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PROSPECTS FOR LEARNING THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract
This article examines the prospects for the development of Russian language learning in Uzbekistan. It provides a historical overview of how attitudes toward learning Russian have evolved over the centuries. The author explores the emergence of a new multipolar linguistic situation in the country.

Keywords: Russian-speaking population, multiethnic society, bilingualism, language policy, linguistic self-identification, multilingualism, native speaker.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing "Russian-speaking population," we should primarily consider its "carriers"—that is, people for whom Russian is not their ethnic language, but is acquired as a second language—in other words, bilinguals This approach is valid, as there are significantly more Russian-speaking bilinguals than native speakers for whom Russian is their mother tongue, ethnic, and often the only language.

Clearly, the success of studying, developing, and preserving the Russian-speaking identity depends on how bilingual individuals perceive the Russian language. Or, to use a term from sociolinguistics, how Russian-speaking bilinguals identify themselves through the language—this is known as linguistic self-identification. Studying this phenomenon answers a critical question: In what forms does the Russian language exist in a bilingual setting? Without this understanding, effective linguistic planning and predicting the future of the Russian language outside its native territories becomes impossible.

This question has become a scientific issue that requires socio- and psycholinguistic solutions for two reasons:

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• Can we derive data on the forms of Russian in bilingualism from well-established sociolinguistic surveys and questionnaires that provide useful information about the functional parameters of Russian usage (e.g., areas of communication, proficiency levels)? Or should we go beyond observable behavior and examine the linguistic consciousness of individuals?

• Is the Russian of monolinguals identical to the Russian of bilinguals? In bilinguals, linguistic awareness is equally directed toward both languages. Russian is evaluated and perceived through personal imagery and attitudes. Each individual defines their relationship to the language—as native, non-native, "bread-winning," "necessary," or "unnecessary."

Bilingual language identification models based on the "us vs. them" stereotype, while categorizing motivations for language choice, fall short in addressing complex forms of Russian-language self-identification. For bilinguals, awareness is linked to deeper concepts like heritage and ancestry.

Over the past decade, the linguistic situation in the post-Soviet space has taken on fundamentally new dimensions. From a cultural and communication matter, it has extended into internal and foreign policy, influencing interstate relations.

In Uzbekistan, a long-established ethic of interethnic relations exists, whereby one language equals one culture, and two languages equal two cultures. Unsurprisingly, Uzbeks fluent in both languages find themselves at an advantage. The roots of this unique situation lie in the historical realities of the 20th century. It is well known that Russian was widely used across Uzbekistan throughout the 20th century, largely due to migration patterns in the early part of the century and during the 1950s.

Today, Russian continues to function as a language of interethnic communication within Uzbekistan's multiethnic society. Even decades after gaining sovereignty, the country's language situation remains multipolar. The Law on the National Language of the Republic of Uzbekistan is the primary legal document regulating this sphere. It is fairly democratic, asserting the need for equal respect toward all languages used in Uzbekistan and granting citizens the freedom to choose their language for education, work, and childrearing.

While Uzbek is designated as the state language, the law clearly outlines its areas of application and emphasizes that this status does not restrict the legal freedom

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of individuals. However, it is also evident that most urban Uzbeks speak Russian fluently, whereas the Russian-speaking population's knowledge of Uzbek remains inadequate. Furthermore, a separate article in the law devoted to the use of Russian is effective largely because the Russian-speaking population in the country is both sizable and socially significant. Paradoxically, though, this does not lead to increased motivation among Russian speakers to learn Uzbek.

As a result, not knowing Uzbek can hinder not only employment opportunities but also interpersonal communication. In a multiethnic society, a monolingual individual cannot feel fully integrated with the world around them.

There are many countries worldwide where bilingualism or even trilingualism is legally recognized and practiced. An insightful quote from Dr. G.N. Chirshyeva, a philologist, is especially relevant. She writes in her article "How to Raise a Bilingual Child": "In a mixed family, a child absorbs not only two languages but also two cultures from their respective native speakers." The state, often likened to a family, relies heavily on mutual understanding for its wellbeing.

While the negative impacts of the Russification process—affecting many Uzbeks—are frequently highlighted, there are positive examples as well. Many Russians, Germans, and Koreans who lived their entire lives among Uzbeks have become culturally assimilated. Herold Belger, who grew up in Central Asia, once admitted that he considers himself Turkic at heart. Such cultural interweaving should not be outright dismissed—it is a valuable phenomenon.

In today's Uzbekistan, genuine mutual understanding requires more than formal bilingualism; it calls for cultural bilingualism. While it already exists, more effort is needed to make it the prevailing social norm. There are numerous situations in which the Russian language is indispensable—especially during interethnic interactions (excluding native Russian speakers). It is often used in translations during negotiations and press conferences involving foreign guests in Uzbekistan. Visitors from CIS countries frequently use Russian among themselves, while many foreign diplomats and entrepreneurs either speak Russian or bring translators.

In reality, Russian continues to hold a stable—though not dominant—position as a language of necessity across many sectors. One is reminded of Uzbek intellectual Mahmudkhoja Behbudi's early 20th-century remark on the

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importance of knowing multiple languages, including Russian, especially for business and trade.

CONCLUSION

Two general trends can be identified. On one hand, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian language has steadily lost its status as a socially significant language in Uzbekistan, being gradually replaced in some spheres by English. On the other hand, in recent years, Russian is increasingly seen as a practically indispensable language. This has led to changes in its vocabulary and a narrowing of its functional domains.

Russian remains the cornerstone of a distinct subculture in Uzbekistan, formed during the Soviet era and comprising not only European populations but also segments of the native Uzbek population in urban centers. The change in the language's status may have initially disappointed local Russian speakers, but it has ultimately contributed to its preservation as a secondary yet valued language. Russian continues to influence the Uzbek language and holds a relatively equal place in the tradition of Central Asian multilingualism.

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