

**SPECIAL ARTICLE**

## **Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Russia**

### **Linguistic aspects of the current regional war and implications for translators**

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**ABSTRACT:** Despite independent Kazakhstan's close ties to Russia based on geographic proximity, economic interdependence, formal treaties of mutual cooperation, and a shared linguistic and historic heritage, the viability of these ties is being tested by events of the past year and in particular, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Due to the widespread proficiency in the Russian language in all three countries, through internet access and social media, the people of Kazakhstan are able to access not only the Russian perspective of the war, but also that of the Ukrainian people. Internationally, Kazakhstan's leaders are attempting to maintain a delicate balance vis-à-vis Russia, ensuring on the one hand that their alliance based on mutual interests and a common history is not endangered, yet needing on the other hand to appear credible and responsible in the eyes of European and Western powers in view of their long-term strategic plans for Kazakhstan's development as a major player in Eurasian affairs. The analysis by Maerz (2019) posits that autocratic regimes such as those in Russia and Central Asia tend to use democratic terms in a way which only simulates pluralism by camouflaging their actual intent. All parties to international negotiations, including interpreters, need to be aware of these

linguistic practices to properly understand and convey the actual message. The delicacy of this balancing act highlights the need for translators and interpreters employed at international negotiations and encounters to be aware of the historical precedents as well as the current ideologies and contemporary status of relations between the parties involved. Translations cannot be rendered solely according to linguistic equivalents, as identical terms can transmit divergent meanings when seen through the lens of a different heritage or ideology. The stakes at such international encounters are extraordinarily high: nothing less than stability, prosperity, and world peace. This argues for the importance of offering professional development opportunities for translators and interpreters to maintain their awareness of the nuanced issues in play. There is a need to acknowledge the crucial role and need of these professional communicators to constantly maintain their knowledge of the social and political context.

**KEYWORDS:** Kazakh language, language policy, Russian language in Kazakhstan, authoritarian system language, interpreter roles, Impact of Russia-Ukraine war on language practices in Kazakhstan

**Аңдатпа:** Егемен Қазақстанның Ресеймен тығыз байланысы географиялық жақындық, экономиканың өзара тәуелділігі, ресми екіжақты құжаттар, кейбір ортақ тарихи және тілдік мұраға негізделгенімен, бұл қатынастар былтырғы жылғы оқиғалар, әсіресе Ресейдің Украинаны басып алу әрекеттері жағдайында үлкен сыннан өтуде. Осы үш елде орыс тілі кеңінен таралғанымен, қазақтар бұл соғысқа қатысты ақпаратпен тек орыстардың көзқарасы тұрғысынан ғана емес, әсіресе Интернет және әлеуметтік желі арқылы келіп жететін Украина халқының өз пікірі арқылы да таныс болуда.

Халықаралық сахнада, бір жағынан, өзара ортақ мүдде мен тарихи жақындықты жоғалтып алмау үшін қазақ басшылары мүмкіндігінше Ресейді ренжітпедудің амалын іздегенімен, екінші жағынан, Еуропа және Батыс елдері алдында олардың Қазақстанды Еуразиядағы ірі ойыншыға айналдыруға бағытталған ұзақ мерзімді жоспарын ескеріп, өздерін сенуге тұрарлық, әрі жауапты боп көрсете білуді

мақсат тұтуда. Маерздың сараптамасы (2019) Ресей мен Орта Азия елдеріндегі автократиялы режимдер демократия тілін плюрализмді симуляциялау үшін пайдаланып, оны өздерінің шын ниетін жасыру мақсатында қолданатынын көрсетіп берген болатын. Халықаралық келіссөздерге қатысатын өкіл мен аудармашылар осы жайтты ескеріп, айтылған сөз мағынасын дұрыс түсініп, жеткізе білуге атсалысқаны абзал. Осы өте сезімтал теңгерімді таба білу келіссөз бен кездесуге қатысатын аудармашы мен тәржімашы осы тұрғыдағы тарихта орын алған жағдайларды біліп, қазіргі өзара ынталанушы елдердің идеологиясы мен олардың арасындағы қатынастардың қазіргі сипатын білгені дұрыс.

Аударманы тек лингвистика тұрғысынан сәйкестік іздеп жасаған дұрыс болмайды. Себебі, бірдей терминнің өзі әр елдің идеологиясы мен тарихи мұрасы тұрғысынан қарағанда түрлі мағына беруі мүмкін. Осындай кездесу барысында қатенің құны аса жоғары болады, әсіресе: қауіпсіздік, өркендеу мен әлемдегі бейбітшілік тұрғысынан қарағанда. Сондықтан, бұл мақалада аудармашыға осындай іске қатысты ньюанстарды түсіну мақсатында кәсіби өсу мүмкіндігін ұсыну маңыздылығы айтылады. Кәсіби түрде коммуникация және басқалармен араласуға жауаптыларға өздерінің қоғам мен саясаттың дамуына қатысты білімін тұрақты түрде шыңдап отырудың маңызы өте зор деп таныған жөн.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қазақ тілі, тіл саясаты, орыс тілінің Қазақстандағы қолданысы, авторитарлы жүйенің тілі, аудармашы рөлі, Ресей - Украина соғысының Қазақстандағы тілдер қолданысына ықпалы

## 1. Introduction

For Kazakhstan, a former Soviet Republic which declared its independence in December 1991, the war in Ukraine, another former Soviet Republic,

presents challenges to what has been a 30-year process of national identity development, a process fostered in part through adoption of language policies promoting the use of the titular Kazakh (Qazaq) language. The current language policy of Kazakhstan endorses a trilingual policy, with Kazakh as the state language, Russian as the language of communication between various ethnic groups, and English to be used as the default lingua franca for international communication (Aksholakova & Ismailova, 2013; Fierman, 1998; Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1997).

The formal language policy declaring Kazakh to be the state language notwithstanding, the Russian language still plays a dominant role in a number of places, particularly in northern and eastern Kazakhstan, due to the history of language policies in the country and the demographic situation in the various Kazakh regions and towns. This continued linguistic vitality of Russian in Kazakhstan even 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, serves as both an enduring cultural and linguistic bond to the former dominant power and as a means of establishing distance from that dominant power, inasmuch as the linguistic bond of Russian is simultaneously shared with other former Soviet republics, and notably with Ukraine.

## **2. Status of the Kazakh and Russian Languages in Kazakhstan in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

The Russian language's influence was enormous during the 20th century and continues to have significant influence not only on daily linguistic practices of the people but also on lexical and grammatical aspects of the Kazakh language in the 21st century (Muhamedowa, 2009).

Although official policies mandate that government officials must demonstrate fluency in both Kazakh and Russian before being hired, many state bodies and institutions located in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, use Russian as their main language of communication. It is safe to say that the Russian language still maintains a strong position in many domains of Kazakh society. Many Kazakh intellectuals and influencers know Russian better than Kazakh, as many of them attended schools in Kazakhstan where Russian was the language of instruction; many later studied at Russian universities or at universities in Kazakhstan where they opted to follow a curriculum in Russian rather than in Kazakh. And indeed, the trend

continues. Hudson (2022) provides statistics showing that as recently as 2017, 23% of the international students in Russia were from Kazakhstan and she found that “the Russian Federation remains the primary destination for Kazakhstani students seeking to study abroad” (p. 479). Hudson attributes this trend to various factors, including the low cost of higher education in Russia, the availability of scholarships for Kazakh students, geographic proximity and the ability to attend courses delivered in Russian, eliminating the need to attain high proficiency in a foreign language in order to study abroad.

The Russian language’s influence in the 20th century was a result of the Soviet state and government’s dominant role in all affairs pertaining to Kazakhstan. Bolshevik and Soviet governments pursued several political and ideological objectives and attempted to exercise maximum control over all aspects of Kazakh life, including daily language usage.

One important objective of the Bolsheviks and Soviets after 1917 was to maintain stability in a polyethnic empire. The Russian language was used as a political tool of ideology and propaganda in Kazakhstan as well as in other Soviet republics, where the eponymous languages were also influenced by dominance of the Russian language. The Soviets gradually achieved their goal of russification and diminished the role of the Kazakh language, which played only a secondary role in many domains after a few decades of communist control. (For details on this history, see Baskakov & Xasanov, 1996; Cummings, 2012; Dave, 2018; Muhamedowa, 2009; Pavlenko, 2013; Smagulova, 2016; Zhanabayeva et al., 2014).

A second and concomitant objective of the Soviets was to influence the speakers of Kazakh to consider Russian the language of inquiry, abandoning the use of their native Kazakh language to acquire scientific and general knowledge, stigmatizing the language and hindering its development in numerous fields of development.

This is illustrated by the account of Michaels (2003), who has researched the introduction of medical practices in Kazakhstan as an arm of Soviet policy of russification. According to Michaels (2003) “the state utilized biomedicine as an imperial tool” (p. 11), which she describes in the following terms:

Through poster art, newsreels, newspapers, leaflets, public speeches, and doctor-patient encounters, Soviet authorities used the symbolic power of language to reinforce social, political and economic relations between

the colonizers and the colonized. In the field of medicine and public health, the symbolic power of biomedical discourse became a mighty tool for demonstrating Soviet authority and undermining ethnomedical practitioners as a competing source of power at the local level (Michaels, 2003, p. 10).

A third objective of the Soviets during their 70-year domination was to demonstrate special consideration for smaller, less-widely-spoken languages of the many ethnic minorities of the Soviet Union, something that they asserted would be possible only in a benevolent Bolshevik and Soviet state that sought to protect its ethnic minorities. The Soviets attempted to portray the status of regional or minority languages which had come in contact with other former European empires as having been suppressed and relegated to secondary status under the domination of the colonial languages of Britain, France or Spain. Although they ultimately engaged in a gradual process of russification, Soviet ideology continued to contrast the suppression and attempts at obliteration of minority languages by European colonial powers with a portrayal of the Soviets as respectful of the indigenous languages and cultures of the peoples they had incorporated into the Soviet state.

At the time Kazakhstan became independent in 1991, only about 30% of the population was ethnically Kazakh, while approximately 37% of the population was ethnically Russian. This demographic reality, along with geographic proximity due to sharing the longest continuous land border in the world with Russia (7,644 km), combined with the actual politico-ideological practices during the Soviet era, led to the widespread use of Russian and resulted in a serious decline in the use of the Kazakh language in many spheres within the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan.

Today students of Kazakh can clearly see and feel scars left by the Soviet regime on the “body” of the Kazakh language. The totalitarian state, its Marxist and Leninist ideology, and its fight against the influence of what were termed “bourgeois values and thoughts” of the West left the Kazakh language unprepared for the role of the state language of an independent Kazakhstan.

However, after a long period of decline, the Kazakh language is currently evolving into the language of a newly independent state. This evolution is being influenced by baggage inherited from the past, for reasons both cultural and political (see Dave, 2018; Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2011; O’Callaghan, 2004; Pavlenko, 2008; Sabitova & Alishariyeva, 2015; for a detailed overview of the

bilingual education offered in Kazakhstan, see Bahry et al., 2017).

One indicator of this progress is that although the Kazakh language is still written in the Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet, awaiting resolution of disputes among linguists and policy makers to announce the dissemination of a final version of a latinized alphabet, the oft-postponed latinization proposal is now slated for a phased introduction between 2023 and 2031 (Satubaldina, 2021).

The effort to achieve fluency and literacy in the Kazakh language throughout the country still faces challenges, however, particularly in urban areas and among highly educated Kazakh adults. According to a survey among Kazakh parents conducted by Smagulova (2016), she found that “urban Kazakhs were less likely to enroll their children in Kazakh-language schools and were also less likely to have attended such schools themselves. Wealthier Kazakhs were less likely to speak Kazakh fluently, use Kazakh at work, and find Kazakh valuable” (p. 103). The same survey showed that the trend is reversing for the younger generations, however. Smagulova (2016) reports that parents who did opt to send their children to a Kazakh language school did so primarily for instrumental reasons rather than out of a commitment to the revival of the language. These parents calculated that in the lifetime of their children, with the growing role of the Kazakh language in public domains, as provided for in the language policy of the nation, knowledge of Kazakh would be a useful skill to have to ensure employability:

[T]he decision by these parents to send their children to a Kazakh-medium school does not imply commitment to language revival. In these cases, there appeared to be a very weak link between ethnic identity and language. For them, Kazakh, like Russian or English, was a form of linguistic capital that could allow their children to gain access to a wider job market and improve their life chances (Smagulova, 2016, p. 104).

### **3. Shared Perspectives as Sources of Solidarity for Kazakhstan and Ukraine**

The Cossacks of Ukraine and the Kazakhs (“Qazaq” in the Kazakh language) of Kazakhstan are not carrying their nearly-identical names by chance. The words originate from the same root – a word meaning a “free”, “freedom-loving” individual or people. Historically, the people of modern-

day Kazakhstan and Ukraine both had to fend off encroachments from neighboring powers and both suffered similar harsh policies under the czarist and Soviet regimes. The two countries thus have similarities in perceiving long-standing existential threats from imperialists living in a shared neighborhood. (For further historical details on the origins of the Cossacks and their central role in the foundation of Ukrainian national identity, see Liechtenhan, 2022; Pincas, 2022; Sarmant, 2022; Tatarenko, 2022a, 2022b).

Similar to the Kazakhs in the post-Soviet era, Ukrainians were very actively engaged in a nation-building process before the 2022 war. Ukraine had succeeded in building a political nation with a clear national identity. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Donbass, however difficult and tragic it was for the Ukrainian people, served to hasten the process of national consolidation and nation-building.

Thus far, Kazakhstan has been able to develop its identity in a more peaceful environment without the overt difficulties and hazards faced by Ukraine. One positive outcome for Kazakhstan in the current war between Russia and Ukraine is that Kazakhs have had a chance to learn from the successes and failures of its neighbors. Kazakhs want to strengthen their national identity and construct a viable political entity as soon as possible. To do this, the citizens are exerting efforts to improve their Kazakh language skills and paying closer attention to their own history in order to extract important lessons for the future.

The two former Soviet republics also share a linguistic bond through widespread fluency in Russian. Ukraine, with its plethora of Russian-speaking influencers and active social media bloggers, offers alternative avenues of information to Russian-speaking Kazakhs.

#### **4. Language and Communication Channels During the War**

Fluency in the Russian language throughout most of the former Soviet republics allows for the possibility of dissemination of information from multiple perspectives. As discussed above, many ordinary Kazakhs still use the Russian language in their daily lives, so having the language widely spoken across most of the states of the Russian Federation, including in Russia, had become a major source of information about the outside world even before the current war in Ukraine.

Now that Russian media have been seen to promote a one-sided view of the war in Ukraine, younger, educated, wired Kazakhs have made use of ample opportunities to obtain information about the world and the war from multiple sources. In her Fall 2021 survey of university students in three urban population centers of Kazakhstan (Almaty, Astana, and Kostanai), Hudson (2022) found that 95% of her respondents rely on internet sources either “sometimes” or “often”. This figure compares to 50% of her student respondents who stated that they “never” use television to become informed about world events (Hudson, 2022, p. 482).

Internet-based news and entertainment channels from Ukraine broadcasting in Russian have gained in popularity among ordinary Kazakhs. Ordinary Kazakhs were not previously well-informed about Ukraine, but beginning with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the Donbas, many people in Kazakhstan started to view and listen to Ukrainian politicians, journalists and bloggers with more enthusiasm and trust. A number of Ukrainian bloggers who voice their displeasure and protest against the war are currently being followed by many active citizens of Kazakhstan. One of the most popular ones is a Telegram channel called Ukraine365. Kazakhs use these sites to become informed about the history of Ukraine, about historical relations between Russia and Ukraine, and in particular details about Russian imperialism toward Ukraine. Kazakhs are also very interested in knowing about atrocities that were committed against Ukraine when under Bolshevik rule, particularly the great famine known as Holodomor in Ukraine, and which also drastically affected Kazakhstan between 1930-1933, killing approximately 40% of the total Kazakh population at that time. Contemporary discussions going on in Ukraine about democracy and human rights are also of great interest to Kazakhs following Ukrainian media outlets.

In Russia, the current war is called “spetsialnya operatsiya”, or “special operation”, and the Kremlin has almost total control over the way the “special operation” is portrayed in the media. An observer of the Russian media, Stephen Cushion, professor of journalism at Cardiff University, made the following observation:

Since the invasion of Ukraine, journalists across the western world have covered Putin’s unprovoked attack, reporting from basements and underground stations to not just cover Russian military atrocities, but to uncover and convey the devastating human impact. By contrast, Russian

state TV channels have all but blacked out the harsh realities of warfare and humanitarian catastrophe... (Cushion, 2022).

Cushion goes on to confirm what is now a well-known fact outside of Russia:

Russian authorities have tightly controlled Putin's narrative by limiting people's access to media that challenges his perspective and ensuring that state media closely follows the Kremlin's script...Russian journalists are not reporting on a war, or even an invasion or attack. The state requires them to label it a "special operation", designed to protect the country's security in the face of an expanding Nato alliance (Cushion, 2022).

Among major international media, only YouTube is still operational in Russia, tolerated primarily because it also serves the Kremlin's interest in reaching a large segment of the Russian population to disseminate their version of the war (Perrigo, 2022). Other independent social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook have all been shuttered or are unavailable. Independent Russian journalists have either moved abroad to continue operations from there or have ceased broadcasting to avoid heavy fines or imprisonment if they run afoul of the restrictions on the media.

The Russian propaganda machine works around the clock and constantly repeats catch phrases such as the following: "Ukraine is not a sovereign state, it is a part of Russia", "Nazis are occupying Kiev", "Ukraine was invented by Lenin", "Ukraine will be freed from satanists", "Ukraine has no history or language", "The Ukrainian language is a dialect of Russian". As *New York Times* journalists reported on February 21, 2022, just three days before the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, Putin is said to have stated that "Modern Ukraine was entirely and fully created by Russia, more specifically by the Bolsheviks, communist Russia" (Schwartz et al., 2022).

Bolsheviks, Lenin, Stalin, and rigid communists are long gone. However, the language is still a victim of the political system, its ideologies and practices. The Kremlin is constantly finding creative ways to invent new catch phrases and words that suit its current political objectives. The Kremlin narrative is constructed around three key points: (1) Russia as victim, whose duty is to reconquer the territories that constituted the former Russian Empire; (2) attribution of evil intentions and asserting inaccurate

assumptions about the sentiments of the people or governments in the west towards Russia; and (3) a purported NATO intention to expand eastward at the expense of Russia.

Even the Kazakhstan public is not immune to these propaganda assaults. Official statistics from Kazakhstan for May 2022 indicate that there are 170 Moscow-based channels registered to operate in Kazakhstan, which corresponds to 72% of the total of 269 foreign-based channels in Kazakhstan (Hudson, 2022, pp. 480-482). As in Russia itself, the older Russian-speaking generation follows either Kazakh-produced programming or Russian language state TV broadcasts available in Kazakhstan, which are primarily pro-Putin. Because of the prominence of Russian broadcast media on multiple television channels in Kazakhstan and their availability to any Russian speaker in Kazakhstan with cable or internet access, Kazakhs cannot fully isolate themselves from the current discourse and state propaganda in Russia. As Hudson (2022) points out,

The Russian language is a significant factor in matters of soft power because it not only enables people to directly access information from Russia—thereby aiding their socialization by the perspectives found there—but also facilitates their feeling part of a shared cultural space (p. 477).

The younger generation, however, has ready access to alternative news sources about Ukraine and the wider world via Instagram and Telegram channels. Others access independent foreign media, either directly in English or via their Russian or Kazakh broadcasts. They tune in to these broadcasts or receive news feeds from the BBC or the U.S. news channel AZATTYQ (a Kazakh word meaning “independence”), available at <https://azattyq-news.kz>, which broadcasts independent news and maintains a YouTube channel. The Russian language YouTube channel гипперборей (gipperborei “hyperborea”), with host Vadim Boreiko based in Almaty is considered a popular independent media outlet and has 234,000 subscribers as of late November 2022.

One troubling development with respect to the Russian language and which is shared by both Ukraine and Kazakhstan is the issue known under the label of “ownership of Russian”. In 2007, Putin issued a decree creating the “Russkiy Mir” (“Russian World”) Foundation,

as a government-sponsored organization aimed at promoting the Russian

language and Russian culture worldwide, and forming the Russian World as a global project, co-operating with the Russian Orthodox Church in promoting values that challenge the Western cultural tradition... The Foundation was modeled after similar culture promotion agencies, such as [the] British Council and [the] Goethe Institute (Russkiy Mir Foundation; see also Kudors, 2014, 2010).

The problem is that the concept of “Russian world”, as defined by the Foundation, implies that any Russian speaker, even foreign learners of Russian as a second language, owe obedience to the ideology of “Mother Russia”. What is meant by “Russkiy Mir” is contained in the foundation’s own definition of its scope, cited by Friess (2022):

Russkiy mir includes not only Russians, not only inhabitants of Russia, not only our fellow countrymen in foreign countries near and far, emigrants, expatriates, and their descendants. It also extends to foreign citizens who speak, learn, and teach Russian and all people with a sincere interest in Russia and her future.

A more politicized description of the concept is provided by Ukrainian analysts more outspokenly critical of Russia, who state that 20 Russkiy Mir centers had been established in Ukraine as of 2021:

“Russkiy Mir” is a Russian quasi-ideology aimed at the expansion of influence abroad and uniting the states considered by the Kremlin as its backyard on the basis of Russian language and common history... With “Russkiy Mir” Putin’s Russia attempts to establish itself as a civilization-forming state and as a leading geopolitical actor...

Russian language is established as a key unifying factor, and it correlates with the foreign policy of the Russian Federation... which has repeatedly used manipulations around language issues as a pretext for aggressive actions, including military conflict. The Kremlin defines anyone who, according to Vladimir Putin, “speaks and thinks in Russian”, as a part of “Russkiy Mir” (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, 2021).

The all-encompassing assumption by “Russkiy Mir” that anyone who is a Russian speaker shares the values of the current Russian state is vigorously

contested in both Ukraine and Kazakhstan. In these two countries, it is primarily Russian-speaking authors and poets, whose tool for their craft is the Russian language, who are resisting the efforts of Moscow to assimilate them to the culture and policies of Russia by virtue of their chosen language of expression. In Ukraine, some are choosing to switch to writing in Ukrainian as a matter of principle and in protest against the war.

In reviewing the impact of the *Russkiy Mir* project on Kazakhstani writers, the German co-founder of *Russophone Voices* and researcher at the Centre for Eastern European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin writes:

While the Kremlin wants to declare Kazakhstan's Russian speakers for themselves, Kazakh nationalists want to limit the influence of the Russian language... When the war kicked off, the young *Russophone* literature scene in Kazakhstan stood almost unanimously in solidarity with Ukraine – demonstrated not only by taking part in rallies and making statements on social media, but also in literature. [The] Kazakhstani literary journal *Daktil* dedicated its March edition 'to the Ukrainian people and everyone who is undergoing adversity'. It continues: 'We stand for world peace. Say no to war!'... [I]n a time when any mention of war is officially forbidden, at least in Russia, this is a political statement. It also shows that Russian-speaking Kazakhstanis are not prepared to bow down to the linguistic demands of the Kremlin (Friess, 2022).

In response to the outbreak of war in Ukraine, a new organization of *Russophone* writers and intellectuals was spawned. Known as *ROAR* (Russian Oppositional Arts Review), it is described by Friess (2022) as follows:

...an international cultural project which collects and shares *Russophone* opinions on the war. It is an online platform for Russian and Russian-speaking creatives who consider themselves and their art to stand against that segment of Russian culture which serves the 'current criminal political regime in Russia'.

Clearly, for the writers and intellectuals of Kazakhstan and Ukraine, there is a feeling of national identity quite separate from the language of the political state with which that language is associated. Intellectuals and

activists who are users of other widely-spoken world languages, foremost among which is English but which also includes French and Spanish, have also dealt with, and continue to deal with, this challenge of separating the language which vehicles their thoughts from the ideals, practices and ideologies of the nation which is seen as the seat of the “mother tongue”.

## 5. Soviet Era Legacy Affecting Language Use in Former Soviet Republics

Russia’s great poet, Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), transformed Russian literature by inventing new genres and enriching the Russian language by adopting key elements of French, which was the lingua franca of that age. However, the Bolsheviks, especially under Lenin and Stalin, had their own very strong influence on the Russian language. In short, the Soviet system adapted the Russian language to serve as a tool in service of its ideology and aggressively used it to achieve its political goals. New words and phrases emerged during the reign of the Bolsheviks and still remain embedded in the linguistic legacy of the language, ready to be activated for new political purposes.

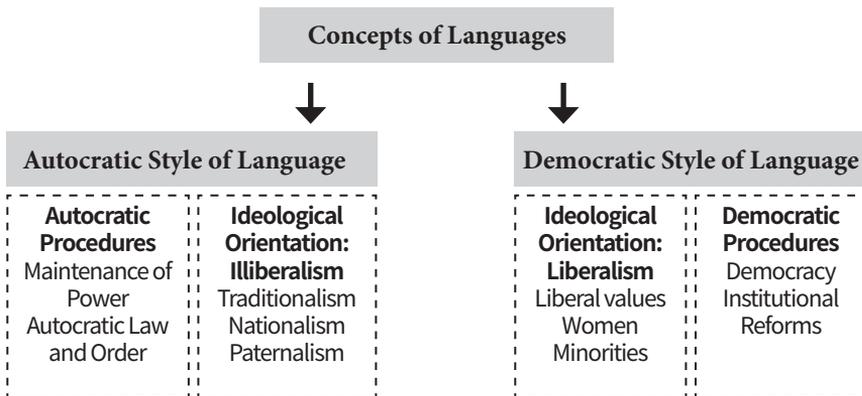
Authoritarian and totalitarian states make use of a particular style of language, which usually has the following traits:

- A disregard for political plurality
- A disregard for cultural diversity
- Rewriting of the history of the country and people for their own goals and convenience

For an illustration of the ways states can manipulate language and render its interpretation opaque, we refer to the work of Maerz (2019) entitled “Simulating pluralism: The language of democracy in hegemonic authoritarianism”. The paper argues that authoritarian leaders employ familiar terms reflecting democratic ideals (such as rights for women and minorities) but doing so is only for the purpose of deflecting their actual intentions, i.e., Maerz maintains that they are only “simulating” pluralism in their government style. To reach these conclusions, the paper analyzes the language used by autocrats of three types, the first of which are the hegemonic types, i.e. those who espouse

democratic values and appear to encourage plurality in order to establish the legitimacy of their rule, contrasted with the language used by autocrats of other two types of authoritarian regimes who rely less on the language of democratic procedures. The second type examined are “closed” regimes, exemplified by Saudi Arabia, which has no elected legislature, and by North Korea, which is a single party state. The third type are “competitive” regimes such as Russia or Malaysia, which officially allow political parties to compete in elections. The corpus analyzed by Maerz consisted of the texts of 2,074 published speeches by leaders in 22 countries, among which were speeches by leaders of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Singapore (all classified as “hegemonic” regimes) as well as leaders of five countries classified as democracies: Canada, Denmark, Germany, Norway and the UK. Figure 1 illustrates Maerz’s conceptualization of the differences between an autocratic style of language use and a democratic style, with the accompanying procedures and ideological orientations typically displayed by each.

Figure 1: Autocratic vs. democratic styles of language (adapted from Maerz, 2019, p. 4)



After analyzing language use by leaders in various autocratic states, Maerz (2019) draws the following conclusion:

It is striking that almost all hegemonic regimes in this analysis emphasize democratic procedures [to] a comparatively high degree...Uzbekistan is at the very top of the scale, closely followed by Kazakhstan, Jordan, Tajikistan

and Azerbaijan. Their scores of speaking about democratic procedures compare to those of democracies or even outrun them. Yet, a crucial difference is that the language of hegemonic regimes clearly accentuates illiberalism whereas the democrats in this analysis stress liberalism. While these findings confirm...that the leaders of hegemonic regimes overstate the talk about democracy, they also highlight that this language of democracy in non-democratic surroundings typically lacks elements of liberalism (Maerz, 2019, pp. 11-12).

Further, in her analysis of speeches by Putin of Russia during the period 2012-2018, Maerz (2019) notes that “there is a slight prevalence of talking more about democratic than autocratic procedures. Yet, at the same time, Putin makes use of a comparatively illiberal style of language” (p. 15).

Maerz contends that when negotiators of the autocratic style discuss with counterparts of the democratic style, they are not really speaking the same language, which can lead to blockages. Even though using the same words, the meanings may be different within their respective ideological frameworks. Maerz’s analyses show how authoritarian governments simulate pluralism by deriving different meanings from familiar words used in democratic societies.

The Maerz (2019) analysis of linguistic abuse by hegemonic regimes is lent additional credence by the earlier work of Stroińska (2002) in her study entitled “Language and totalitarian regimes”. She argues there that

the communist perspective has survived the end of the system because people still speak the same language they used to speak before and it is the language that sneaks old meanings and attitudes into new expression. These old meanings are not just some harmless antiquated concepts but continue to serve as means of propaganda and mass deception. A new hybrid mixture of old propaganda and a new, more Western-style language of politics is emerging, different from the traditional Newspeak, but equally confusing and full of traps (Stroińska, 2002, p. 23).

Another example of fundamental differences which may arise when authoritarian regimes enter into relationships with democracies is that highlighted by Estonian professor of politics, Andrei Makarychev, in his 2022 article “Russia’s war in Ukraine: A clash of two philosophies of power”:

Russia's frustration with the liberal international order has a long history and is grounded in the country's inability to accept norms of democracy and the rule of law as guiding principles of its domestic and foreign policies...

Under these conditions, the gravest mistake on the side of the liberal Europe would be to compromise its core values and give any degree of legitimacy to Putin's approach to international politics (Makarychev, 2022).

A further illustration of difficulties that may occur when representatives of different ideologies interact may be found in international discourse concerning the word "law". In Western countries, the law enforcement agencies usually have the word "law" in their names. It reflects, among other things, their political system and culture. Law is a key word for them and when hearing the word, a Western interlocutor will make certain assumptions about the roles of such an agency. However, in Russia and former Soviet states such enforcement agencies can be known by a variety of names, but they will not be referred to as a law enforcement agency. It is not in their political culture and system to emphasize the rule of law.

In Kazakhstan, people use the Kazakh version of the Russian term "pravoohranitelnie organy", or "huquq qorghau organdary" (rights protection agencies).

The designation is a misleading one, because first of all, it is not clear whose rights these agencies protect. In the systems of post-Soviet countries, agencies protect the rights of some, but do not protect the rights of all citizens. Secondly, the term "rights protection agencies" does not indicate any mechanism for enforcing the law or the rule of law.

## **6. Implications of Soviet Era Legacy for Translators**

The problem this poses is how can the full force and meaning of a word such as "law" be translated from a Western language into Russian or Kazakh?

These examples illustrate the complexity involved in interpreting certain concepts that are customary in countries like Russia and Kazakhstan into languages like English and French and vice versa. Beyond finding linguistic equivalents for such terms, conventional interpretation of their meaning is

not uniform across national and ideological barriers.

A final set of examples of discourse held over from the Soviet era still widespread in former Soviet republics illustrates how values can be manipulated by different ideological systems to the point that no common ground remains between interlocutors coming from different ideological perspectives.

- **In the economic domain:** The USSR had almost no private sector. Everything, or almost everything, belonged to the State. In the process of interpretation, many Western terms became useless or developed negative connotations. For example, the term “liberal democrats” has been used in Russia for decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union for members of the far-right nationalist political party the “Liberal Democratic Party of Russia”. For 30 years this party was headed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the well – known pro-Kremlin chauvinist politician who advocated for a new Russian imperialism. However, there is no liberalism or democracy in this party, or in Russia for that matter. There is no liberalism or democracy in this party or in Russia for that matter.
- **In the cultural domain:** Western culture was perceived as “the other”, or the so-called “bourgeoisie”. The state media in post-Soviet states protects people in power by often portraying businessmen and rich people as “the bourgeoisie”. Bolshevik and Soviet textbooks used to consider them as a class enemy of the working class and peasants of the USSR. That is why Russian and other post-Soviet republics’ languages still have many negative words and phrases related to the West.
- **In the religious domain:** Since the Soviets created an atheistic society, the absence of proper knowledge about beliefs or a dogmatic view of religion, especially Islam, influenced the public discourse about religions in Soviet republics in a very negative way.

In short, if interpreters and translators of Russian are under the influence of the “Russian World” perspective described above, their perceptions of the Russian utterances may differ starkly from those of a Russian-speaking interpreter who is neither familiar with nor influenced by that perspective and its implications. The interpreted lexical choices derived from these different perspectives may convey quite different nuances.

A similar situation also applies to the case of cross-border interactions

between North and South Korea. The Korean language is used in both countries, but the language has evolved separately and in quite distinct historical circumstances for the past 70 years.

The language used in North Korea reflects the neo-Stalinist nature of its regime. The absence of plurality, the rigid nature of the system, and its closed character can be seen in the discourse features currently used there. In addition the North Korean ideology of *juche* (“self-reliance”), despite the fact that its heroes are multi-ethnic, e.g., Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Kim, leads to nationalistic views and practices in the language.

Currently, the language of North Korea has very few international borrowed words and phrases, compared to the Korean language in South Korea, with the result that the two languages diverge sufficiently that interlocutors on each side may have difficulties in understanding the nuances of certain words or phrases used by their counterpart.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite its close ties to Russia in a number of fields, e.g. linguistic, geographic, historical, and economic, all of which have contributed to Kazakhstan’s relatively non-critical stance toward Russia’s foreign policy in the “near abroad” region surrounding Russia, the durability of these ties is being tested by events of the past year. As Hudson (2022) notes, “the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused some in Kazakhstan to question the assumption of the inevitable cultural and political proximity to Russia...” (p. 489).

Although there is some resistance on the part of old elites, which benefited from the privatization of State assets after the collapse of the USSR, it is obvious that Moscow’s “soft power” in Kazakhstan received a significant blow from its own bellicose and imperialistic words and deeds in Ukraine and in Kazakhstan as well, during the January 2022 events that took place in Almaty and other Kazakh cities.

In this context it is useful to understand different reasons and goals that have been pursued by the post-Soviet states. It is also important to pay close attention to the nature of power in Russia and many post-Soviet states that continued to exist after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. In the first author’s opinion, one of the most important reasons for the strength and durability of Soviet propaganda is related to a strong desire on the part of the elites still

in power to maintain the status quo, these elites having been formed by the Soviet regime.

Ukraine, by its achievements in democratizing the political life and its people's desire to improve their country's stability and economy by expanding cooperation with the EU and NATO, was considered by the reactionary forces as a mortal blow to their power and interests. Despite all these tragedies and tremendous human losses and suffering in Ukraine, Kazakhstan has a chance to learn from the past and current difficulties in the relations among the countries of our region, and to take gradual positive steps towards progress and prosperity.

The delicate balance which Kazakhstan's current leadership is attempting to maintain vis-à-vis its stronger northern neighbor reinforces the imperative not only for translators and interpreters, but also for all actors from both the public and private sectors, to be aware of the historical as well as contemporary status of relations between the two countries, as these will affect the outcome of their encounters and negotiations, be they commercial or political.

Indeed, personal experience has shown that representatives of governments in different international venues like that of the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) cannot always understand each other, even when using English or French as the working language.

In the context of Central Asian states, for example, it will be extremely helpful for interpreters to be knowledgeable about both Soviet and Islamic values and practices, since people of this region are moving to revive some abandoned traditions and beliefs after decades of Soviet rule. Yet Soviet values and beliefs are also present in their lives, so when they speak or write one may detect some old Soviet habits in domains such as those examined above.

Specialists working with the languages of former socialist or communist countries (e.g. USSR, Eastern and Central Europe, China, Mongolia, Vietnam) need to be informed of changes underway in the area of language usage in these countries. It is particularly important to organize special professional development courses for those who deal with the societies which have had an autocratic past or which are in the process of transitioning to democracy.

As we have seen, governments in authoritarian states use democratic mechanisms such as elections and party politics to take on board different views and opinions in order to maintain their undemocratic regimes. More

often than not, authoritarian countries write laws using particular words and phrases to intentionally create ambiguity, which can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. It is thus important for language specialists to know as much as possible about the political structure and social values of the country of interest. They must follow current events and be in contact with the citizens of these countries to keep abreast of the inevitable changes in language usage which are in progress.

As the scholars Ahn and Smagulova (2016) have noted,

As the region (and the world) continues to become increasingly interconnected, under-researched areas like language and transnational spaces ... and the complexity of their ideological underpinnings both illustrate and provide insight into the dynamics of multilingualism, identity construction, and the way language becomes a means through which to see different (and changing) ideological agendas (p. 268).

The stakes associated with the task of facilitating genuine understanding are nothing less than stability in international relations, world peace and prosperity. Such high stakes argue for the importance of offering professional development opportunities for translators and interpreters which include keeping abreast of world events through multiple media channels, having access to speeches and statements delivered by high-ranking officials from a multitude of countries, and receiving updates and policy briefings from experts, academics and relevant staff of high-ranking officials. Politicians engaged in international negotiations place a great deal of trust in their interpreters and there is a need to acknowledge their crucial role and the need of these professional communicators to constantly maintain their knowledge of the social and political context.

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