

Language situation in dynamic Eurasian region: Introducing the special issue

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Eurasia is vast, covering enormous territories with distinctly different landscapes, climates, and time zones. Throughout the centuries, the inhabitants of these territories have moved, encountered various challenges and threats, adapted to new living conditions, changed their accustomed ways of life, and consistently had to communicate with both fellow inhabitants and strangers. The languages spoken in this region have also undergone constant changes, adapting to the communicative needs of their speakers. Stretching from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and the Far East, Eurasia holds a unique position as a convergence point for diverse linguistic traditions. The languages spoken within this region belong to numerous language families, including Indo-European, Turkic, Finno-Ugric, Tungusic, Mongolic, and several others, forming a rich tapestry of histories, cultural interactions, and linguistic evolution. Furthermore, the socio-political developments have had a significant impact on the language situations in different regions. Some languages or language variants have gained prestige and influence, while others have fallen into disuse and disappeared. State authorities have actively promoted languages they deem strategically advantageous and have sometimes attempted to suppress those they perceive as threats to national unity or independence. Political, religious, and cultural activists have pursued their own agendas, contributing to the complex mosaic of efforts aimed at managing language situations.

In recent years, the Eurasian region has undergone substantial socio-political and economic transformations, which have had far-reaching effects on linguistic diversity and language practices within the region. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the emergence of independent nation-states, and the growing interconnectedness of the global community have all contributed to remarkable changes in the linguistic landscape. This special issue seeks to offer a comprehensive exploration of these shifts and their implications for language usage, identity, and intercultural communication within the Eurasian context. The primary

focus is on the Eurasian region as a linguistically diverse, multiethnic, and multicultural setting, providing a lens through which to examine these phenomena.

Multilingualism, language contacts, and socially loaded linguistic variation form an integral part of everyday life within diverse linguistic communities across the globe. The capacity to speak multiple languages or navigate various linguistic registers equips individuals with a wider array of communicative tools and facilitates intercultural comprehension and access to opportunities. People often adjust their language use to align with specific social contexts, adhering to linguistic norms or indicating their affiliation with particular groups. These linguistic variations can bear cultural significance and serve as markers of identity and belonging. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in regions characterized by linguistic diversity, such as the Eurasian region.

Recognizing the significance of multilingualism is essential for numerous reasons. Firstly, it serves as a catalyst for effective communication and promotes intercultural understanding within diverse societies. By being proficient in multiple languages, individuals can establish connections, bridge cultural gaps, and gain a deeper appreciation for different perspectives.

Furthermore, the study of multilingualism and language contacts plays a crucial role in the preservation and revitalization of minority languages. By actively supporting and promoting these languages, we contribute to the maintenance of cultural heritage and diversity.

Language choices and variations also carry social implications. They can signal social status, solidarity, or resistance, thereby shaping interactions and social hierarchies. Acknowledging and respecting these variations are crucial in fostering inclusivity, combating language-based

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discrimination, and nurturing a sense of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Eurasia, being a hub of intensive contact for countless centuries, is currently experiencing rapid transformations brought about by globalization, migration, and digitalization. These changes have given rise to new actors, popular language use trends, and the formation and enactment of new identities. Simultaneously, global and regional events, as well as social and political measures resulting from pandemics and military conflicts, are impacting communication processes and exchanges in the region.

Furthermore, historical memories and the shadows of the imperial and colonial past continue to exert influence in Eurasia, shaping people's attitudes and language choices. In this special issue, the authors present diverse cases that range from the utilization of minority languages in Russia to the challenges associated with providing higher education in the national language in Kazakhstan, and from language practices among Ukrainian and Belarusian citizens in the current political climate, to the historical origins of linguistic diversity in Tajikistan. Across these varied cases, a strong connection between historical legacies and the present can be observed, as well as a link between specific events and broader issues surrounding ideology and identity.

The first article, titled "Treatment of and attitudes towards 'other' languages in modern Russia: Evidence from metalinguistic discourse," co-authored by Nam Hye Hyun and myself, provides a comprehensive overview of several studies conducted on language attitudes among Russian citizens. The primary objective is to unveil the prevailing language ideology prevalent in various public domains in Russia. To achieve this, we examined metadiscourse, which encompasses statements reflecting language attitudes and ideological concepts, originating from both state actors and individuals participating in communication on different internet platforms.

Over the past two decades, there has been a notable shift in the official language ideology in Russia. Initially, the emphasis was on guaranteeing linguistic equality and diversity, but it has since evolved to prioritize unity, purity, and support for the Russian language. However, language practices within Russia are gradually becoming more diverse, which could pose challenges for the maintenance of monolingualism and linguistic purism in the future. As a result, the public metadiscourse reflects increasingly contentious tendencies.

By analyzing a range of data sources and research findings, our article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding language attitudes in contemporary Russia.

The second article, "Linguistic in/exclusion in medicine: Multilingual Covid-19 communication in Russia," authored by Vlada Baranova, added to this perspective. It delves into

the disparity between the prevailing monolingual ideology in Russia and the practical necessity of employing multilingual communication methods.

Establishing a trusting relationship between doctors and patients is crucial, especially during a pandemic. Utilizing patients' native languages allows medical practitioners, as well as business and state actors, to minimize the risk of misunderstandings and overcome potential biases against medical procedures. In this context, grassroots initiatives play a vital role in supporting these efforts and providing more adaptable solutions to foster inclusivity in medical communication.

The article highlights the importance of bridging the gap between the dominant monolingual ideology and the need for multilingual communication in the medical field. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive practices and ultimately improve the doctor-patient relationship in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

The next two articles examine language practices in Ukraine and Belarus. In the article "East vs. West: geopolitical orientations and language practices of residents of central and southern Ukraine" by Olesya Palinska, the author explores the relationship between language attitudes and political views among individuals residing in Ukrainian regions that have historically been influenced by Russian. Alongside Ukrainian and Russian, a mixed idiom known as Surzhik is widely used in these areas. The status of Surzhik is contentious, and its usage varies across different regions of Ukraine, aligning with differences in speakers' geopolitical orientations, whether they identify as "pro-Russian" or "pro-European." The study, conducted prior to the full-scale invasion by Russia, sheds light on the prevailing situation and challenges the notion that Putin's appeal to unite with Russians reflects the majority sentiment among eastern and central Ukrainians.

In Irina Liskovets's article, "Challenges and reasons for using a passively known language in daily practice: cases of Belarusian and Ukrainian," another facet of multilingual contact in Ukraine and Belarus is explored—the rapid and spontaneous shift to actively using a language that individuals only know passively. Due to the close linguistic relationship between Russian and Belarusian, as well as Russian and Ukrainian, many speakers are able to understand these languages without mastering them. For political and ideological reasons, many Belarusian and Ukrainian citizens are now consciously making an effort to switch from Russian, their native tongue, to Belarusian and Ukrainian. This shift symbolizes their loyalty to their respective states and their ethnic and cultural identities. The article focuses on the linguistic outcomes of such conscious language choices and compares them with other contact phenomena, such as the mixed idioms of Surzhik (Russian-Ukrainian) and Trasyanka (Russian-Belarusian).

The article “Coexistence of multiple writing systems: classifying digraphia in post-socialist countries,” authored by Kim Bora and Jung Youngjoo, delves into the consequences of political transformations in the post-Soviet space, particularly the transition from one writing system to another and the coexistence of different writing systems within the same country. The authors conduct a detailed exploration of this phenomenon, focusing on post-socialist countries such as Russia, Belarus, Serbia, and Uzbekistan.

These countries have experienced the use of different variations of the same alphabet or even completely different alphabets for writing, which can be attributed to changes in state language policies, as well as the impact of digitalization and hybridization. The article provides a comparative analysis of these cases, shedding light on the complexities and implications of digraphia, the coexistence of multiple writing systems, in post-socialist countries. By examining the various factors and dynamics behind the adoption of different writing systems, the article offers insights into the socio-political and technological forces shaping the linguistic landscape in these countries.

Kazakhstan, undergoing its own transition from Cyrillic to Latin script, presents an intriguing case for sociolinguistic analysis, particularly considering its significant Russian-speaking population, similar to Ukraine and Belarus. In their article titled “Language revitalization: challenges for Kazakh in higher education,” Dina Kucherbayeva and Juldyz Smagulova focus on a specific domain of language use, namely, higher education, within the context of Kazakhstan’s complex language situation.

The article explores language policies that aim to establish Kazakh as the medium of instruction in the higher education sector, with the goal of fostering cultural independence. However, these policies encounter numerous pragmatic and ideological challenges, as revealed through interviews conducted with university students studying in Kazakh. The study highlights the difficulties associated with overcoming the legacy of the past and decolonizing knowledge production institutions. Achieving true language

revitalization and creating a more inclusive and culturally independent higher education system requires significant time and effort.

The final article titled “Towards understanding Tajikistan’s sociolinguistically complex language ecology: historical development, current status, issues, research, policy, and practice” by Stephen Bahry and Tojiniso Olimnazarova explores a relatively understudied region of Eurasia, Tajikistan. The article adopts a language ecology perspective to examine Tajikistan as a region characterized by the convergence of multiple languages and cultures.

The authors aim to provide insights into Tajikistan’s current language ecology, taking into account its historical development, existing language policies, and the challenges posed by its post-colonial and globalized existence. The country’s linguistic scene is shaped not only by its past but also by the demands of the present. By reviewing the language and language-in-education policies, the article sheds light on the sociolinguistic complexities and issues faced by Tajikistan.

The collective insights presented in this special issue hold significant value for researchers, policymakers, educators, and individuals seeking to comprehend the complex language dynamics in the ever-changing Eurasian region. The studies’ exploration of language practices and attitudes aims to foster a deeper understanding and recognition of the linguistic richness found within the region. By shedding light on the intricate language situation in Eurasia, this special issue encourages a broader appreciation for the region’s linguistic heritage and facilitates the formulation of informed approaches to language planning and policy.

Ultimately, the aim is to create an environment where linguistic diversity is celebrated, intercultural communication is fostered, and inclusive language practices are embraced. The insights shared in this special issue provide a foundation for meaningful dialogue, research, and action to promote linguistic understanding and harmony in the Eurasian context.