

The Emotions We Speak

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The Lab

The Language and Emotion Lab is a new lab at the Dept. of Psychology. It stems from Prof. Antonyuk's FWF START grant 'The emotions we speak', which investigates the emotional drivers of language change.

What we do

We combine the generative approach to the study of language as a cognitive human capacity with the sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and neurophysiological investigations in order to address the following overarching question:

what is the role of emotion in language?



Planned methodology:

Implicit attitudes assessment, questionnaires, EMG recordings, EEG, fMRI

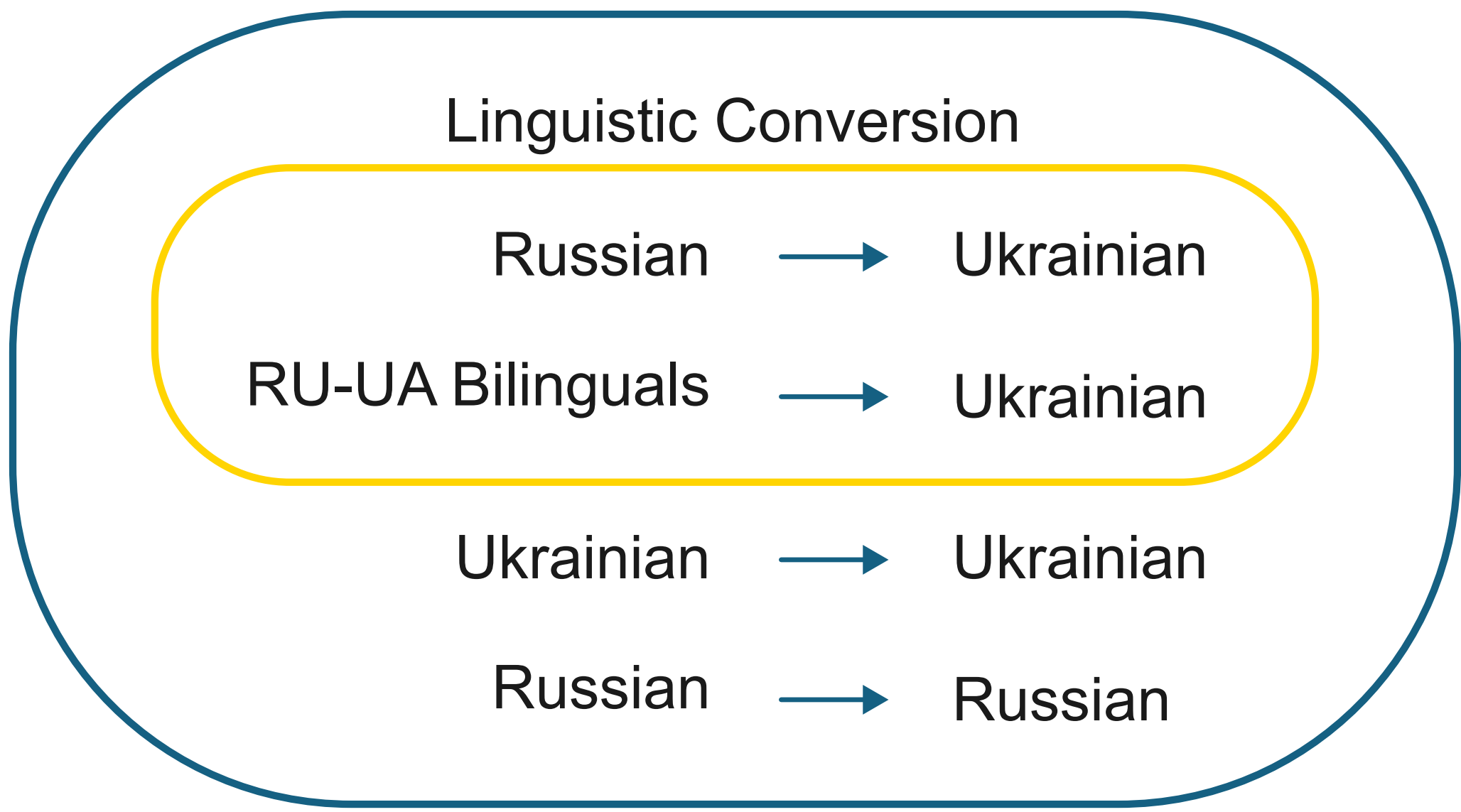
FWF START "The Emotions We Speak"

The goal is to investigate the role of subconscious emotional attitudes to linguistic material in language contact situations in order to propose a predictive theory of contact-induced language change. Unlike language change in diachrony, contact-induced language change is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to predict [1; 2; 3]. This unpredictability is a core theoretical problem. By focusing on the emotional drivers of speakers' linguistic behavior, we aim to address this problem.

The Empirical Focus

The sociolinguistic process of LINGUISTIC CONVERSION, a hypothesized precursor to language change, is currently underway in Ukraine. It involves native speakers of Russian and bilinguals in Russian and Ukrainian making a categorical switch to Ukrainian. **Key feature:** the unusually strong emotions underlying the conversion process, which allows us to study the role of emotions in speakers' LINGUISTIC DECISIONS, an arguably key factor in language change [3].

Ukrainian Society: Major Languages

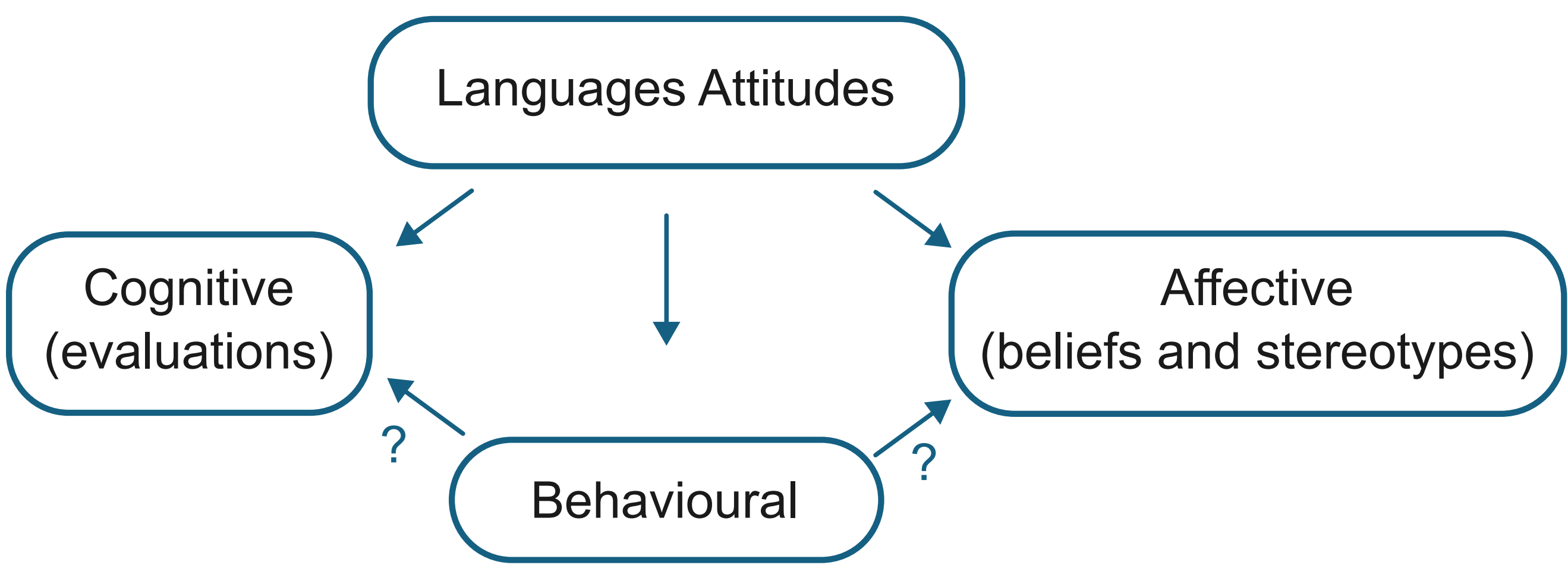


General Hypothesis

Conscious and unconscious emotional attitudes towards linguistic material will impose pressure on the linguistic system, leading to predictable language change.

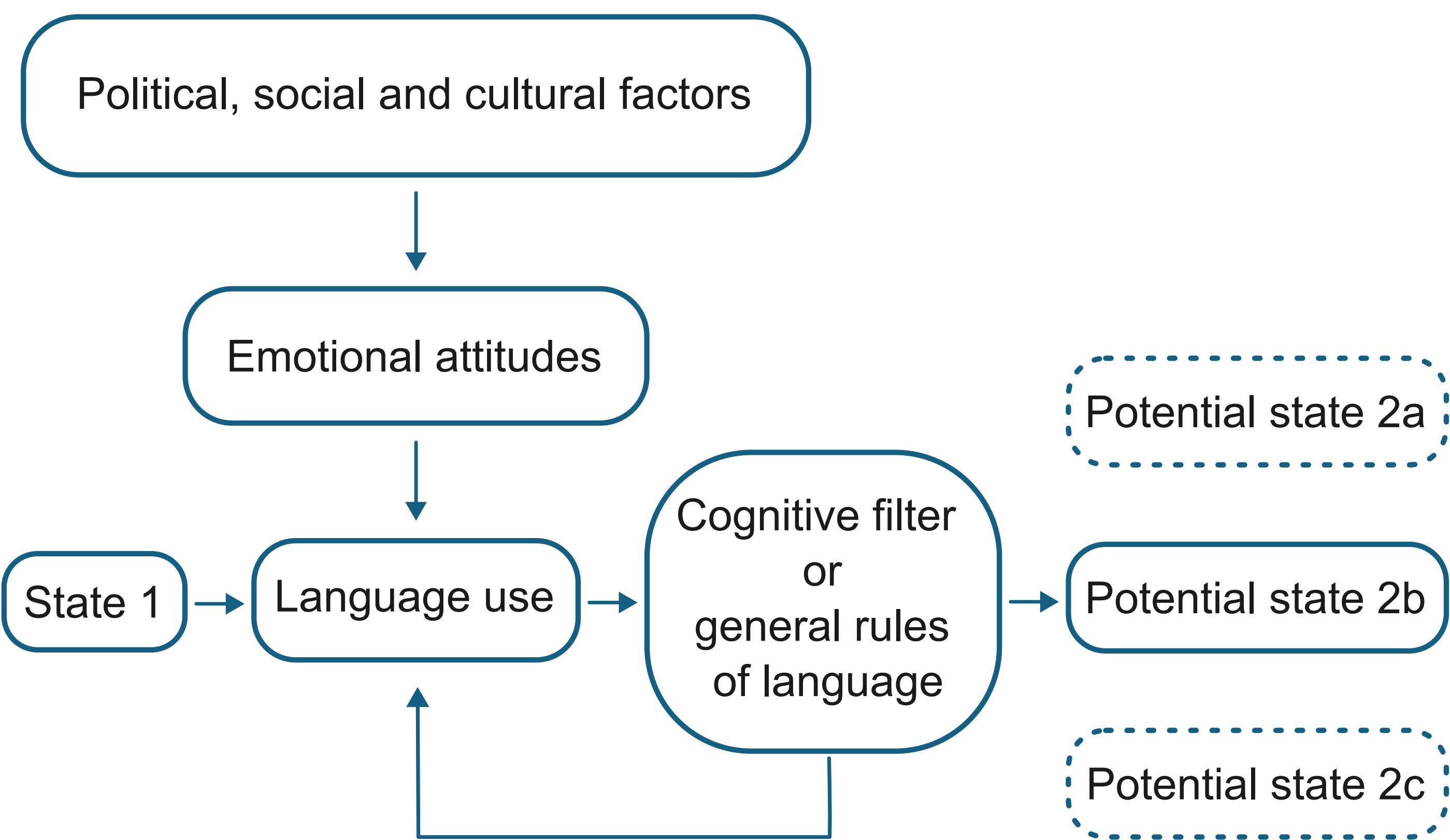
Hypothesis 1: The emotional component underwriting linguistic conversion is a powerful trigger for language change. Speaker decision to avoid any part of language due to emotionally-charged associations with Russian will act as a catalyst for language change.

The Emotional Drivers of Language Change



Linguistic conversion: a sharp change in speakers' attitudes, presumably at all levels.

General Form of the Envisioned Theory



Work Plan

Generative linguistics

Identify linguistic structures of interest that will serve as material in experimental investigations.

Sociolinguistics

Get conscious and unconscious emotional attitudes to linguistic stimuli.

Neurophysiology

EEG studies to measure ERPs to linguistic stimuli.

Expected outcome

Integrated theory of emotionally driven contact induced language change.

Novelty

Theory: our theory posits that the role of emotion in language is much greater than currently appreciated, with consequences for language change.

Approach: our highly interdisciplinary approach connects the formal study of language (generative linguistics) with its embedding social and psychological environment.

Methodology: we rely on a broad range of formal theoretical and experimental methodologies to study questions traditionally addressed within historical linguistics and language contact studies.

Selected References

1. D'Alessandro, R., Putnam, M. T., & Terenghi, S. (2025). Syntactic change in diachrony versus contact-induced change: two sides of the same coin? The Linguistic Review. <https://doi.org/10.1515/tlr-2025-0012>
2. Nomachi, M., & Heine, B. (2011). On predicting contact-induced grammatical change. Journal of Historical Linguistics, 1(1), 48–76. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jhl.1.1.03nom>
3. Thomason, S. (2008). Social and linguistic factors as predictors of contact-induced change. Journal of Language Contact, 2(1), 42–56. <https://doi.org/10.1163/000000008792525381>