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Bilingualism in the Former Soviet Union

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Abstract

My research in Kazakhstan examines societal bilingualism through the lens of sociolinguistic scale. I seek to understand the prevailing attitudes and patterns of use of Kazakh, Russian, and other languages, especially in light of research from the 1990s with (incorrectly) predicted interethnic violence if Kazakh were promoted too aggressively. I used two different research methods in pursuit of these goals. The first, a verbal guise survey, investigated participants' perceptions of Kazakh and Russian as languages. This study revealed that some old negative stereotypes still cling to Kazakh, but that in some respects Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs view both languages quite differently. The second study was a linguistic landscape study that explored the relative frequency of Kazakh and Russian in public signage. The high frequency of Russian, particularly in unregulated media such as graffiti and handbills, underscores its continuing instrumental role as Almaty's lingua franca. I suggest, however, that Kazakh too has an important role as an exponent of Kazakh ethnic identity.

Research Goals

The goals of my research were both theoretical and practical. On the theoretical end, I am seeking to establish a framework for talking about scale in the social sciences, following the work of both Blommaert (2007) and Lemke (2000). On the more practical end, I am following up on previous research into the status of Kazakh in Kazakhstan, and the changing role of Russian in the post-Soviet

world. Kazakhstan is an under-researched region in the field of sociolinguistics, and thus I have an additional, minor goal of bringing more attention to Kazakhstan and Central Asia in general as a site for sociolinguistic research.

The term "scale" has been used in various ways in the sociolinguistic literature. Lemke (2000) focuses on the different time-scales at which processes and events play out. For instance, a semester-long course is made up of individual class meetings, which are in turn built up from instances of interactions between the instructor and students, which are themselves built of words and utterances. In contrast to this largely temporal view of scale, Blommaert (2007) built his notion of scale off the work of Fairclough (2006) and off previous literature in World Systems Theory and its emphasis on center-periphery relationships. In his view, scales define the spaces in which meaning is made, and an individual moving from one scale to another may find it difficult to make herself understood. Blommaert considers scales a powerful tool for tackling the increased complexity and decreased presupposability of superdiverse urban centers (2007, 2014; Collins, Slembrouck, & Baynham, 2009). An analysis based on spatial scales recognizes that social structures are not uniform or unified, and allows for competing centers of normative authority to exist—and to organize semiotic structures of fundamentally different natures under a single framework.

My work is an attempt to unify these two understandings of scale – the spatial and the temporal – and apply them to further our understanding of Kazakhstan's multilingual society. The present language ecology of Kazakhstan is complex, due to the interaction of multiple different forces on different scales. Kazakh, legally recognized as the state language since 1991, was in the Soviet period heavily associated with rurality, poverty and cultural backwardness, in contrast to Russian as the language of cosmopolitan modernity. Today English has replaced Russian as the language associated with the future and global culture, and is heavily promoted by the state. At the same time, Kazakhification has been pushed to re-assert Kazakh ethnic identity and ethnic nationalism. While Russian has not been institutionally promoted in this same manner, it remains an instrumentally

valuable language as a regional lingua franca, and the first language of a large number of urban residents of different ethnicities, due a history of Soviet Russification.

In the 1990s the dominant assumption by Western scholarship was that Russian would remain the primary language of the newly-independent republic, due to the large, affluent population of ethnic Russians who formed a demographic majority in several regions (Khazanov 1995: 170, Pavelenko 2008). It was not only ethnic Russians who were cause for concern: both scholarly and popular publications cited the claim that 40% of ethnic Kazakhs could not speak "their own" language (though at least Dave 1996 admits this might be too high; see also Fierman 2010) which was an even bigger problem for a regime clothed in nationalism than the presence of monolingual "foreign" ethnic groups. Laitin (1996) predicted that only a "violent fundamentalist movement" would effect real change.

This picture began to evolve at the turn of the century, however. Surveys such as Rivers (2002) showed some evidence of an increasing positive attitude towards Kazakh, with discernible differences between university students just a few years apart in age. Fierman (2005), meanwhile, finds greater visibility for Kazakh in many domains of public life, particularly in urban areas where internal migration has drastically increased the Kazakh share of the population (Fierman 2005, Bissenova 2012). Perhaps most important of all, however, is that the dire predictions of inter-ethnic strife made in the 1990s never materialized. Kazakh and Russian continue to co-exist a generation after the dissolution of the USSR, and my research seeks to make sense of this.

Research Activities

During my time in Kazakhstan I worked on two major research projects. The first was a linguistic landscape analysis, pursuing Fierman's observation of greater public visibility of Kazakh in urban centers. The second was a verbal guise survey that sought more evidence of Kazakhstanis' attitudes toward both Russian and Kazakh.

Language choice is potentially meaningful in multiple ways, and at multiple scale-levels. Frequently language is linked to identity formation across broad scales, such as the state or the ethnic nation (Anderson, 1983; De Fina, 2013; Fierman, 1998; Joseph, 2010; Smagulova, 2006) but such relationships are rarely as simple or iconic as they seem on the surface (see for example Büscher, D'hondt, & Meeuwis, 2013 and Jaffe 2007). Other meanings may emerge at smaller scales, as stereotypes associated with a language are used to do other kinds of identity work. Consequently, the choice to use one language or another is not a simple analysis of instrumental value (Laitin, 1996) but rather a negotiation of multiple, multi-dimensional meanings.

Verbal Guise

The second research project was a verbal guise study (Baker, 1992; Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960; Mulac, 1975; Woolard, 1989; Zahn & Hopper, 1985) asking participants to evaluate eight “guises” consisting of four individual speakers reading a passage from a children's book, once in Russian and once in Kazakh. These evaluations reflect underlying language attitudes, which influence but do not determine language choice. (Baker, 1992; Garrett, 2010). A 2013 pilot study using the same materials and methods suggested a stark contrast between ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic Russians in terms of their attitudes towards Kazakh, but the small size of the pilot data sample limited the conclusions which could be drawn from it.

Participants for this study were recruited from visitors to the American Space at NARKhOZ University and from students at Kazakh National University named for Al-Farabi, both in Almaty. I chose students because they represent the first truly post-Soviet generation of young Kazakhstanis, those who were born after or only shortly before independence, and who are now or will soon be entering university, entering the workforce, and starting families of their own. Additionally, research such as (Llamas, 2007), (Beal, 2010) and (George, 2014) found significant age effects in how people identify in the aftermath of a border shake-up such as that experienced by Kazakhstanis. This correlates

with the strong age effects Rivers (2002) found in his language attitude survey, with students only a few years apart in age showing a significantly different opinion of Kazakh and its future potential.

The text for the matched guise materials was taken from a children's book called "Great Travels Across Kazakhstan." This book is printed in both Kazakh and Russian, with parallel texts on facing pages. There are some very minor stylistic differences between the Russian and Kazakh versions, but this does not constitute a significant departure in meaning; indeed, exactly parallel versions would be perceived as markedly unnatural and un-idiomatic.

Following Woolard (1989)'s method, three different speakers recorded the text in at least two of three guises: Russian, Kazakh and English. The three speakers recorded will be referred to by the following pseudonyms:

1. "Abzal" – a bilingual ethnic Kazakh informant from Almaty, who identified himself as more comfortable speaking Russian than Kazakh.
2. "Bolot" – a bilingual ethnic Kazakh informant from Shymkent, who identified himself as more comfortable speaking Kazakh than Russian.
3. "Vadim" – an ethnic Russian informant from Almaty who is a proficient speaker of Kazakh
4. "George" – an American with intermediate-language proficiency in both Russian and Kazakh, though his Kazakh is the more advanced of the two languages. He was recorded as a filler voice.

The survey was set up using the website SurveyGizmo to allow participants to work at their own pace and to block-randomize the order in which the guises were presented. Participants were given a choice at the beginning of the survey to proceed in either Russian or Kazakh.

Each guise was presented on a separate page, and participants were instructed to listen to each

recording only once. After each guise, the participants complete a set of questions about the imagined speaker. The questions were semantic-differential scales based loosely on Mulac (1975, 1976) and Zahn and Hopper (1985); the subset of items used were those which seemed to have the greatest discriminatory validity based on the results in Kennedy (2013) The translations of these items have been checked multiple times to ensure comparability.

Linguistic Landscapes

Linguistic landscapes (Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Maly, 2014; Gorter, 2006a, 2006b; Shohamy, Shohamy, & Gorter, 2008) investigate the dense visual landscape of urban centers and combining a “broad” survey of language displays with the “deep” ethnographic investigation of particular displays or types of displays. In Kazakhstan, the choice of which language or languages to utilize in these public displays is partly regulated by national law, but still reveals something about the meanings assigned to each language.

For my study I used the methods outlined in Lyons and Rodríguez-Ordóñez (2015) which combine quantitative measures of what types of signage are seen where with a frame analysis derived from the work Goffman (1976). Data was gathered in each of the eight districts of Almaty, with one neighborhood sampled in each district. To ensure the neighborhoods I chose were representative of the district, I used apartment prices from the real estate website Krysha.kz: each neighborhood has an average rent for a one-bedroom apartment that is the same or very close to the average for the whole district, as of October 2016. This method was admittedly less accurate in districts with a higher percentage of private homes (primarily Medeu and Alatau).

In each neighborhood I photographed as many signs as I could find in a two-hour period, focusing as much as possible on main streets. As is typical of LL research, the definition of a sign is somewhat subjective (see Gorter 2013 for some discussion of this). I focused on signs with fixed locations, omitting (e.g.) vehicles or litter. I also paid special attention to fliers and graffiti, but due to weathering many of the examples I found were difficult or impossible to read. In the case of fliers, I only counted those with the main text at least 75% intact and easily readable. As for graffiti, I omitted those examples I found too faded or obscured to be readable in natural light. This method meant that, of the 3,028 signs I eventually coded, the distribution across districts was not even. However, it should be noted that, especially in 10th Microaion, a certain number of signs were repeated instances of the same flier or poster in different spots.

I initially coded the signs for their physical type (fliers, plaques, billboards, etc.) as well as their content. I also coded each sign for language, and for script (Cyrillic or Latin, mainly) independently of language, in part because of the current government initiative to institute Kazakh orthography by the beginning of 2018. Finally, following Tufi and Blackwood (2010) I indicated whether the text of the sign included trademarks.

Important Research Findings

Verbal Guise

Using a method called factor extraction, I was able to reduce my thirteen semantic differential items down to four factors. I initially anticipated that three of the factors would map onto Mulac's (1974) categories of Status, Solidarity and Dynamism, as was the case in the pilot study. These data, however, have a much different pattern; the four factors can best be described as Educated, Sociable, Cosmopolitan and Low-Status.

An analysis of variance using these factor scores found the following results:

- For Educated, there was a main effect for the speaker and an interaction between the participant's ethnicity and the guise of the recording. Kazakh guises were judged as significantly less educated by non-Kazakh participants. One of the speakers, Bolat, was also judged to sound much more educated than the others. There was no interaction effect between speaker and guise, however.
- For Sociable, there were several complex effects. On average, the Kazakh guises were judged to be less sociable than Russian guises, though those participants whose ethnicity was coded as "other" (which included those who did not specify an ethnicity or who gave a non-specific answer such as "citizen of the world") regarded all guises as equally unsociable. There was also an interaction between speaker and guise: Vadim and Abzal were both judged more sociable in their native guise, while Bolat was judged equally low in both. Finally, there was a complex three-way interaction: if the data is broken out by participant ethnicity, Kazakhs rated Abzal and Bolat equally sociable in both guises, but Vadim more sociable in Russian. Russians, by contrast, considered Bolat more sociable in Kazakh, but Vadim more sociable in Russian. The Other group, by contrast, considered Abzal and Vadim slightly more sociable in Kazakh, while Bolat was noticeably less sociable in Kazakh. This effect will require much additional investigation.

- For Cosmopolitan, Russian was universally judged more cosmopolitan, and Bolat was again judged significantly more cosmopolitan than the other two speakers. Vadim, the native Russian speaker, was judged as far more cosmopolitan when speaking Russian than when speaking Kazakh, as was Abzal (though the contrast was less).
- Finally, for the Low-Status factor, there were no statistically significant results.

These results suggest that certain negative stereotypes continue to cling to Kazakh (less educated, less modern) but the complicated results of the Sociable factor point to different reactions based on the perceived identity of the speaker. Vadim, who speaks Kazakh with a slight but noticeable Russian accent, was regarded less positively by both Russians and Kazakhs in that guise; this recalls Laitin's (1996) matched guise results, which suggested that there was no real benefit for ethnic Russians attempting to learn the titular languages of the new post-Soviet states. Kazakhs regarded the two Kazakh speakers about the same in both their guises, but the two other ethnic groupings had contrasting reactions to those two. However, it should be noted that this interaction effect is on the very edge of significance, and it may be necessary to gather more data to clarify the interpretation.

Linguistic Landscapes

Out of the 3,028 signs I coded, 1,676 (55%) were monolingual Russian, and another 516 (17%) were parallel Russian and Kazakh. Monolingual Kazakh signs accounted for just over 7% of the signs, and another 4.8% of the signs were either monolingual in English or ambiguous as to whether they represented Russian or Kazakh. (The majority of the latter group were either personal names, or signs advertising notaries, as the word "notarius" is the same in both languages) A total of 922 signs, or 30%, showed some degree of language mixing.



A clothing store in Bostandyq District, combining the Russian word for sweet ("sladkiy") with the English word "kids". The text "children's clothing store" appears above and below the logo in both Kazakh and Russian.

When looking at the distribution of language compared to the types of signs, handbills were most likely to be written in monolingual Russian (more than 80%). These informal fliers are not subject to legislation that requires the use of both Kazakh and Russian in other public signs, and the relative absence of Kazakh could be explained in different ways. If the authors of the handbills assume Russian is the more widely understood language (and they would have reason to do so) they may default to Russian to save space and thus paper. If the authors are not proficient in Kazakh—and only one in four ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan's 2009 census claimed to be so—they may be unable to produce a parallel text and perhaps unwilling to seek out help to do so. More than a quarter of the fliers (27%) were advertising jobs; Smagulova (2008) notes a correlation between higher income and a preference for Russian over Kazakh in the workplace. In this particular subcase, the choice of Russian for the flier may be a subtle filtering mechanism, to deter applicants who don't speak Russian well. Alatau was the only district where a significant number of fliers were in Kazakh (35 vs. 33 in Russian) and there were far fewer advertising jobs; the most common fliers in Alatau were those advertising rental opportunities.

Given the complexity of my data, I used a binomial logistic regression model to analyze what factors best predicted the presence of each language. Kazakh was most likely found in the districts of

Alatau, Turksib, Jetisu and Nauryzbai—the two districts with the highest percentage of ethnic Kazakhs by population as well as the two lowest, though Jetisu also has a large population of ethnic Uyghurs whose language is related to Kazakh. Kazakh is also significantly more likely to be found on billboards, building signs and street signs, where its presence is regulated by law, and least likely to be found on handbills. Street signs also serve to perpetuate the "banal nationalism" described by Billig (1995), as small but persistent reminders of national identity. They are also a site of small acts of resistance, as some older residents of the city continue to use Soviet-era street names. It is noteworthy that, in the very modern mobile game "Pokemon Go," a fountain on Dostyk Avenue has been registered as the "Fountain on Lenin," reflecting a name that hasn't been in official use in a quarter century.

Interestingly, the model also found a strong negative correlation between Russian and Kazakh; despite laws mandating the use of both languages, many of the signs I coded were effectively monolingual, displaying Kazakh and Russian in separate but adjacent spaces rather than a single parallel text.



A beauty salon in Altai-1 microdistrict, Turksib, Almaty. The Kazakh (left) and Russian (right) are visually separate texts.

Russian, on the other hand, was significantly less likely to be found in Nauryzbai, Alatau, and Almaty – this last district features a large number of foreign languages, both English and others. It is also, as mentioned above, significantly more likely to be found on fliers, and found in exclusion of Kazakh. English, the most common foreign language in the sample, was least likely to be found in

Nauryzbai and Turksib, and more likely to be found alone or in combination with Russian than with Kazakh or another foreign language. English was also strongly negatively correlated with the present of trademarks on advertising signs, an unexpected result. English was used in nearly 25% of graffiti, but this was often in the form of band names or a few stock words (love, friend, fuck); Russian was the most commonly used specific language in graffiti (32%) while nearly 37% of graffiti consisted merely of personal names as was thus not coded for a specific language.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

This research supports other avenues of investigation, such as Smagulova (2014), which suggest that Russian will not be disappearing from Kazakhstan any time soon. The correlation between Russian and the "cosmopolitan" factor of the verbal guise study indicates that Russian is still seen as more modern and more urban than Kazakh, stereotypes that have persisted since the Soviet period. Similarly, the use of monolingual Russian as the medium for fliers and graffiti (modes of expression not regulated by law) underscores the continuing utility of Russian and its active presence in the daily lives of city dwellers.

Kazakh, by contrast, may be more visible, but visibility is not necessarily an indicator of vitality (Landry and Bourhis 1997). Its presence on the city's physical margins (where apartment prices and incomes are lower) may be connected to internal migration from rural communities or the settlement of *oralman* (returners) from China and Mongolia. The fact that ethnic Kazakhs in the verbal guise study seemed to have less negative opinions of Kazakh than other ethnic groups suggests that the state's Kazakhification efforts have succeeded in at least one respect. Given the divergent evaluations on the Sociability factor, I argue that the Kazakh language serves as a marker of Kazakh ethnic identity, to the exclusion of its ability to unify Kazakhstani citizens across ethnic groups (Akiner, 1995, p. 71; Kolstø, 1998, Fierman 2005, O Beachain & Kevlihan, 2011). As Kazakhs now form the ethnic majority of the country, the distinction is subtle but important. For one thing, if Kazakh is a signal of ethnic identity,

then the success of Kazakhification cannot be measured in terms of how many non-Kazakhs are proficient in the language. For another, it suggests that, even if Kazakh is not being used in spheres such as higher education or business, it nevertheless will continue to be used for what Fierman calls "affective reasons" (2005), those related to identity and culture. What this means for the relationship between Kazakh, Russian and other languages in the long term is uncertain. However, it does emphasize that language ecology is not a zero-sum game; both languages can, and likely will, endure well into the future.

The primary uses of foreign languages, including English, in the linguistic landscape data involved premium or luxury branding, entertainment, and language education. The prestige attached to these languages will likely continue to drive a demand for English lessons, English tutors and English language education resources.

Co-Curricular Activity

During my time in Almaty, I studied Kazakh intensively with a tutor at KazNU and greatly improved my reading proficiency.

I also volunteered at the American Space which was, at the time, hosted at Narkhoz University. There I lead clubs including "Academic Writing," "Global Issues" and the weekly (later bi-weekly) movie club. It was a wonderful opportunity to engage with local English learners on a variety of topics, as well as to discuss the different perspectives we brought to world issues. I assisted a number of club members with writing application materials for foreign universities. I greatly enjoyed working with Kymbat Turysbekova, the librarian at the American Space, as well as the embassy staff who oversaw the program and the other American volunteers.

Finally, I assisted in scoring essays for the US-CAEF scholarship to KIMEP university.

Conclusions

My research into Kazakhstan's bilingual society was conducted from two primary directions, a verbal guise survey and a linguistic landscape study. These two different methods revealed different aspects of Kazakhstan's bilingual society. The apparent preference for Russian in the linguistic landscape, and the positive valuation of it in the survey, both point to its key role in the lives of modern Kazakhstanis. This is the result of long-term historical processes: Almaty was, after all, originally a Russian fort which grew into a residential city, and prior to Kazakhstan's independence the number of Kazakhs was vanishingly small (Dave 2006). Smagulova (2014) outlines some of the means by which this preference for Russian is reproduced even in Kazakh families, but I have shown here how widespread that preference is. Still, unlike earlier researchers, I do not claim that Russian will necessarily drive out Kazakh or else be driven out by it; rather, I am optimistic that Kazakh and Russian can continue to co-exist in different spheres, and on different scales.

Plans for Future Research

Some obvious avenues for future research include taking the same methodology used for the linguistic landscape study to other cities in Kazakhstan and perhaps elsewhere in Central Asia for the purpose of comparisons. In particular I intend to visit Astana, which has undergone considerable growth since becoming the nation's capital in 1996. This difference in its history may be visible in a different linguistic landscape, but I was unable to fit a visit into my grant year as I had hoped. Similarly, a comparison with Tashkent or another city with less Russian roots would also provide an intriguing basis for comparison.

I am also carefully watching the current national conversations regarding the transition from Cyrillic to Latin as Kazakh's official orthography. This change will deeply affect both institutional practices and daily lives, and much of the discourse surrounding it reveals attitudes about language and national identity.

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