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Ukrainian Phonetic Shibboleths: Articulatory Specificity and Linguodidactic Ways of Overcoming Interference

Abstract: The relevance of this study is determined by the growing importance of phonetic shibboleths in contemporary Ukrainian sociolinguistic, linguodidactic and security contexts. Under the conditions of globalisation, mass language learning and intensified bilingual communication, phonetic interference has become one of the central problems of applied phonetics. At the same time, since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths have acquired not only linguistic, but also national, regional, cultural and identification significance. The research problem lies in the need for a comprehensive scientific and methodological description of Ukrainian sounds that are difficult for non-native speakers and bilinguals to reproduce because of subconscious articulatory habits and differences between phonological systems. The object of the study is Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths, namely sounds and pronunciation features that function as ethnic, national or regional indicators of a speaker. The study aims to conduct a scientific and methodological analysis of Ukrainian phonetic phenomena that create pronunciation difficulties for speakers of other languages or dialects and to identify effective linguodidactic ways of overcoming phonetic interference. The scientific novelty of the article lies in interpreting Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths not only as linguistic markers, but also as instruments of identity recognition, regional localisation and applied phonetic training. The study employs descriptive and scientific-methodological analysis. The theoretical framework is based on the works of Ukrainian phoneticians and linguists, including N. Totska, V. Brakhnov, Z. Dudnyk, O. Ishchenko, O. Bas-Kononenko, V. Bondarenko, I. Savchenko and other scholars. The article analyses vowel and consonant shibboleths of Ukrainian, including the pronunciation of [ɪ], [o], [ɥ], [r], [rʲ] and related phonetic phenomena. Particular attention is paid to the preservation of full vowel pronunciation in unstressed positions, the absence of strong vowel reduction, regional articulatory variants, the pronunciation of the Ukrainian pharyngeal fricative [r], the non-syllabic [ɥ], soft affricates, and the word *paliannytsia* as a complex phonetic test. The study demonstrates that the main obstacle to accurate pronunciation is not only insufficient knowledge of orthoepic norms, but also the stability of the native articulatory base, which operates at the level of subconscious neuromotor programmes. The article concludes that effective correction of phonetic interference requires targeted linguodidactic and speech-therapy strategies, including work with quasi-homonyms, contrastive pronunciation pairs, visual control of articulation, video recording, tongue-twisters and specific mechanical

exercises. Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths are therefore considered both reliable tools of linguistic identification and important objects of applied phonetic and linguodidactic research.

Keywords: shibboleth, phonetics, sound, articulation, linguistic identity, interference, linguodidactics.

Introduction

In the context of globalisation and the mass study of foreign languages, the problem of phonetic interference has become one of the central issues in contemporary applied phonetics. Interference may be understood as the transfer of pronunciation skills from the native language to another language, which results in an accent and, in some cases, distortion of meaning. Researchers identify several causes of this phenomenon. The first is subconscious resistance, namely a psychological barrier to accepting articulatory movements that are not characteristic of the speaker's native language. The second is the influence of the first language, which is manifested in the automatic use of already established articulatory patterns. For example, Ukrainian students often do not distinguish between long and short vowels in English because this contrast is absent in Ukrainian. The third cause is the lack of language contact, that is, the absence of perceptual experience in listening to authentic speech (*Nesterenko & Lysenko, 2024*).

The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, clear transformational processes have been observed in relation to self-identification, language policy, and the language codes used in everyday communication (*Kuznietsova, 2025, p. 23*). Applied phonetics is therefore acquiring a broader social significance: it becomes not only a field of linguistic description, but also an instrument of sociolinguistic analysis that helps to understand processes of integration, differentiation or marginalisation of certain groups through language.

Although the problem of phonetic interference is one of the key issues in applied phonetics, the mechanisms for overcoming subconscious articulatory barriers and the stability of the native-language articulatory matrix in adult speakers require deeper scholarly investigation. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion, phonetic shibboleths have acquired not only linguistic, but also security-related and identification significance. Accordingly, there is a need for a comprehensive scientific and methodological description of specific Ukrainian sounds, in particular [ɪ], [ʃ], [r], [ɪ'] and others, as markers of national and regional identity. There is also a need to develop effective linguodidactic approaches to their acquisition by non-native speakers and bilinguals.

The research problem lies in the insufficiently developed scientific and methodological explanation of Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths as articulatory, acoustic, sociolinguistic and linguodidactic phenomena. On the one hand, such sounds function as stable identifiers of a speaker's linguistic, ethnic or regional background. On the other hand, they represent pronunciation difficulties for speakers whose native articulatory base does not contain the relevant phonological or phonetic patterns. This creates a methodological challenge: it is not enough to explain the orthoepic norm theoretically; it is necessary to determine how subconscious articulatory habits can be modified through targeted phonetic, speech-therapy and linguodidactic training.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in interpreting Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths as complex linguistic units that combine articulatory-acoustic specificity, sociolinguistic identification value and practical linguodidactic potential. The article considers shibboleths not merely as isolated pronunciation difficulties, but as markers of national and regional belonging, as indicators of phonetic interference, and as objects of applied phonetic correction. Particular attention is paid to

the sounds and sound combinations that reveal the influence of another language or dialectal background and therefore require systematic methodological description.

The object of the study is phonetic shibboleths, namely the sounds of the Ukrainian language that most often function as ethnic or regional indicators of a speaker.

The subject of the analysis is the articulatory-acoustic and linguodidactic parameters of Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths.

The study aims to provide a scientific and methodological analysis of Ukrainian phonetic phenomena that constitute pronunciation difficulties for speakers of another language or dialect.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been set:

- to clarify the scholarly definition of the concept of “shibboleth” in linguistics and its role as an instrument of linguistic identification of the individual;
- to analyse key Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths, including the pronunciation of [и], [о], [ѣ], [г], [и'] and other sounds, and to provide their linguodidactic justification;
- to describe the articulatory-acoustic features of selected Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths;
- to identify typical deviations from the Ukrainian literary pronunciation norm caused by phonetic interference;
- to examine the role of subconscious articulatory habits in the reproduction of Ukrainian sounds by non-native speakers and bilinguals;
- to consider scientific and methodological approaches to the use of shibboleths in applied linguistics, dialectology and linguodidactics;
- to outline effective ways of overcoming phonetic interference through targeted pronunciation training, work with contrastive pairs, visual control and specific mechanical exercises.

The theoretical significance of the study lies in deepening the understanding of phonetic shibboleths as phenomena situated at the intersection of phonetics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, dialectology and linguodidactics. The research contributes to the theoretical description of Ukrainian phonetics by showing that individual sounds may function not only as elements of the phonological system, but also as markers of identity, regional origin and language competence. It also clarifies the role of articulatory habits as stable cultural and ethnic identifiers of the speaker.

The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of using its results in Ukrainian language teaching, pronunciation correction, speech training, work with bilingual speakers, and Ukrainian as a foreign or second language instruction. The proposed linguodidactic approaches may be useful for teachers, speech therapists, lecturers, language instructors, dialectologists and specialists in applied linguistics. They may also contribute to the development of methodological materials aimed at overcoming pronunciation interference and forming a stable Ukrainian articulatory base in adult learners.

Thus, the study of Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths is important not only for the description of the sound system of the Ukrainian language, but also for understanding broader processes of linguistic identity, regional differentiation, language adaptation and phonetic integration. In contemporary Ukrainian realities, phonetic shibboleths are becoming a significant object of linguistic research because they reveal how pronunciation connects language, identity, social belonging and communicative security.

Methods

The methodological framework of the study is based on a qualitative linguistic and scientific-methodological approach combining descriptive phonetic analysis, articulatory-acoustic interpretation, elements of sociolinguistic observation, and linguodidactic modelling. This methodological combination was selected because Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths are not only units of the sound system, but also markers of national, regional and sociolinguistic identification, as well as practical objects of pronunciation training for non-native speakers and bilinguals.

The study focuses on Ukrainian phonetic phenomena that create pronunciation difficulties for speakers of another language or dialect, in particular for adult bilinguals whose established articulatory base differs from that of Ukrainian literary pronunciation. The empirical material of the study includes Ukrainian vowel and consonant sounds that most frequently function as phonetic shibboleths, namely [ɪ], [o], [ʏ], [r], [ɪ'] and related pronunciation patterns. Particular attention is paid to those sounds whose incorrect reproduction reveals phonetic interference, regional origin, or the influence of another phonological system.

The descriptive method was used to record, classify and systematically explain the articulatory properties of Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths and typical deviations from the literary pronunciation norm. This method made it possible to describe the position of the speech organs, the degree of openness of the oral cavity, labialisation, tongue position, palatalisation, pharyngeal articulation, and the interaction between vowels and consonants in different phonetic contexts. It was also used to identify recurrent pronunciation substitutions, such as the replacement of Ukrainian [ɪ] by sounds closer to [i] or [ɨ], the replacement of unstressed [o] by [a], the incorrect pronunciation of non-syllabic [ʏ], the substitution of the Ukrainian pharyngeal [r] by [r] or [x]-like variants, and the insufficiently soft articulation of [ɪ'].

The scientific-methodological analysis was applied in order to examine Ukrainian phonetic phenomena that constitute pronunciation difficulties for speakers of another language or dialect. This analysis was aimed not only at describing the relevant sounds, but also at determining their linguodidactic justification. In this respect, each phonetic shibboleth was analysed according to several parameters: its place in the Ukrainian phonetic system, its articulatory and acoustic specificity, its potential role as a national or regional identifier, the most frequent types of interference, and the most effective methodological techniques for overcoming pronunciation difficulties.

The theoretical basis of the study is formed by the works of Ukrainian phoneticians and linguists, including N. Totska, V. Brakhnov, Z. Dudnyk, O. Ishchenko, O. Bas-Kononenko, V. Bondarenko, I. Savchenko and other scholars. Their studies provide the foundation for analysing Ukrainian vocalism and consonantism, orthoepic norms, articulatory habits, sound modifications in speech flow, assimilation processes, vowel quality, speech tempo, and the relationship between phonetic norm and actual pronunciation practice. The study also relies on the methodological understanding that articulatory habit is a stable cultural and ethnic identifier of a speaker and that theoretical knowledge of orthoepic rules is insufficient without systematic articulatory training.

The research procedure consisted of several stages. At the first stage, the concept of “shibboleth” was examined in its linguistic, historical and sociolinguistic dimensions. Particular attention was paid to its transformation from a historical marker of group identification into a

contemporary instrument of linguistic, national, regional and security-related recognition. At the second stage, the most significant Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths were selected for analysis. The selection was based on their phonetic specificity, frequency of pronunciation errors among bilinguals and non-native speakers, and relevance for identifying national or regional pronunciation features.

At the third stage, the selected sounds were described in terms of their articulatory features and their position within the Ukrainian phonological system. Ukrainian vocalism was analysed with attention to the preservation of full vowel pronunciation in both stressed and unstressed positions, the absence of strong vowel reduction, the quality of [ɪ] and [o], and regional deviations from the literary norm. Ukrainian consonantism was analysed with attention to the pronunciation of non-syllabic [ʃ], soft affricates such as [ɲ], the Ukrainian pharyngeal fricative [r], and the articulatory complexity of words such as *palianytsia*, which function as complex phonetic tests.

At the fourth stage, typical cases of phonetic interference were identified and interpreted. The study considered interference as the transfer of pronunciation habits from the native or dominant language into Ukrainian. Particular attention was paid to subconscious articulatory resistance, that is, the difficulty adult speakers experience when they attempt to reproduce movements of the speech organs that are absent from their native phonetic system. This approach made it possible to explain why pronunciation errors persist even when speakers consciously know the relevant orthoepic rules.

At the fifth stage, linguodidactic strategies for overcoming pronunciation difficulties were systematised. These strategies include contrastive work with quasi-homonyms and minimal or near-minimal pairs, slow controlled reading, visual monitoring of lip and tongue position, video recording of one's own speech, gradual acceleration of pronunciation tempo, work with tongue-twisters, and specific mechanical exercises aimed at activating speech organs that are not normally involved in the speaker's native language. For example, exercises for the Ukrainian pharyngeal [r] require attention to the movement of the root of the tongue and the narrowing of the pharyngeal cavity, while the pronunciation of [ɲ] requires the gradual development of soft affricate articulation.

The analysis of vowel shibboleths was conducted with regard to both national and regional pronunciation markers. The Ukrainian [ɪ] was examined as one of the most salient indicators of phonetic competence, especially in the speech of Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals. The sound [o] was analysed in relation to the preservation of labialisation and the avoidance of "akannia", that is, the replacement of [o] by [a] in unstressed positions. Regional variants, such as the narrowed [ô] in Transcarpathian speech or the expanded articulation of [ɪ] in the Galician-Bukovynian dialectal area, were interpreted as markers of regional phonetic identity.

The analysis of consonant shibboleths focused on sounds that are particularly difficult for bilinguals and non-native speakers. The non-syllabic [ʃ] was examined as a positional allophone of /ʃ/ that is often incorrectly replaced by [ɸ] under the influence of another phonetic system. The soft affricate [ɲ] was analysed as a complex sound requiring the coordinated articulation of a stop and a fricative component. The Ukrainian [r] was examined as a pharyngeal voiced fricative whose correct pronunciation requires specific articulatory training of the throat muscles. These sounds were treated as linguodidactic priorities because their incorrect pronunciation immediately reveals phonetic interference.

The study also used elements of comparative phonetic analysis. Ukrainian pronunciation features were considered in relation to other phonological systems, primarily Russian, but also English, Belarusian, Romanian, French and other languages where relevant. This comparison made it possible to explain why certain Ukrainian sounds are replaced by more familiar sounds from another phonetic system. It also helped to identify the articulatory basis of pronunciation errors and to determine which correction strategies may be most effective for particular groups of learners.

The linguodidactic component of the methodology is based on the principle that pronunciation correction must combine conscious explanation with repeated articulatory practice. Therefore, the study does not limit itself to describing phonetic errors, but proposes practical ways of overcoming them. Particular emphasis is placed on exercises that transform theoretical knowledge of pronunciation into stable neuromotor skills. This is especially important for adult learners, whose native articulatory base has already been consolidated through many years of speech practice.

The validity of the analysis is supported by the integration of theoretical phonetic sources, description of actual pronunciation difficulties, comparison of literary and non-literary pronunciation patterns, and the formulation of practical methodological recommendations. The study is qualitative in nature and does not involve instrumental acoustic measurement or experimental testing of learners. Therefore, its findings should be interpreted as a scientific-methodological and linguodidactic analysis rather than as an experimental phonetic study. At the same time, the proposed approach provides a basis for further empirical research, including acoustic analysis, perception experiments, and testing the effectiveness of specific pronunciation correction techniques.

Thus, the selected methods make it possible to examine Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths as complex phenomena situated at the intersection of phonetics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and linguodidactics. The combination of descriptive analysis, scientific-methodological interpretation and linguodidactic modelling allows the study to explain both the articulatory specificity of Ukrainian shibboleths and the practical ways of overcoming interference in their acquisition by bilinguals and non-native speakers.

Literature Review

The concept of a “shibboleth” — from the Hebrew words meaning “ear of grain” or “stream” — historically denotes a linguistic feature by which the ethnic or regional origin of a speaker can be recognised. The term originates from the biblical story of the conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites: the Gileadites blocked the crossing over the River Jordan and forced everyone who attempted to pass to pronounce the word *shibboleth*. If a person pronounced it as *sibboleth*, they were killed, since this confirmed that they belonged to the hostile Ephraimite tribe (*Judges 12:5–6*).

In the twenty-first century, the shibboleth has acquired new significance in the Ukrainian context. Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian shibboleths, such as *palianytsia*, *polunytsia* and *Ukrzaliznytsia*, have been transformed from linguistic curiosities into real security instruments and markers of national identity. In the contemporary context, shibboleths perform several main functions: first, a recognitional function, namely the rapid verification of belonging to the “us–them” group, which is relevant for identifying spies and Russian-speaking

Ukrainians, including internally displaced persons; secondly, a protective function, namely the detection of saboteurs, since the articulatory habits of an adult are difficult to change instantly even with excellent knowledge of another language; and thirdly, a unifying function, since the memefication of the word *palianytsia* has created a powerful cultural code that consolidates Ukrainians through humour and awareness of the uniqueness of their own language.

The ethnic self-awareness of any person is based primarily on their native language. The production of sounds is the result of the coordinated work of the respiratory, nervous and muscular systems. In the process of communication, the speaker does not think each time about how to adapt one sound to another, since human consciousness immediately sets the pronunciation of the whole word in accordance with the laws of the articulatory base of the native language, which has been formed through regular training over many years. This property of linguistic consciousness is nothing other than an articulatory habit, which, according to Z. Dudnyk, acts as a specific cultural and ethnic identifier of the individual. Therefore, “the speaker who masters the articulatory base of another type of speech, even knowing the orthoepic rules, may incorrectly apply the acquired knowledge of pronunciation both because another system of skills predominates in their experience and because they do not understand the action of subtle but regular factors for a given speech community that have not entered the field of systematic scholarly consideration” (*Dudnyk, 2010, p. 4*).

From the methodological experience of developing perfect Ukrainian pronunciation, it is known that what hinders it is not so much the learner’s or student’s inability to pronounce correctly, but rather the “nets” of established intentions transferred from native speech to another language (*Dudnyk, 2010, p. 5*). Understanding and eliminating phonetic obstacles become key elements in the pedagogical landscape, since they form the basis of successful attempts at language learning (*Nesterenko & Lysenko, 2024, p. 187*).

In the modern Ukrainian literary language, the vowel system consists of six vowel phonemes: /a/, /o/, /y/, /e/, /u/, /i/. The main feature of Ukrainian vocalism is that unstressed vowels do not differ significantly in their pronunciation from stressed ones, and all syllabic vowels of the Ukrainian language retain full pronunciation in all positions, as well as, with relatively few exceptions, their quality in unstressed syllables. Sharp reduction, weakening or indistinct pronunciation of a vowel is a rare and atypical phenomenon for the Ukrainian language, which in this respect brings it closer to Italian or Spanish. By contrast, English and Russian, for example, are characterised by strong reduction. The absence of full vowel reduction is caused by the nature of Ukrainian word stress, the strength of which in Ukrainian is greater than in Polish and Czech, but significantly weaker than in Russian or English. For this reason, the stressed syllable in Ukrainian is not as sharply distinguished from unstressed syllables (*Kiuntzli & Pyskach, 2010, p. 161*). L. Skalozub also noted that synthetic factors of the segmental and suprasegmental levels of the phonetic system are always manifested in a sentence (*Skalozub, 2001, pp. 51–52*).

In the monograph *Vowel Sounds of the Ukrainian Language Depending on Speech Tempo*, O. Ishchenko experimentally traced the specific characteristics—duration, spectrum and intensity—of vowel sounds in different word positions against the background of speech tempo variation. According to the researcher, as tempo increases, the duration of the vowel sound decreases. Tempo changes the sounding time of a sound in all positions of the word—initial, medial and final—and

in all syllables regardless of their consonantal composition. Thus, tempo change is observed through the shortening or lengthening of vowel sounds (*Ishchenko, 2012, p. 185*).

O. Bas-Kononenko noted that “the quality of a vowel is influenced by its position in the word, its consonantal-vocalic environment, and the rhythm of the word” (*Bas-Kononenko, 2019*). Having analysed three major orthoepic dictionaries of the Ukrainian language—*Ukrainian Literary Pronunciation and Stress. Dictionary-Reference Book* (1973), M. I. Pohribnyi’s *Orthoepic Dictionary* (1984), and the two-volume *Orthoepic Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language* (2001–2003)—the researcher drew attention to differences and scholarly inaccuracies in the most recent of them.

Thus, phonetic experiments conducted by scholars have shown that vowel sounds vary widely in terms of the acoustic parameters of time and intensity: their values always depend on linguistic phenomena, such as tempo, stress and position in the word, and extralinguistic phenomena, such as the physical and psycho-emotional state of the speaker, the communicative situation, motivation and willingness to communicate.

The system of Ukrainian literary consonantism comprises thirty-two consonant phonemes: /б/, /п/, /м/, /в/, /ф/, /л/, /л', /т/, /т', /з/, /з', /с/, /с', /ц/, /ц', /аз/, /аз', /ж/, /ч/, /ш/, /аж/, /л', /л', /н/, /н', /р/, /р', /ї/, /г/, /к/, /х/, /г/. Pronunciation difficulties for bilinguals are posed by the sounds [ц'], [аз], [аз'], [ч], [аж], [р], [р'], [г] and [х]. In oral literary speech, many cases of double and even triple phonetic interactions, overlapping phonetic phenomena and the emergence of one combinatory change as a result of another have been identified, which is clearly illustrated by modern orthoepic dictionaries (*Peshchak et al., 2001–2003*). Various modifications of consonants, including assimilation, dissimilation, dieresis and others, have been examined in the scholarly works of V. Brakhnov, N. Totska, V. Bondarenko, I. Savchenko and other researchers (*Bondarenko, 2010; Brakhnov, 1970; Savchenko, 2012; Totska, 1981*).

Results

Vowel Sounds as Phonetic Shibboleths

The unique Ukrainian wide-narrow front vowel of high-mid aperture [ɪ] is one of the most prominent phonetic language markers that make it possible to distinguish a native speaker from a non-native speaker or from a bilingual speaker whose dominant language is another one. For Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals, this sound often becomes a “stumbling block” and reveals linguistic interference. The main reason for incorrect pronunciation is substitution, that is, the replacement of one sound by another. The articulatory base of a bilingual speaker accustomed to the Russian phonetic system attempts to substitute the unfamiliar Ukrainian [ɪ] with the nearest “familiar” sounds, [ы] or [і]. This is particularly noticeable after the pharyngeal, back-lingual and sibilant consonants: [кúьіф] (*Кувіф*), [хúьітро] (*khytro*, “cunningly”), [гúьінути] (*hynuty*, “to perish”); [грóшні] (*broshi*, “money”), [кράшччі] (*krashchi*, “better”), [сúшні] (*sushi*). To overcome this defect, various speech-therapy exercises should be recommended, one of which is the pronunciation of contrastive pairs: діл – дим, тік – тин, сік – сир, ліс – лис, кіт – кит, кричи – кричіть, суши – сушіть, чип – чін, жити – жінка, шити – шість, and so on.

In the modern Carpathian dialects of Ukraine, the ancient Slavic back vowel phoneme /ы/ has been preserved (*Berzenko, 1980, p. 52*), and it functions as a regional marker of Ukrainian speech. We have often observed the speech of highly educated people who had long since left their

dialectal environment, but who had not managed to get rid of their articulatory habit and, when communicating in the literary language, continued to pronounce [ɨ] instead of [и], which developed from the back Indo-European long *ī*: *мы, пробле́мы, сын*. This phenomenon has a clear historical, articulatory and psycholinguistic basis and indicates the deep preservation of an archaic Proto-Slavic phonetic matrix operating at the level of subconscious neuromotor programmes.

Another specific feature in the system of dialectal Ukrainian vocalism of the Galician-Bukovynian group is the expanded articulation of the stressed sound [и], with full or partial approximation to [e]: *родéна* instead of *родина*, *сéла* instead of *сила*, *пéти* instead of *пуди* (*Matviias, 1990, p. 73*). This feature often marks a person originating from these territories, who, while speaking the literary language, pronounces *сéнтаксис* instead of *синтаксис* or *пréисудок* instead of *присудок*.

The sound [o] may also be regarded as both a regional and national shibboleth. It is a broad, labialised, back vowel of mid aperture. The replacement of the rounded unstressed [o] by the unrounded [a], a phenomenon known as *akannia*, which is characteristic of northern Ukrainian, especially Polissian, dialects, as well as Belarusian and Russian, serves as an identifier of a Russian-speaking person. Such a speaker may pronounce *мостíти* as *мастíти*, *пора́ди* as *пара́ди*, *голосува́ти* as *галасува́ти*, *раби́* as *раби́*, and so on. This feature is also used to identify many people originating from northern, southern and eastern Ukraine.

The speech of Transcarpathians is distinguished by the narrowed [ô], which occurs in both stressed and unstressed positions before a soft consonant, before a syllable containing [i], [y], [ô], and before the non-syllabic sounds [j̥] and [j̨]: *кpȯj̨, xȯm'íти*. In order to develop the technique of broad articulation of [o], it is necessary to monitor the correct shape of the lips and the degree of opening of the oral cavity, and to practise constantly distinguishing the pronunciation of [o] and [y], for example in quasi-homonyms: *сам* — with the mouth widened on [o] while looking in the mirror — *сум, бор – бур, бот – бут, копа – куна, копити – купити, лоб – луб, мор – муф, роки – руки, ток – тук, тонати – тунати*, and so on. One should begin with slow reading, fixing the articulation, and then gradually increase the tempo. The reading should be recorded on video, with constant correction and improvement of one's own pronunciation.

Conversely, people originating from eastern and central Ukraine are often identified by a broad [o]. Moreover, the articulation of [a] with a noticeable tendency towards [o] may frequently serve as a phonetic shibboleth for identifying them: [ї́на жиелáо ỹ Хáоркови саома́ о]. Such pronunciation is immediately noticed by residents of south-western Ukraine, where, because of the war, there are now many internally displaced persons.

Consonant Sounds as Phonetic Shibboleths

In Ukrainian, most consonants are produced by the approximation of the anterior parts of the speech organs: the lips, the front part of the tongue, and the upper teeth. In addition, as a result of coarticulation, sounds change their qualitative and quantitative characteristics. The modifications of Ukrainian consonants that depend on their position within the word and the syllable include the changes of [в] and [j] into [j̥] and [j̨]. The following dependence is observed: at the beginning of a syllable before a vowel, the sounds [в] and [j̨] occur, whereas at the end of a syllable after a vowel, or at the beginning of a syllable before the following consonant, the non-syllabic vowels [j̥] and [j̨] occur as positional allophones of the phonemes /в/ and /j̨/. Compare: [j̨áблукo], [пj̨тáj̨y],

[гул'аї], [вам], [буваї], [маї], [стаїте], and others. However, Russian-Ukrainian bilinguals often incorrectly pronounce [ф] instead of [ў]: [знаф], [л'убоф], [слухач'іф], [жофтий].

Ukrainian has a developed system of consonant softness, which covers a significant part of its consonant system: /л'/, /т'/, /з'/, /с'/, /лз'/, /ц'/, /л'/, /н'/, /р'/, /й'/. The well-known shibboleth *palianytsia* [пал'аниц'а] functions as a complex phonetic test that checks several levels of speech competence simultaneously. Its pronunciation requires precise coordination of the movements of the speech organs, which is natural for Ukrainians but a serious challenge for foreigners. The sound [ц'] is an affricate formed through the instantaneous fusion of the plosive [т'] and the fricative [с']. Foreigners whose languages do not contain such a sound will replace it with their own equivalents. An example of such substitution is the transliteration of the Ukrainian surname *Лусиця* as *Lissitsa*, as a result of which, for instance, the well-known Ukrainian agricultural expert Oleksii Lysytsia became Alex Lissitsa. However, the modern transliteration of this surname as *Lysytsia* is also unable to convey the exact sound of the affricate [ц'].

Russian-speaking individuals find it particularly difficult to reproduce the soft [ц'], since their native language has only its hard counterpart. To correct pronunciation, it is advisable first to practise two-sound combinations such as [ц'а], [ц'о], [ц'у], [ц'і], and then to articulate two- and multi-syllabic words: *цяця, киця, праця, вулиця, криниця, столиця, крамниця, залізниця*, and others; *цього, цьому, лицьовий, кільцьовий, працьовитий; кицю, пацюк, цюкати, танцюю; ціна, цілий, цікаво, руди, танці*. Tongue-twisters containing this sound may also be suggested: *Ця киця-цяця у спідниці / Танцює танець у крамниці; Вранці наші іноземці / Принесли смачні гостинці: / Тут рум'яна паляниця / І солодка полуниця!*

A vivid indicator of Ukrainian euphony is the tendency to avoid hiatus, that is, the meeting of two vowels. For this purpose, an intervocalic [j] often appears, for example in the words *проєкт, діста, траєкторія, егойст*, and others. This sound must not be omitted during articulation. Therefore, the incorrect pronunciation of the words *лінія* as [л'ін'іа] instead of [л'ін'іја], *пам'ять* as [пám'ат'] instead of [пám'јат'], and *питає* as [пиегає] instead of [пиегаје] immediately identifies Russian-speaking bilinguals.

Ukrainian orthoepy allows the pronunciation of the consonants [т] and [т'] with an approximation to [ц] and [ц'] if they occur after [с'] or before the sibilants [ц], [с], [ц'], [с']: *стіна* [с'т'ц'іна], *радість* [радіс'т'ц'], *у місті* [у м'іс'ц'і], *воріття* [воур'іц':а], *дивиться* [дівіиц':а]. By contrast, in the words *життя* [жит'т':а] and *тіло* [т'іло], the approximation of [т'] to [ц']—[жит'ц':а], [т'і'ло]—is a violation of the pronunciation norm. Similarly, [л] and [л'] may be pronounced as [лз] and [лз'] only before the sibilant sounds [з], [ц], [с], [лз], [з'], [ц'], [с'], [лз']: *радісья* [радіз'с'а], *на грядці* [на гр'адз'ц'і]. In other cases, such affricatisation is erroneous: *діти* [діт'ц'і], *ходять* [хóдз'ат'ц'], and others.

The pronunciation of the Ukrainian voiced pharyngeal fricative [ґ] is problematic for foreigners, including Russians, Romanians, French speakers and others. This sound is produced as a result of a narrowing that occurs in the pharyngeal cavity owing to the backward movement of the root of the tongue and its approximation to the posterior wall of the pharynx, as well as through the contraction of the muscles of the posterior pharyngeal wall. Speakers who do not have the articulatory skills required for correct pronunciation often pronounce it before back vowels as [ґх]: [ґхárно], [ґхолова], [ґхýсто]. Since the vowels [а], [о], [у] require the lowering of the lower jaw and the retraction of the tongue, it is difficult for a foreigner in this position to maintain a “pure”

vibration of the vocal cords. The root of the tongue involuntarily rises towards the soft palate, creating excessive friction, which results in a sound resembling a hoarse, “unclean” [x] with an admixture of voicing.

Another incorrect pronunciation, [гiркo], [гiпc], [гiйзep], is explained by the fact that the vowels [e], [i] and [u] are front vowels, during the production of which the back of the tongue rises high towards the palate. For a foreigner, especially a speaker of Romance languages or Russian, this tense tongue position provokes a reflex closure, as a result of which the plosive sound [r] (g) is produced. Thus, [r] is a genuine phonetic exclusivity that requires training of the throat muscles, which are usually not involved in other languages. For this purpose, the “gargling” exercise may be recommended: one should take a little water into the mouth, tilt the head back and begin to “gargle” while producing the sound [x-x-x] or [r-r-r], and then try to perform the same procedure without water, monitoring the movement of the tongue. Articulation drills and tongue-twisters combining the sounds [r] – [r] – [x] are also effective. For example: *Григорій гнав гусей на гору; Гліб горланить, а Хома ховається; Годувала гава гавенят на танку. Готувала в горщику гарну запіканку.*

Discussion

The general research problem addressed in this study lies at the intersection of sociolinguistics, applied phonetics and linguodidactics. The results confirm and expand previous findings in Ukrainian phonetic studies by demonstrating that phonetic shibboleths are not merely isolated pronunciation features, but complex linguistic phenomena connected with articulation, identity, regional belonging, social perception and language acquisition. In contemporary Ukrainian conditions, especially after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion, these phenomena have acquired particular relevance because they function simultaneously as markers of linguistic competence, national identity, regional localisation and communicative security.

The analysis of the pronunciation of the vowels [u] and [o] as reliable shibboleths corresponds to O. Bas-Kononenko’s observations concerning the preservation of full vowel pronunciation in Ukrainian, including in unstressed positions. Unlike Russian or English, where strong reduction is typical, the Ukrainian articulatory base requires a comparatively clear and full realisation of vowels. This feature makes processes such as *akannia*, that is, the replacement of [o] by [a], or the approximation of [u] to [i] or [y], especially noticeable identifiers of phonetic interference. Such deviations are not accidental pronunciation errors; they reveal the influence of another phonological system and demonstrate the stability of previously formed articulatory habits.

The findings also show that Ukrainian vocalism can function as both a national and regional marker. The Ukrainian [u] is particularly important because it occupies a specific position in the vowel system and is difficult for Ukrainian-Russian bilinguals to reproduce accurately. The tendency to replace it with [y] or [i] demonstrates the mechanism of phonetic substitution, when a speaker uses the closest available sound from the dominant language. At the same time, regional variants, such as the preservation of the archaic back vowel [y] in Carpathian dialects or the approximation of stressed [u] to [e] in the Galician-Bukovynian area, indicate that shibboleths do not operate only according to the binary opposition “native speaker—non-native speaker”. They may also identify a speaker’s regional background within the Ukrainian-speaking continuum.

The sound [o] provides another important example of the interaction between the national literary norm, regional variation and interference. The preservation of rounded [o] in unstressed

positions is an important feature of Ukrainian pronunciation, whereas its replacement by [a] may indicate the influence of Russian, Belarusian or certain northern Ukrainian dialectal patterns. Conversely, a narrowed [ô] in Transcarpathian speech or a broadened [o] characteristic of some speakers from central and eastern Ukraine may function as regional phonetic markers. Thus, vowel shibboleths demonstrate that phonetic identification is multidimensional: it can reveal not only whether a speaker has mastered the literary norm, but also which regional or bilingual articulatory background influences their speech.

From the perspective of psycholinguistics, the difficulties recorded in mastering Ukrainian consonants such as [ɪʔ], [r] and [ʃ] by adult speakers illustrate Z. Dudnyk's concept of articulatory habit as a stable cultural and ethnic identifier of the individual. The present study confirms that theoretical knowledge of orthoepic rules is insufficient for achieving correct pronunciation. Articulatory matrices formed in the native or dominant language operate at the level of subconscious neuromotor programmes. As a result, adult bilinguals and non-native speakers often encounter a powerful psychological and muscular barrier when attempting to produce movements that are not characteristic of their established phonetic system.

This is particularly evident in the pronunciation of the Ukrainian non-syllabic [ʃ]. The replacement of [ʃ] by [ɸ] among Russian-Ukrainian bilinguals demonstrates the influence of another phonetic system on the realisation of Ukrainian positional allophones. Such errors reveal not only the speaker's lack of automatic control over Ukrainian phonetic alternation, but also the deeper problem of transferring native-language articulation into Ukrainian. Therefore, the acquisition of [ʃ] requires not only knowledge of its positional distribution, but also systematic auditory and articulatory training aimed at developing automatic pronunciation skills.

The soft affricate [ɪʔ] represents another significant case of phonetic interference. The Ukrainian word *paliannytsia* functions as a complex phonetic test because it requires the coordinated realisation of several features: palatalisation, affrication, vowel quality and rhythmic organisation. For Russian-speaking individuals, the reproduction of [ɪʔ] is especially difficult because their native language has a hard counterpart but lacks the same soft affricate in the relevant phonetic function. The inability to pronounce [ɪʔ] accurately therefore becomes a reliable indicator of articulatory interference. At the same time, this case demonstrates that shibboleths are not only diagnostic tools, but also useful didactic units: they concentrate several pronunciation difficulties in one lexical form and can be used as material for systematic correction.

The Ukrainian pharyngeal voiced fricative [r] is one of the most distinctive consonantal shibboleths. Its correct pronunciation requires a specific configuration of the pharyngeal cavity, the root of the tongue and the posterior pharyngeal wall. Speakers whose native languages lack such articulation tend to replace it with sounds that are closer to their own phonetic system, including [r] or a voiced [x]-like variant. This confirms that phonetic interference depends not only on auditory perception, but also on the physical readiness of the articulatory apparatus. The production of [r] requires activation of muscular mechanisms that may be unfamiliar to speakers of Russian, Romance languages and other linguistic systems. Consequently, the correction of this sound must include not only explanation, but also mechanical and speech-therapy exercises.

The results require a reconsideration of traditional linguodidactic approaches to pronunciation training. Overcoming phonetic interference cannot be achieved through conscious control alone. Learners may know the rule, understand the difference between sounds and even recognise the

correct pronunciation in another speaker's speech, but still fail to reproduce the sound accurately because the native articulatory matrix remains dominant. Therefore, effective correction must include repeated speech-therapy training, auditory differentiation, articulatory automatisisation and multimodal feedback.

The proposed exercises with quasi-homonyms and contrastive pairs are particularly important because they combine auditory discrimination with articulatory practice. Pairs such as *діл – дилм, сик – сип, ким – кум, сом – сум, боп – буп* and similar examples enable learners to distinguish between sounds that are close in perception but different in the Ukrainian phonetic system. Such exercises help transform abstract knowledge of pronunciation norms into practical phonetic competence. They also allow teachers to detect whether a learner's error is primarily auditory, articulatory or both.

Visual control is another important strategy for overcoming interference. Monitoring the shape of the lips, the opening of the oral cavity and the position of the tongue, including through mirrors or video recording, makes articulatory movements more conscious and controllable. This is especially useful for sounds whose correct pronunciation depends on visible articulatory parameters, such as labialisation in [o] or the opening of the mouth during vowel production. Video recording also provides learners with delayed feedback and allows them to compare their pronunciation over time, which is important for forming stable neuromotor skills.

Mechanical exercises, such as the “gargling” exercise for the Ukrainian [r], are justified by the fact that some sounds require the activation of articulatory mechanisms that are not normally used in the learner's native language. In such cases, purely verbal explanation is insufficient. The learner must first develop physical awareness of the relevant articulatory zone and only then integrate the movement into actual speech. This approach brings linguodidactics closer to speech therapy and supports the view that adult pronunciation training should include not only phonological explanation, but also targeted motor practice.

The study also has broader sociolinguistic implications. Ukrainian shibboleths operate in the space between language, identity and social evaluation. They can mark a speaker as belonging to a particular national, regional or linguistic group. In wartime conditions, they may also acquire a security-related function, as in the case of *palianytsia*, which has become a cultural symbol of resistance and unity. However, the social function of shibboleths should be interpreted carefully. On the one hand, they may consolidate a community and reinforce linguistic awareness. On the other hand, they may also become instruments of exclusion or stigmatisation, especially in relation to bilinguals, internally displaced persons or speakers who are actively transitioning to Ukrainian. This ambivalence requires further sociolinguistic and ethical reflection.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in the interpretation of phonetic shibboleths as complex markers located at the intersection of phonetic structure, articulatory habit and identity. Traditional phonetic description usually focuses on the classification of sounds and pronunciation norms. The present study shows that certain sounds become socially meaningful because they are difficult to imitate without long-term articulatory training. In this sense, shibboleths reveal the embodied nature of language: identity is not expressed only through lexical choice or grammar, but also through deeply automatised movements of the speech organs.

The practical contribution of the study lies in the development of linguodidactic approaches to overcoming interference. The findings suggest that pronunciation teaching should be organised

around specific articulatory difficulties rather than around abstract rules alone. For bilinguals and non-native speakers, the correction of Ukrainian pronunciation should include work with minimal or quasi-minimal pairs, controlled repetition, slow reading, gradual tempo increase, tongue-twisters, visual feedback, video analysis and mechanical exercises. Such strategies are particularly important for adult learners because their native articulatory base is already stabilised and cannot be restructured through passive exposure alone.

At the same time, the study has several limitations. First, it is primarily qualitative and scientific-methodological in nature; it does not include instrumental acoustic measurements or experimental testing of learners before and after pronunciation training. Secondly, the analysis focuses on selected Ukrainian shibboleths, while other potentially significant sounds and prosodic features remain outside the central scope of the article. Thirdly, the discussion of regional variation is based on selected phonetic markers and does not aim to provide a complete dialectological description of all Ukrainian regions. Fourthly, the sociolinguistic role of shibboleths in wartime communication requires additional empirical research involving speakers from different regions, age groups and linguistic backgrounds.

Future research may develop this topic in several directions. One promising direction is the experimental acoustic study of Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths in the speech of bilinguals and non-native speakers. Such research could measure vowel formants, duration, intensity, degree of labialisation, palatalisation and pharyngeal articulation. Another important direction is the psycholinguistic study of articulatory resistance in adult learners, including the role of auditory perception, motor control and emotional attitudes towards pronunciation correction. It would also be useful to test the effectiveness of specific linguodidactic techniques, such as quasi-homonym drills, video feedback and mechanical exercises, through controlled pedagogical experiments.

A further perspective concerns the long-term stability of lexical shibboleths as social and security markers. Human speech is adaptive, and speakers can gradually learn even difficult pronunciation patterns if they have sufficient motivation, exposure and training. Therefore, the effectiveness of particular shibboleths may change over time. Words that once functioned as reliable markers may lose part of their diagnostic value when they become widely known and deliberately practised. This makes it necessary to examine shibboleths dynamically, as phenomena that evolve together with social conditions, language policy and communicative practice.

Overall, the discussion confirms that Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths are significant not only for theoretical phonetics, but also for applied linguistics, language teaching, sociolinguistics and identity studies. They reveal how deeply pronunciation is connected with the speaker's linguistic biography, regional background and cultural affiliation. The main obstacle to accurate pronunciation is not the absence of knowledge, but the stability of subconscious articulatory habits and the difference between phonological systems. Therefore, the successful acquisition of Ukrainian phonetic shibboleths requires systematic, multimodal and practice-oriented training aimed at transforming conscious knowledge into stable articulatory skill.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, the phonetic shibboleth is being transformed from a biblical password into a high-precision instrument of applied linguistics that enables reliable identification of an individual in a globalised world. However, shibboleths do not merely identify speakers; they

also shape social attitudes towards them. In Ukraine, the word *palianytsia* has become a symbol of unity and cultural resistance.

In addition to functioning as a marker of national identification and as a means of distinguishing between “us” and “them”, phonetic shibboleths serve as an accurate instrument for the regional localisation of a speaker. Specific articulatory habits, such as the preservation of the archaic Proto-Slavic phoneme /ɫ/ or the narrowed [ô] in Transcarpathia, the expanded articulation of [ɲ] in Galicia and Bukovyna, and the replacement of unstressed [o] by [a] among speakers originating from southern, northern and eastern Ukraine, make it possible to identify the geographical origin of a speaker even when they communicate in standard Ukrainian.

Phonetic phenomena are reliable instruments of linguistic identification because they are rooted in deep articulatory and phonological structures. The main reason why foreigners or Russian-speaking Ukrainians are unable to reproduce certain Ukrainian sounds correctly lies primarily in the divergence between articulatory bases, that is, the set of habitual movements of the speech organs. This difficulty is further reinforced by the absence of practical pronunciation skills and by a psychological barrier to unfamiliar articulatory movements.

An important feature of Ukrainian, which distinguishes it from Russian and English, is the preservation of full vowel pronunciation in unstressed positions. This is determined by the specific character of Ukrainian word stress, which makes sharp reduction or indistinct pronunciation of vowels atypical for the Ukrainian phonetic system.

Successful elimination of accent and correction of sound substitution by foreigners or bilingual speakers cannot be achieved through knowledge of orthoepic norms alone. The formation of an accurate Ukrainian articulatory base requires the purposeful use of speech-therapy and phonetic practices, including work with quasi-homonyms and contrastive word pairs, visual control of lip and tongue position, video recording of speech, and the use of specific techniques such as the “gargling” exercise for practising the pharyngeal [r].

In view of the above, a promising direction for the development of applied phonetics lies in the integration of linguodidactic approaches with new technologies and sociolinguistic monitoring. The development of innovative psycholinguistic methods for rapidly overcoming articulatory barriers in adult speakers, as well as further research into the evolution of shibboleths as security-related instruments, remains a key task for future scholarly studies.

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Conflict of Interest

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