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## Language and identity in post-soviet nations of Central Asia

## ЯЗЫК И ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ В ПОСТСОВЕТСКИХ СТРАНАХ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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***Abstract:** this paper explores the role of language in identity formation. Language is a part of culture, and therefore, an inseparable element of identity. This understanding of the relationship between language and identity will be used to explore language and identity issues in post-Soviet Central Asian countries. Literature on identity formation will be reviewed with a close focus on socially constructed aspect of identity formation.*

***Аннотация:** в статье рассматривается роль языка в формировании идентичности. Язык является частью культуры и, следовательно, неотделимым элементом идентичности. Такое понимание взаимосвязи между языком и самобытностью было использовано для изучения вопросов языка и идентичности в постсоветских странах Центральной Азии. Изучение литературы по формированию идентичности проводилось с особым вниманием к социально-конструктивистскому аспекту формирования идентичности.*

***Аннотация:** бул макалада тилдин иденттуулукту тузуудегу ролу каралат. Тил маданияттын бир белугу жана ошондуктан иденттуулуктун ажырагыс элементи болуп саналат. Тил менен иденттуулуктун ортосундагы байланыштын ушундай нукта тушунуу бул макалада Борбордук Азия олквлрундв тили жана иденттуулук маселелерин изилдвв учун колдонулду. Иденттуулукту тузуу боюнча адабияттарды изилдвдвв иденттуулук тузуунун социалдык-конструктивисттик вцутунв взгвчв квиул влвунду*

***Keywords:** identity; language; culture; education.*

***Ключевые слова:** идентичность; язык; культура; образование.*

***Негизги сөздөр:** иденттуулук; тил; маданият; билим.*

### Introduction

What is identity? Although I recognize the essentialist approach to identity which contends that certain features of one's self remain fixed across time and space (Hoffman, 1998, p. 329), my focus is on socially constructed identity which views self as an evolving concept dependent upon social forces and experiences. I use identity as defined by one's membership in a group, one's notions about how others perceive him or her and one's place in society.

Diane Hoffman, professor from the University of Virginia (USA) defines self as a “culturally patterned way of relating to others” whereas, identity is defined as the “self’s situatedness in social roles” or a person’s perception of his place in the social structure. This form of identity is based on race, culture, language, ethnic and class differentiations and how an individual relates oneself to others in a particular social structure. Hoffman maintains that identity construction is a common phenomenon that occurs during schooling as a response to social pressures. Identity can be defined by group membership, which can be also be used as a boundary marker. For an individual, identity is culturally defined by values and norms which are also subject to change depending upon the daily experiences.

What is language and what role does it play in identity formation? Language has, for centuries, been used as a tool of communication that ties people together into a close-knit community of the speakers. Language, along with factors such as race, religion, history and territory forms major symbols of identity of ethnic groups. As Sarup states, “it is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings... Through language, we come to ‘know’ who we are” (1996, p. 46). Participation in the linguistic environment helps people learn the values and beliefs of the group to which they belong. On the one hand, language serves as a symbol of unity and understanding among members belonging to socio-cultural groups; on the other, it acts a boundary marker, keeping non-speakers from understanding the communication of the in-group, and thus, keeping them from becoming a part of the group. For both reasons, language has commonly been used by ethnic and state leaders to instigate a form of collective identity for political as well as developmental reasons. The dawn of the era of post-colonialism brought with it the need for independent states to gather a new sense of identity, distinct from that of the colonizers; language, along with history, culture and religion were some of the major tools used to bring people of certain similarities together as well as demarcate their identity from the rest of the world.

In this paper, I will be exploring the role of language in identity formation. Language is a part of culture, and therefore, an inseparable element of identity. I will be using this notion as my hypothesis which will be tested in the post-Soviet nations of Central Asia. “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (Ngugi, 1997, p. 5). According to Ngugi, African scholar, language has two main functions: it is a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language carries culture of those for whom it is the mother tongue. Ngugi argues that as a carrier of culture, language is inseparable from identity. He identifies three roles of language as a carrier of culture. First, language is used to create history, a “collective memory bank (15)” of a group of people. Culture in turn is a product of

history. Second, language is a means by which we create images of the world surrounding us. The way we define ourselves, individually and collectively, depends on how we paint the picture of the world that surrounds us, the struggles between man and nature, and how we relate to that world. Third, written language is used to portray how a culture views the world, its values, and history. Language is also used as a tool to differentiate one culture from another each with their own unique history.

Ngugi asserts that when colonizers impose their languages upon the populations, not only are they affecting the means of communication, but they are also imparting through language, their culture, values and the way they view the world. Because the colonizers bring with them the belief that of the colonized as being backward, and because the colonized are forced to look at themselves from the cultural lens of the colonizers, their own place in the world appears to be inferior to that of the colonizers. Language has been a tool used to suppress the identity (culture, values and history) of the colonized and elevate that of the colonizers. In Africa, Ngugi argues, “English was made to look like the language spoken by God (Moving the Centre, 33)” whereas, African languages were associated with humiliation.

Ngugi’s analysis of the use of language as a tool of identity formation allows for comparison between the colonial and the Central Asian experiences. The post-Soviet context appears to share some similarities with post-colonial Africa, and at the same time, some of their experiences were more unique to Central Asia. One of the commonalities between the two regions was that both experienced several phases of linguistic transformations that affected their sense of identity in relation to the world in one way or another.

#### *Language in the Pre-Soviet era:*

The major transformation in language followed the introduction of Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the incorporation of Central Asia into the Arab-Persian influence. Languages and cultures of Central Asia were heavily influenced by the Arab and Persian traditions. Arabic vocabulary, grammatical structures and literary forms were in common usage. Chagatay Turkish, which descended from the Uyghur dialect, was the most commonly used dialect in Turkic literary from the eleventh century until the arrival of the Russians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though it was not the common indigenous dialect. However, Chagatay had been contaminated with Arabic and Persian grammar, vocabulary and literary forms.

The Tsarist advent to Central Asia was mostly determined by economic motives and therefore, Tsarist strategy in Central Asia was mainly that of non-interference. However, Russians viewed themselves as representing a civilization and Central Asia as being historically backward and barbarian. Russian schools and a printing press were opened to ‘enlighten’ indigenous people. Secular education programs were introduced, more extensively in southern Central Asia such as the Kazak Steppe

(Haugen, 51). Reforms in Central Asia during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were mainly the result of a spillover of reforms advocated by Tatar Jadids in the Russian Empire. Language in Central Asia had evolved through assimilation of the nomadic peoples as well as the sedentary populations with different cultures and languages and had not been a unifying force for people of different groups until the Jadids recognized it to bring Turkic people together. Jadids used secular education to replace the religious education as a process of modernization. Education was seen being necessary to get out of the Central Asian backwardness or societal decay.

*Language in the Soviet era:* After the arrival of the Soviets, language was once again determined as a key to ingrain shared consciousness of socialism. National or indigenous languages were highly promoted by Lenin, and language became a marker of identity. Formation of national languages was considered a vital task by the Soviets to create a sense of national identity. Soviets considered language a powerful tool to induce unity.

In 1928, Latin script was used to replace the Arabic script across Central Asia. In 1940, Cyrillic script was used to replace the Latin script. The transition from Latin to Cyrillic slowly led to the decay of the native languages. A lot of Russian words had to be borrowed in each of the languages, limiting the social as well as occupational functions of such languages. The native languages began to be spoken less and less by the national intelligentsia, creating a wide gap between the educated and the non-educated people, as well as rural and urban populations (R'oi, 1984).

The major concern of the Soviet Union was to increase literacy to consolidate the people of all republics into one socialist system. Elementary schooling, adult education through special schools and “red corners” in factories and workshops changed the number to almost 70% by 1939. Soviets were trying to promote national identities and at the same time promote a unified soviet identity. After Lenin (who stressed the equality of all languages and a multinational state), however, with Stalin at the forefront, national/ indigenous languages were not promoted as such and instead Russian was forced as the official means of communication all over Central Asia. Any political, economic or professional status required proficiency in the Russian language. Only rural population was not as affected by russification and used their native tongue but overall, russification was very successful.

#### *Language and identity in the Post-Soviet era*

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet nations struggled to build their nations a new country by reviving their language and rebuilding identity. Language was again relied upon to create a new identity of the nations freed from the Soviet influence. Since 1991 – the year the Soviet Union collapsed – the search and construction of a new identity has taken different forms, including adoption of the language laws; revitalization

of cultural traditions, customs and holidays that were forbidden under the Soviet regime; revision of history; reform of school curriculum; re-introduction of Islamic religious practices; and renaming of cities and towns (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2001).

New nation-building efforts were centralized around revitalizing their suppressed culture and revolting against Russification (Lapidus, p335). Central Asian countries attempted “to oust Russian as the dominant language and to enshrine the titular language as the official one subsequently became the core of nation-building projects” for all Central Asian states (Lapidus, 2002, p. 335). In Kyrgyzstan, the dissatisfaction of the rural population with the dilution of Kyrgyz culture and language coupled with the expressive views from writers and intellectuals about the inappropriateness of Cyrillic alphabet usage in schools led to the declaration of Kyrgyz as the official language in 1989 (Fouse, 287). The former Soviet states made major language reforms and some of them converted back to their usage of the Latin alphabet. Indigenous people fought Russification because they felt that it had eroded their Kyrgyz culture and language through the domination of Russian language and the Cyrillic alphabet in the education system.

For instance, under the changing political and socio-cultural circumstances, to be a Kyrgyz in today’s Kyrgyzstan means a radically different thing to Kyrgyz people. Historical circumstances, legacies of the Soviet/Russian cultural domination and resurgent nationalism appear to necessitate instrumentalization, as primordial entities, of the Kyrgyz language, culture, ethnicity, land, myths and legends to reassert and re-establish Kyrgyzness. Having shed off the identity of the Soviet nation, which denied and purged their pre-Soviet ancestors as bourgeois elements, Kyrgyz people strive to reclaim lost elements of their identity by turning to their historical roots and defending its historicity and authenticity. The rationale behind such claims as “Kyrgyz is a language spoken by Manas and ‘jeti-ata’ is the attempt of Kyrgyz people to challenge cultural oppression and marginalization and to counteract the notion that as a nation Kyrgyz people are a Soviet construct.

This demonstrates that, even though language is an important source of identity, its success as an identifier is largely dependent upon its relationship with other identifiers such as history, culture and education. Language on its own may not be able to instigate a sense of identity among a community member if there is no other commonality holding the nation together.

### **Conclusion**

In all three phases of nation building - pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet period - the reformers used language and education to create identity. Soviets believed that the creation of national identity would ease the process of modernization and regional administration. According to Stalin, territorial unity, cultural unity, economic unity and linguistic unity were the basic

requirements of a modern nation. Language planning was a key tool to instigate linguistic unity and history writing for cultural unity during the Soviet period. The Russian language was imposed upon the Central Asians by means of education. Language acquisition was also associated with progress whereas, the rural areas remained undeveloped. Russification was seen as being vital to creating a soviet socialist identity. Russian language signified modernization, and native languages were slowly fading away in their usage.

It can be said that although language was not a significant identifier in Central Asia before the Soviet arrival, language has been used time and again to instigate a sense of national unity and identity among the Central Asians. Similar was the case for other Central Asian countries as far as national identity was concerned.

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