Language and identity in the late Soviet Union and thereafter

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Abstract
The introduction to the special issue takes a brief look at the history of ethnolinguistic policies in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and post-Soviet space. It also covers relevant key terms for understanding linguistic processes taking place after the collapse of the USSR. At the end it introduces the case studies included in this special issue.

Keywords: LANGUAGE POLICY, IDENTITY, COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, POST-SOVIET IDENTITIES

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1 Introduction

The articles in this comparative special issue of Sociolinguistic Studies, ‘Post-Soviet identities: Ethnic, national, linguistic, and imperial’, are focussed on the dynamic of the collective identity formation of the peoples in the post-Soviet space through an analysis of the linguistic and inter-ethnic situations in five distinct settings: Kazakhstan, the Autonomous Republic of Sakha in the Russian Federation, Moldova, the Baltic countries and the Russian-speaking diasporas in Europe (in Germany and Norway in particular). In her recent overview of multilingualism in post-Soviet space, Pavlenko (2013) notes that the language regimes and processes in this area are still insufficiently studied, particularly in the comparative perspective. This special issue has emerged in the wake of the international conference Hot and Cold Ethnicities in Post-Soviet Space, held in Tallinn, Estonia in October 2011, and it is focussed on just this goal, together with another collection from the same conference (see Zabrodskaja and Ehala, 2014).

We start this introduction with a short overview of the ethnic and language policies in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union (SU) and post-Soviet space. Then we discuss some notions, such as Russification and nativisation, which are commonly used to label and characterise language and ethnic policies in the area, pointing to the highly ideologically charged nature of these notions, which makes it hard to analyse the processes that they describe objectively and impartially. We suggest that the notion of normalisation (Reniu i Tresserras, 1995) captures the common spirit of these notions and allows for a more balanced analysis. In the final section of this introduction, we present the case studies that have been included in this special issue.

2 Historical background

Identity-related language issues have been central in Russia and its (post-)imperial territories for well over 150 years, after purposeful Russification policies were first introduced following the 1863 January Uprising in the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Weeks, 2010; Pavlenko, 2011). Until that time, Russification was mainly unplanned and administrative, i.e. the spread of Russian occurred voluntarily due to the social mobility of separate individuals in terms of entering the higher social classes, and due to the development of an imperial infrastructure for the centralisation of the state (Thaden, 1981). Both of these processes had insignificant impacts on the identities of the predominantly peasant non-Russian populations.
After the January Uprising, a systematic policy of Russification was established. While in the case of Poles it did not aim at cultural assimilation but just at reducing possible separatist sentiments, the main target of cultural Russification became the rural populations of Belarus and Ukraine, who did not have distinct national identities and, for this reason, fell easily under Polish influence and were Polonised, as was feared by the tsarist authorities (Weeks, 2010). Due to the weakness of the Russian empire at this time, these Russification attempts were not very successful. In other peripheral areas of the empire, Russification was even weaker and there were no attempts at large-scale cultural assimilation of non-Russian populations. Furthermore, the 1905 revolution hindered the Russification policy considerably.

Compared to tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union was much more successful in the cultural assimilation of non-Russian populations. The Soviet period was characterised by large flows of migration and resettlements, which changed the demographic structure of most socialist republics of the Soviet Union. These changes, together with the state policy of ethnic-Russian bilingualism and attempts to create a collective identity of Soviet people, led to a degree of blurring of the borders between linguistic, ethnic and national identities in some contexts, although not universally. As a result, a common language-based identity was constructed and knowledge of Russian became a crucial condition of participation in the Soviet society (see Wojnowski, 2015).

Despite this, or perhaps because of this, the questions of language and collective identities became the major concerns of the peoples of the late SU. The mass movements that ultimately led to the breakdown of the SU got their initial spark from the article ‘Views on bilingualism without rose-coloured glasses’ by the Estonian linguist Mati Hint (1987a, 1987b, see also an article written in the same vein by the Latvian linguist Bušs, 1988). Hint’s article, which questioned the official policy of ethnic-Russian bilingualism and argued elaborately that bilingualism was detrimental to children’s development, spread like wildfire throughout the socialist republics and autonomous regions of the SU, everywhere where there were ethnically non-Russian communities.

Raising the status of ‘root languages’ (i.e. languages of the autochthonous communities) in various areas of the SU became one of the main goals of popular mass movements. Less than two years after the publication of Hint’s article, language laws began to be adopted in the parliaments of the Soviet Socialist Republics. The first among these laws was the Estonian Language Act, adopted on 18 January 1989. Very rapidly ten other republics also adopted similar laws (the last being Turkmenistan on 24 May 1990). Only the Caucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia did not adopt language laws, as their

Most of the language laws of the Soviet republics established titular languages as official, and set language requirements for state employees and officials. The Russian language was mentioned in all these laws but the status it was given varied considerably. In the Lithuanian and Estonian language laws, Russian was afforded no special status; it was just mentioned as a language of communication with the central Soviet administration and, in the Estonian law, it was recognised as a widely used first language. In four language laws, in Latvia, Ukraine, Moldova and Turkmenistan, both the official titular language and Russian were recognised as languages of inter-ethnic communication. In five other laws, in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, only Russian was granted the status of the language of inter-ethnic communication (Grenoble, 2003).

These subtle differences in status granted to Russian reflected the cultural and demographic power balance between the titular nations and the Russian-speaking communities in the socialist republics. Clearly the Caucasian republics needed no language laws, as the Russian-speaking populations were all but non-existent there. Russian was recognised as an important language to be learned, but it constituted little threat to the titular nations in these republics. Lithuania had only a small Russian minority and a strong national tradition so that there was no need to establish a special status for Russian. While having a considerable Russian minority, Estonia strongly insisted on the restoration of the status of Estonian as the only state language, as it had been before the annexation of Estonia in 1940. The Latvian, Moldovan, Turkmen and Ukrainian languages were in a slightly weaker position and, thus, granted more recognition to Russian. In the rest of the republics, Russian had already gained significant cultural and administrative roles. That is why Russian rather than the national language was recognised as the language for everyday inter-ethnic communication.

Even though the ultimate breakdown of the SU was legitimised by a combination of various moral and economic arguments, language issues remained in the forefront of social reforms, together with the economic transition to capitalism, in the newly emerged independent states. More than 20 years after the collapse of the SU, the processes of linguistic, ethnic and national identity formation are still cogent. This is perhaps most vividly seen in the case of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Law on Languages (1989) gave Ukrainian the status of the only official language, made it the language of the government and all communication with public bodies, declared the functioning and development of the Ukrainian language and culture to be the priority of the state, and made Ukrainian the
language of education at all levels of education in Ukraine (Zakon, 1989). This law reduced the role of Russian considerably and remained in effect for the next 23 years, till 2012, although it was hardly enforced in the predominantly Russian-speaking eastern and southern regions of Ukraine (see Polese, 2014).

In 2012, the Verkhovna Rada, the parliament of Ukraine, established a new law, ‘On the principles of the state language policy’, which gave Russian and other minority languages the status of ‘regional languages’ in municipalities where the proportion of minority language speakers exceeded 10%. Regional languages were allowed to be used in courts, schools and other government institutions. While it legalised practices that were already widespread in those areas with high percentages of Russian-speakers, the process of the adoption of this law caused highly emotional discussions, and led to public demonstrations and even a fistfight in the Ukrainian parliament (Pavlenko, 2013). These tensions did not ease over time, and one of the first actions on 23 February 2014 that the new Verkhovna Rada took after the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution was voting to repeal the 2012 Language Law. Although the new Ukrainian president, Oleksandr Turchynov, vetoed the repeal bill on 28 February, the damage had been done: the repeal sparked protests in Russian-speaking regions, contributing to the crisis in Crimea.

While the Ukrainian case has been the most dramatic one, similar tensions between the titular and Russian language have characterised several successor states of the Soviet Union, including the Russian Federation itself. At the core of these debates is not the problem of language use in the instrumental sense, but the association of language with specific collective identities. The language debates are battles of collective identities and the relative status that is ascribed to the people having these identities in a society.

3 Language debates and collective identities

Language debates become emotional at the moment, and to the extent, that the languages concerned are associated with collective identities that are in competition in a certain territory. There is no doubt that the cause of language debates in the post-Soviet societies is the imperial expansion of tsarist Russia, and later of the SU, which brought the Russian language, culture and speakers as significant elements into territories that had had different language regimes previously. In some cases, these processes had started several centuries before, and in some instances later. In all these cases, the competition between the imperial Russian language and identity and the local ones intensified during the 20th century, largely aided by general technological modernisation characteristic of this period. As the collapse of the SU left large Russian-speaking communities in the successor states, the debates have not ceased, but have acquired a new perspective.
We will start our discussion on these debates by outlining the four key terms – *commodification, assimilation, Russification and nativisation* – that Pavlenko (2013) uses to characterise identity-related language policies and processes in the SU and thereafter.

Pavlenko (2013) defines commodification as the increased need for knowledge of Russian for business, education and leisure purposes. The term is, of course, broader and is used to characterise the market value of any language in a certain society, or even in a smaller linguistic environment within a state (Heller, 2003, 2010). The relative level of commodification of languages is perhaps the key factor that influences individuals’ motivation to acquire a particular language in addition to their first language. As language commodification depends on a large array of factors, the relative market value for each particular language may vary from region to region within a state, not to mention the differences between states. Relative commodification of competing languages in one linguistic environment is the long-term ‘invisible hand’ that causes language shift amongst the native speakers of weakly commodified languages. Assimilation, which is tied to differences in commodification, is a natural process, and is inherently neither good nor bad, but just another manifestation of the power law, so common in nature.

By Russification, Pavlenko (2013:264) means the ‘consistent and long-lasting attempts to forcibly make Russians out of non-Russians’, but argues that much of the language shift amongst the non-Russian population has not been due to forceful Russification, but that it is just a consequence of modernisation and the high level of commodification of the Russian language and culture (we believe that this is especially true in Central Asia).

By nativisation, Pavlenko (2013) means the following processes in the post-Soviet societies: (1) establishing titular languages as languages of administration, (2) elimination of Russian from official paperwork and communication, higher and secondary education and state-sponsored media, (3) de-Russification of grammar and vocabulary (we would also include the transition from a Cyrillic to a Latin alphabet), (4) spreading the knowledge of titular languages among those who did not know it before and (5) spreading the knowledge of English as an alternative to Russian as a lingua franca. She labels all these phenomena with the term ‘the monolingual turn’, which is aimed at an intended language shift of Russian-speakers and largely involves policies of nativisation, with intended assimilation of Russian-speakers.

Despite the different and highly charged terms, one has to admit that the processes of Russification and nativisation are functionally equivalent and, furthermore, have the same relationship to the notion of assimilation as the
alleged long-term goal. To facilitate more neutral discussion of the language policies it is necessary to secure the functioning of an official language, we propose to abstain from the use of nativisation, Russification and other terms of the nature of ‘X-ification’, in favour of the notion of normalisation. Normalisation was first used by the Generalitat of Catalonia to call for elaboration of the General Plan of Language Normalization which took place on 18 December 1991 (see Reniu i Tresserras, 1995). Thereafter it has been used sporadically in the literature of language policy to denote the process by which a minority language aims to improve its status and corpus planning in society.

We propose to use normalisation more broadly to denote all language planning attempts that aim to establish a desired language regime that would be perceived by the population as normal. In the process of normalisation, two qualitative steps need to be distinguished: first, ensuring that everybody has sufficient official language competence and, second, ensuring that everybody has developed an emotional attachment to the collective identity associated with the official language. While there is no denying the legitimacy of the first step in any nation-building project, the second step is what makes the situation emotionally charged, causing accusations of attempts at assimilation of minorities.

It is fairly clear that, for a highly commodified language, it takes less effort to normalise than for a relatively less commodified language. Understandably, the methods are different, as are the possible outcomes, and this can be seen in the analyses of all case studies included in this collection. What we would like to stress is that the analysis of the normalisation processes and policies needs to be highly context-dependent and multilevel: to understand what is happening in each particular situation, it is necessary not only to search for official language policies and rhetoric, but also to look at actual language practices, the relative commodification of the languages involved and the processes of collective identity formation affected by language normalisation. As this special issue will reveal, there are large differences in these contextual factors, which means that it is impossible to assess language and collective identity processes in a uniform manner in all settings of the post-Soviet space.

4 Overview of the special issue

In our special issue, we present a set of detailed case studies focussing on the aspects of how collective identities are tied to language normalisation efforts in different post-Soviet societies, and the relative outcomes of these processes in different contexts.
The collection starts with the article ‘Blurring of collective identities in the post-Soviet space’, by Martin Ehala. He adopts the Sign Theory of identity (Ehala, 2007) to distinguish between the particulars of different collective identities: linguistic, ethnic, national and imperial. According to the theory, collective identity may be interpreted as a Social Sign. The general function of Social Signs is to structure the social world and legitimise the distribution of power and resources between the members of different subgroups in society.

Ehala specifies the functional and structural differences between ethnic, ethnic national, civic national, imperial and linguistic identities, and outlines the conditions for identity blurring, using the notions of identity density and identity distance. He argues that the distinctions between ethnic, linguistic and national identities became blurred as a result of Soviet language and ethnic policies. These developments led to the ethnicisation of nation-building efforts in a number of successor states of the SU.

At the same time, because of the strong exclusive nature of ethnicist nation-building, the non-autochthonous populations of the former republics, mainly speaking Russian as the first language, developed non-ethnic Russian linguistic identities having strong connections to Soviet cultural heritage. These identities, while largely linguistic and cultural, are not tied to ethnicity or even to nationality, but represent a hybrid supra-national identity (see also Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013, who describes how post-Soviet communities/groups have constructed a common language-based identity in which the Soviet element has a substantial role). Ehala’s theoretical analysis is backed up by the evidence from the case studies in this special issue.

The processes of identity formation are analysed in great detail in the first case study, ‘Transnistrian conflict in the context of post-Soviet nation-building’, by Anastasia V. Mitrofanova, who distinguishes five major forms of Moldovan identity: (1) Moldovan ethnonational identity as a regional variation of Romanian identity, (2) a specifically Moldovan ethnonational identity, (3) a post-Soviet amorphous ‘non-identity’, (4) specific identities of ethnic minorities (identification of Ukrainians with Ukraine, Russians with Russia, etc.) and (5) marginal identities of the titular ethnic group. This contrast with firm and consolidated Transnistrian identity, which is a civil identity based on ideology, not on ethnicity, is open to all post-Soviet ethnic groups. Because of the different structures and contents of the identities on the opposite sides of the Dniester River, there is no immediate path to consolidation. Her case study provides a great deal of empirical support for the understanding of collective identities as competing social signs which have different appeals to different fractions of the society, thus illustrating
the dynamic between identities as social signs and the links that individuals in a society develop to these identities. Her case is also a very insightful account of the emergence of a new collective identity in the Transnistrian area.

The second case, ‘What is my country to me?’ Identity construction by Russian-speakers in the Baltic countries, by Anastassia Zabrodskaja, goes into more detail in analysing how existing ethnic, national, imperial and linguistic identities become blurred in the post-Soviet setting of the Baltic countries. She discusses the findings of qualitative studies carried out among Russian-speakers in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 2008–2011, triangulated with quantitative cluster analysis. The results show that the Russian-speaking community is quite diverse in respect of its beliefs and attitudes, as well as in terms of its ethnolinguistic vitality and identity clusters: from animosity towards titular nations to the desire for assimilation into the mainstream society with two (in Latvia and Lithuania) and three (in Estonia) in-between clusters. Diaspora identity is gradually separating from the mainland Russian identity. The sociolinguistic environment and proficiency in an official language are very strong determinants of the ethnolinguistic identity of Russian-speakers. Zabrodskaja’s analysis reveals the wide variety of ways in which identities related to the same signal (the Russian language) can have widely varying content differences, so that it is for some people a signal of imperial identity, for some linguistic identity and for some a newly emerging ethnic identity.

Kinga Geben and Meilutė Ramonienė, in their article ‘Language use and self-identification: the case of Lithuanian Poles’, show that the choice of ethnic identity is affected by many factors. Polish culture was closest to the interviewees, followed by Russian and then Lithuanian. Their ethnic and cultural awareness can be seen as a combination of different cultural elements that have always been accessible to them in their multilingual and multicultural environment, such as place of residence, origin, tradition, family and language. The issue of identity is particularly complex at the intersection of languages and cultures. Poles speaking all three languages and participating in the three worlds of media that present various cultural and political patterns (with a clear influence of Russian media, in TV, radio and newspapers) are differentiated by a sense of separateness from the rest of Poland and Lithuania. However, Polish residents in smaller towns, who experienced a stronger Russification policy in the Soviet period, currently tend to accept the domination of Lithuanian.

Aimar Ventsel and Natal’ia Struchkova argue in their paper, ‘Sakha language and education in a social, cultural and political context’, that, due to economic, social and political processes, the Sakha language in the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, in the Russian Far East, occupies at least two niches in the society: as a language of
those in the disadvantaged low social strata and as a language for the national elite. The Sakha case demonstrates that language speakers do not form a coherent group and the status of their language can vary according to the social positions of the speakers. The paper also shows that processes of ‘elitarisation’ and ‘lumpenisation’ of the language are intermingled and that people can move from one language stratum to another using various strategies. Their case study indicates convincingly that the distinction between ethnic and national identity is very blurred and often very hard to determine, and shows how linguistic identity is in a tense dynamic relationship with ethnic/national identity, being influenced from outside by the imperial identity of the majority Russian population in the autonomous Republic of Sakha.

The paper ‘Cultural and language self-identification of ethnic minority groups in Kazakhstan’, by Sholpan Zharkynbekova, Aliya Aimoldina and Damira Akynova, assesses the ethnolinguistic vitality of four ethnic minority groups (Russians, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans) in Kazakhstan. This analysis enables the authors to compare the ethnolinguistic processes of these ethnic groups and the roles of the demographic and communicative capacities of their languages, particularly the role of L1 in ethnic identity and the maintenance and development of ethnic languages. The paper provides rich material on the interplay between ethnic, national, linguistic and imperial identities in several combinations. One can see how several ethnic/national identities have gradually been eroded, becoming symbolic identities at the same time that there is noticeable blurring between imperial and linguistic identities associated with Russian. The case provides significant empirical support for the hypothesis that identity density and distance affect the blurring process.

In the final article, ‘Maintaining ties: Russian-speaking communities in Germany and Norway’, Ekaterina Bagreeva and German Mendzheritskiy present a comparative study of the migrant communities in Germany and Norway. Their analysis focuses on the issue of collective identity associated with the Russian language in the immigrant context. Even though the Russian-speaking immigrant groups in Germany and Norway differ considerably in density, size and reasons for immigration, there are some similarities in the way collective identity is maintained. The case is interesting in that it involves several layers of collective identity: the immigrants to Germany have either German or Jewish ethnic identity, which was the defining characteristic for their acceptance in the host country. Besides this, they all have some sort of collective identity association with Russian, whether linguistic, national or imperial, and this identity is going through a further formation process in the German and Norwegian Russian-speaking diaspora contexts.
5 Concluding remarks

All the papers in this special issue were written well before the spring 2014 events in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Even though these events directly involve only Ukraine, their impact on the identity processes in post-Soviet societies cannot be underestimated (especially in Transnistria).

It is very likely that in as much as the feasibility of the Russian imperial identity is enhanced through the annexation of Crimea, some of the identity formation processes, mainly the emergence of new Russian-speaking non-imperial identities, will be affected. It is impossible to predict right now whether this will lead to a clearer fragmentation within the Russian-speaking communities into subgroups with imperial, ethnic or symbolic ethnic identities, to the rejection of Russian linguistic identity by bilingual national elites in several post-Soviet republics, to the rise of the status of the Russian language in the Baltic countries, together with the development of stronger civic national identities, or to other yet unknown developments.

However, the changed situation and unpredictability of the future identity processes do not affect the relevance of this collection, as it provides empirical data useful in testing different approaches introduced in language policy theory. The analysis presented in this special issue shows the developments that took place largely at the time when the Russian imperial identity was considered to be a phenomenon of the past. After the events in Crimea, one can argue that it is again one of the feasible identity choices for Russian-speakers in the post-Soviet space. How this quickly developing political situation may change identity formation processes and what new patterns of identities might supplant the previous ones remain to be seen. Future comparisons with the analysis in this special issue will certainly be able to clarify the dynamic. The interpretation of new patterns and phenomena will gain much from our knowledge of the previous context.

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