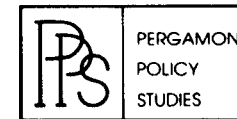


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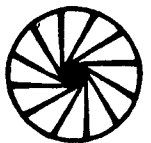
ON THE SOVIET UNION
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Ethnic Russia in the USSR

The Dilemma of Dominance

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Edward Allworth

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28 Whose Russian Language? Problems in the Definition of Linguistic Identity

Jonathan Pool

A curious thing happened to a group of linguists from the United States during a visit to Peking in 1974. They were listening to a professor at the Central Institute for Nationalities explain that it was the immediate goal of Chinese linguistics to teach everyone in China standard Chinese. What, he asked his visitors, was the immediate goal of American linguistics?(1) The question made the Americans aware that their profession differed from one country to another not only in what its goals were but, more basically, in whether it was a single effort directed toward a single goal.

The Soviet way of talking about languages can create the same kind of awareness. It would not be a caricature for a Soviet observer of linguistic life to describe Russian as "the national language of the Russian people, the second native language and the voluntarily selected language of interethnic communication and cooperation of the peoples of the USSR, the language of a historically new human community, the Soviet people, and one of the five world languages." In fact, Soviet discussions of language policy often contain similar passages.(2)

This kind of description attributes an identity to a language. Like linguistics and its "immediate goal," the languages of the world differ not only in their identities, but also in the extent to which they have identities at all. To make this clear, the identity of a language and its characteristics should be distinguished from one another. The characteristics of a language are properties that it objectively possesses and that can be interpersonally verified. Every language has them. Some of them are linguistic (the properties of its lexicon, morphology, and syntax; the changes that these properties have undergone; and so on), and others are sociolinguistic (who speaks it under what conditions, what

proportion of its speakers are native, does it have a written form, how standardized is it, and the like).

In contrast, the identity of a language is neither true nor false; rather, it is believed or rejected. There is no way for those who differ to reconcile their differences. Just as the ethnic identities that people adopt, or that others attribute to them, are not fully determined by or predictable from their ethnic characteristics (skin color, heredity, residence), likewise, the identities that people invest in languages cannot be seen as mere offshoots of the latter's objective characteristics. The fact that languages of small minorities or of colonial domination have assumed the identity of "national language" (for instance, Bahasa Indonesia, Papua-New Guinea Pidgin) illustrates this relative autonomy of linguistic identity.

One way to view the identities of languages is to separate them into different aspects. Soviet statements about linguistic identities suggest four such aspects, which we may call: the ontological aspect, or what kind of language it is; the associative aspect, or to whom the language is linked; the historical aspect, or what social and political roles the language has played, plays now, and is destined to play in the future; and the moral aspect, or how the language ought to be treated.

Wherever there is identity, an identity crisis may also be found. Languages can, indeed, have identity conflicts, and if the problems encountered in the definition of their identities become serious enough, it is reasonable to speak of languages as suffering identity crises.

Identity conflicts can arise for a language in at least four ways: 1) One aspect of its identity may be incompatible with another aspect; 2) an incompatibility may exist within one of the aspects; 3) leading language identifiers might disagree about a certain aspect of the identity of a certain language; or 4) the identity of one language might be incompatible with the identity of another language.

It has been observed that different languages are not competitive when they are used by different people for the same things, or by the same people for different things. Conflict arises when two or more languages are defined as appropriate for use in the same situation by the same people.(3) This explanation of language conflict relies on colliding identities of different languages: Type 4 above. On the other hand, language conflict was once attributed to relative status inconsistency - one language could dominate another in (among other things) number of speakers; frequency with which speakers of other languages learn it; or use for official purposes. It was hypothesized that conflict arises from inconsistency among these kinds of dominance, such as when the official language is one that is spoken by a numerical minority.(4) This explanation combines identity conflicts of Types 1 and 4.

The Soviet Union is a country in which much attention is paid to language, for obvious reasons. Soviet specialists have sought to discover and to change the characteristics of languages. At the same time, they have devoted great effort to defining linguistic identities. There is good reason for this effort. One of the most effective and least expensive ways to influence how people behave toward languages (for example, which languages they use, or how well they learn a language) is by manipulating their linguistic attitudes.(5) And in a multiethnic state with historical ethnic antagonism, whose leadership is striving toward higher levels of education, cooperation, and economic integration for the entire population, how the citizenry behaves linguistically is one of the most important things that one might want to shape.

Of all Soviet languages, Russian has been the object of by far the most effort at identity-building. The range of different identities that have been given to Russian has been wide; the impact of Russians' identity on the daily life of Soviet citizens has been great; hence, the basis for conflict over, or conflict among, the aspects of Russian's identity has been clearly present. Every aspect of its identity, in fact, as defined by Soviet scholars and political leaders, either is in some doubt or is composed of elements whose compatibility is questionable.

Ontologically, Russian is identified as a highly developed standard language, but also as a collection of nonstandard varieties or dialects. In addition, it is the language of one particular ethnic group; a domestic *lingua franca* (medium of communication among people with different native tongues); and an international language. For different people it has the identity of a native language, a "second native language," a non-native but not foreign language, or a foreign language.

Associatively, Russian belongs to the Russian people, but it is also the "language of Lenin" and of the whole Soviet population, as well as of the people of the world who use it internationally, especially in the countries that are politically allied with the Soviet Union.

Historically, Russian serves to express the Russian culture; to transmit cultural values from the rest of the world to the Russians and to the other Soviet people; to bring branches of Soviet culture closer together, increase tolerance and interethnic friendship, and promote a unique supraethnic Soviet culture; and to aid economic mobility and growth in the USSR. The historical identity of Russian has also been affected by the deep controversies over the nature of language in society that raged in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s in particular. These colloquies related to whether language is autonomous or is a product of socioeconomic forces, and, hence, whether economic and political mobilization and integration produce linguistic homogenization and, if so, what

kind of homogenization.(6) The principal impact these disputes had on the identity of Russian was on whether Russian or a conglomerate of Russian and other Soviet languages was destined to become the Soviet-wide language of the future. A similar implication was discussed regarding the future language of the world.

Russian also has a multiple moral identity. It is urged that Russian be taught to everyone in the USSR and millions outside, but also that it be meticulously standardized on the basis of the accepted native variety. No one should be coerced into learning it, yet no one can be a fully qualified member of the skilled Soviet labor force without knowing it.(7) Russian should be treated equally, yet be elevated to a unique, supreme status among Soviet languages.

These intraaspectual conflicts are products and reflections of conflicts between different aspects of Russian's identity, and of conflicts between the identity of Russian and the identities of other languages. Thus, ontologically, Russian is clearly an ethnic language; yet associatively, historically, and morally, it extends far beyond the Russian ethnic group. One way to resolve this contradiction is to create a new, wider ontological identity: "second native language" is one embodiment of that strategy. Similarly, the historical aspect of the identity of Russian includes continual progress toward more use by more people for more purposes. Yet, several other Soviet languages, spoken by millions of these same people, have this same content in their own identities. Can Uzbeks, for example, use both Russian and Uzbek for an ever-expanding repertoire of purposes? Most Soviet language identifiers say yes, by postulating that in a socialist society languages are symbiotic. The wider use of Russian causes the use of Uzbek to widen also, because the crucial question is not which language is used, but whether people are rendered capable of new linguistic activities, in which case both languages can assume new roles.

Linguistic identities are carefully defined, then, with the effect of changing the meaning that might otherwise be attributed to language policies and language behavior. If Russian is the specific language of one ethnic group, then its adoption for intergroup communication can be seen as a kind of domination. If it is the language of communication among various ethnic groups, then its adoption as such is hardly an act at all, for this role is inherent in the very identity of the language.

Some of the attempts to resolve conflicts over language by defining or redefining linguistic identities may not fully succeed, particularly if the options are perceived to affect interests differently, and the stakes are high. Let us look more closely at three conflicts which may someday become apparent and severe enough to yield crises. If they do, the

reason will not be that they have survived long and strenuous efforts at resolution. On the contrary, these conflicts are serious ones that are basically ignored by Soviet language identifiers, just as they have generally been neglected by the apologists of language policies elsewhere.

First, there is a conflict between the ontological and the associative identities of Russian, that is between what Russian is and to whom it belongs. A major thrust in the efforts to redefine Russian's associative identity has been to widen it. Russian belongs not just to Russians, but to all Soviet citizens, and even to millions of foreigners. Universal fluency in Russian among the Soviet population is predicted for the near future, and the increasing use of Russian internationally is also projected. Yet the mainstream of Soviet thinking also calls for the increasing standardization of the language according to native-speaker norms.(8) Consequently, as more and more nonnative speakers learn Russian, it should also become harder and harder to learn correctly, and nonnative speech should become easier and easier to detect. In a recent volume about Russian in the Ukraine, x-rays and fine acoustic measurements were used to document the minutest differences in tongue, jaw, and lip positioning, length of vowels in milliseconds, and other features of Russian speech behavior between native Russian speakers and native Ukrainians speaking Russian. The book's purpose is not merely to make it clear why nonnative speech is different; the analysis is followed by recommendations about how the schools should use this knowledge to teach Ukrainian children to speak Russian with more perfect (more native-like) pronunciation and intonation, well past the point where the differences would have caused any misunderstanding.(9)

Were the Soviet Union to implement a rigid policy identifying Russian as belonging to a large fraction of the human race but as being defined by the speech of the native-speaking subset of its "owners" alone, one could predict serious tension. Such a policy would satisfy some ethnic aspirations among the Russian half of the Soviet population, but would create a permanently inferior outgroup that could never fully master the language that in theory belongs equally to it. Besides creating friction between Russians and non-Russians, this policy would create antagonism within the non-Russian Soviet nationalities by elevating their linguistically most versatile (but otherwise not necessarily most qualified) members to the highest positions, and by encouraging parents to enroll their children in Russian-medium schools as the only realistic means by which they could acquire fluency in "correct" Russian. If the demands of Russian purists for the exclusion of "unnecessary" (almost all) foreign loan words were satisfied, then resentment against Russian would increase, because it would be less of a window on the world than before for the other Soviet ethnic groups.

The opposite policy would create different problems. Control over the features of Russian would be thrown open to all its speakers, second as well as native. Regional dialects of Russian emerging from the cultural and linguistic differences between groups of its learners would be tolerated, legitimized, and even romanticized, as is now beginning to happen - after years of stubborn elite opposition - to regional varieties of English in India, Africa, and elsewhere.(10) Nonnative speakers of Russian within the USSR might adopt strategies of deliberate differentiation from native-like Russian while, in general, still preserving intelligibility, so as to communicate their ethnic identity along with the content of their message.(11) While these consequences would enhance the loyalty of non-Russians to the regime, the Russian language would lose much of its potency as a focus of Russian ethnic pride. Russians would be able to consider themselves the only Soviet ethnic group that had lost control of its own language. The counter-argument would certainly be heard that Russian puts its stamp on every other Soviet language, so the proliferation of nonnative Russian dialects makes for genuine mutuality. To the extent that this diversification became extreme, however, Russian would cease being a usable medium of communication among those who learned it, except for those who already shared another language.

Soviet policy has not clung steadily to either of these models. Fears of disidentification through the excessive borrowing of words from other languages have often been expressed in the Soviet press. The main sources of worry have been foreign languages rather than other Soviet ones. The last two decades, however, have seen some linguistic dogmatism, including purism, fall into disrepute.(12) Some moderation of the demand for native-like pronunciation among learners of Russian can be found in recent writings,(13) along with the advice that a native-like command of Russian is destined to remain a rarity.(14) This argument has been strengthened by sociolinguistic research on Russian, showing that native Russian itself naturally varies across time, space, and social position.(15) Praise for the borrowing of words from the languages of the world and from other Soviet languages by Russian can also be found.(16) Whereas Russian's irregularity was once praised for its positive aesthetic effect,(17) now its regularity is cited as a feature that enhances its learnability by nonnative speakers.(18)

This shift toward a more tolerant policy has not gone far yet, however. The native Russian-speaking population is not being educated to accept nonnative varieties of Russian as equally legitimate with the standard variety. And hardly anyone ever argues that the further standardization of Russian should be carried out with a view to reducing its difficulty for nonnative learners, as a Soviet scholar did many years

ago.(19) Thus, a potentially serious gap remains between what Russian is identified as being and to whom it is identified as belonging.

A second serious, but unacknowledged, conflict is between the historical identity of Russian as the only language for communication among Soviet ethnic groups and the ideal of equality that enters into the moral identity of Russian and every other Soviet language. Only about three percent of the Russians in the Soviet Union claim to be fluent in any other Soviet language, whereas about half of the non-Russians claim to be fluent in Russian. The response to this situation by nearly all Soviet commentators is not indignation or a call for new effort at rectifying the imbalance; it is to treat the phenomenon as natural, desirable, and deserving of further encouragement. Thus, analysts of bilingualism in the Soviet Union only occasionally(20) describe bilingualism among Russians, and only rarely(21) is the learning of other Soviet languages by Russians advocated (even though this is a feature of Russian-medium schools outside the RSFSR). The most commonly expressed attitude is that non-Russians should do the learning, and this belief is expressed to foreign as well as domestic audiences:

While a knowledge of any two languages and their utilization in daily communication can be regarded as bilingualism, the specific type of bilingualism that is needed in the Soviet multinational state is the one in which a person knows both his native tongue and Russian. While other forms of bilingualism may also be developing...their importance is of a local character.(22)

The crucial justification for this point of view is the argument that all Soviet languages and all Soviet language groups are equal. Instead of seeing the selection of Russian for the role of *lingua franca* as a sign of inequality, Soviet commentators see it as a sign of equality. If the Soviet language groups were not equal, they would never tolerate the selection of one (dominant) language as their means of intercommunication. Since they have voluntarily embraced one such language, the language groups must, therefore, be equal, and that language must, therefore, not be dominant. It would follow, then, that the efforts being made in some other countries, like Canada or Yugoslavia, to achieve behavioral symmetry among language groups are necessary because of, and are evidence for the existence of, inequality among the languages and their speakers. In other words, the more unequally the languages of a country are treated, the more equal they must actually be.

This is a fragile edifice on which to build the justification for selecting a lingua franca, because the acceptance of one language among many as the common medium of transethnic communication not only reflects a situation of equality or inequality, but also affects it. On its face, native speakers of the selected language are differentially benefited. The group whose members must acquire that language anew in each generation or be denied the benefits of speaking it affords are relatively worse off. This principal is supported by much evidence, is easily understood, and is widely believed, as language conflicts in many countries show.

What is interesting is that this problem has been left untouched by those who have made both equality and universality components of Russian's identity. They have not argued that the unequal learning burden is compensated for by the Russians' loss of control over their own language; that monolingualism is more of a liability than an asset; nor that Russians have subsidized other ethnic groups economically to counterbalance their own linguistic advantage; though all of these are potentially plausible claims. Instead, they have simply ignored the issue, suggesting that Russian's predominance does not impair equality because the adoption of Russian as the lingua franca either is objectively or technically inevitable (something which Professor Rywkin's article in this volume, chap. 19, claims but which has never been shown to be true), or, more often, is completely voluntary. Evidence supporting the claim that it is voluntary is almost never provided, and the evidence that is offered⁽²³⁾ really shows only that language shift is taking place and says nothing about how voluntary it is. Even if unidirectional linguistic accommodation is voluntary, its consequences require analysis. Subordination is no less subordination merely because it is voluntary.⁽²⁴⁾ Are Soviet claims to an egalitarian language policy true in practice? Some theorists claim that different languages are in principle incapable of being treated equally, regardless of intention.⁽²⁵⁾

Third and last, there is an identity conflict between the domestic and the international aspects of the Russian language's historical and moral identity. Domestically, as already indicated, the future role of Russian as the common tongue has been decided. It is treated like an accomplished fact and the major issues raised by this decision are not treated as issues. Internationally, however, the eventual position of Russian is by no means certain, and the authoritative sources of Soviet language policy are arguing for two alternatives at once. One is the growing world role of Russian, seen as a by-product of the progress of socialism and of Soviet policy in the global arena. Promoting Russian as a world language, however, brings with it at least three dangers. Two of them are those already discussed: that

Russian will cease to be defined by the speech norms of the Russians themselves; and that international dominance by Russian, if achieved, will cause unequal burdens and resentment against the USSR. The third danger inherent in identifying Russian as a world language is that doing so requires also admitting English, French, German, and perhaps some other languages into the same identity class. The result is to legitimize a competition among these languages for world hegemony, and, if Russian loses to another language, the outcome would be a total defeat, from the Soviet point of view.

The second line of argumentation in the international arena avoids this risk by denying the possibility of a single international language, at least in the foreseeable future. Russian is identified as at least a "zonal" international language, and a synthetic auxiliary language, generally Esperanto, is promoted for a supplementary role (not yet specified in any detail) among the world's various zonal international, nonsynthetic languages.

In advocating that the auxiliary world language be a synthetic one, some Soviet specialists in interlinguistics make, cite, or imply three powerful arguments: first, that it would be fundamentally inegalitarian for the world to adopt the language of any one ethnic group as the general means of international communication; second, that a synthetic language, if properly designed, can be learned much less expensively than a nonsynthetic one;⁽²⁶⁾ and third, that the supporters of a neutral, constructed language will become a mass movement only where (as in socialist countries) the government promotes intergroup communication and friendship and is willing to invest in radical good ideas long before they are expected to be profitable.⁽²⁷⁾ It is precisely these kinds of arguments, however, that are missing on the domestic level, in spite of the fact that at first view, they are just as applicable there as internationally. The more effectively Soviet interlinguists put the case for a synthetic international auxiliary language, the greater the protection they will be affording Russian against the risk of a disastrous loss at that level. At the same time, they will be calling attention to the parallelism between the multiethnic USSR and the multinational world and, hence, to the following question: Even if the language which is best for the Soviet Union is not best for the world, why is the language that is best for the world not best for the Soviet Union?

The strategy that Soviet language identifiers generally follow, in order to cope with conflicts between the identities of languages, is conflict denial rather than conflict resolution. On the domestic level, Russian's identity as the lingua franca is argued not to be at the expense of the other Soviet languages, but actually to help promote their enrichment and flourishing. It was said that those who learn Russian are

not suffering a loss in comparison with the Russians; they, and their native languages, are, rather, making an absolute gain. At the international level, a synthetic international language does not interfere with the regional and even global aspirations for Russian; it is auxiliary, so it has no effect on ethnic group languages either domestically or in international use. (28)

Conflict, however, cannot be avoided so easily. Such rhetoric renders preferences among alternative language policies purely a matter of opinion, providing no basis for using evidence and reasoning to reach agreement. A Soviet sociolinguist has recognized this, implicitly, by saying that, once trust among the ethnic groups of a state has been established, "the problem of choosing a common language comes down to choosing the one that is most convenient and least demanding in terms of time and effort." He, thereupon, departs from the identity-defining style and describes nine characteristics of Russian that contribute to making it the language that satisfies this criterion in the USSR. (29)

The next step in the argument should be that, if time, effort, costs, and benefits are the basis for language policy, then how those costs and benefits are distributed among the affected people is a relevant consideration as well. Most language policies appear to impose enormous costs on some, while conferring considerable benefits on others. Perhaps this is why language policies not only in the Soviet Union but everywhere have for centuries been justified by the manipulation of identities rather than by analysis of the consequences that flow from them.

NOTES

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- (22) Isayev, p. 350.
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- (29) Isayev, pp. 337-46.