

**Summer Research Project Title:
“How it Gets Done in Odessa: Promises, Plans, and Predictions in Uncertain Times”**

Topics covered in this report:

- a. *Initial questions and hypotheses*
- b. *Objectives and outcomes*
 1. *Language training*
 2. *On-site research*
 3. *Networking*
- c. *Plans for dissertation work*

a. What does it mean to make, or keep, a promise? How are senses of morality both constructed and manifested in everyday talk? Who is considered capable of making predictions and fulfilling commitments, and who is not? Although my initial questions in my Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training grant proposal were related to how people make promises, plans and predictions, by the time I went to the field for pre-dissertation work in the summer of 2011, I was particularly interested not only in these forms of speech, but how people morally evaluated those who committed themselves to certain actions, or, perhaps, didn't follow through on them. I planned to investigate this by continuing my research from the previous summer on a former collective farm (*kolkhoz* in Russian, or *kolkhosp* in Ukrainian) two hours' bus ride from the Odessa city center. Specifically, I planned to look into how farmers, fieldhands, and grain traders negotiated the sale of wheat, and what the consequences were for not selling commodities and prices previously discussed. My interest in this topic stemmed from my experiences in this same village during the summer of 2010, during which a historic heat wave damaged much of the wheat crop in Western Russia and Eastern Ukraine, provoking confusion among small farmers and their fieldhands about what constituted a good sale price, and what sorts of bonuses or even salaries could or should be promised to workers.

As a linguistic anthropologist, I'm interested in the fine details of face to face conversation; additionally, I am interested in language as social action. Rather than assume that speech and action are entirely disconnected (as in 'what people say and what people do are two different things') and merely referential, I approach speech as part of a semiotic system in which the production and exchange of signs has consequences for social relations. For my interests, then, whether or not a promise is kept is no more significant than the circumstances under which it was made and taken up. Certainly, not everyone in a community is considered equally able or likely to follow through on verbalized commitments; such evaluations of personages are made not only through 'actions,' but through talk itself. How different personages are constructed in speech, is, I suggest, one means of getting at social stratification within a community.

Ultimately, I hypothesized that examining conversations in which promises, plans, or predictions were made or assessed could provide me on how those forms of speech, and the people producing them, are valued. Moreover, I hypothesized that studying small scale interactions in which people morally evaluate their neighbors and former fellow *kolkhozniki* (collective farm workers) could provide insights on social stratification and hierarchies within communities that other studies that are more focused on material transactions might miss.

b. Since my grant was for pre-dissertation research and language training, I arrived in Odessa in May, 2011, with the objective of gathering initial data, as well as improving my abilities to carry out more extensive and nuanced investigations during my forthcoming long-term fieldwork. As such, my summer objectives were three-fold:

- 1) Improving my written and spoken 'standard' Russian;
- 2) Collecting audio and visual data for analysis;

- 3) Expanding my network in the region where I've been working, as well as with Ukrainian academics that can be of help to me in the future.

I set my first goal in response to my observation that while living in my fieldsite, I'd picked up the local mixed Russian and Ukrainian dialect. While this was not a problem – and was even welcome – in the village, my academic goals required better control over 'standard' language. As it had been several years since I had formally studied Russian (I had studied Ukrainian on an advanced level while completing my masters degree), and Odessa city itself is primarily Russophone, I elected to work on Russian for the summer. While there were some logistical problems with my training that resulted in me receiving far fewer hours of lessons than I had hoped for, the training that I did receive was beneficial. Particularly helpful was the time spent with an instructor who worked with me on social science readings and vocabulary. In addition to my lessons, I spent time developing my Russian with local friends and acquaintances, and through enjoying cultural events.

My efforts to improve my 'standard' Russian had additional payoff in the village I was working in, not only for communication purposes, but for what I was able to learn about the local dialect and language ideologies. Re-learning 'standard' language made me more attuned to the nuances of code-mixing, and ways in which community members exploited their knowledge of both Russian and Ukrainian to find *just* the right word for what they wanted to say, as well as color others voices when, for example, narrating a controversial event that had occurred in the village. At the same time, I also became more attentive to the particularities of the local dialect, noting, for example, how the use of Russian vs. Ukrainian noun forms tended to clump in particular categories, how verbal affixation sometimes varied with tense and the origin of the verb-stem, and how even fairly 'standard' Russian speakers born and raised in Russia had

acquired local phonological patterns (for example, the well-documented Ukrainian replacement of Russian /g/ with /h/).

As I was attending to my informants' language, they were also attending to mine. Since I find it difficult to switch back and forth between Russian and Ukrainian, I elected to speak my target language, Russian, most of the time. However, during my first summer in the fieldsite, I had been speaking the Western Ukrainian dialect I'd been trained in at University of Michigan and at Ivan Franko National University in L'viv. My switch apparently took several of my informants by surprise, though most of them were already aware that I knew Ukrainian, and, after gently chastising me for becoming an *Odessitka*, continued to speak with me as they had before. However, the change provoked many conversations about language politics in the region. While this wasn't my primary research topic (it has been well-covered by other scholars, both Ukrainian and foreign), the information I gathered was a pleasant side-effect, and was, I think, particularly useful for understanding local ideologies about speakers of different codes, and the qualities attributed to such speakers.

When I began my research, I hoped to spend more time in the fields with farmers, and observe more of their interactions with fieldhands and grain traders. Again, I was interested in pricing predictions and salary commitments, topics directly related to working the land and the success of the harvest. However, I encountered the same problem I'd had the previous year: the summer months are a terrible time to do research with agricultural workers, who are up at dawn and working in fields far from the villages until the sun sets, coming home only to sleep, and eat astonishing amounts of food. (Collectives tended to have a residential center, with fields radiating outward for kilometers in all directions.) This, combined with my language learning

commitments in the city, made accessing farmers often enough to be able to observe *patterns* of interactions, rather than merely instances, rather difficult.

Another challenge was my gender: the fields are a largely male space, and it seemed to be socially unacceptable for me to be spending the day with large groups of men engaged in what was considered by the community to be exclusively men's work. During the Soviet-era, women working on the collective tended to be engaged in weeding and hoeing gardens, and dairy and poultry production. Despite the end of large-scale animal husbandry in this region, this gendered division of labor persists. (On the upside, this opportunity to do pre-dissertation research has allowed me to think of solutions to these obstacles. As such, I have budgeted money for a bicycle and car hire, so I can move between sites more easily.) I did manage several meetings with people whom I'd worked with in the past, as well as new meetings with their connections, including the head of one of the two cooperatives that succeeded the former collective farm. However, the format of these interactions was more akin to that of interviews, and as such, informative, but not quite what I was looking for.

More productive for my research purposes was the time I spent at other worksites in the village, most notably the school, local stores, and the hospital. I had agreed to teach a free, communicative English class for high school students twice a week during June and July, which allowed me to make connections with students, teachers, and administrators, both from my host village as well as neighboring ones. Because of bus schedules, this in turn required both me and the class attendees to spend significant amounts of time waiting for transportation or for the school to open in the morning. As such, I developed a regular routine of visiting various informants who lived or worked near the school, and observing them as they went about their days. In addition, I rode the bus regularly with people who commuted between the village and

the city, for reasons as varied as visiting relatives to procuring goods for their stores. It turned out that they had plenty to say about promises, plans, and predictions, as well as those who were capable of making – or undermining – them.

Two topics that particularly garnered my interest were 1) the concept of envelope money, or money paid ‘in the envelope,’ tax free, on top of the salary reported to the government; and 2) witchcraft, and its purported role in the local economy. For the purposes of this report and protection of my informants (not to mention my standing in the community), I will not delve into the details of these conversations. However, regarding the first point, I became interested in the role of envelope money in negotiating work contracts not only in the village, but also in the city, where it seemed even more present. It seemed that this practice was one that permeated both spaces, and was connected to a continuing mistrust in the government and its spending practices. However, negotiating a salary with an envelope money component also required an employee to trust his or her employer to actually provide the cash promised. Thus, the employee had to believe that his or her employer was capable of making predictions (ie. accurately anticipating the amount of money there would be to distribute to employees) and moral enough to follow through on commitments.

In early July, I gave a paper called “From Village Gossip to Envelope Money: ‘Public/Private’ Distinctions and the Eerily Familiar in Odessa Oblast” at the 3rd Annual Ukrainian International Summer School in the Social Sciences, an outstanding program for graduate students and recent PhDs or *kandidaty nauk*. (The school is organized by faculty from Natsional’nyj Universytet Kyevo-Mohyljans’ka Academia, University of Ottawa, and Ecole de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, and was truly one of the best academic experiences I’ve ever had. I also made fantastic networking contacts in Ukraine and at other universities in

Europe and North America, and would strongly recommend that U.S. graduate students in the social sciences apply to it.) My argument in that paper was that taken for granted fractals like ‘public/private’ and ‘us/them’ are powerful Soviet-era language ideologies underlying many more readily observable present-day cultural forms. In other words, ‘envelope money’ might not be exactly a Soviet practice that has continued into the present, but the binary distinctions that underlie and facilitate it could be considered Soviet-era legacies.

These questions of whom one can trust, and how speech can make or break commitments, also informed my understanding of the rumored practicing of witchcraft by an ethnic minority woman from a neighboring village. Without going into detail, the conflict highlighted for me that while ethnic tensions don’t seem to be particularly pervasive in this region, many people retain deeply held stereotypes about how people they perceive as different from themselves (for reasons of ethnicity, origin, or class) speak, as well as what their speech can do. This may be a topic that I will examine more closely in the future, but it is not one that I am prepared to write about at this time.

c. Ultimately, I would declare my summer research a success, though as so often happens, that success was due to the fragility of my lands, rather than my ability to follow through on them. (This seems most appropriate given my topic of interest.) However, the defining moment of the summer, and the issue that will serve as the organizing event of my dissertation research, had nothing to do with envelope money or witchcraft. Rather, it was the passing of legislation setting a date for the ending of the 20 year moratorium on farmland sales. In other words, the Ukrainian government intends to open a land market in 2013, during the time that I will be conducting my extended fieldwork. My research interests have thus far centered on the entanglement of

language and agrarian political economy, and following small landowners' preparation for and actual sale of their property promises to provide plenty of opportunity to study promises, plans, and predictions, as well as stakeholders' practical navigation of the reforms more generally.

Provided that I secure adequate funding, I will begin my dissertation fieldwork in August, 2012.

Thanks to the Title VIII Combined Research & Language Training Program, and its facilitation of my Russian language skills, preliminary research, and networking (both in my agrarian fieldsite and with other academics), I have established a foundation for my investigations that will allow me to work more efficiently and effectively.