

The Limits of Language Revival

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1. Language Planning in the Kyrgyz Republic since 1989

Kyrgyz became the Kyrgyz Soviet Republic's official language in 1989 and is mentioned in the 1993 constitution as the state language of the Kyrgyz Republic. After independence in 1991 language became a highly politicised issue. Language policy in independent Kyrgyzstan has mainly been a negotiation between the status of Russian and Kyrgyzⁱ. Before independence, knowledge of the Russian language already played a decisive role for occupational opportunitiesⁱⁱ. Until today language planning, however, has not produce the desired result of a language shift from Russian to Kyrgyz. Thus the government saw the need to recognize Russian as a second official language in May 2000. It is still not clear which concrete changes the new law will implement. But it is a moment to evaluate the success and failures of *status* and *corpus* planning in the last ten years¹. In the following I shall concentrate on status planning, but corpus planning cannot be dismissed since status very much depends on how well a language is elaborated and standardized. Understanding the speakers' subjective perception of language status can explain individual language choice. This in turn can give language planners the opportunity to address potentials and deficiencies.

I will outline why it is difficult to give a precise answer about language status in Kyrgyzstan. This will be done by examining the languages' various functions and by positioning them on a majority – minority scale.

2. Language Status

When people talk about language Status in Kyrgyzstan they usually speak about **legal** status “они дали кыргызскому языку статус » (*they gave the Kyrgyz language status*). The apparent tension between the *de jure* and the *de facto* status of Russian and Kyrgyz makes it clear that legal instruments are only one means to enhance language status. Other influencing factors, as analysed below, are not to be neglected.

Linguists and social scientists have used different terms to talk about language status, alternately referring to the number of speakers, the prestige of the language, its economic power, legal status, use or functionality. The attributes most often ascribed to the non-dominating languages which are mostly used are *minority language*, *lesser used language*, *threatened language*, *endangered language*, “*small*” *language*, *non-dominant language* or “*weak*” *language*ⁱⁱⁱ. They all imply that in language contact situations one language dominates^{iv}. This is clearly the case in Kyrgyzstan, but still none of these attributes are appropriate for a clear description of Kyrgyz or Russian and their relation to each other in Kyrgyzstan. I shall use *majority* and *minority* language. These terms do, however, not refer to the number of speakers. I will refer to *minority language* as a language that needs institutional support in order to function in official and not only community or family communication. There are of course more features that characterize a language as a minority language. I will evaluate the following in this essay:

- 1.) legal status and linguistic rights
- 2.) symbolic value
- 3.) functional potential
- 4.) number of speakers
- 5.) economic potential

1.1. Legal Status and Linguistic Rights

Kyrgyz has been the state language since 1989, which means that official documents have to be presented in Kyrgyz. However, Russian, which was granted official status in 1994 and became the second *official* language in May 2000, is relied on for official documentations. These laws are not always meaningfully applied or controlled. Government documents are mainly read and written in Russian and translated into Kyrgyz in order to comply with the law but not for communicative reasons.

Although the labels *Official* and *State* language remain, Kyrgyzstan has now *de jure* accepted a bilingual language policy. The differentiation between *State Language* and *Official Language* has purely symbolic implications, since the Kyrgyz Constitution allows only for one *State* language^v. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz constitution does oblige the

¹ *Status planning* refers to language external changes, such as legal status or use of a language in educational institutions. *Corpus planning* refers to language internal elaboration, codification and standardization processes.

president of the Kyrgyz Republic to be competent in Kyrgyz, but not in Russian. To be fluent in Russian is taken for granted and does not need to be assessed. Presidential candidates had to demonstrate competence in Kyrgyz to a linguistic election committee in September 2000 for the first time. This language test was highly debated^{vi}, since the constitution does neither allow infringements of rights on the base of lacking command of the state language nor does it state how candidates' language competence has to be assessed².

Thus on the strictly legal level, we find equal status for Kyrgyz and Russian with a slight plus for Kyrgyz, which has been the state language for longer than Russian and which is demanded from presidential candidates.

If we look at the linguistic human rights situation, linguistic rights are constitutionally guaranteed for speakers of all languages. Translators are to be provided in lawsuits given a person is not competent in either one of the languages.

The claim made by many Russian speakers that their linguistic human rights were violated before 1994 leaves the impression that Russian had become a minority language in Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand Kyrgyz speakers' rights are more severely violated, since, for instance, Kyrgyz speaking students are disadvantaged in Russian dominated higher education. Furthermore, translations in lawsuits are sometimes provided into Russian but not into Kyrgyz. In addition it is admitted that translators make their own decisions about what they consider important to be translated. The lack of qualified translations mainly affects translations into Kyrgyz. As a judge in the southern town Osh explained to me it, is assumed that "everybody understands Russian, because we are a country of the former SU". This is however not the case. Many rural dwelling Kyrgyz can not fully follow the lawsuit in Russian.

Now after both languages have become official it is mainly the Kyrgyz speakers rights that are violated, which leads to an imbalance in favour of Russian.

2.2. Symbolic value

It is mainly language attitudes that reflect the *symbolic value* of the languages. Social prestige or other connotations turn a language into a prestigious or stigmatised variety^{vii}. This clearly differs from speaker to speaker and is perceived differently depending on

² The test is suspected to rule out strong oppositional candidates and is thus anti-democratic in this sense as well.

situational variables. The *symbolic value* of a language is very often drawn upon for explanation of group identity and ethnic relations^{viii}.

In Kyrgyzstan, Russian has the connotation of being the post-colonial language, the dominance of which for many Kyrgyz meant a threat to their identity. However it is also highly prestigious as the language of not only education but also (pop-)culture.

Kyrgyz has folkloristic connotations and has mainly for ethnic Kyrgyz regained importance as a means of identification with their ethnic group and thus the titular ethnicity of the country. Kyrgyz has become a symbol of Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty. Ethnic Kyrgyz, who do not speak "their own language" have to justify themselves. To speak Kyrgyz is *politically correct*. Many Russians, however, still perceive Kyrgyz as an inferior language, which lacks functionality. It is very often labelled the language of the *wild* and *uncivilized*, referring to the Kyrgyz nomadic traditions. This stigma and the lack of functionality which shall be discussed in the next paragraph are the main reasons for Russian-speakers reluctance to learn Kyrgyz^{ix}.

Since both languages have a certain prestige, but a stigma at the same time, the situation is quite balanced, with no language dominating the other in terms of symbolic value.

2.3. Functional potential

In comparison to other titular-languages in CIS countries, Kyrgyz has a very short literary tradition. The Turkic Central Asian languages Kyrgyz and Kazakh were codified and thus created as distinct languages during the Soviet standardization campaign in the 1920s^x. Due to this and the fact that during the late Soviet era no necessity was created to express oneself in Kyrgyz in official situations^{xi}, the degree of standardization is very low. A lot of Kyrgyz speakers complain about the lack of clear terminology and even pro-Kyrgyz scholars refrain from publishing in Kyrgyz, since terminological ambiguity can not be avoided^{xii}. The attempt to replace Russian loanwords and constructions with archaic Kyrgyz or Arab forms has shown minor results and is at the same time ridiculed by many Kyrgyz speakers. Yet, Kyrgyz speakers still complain about the fact that Kyrgyz is not equipped with its own terminology. A Kyrgyz-speaking student explained to me that "every other word in a scientific or technical text is a Russian loan."^{xiii} Russian loans are not perceived as a potential to enrich Kyrgyz but rather as a sign of the language's weakness and impurity.

Official translations of Russian texts into Kyrgyz are more lip service than communicative necessities, because very often it is only the Russian version that is read. This is illustrated in the following quote from an English-language newspaper:

"A sentence which reads in Russian, 'the Legislative Assembly of the Kyrgyz Republic can introduce martial law only in the event of aggression against the Kyrgyz Republic,' is translated into Kyrgyz as, 'martial law can be introduced in the Kyrgyz Republic in the event of the Legislative Assembly attacking the Kyrgyz Republic.'" ^{xiv}

Thus language planners face the demanding task to elaborate and standardize Kyrgyz (*corpus planning*) and to implement language laws (*status planning*).

In comparison to Russian, which is a world-language with a long literary tradition and which gives access to a great amount of information (literature, mass media, internet etc.), Kyrgyz is clearly in a weaker position.

2.4. Number of speakers

What seems to be one of the easiest tasks, to assess the number of speakers of both languages, is in Kyrgyzstan a difficult endeavour.

In certain regions Kyrgyz-speakers are clearly the majority, whereas in others, mainly urban regions and in the Northern Chuy valley Russian speakers dominate.

Is it reasonable to differentiate between territorial units, or does the number of speakers country-wide give us meaningful information? The number of speakers of one language as given in the last censuses are not reliable, due to ambiguous categorization. First, the question about *native language*, *dominant language* or *language use* implies clear categories. These categories, however, differ in their meaning from individual to individual. *Native language* is very often equated with ethnicity and does not reflect language competence or use^{xv}.

Second, *dominant language* is a useful term, but neglects bilingual speakers' ability to speak, use and think in both languages, thus gives unrealistic results as well. The question: "Which language do you speak and use at home?" might elicit one-sided answers, since some individuals may overstate their use of one language, which they find more prestigious^{xvi}. Some informants even claimed to use German and English regularly at home. This clearly shows that use may be constrained to stereotypical phrases, but is still perceived as regular use.

The third reason why one cannot rely on official data is that neither the Soviet nor Kyrgyzstan's censuses do foresee cases of trilingualism^{xvii}, which occurs frequently especially in southern Kyrgyzstan. If a Kyrgyz speaker in the south claims to speak Uzbek as a second language, he will not have the possibility to state his knowledge of Russian as a third language, even though he might be almost fluent in it.

Thus all numbers and percentages of speakers of one language are rough estimations, which imply a slight plus in favour for Kyrgyz speakers.

2.5. Economic and educational resources

Economic opportunities in Kyrgyzstan are clearly higher if a person has good knowledge of Russian. Nevertheless, knowledge of Kyrgyz is required more and more by local and foreign employers. This shows clearly that Kyrgyz competencies have increased their value on the linguistic marketplace. However, it is only valued in combination with Russian. Thus Russian-Kyrgyz bilingualism (leaving knowledge of foreign languages aside) ranks highest. Russian monolingualism comes next on the economy scale, whereas Kyrgyz monolingualism has only little economic value. Part of the explanation for this can be found in the weak functionality of Kyrgyz, but it mainly reflects the fact, that language shift follows economic shift. Instrumental reasons to learn a language do not necessarily show excellent results, in form of oral fluency, but they effect a high number of persons, thus leading to mass language shift^{xviii}.

Language use in educational institutions mirrors a similar situation: children who attend Kyrgyz-instruction schools, in particular in rural settings, are stigmatised, because they are known to receive inferior education. Reasons for this include a lack of textbooks and neglected teacher training. Russian-instruction schools, in contrast, have the reputation of educating critical and self-confident students. They are supplied with Russian textbooks and scientific literature, which are often developed in Russia. Higher education is dominated by Russian. The division between *Kyrgyz* (also called *natsional'nye*) and *Russian* (sometimes also called *evropejskie*) classes is continued in many higher education institutions. Many Kyrgyz students thus feel disadvantaged and intimidated in higher education because their academic achievements and competencies in Russian are not on par with those of their Russian-speaking peers. This is clearly an example of how the right to mother tongue teaching leads to linguistic disadvantages.

The situation hints toward a clear dominance of Russian in the sphere of economy and education.

The combination of all the above evaluated factors, would result in almost equal status of the languages. Nevertheless, many Kyrgyz and Russian speakers as well as foreign researchers agree that Kyrgyz can without doubt be labeled a *minority* language. How can this be explained?

It is usually speakers of the minority language that are pressured to become bilingual. This is clearly the case for Kyrgyz-speakers, although in rural areas there are some Russian-speakers, who are competent in Kyrgyz. I deem the economic potential and the functionality of a language the decisive factors, which lead to one-sided bilingualism. In both aspects Russian clearly dominates. Thus, legal instruments can support a social current but cannot bring about complete language shift alone.

Economic factors to not only influence an individuals choice to learn a certain language, financial potential is also a prerequisite for corpus planning.

2. Costs of Language Planning

Economic strength of a country or a speech community is not only crucial as an incentive to learn this country's or community's language. Economic constraints are also decisive in the success of language planning^{xix}. The elaboration, standardization, translation of literature and documents as well as the implementation of a policy are costly matters. The more measures a government can afford to take and the more qualified the linguists, policy makers and language teachers, the higher are the chances for success of corpus and status planning^{xx}.

Yet, language centers in Kyrgyzstan lack qualified staff. Good linguists are hired to work as translators for international organization, where they earn more than in state employment. The remaining human resources are poorly organized. Decision makers rely on legal instruments, passing one decree after the other without monitoring the implementation of the existing laws.

Since teachers' salaries are very low and teachers' qualifications are neglected, the efficient implementation of an innovative language policy in educational institutions would demand expenses in the educational sector, which exceed the state budget or contradict the government's priorities.

These limits of Kyrgyzstan's language planning are predominantly economic and organizational.

It can be concluded that the successful language shift or even revival depends to a large extent but not exclusively on economic factors. Thus the limits of language revival are rooted in economic constraints. On the one hand, economic factors determine a person's instrumental motivation to learn the given language, on the other hand language policy has to be financed.

ⁱ RFE/RL NEWSLINE 27.11.1995, RFE/RL NEWSLINE 13.3.1996, RFE/RL NEWSLINE 9.7.96

ⁱⁱ Khazanov, 1995, 117

ⁱⁱⁱ Grin, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994b; Leontiev, 1994

^{iv} Turi (1994; 111)

^v The Kyrgyz Constitution

^{vi} RFE/RL NEWSLINE vol. 4 # 157; RFE/RL NEWSLINE vol. 4 # 164

^{vii} Bradac, J. 1990

^{viii} Dave, B. 1996

^{ix} Gardner, R. C., Lambert, W. E. 1992

^x Kirkwood, M. 1991; Crisp, S. 1991

^{xi} Kreindler, I. 1989

^{xii} Personal communication with Erkajim Zhorobekova, head of the philosophy department of Osh TU (February 1999)

^{xiii} Focus-Group with sociology students at the American University in Kyrgyzstan (October, 17th 2000)

^{xiv} Times of Central Asia 24.8.2000

^{xv} Tishkov, V. 1997, 90

^{xvi} Data of this kind is used by Azankanov (1997, 74) and Orusbaev (1989)

^{xvii} Belikov, V.I. 1997, 28

^{xviii} Willemyns, R. 1992

^{xix} Grin, F. 1996

^{xx} Weinstein, B. 1983

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