

THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE CAPITAL OF UKRAINE IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING MEDIA

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Abstract

Speaker identity is one of the factors that might play a role in the realisation of sounds. Previous studies have observed that phonetic variations, alongside the formation of speaker's identity, can index political meaning. This article aims at analysing a politically conditioned variation in rendering the name of the capital of Ukraine. Though the change from 'Kiev' to 'Kyiv' precedes the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine, the analysis shows 24 February, 2022 has accelerated the process. Contrary to the general tendency for a language change to manifest first in the spoken mode and then proceed to writing, the findings indicate faster shift from 'Kiev' to 'Kyiv' in written English.

Keywords: phonetic change, politically conditioned variation, speaker identity, spoken mode, written mode, Kyiv, Kiev

1. Introduction

The spread of global English has altered the perspective on pronunciation. For learners, the emphasis has shifted from normative pronunciation (Levis, 2005), towards intelligibility (Levis, 2018). Though previous studies reported on accents having an impact on such diverse aspects as a person's trustworthiness (Anderson *et al.*, 2007; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010), physical attractiveness and intelligence (Anderson *et al.*, 2007), psychosocial, behavioural, and personality attributes (Shah, 2019), accuracy and prestige (Frumkin & Thompson, 2020), or people's perception of one's effectiveness, competence, and friendliness (Tsalikis *et al.*, 1991). Nowadays prominent figures in politics and media often exhibit accent diversity (Lindsey, 2019). Since varietal and dialectal differences are no longer stigmatised or at least the stigmatisation has decreased, a question arises whether a person's pronunciation should be paid attention to if that person is intelligible or whether it should be disregarded. A follow-up question would address the pronunciation of geographical names. Is variability in the pronunciation of geographical names to be accepted? How likely is the pronunciation of toponyms to change?

The ongoing war in Ukraine has had far-reaching consequences not only for the stability of the world but also language. Ukraine taking an important part of news stories, allows one to observe the change in the spelling and pronunciation

of the names of its cities. The change of ‘Kiev’ to ‘Kyiv’ in the English-speaking world had started prior to the beginning of the war in February, 2022. In 2006, Kyiv was approved as one of the standard forms and on June 11, 2019, it became “the only name available for standard use within the United States (U.S.) Government” (BGN, 2019). The beginning of the war, however, moved the #KyivnotKiev campaign to a new level. The leading broadcasting companies have moved to the use of Kyiv to various extents (the Belgian news service VRT NWS reported (Hodge, 2022)).

Previous studies have observed the systematic nature of linguistic variation. Hay (2018), exemplifying some possible factors that might affect the realisation of a sound, distinguishes linguistic context, speaker identity, addressee identity, and conversational topic. In the case of the change from the Russian variant ‘Kiev’ to the Ukrainian variant ‘Kyiv’, the linguistic, namely phonological, context can be excluded from the list of possible factors. In both variants, the first syllable in the English pronunciation of the capital city of Ukraine is /ki:/. The change happens in the peak of the second syllable ending in a labiodental fricative coda, which can be either fortis (for the pronunciation of ‘Kiev’ see Collins Dictionary Online (CDO) and Current British English searchable transcriptions (CUBE) (Lindsey and Szigetvári, N/A); for the pronunciation of ‘Kyiv’ see CDO) or lenis (for the pronunciation of ‘Kiev’ see Cambridge Dictionary Online; for the pronunciation of ‘Kyiv’ see CUBE). Thus the vowel change happens in the identical phonological context.

The change from ‘Kiev’ to ‘Kyiv’ is not limited to conversational topics since it is manifested in various contexts but rather it can be seen as a way to “label moral space” (Duncan, 2022: 25). Studies on the language of politicians suggest that phonetic variations could not only help in forming speaker’s identity (Hay 2018) but also index political meaning (Hall-Lew *et al.* 2010; Hall-Lew *et al.* 2017). ‘Kiev’ to ‘Kyiv’ change, thus, could be ascribed to politically conditioned variation, which Sloman *et al.* (2021: 2) define as “linguistic variation that can be anticipated on the basis of the speaker’s political identity.” In the ‘Kiev’ / ‘Kyiv’ dichotomy, one’s political identity can be defined as pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian. To some extent, alongside speaker’s identity goes addressee’s identity since people are known to modify their language (the level of pronunciation not being an exception) depending on their audience (cf. Kirkham and Moore, 2016).

Burridge and Bergs (2016: 253) discern a number of aspects working in a network leading to changes to happen, namely, “psychological (the mental make-up of speakers), physiological (the production of language), systemic (the linguistic system with interacting components), social and political (the speech community and the individual, the socio-political environment), external (contact and borrowing)” *etc.* It is noteworthy that the vowel sequence of the Russian variant /i:e/ as well as the one of the Ukrainian variant /i:i/ are acceptable in the English language, for example, /ri:edit/ ‘re-edit’ and /bi:ɪŋ/ ‘being’. In those cases when both sequences are allowed for the same word (e.g. ‘re-enact’, ‘re-engage’,

‘re-enlist’, ‘re-establish’, *etc.*), /i:ɪ/ tends to be the preferred one (cf. Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary 18th edition, 2011). The change thus cannot be ascribed to physiologically motivated. The fact that the change has been accelerated by the war in Ukraine allows the interpretation of it being not only political but psychological as well, since the pronunciation attests one’s political beliefs, moral values, and is a conscious decision to shift from the Russian variant of ‘Kiev’ to the Ukrainian variant of ‘Kyiv’. “Our pronunciation allies or isolates us from a community of speakers” (Parrino, 2013: 171). The present paper, thus, aims at reporting on the consistency or inconsistency of the politically conditioned variation of the Ukrainian capital name in the English-speaking media by trying to address the following questions:

Q1: What was the explicit rendering of the capital of Ukraine in the pre-war period and during different stages of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine?

Q2: Did the change in the spoken and written modes happen simultaneously?

Q3: What were the factors influencing the change?

2. The name of the capital of Ukraine in light of the framework for place naming and renaming processes

A framework for place naming or renaming processes proposed by Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch (2016) combines three factors, namely, geopolitical contexts, technologies, and actors. The framework suggests that geopolitical contexts can be classified into four categories which are not mutually exclusive: revolution, emergence, conquest, and commodification. The renaming of the capital city of Ukraine would most likely fall under the heading ‘revolution’. The change from the Soviet regime to an independent country could be considered to signal “a radical change in the political order” (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016: 8). A more noticeable shift towards a wider acceptance of the Ukrainian variant by the international community has happened with the outbreak of the war, i.e. applying the framework, in the geopolitical context of an attempted *conquest* by Russian forces. The renaming could also partly fall under the heading of *emergence*. Although the city has had long standing traditions, the country gained independence on 24 August, 1991. The adoption of Kyiv by the Ukrainian government in 1995 (Babij 2018 N/A), leading to the #KyivnotKiev campaign that started in 2018, could allow treating ‘Kyiv’ as a city with its new identity, i.e. “newly individualised” (ibid.), in a country “searching for ideas as to how to write a new ‘national biography’ ” (Lazarenko, 2022: 430). In the framework, the geopolitical context of *commodification* is defined as “a term that covers all the contexts in which powerful individuals, or corporations, annex the toponymic landscape that forms part of the commons for their own (financial or symbolic) profit” (ibid.). The aspect of the *commodification* context that could apply to the renaming of the capital, thus, is the symbolic profit the country receives reacquiring the original spelling, and consequently the pronunciation of its capital.

For this interpretation, however, the whole nation would represent ‘powerful individuals’ and the government would be seen as ‘corporation’. The annexing aspect of the *commodification* context, specified in the framework, however, allows the acceptance of some aspects of this context with reservations only.

In the framework, the technologies are understood as various political objectives “to construct and maintain a collective identity, to define what constitutes the body politic, and to inscribe, sometimes forcibly, that particular, constructed, collective identity in a space” (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch 2016: 9). Among the four categories, namely *cleansing*, *founding*, *restoring*, and *promoting*, the act of renaming a capital city can probably be best classified under the technologies of *restoring* and *cleansing*. The former is used to reinstitute a historical toponym, i.e. Kyiv, while the latter tries to discard the imprint from a Soviet political order and the forced imposition of the Russian language.

The two already discussed factors (geopolitical contexts and technologies) are not possible without the third factor (actors). The latter is probably the most complex of the three as it offers numerous heterogeneous sets. In the renaming of the capital city of Ukraine, the primary role was played by the actors best ascribed to *state power*, i.e. “the main and official producers of place names and of place naming norms” (ibid. 10) since the Ukrainian variant was endorsed by the government “making Kyiv mandatory for use in legislative and official acts” (Calvert 22 Foundation, 2015 N/A). At the same time, in the renaming process, it is impossible to exclude *civil society* as *state power* proved not to be enough to secure the acceptance of the name Kyiv “beyond the rarefied world of diplomatic protocol” (Dickinson, 2019 N/A). The #KyivNotKiev campaign started by the officials received support of the *civil society* (e.g. as it is noted by Khanenko-Friesen, “Ukrainian diaspora ... have been very vocal in this transition” (CBC News, Mar 04, 2022, N/A)) to be able to see the changes. The importance of the role of the society can be seen in the reasoning underlying the changes in place-name pronunciation provided by CBC’s chief pronunciation counsellor Laura Carlin: “While language does evolve, we generally change place-name pronunciations only to reflect a true shift in how people in English-speaking Canada refer to a country or to match widespread shifts in transliterations ... or to eliminate pronunciations that are truly problematic” (ibid.). The change of the pronunciation by the news outlet, consequently, should mean that the ‘new’ pronunciation is already well ingrained in the society, making an easy shift to it for the news readers and reporters who are part of the society. The *private sector* actors aiming “to produce added value through place naming” (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016: 10) are interlinked with *civil society*, especially in the view of the ongoing war, as the Ukrainian variant of the city can be seen as having added value of support and solidarity with the country.

3. Methodology

The present study seeks to examine the pronunciation of the capital of Ukraine as reported by various media sources broadcasting in English. A total of 307 samples were collected from a diverse range of prominent news agencies including 9 News Australia, ABC, Al Jazeera, BBC, CBS, CNBC, CNN, DW, Euronews, France 24 English, GBNews, MSNBC, NBC News, Poland Daily, Reuters, Sky News, Sky News Australia, the Guardian, the New York Times, TRT World, VICE News, as well as various online channels (e.g. vlogs). The samples were categorized into four distinct time periods, namely pre-war ($n = 72$), 24/02/22 to April 2022 ($n = 83$), May 2022 - November 2022 ($n = 77$), and January 2023 - April 2023 ($n = 75$) in order to observe possible trends in pronunciation over time. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, only one instance per speaker per recording was selected. Though the pronunciation of the Ukrainian capital could be seen as a scale with a number of individual phonetic differences, the acoustic analysis was beyond the scope of the study. Thus, the analysed variants were treated as binary and were categorized as Kyiv or Kiev based on an auditory analysis. The pronunciation was then compared to the written form of the city's name provided alongside the recordings, in order to assess the degree of consistency between the spoken and written modes in the use of the city's name.

3. Kyiv /k i:ɪv/ or Kiev /ki:ev/: Pre-war period

In this study, one data set from the pre-war period consisting of 72 recordings that explicitly mentioned the name of the capital of Ukraine was analysed. The time frame was from 2014 until February 23, 2022, i.e. the eve of the war. Despite the recommendation made in the X/9 Resolution of the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (E/CONF.101/144, 2012: 27) to adopt the romanization system in Ukraine for the transliteration of Ukrainian geographical names, including the capital city of Ukraine as 'Kyiv' (E/CONF.101/84, 2012), the findings revealed a significant prevalence of the Russian variant 'Kiev' (90.3 per cent) over the Ukrainian 'Kyiv' (9.7 per cent). The ratio of 'Kyiv' to 'Kiev', which stood at 1:9.3 is noteworthy, as it suggests a problematic tendency to favour the Russian variant, 'Kiev', over the Ukrainian 'Kyiv'. Despite efforts by the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names to recognise the use of the romanization system for Ukrainian geographical names, the prevalence of 'Kiev' in the data set highlights the challenges faced in implementing this recommendation.

The analysis of the written mode revealed a lower 'Kyiv' to 'Kiev' ratio as compared to the spoken mode. It was found to be at 1:2.5, with the capital being explicitly rendered as 'Kyiv' at 25.4 per cent and as 'Kiev' at 65.3 per cent. Interestingly, in the written mode of one sample, there was no explicit mentioning of the capital city of Ukraine, though the spoken mode had an explicit mentioning

of ‘Kiev’. In the provided transcription, it was rendered as ‘cave’ (Figure 1). In the English language, there are but a few words starting with /k/, ending in /v/, and having two symbols in between. Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary 18th edition (2011) provides six matches for k??v search. Though the word ‘cave’ has a closing fronting diphthong in its nucleus, it is the only word from the list with two front vowel qualities, which might have resulted in it being chosen for rendition of ‘Kiev.’

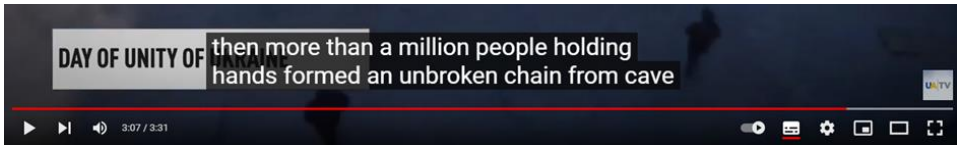


Figure 1: The capital of Ukraine transliterated as ‘cave’ in UATV English (22 January 2021)

A total of five occurrences, accounting for 6.9 per cent of the data set, exhibited the transcription of the capital by employing both variants. An example could be seen in Figure 2.

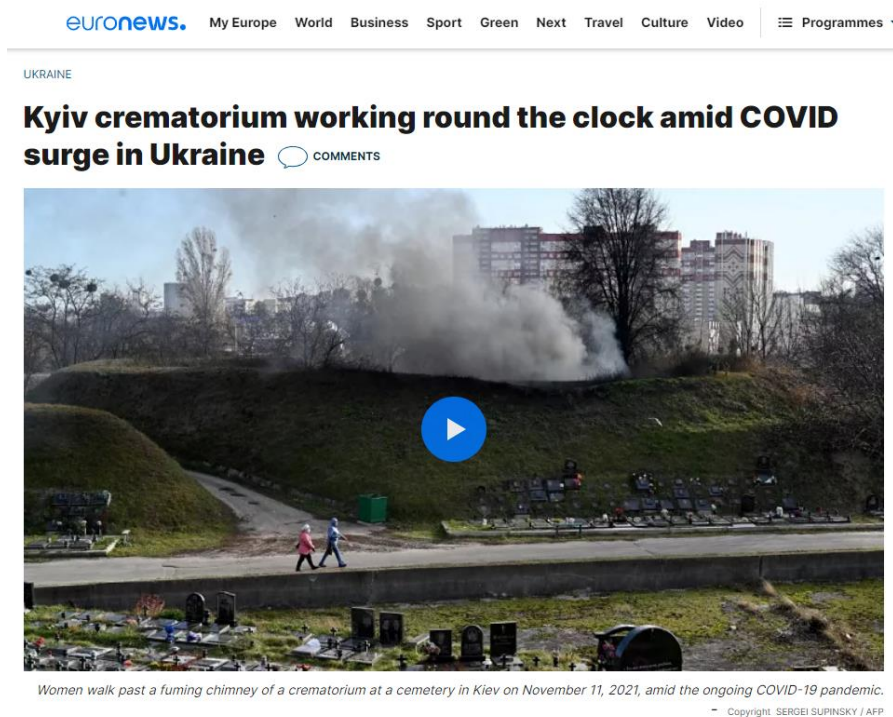


Figure 2: The variation in the explicit rendering of the name of the capital city of Ukraine in euronews. (17 November 2021)

DW NEWS – News (Deutsche Welle November 28, 2018 10:00am-10:16am CET) program, wherein it was used as ‘Kiev’ in the spoken mode and referred this way in the transcribed text provided in the archive. However, the data displayed on the screen employed the Ukrainian rendition (Figure 3).

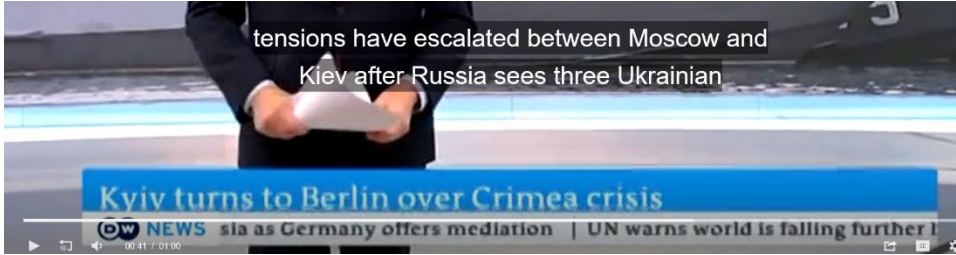


Figure 3: The variation of ‘Kyiv’ and ‘Kiev’ in DW NEWS – News (28 November 28 2018 10:00am-10:16am CET)

The examples provided in Figures 2 and 3 can be interpreted as highlighting the lack of uniformity in the depiction of the city’s name in the written mode, wherein the use of both variants is not deliberate. In contrast, Figure 4 can be construed as portraying the transition from the usage of the name ‘Kiev’ to ‘Kyiv’. The title of the visual piece produced by two full-time travel vloggers from London features the Ukrainian variant in capital letters, but also includes the Russian equivalent in parentheses. While the vloggers seem to favour ‘Kyiv’ over ‘Kiev’ in writing (the former is not only written first but it is also written in capital letters), they retain ‘Kiev’ in the spoken mode.

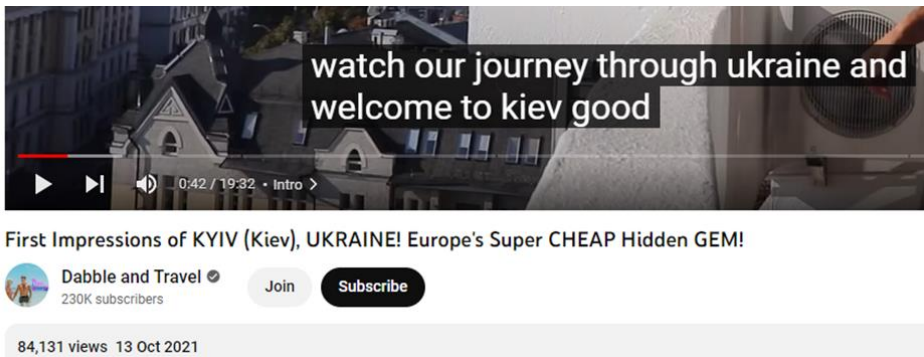


Figure 4: The variation of ‘Kyiv’ and ‘Kiev’ in Dabble and Travel vlog (13 October 2021)

Based on the analysed data set, it can be observed that in the cases of inconsistency between the modes, the Ukrainian variant of the city was more likely to be used in the written than spoken mode. There were thirteen instances where the name, pronounced as ‘Kiev’, was transliterated as ‘Kyiv’. In contrast, the reverse scenario, where ‘Kyiv’ was transliterated as ‘Kiev’, was witnessed only once. The findings might suggest that the written mode experiences a more

rapid transition towards the Ukrainian variant of the capital, while the spoken mode tends to exhibit greater resistance to this politically motivated change. The chosen variant in speaking does not necessarily signal a person's deliberate choice but can be indicative of one's habit to choose a more common pronunciation.

4. The period from 24/02/22 to April 2022

The second data set, encompassing the samples from the initial day of the war on 24th February 2022 to April, 2022, reveals a statistically significant shift in the frequency of usage of the Ukrainian and Russian names for the capital city. The ratio of Ukrainian to Russian iterations has decreased from 1:9.3 in the pre-war period to 1:0.8, indicating a significant increase in the use of the Ukrainian name.

In the samples from the first months of the war, the Ukrainian rendition of the city, Kyiv, was used in 56.6 percent of all the cases. The observed shift may reflect a heightened sense of political awareness concerning the two variants of the city and support to Ukraine in light of Russia's full-scale war against it.

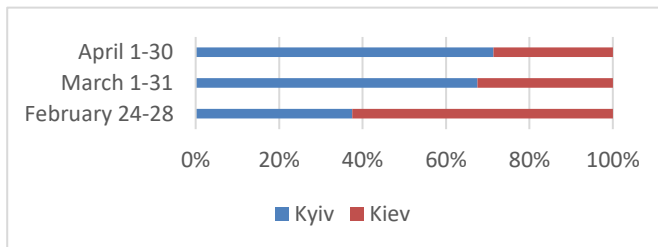


Figure 5: The pronunciation of the capital city of Ukraine in English media during the first months of the war in 2022

The analysis of Figure 5 reveals a trend towards Ukrainian pronunciation of the capital city, Kyiv, during the period under examination. The data indicates that though at the onset of the Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, the utilization of the Russian spelling, Kiev, was still prevalent, being employed 1.7 times more frequently than Kyiv, it marked a statistically significant difference comparing to the pre-war period (The Fisher exact test statistic value is 0.0017. The result is significant at $p < .05$). The 'Kiev' / 'Kyiv' pattern was reversed by March, with 'Kyiv' being employed approximately twice as often as 'Kiev'. This trend continued in the dataset for April, demonstrating an insignificant shift towards the use of the Ukrainian pronunciation of the capital city.

The shift towards the Ukrainian variant is not limited to the spoken mode, as evidenced by the increased usage of the name 'Kyiv' in the written mode during the period under examination. The transliteration of the city as 'Kyiv' increased

from 25.4 per cent in the pre-war period to 63.9 per cent, while the rendering as the Russian variant decreased from 65.3 per cent to 33.7 per cent respectively.

However, this period was characterized by inconsistent transitions from 'Kiev' to 'Kyiv' in spoken and written English. Thirty out of 83 cases exhibited discrepancies between pronunciation and transliteration. While written language appeared to accommodate changes more readily, with 18 instances of 'Kiev' being transliterated as 'Kyiv', only 12 cases were observed where the old variant was retained in writing while the presenter or journalist successfully adjusted their pronunciation to the 'Kyiv' variant.

5. The period between May 2022 and November 2022

With the ongoing war, the Ukrainian variant exhibited a trend of strengthening its linguistic presence. The data from the third dataset corroborated the trend with the ratio of 1:0.5 for 'Kyiv' to 'Kiev' respectively. This ratio, observed since the commencement of the war, indicates a gradual shift towards the adoption of the Ukrainian variant. During this period, 'Kyiv' accounted for 66.2 per cent, while 'Kiev' constituted 33.8 per cent. These findings imply a discernible impact of the war on the linguistic reality, with the Ukrainian variant emerging as the more prominent of the two.

In writing, the dichotomy between the transliterated variants of the Ukrainian capital city, 'Kyiv' and 'Kiev', remained similar to the previous period, the former variant being used 67.5 per cent with the latter accounting for 32.5 per cent. Interestingly, no instances of intentional employment of both variants of the city's name were observed during this period under examination. The double variant occurrence was identified solely in the case of auto-generated transcript, where the preference for 'Kiev' persisted.

A problem of subtitle rendering was observed analysing the name of the capital city. The example in Figure 6 depicts an instance in which the pronunciation of 'Kyiv a' was rendered as 'key for'. This error might not only impede the viewer's comprehension of the content, but also undermine the integrity of the message being conveyed. Therefore, efforts need to be made to improve the accuracy of subtitle rendering either by advancing speech recognition technology or engaging in more rigorous manual review processes.



Figure 6: ‘Kyiv a’ as ‘key for’ in the subtitles in DW News (1 November 2022)

In the period under examination, it was found that there existed inconsistencies between the variants in the spoken and written language modes with almost equal frequency. It was observed, however, that a consistent rendering of either one of the variants was observed in the majority of the analysed cases, accounting for 75.3 per cent of the data.

6. The period from January, 2023 to April, 2023

The last analysed period contained data samples dating January 2023 - beginning of April 2023. The Ukrainian version of the capital city proved to be the strongly prevalent pronunciation in the English-speaking media with the ‘Kyiv’ to ‘Kiev’ ratio of 1 to 0.3, which accounted for 78.7 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. In the findings, a new type of pronunciation, ‘Kiv’, was identified, which was not observed in the other datasets.

The variant ‘Kiev’ proved to have gained its ground in the written mode. It was found in 57 out of 75 samples, i.e. in 76 per cent of the total. The analysis of the dataset suggests that the news outlets rather successfully moved towards the Ukrainian variant with one exception observed in the Turkish public broadcast service TRT (Figure 7), where both variants, ‘Kyiv’ and ‘Kiev’, were used for the same news broadcast.

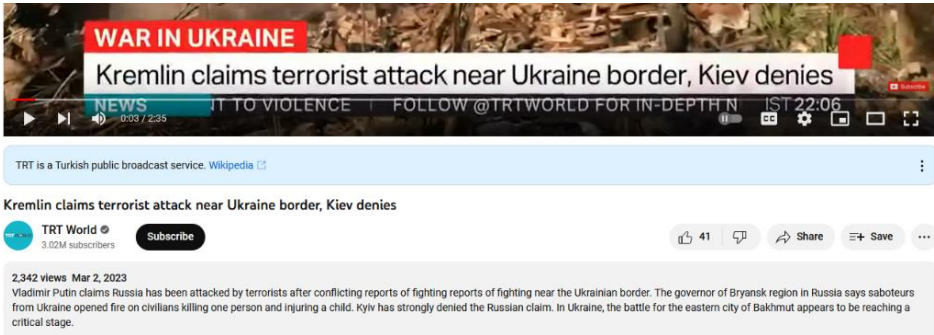


Figure 7: The variation of ‘Kyiv’ and ‘Kiev’ in TRT World (02 March 2023)

In the analysis of the samples from the beginning of the year 2023, it was found that nearly three-fourths of the cases exhibited a consistency in rendering of the name of the capital city in both spoken and written modes. However, despite the majority of instances being consistent, the data revealed a need to improve the quality of subtitling. Not only there were 11 instances of ‘Kyiv’ rendered as ‘Kiev’ but also the problem not to recognise the place name, the phenomenon also observed analyzing other datasets. This period, however, revealed a higher degree of transcription ‘mishaps’. Alongside cases of ‘cave’ (Figure 8) or ‘key’ (Figures 9 and 10), two instances of the capital being transliterated as ‘keep’ (Figures 11 and 12) were found.

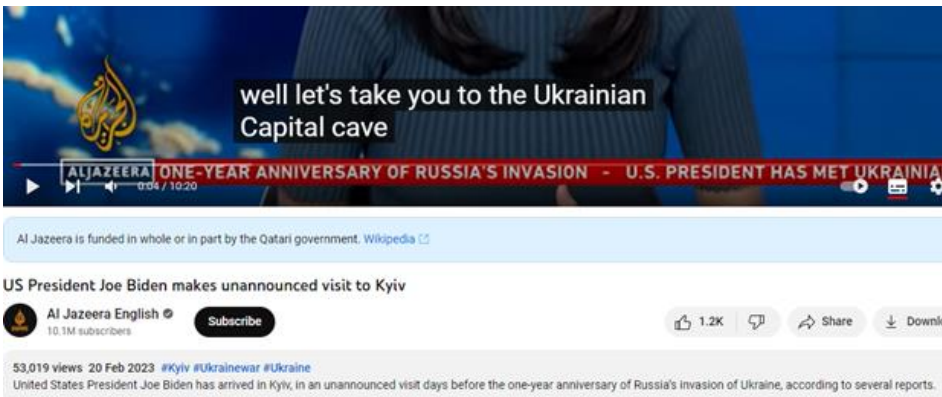


Figure 8: The transliteration of the capital city of Ukraine as ‘cave’ in the subtitles in Al Jazeera English (20 February 2023)



Figure 9: The transliterations of ‘Kyiv’ as ‘key’ in the subtitles in euronews (29 March 2023)



Figure 10: The transliteration of ‘Kyiv’ as ‘key a’ in the subtitles in Sky News (20 February 2023)



Figure 11: The transliteration of the capital city of Ukraine as ‘keep’ in the subtitles in euronews (01 January 2023)



Figure 12: The transliteration of 'Kyiv' as 'keep' in the subtitles in LiveNow from Fox (25 February 2023)

7. Discussion

The beginning of the war marked an increase in people's consciousness in the matter of phonetic rendering of the capital city of Ukraine. A number of videos and articles were posted on how and why to pronounce 'Kyiv' correctly. The question arises whether dictionaries reflect the change in spelling and pronunciation, and whether they can facilitate the shift towards the Ukrainian variant of the capital city. The analysis of some widely used online dictionaries indicates that CDO does not include city names and presents 'Kyiv' as a variant of 'Kiev' for naming a special chicken dish. The pronunciation, however, is provided only for the primary, i.e. 'Kiev' variant. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, even in April 2023, fails to reflect the change and claims 'Kiev' to be the capital city of Ukraine. Dictionary.com while having separate entries for the Ukrainian, as well as the Russian variants, limits the opportunity to listen to the pronunciation of 'Kyiv'. It is not surprising that the most informative dictionary to check the pronunciation of the name of the capital is CUBE since it allows its users "to find and explore pronunciation patterns in English which are phonetically up to date" (CUBE, N/A). The assigning to 'Kyiv' and 'Kiev' entries, however, poses some questions. Supplementing an auditory analysis with spectrogram data, it can be seen, that though Figures 13 and 14 show how the name was rendered under 'Kyiv', while Figure 15 - under 'Kiev,' the spectrogram in Figure 14 shows the change in vowel openness analogous to the one in Figure 15, which is hardly visible in Figure 13.

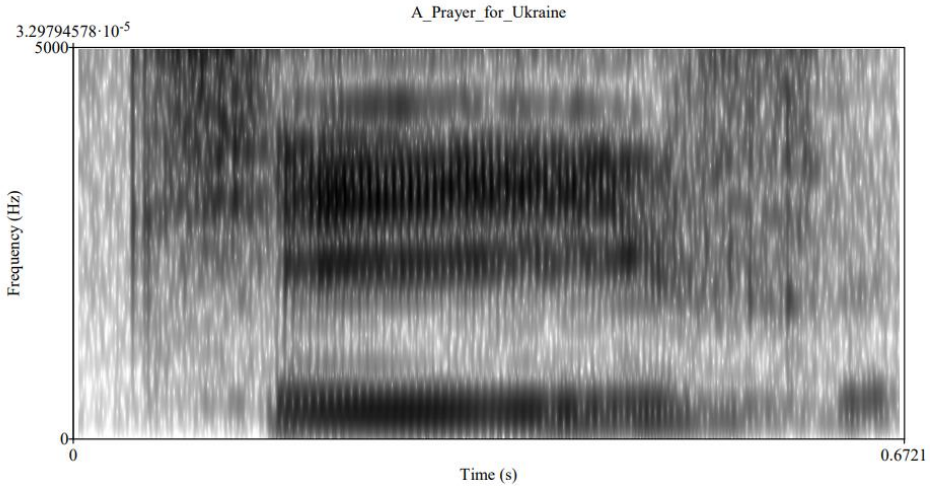


Figure 13: The spectrogram of the capital city of Ukraine under the heading of ‘Kyiv’ (The Church of England (27 February 2022)) in CUBE

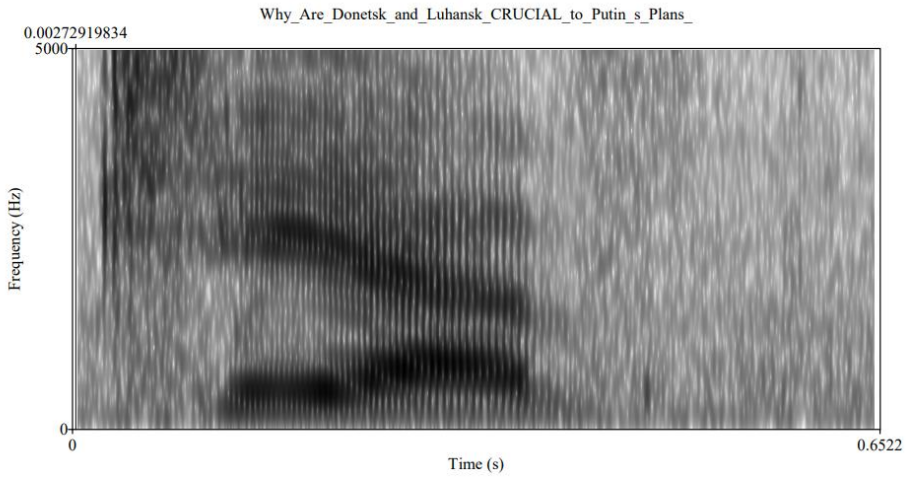


Figure 14: The spectrogram of the capital city of Ukraine under the heading of ‘Kyiv’ (On Demand News (23 February 2022)) in CUBE

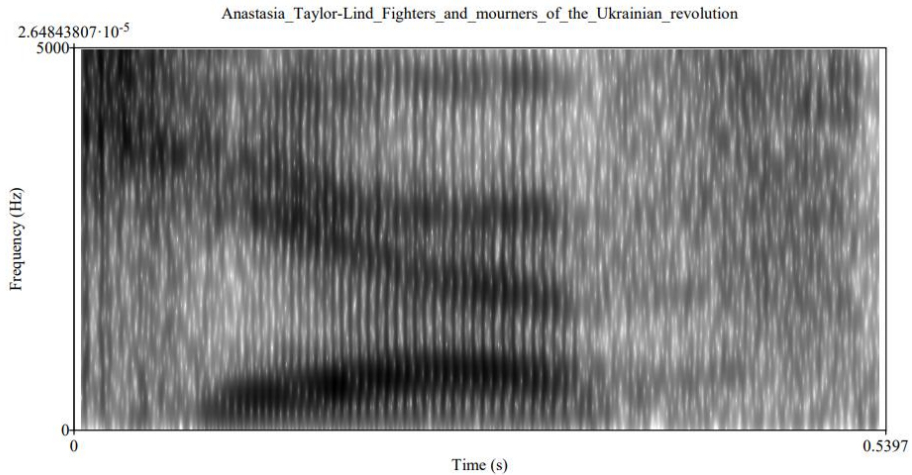


Figure 15: The spectrogram of the capital city of Ukraine under the heading of ‘Kiev’ (TED (09 December 2014)) in CUBE

Based on a widely accepted belief that language change in the spoken mode precedes one in the written mode (Ingham, 2016: 381), it could be hypothesised that the shift from ‘Kiev’ to ‘Kyiv’ in spoken rendition would precede the shift in writing. The results, however, proved the opposite. The shift in writing preceded the one in spoken language. The findings support the observations made by Khanenko-Friesen (director of the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta): “We’ve seen media changing the spelling, transliteration and now pronunciation” (CBC News, 2022). The reasons might be manifold. First of all, it might be a matter of habit. People are used to certain ways of pronunciation and it is difficult to change them. Due to its political aspect, the transition in writing happened faster, with the exception of autosubtitling. The autosubtitling system proved to have been facing problems not being able to recognise not only the newly re-established Ukrainian name ‘Kyiv’ but also the Russian rendition ‘Kiev’. The results support the idea of language change being complex and not always straightforward, and “never one-dimensional” (Burridge and Bergs (2016: 253). As it is noted by McMahon (1994), the simultaneity of linguistic changes is almost impossible to be manifested as “changes which take place gradually in the spoken language may arrive in writing as the result of a fairly abrupt change in orthographic practice” (McMahon, 1994: 128). In the case of ‘Kyiv’ / ‘Kiev’ dichotomy, the rather abrupt shift is marked by the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine. The rapid adoption of the Ukrainian rendition of its capital city in English-speaking media, thus, can be seen as reflecting growing political awareness and solidarity with Ukraine, which, using the cleansing and

restoring technologies (for the discussion of the framework see Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch (2016)), has been trying to discard the toponymic imprint of the Soviet era and reinstitute the Ukrainian toponyms to the geopolitical vision of the world.

The findings show that the beginning of the war on 24 February 2022, has had a discernible influence on the pronunciation of the Ukrainian capital. The statistical analysis conducted in this study highlighted the role of language and media in reflecting societal attitudes and values. A statistically significant difference (with a Fisher exact test statistic value of <0.00001 and significant results at $p<.05$) in the usage of ‘Kyiv’ and ‘Kiev’ in English-speaking media prior to the war and following its onset was observed. In subsequent periods, there has been a persistent preference for ‘Kyiv’ over ‘Kiev’. However, the distinctions between the post-war intervals did not yield statistically significant outcomes at $p<.05$ (with a Fisher exact test statistic value of 0.2563 for 24 February 2022 to April 2022-May 2022 and 0.0696 for April 2022-May 2022 to January 2023-April 2023).

The numerous inconsistencies in the rendition of the capital city in both language modes observed in the study indicate a positive shift towards the Ukrainian variant as the percentage of the transcribed form to be rendered as ‘Kyiv’ showed a noticeable increase in the last analysed period with 58.8 per cent of all the cases of ‘Kiev’ in the written mode to be pronounced as ‘Kyiv’ (Figure 16). The importance of this tendency is even greater taking into consideration that the findings indicate the shift in the written mode to be faster than in the spoken mode.

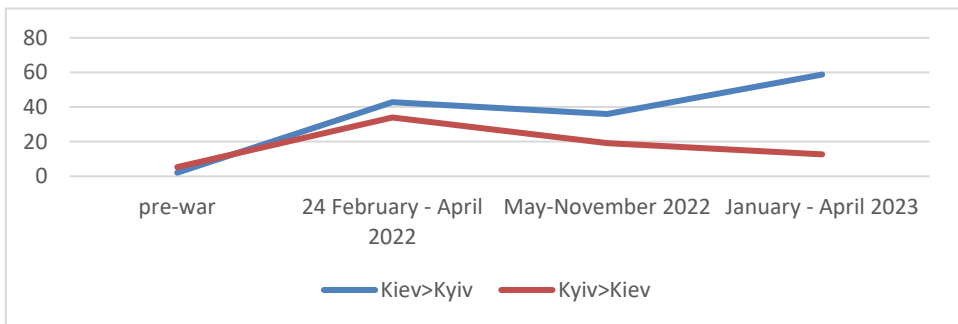


Figure 16: The inconsistency of rendering the name of the capital city of Ukraine in the written and spoken modes

Though media shows the move towards the pronunciation and the spelling of the capital of Ukraine as ‘Kyiv’, there are areas that could help to ease the transition. The reported problems in subtitling need to be resolved because “a particular toponym reflects a certain power relationship” (Giraut and Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016: 5), therefore, “[h]ow to pronounce and spell Kyiv is not a matter of personal choice. It’s political and it matters” (Petrow, 2022).

4. Conclusions

The present study aimed at examining the consistency, or lack thereof, in the use of the politically conditioned variation of the capital of Ukraine in the English-speaking media. The analysis confirmed that the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in a noticeable shift in explicit rendering of the name of the capital city. The dominant Soviet variant of the pre-war period /ki:ev/ was replaced with the Ukrainian variant /ki:rv/ (Q1). The latter steadily reinforced its linguistic presence throughout the three war stages under analysis. The data, however, revealed an asynchronous change in the spoken and written modes (Q2). Contrary to the general tendency for language change, the empirical evidence showed the implementation of the change in writing to precede the one in the spoken mode. The fact that the change has been accelerated by the war in Ukraine allows the interpretation of it being not only political but also psychological in nature (Q3). Despite the shift from the Soviet to the Ukrainian variant reflecting personal values and a conscious decision, the inherently spontaneous nature of spoken language, combined with less time to reconsider the use of the accustomed variant, could have influenced the linguistic choices.

Due to the scale and nature of the study it should be seen as a starting point. Future research, using more empirical data, stratifying them based on political leanings of media outlets, and employing acoustic alongside auditory analysis, would shed more light on the topic of politically conditioned variation of toponyms in Ukraine.

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