

# Teaching Minority Languages: Social and Cultural Problems

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**Abstract**—The article considers the issue of teaching the languages of ethnic minorities in Russia and in Europe. The author uses the method of comparative analysis to study how minority and regional languages were taught in the Russian Empire as compared with contemporary states. The article defines the existing problems: voluntary assimilation caused by inner migration and higher status of the majority language in urban areas, communication in the majority language at school and in the family. One of the demotivating factors for students educated in minority languages is the need to prepare for the unified state exams which are conducted in Russian. Another serious obstacle is lack of experienced teachers and teaching materials. The author concludes that joint efforts of state authorities and ethnic associations can help to preserve minority languages and cultures.

**Keywords:** *ethnic; mother tongue, minority language, cultural diversity, education*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The right to be educated in the mother tongue is one of the inalienable human rights provided by international and state documents. Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) [1] state that the international community recognizes the right of the child to get an education in the mother tongue as one of the basic values of education. The document calls for respect to the child's mother tongue and their cultural identity. The Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions (2005) [2] once again confirms the role of education in protecting and promoting various forms of cultural self-expression and stresses that linguistic diversity is one of the basic elements of cultural diversity. The Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation (2012) considers the right to get an education in the mother tongue as one of the significant social rights within the framework of preserving ethnic and cultural identity [3]. Being an integral part of culture the language contributes to building and preserving cultural identity, constructing the language picture of the world and determines world perception and mentality. There is no denying the fact that both in mono- and multilingual communities the preferred

language of communication among its members is the mother tongue [4].

The age of globalization raises various questions:

- In what language should the children of ethnic minorities be taught in urban and rural areas?
- What are the motivating and demotivating factors for parents / children in choosing mother tongue as the language of education?
- What should the state do to educate minority language children in their mother tongues?
- How can the state cope with the problem of finding educators who can teach in minority languages?

In recent decades, representatives of minority ethnic groups and politicians in Russia and abroad have frequently insisted on educating representatives of national minority groups solely in their mother tongues, both at school and at university. A growing awareness of the need to preserve cultural identities has stimulated an interest among members of ethnic communities in revitalizing ethnic languages and cultures and has influenced language policy in multiethnic countries [5] [6] [7]. In the context of growing language extinction, preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity is possible only if a certain language is used by the members of a community in everyday oral discourse and functions as a cultural dominant within the community.

## II. METHOD AND DEFINITIONS

The historical approach and the method of comparative analysis make it possible to see how the problem of dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity was coped with in Russia and in other countries in the historical aspect and how it is addressed today. The analysis rests on the provisions of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the sociolinguistic typology of languages suggested by A. Pascaud.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages explains that the two concepts refer to the languages of the autochthonous groups of people inhabiting a

certain territory and speaking a language different from that of the majority of the country's population. While the term "regional" refers to the language spoken within a state but on a limited part of its territory (where it may be used by the majority of the regional population), the term "minority" describes two types of situations: 1) the language spoken by a group of people smaller than the majority of the population whose habitat is not limited to a definite part of the country; 2) the language different from the state language, spoken by a small group of people which inhabits a definite territory of the country and is smaller in number than the rest of the population [8]. The charter stresses that "each category of language has its proper place" in the life of the national community. Neither of the terms is a legal concept. This terminological opposition was further developed by linguists, philologists and educators [9] [10] [11] [12].

A typological approach to the problem of linguistic minority was undertaken by A. Pascaud who singled out minority languages, language minoration and minorization, languages in a minorital situation [13]. Analysing languages in terms of sociolinguistics, he explains the prevalence of quantitative, mostly demolinguistic parameters in defining minority languages as well as functional and sociocultural qualitative parameters in defining minorized languages. According to A. Pascaud, a language can be described as a regional language within a certain country and a majority language within that region but a minority language within Europe (e.g. Catalan in Spain); at the same time, it may be considered as a state language elsewhere (e.g. Flemish in Belgium). Language minoration implies a natural decrease of language status in a given society: often it is not taught at school and does not promote the owner's social mobility (e.g. oral languages of Dagestan and Azerbaijan). Language minorization describes lowering language status in a given society (e.g. in Turkey, the languages of ethnic minorities other than Greeks, Armenians and Jews). The languages of immigrants usually fall into the category of languages in a minorital situation although in the mother country they often act as majority languages.

### III. COPING WITH LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN RUSSIA

As a multiethnic state, Russia has always had to cope with linguistic diversity aiming to make the majority of the population bilingual. By the end of the 19th century the country had two prevailing systems of teaching Russian in ethnic regions: 1) ethnic-oriented bilingual education based on religious affiliation and 2) secular education in the mother tongue with Russian as an obligatory subject [14]. The Soviet period saw an upsurge of interest in mother-tongue teaching: in the constituent republics, Russian was an obligatory subject in national schools and the republican language was obligatory in Russian-based schools. Language proficiency in Russian enabled various nationals to make a career at the local and federal levels. By the early 1990s, the country faced asymmetrical Russian-ethnic bilingualism.

The 2010 census showed that in contemporary Russia over 98 percent of the population speak Russian although there are 26 languages of schooling (2017) equally divided

between primary and secondary education. Since 2018 state republican languages have been learned on a voluntary basis, while before they made an obligatory part of schooling both for indigenous students and Russian speakers. That sometimes led to social tensions [15]: when Russian speakers in Tatarstan were obliged to have as many classes of Tatar as of Russian it lowered their chances of getting high grades in the state exams in the Russian language and mathematics which are taken in Russian; hence it lowered their chances of being enrolled in colleges or universities.

Today many regions of Russia are witnessing a decline of interest in learning and using the indigenous languages. The Udmurt and Chuvash languages used mostly in rural areas are no longer widely spread among the urban population. From 2002 to 2010, the number of native Udmurt speakers fell by 30 percent; from 2008/2009 to 2014/2015 academic year the number of primary school children educated in their mother tongue in Chuvash rural areas fell by 10.2 percent [16]. In contrast with this is the language situation in the remote region of Tyva (Tuva) where in 2013 a high number of students failed their state exam in Russian. With 68 percent of the population employed in cattle, sheep and horse breeding and 23 percent in the mining industry, Russian is often seen as a minorated language which gives no privileges in social mobility.

The language situation with the nomadic peoples of Siberia, the North and the Far East, is more complicated. Although alphabets for indigenous spoken languages were created in the 1930s, since that time children have been taught in boarding and nomadic schools in Russian with occasional attempts to introduce mother-tongue primary education. Today the language of communication in the family is often ethnic but at school it is Russian. Boarding school is still the most popular form of educating children although it is stressful for them to be torn away from the family from September to May. In recent decades there have been feeble attempts to teach pre-school children in the mother tongue with teachers accompanying several families of reindeer herders.

### IV. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING MINORITY LANGUAGES

In Europe, the idea of plurilingualism is gaining popularity. The EU Commission set the aim to turn young Europeans into bi-/trilingual speakers who know, besides their mother tongue, a minority or regional language plus a European majority language. Regional and minority languages referred to in European documents on education are plentiful [17].

In the Belgian Walloon, French speaking school students usually choose Flemish (Dutch) as their first foreign language, while their peers in the Dutch speaking Flanders choose French; German speaking students more often choose French. Higher education is provided in French or Dutch that is why German speaking nationals go to German universities, but it does not provoke social tensions. Children of migrants

attend local Belgian schools and have their schooling in French or in Dutch, depending on the region.

In Moldova, the language of education, at all levels, is Romanian with the exception of the autonomous Gagauz region where the predominant language is Russian. The efforts of the local authorities aimed at revitalizing the indigenous language which is recognized as endangered [18], have led to introducing Gagauz as an obligatory school and university subject. The use of Russian is rooted in history and its value is closely linked with better job opportunities. Although this idea is popular with certain quarters of the younger generation, the intellectual part of the community see it as “a mixed blessing” [19] and insist that young people should be taught to pride their mother tongue as part of the cultural heritage [20].

In Serbia, Romanians in Vojvodina speak a local oral dialect of Romanian (Banat) and are not only educated in standard Romanian but use it in court, official administrative discourse and cultural activities. As Serbian citizens, Romanians also learn and use both Cyrillic and Latin versions of Serbian [21].

In Latvia, Russian speakers make 37.2 percent of the population (2011) while Russian serves as the language of instruction only in a limited number of primary schools. At the same time, in Ireland migrant Latvian children have better opportunities: they can take school graduation exam in Latvian. The ethnic diaspora supported by the mother country is determined to have this exam recognized as equal to the exam for national minorities in Latvia: that will enable young Irish Latvians to get university education in Latvia. The Latvian community also aims at making the Irish authorities introduce Latvian as one of the foreign languages taught at school.

In Britain, minority languages (Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Cornish) are taught in the respective regions. The 2011 census in the country showed that the second most popular language after English is Polish; Britain also has a high percentage of Indian, Pakistani, Lithuanian and Latvian natives. But municipal authorities do not offer respective language programmes in their mother tongues – these are arranged and carried out by numerous ethnic communities that find instructors and finance the programmes. A similar situation can be observed in other European countries.

## V. CONCLUSION

Language domination and assimilation is caused by developing economies that make people adopt the economically dominant tongue for fear of being left out [22]. Reduced competitive abilities of minority languages [23] make their bearers turn to using majority languages and refrain from transmitting languages and cultures to their children in the family. In Russia, the differences between social and working opportunities in urban and rural areas cause a permanent outflow of people to town with Russian as the language of communication. Inner migration of families from the remote regions to the central parts of Russia does not only depopulate rural areas but leads to ethnic languages

minoration. As children usually speak the language of school socialization, they transmit this communication habit to home language practice. Hence the chances of using a minority language are reduced. Researchers and educators stress that the process of sustaining and promoting the use of a minority language implies active participation in communication, with members of the language community as custodians of linguistic and cultural heritage [24].

As a result of language assimilation in favor of Russian, a growing number of indigenous Nordic population have been giving up their ethnic languages claiming Russian as the mother tongue. More often than not, economic reasons act as demotivating factors in choosing mother tongue as the language of education. Another demotivating factor leading to language assimilation is the unified state exam in Russian as an obligatory requirement for everyone. Ethnic school graduates realize that if they want to become college or university students they have to be proficient in Russian, often at the expense of losing their mother tongue.

Analysis has shown that the most widely used pattern of preserving minority languages in Russia and in Europe is using them in primary school as the language of instruction. In the secondary school a minority language becomes an ethnic component subject while further instruction is carried out in the state (majority) language. University education is usually provided in the state language in order to give equal job opportunities to all graduates.

Bilingualism, at least at the level of everyday and official communication, seems to be a natural requirement for the students of regional and republican schools, both ethnic and non-ethnic. Ethnic cultures can be taught in minority languages for ethnic nationals and in Russian for others, but language and cultural awareness is a necessary requirement for intercultural communication. Developing bilingualism has a bonus: bi- or trilingual children usually do better in education and social interaction.

In order to motivate ethnic minorities to sustain language diversity the state ought to increase its efforts in providing proper conditions for education. So far, there have been few or no teaching materials in minority languages published in the 21st century. Schools need experienced minority language teachers who should be motivated to go to the remote towns and villages. Schools also need teaching materials and resource centres. Ethnic minority representation in drafting curricula can cater to the needs of grassroots professionals. In January 2020, President V. Putin commissioned several ministries and agencies to work out measures aimed at promoting the use of Nordic, Siberian and Far Eastern minority languages in schooling. One of the related tasks is to provide support for Nordic minority university students. Similar efforts ought to be taken in relation to other ethnic minorities. A joint effort of the state and associations of ethnic minorities can lead to sustainable development of language diversity ensuring cultural awareness and promoting effective intercultural communication.

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