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In response to a recent article that I wrote about the social, political, and historical importance of correct terminology when discussing Ukraine, I received a follow-up question from a reader, which may also interest Language Matters readers.

Therefore, the present column focuses on this terminological issue in more depth.

Many people, particularly those over the age of 30, will be familiar with Ukraine being referred to as “the Ukraine”. However, the difference between “Ukraine” and “the Ukraine”, while seemingly small, has deep underlying meaning for Ukrainians.

It is worthwhile then to explore the linguistic history behind the difference in terminology so that speakers know why the difference is so significant.

First, “the Ukraine” was the form widely used in English during the Soviet Union, and the form that is still widely used today in English by many people from Russian-speaking countries. However, “Ukraine” (without “the” in the front) is the official name of the country and how Ukrainians refer to the country in English.



Why ‘the’ counts

Language Matters

Why is this difference in terminology such a big deal?

A bit of context is necessary first. Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but the Ukrainian people have identified as such for centuries and point to the establishment of the capital, Kyiv, more than 1000 years ago as evidence of the long establishment of Ukrainian people on Ukrainian soil.

The Ukrainian language developed from Old East Slavic, with Old Ukrainian developing as early as the 10th century and Modern Ukrainian developing in the 17th or 18th century. While the Ukrainian and Russian languages connect back to the same Old East Slavic root, and are

largely mutually intelligible, Ukrainian linguists Laada Bilaniuk and Svitlana Melnyk argued in 2008 that the two languages still have approximately a 38 per cent difference in vocabulary.

In the 1950s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev kicked off a process of Russification, and relegated all minority languages of the Soviet empire (including Ukrainian) to “non-viable” status, while enforcing Russian as the only official language of the empire.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the way English speakers learned to speak about places during this time comes originally from Russian, and it should also start to become clear why the difference between Ukrainian and Russian language practices is such a big

deal to Ukrainians.

Readers with some knowledge of Russian will know that there are no articles (“the” or “a”, for example) in the Russian language. So where did “the Ukraine” in English come from?

To answer this question, we have to look at how Ukraine is discussed in the Russian and Ukrainian languages themselves, and how this is grammatically translated into English. In Russian and Ukrainian, this grammatical difference comes down to what preposition is used before the country’s name – transliterated as “na”, or “v”.

The tradition in Russian is to say “na” Ukraine, while the Ukrainian practice uses “v” Ukraine. This is a meaningful difference, because the former preposition is used when you say things such as “na okrainye” (on/at the borderland) or when you otherwise refer to places/things without defined political borders. However, the latter preposition is used when you say things such as “v Rossii” (in Russia). When this usage gets translated into English, the former preposition gets translated with “the”, while the latter gets translated without it.

Saying “the Ukraine” in English is drawing upon the preposition used when no defined political borders are present, and therefore ignores Ukrainian sovereignty. This explains the significance behind and importance of correctly using “Ukraine” when talking about the nation.

Corinne Seals is Ukrainian-American by birth.

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Refugee response shows generosity

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by Stuff newspapers.

Not so very long ago, discussions about migrants and refugees were dominated by populists determined to blame foreigners for all our woes.

Images reminiscent of Nazi propaganda, such as the infamous “breaking point” Ukip poster in 2016, were used to suggest we were facing some kind of invasion; the UK Government adopted a “hostile environment” immigration policy.

The frankly xenophobic atmosphere ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum has lingered, even as the folly of our departure from the European Union has unfolded and many have come to realise the benefits of people blessed with a considerable

Viewpoint

degree of “get up and go” as a consequence of their absence.

However, there is a very different side to the people of this country, one now making itself felt with a demonstration of its values.

As of last Wednesday more than 138,000 people in the UK had offered to take in a Ukrainian refugee – not just into their country but into their very homes. In these difficult times there is a vast army of warm-hearted, generous people willing to put themselves out to help others.

It’s time to stop falling for populist propaganda, of the type thrown around by the likes of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, and instead embrace the duty we all have, as human beings, to one another.