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When language policy is not enough

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Abstract: By focusing predominantly on discourse production and language management, language policy research de-emphasizes the material sources of inequality. The paper argues that language management, often restricted by ritualistic and symbolic gestures, cannot rectify historically formed relations of power and calls for critical examination of both sociolinguistic and socio-economic consequences of language reforms.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; language policy; language revitalization; social inequality

In this essay I would like to discuss the limits of language policy. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, language policy is driven by the nationalist discourse constructing Kazakhstan as a land of Kazakhs who speak Kazakh. Language policy has been strongly motivated by a perceived need to promote Kazakh, which had occupied a relatively peripheral position in the Soviet-era marketplace as a national language of a new nation-state. The argument is that the new national language should be developed and institutionalized in government and schools. When it comes to language planning activities, Kazakhstan officials have played by the language policy playbook. Restoring Kazakh as a national language of Kazakhstan involved status and corpus planning, language-in-education planning to increase number of speakers, and prestige building. The 2009¹ National Census data seems to suggest that the policy has been successful: the majority of respondents report fluent reading (64.8%) and writing skills (62%) in Kazakh. In the academic year of 2017/2018, 66% of all school children attended Kazakh-language schools and 65% of university students were studying in Kazakh. The southern and western parts of the country are almost mono-ethnic and Kazakh-speaking. Yet the alarmist discourse of Kazakh language endangerment persists; it co-exists with discourse of shaming and blaming Russian speakers, especially Russian-speaking ethnic

¹ The next Census was originally scheduled for 2019. It had been rescheduled to fall 2020, but then because of the COVID-19 pandemic it was postponed to October 2021.

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Kazakhs, and with periodic calls to strip the Russian language of its status of an official language and to prohibit Russian-medium schools. So what is happening?

Bourdieu's model, operating within the political structure of the nation-state, assigns a particular language variety as the state language. In this linguistic market, speaking the right sort of language (typically state or official) is seen as indexical of being the right sort of person and gives access to the right sort of education, which in turn allows access to other economic and cultural resources. However, this framework does not adequately describe states in transition – states in the midst of the process of reimagining their language hierarchies. Kazakh is a state language and it is the language of a majority of the population. Yet we are observing persistent social inequality running along language lines; Kazakh speakers are more likely to be less well-educated and more likely to be socially disadvantaged in comparison with their Russian-speaking compatriots. Russian proficiency is linked to higher income while the lack of Russian proficiency appears to act as an economic penalty. Kazakh-medium schools continually underperform, as demonstrated by international tests, such as PISA. While in post-imperial Kazakhstan Russian still mediates socio-economic divisions, due to lack of quality Russian language teaching and decreasing diversity, access to Russian is becoming limited. Trilingual policy, which as Karabassova (2020) notes puts more emphasis on development proficiency in English than in Kazakh among Russian speakers or Russian among Kazakh speakers, further deepens existing inequalities and produces “elite closure” (Myers-Scotton 1993, cited from Block 2018: 579). It appears that language policy has unintentionally resulted in widening social difference and social inequality in the globalizing new economy.

Heller (2003, 2010) has persuasively argued that when studying multilingual societies, we need to expand our understanding of language as a marker of ethnic identity or national affiliation to include consideration of how the position of a language within the global knowledge-based marketplace can affect how both the language and its speakers are socially positioned. For example, our data show that, contrary to appearances, the rise in the number of Kazakh-medium schools in Almaty, the country's largest megapolis, is not the result of the increasing attractiveness of Kazakh-medium education for Russian-speakers, who continue to favor Russian-medium education (Ahn and Smagulova 2019). The increasing symbolic capital accorded to Kazakh since independence does not appear to be reversing the process of language shift among Russian-speaking ethnic Kazakhs, nor it is creating a generation of new Kazakh speakers among the non-ethnic Kazakh population. Instead, these schools seem to largely enroll Kazakh-speaking rural migrants who, for historical reasons, lack the economic, cultural, and linguistic resources that would enable them to succeed academically. Fleming and Ansaldo (2020), based on findings of ethnographic interviews in Kazakhstan and

other places, also point to “the limits to which linguistic revivals can claim to be truly empowering and uniformly beneficial to their citizens” (52).

We need to ask what are the effects of upscaling Kazakh in the context of the expansion of existing political economies and globalization. In language policy research we need a very critical appraisal of both sociolinguistic and socio-economic consequences of language reforms. We should reevaluate our current assumption that the desires for independent territory and self-rule are more important for language revitalization than economic advantage (Paulston et al. 1993: 281) and admit that the little attention paid to political economy produces “naive accounts of the role of language in relation to the promotion of social justice” (Codó 2018: 468).

Kazakhstan’s case highlights that ritualistic and symbolic gestures or even institutionalising a demographically dominant language are not able to rectify historically formed relations of power. Recognition does not lead to fair redistribution (Duchêne 2020: 2). For so long the state policy has been focusing on discursive strategies of legitimization of the Kazakh nation-state. The key forms of “traditionalist” knowledge production have predominantly centered on reclaiming physical and symbolic spaces, managing population (homogenization and redistribution), and managing language. Little or no attention was paid to eliminating structural and material inequalities and improvement of opportunities for Kazakh-language speakers, who typically used to reside in rural areas. The collapse of the Soviet economic system and particularly abolishing the Soviet system of support for rural industry resulted in unemployment, growing poverty, further decline in standards of living (many villages still lack basic infrastructure such as roads, running waters and gas), closing of small schools and emergency centers in remote areas, and a decline in the quality of education. Predictably it led to mass rural-to-urban migration and long commuting for work in the cities; but many migrants, mainly Kazakh-speaking, remain marginalized.

Kazakhstan’s case poignantly illustrates that “[w]ithout the guarantee of material conditions for actual participation, recognition alone simply gives a symbolic voice to subaltern bodies” (Duchêne 2020: 3). But then it also shows that giving symbolic voice without changing the socio-economic positioning of speakers can be potentially dangerous. It propels populist nationalism, feeds social tension, triggers ethnic clashes, and even serves as an excuse for violence as demonstrated by pogroms of Dungan villages in February 2020.

There are calls to use political economy more widely as a frame for analysis and discussion of language policy (e.g., Codó 2018), but it seems we also need to rethink what expert advice we offer language policy planners. Linguistic disadvantage is a symptom of systemic social inequality. By mainly focusing on discourses and language management, we de-emphasize the material sources of

inequality. We are giving advice on how to treat symptoms while ignoring the cause. Language policy recommendations should not be limited to language management advice; we must address the need to create economic niches and opportunities for speakers of languages in the process of revitalization and reinstatement.

I would like to close this essay by inviting international researchers to take a closer look at our region. Monica Heller (2008) suggested that language scholars can contribute to social theory by examining contemporary social changes and their nature. I find it puzzling that, with this agenda in mind, few sociolinguists have paid attention to our region – Central Asia – which is undergoing seismic socio-economic, political, demographic, cultural and linguistic transformations. All these present an unparalleled setting for studying sociolinguistic change that could potentially enrich sociolinguistic theory. Many processes taking place here are different from well-described cases of language planning in democratic and free-market states with rational agents. I believe that critical analysis of language policy in other settings, such as situations of dominant populist nationalism in combination with the seeping in of neoliberal discourse, centralized autocratic regimes, practices of reporting up, bad management, and corruption, has potential to add to the theory of the sociology of language. In Central Asia, there are few local researchers who are trained in sociolinguistics and language policy; existing research is traditionally oriented to structuralist methodology and few data collection methods are considered legitimate sources of knowledge production. Without the help of the international community in critically analyzing the sociolinguistic situation, informing language policy decisions, training/mentoring of local researchers and collaborating with local scholars, I am concerned that many sociolinguistic processes will again be left undocumented and unanalyzed (Pavlenko 2013: 263).

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