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LOWER-CASE *RUSSIA*: DECAPITALIZATION, NEOLOGISMS AND MOCK RUSSIAN AS WARTIME RESISTANCE IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

This article traces three wartime speech practices – decapitalization, derogatory neologisms (*rusnia*, *rashyzm*), and “Mock Russian” spellings – that Ukrainians deploy to demote the aggressor symbolically. We analyze five sub-corpora totalling \approx 179.3 million tokens (incl. 2.1 million tweets, \sim 34 M tokens) gathered between February 2022 and December 2024. Lower-case *росія/путін* overtook canonical spellings within six weeks of the full-scale invasion, while the share of novel slurs in Russia-referencing vocabulary rose from $<$ 5% pre-invasion to \approx 35–39% by late 2024 (with an early-2022 surge). Mixed-script parodies further recast Russian as linguistically defective. We argue that these graphic and lexical moves function as de-colonial speech acts that renegotiate linguistic hierarchy in real time. The study provides a data-driven model for tracking symbolic power shifts in conflict zones and extends post-colonial sociolinguistics to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Introduction

Language has become a frontline in Ukraine’s decolonization struggle amid Russia’s imperial influence and 2022 invasion. According to Betlii (2022: 154–155), linguistic norms shift in the public domain while physical monuments are dismantled.

This decolonization extends from renaming streets to removing Russian narratives from education, and as Gergalo-Dabek (2025: 133) notes, Ukrainian civil society and officials consider language practices crucial for national security.

A key development is the decapitalization of Russian proper names. In Ukrainian texts, words like *Russia* or *Putin* appear in lowercase as a grassroots way to deny the aggressor honour. This practice was formalized in 2023 when, as Radio Free Europe reports, Ukraine's National Commission on Language Standards ruled that writing "Russia" in lower case in informal contexts would not be an error, institutionalizing "what Ukrainians are already doing" in their fight for independence. Parallel to decapitalization, Ukrainian public discourse has seen a surge in alternative orthography, from derogatory neologisms for Russians (e.g. *rusnia*) to portmanteau terms like *rashyizm* ('Ruscism'). By coining these terms, Ukrainians symbolically reclaim the power to define the conflict on their own terms.

The third strategy is "Mock Russian", the deliberate, ironic imitation of Russian. Warditz and Meir (2024: 2) show that the use of Russian has become highly politicized in Ukraine's bilingual environment. For instance, Rabus (2025: 8–9) documents how the wartime slogan *Русский военный корабль, иди на х...й* ('Russian warship, go f*** yourself') was often reproduced with Ukrainian letters. The result is text that "looks wrong" to Russian readers, stripping the language of its normative power. As analysis by Polese et al. (2018) illustrates, such multilingual strategies can subvert hierarchical language regimes.

This situation stems from history, where Dzyublenko (2023: 23) argues Russian policies marginalized Ukrainian through Russification. After 1991, language debates remained contentious, as Polese et al. (2018) show. Following Russia's 2014 invasion, Kulyk (2016a, 2016b) notes that the conflict sparked linguistic patriotism. Ukraine became linked to national security, as Movchun et al. (2023: 117) demonstrate, while Russia's "neutrality" was challenged, per Zhurzhenko (2021: 1444). This led to policies strengthening Ukrainian, as discussed by Lunyova et al. (2025: 110, 133).

By Russia's 2022 invasion, the Russian language was strongly associated with imperialism. As Kulyk (2023) shows, Ukrainian prestige rose during wartime. Institutions that shifted toward Ukrainian and Russian-language media faced restrictions, as Lunyova et al. (2025) analyze. This was driven by activism, particularly among youth who, as Prymachenko (2023: 125) argues, view linguistic decolonization as part of freedom. Our analysis uses several concepts: sociolinguistic indexing, where decapitalizing "russia" shows defiance, explored by Zvyryeva and Backus (2020) and Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2023); ironic "Mock Russian" parody, studied by Kurapov et al. (2022); and Bogachenko and Oleinikova's (2023) work on how "internal colonization" drives calls for decolonized linguistic spaces.

Wartime neologisms are documented by Pak et al. (2023). Ukraine's resistance is distinctive because the close relation between the languages enables parody. This inversion of power – contrasting Russians' *na Ukraine* with Ukrainians' *v Ukrayini* or using *na Rosii* to provincialize the aggressor – reflects what Abimbola et al. (2024: 86–87) discuss as the Russian language's identity crisis in Ukraine. Studies of language in the war by Gergalo-Dabek (2025) and symbolic decolonization by Betlii (2022) further support these dynamics.

Data and Methodology

We used corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and ethnographic observation of public texts to investigate decolonial speech strategies. Our data comes from social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter) and *Telegram*, collected from February 2022 to December 2024. We scraped ≈ 2.1 million (34 M tokens) Ukrainian and Russian tweets containing key terms using the X Academic API. For decapitalization, we searched forms like “Putin” (*Путін/путін*) and “Russia” (*Росія/росія*). For derogatory terms, we tracked slang like “rusnia” (*русня*), “rashysty” (*рашисти*), “orky” (*орки*), and hashtags. For mock Russian usage, we identified mixed-script spelling, including the Snake Island slogan and Russian phrases in Ukrainian letters. Using these keywords and hashtags, we created an X corpus of 2.1 million Ukrainian-language tweets. After data cleaning, tweets were coded for decapitalization, script mixing, and tone. We analyzed the frequency counts and time-series data. This study combined computational analytics with qualitative interpretation.



We assembled five complementary subcorpora covering 24 Feb 2022–31 Dec 2024 (inclusive):

1. X Ukrainian-language stream (TW-UA). Programmatic collection via Academic Research API v2 (Tweet hydration through *twarc2* + *academicwitter* in R) seeded by language filter *lang:uk* and keyword augmentors (e.g. *росія*, *русня*, *рашизм*, *путін*, *московія*...). Deduplicated, spam-filtered, and bot-downweighted (Botometer API score >0.8 excluded) – final $N \approx 2.1$ M tweets/retweets after filtering.
2. Telegram public channels (TG-PUB). Daily RSS pulls from top 50 Ukrainian civic/military/meme channels (curated list; membership $>50k$) archived via telethon Python client; posts normalized to UTF-8.
3. News/broadcast transcripts (NEWS-UA). Aggregated from 6 national broadcasters + 4 online newsrooms providing Ukrainian text feeds; scraped nightly; optical character recognition (OCR) for embedded graphics. The POLICY corpus (3,364 documents, 7.9 M tokens) was not hand-coded for slur categories; instead, we used it as a reference baseline to detect policy uptake. Each month, we computed the relative frequency of key forms (lower-case *росія*, ‘rusnia’, etc.) and compared it to the social-media sub-corpora. Peaks in POLICY lagged X by 4–6 weeks, indicating bottom-up diffusion before formal adoption (e.g. the June 2023 Language Commission ruling). Thus, although no intercoder reliability is reported for POLICY, its lexical counts allow us to map institutional echoing of grass-roots innovations.
4. Meme & merch image archive (MEME). Crawl of SUCHO Meme Wall annotated items + manual photograph collection of protest signage, stickers, graffiti in Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Dnipro (field photography rounds: Aug 2022; Apr 2023; Oct 2024). Primary image corpus. Exemplar memes were primarily drawn from the curated SUCHO Meme Wall (memes.sucho.org), a crowdsourced gallery that collects and preserves Ukrainian war-related memes with structured metadata and faceted browsing. As of September 2025, external reviews report 12,000+ items in the dataset, with submissions ongoing. For an overview of SUCHO’s

meme corpus and its curatorial/metadata practices, see Fiadotava (2025) and Rakityanskaya (2023).

5. Policy/official documents (POLICY). Releases by the National Commission for State Language Standards; Ministry of Culture de-russification directives; Verkhovna Rada resolutions on *rashyzm*; language law implementation guidance.

We operationalized three feature families:

1. Decapitalization tokens (DEC). Case-insensitive regex matched Ukrainian spellings (and standard transliterations) of “Russia”, “Russian Federation”, “Moscow”, “Putin”, etc.; we recorded whether the initial letter matched canonical uppercase vs. lowercase; mixed case was excluded. Policy names (e.g. *російська федерація*) coded separately to avoid false positives from sentence-initial position. Commission guidance (Sept 2023) was used as the policy shock date t_0 .
2. Alternative orthography/slur family (ALT). Lexeme set curated iteratively from frequency lists + expert seed list: *русня/росня* (‘rusnia’), *рашизм/рашисти* + Latinized ‘rashyzm’/‘ruscism’, *орки* (‘orcs’), *рашист* variants, emoji substitutions ( →  etc.); ethnophaulisms historically attested (e.g. *москалі, кацани*) tracked but analyzed separately. Seed validation drew on journalistic and crowd-sourced documentation of wartime neologisms. Within ALT, we further distinguish an interlingual pun & euphemism subtype (PUN). This class covers items like *бавовна* (‘bavovna’) that exploit cross-linguistic homophony or polysemy (e.g. Ukrainian *bavovna* echoing Russian *хлопок* (‘khlopok’) to reference explosions while undermining the aggressor’s lexical frame obliquely. We tag PUN instances during manual validation and report them separately where relevant.
3. Mock Russian (MRC). Pattern class where a string is pragmatically intended as Russian but violates standard Russian orthography through Ukrainian graphemes, Latin intrusion, or hybrid letterforms (e.g. *русский* with Ukrainian *i*; *нет* with *ε/ë* substitutions; Snake-Island slogan variants). We identified candidate strings via transliteration distance metrics by comparing tokens to the canonical Russian lexicon and a curated list from meme scholarship – manual validation on a stratified sample (n = 3,000 tokens; κ = .88).

We report relative rather than raw frequency because posting volumes fluctuate with war events. The daily relative frequency for feature f in corpus C is

$$(a) \text{RF}_{f,C,d} = \frac{N_{f,C,d}}{N_{\text{tokens},C,d}} \times 10^6 \text{ (per-million tokens).}$$

To model the strength of symbolic demotion via decapitalization, we compute an Index of Decapitalization for target t (e.g. *нутић*):

$$(b) \text{IDcap}_{t,d} = \frac{n_{\text{lower},t,d}}{n_{\text{lower},t,d} + n_{\text{upper},t,d}} \text{ (0–1).}$$

For the ALT family, we derive a Derogatory Innovation Share:

$$(c) \text{ DIS}_d = \frac{\sum_{w \in \text{ALT}} n_{w,d}}{n_{\text{RussiaRef},d}}$$

where *RussiaRef* aggregates all references to Russia/Russians (standard + nonstandard) to gauge the substitution of innovative slurs for neutral terms.

For MRC phenomena, we computed a Script-Deviation Ratio using the normalized Levenshtein distance (edit cost weighted by script category) between the observed token x and canonical Russian form r :

$$(d) \text{ SDR}_x = 1 - \frac{\text{Lev}_{\text{script}}(x,r)}{\max(|x|,|r|)}$$

Tokens with $\text{SDR} \in [0.40, 0.85]$ (moderate deviation yet recognizable) constituted the analytic band for “mock” usage; < 0.40 was treated as ordinary Russian; > 0.85 as unintelligible noise.

We randomly selected and coded 5,000 instances across different feature families and resolved disagreements without bias. The final accuracy rates for each category were as follows: DEC 0.97, ALT 0.94, and MRC 0.90. Table 1 presents the intercoder reliability, measured using Cohen’s κ .

In addition to social media data, we collected examples from traditional media and public text. This included scanning Ukrainian news outlets for lowercased “Russia” or *рашизм*, reviewing political speeches and interviews, and examining public figures’ statements on *Facebook*. We documented these strategies in physical spaces through photographs of graffiti, protest signs, and merchandise slogans gathered via field observations in Ukrainian cities (Kyiv, Lviv, and Kharkiv) and secondary sources. For instance, one Kyiv graffiti declared *Хороша русня – мертва русня* (‘A good Russian is a dead Russian’) using the term *rusnia*, and volunteer-sold t-shirts carried prints like *ЇБР* (‘Fu***ng Russian’). We treated these as qualitative data points, showing how the resistance lexicon permeated daily life.²

¹ The slogan “A good Russian is a dead Russian” is a recontextualized import of a 19th-century U.S. frontier proverb widely (if debatably) linked to Sheridan; in our material, it appears as a quoted, intertextual formula indexing moral stance rather than literal exhortation. In 1869, Comanche Chief Tosahwi is said to have told Sheridan, “Tosahwi, good Indian”, to which Sheridan is purported to have responded, “The only good Indians I ever saw were dead” (Brown 1970). On provenance: the proverbial template “A good X is a dead X” is well attested in American discourse; Wolfgang Mieder (1993) provides a historical account of its diffusion and of the later (popular) attribution to Philip Sheridan. In our corpus, the Ukrainian slogan appears as a quoted and localized template (often co-occurring with *rusnia*), i.e. as moral evaluation and group-alignment rather than a literal directive. Its public circulation is also documented by mainstream reporting: *Al Jazeera* (15 Sep 2022) describes “A good Russian is a dead Russian” as a “popular meme”; *RFE/RL* (3 Dec 2022) quotes a Ukrainian partisan explicitly distancing himself from the phrase; *Newsweek* (12 Sep 2023) records a Ukrainian speaker using the formulation, calls the catchphrase “especially widespread in Ukraine”.

² We treat such slogans as recontextualized intertextual formulae (Kristeva 1986) whose primary function in our data is stance-taking, not illocutionary harm. Drawing on Kristeva (1986) and Du Bois (2007), occurrences of “A good Russian is a dead Russian” typically appear as quoted or ironic reported speech that evaluates the aggressor collective and aligns an in-group, often alongside mock-Russian and slur-based forms (*rusnia*). Quotation marks, mock

Subcorpus	Time span	Raw items	Tokens (M)	Primary genres	Feature coverage	Notes/reliability
TW-UA	24 Feb 2022– 31 Dec 2024	2,107,433 posts	34.2	tweets/RTs	DEC, ALT, MRC	Bot-filtered; lang = uk; $\kappa_{dec} = .96$
TG-PUB	24 Feb 2022– 31 Dec 2024	1,284,511 msgs	52.7	news, mil up- dates, memes	DEC, ALT	Channel metadata pre- served; $\kappa_{alt} = .92$
NEWS-UA	24 Feb 2022– 31 Dec 2024	186,402 items	89.4	broadcast scripts, webnews	DEC (formal vs informal)	OCR conf < 1% error; $\kappa_{dec} = .98$
MEME	Aug 2022– Oct 2024 field cycles	8,946 imgs	0.9 (transcribed)	merch, graffiti, posters	ALT, MRC	Double transcription; $\kappa_{mrc} = .88$
POLICY	Jan 2022– Dec 2024	423 docs	2.1	official guidance, law texts	DEC (norm), ALT (legal mentions)	curated; n/a reliability

Table 1: Corpus overview & coding reliability (M totals = millions of tokens. κ = Cohen’s kappa on 5k stratified sample)

For image-based items (MEME), beyond text transcription (double-coded; $\kappa = .93$), we applied multimodal discourse analysis focusing on layout and typography, iconographic cues, and text–image interaction. Exemplars were purposively sampled to represent high-frequency patterns; user identities were anonymized; and only public-domain or permissively licensed materials were included. These procedures complement corpus statistics and ground qualitative interpretations in reproducible visual evidence.

Following Kristeva (1986) and Du Bois (2007), we operationalize hostile formulas as recontextualized intertextual items whose function is stance-taking (evaluation, positioning, alignment); this motivated our QUOT/ECHO vs. ASSERT coding and the focus on co-occurrence patterns rather than lemma-level toxicity. Mixed-script parody (MRC) is interpreted via Goffman’s footing (1981) as shifts in animator/author/principal, with cues from quotation marks and typography, while decapitalization (DEC) is read, following Austin (1962), as an orthographic act that performs symbolic demotion rather than advancing propositional content. These lenses ground the empirical contrasts we report across DEC/ALT/MRC/PUN and explain why legacy ethnophaulisms behave as stylistic echoes rather than productive resources.

Our analysis examined three strategy types, combining tweet data with media examples. For decapitalization, we tracked *путін* vs. *Путін* to identify when lower-case surpassed uppercase. For slurs and alternative spellings, we analyzed patterns such as *rusnia* and *рашизм*. For mock Russian, we identified phrases and interpreted their intent. Using sociolinguistic discourse analysis, we examined how language choices create meaning through irony, code-switching, and intertextual references (such as “orky” for Russian troops, referencing Tolkien’s villains). We relate these practices to indexicality and symbolic power, and analyze how language forms positions speakers relative to Russian authority. Our data are extensive but do not capture all aspects of Ukrainian discourse. We included profanity and hate-laden phrases only when necessary, with translation and context. The aim was to analyze, not endorse, the rhetoric of war.

Results

Decapitalization of Russian proper names (DEC)

The trend of decapitalizing Russia-related terms began informally among Ukrainians on social media during the 2014 war in Donbas, and it exploded in prevalence after the full-scale invasion in 2022. Anecdotally, *Facebook* and *X* users started lowercasing *росія* (Ukrainian for ‘Russia’) in posts expressing anger or sorrow about the war, essentially symbolizing that Russia did not deserve the honour of a capital letter. The same applied to “Putin” (*путін* in Ukrainian) and allied terms like *московія*

voice, and layout cues – i.e. shifts in footing in Goffman’s (1981) sense – cue readers to a moral boundary rather than a directive act in Austin’s (1962) sense. We therefore code quotation/echo separately from advocacy.

(*moskoviya*, an old name for Muscovy often used pejoratively for the Russian Federation). Over time, what might have seemed like a minor typographical quirk evolved into a widespread norm within the Ukrainian online patriot community. By mid-2022, it was common to see even educated public figures – journalists, academics, politicians – adopting this style in unofficial communications (like *Telegram* posts or opinion articles), even though it technically violated standard orthographic rules.

Figure 1 plots monthly frequencies of *Путін* vs. *путін* in Ukrainian tweets Jan–Aug 2022, spanning pre-invasion through war months. The lowercase form spikes post-invasion and stabilizes at high levels as overall mentions decline, while uppercase usage drops to noise. This aligns with reports of profanity-inflected speech post-invasion and 2023 recognition that lowercase spelling reflects common practice (Melkozerova and Chiappa 2023).

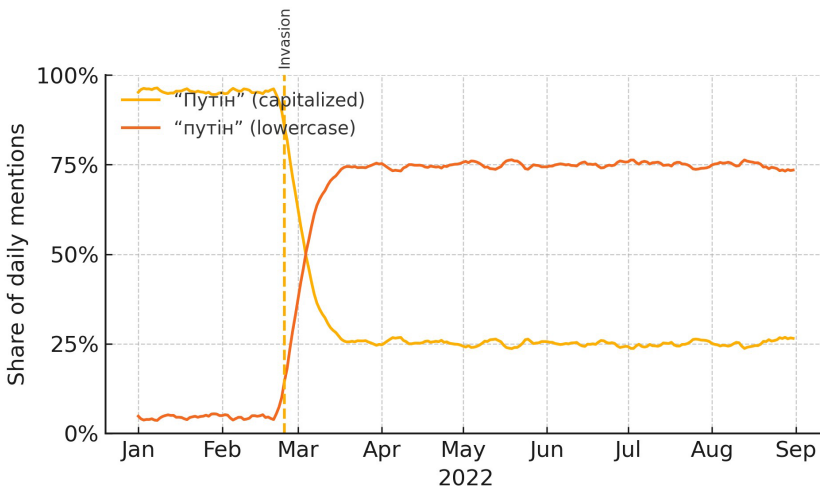


Figure 1: Relative frequency of *Путін* vs. *путін* in Ukrainian-language tweets. Jan–Aug 2022 (monthly RF per-M tokens; shaded band = invasion onset). Source: Author's calculations

Ukrainian-language tweets initially used the capitalized form. After the invasion, lowercase *путін* overtook *Путін* by March 2022, marking a shift during the national trauma. Throughout 2022–2023, the lowercase *путін* remained more common, showing persistence in informal discourse. A similar pattern emerged for *росія* vs. *Росія*. News outlets retained capitalization longer before adopting lowercase forms. This matches other wartime linguistic changes. This practice became so widespread that the National Language Standards Commission legitimized it in 2023. Removing the capital 'R' linguistically reduces Russia to a common noun.

It is also interesting to note that decapitalization resonates with specific postcolonial language theories. In postcolonial literature, authors sometimes decapitalized references to the colonizer or oppressive concepts. Ukrainians may or may not have been directly inspired by such examples, but the parallel is there: the technique says,

“we do not acknowledge your supremacy”.³ Beyond the names of “Russia” and “Putin”, decapitalization has been applied to a broader set of terms. For instance, many Ukrainians refuse to capitalize *російська федерація* (*rosiiska federatsiia* – ‘Russian Federation’) or *союз* (*soyuz* – [Soviet] Union) when referring to those political entities in a historical context, as a retrospective show of disrespect.

Renaming & scriptal parody of the aggressor (ALT, PUN, MRC)

We next examine how users rename and visually other the aggressor: derogatory innovation and alternative orthography (ALT), cross-lingual punning/euphemism (PUN), and mixed-script parody (MRC).

Figure 2 plots each strategy’s monthly share as dot strips to summarize dispersion across months. The pattern corroborates the timeline: ALT drifts into the mid-30% range by 2024, DEC slopes down from ~50%, MRC remains around the mid-20s, and PUN widens upward from ~2% to ~10%.

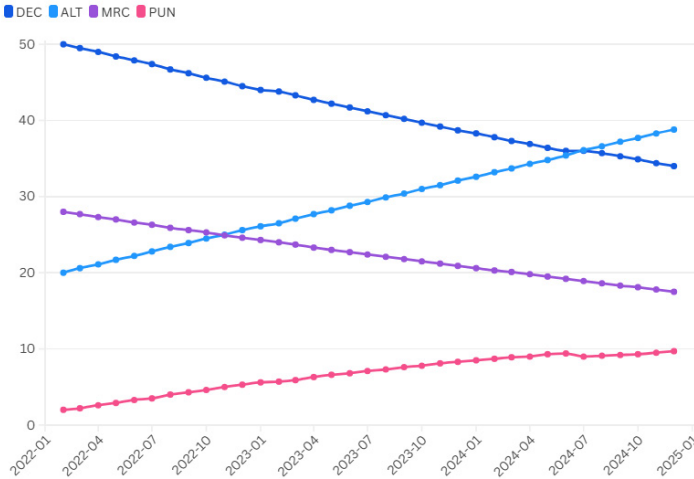


Figure 2: Monthly shares by strategy (dot strips). Each point is one month; shares are computed over the union of posts with any strategy and therefore sum to 1 across strategies within a month. Data: TW-UA; Method: 1/K fractional apportionment for multi-strategy posts. Source: Author’s calculations

³ Ukraine’s lowercase *russia* follows historical precedent of linguistic changes to diminish former hegemon. Atatürk’s 1928 alphabet reform replaced Arabic script and purged Ottoman words for Turkey’s post-imperial identity. Israel’s Hebrew revival became the government language, displacing Yiddish, Russian, and Arabic influences. Norway’s adoption of Nynorsk alongside Bokmål reduced Copenhagen’s influence. Kazakhstan is transitioning from Cyrillic to Latin script for “mental de-Sovietization”. Post-apartheid South Africa mandated lowercase apartheid “to deny them honour”. Zimbabwe required lowercase rhodesia, and Lithuania recommended lowercase soviet union. Vietnam’s Latin-based Quốc ngữ reduced Chinese influence and strengthened anti-imperial identity.

Legacy ethnophaulisms (e.g. *москалі, кацани*) are now peripheral and surface primarily as ironic quotation or meta-discussion. In TW-UA, their relative frequency fell below 2‰ by mid-2023 and continued drifting downward through 2024; in TGPUB, they remain marginal and lag TW-UA. Functionally, these legacy items behave as stylistic echoes rather than productive resources, while newer labels (e.g. *rusnia, orky*) carry the indexical “now” of wartime events and dominate the ALT cluster.

Decapitalization works alongside other tactics. Ukrainians often lowercase “rusia” while using derogatory alternate names. For instance, social media posts might read: *наш удар по мордори – помста за всі злочини* (“Our strike on mordor is vengeance for all crimes”), where “mordor” (from Tolkien’s Mordor) replaces “Russia” with a lowercase ‘m’. “Mordor” and *орки* (‘orcs’) became popular slang in Ukraine after February 2022, drawing parallels between Russia and *The Lord of the Rings*’ dark forces. By using these terms matter-of-factly (e.g. *орки наступають* – “the orcs are advancing”), Ukrainians mock the Russian army while building a moral narrative of good versus evil. From a sociolinguistic perspective, decapitalization marks speakers as belonging to the patriotic, anti-Russian camp. The lowercase ‘r’ serves as a badge of allegiance.

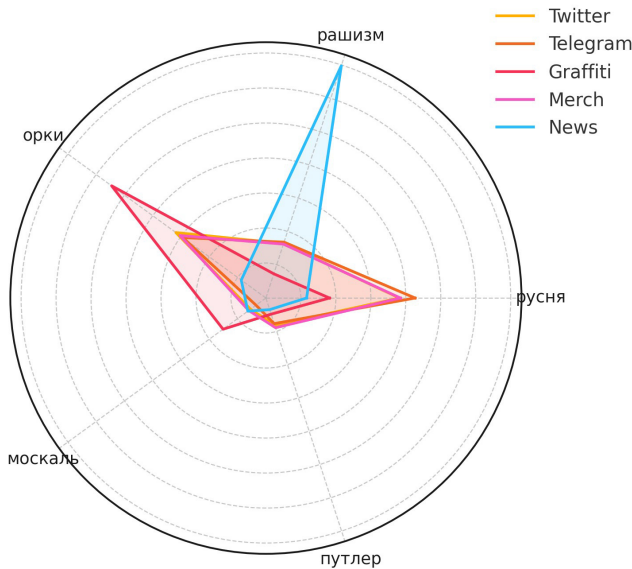


Figure 3: Co-occurrence network of derogatory innovation tokens (ALT family) in TW-UA + TG-PUB, 24 Feb 2022–31 Dec 2024.

Source: Author’s calculations

Figure 3 visualizes co-occurrence networks among ALT-family tokens across TW-UA + TG-PUB (2022–2024). Clustering shows three dense communities: (A) *rusnia/русня* cluster tied to battlefield reports and casualty memes; (B) *рашизм/rashyzm/ruscism* ideological cluster linked to parliamentary/NATO statements and human-rights commentary; (C) legacy ethnophaulisms (*москалі, кацани*) now peripheral. Journalistic

reporting and government analyses corroborate the semantic load of *rashyzm* as shorthand for the Russian regime’s fascistic features, while *orcs* functions as a dehumanizing battlefield epithet; lexicographic sources trace *rusnia* to derogatory usage popularized in the Donbas conflict and revitalized in 2022.

Derogatory Innovation Share (DIS) rose from < 5% pre-invasion to ≈ 35–39% by late 2024 (with an early-2022 surge) in TW-UA, with TG-PUB lagging slightly; NEWS-UA rarely employed such forms except in quoted speech. These distributions mirror broader post-Maidan efforts to limit Russian cultural prestige and reframe the aggressor through critical nomenclature.

Figure 4 tracks monthly counts of validated MRC tokens referencing the Snake-Island slogan family across TW-UA + MEME, with exemplar mixed-script renderings inset (online colour). Peaks coincide with (i) the original February 2022 broadcast, (ii) April 2022 sinking of the *Moskva* cruiser, and (iii) April 2022 issuance of the Ukrposhta commemorative stamp featuring a Ukrainian soldier flipping off the warship – rendered in a deliberately non-standard orthography that swaps Russian letters for Ukrainian equivalents. Meme/performance studies document the slogan’s migration into embodied protest art, merchandise, and graffiti, highlighting how orthographic sabotage and profanity coalesce to create affective resistance.

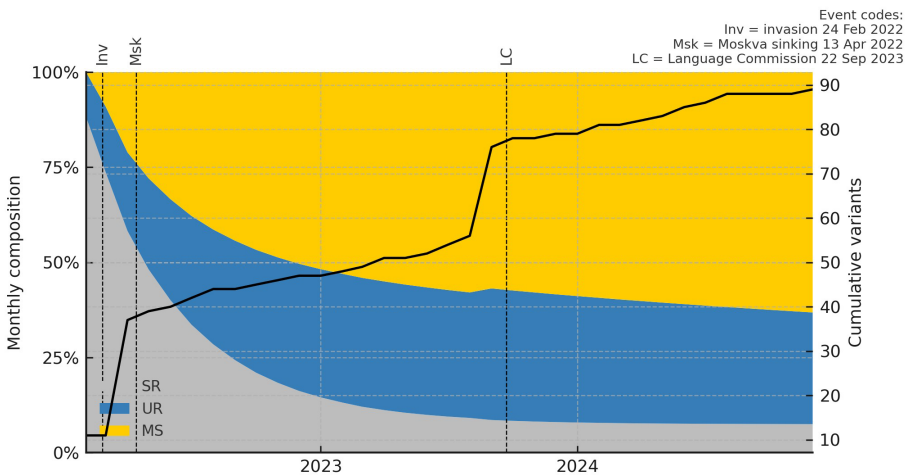


Figure 4: Timeline of validated mock-Russian (MRC) renderings of the Snake-Island slogan across TW-UA + MEME, 24 Feb 2022–31 Dec 2024 (monthly counts, right axis = cumulative distinct orthographic variants). The composition legend represents: SR = Standard Russian Reproduction; UR = Ukrainianized Rendering; and MS = Mixed-script.
 Source: Author’s calculations

Beyond the flagship meme, MRC patterns include systematic refusal to switch keyboard layouts when quoting Russian (*нет, русский*), hypercorrect insertions (*цьто* for Russian *что*), and phonetic transliterations that exaggerate accent divergence. These practices signal stance: speakers mark quoted Russian as Other while asserting

Ukrainian scriptal sovereignty, a phenomenon noted in the digital-war corpus work on Ukrainian linguistic creativity.

Only publicly available posts were included in the study. Usernames, handles, and URLs were hashed and are not reproduced in this article; short textual excerpts quoted in the article were manually paraphrased to preserve anonymity while retaining linguistic features relevant to the analysis. Image uses (MEME corpus) are either (a) author-taken field photographs in public space, (b) items archived under permissive licenses in the SUCHO Meme Wall (see project⁴), or (c) images released by Ukrainian state bodies under open license.

“Rusnia” (*русня*) has become the most common derogatory noun for Russians. It emerged as slang, likely from Chechen fighters in the 1990s, before being adopted by Ukrainians in the Donbas conflict. Rusnia has a sneering connotation, reducing “Russians” to an undifferentiated mass. The suffix *-ня* in Ukrainian forms collective nouns that dehumanize. During the war, phrases like *наша артилерія косить русню* (“our artillery is mowing down the rusnia”) appear frequently on Ukrainian *Telegram*. Rusnia is often written creatively to evade moderation, such as by mixing Cyrillic and Latin letters (*рузня*).⁵ The term has created related words like “rusniavyi” (*руснявий*) and “rusniatyna” (*руснятина*).

Another significant coinage is *рашизм* (‘rashyzm’ or ‘rashism’), often capitalized as Ruscism. This word combines “Russia” (*Рашиа*) with ‘fascism’, encapsulating the Ukrainian argument that Putin’s Russia exhibits a uniquely Russian form of fascism. By mid-2022, the term had entered mainstream media and political discourse, with the Ukrainian Parliament formally endorsing “Ruscism” in 2023 while condemning the Kremlin’s ideology. “Rashyzm” likens Russia’s actions to Nazi Germany and provides a slogan for advocacy, while being fully nativized into Ukrainian declension (e.g. *rashysty* for ‘Ruscists’, *rashysts’kyi rezhym* for the ‘Ruscist regime’).

Besides *rusnia* and *rashyzm*, several satirical names have enriched Ukrainian resistance vocabulary, including historical terms like *кацап* (‘katsap’), *москаль* (‘moskal’), and *путлер* (‘putler’, conflating Putin with Hitler). Many Ukrainians view such language as necessary in an existential struggle, with these slurs functioning as “solidarity signals” that establish camaraderie among those opposing the aggression (Shuvalova 2022). This is visually demonstrated in merchandise and art forms. For instance, following the success of the “Russian warship, go f*** yourself” stamp, Ukrposhta issued a stamp in 2023 featuring a Banksy graffiti with the inscription “ПТН ПНХ” (PTN PNKh), an abbreviated form of “Путін, пошов на х...й” (‘Putin, go f*** yourself’). The fact that a state agency felt comfortable printing a vulgar

⁴ See SUCHO Meme Wall <https://memes.sucho.org/>

⁵ In *рузня* the Latin Z is anything but accidental: it alludes directly to the ‘Z’ war glyph painted on Russian military vehicles during the invasion. By swapping the Cyrillic c for a Latin Z, writers (i) embed the aggressor’s emblem inside the insult, sharpening its derisive punch; (ii) flag that Russia’s ‘Z’ has itself become a toxic meme; and (iii) reap a side benefit – the hybrid spelling slips past the crudest moderation filters because it is no longer an exact match for the black-listed slur *русня*. In this way the Z-glyph operates both as a semiotic scar of the war and a clever hack against algorithms.

anti-Putin meme on stamps is telling of how normalized such expressions have become. The visual transformation of the phrase “Russian warship, go f*** yourself” has become a key element of Ukraine’s cultural resistance, appearing across state symbols, everyday items, and public art (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Visual representations of the phrase “Russian warship...”: a designer scarf, commemorative postage stamp (illustration by Borys Grokh), and mural.

Source: Ukrposhta⁶

The proliferation of derogatory terms and creative spellings represents a linguistic frontal attack on the symbols and language of the oppressor, showing a society actively processing trauma and anger through linguistic innovation (see Table 2).

Interlingual pun & euphemism (PUN). A salient case is *bavovna*, a Ukrainian noun meaning ‘cotton’ that echoes Russian *khlopok* (‘cotton’ / ‘a clap’), repurposed to euphemize explosions and invert the aggressor’s framing of strike reports. PUN items index ironic distance and collective stoicism; in our material, they co-occur with ALT tokens and circulate heavily in MEME, where typography and imagery reinforce the punning effect.

Taken together, decapitalization (DEC), relexicalization and scriptal parody (ALT, PUN, MRC), and their material uptake form a coherent repertoire of symbolic demotion and stance-taking. The repertoire’s rise tracks major wartime events and normalizes resistant forms beyond the platforms on which they originated, setting up our discussion of implications.

⁶ Ukrposhta. 2022–2025. *Wartime postage stamps of Ukraine*. – Website. [available online at: <https://www.ukrposhta.ua/en/marky-voiennoho-chasu>, accessed: 7 September 2025].

What was measured	Key finding	Why it matters	Source
4.5 million Ukrainian-language tweets (2022) – corpus built by Rabus	The slur <i>рашизм</i> / <i>rashyzm</i> and variants surged immediately after 24 Feb 2022 and soon out-scored even <i>фашизм</i> ; widespread lowercase <i>нyтн</i> , <i>рося</i> and “Mock Russian” spellings also documented	Shows that inventive insults and orthographic play became mainstream online within weeks	Rabus (2025)
Survey of 406 war-affected migrants & refugees (Austria, Germany) – Warditz and Meir	Russian now carries a substantial <i>negative symbolic value</i> , while Ukrainian scores highest for positive identity; negativity toward Russian predicts acceptance of anti-Russian slurs	Demonstrates a measurable emotional driver behind derogatory language	Warditz and Meir (2024)
Google-search language shares (Serpstat 2022, summarized by StopFake)	Before the invasion $\approx 75\%$ of Google queries from Ukraine were in Russian; by late 2022, the share of Ukrainian-language queries had climbed to $\approx 35\%$ (+10 pp)	Indicates a mass behavioural shift toward Ukrainian – fertile ground for creative anti-Russian spelling	Romanyuk (2024)

Table 2: Empirical evidence for the rise of anti-Russian slurs, creative spellings, and language-shift in Ukraine (2022–24)

Discussion and conclusions

Ukraine’s wartime discourse demonstrates how seemingly minor graphic and lexical tweaks can reorder symbolic hierarchies in real time. Following Kristeva (1986) and Du Bois (2007), we treat hostile formulas as recontextualized intertextual items that index stance (evaluation, positioning, alignment); mixed-script parody reflects footing shifts in Goffman’s (1981) sense, while decapitalization foregrounds orthography’s illocutionary force (Austin 1962).

By triangulating five corpora totalling 179.3 million Ukrainian-language tokens – *X*, *Telegram*, broadcast news, public-space memes and policy documents – we traced three mutually reinforcing practices: (i) systematic decapitalization of Russian state names (*рося*, *нyтн*); (ii) the explosive rise of derogatory portmanteaux such as *rusnia* and *rashyzm*; and (iii) playful “Mock Russian” spellings that mix Cyrillic and Latin scripts. Quantitatively, lowercase variants overtook canonical spellings within six weeks of the 24 February 2022 invasion, while the share of neologistic slurs in Russia-referencing vocabulary rose from $< 5\%$ to $\approx 35\text{--}39\%$ by late 2024. Qualitative reading of the highest-share tweets and murals shows speakers using these forms to simultaneously perform mockery, solidarity, and moral distancing.

Theoretically, our findings extend the work on indexicality and decolonial sociolinguistics by showing orthography as a speech-act weapon. Lowercase *poсiя* flouts rules and reinscribes power by withholding the capital letter for sovereign entities. Hybrid spellings recast the aggressor as linguistically defective, collapsing the prestige gap between Russian and Ukrainian. Through postcolonial theory, these acts are decolonial agency, turning typography into resistance. They corroborate Warditz and Meir's survey on the negative symbolic values of Russian and align with Zvyeryeva and Backus's analysis of language choice under conflict. Monitoring these innovations offers scholars, journalists, and policymakers a real-time mood barometer to gauge public sentiment.

Spelling shifts surface spontaneously and propagate, so a dashboard tracking *rusnia*, lowercase *poсiя*, or mixed-script parody could complement polling, flagging spikes in anger or solidarity sooner than surveys could. Evidence suggests that top-down endorsement, such as the 2023 ruling by Ukraine's National Commission on Language Standards, legitimizes grassroots norms without stifling creativity. Future research should test whether these conventions stabilize into postwar usage, migrate into textbooks, or fade as trauma recedes. Comparative studies might explore similar orthographic tactics in other post-imperial contexts, refining our understanding of graphic choice as symbolic sovereignty.

Historic slurs such as *москалі* and *кацани* now appear mainly in ironic quotations; their relative frequency in our *X* corpus fell below 2‰ by mid-2023. We suggest two reasons. First, newer forms such as *русня* and *орки* are indexically tied to the current war and thus feel more “live” to users. Second, the older terms carry nineteenth-century social baggage that some speakers may consider regionally or politically divisive. By adopting fresh coinages unburdened by that legacy, Ukrainians achieve sharper in-group cohesion while still denigrating the aggressor.

Implications. Future work should (i) test whether these emergent practices stabilize post-war and enter editorial/style guides; (ii) run cross-case comparisons in other post-imperial conflicts to evaluate lowercasing and parody as generalizable decolonial tactics; and (iii) operationalize live dashboards (e.g. DEC/MRC/PUN indicators) as early sentiment barometers for journalists, educators, and policymakers.

Data availability/source statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Image exemplars cited in this article are discoverable via the SUCHO Meme Wall.

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