

Countries at odds with one another have similar languages

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The only time I ever went to Ukraine, most of the people I met there were speaking Hungarian. This was in the far south-west of Ukraine, which was part of Hungary until 1919, and then part of Czechoslovakia until 1945, when the Soviet Union took over. The town of Ungvar, on the border with Slovakia, is still Hungarian speaking.

Hungarian is by no means the only non-Slavic minority language in Ukraine. There are large numbers of Romanian speakers, as well as speakers of German, Yiddish and Romany. In Crimea, while it would not be true to say that the Tatars are the original inhabitants, they have certainly been there much longer than the Russians and Ukrainians, who didn't arrive until the 1700s.

The Tatars speak a Turkic language related to Kazakh. The Greeks were just one of many peoples who were in Crimea before the Tatars, and there are still Greek speakers in Ukraine.

As far as Slavic languages are concerned, there are about a million Polish speakers in western Ukraine. Polish is a West Slavic language while Ukrainian and Russian are East Slavic. About a quarter of Ukrainians – the



■ Pro-Russian military in Ukraine where conflict is rife. But, says columnist Peter Trudgill, the languages of Ukrainian and Russian do have a lot in common. Picture: PA

figures are not totally reliable – are native speakers of Russian, but interestingly, only 17pc claim to be ethnic Russians. And, as we have been hearing in the news, most Russians are concentrated in the south and east of the country.

Early in 2014, the Ukrainian government foolishly repealed a law that allowed Russian, Hungarian, Rumanian and Tatar to be used in courts and for other official purposes, but fortunately it quickly repealed the repeal.

Ukrainian and Russian are closely related languages – probably about as close as Italian and Spanish – and some communication is possible between their speakers, since the two languages have more than 60pc of their vocabularies in

common. But when we see pictures on TV of Ukrainians and Russians speaking to each other, they are probably speaking Russian, as many Ukrainians have learned it as a second language. Ukrainian was banned under the Tsars and repressed by Stalin.

The close relationship between Russian and Ukrainian has led to there being a long history of linguistically-prejudiced Russians disrespectfully denying that Ukrainian is actually a language at all, claiming that it is really just a rather inferior peasant dialect of Russian. The last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, also known as Nicholas the Bloody, once said exactly that.

He was, of course, executed in 1918.