notes that this web dictionary is aimed at journalists, politicians, and civic activists and was created with the support of the Charitable foundation "Believe in yourself." Therefore, neither the origins of this initiative nor its focus involve scientific elements, which already raises doubts about the scholarly reliability of this product. To dispel any uncertainties about the author's vision for the further development of the Ukrainian language,

Dr. Synchak further emphasizes that the use of feminine personal nouns heavily depends on the media, which "establish the foundations of fair language" (Ukr. "виробляючи засади справедливої мови"). She identifies the driving factor for linguistic feminization not as the natural language evolution but as the "language-forming chaos of revolutions" (Ukr. "мовотворча стихія революцій").

With all due respect to Ms. Olena, it is difficult to find in these reflections anything remotely resembling a scholarly approach. To our opinion, they are more filled with revolutionary fervor, influenced by considerations outside the scope of linguistic methodology.

Among the "cornerstone" principles on which the dictionary is based, one striking claim is the requirement to treat a feminine form "as seriously and respectfully as their corresponding masculine form, from which it is derived" (Ukr. "так само серйозно і поважно, як і відповідну чоловічу назву, від якої її утворено"). The author immediately replaces this principle with the "principle of parity representation, according to which a woman in the dictionary definition appears as a fully autonomous female subject" (Ukr. "принцип паритетного представлення, згідно з яким жінка у словниковій дефініції постає як повноправна суб'єктка").

This is problematic because the author herself notes that the "feminine" form is derived from the masculine one. This, in fact, clearly indicates its secondary nature. This secondary nature of feminine personal names is further manifested in their derivational failure. For example, it is hardly possible to form an adjective from the word *прокурорка* 'female prosecutor.' Therefore, derived words and word combinations are formed from the base, which in most cases coincides with the "masculine" form: **прокурор**ський нагляд 'prosecutorial supervision,' **прокурор**ський запит 'prosecutorial inquiry,' etc. This feature, which arose against the background of favourable socio-political conditions for the development of feminatives in the Ukrainian language, indicates their limited functions. It should be noted that **derivativity** (the ability to form derivatives) is one of the signs of an apt term (or a name). Therefore, a generic noun that does not have special "feminine" suffixes always wins according to this criterion.

Moreover, the inner form of feminatives has shaped a corresponding usage, leading such units to be perceived as less prestigious. This linguistic phenomenon exists objectively, regardless of the fervent aspirations of language activists. The lack of prestige and lower status of feminized forms in public perception has been duly documented (Arkhangheljsjka 2019: 237, 256, 266–274; Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska 2005: 43; Horvath et al. 2016).

Additionally, such artificial "parity" based on gender contradicts the mechanisms of name formation according to the aforementioned semiotic triangle, where reflecting gender characteristics in a name is appropriate only when gender is of significant importance. Even the very idea of identifying biological sex or social gender with grammatical gender is far from scientific. In

particular, the words "людина" 'human' and "особа" 'person' are feminine in the Ukrainian language, but this does not prevent them from being used in relation to men.

If this is a translation dictionary from a "traditional" to a "fair" language, the left part (the entry) should contain a generalizing word, and the right part should present information about its specific equivalents for masculine, feminine, and non-binary genders. The due explanations about the scope of validity of each should be highlighted, otherwise – if not actually implemented – the author's declared support for fair language looks unconvincing. If the author emphasizes a feminine gender and ignores a non-binary one, this raises questions about the real "fairness" of this work.

The definitions of feminatives begin with "the (female) one who…" (Ukr. "та, хто…"). Thus, the semantic load of these lexemes is unjustifiably broadened not only to women but also to all living female entities, including anthropomorphized objects.

The considerations about different orthographic traditions (the third principle) lack knowledge of phonetics, starting from the difference between transliteration and practical transcription (cf. Vakulenko 2024). For instance, contemporary phoneticians treat the English and German sound [h] as a voiceless vocoid (Boase-Beier and Lodge 2003: 99, 127). Moreover, the assertion of the phonetic similarity between the English [h] and the Ukrainian [x] was defended in the dissertation (Vakulenko 2023). Following its successful defense, this linguistic fact became recognized in Ukrainian linguistics. Accordingly, the form "гакер" 'hacker' is unjustified in Ukrainian. The voiceless pronunciation of the corresponding sound by native English speakers can be heard on numerous specialized resources, in particular on *Forvo* (How to pronounce hacker).

Dictionaries aspiring to recognition should account for such considerations.

The feasibility of aligning the Ukrainian language in Ukraine with the language of the diaspora also seems dubious. These people have spent many years surrounded by languages distant from Ukrainian, losing much of their connection with the lexical and phonological features of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine (uk-UA). Attempting to pronounce Ukrainian words, they rely primarily on their first language – most often English – while trying to adhere to the 1928 Ukrainian orthography rules. As a result, they pronounce the Ukrainian letter "г" (giving rise to a voiced sound in a literary standard) as the English [h], i.e., voiceless, resembling the readout of the Ukrainian "x." Such distortions of Ukrainian pronunciation significantly violate its orthoepic norms and are not worthy of lexicographic codification.

The fourth principle, according to which different variants are presented as equal, contradicts the prescriptive requirement.

The author then mentions a survey of the "expert community" regarding various word-formation variants. It would be useful to know who these experts

are and what their qualifications are in the fields of semiotics, semantics, grammar, stylistics, and terminology theory.

Reflecting on nouns with the suffix "-ець," the researcher appropriately mentions the requirements for *euphony* and linguistic *economy*, which are among the hallmarks of an appropriate term (see Vakulenko 2023: 57–61; Vakulenko and Slyusar 2024). Thus, she acknowledges the necessity of applying term theory to feminatives, which is undoubtedly a positive sign. However, this application is not complete and consistent.

When discussing linguistic economy, it should first be noted that feminatives always fall short of this criterion since they are formed by adding a suffix to a base that, in most cases, coincides with the so-called "masculine" form. Furthermore, the feminizing suffix "-иц(я)" grammatically, semantically, and phonologically corresponds to the suffix "-ик." Assigning it to the suffix "-ець" (which brings a generalizing meaning) violates the requirements of *exactness* and *essentiality*. The requirements of *derivativity* and *organicity* have also been violated, as the lexemes *мовознавиця* 'female linguist', *літературознавиця* 'female literary scholar', *краєзнавиця* 'female local historian' presented in the preface are derived from the non-standard base **знавиця*, which is not documented in any academic source. The author also inconsistently applies the feature of *euphony*, offering awkward neologisms such as *позикодавиця* 'female creditor' and *промовописиця* 'female speechwriter'. These forms not only sound clumsy but also create false associations, further violating the criterion of *essentiality*.

The neofeminative *міністерка* 'female minister' also lacks compliance with the requirement of essentiality, since this is what the "Міністерські озера" 'Ministersjki Lakes' are called in Kyiv.

A consistent accounting for the hallmarks of an appropriate term – in particular, *derivativity* – could protect the author from unjustified claims to the "parity representation" of a feminized name, unreasonably expressed in the first principle.

It is worth noting that the aspiration toward Ukrainization, emphasized in the second principle, is generally positive. However, "authentic" Ukrainian forms must also adhere to the apt term characteristics.

Feminatives ending in "-киня" (such as *членкиня*, *мисткиня*, *математикиня*, *політикиня*, etc.) violate not only the requirement of *euphony* but also the criterion of *organicity*, as they contradict the phonotactic tendency of the Ukrainian language, where the phoneme /k/ before a suffix beginning with "и" turns into /ch/: *вовчиця* 'she-wolf', *бійчиня* 'female fighter', *лемчиня* 'female Lemko', etc. (see Vakulenko 2018; Vakulenko 2025a; Vakulenko 2025b).

Moreover, term theory stipulates that names for entities (including people) should be formed following the aforementioned semiotic triangle, which requires due generalization in such nouns. In Synchak's concept, however, such

generalization is absent. There are also no relevant instructions regarding when feminine personal nouns are recommended and when they are stylistically and semantically inappropriate.

The creation of neologisms – including neofeminatives – implies outstanding linguistic competence, which entails a deep understanding of the relevant semiotic, semantic, grammatical, and phonotactic mechanisms. Unfortunately, such competence is not evident in Olena Synchak's text. Moreover, we believe that the "revolutionary spirit" is far from the ideal method for ensuring the natural development of a language.

4 Conclusion

Thus, Synchak's dictionary represents a rather risky socio-political experiment on the Ukrainian language, which is advocated by supporters of the "language-forming chaos of revolutions" and lacks a scholarly approach. The necessity to carry out such an experiment – especially at this time – has not been justified with convincing linguistic arguments. Such activity has contributed to tension and division within Ukrainian society, thereby undermining its cohesion, which does not strengthen Ukraine's position in resisting the information manipulations of the aggressor state.

The Ukrainian language does not have a sufficient safety margin as, say, German – therefore, such revolutions are especially dangerous for it. It may simply not survive this. Therefore, Ukrainian linguists who love their native language must make every effort to protect it from such shocks and resort exclusively to scholarly methods of studying it.

Nevertheless, this dictionary may have some practical value for developing the Ukrainian language in the "fair" context. This could happen if the recommendations on using feminine personal name s align with the actual function of these in the language, rather than the one imagined by linguistic revolutionaries that they strive to impose on society. This function should be based on general linguistic principles and rules, particularly the semiotic triangle, and an account of the Ukrainian traditions and norms. At the same time, the process of creating neofeminatives must comply with the requirements of term theory, which involves applying the methods of terminology science – the statistical method which is used to determine the presence of appropriate linguistic tools and rules, and the analytical one which is necessary to provide proper scientific justification for emerging lexical units (Vakulenko 2023). The concept of this dictionary must be fully consistent with the principles of fair language regarding non-binary individuals which belong to the most deprived and disadvantaged group and, therefore, are most in need of positive discrimination.

The author sincerely hopes that Dr. Olena Synchak will take the recommendations presented in this review into account, so that her attempts at creating and codifying feminatives may receive in the future a higher evaluation.

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