

AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF UKRAINIAN INTERPRETING AND INTERPRETING STUDIES THROUGH THE PRISM OF PSEUDOCOLONIALITY

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Abstract: This paper examines the history of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine through the analytical lens of pseudocoloniality, focusing on the invisibility of Ukrainian interpreters and the subordination of Ukrainian as a working language. The research employs historiographic sources, memoirs, archival materials, and original interviews with former practitioners to reconstruct interpreting practices across a wide range of institutional and social contexts, including diplomacy, courts, military service, tourism, cinema, community settings, and sites of repression. Attention is also paid to the ways in which interpreting functioned not only as linguistic mediation but also as an instrument of ideological control, surveillance, and assimilation. The analysis demonstrates that interpreting in the Ukrainian SSR was rarely recognized as an autonomous profession; instead, it was frequently embedded in other roles and governed by centralized language policy that privileged Russian. The article addresses a significant gap in interpreting historiography and argues for the necessity of integrating postcolonial and pseudocolonial perspectives into the study of interpreting in imperial and post-imperial contexts.

Keywords: interpreting history; Soviet Ukraine; pseudocoloniality; interpreter invisibility; military interpreting; community interpreting; cinema interpreting; interpreter training

1. Introduction

Soviet Ukraine was not a classic colony in the traditional definition, because it officially kept the status of a union republic (the Ukrainian SSR) and had formal (sovereignty-level) institutions (a government, constitution, and even UN co-founding membership). Dependency theory is more insightful in the Soviet Ukrainian context, as it argues why economically and culturally “poor countries” were not “behind” but how

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they were actively underdeveloped by new Marxist/Socialist colonialism-imperialism. Under colonial and pseudocolonial rule, native (indigenous) languages were frequently restricted, marginalized, or punished, though outright legal bans were less common than systematic suppression. Undermining the status and authority of the Ukrainian language within the 20th century resembled the 1843 threats described for the Irish language by Thomas Osborne Davis: “To impose another language on such a people is to send their history adrift among the accidents of translation –’tis to tear their identity from all places – ’tis to substitute arbitrary signs for picturesque and suggestive names –’tis to cut off the entail of feeling, and separate the people from their forefathers by a deep gulf –’tis to corrupt their very organs, and abridge their power of expression” (Davis 2011: 160). The repression of the language signified the gradual destruction of the nation’s collective memory and identity.

The pseudocolonial status of Soviet Ukraine has been examined through the lens of Soviet nationalities policy and linguistic imperialism (Palko 2020; Masenko 2005; Kolomiyets 2020; Odrekhivska 2025), although in translation studies it has mostly been done on the example of translation, while the present article focuses on interpreting.

Interpreting via community enterprises (courts), diplomatic relations (summits), cultural events (cinema demonstrations) boosted national self-confidence and secured its official status. The paper examines how pseudocoloniality impacted practice, institutionalization and visibility of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine. In this context, interpreting is an interesting object of research, since it exists at the intersection of language, power, diplomacy, culture and many other aspects of human life. Interpreting differs from translation in that it is situational and frequently performed in high-stakes situations.

First-hand testimonies of former practitioners further confirm that interpreting in the Ukrainian SSR occupied a paradoxical position: it was simultaneously perceived as an elite activity and structurally subordinated within Soviet hierarchies. While interpreters were granted access to high-level interactions with foreigners, they were not recognized as autonomous professionals but rather as functional extensions of state officials. We do not invoke autonomy here as a normative ideal. It is well established in the literature on diplomatic interpreting that interpreters are frequently aligned with one of the parties they serve and that strict neutrality is a contested, if not illusory, standard (Roland 1999; Gaiba 1998; Kadrić et al. 2021; Gheorghiu 2020). Our argument is different: in the Soviet Ukrainian context, subordination was not the outcome of institutional trust or party alignment in the diplomatic sense, but of ideological control and structural erasure, which is a distinctly pseudocolonial form of professional invisibility. This dual status reflects a broader pseudocolonial logic in which linguistic mediation was instrumentalized for state purposes while the mediators themselves remained deprived of symbolic and institutional capital. Such perceptions persisted across decades and domains, reinforcing the invisibility of interpreters despite their central role in cross-cultural communication (cf. Synhayivskyi 2026; Kitsyla 2026).

Despite the fact that scholars around the world have paid certain attention to the research into the history of interpreting, its history still remains incomplete, even

fragmented and is greatly focused on Western Europe. Regarding the history of interpreting in the Soviet Union, most publications focus on interpreting in Russia, while interpreting in other republics receives little attention. Ukrainian interpreters are often “hidden” behind the generalization “Soviet interpreters,” and it is difficult to find out their national identity. This article aims at making an outline history of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine in some key domains like diplomacy, courts, military contexts, and interpreter training. This history is analyzed through the prism of pseudocoloniality focusing, among other things, on the use of interpreting and the status of interpreters. The paper draws attention to the invisibility of Ukrainian interpreters in the historiographic sources.

2. Literature Review

Interpreting studies as a discipline has been shaped relatively recently. According to Gile, “the emergence of a discipline devoted to interpreting research in the 1970s is due to a large extent to the ambition and leadership of Danica Seleskovitch of Paris” (Gile 2009: 136). However, most research known widely is the research done in several European centers, while not much is known about the research published in other countries and other languages. For example, Gile (2009) claims that little is known about the research conducted in the USSR due to the lack of access to the literature published there and the language barrier. Nevertheless, he shows that out of the total number of publications worldwide, publications from the USSR constituted 5% in the 1950s, 12.5% in the 1960s, 9% in the 1970s, 1.5% in the 1980s.

Baigorri-Jalón (2015) notes that interpreters have been the subject of research in various fields, including classical studies, archaeology, diplomacy, anthropology, history, and theology. However, the research still does not provide a comprehensive history of interpreting. This could be explained by several reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of historical records, which is largely due to the fact that interpreting has long been considered not important enough to be documented. And secondly, it is the interpreters who are mainly interested in the topic, and thus the research is often done not systematically and without an in-depth understanding of historiographic methods.

Pöchhacker writes that the research on the history of interpreting came into focus of attention in the 1960s due to FIT’s efforts to improve the prestige of the interpreting profession by highlighting the role of interpreters in the history of humanity (Pöchhacker 2004: 159). The historiography of interpreting faces many difficulties because of the “evanescence” of the activity itself, as Pöchhacker calls it, as well as because of the scarcity of historical sources that could become the basis for such research. As a result, historians of interpretation are forced to reconstruct elements of history from marginal references in chronicles, correspondence, autobiographies, and literary texts across cultures. First attempts at researching the history of interpreting were focusing on Europe, mainly, however, later on Asia and Africa came into focus of attention as well (Pöchhacker 2004 : 159-160).

Interpreting and Interpreting Studies in the USSR are highly underresearched. Some attention to these matters has been paid in publications by Gelij Chernov (1992) and

his son Sergei Chernov (2016). Their work focuses on Russia, which reflects the broader asymmetry that the present paper seeks to address: the tendency for scholarship produced at the imperial center to stand as the default record, rendering the non-Russian republics peripheral or invisible by omission rather than by intent.

While interpreting studies have gradually expanded their temporal and geographical scope, the Soviet context, and especially the non-Russian republics, remains insufficiently examined. This lacuna is not merely accidental but reflects the political and linguistic asymmetries of the Soviet system. The following section examines how Ukrainian interpreters became marginalized within Soviet structures and subsequently obscured within global historiography.

The Invisibility of Ukrainian Interpreters in Soviet and Global Historiography. Pseudocoloniality in the Ukrainian SSR manifested in interpreting through a combination of a number of factors, including linguistic, professional, and others. Russian was always privileged, and the Ukrainian language and, thus, Ukrainian interpreters remained on the margins. Formally, the Soviet state promoted internationalism, but in fact, systematic Russification was taking place. According to Masenko (2005), starting from the 1930s, the state intervened directly in Ukrainian grammar, orthography, vocabulary, and terminology to align them with Russian. Distinctive Ukrainian forms were labeled “nationalist” or “fascist,” leading to censorship of dictionaries, translations, linguistic scholarship, and the repression of linguists. Lexicographical sources were required to mirror Russian norms. Ukrainian was increasingly excluded from high-prestige domains like science, administration, and education. Instead, Russian became mandatory, including in professional mediation such as interpreting. From the 1960s onward, Russification was presented as “mutual enrichment,” but in practice it remained a one-way replacement of Ukrainian norms by Russian ones. In the 1970s–1980s, Russian became the sole language of state and party communication, and Ukrainian was reduced to a marginal or symbolic role (Masenko 2005). Practical disqualification of Ukrainian from elite institutional domains functioned as a mechanism of linguistic subordination. This view is supported by the interviews (e.g. Synhayivskyi 2026).

Unfortunately, biographical and academic, as well as other official sources, frequently categorize Ukrainian interpreters under the general categories of “Soviet” or “Russian” interpreters. Consequently, the national and linguistic identity of these people is difficult to reconstruct retrospectively.

In many cases, interpreting was not recognized as a distinct occupation; instead, it was subsumed under other professional roles such as referent, guide, or military officer (Synhayivskyi 2026). This administrative erasure further complicated retrospective identification of interpreters and obscured their linguistic and national identities. The absence of formal positions labeled “interpreter” functioned as a structural mechanism that rendered the profession invisible even within the institutions that relied on it.

Saprykin and Chuzhakin indicate that during the early years of the Soviet Union, high-level interpreting was initially carried out by diplomats from the imperial era and specialists inherited from the Tsarist regime (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 15). It was only later that these roles were gradually transferred to members of the emerging Soviet intelligentsia. This transition illustrates not a democratization of interpreting but

rather a recentralization of linguistic mediation under the new imperial center. The establishment of the Translation/Interpreting Department of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1953 by direct order of Molotov further institutionalized interpreting as a state-controlled, elite service, centered mainly in Moscow (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 15).

According to available sources, interpreting at high political levels was considered to be an ideologically important activity and could only be performed by select individuals. Saprykin and Chuzhakin note that many of the interpreters who worked for figures such as Yuri Andropov were staff members of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. They were selected not just because of their linguistic competence but for reasons of ideological reliability and insider knowledge of party networks (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 19). These interpreters rarely appeared in photographs or television footage (Saprykin & Chuzhakin 2011: 19) and remained largely unknown to the general public, exemplifying the erasure of interpreters' identities despite their crucial role in political communication.

This invisibility is also reflected in Miram's reminiscences, where he writes: "Once I served as an interpreter in a Middle Eastern country, and in his reports my supervisor wrote something like this: "At present, the Office of the Economic Adviser of the USSR Embassy consists of fifteen people and two interpreters..." (Miram 2001: 177). The wording is very indicative: interpreters are counted as something separate, elements of infrastructure, which also speaks about their status within Soviet institutional hierarchies. This is also reiterated by our interviewees Lidia Kitsyla and Serhiy Synhayivskyi. Answering the question about the status of the interpreting profession, Synhayivskyi states: "Even the most insignificant official, if he found himself in a situation where he needed an interpreter to communicate with foreigners, treated the interpreter as an extension of himself, belonging to him by the right of the party's and government's high trust. This was an absolutely obvious and general rule, with only rare exceptions" (our translation from Ukrainian; Synhayivskyi 2026: 3). Kitsyla writes: "Interpreters were rather treated as service personnel. Something like: "interpreter, interpret" (this phrase has stuck in memory as a joking remark, although in fact it illustrates the "pseudo-elitism" of the profession)" (our translation from Ukrainian; Kitsyla 2026: 3).

3. Materials and Methods

Data sources

The source base for this study is deliberately pluralistic, reflecting the scarcity of official records on interpreting in Soviet Ukraine and the structural invisibility of interpreters within Soviet institutions. We drew on published academic literature in interpreting studies and Soviet-Ukrainian history; Soviet-period publications and sources published in independent Ukraine; memoirs of practitioners (e.g. Surovtsova 1996; Miram 2001); constitutional and archival documents; and original written interviews conducted with individuals who had professional experience as interpreters

in the Ukrainian SSR during Soviet times. Participants were recruited through self-enrollment following an announcement in a translator and interpreter professional group on Facebook. The interviews consisted of open-ended written questions designed to elicit reflections on professional status, linguistic practices, institutional constraints, and personal experiences of visibility and recognition within Soviet structures. The interviewees represented diverse domains of interpreting practice in the Ukrainian SSR.

The use of personal narratives and memoirs as historical data is methodologically grounded in the growing body of work on (auto)biography in translation and interpreting studies (Kaindl 2025; Kumiko 2014). Given that participants responded in writing to open-ended questions drawing on long-term professional memory, their contributions are treated here as a form of written oral history testimony, which is a practice with established methodological foundations in the field (Kumiko 2014; Footitt 2021).

Analytical framework

The methodology for examining and situating this material historically is based on the principles of climate of opinion, immanence, and adequacy, as formulated in the Ukrainian historiographic tradition (Poluzhyn 2004). These principles allow a concept or practice to be presented against the background of developments in language and literary studies, to identify its key features, and to establish connections with contemporary scholarship. This framework is combined with a pseudocolonial analytical lens, which provides the overarching interpretive structure for the findings that follow.

The following sections present the findings of this study organized by domain of interpreting practice. The authors deliberately adopt a broad overview of interpreting across multiple domains in order to avoid an overly narrow understanding of interpreting as limited exclusively to conference or court interpreting. Such an approach also responds to the concern raised by Cronin (2002), who expresses his concern about the fact that interpreting research is lacking works focusing on the interpreting function in a wide variety of social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts. By examining interpreting in diplomacy, military service, courts, cinema, community settings, and interpreter training, the article seeks to demonstrate the diversity of interpreting practices and the pervasive influence of pseudocolonial structures across these different spheres. It is important to establish the structural conditions that shaped all of these domains. Soviet language policy from the 1930s onward systematically marginalized Ukrainian in high-prestige institutional settings like administration, science, education, and professional mediation while privileging Russian as the language of state and party authority (Masenko 2005). It is within this framework of linguistic subordination that each of the domains examined below must be read. The interpreter invisibility, professional erasure, and lack of institutional recognition documented across diplomacy, courts, military service, cinema, and community settings are not coincidental features of individual domains: they are manifestations of a single pseudocolonial logic operating across the entirety of Soviet Ukrainian public life.

4. Court Interpreting

The diplomacy of the Ukrainian National Republic (1917-1921) heavily used the legacy of the Czarist regime meaning the deployment of personnel schooled in the Russian Empire. Certainly, interpreters used both Ukrainian (their native language) and Russian (the former professional language, being still visible in the transient society) as well as the language required in a specific country or for a diplomatic mission. After a long period, Ukrainian was again a language of diplomacy, Ukraine engaged vibrant international cooperation, and interpreters were unavoidable aids in all envoys, often deployed as secretaries (cf. Matiash 2019: 42, 149, 151, 209, 245, 282, 304, 309, 419, 492). However, the short-lived but dynamic history of Ukraine's independent diplomacy did not have a chance to shape a separate school of interpreters or a distinctive tradition in Ukrainian interpreting history.

Meanwhile, it prepared the general background for community interpreting which, in Soviet Ukraine, was first formalized officially as court interpreting. The first Ukrainian constitutions in the 20th century created a very general milieu of linguistic diversity, banning all types of discrimination and boosting the status of Ukrainian: Paragraphs 6 and 12 of the 1918 UNR Constitution (*Konstytutsiya* 1918), Paragraph 32 of the 1919 UkrSSR Constitution (*Konstytutsiya* 1919) and Paragraph 20 of the 1929 UkrSSR Constitution (*Konstytutsiya* 1929). During the 1920s and increasingly after the year 1930, these declarations were only imaginary, but surprisingly, the new constitution declared the deployment of an interpreter or translator (in Ukrainian, the single word 'perekladach' denotes both translators and interpreters, and a relative adjective-attribute – 'usnyi' (oral) and 'pysmovyi' (writing) – is used where the difference is important).

Thus, Paragraph 109 of the 1937 UkrSSR Constitution proclaims: "Judicial proceedings in the Ukrainian SSR are conducted in the Ukrainian language; in the Moldavian ASSR, in the Moldavian or Ukrainian language, depending on the national composition of the majority of the population of the district, with provision for persons who do not know the language of the majority to be fully acquainted with the case materials through an interpreter, as well as the right to speak in court in their native language" (*Konstytutsiya* 1937). This provision partly regularized court interpreting in the UkrSSR because of the existence of the Moldavian ASSR (1924-1940) as its integral constituent. What is significant and symbolic was the employment of the term "interpreter" in the fundamental legal charter. It was both the recognition of the profession and the raise of the professional visibility and an impact for the further development of translation and interpreting studies.

Paragraph 157 of the 1978 UkrSSR Constitution almost repeats the above clause, though without Moldavia (being a separate union republic in 1940-1991), and the provision sounds with a clearer focus of the oral component: "participation in court proceedings through an interpreter" (*Konstytutsiya* 1978). This Constitution functioned as the Constitution of Ukraine in 1991-1996. When the 1996 Ukraine Constitution was adopted, it did not preserve this formula. So, the term "interpreter" was fixed officially during 1937-1996 in Ukraine's highest legal instrument, although in reality, the conditions were not favourable for Ukrainian translation and interpreting.

Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing the right to participate in judicial proceedings through an interpreter, practical implementation remained inconsistent and largely informal. Testimonies from the late Soviet period suggest that interpreting in legal and investigative contexts was episodic and contingent rather than institutionalized. Interpreters were occasionally summoned when needed, without formal accreditation or professional safeguards, highlighting the discrepancy between declarative legal norms and actual linguistic practices within Soviet judicial and law-enforcement systems (Zayachkivska 2026: 2-3).

Beyond institutional frameworks, interpreting in the Soviet Union was shaped by adaptation, assimilation, and often the erasure of national affiliation. Those become particularly evident when examining the careers of interpreters in the imperial center.

5. The Empire's People

People from various ethnic backgrounds were frequently integrated into the imperial or metropolitan system, where professional advancement often required the suppression or abandonment of their own identity, heritage, country, culture, language, and academic traditions. A number of Ukrainians and other ethnic representatives directly connected to Ukraine are now conceptually integrated in the Russian academic tradition without any mention or contribution to Ukrainian studies and the Ukrainian academic tradition.

Albeit born in St. Petersburg, Valentyn Berezhkov (1916-1998) was of Ukrainian origin, and it is not surprising that the aftermath of Russia's Civil War was experienced by him in Ukraine where he also obtained a university degree. He is well-known as an interpreter in Soviet diplomatic missions and especially as a personal interpreter for Stalin during the 1943 Tehran Conference. His memoirs, published as books (e.g. Berezhkov), were very popular, and he described the profession of diplomatic interpreter briefly but concisely in them.

Another top-rank diplomatic interpreter was Pavel Palazhchenko (born in 1949) who interpreted for the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Although his last name sounds typically Ukrainian, he is allegedly of partly Ukrainian origin, but because of unfortunate familial conditions, he cannot claim it himself (Palazhchenko 2020). His practical books for training interpreters and translators are quite insightful but do not help Ukrainians to be Ukrainians.

Mikhail Tsvilling (1925-2013) was born in the Ukrainian city of Odesa when the city was reviving its Ukrainian identity after the collapse of the Czarist regime. He might have been of Jewish (more probable) or German (less probable) origin. His contribution to translation lexicography as well as translation and interpreting studies is great, but his writings offered room to the Ukrainian "theme."

The main pain for contemporary Ukrainians lies in the fact that people of Ukrainian origin did little to popularize Ukrainian culture or scholarship, contributed almost nothing to enhancing Ukraine's prestige, and failed to promote Ukraine-centred or Ukraine-aware academic traditions. Ukraine was largely erased from their writings – and perhaps even from their hearts. The mechanisms that facilitated such assimilation

were especially pronounced in wartime and postwar contexts, where interpreting acquired heightened strategic and political significance.

6. War, Military Interpreting, International Justice

Baigorri-Jalón (2010) writes about the role Soviet interpreters played during the Spanish Civil War, as well as in other 20th-century wars. Although the author does not explicitly mention interpreters from Soviet Ukraine, it is reasonable to assume that Ukrainian nationals were also represented there.

The problem of interpreter participation without recognition is particularly evident in wartime and postwar contexts. Records from the Nuremberg Trials indicate that Ukrainian was among the languages interpreted during the proceedings, alongside Polish, Yiddish, Hungarian, and Czech. Ukrainian-speaking defendants and witnesses were provided with consecutive interpreters, and Ukrainian was thus acknowledged (“Nuremberg Trials,” n.d.; “A War Crime,” n.d.). At the same time, Ukrainian interpreters themselves were rarely identified as such; figures like Michael Voslensky, a Ukrainian-born interpreter at Nuremberg, are typically remembered within Russian or “Soviet” historiography.

Ukrainian interpreters worked in military contexts. Military contexts were among the few domains in which systematic training in interpreting was provided. Unlike civilian educational programs, military departments focused on more practical interpreting skills and exposure to real communicative situations. Otherwise, interpreter training was limited and theory-heavy. This contrast shows the strategic value attributed to interpreting in military and geopolitical contexts. For example, Synhayivskyi, respondent in our interview, served as a military interpreter in Ethiopia (1984-87) participating in aid missions and military advisory groups (Synhayivskyi 2026: 1).

While military and diplomatic interpreting represented the most controlled and prestigious forms of linguistic mediation, other contexts reveal its coercive and punitive dimensions. Memoirs and occupation-era materials expose how interpreting functioned under conditions of repression, imprisonment, and forced labor.

7. From State Service to Captivity

The memoirs of Nadia Surovtsova¹ offer a rare insight into the everyday realities of interpreting in early Soviet Ukraine. She worked as a translator and interpreter for different bodies in the Ukrainian SSR and later became a victim of Stalinist repression. Surovtsova's example shows the interconnection between linguistic mediation and

¹ Nadiya Vitaliyivna Surovtsova (5/17 March 1896, Kyiv – April 13, 1985, Uman), Ukrainian public figure, journalist, and memoirist; editor of foreign-language publications at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian People's Republic; translator, interpreter and historian; Doctor of Philosophy; victim of Stalinist repression.

political surveillance and control. Her recollections illustrate that interpreting was often an additional, unacknowledged duty. (Surovtsova 1996: 179).

Surovtsova recalls escorting foreign delegates, interpreting political speeches at factories, and mediating spontaneous exchanges between workers and international guests (Surovtsova 1996: 193–194). Even in the Gulag, Surovtsova continued to perform interpreting functions informally, translating for fellow prisoners who did not speak Russian (Surovtsova 1996: 294). Comparable situations of interpreting under great power asymmetry is documented in Nazi concentration camps, where multilingual prisoners (it is worth noting that Ukrainians were among the prisoners as well) were forced to perform the roles of interpreters (Tryuk 2016).

The Ukrainian materials on Nazi occupation and forced labor corroborate this pattern of interpreting as an instrument of coercion, surveillance, and asymmetrical power. Archival documents and reminiscences show that translation and interpreting mediated key moments of domination: orders on the deportation of Ukrainian youth for labor in Germany were officially translated into Ukrainian. During deportation and upon arrival in Germany, communication with deportees was frequently conducted through an interpreter. At the same time, interpreters occupied an ambivalent and often morally compromised position. Testimonies from former forced laborers describe interpreters who acted as intermediaries for the Gestapo or camp authorities, collecting information, denouncing prisoners, and facilitating repression that could result in executions (Halchak 2004).

As in Surovtsova's Soviet experience and in Nazi concentration camps more broadly, linguistic mediation here was inseparable from systems of control: interpreters were embedded in mechanisms of violence, discipline, and political policing.

8. Interpreter Training

Until the late 1980s, professional training of translators and interpreters was provided only by two universities in the Ukrainian SSR – Kyiv University (now Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv) and Kharkiv University (now V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University). Having translation/interpreting departments at other educational institutions was impossible for ideological reasons (Chernovaty et al. 2021: 69). This centralized and politically controlled model was caused by broader Soviet practices, in which aspiring interpreters were typically trained in Moscow, most notably at the Moscow Pedagogical Institute for Foreign Languages, or through military programs, and were subsequently integrated into state service under the authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Interpreter training was thus closely tied to state and diplomatic structures.

Interviewees consistently emphasized the marginal role of Ukrainian in interpreter training and the dominance of Russian as the obligatory working language. Formal instruction in interpreting techniques was minimal, and students were often expected to acquire professional competence through practice alone. This model effectively reproduced linguistic hierarchies aligned with Soviet language policy and limited the

development of Ukrainian-centered interpreting traditions (cf. Zayachkivska 2026; Kitsyla 2026; Cherednychenko 2026; Kushnirenko 2026).

The United Nations Organization subsidized Soviet training programs in the 1970s. Upon mutual agreement, Russian-language interpreting at the UN remained the exclusive domain of Soviet nationals (Roland 1999: 145-146). Only with the lifting of ideological restrictions in the late 1980s did Ukraine begin to expand its own interpreter-training capacity, which led to the establishment of translation departments across multiple universities by the mid-1990s (Chernovaty et al. 2021: 69).

9. Variety of Community Interpreting

Interpreting in Soviet Ukraine extended far beyond diplomacy and military service. Various forms of community interpreting emerged in response to social needs, linguistic diversity, and institutional gaps, often operating at the margins of official recognition. Interpreting in general and community interpreting in particular can also be viewed as having a lot of other facets, like sign language interpreting.

Sign languages are national or regional rather than universal because they are natural languages that emerge and develop within specific deaf communities. Like spoken languages, they evolve organically, acquiring their own grammar, vocabulary, and discourse conventions, and are shaped by the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which they are used. Sign languages are closely linked to the deaf cultural identity and reflect local traditions, shared experiences, and social norms. The diversity of sign languages mirrors the diversity of the communities that use them, making universal unification neither practical nor desirable. In Ukraine, the sign language has existed for more than two centuries. It first emerged within early deaf communities and in specialized educational institutions for deaf children, notably the Lviv School for Deaf Children, established in 1830, and the Odesa school, opened in 1843 (Kulbida 2004: 173). The development of Ukrainian Sign Language was abruptly disrupted during the Stalinist period. Joseph Stalin exerted a strong negative influence on the use of sign language in the educational practices of special schools. He asserted that deaf people were “abnormal” and “mute,” and claimed that their manual communication was “not a language at all, not even an ersatz language.” As a result of these views, sign languages were effectively eliminated from the teaching process in schools for the deaf for decades (op. cit.). When Soviet TV transmitted some broadcasts with sign interpretation for the whole USSR in the 1980s, it was the Russian sign language that also contributed to the union-level Russification. The Ukrainian sign language reentered the public and official use only after Ukraine’s restoration of its Independence in 1991.

10. Cinema Interpreting

As a form of translation or interpreting, cinema interpreting can be understood as a specific mode of audiovisual translation in which spoken language in a film or cinema-related event is orally translated from a source language into a target language for the

audience. Unlike written forms of film translation such as subtitling or dubbing, cinema interpreting relies on real-time oral mediation. The interpreter listens to the original dialogue or speech and immediately renders its meaning into another language, taking into account not only words, but also tone, emotion, cultural references, timing, and visual context.

Today, cinema interpreting survives mainly in specialized contexts such as film festivals, archival screenings, educational settings, and live events, including post-screening discussions and Q&A sessions. Historically, however, it represents one of the earliest forms of audiovisual translation and played a crucial role in enabling cinema to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. It was once a widespread and essential practice, particularly in the early history of film, before subtitling and dubbing became established forms of audiovisual translation. Live interpreters orally translated dialogue during screenings, particularly in multilingual societies, smaller markets, rural areas, and colonial contexts where technical resources were limited.

Empirical evidence from late Soviet Ukraine demonstrates that cinema interpreting persisted as a localized practice. In Lviv, for example, foreign-language films were interpreted by interpreters to enable their screening for mass audiences. This form of mediated access illustrates both the adaptability of cinema interpreting and its dependence on individual interpreters operating within ideologically constrained frameworks (Zayachkivska 2026: 1).

Cinema in a national language is not tolerated within the empire because it is perceived as a powerful vehicle for cultural identity and political consciousness. The authorities recognize cinema's capacity to reach mass audiences and therefore sought to control its linguistic and ideological content. Dominant languages are promoted in cinematic production and exhibition as a means of cultural standardization and political control. This policy not only limited linguistic diversity in early cinema but also shaped the development of film translation practices, such as live interpreting. Dubbing tends to be more popular in totalitarian states because it allows for greater ideological and linguistic control over audiovisual content than other forms of translation, such as subtitling. By replacing the original soundtrack entirely, dubbing enables authorities to fully rewrite dialogue, adjust tone, and eliminate undesirable meanings without the audience having access to the source language. This is why foreign films were not dubbed in Ukrainian.

11. Conclusion

Ukrainian interpreters were largely invisible in the Soviet milieu because "colonial" power structures were designed to erase local agency while maintaining control over communication. Although interpreting was essential to the functioning of administration, commerce, and culture, interpreters were rarely acknowledged as national or cultural subjects. Instead, they were positioned as neutral intermediaries serving imperial or colonial interests.

Colonial regimes deliberately avoided recognizing interpreters as representatives of national identities, since doing so would legitimize the very cultures and languages

that colonial rule sought to subordinate. Visibility of national interpreters could strengthen local authority, encourage linguistic pride, and foster political consciousness, all of which posed a threat to colonial dominance. As a result, interpreters were rendered anonymous, marginal, or replaceable, even while their labor remained indispensable.

The analysis demonstrates that interpreters occupied a paradoxical position within Soviet hierarchies. On the one hand, they were entrusted with high-stakes communicative tasks in diplomacy, military operations, courts, cinema, and international encounters. On the other hand, they remained professionally invisible, administratively erased, and linguistically constrained. Interpreting was frequently treated not as an autonomous profession but as an auxiliary function embedded within other roles, reinforcing the marginalization of both interpreters and the Ukrainian language.

The Ukrainian case illustrates how interpreting in pseudocolonial settings cannot be understood solely as a neutral communicative practice. Instead, it must be analyzed as a socially embedded activity situated at the intersection of language policy, power, identity, and resistance. Recovering the history of interpreting in Soviet Ukraine thus not only enriches interpreting studies but also contributes to postcolonial and decolonial understandings of language mediation in imperial and post-imperial contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.