*Language and Linguistics Compass* 7/4 (2013): 262–271, 10.1111/lnc3.12024

# Multilingualism in Post-Soviet Successor States

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Abstract

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the fourteen successor states began to distance themselves from Russia and its language. This situation was strikingly different from most post-colonial states of Asia, Africa, and Latin America that maintained the languages of the former colonizers. For researchers, the post-Soviet context became a natural sociolinguistic 'experiment', in which the previously shared political and linguistic system offered a common starting point for language reforms and the different outcomes illuminated the effects of demographic, political, economic, and social factors. The purpose of the present article is to outline the key findings of the research to date, to discuss their implications for sociolinguistic theory, and to identify gaps and productive directions for future inquiry.

## 1. *Introduction*

As I am working on this article, I keep one eye on breaking news from Ukraine, where the new language law first led to a fistfight in the parliament and then to clashes between protesters and police. Nothing new, really – just another chapter in the ongoing saga of 'language wars' in the post-Soviet space, where every new language law may lead to heated emotional exchanges, public strife, and even military conflicts and secession. For decades and, in some cases, centuries, the inhabitants of what we now call post-Soviet countries or successor states had watched their native languages take second seat to Russian, the *lingua franca* of the Russian empire and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The dissolution of the USSR in December of 1991 allowed the successor states to distance themselves from Russia and to renegotiate this bilingual compromise. In contrast to many post-colonial countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the new governments did not want to preserve Russian as one of official languages – rather, they wanted to create new linguistic regimes, where Russian would play only a supporting role or no role at all. For researchers, the post-Soviet context became a natural sociolinguistic 'experiment', in which the previously shared political and linguistic system offered a common starting point for language reforms and the different outcomes illuminated the effects of demographic, political, economic, and social factors. In what follows, I will examine what we have learned from two decades of research on post-Soviet language reforms. To place these findings in context, I will begin by discussing who studies post-Soviet language reforms and what questions and methods are used in this study.

## 2. *Who Studies Post-Soviet Language Reforms and Why?*

In the early 1990s, I was a graduate student in linguistics in a US university. As a native speaker of Russian, fluent in Ukrainian, I was perfectly positioned to go back to my native Ukraine to examine the transition from Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism to Ukrainian as the only state language. Yet, such a dissertation topic never occurred to me or to any of my faculty mentors. Post-Soviet events went largely unnoticed by the linguistic community in the United States: the publications I read and the conferences I went to were dominated by traditional preoccupations, like code-switching, and by new trends, like identity construction. Perhaps, this is not surprising – linguistics does not have a tradition of looking for 'hot spots', and the study of language ideologies and language in nation building was not as prominent then as it is today. Most sociolinguists also lacked an appropriate linguistic and disciplinary foundation for the study of post-Soviet language reforms – in Western academia, experts on Russian and Soviet language policies have traditionally resided in departments of history, political science, and area studies and published their work in *American Political Science Review*, *Soviet Studies*, *Slavic Review*, and *Russian Review*.

As a result, the first decade of research on post-Soviet language reforms was dominated by political scientists, most notably David Laitin (1998) and Pal Kolstø (1995) and their teams, who rushed to the newly independent countries to document the change in linguistic regimes. This work resulted in foundational cross-country studies of early post-Soviet language management (Kolstoe 1995; Laitin 1998; Landau and Kellner-Heinkele 2001; Savoskul 2001; Smith et al. 1998). The few publications that appeared on the pages of applied and sociolinguistic journals were mostly surveys (e.g. Kreindler 1997) and opinion pieces (e.g. Druviete 1997). The lack of systematic sociolinguistic fieldwork in the early days of the reforms, be it by local or Western scholars, resulted in the irrevocable loss of precious information about changes (or lack thereof) in linguistic practices, linguistic landscapes (i.e. written language in the public space), and linguistic competencies. To say it simply, we have never learned who in the early 1990s stopped using what language or started using another language with whom and when.

Equally detrimental was the lack of collaboration between Western and local scholars. Western political scientists had a strong theoretical and methodological base and as outsiders attempted to approach the events objectively, but they rarely had full understanding of the local languages and contexts. In turn, local sociolinguists had the understanding of the local languages but little familiarity with contemporary theories and methodologies and no funding to undertake comprehensive fieldwork. Instead, some adopted purist and ideological agendas, advocating the supremacy of the local language and legitimizing new language policies (e.g. Druviete 1997).

The publications that appeared by the end of the first decade raised interest in post-Soviet multilingualism among Western sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and education scholars and inspired fieldwork-based studies of individual countries and collaboration with local scholars. As a result, the second decade of research is distinguished by detailed studies of language and education management in several countries, including Kyrgyzstan (Korth 2005), Latvia (Silova 2006), Moldova (Ciscel 2007), and Ukraine (Bilaniuk 2005), and by publications that brought together Western and local scholars (Besters-Dilger 2009; Garibova and Zuercher 2009; Kulyk 2010; Mustajoki et al. 2010; Pavlenko 2008a; Verschik, 2009).

At present, we are making a transition to the third stage, distinguished by renewed interest in cross-country comparisons (e.g. Fierman 2009; Iatsenko et al. 2008; Pavlenko 2008b,c, 2011a, 2012, 2013), increased attention to language contact phenomena (e.g. Verschik 2008, 2010) and linguistic landscapes (e.g. Muth 2012; Pavlenko 2009), and emerging research on countries like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which until recently have been 'blind spots' (e.g. Nagzibekova 2008; Permanov et al. 2010). Most importantly, the new wave of scholarship is beginning to ask new questions about post-Soviet multilingualism that were not asked in previous research, focused on language reforms.

## *3. Research Questions and Methods: What Do We Want to Know and How Do We Study It?*

The first two decades of research were largely guided by questions about language reforms and their impact on the public domain, i.e. administration, media, and education, and on language attitudes: What roles do the titular language (i.e. the language of the dominant ethnos, e.g. Armenian in Armenia) and Russian play in the public domain? What are their roles in the private domain? What are people's attitudes towards respective languages? What do these trends mean for the future of respective languages in the community in question? These questions are usually answered through questionnaires, and the overreliance on self-reports and census data is the main methodological weakness of the research to date. To strengthen their arguments, researchers supplement these data with ethnographic data, interviews, linguistic biographies, participant observation, and analyses of media texts and linguistic landscapes.

Yet, the focus on language attitudes does not exploit the full potential of the post-Soviet situation, which is a true treasure trove for sociolinguistic theory building. To highlight this potential, the overview below will summarize the findings of the research to date with regard to four interrelated processes: (a) *russification*, i.e. the effects of Russian and Soviet language policies on the populations of successor states; (b) *nativization*, i.e. the effects of the intended language shift on the public domain; (c) *assimilation*, i.e. the effects of post-Soviet language reforms on allegiances and competencies of linguistic minorities; and (d) *commodification*, i.e. the effects of Russia's economic recovery on the status of Russian in the post-Soviet space. I will also discuss the implications of these findings for sociolinguistic theory and point to gaps in existing research. Due to space limitations, the discussion will focus predominantly on language reforms in the fourteen successor states. The multilingual situation in the Russian Federation is sufficiently different and complex to merit a separate review.

## *4. Russification: What Was It and How Did It Affect the Successor States?*

To understand the outcomes of post-Soviet language reforms, it is necessary to place them in a historic context. Sociolinguists commonly use 'russification' as a trope referring to consistent and long-lasting attempts to forcibly make Russians out of non-Russians (e.g. Besters-Dilger 2009; Taranenko 2007). Contrary to this popular image, historiographic research shows that until the late 19th century, Russian language management was a *laissez-faire* affair, with autonomy granted to German in the Baltic provinces, Polish in Congress Poland, and Swedish in Finland – consistent russification reforms began only after the 1863–1864 Polish rebellion and ended after the 1905 revolution (Dowler 2001; Pavlenko 2011b; Thaden 1981; Weeks 1996).

These reforms are often cited as evidence and explanation of russification, yet this approach is based on 'the illusion of politics', a faulty assumption 'that change comes from the pens of legislators' (Eklof and Peterson 2010: 9). Its key distortions involve the goals and impact of the reforms. The administration never aimed to turn everyone into Russians: russification of Orthodox Slavs was encouraged but assimilation of non-Christian ethnics was undesirable and often forcefully prevented, and several ethnic groups had primary education in their native languages (Alpatov 2000; Dowler 2001; Kappeler 2001). The key aims of the reforms were to punish rebellious Poles, to counteract Polish influence on Belarussians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians, and to prevent germanization of Latvians and Estonians and tatarization of Kazakhs. The impact of the reforms was significantly lessened by the government's inability to fully implement them, due to the inadequacy of its bureaucratic machine, the decentralized and poorly funded education, and the scarcity of qualified Russian-speaking teachers (Dowler 2001; Laitin 1998; Weeks 1996). In Central Asia, for instance, imperial russification made no impact whatsoever on the population at large (Akiner 1997; Dowler 2001).

The greatest impact of russification was seen in the territories that became regular Russian provinces, Bessarabia (later Moldova) and Left-bank Ukraine, the territory on the left side of the river Dnieper, incorporated into Russia through the 1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav. The impact was also felt in the Western provinces, Belorussia and Right-bank Ukraine, incorporated into the empire as a result of the 1772–1795 partitions of Poland. In both provinces, the imperial policies delayed standardization of the titular languages and establishment of native-language schooling. Yet the failure to provide Russian-language schooling meant that compactly settled Belorussian and Ukrainian peasants continued to maintain their native languages. Russian was mainly spoken in Belorussian, Bessarabian, and Ukrainian cities, where 19th century industrialization brought in the influx of Russian workers. This urban/rural divide eventually gave rise to language ideologies that linked Russian to modernity and titular languages to backwardness. The studies to date show that russification in the Russian empire was largely the result of bottom-up processes, such as migration and integration, rather than top-down policies, and usually stopped with ethnic elites, encouraged by social incentives, such as promotion in the imperial service. Nor did it involve a shift to Russian – rather ethnic elites and the educated middle-class in Armenia, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland incorporated Russian as an additional language into their multilingual repertoires (Kappeler 2001; Laitin 1998; Thaden 1981).

Clumsy russification policies also had an inverse effect – heightening the sense of national identity, they created the pre-conditions for mobilization of national movements that turned against the empire. In 1917, the Russian empire, weakened by war and social upheaval, disintegrated, and Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, and Finns shook off the Russian influence and formed independent nation-states. Other territories joined the USSR and eventually became Soviet republics. These republics, however, had no common language – in Belorussia, Bessarabia, and Ukraine, Russian did not spread beyond the cities; in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, it was spoken by the educated upper class; and in Central Asia, it made no inroads.

The Soviets inherited a population that spoke hundreds of different languages and was often illiterate to boot. Their language policies were based on the assumption that the new regime would be best accepted if it functioned in people's own languages. To adapt local languages for use in administration and education, Soviet language planners began systematic language standardization and codification efforts and established primary education in more than 70 languages (Alpatov 2000; Grenoble 2003; Pavlenko 2013; Slezkine 1994; Smith 1998). By the mid-1930s, however, the administration realized that 'presiding over 192 languages and potentially 192 bureaucracies was not a very good idea after all' (Slezkine 1994: 445). From then on, they made a transition to a dual course, supporting the maintenance of titular and some minority languages and the spread of Russian as a second language (L2). This spread was also encouraged by mass migrations, which brought large numbers of Russian speakers to Estonia, Latvia, and Kazakhstan (Pavlenko 2008b, 2011a; Smagulova 2008).

This approach to language management enabled high levels of monolingualism among native speakers of Russian and high levels of bilingualism and titular language maintenance among most titulars: in the last Soviet years, the majority of the pupils in eleven of the republics were enrolled in titular medium schools. The only exceptions were Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, where urban titulars often shifted to L1 Russian and most pupils attended Russian-medium schools (Pavlenko 2013). The spread of Russian as L2 was limited: in

1989, only 47.5% of non-Russians declared L2 Russian competence (Goskomstat SSSR 1991). Undoubtedly, Census data are not entirely trustworthy: Estonians and Latvians may have underrepresented their Russian competence, while the data from Central Asia overestimated it to please the center (Akiner 1997). The center was nevertheless concerned by this limited spread. Yet, just as in imperial Russia, intensified russification efforts achieved an opposite effect: the new reforms fueled national resistance movements, while titular language support provided these movements with languages to rally around.

### *5. Nativization and Assimilation: How Do You Go from Bilingualism to Monolingualism?*

In an ironic turn of events, following the dissolution of the USSR, the titular elites who most vocally protested the Soviet imposition of Russian have come to appreciate the need for a unifying state language – the nation building in the successor states took a turn from official bilingualism to monolingualism. This 'monolingual turn' was reflected in the language planning objectives: (a) to ensure that administration, education, and the media function in the titular language; (b) to eliminate Russian from official paperwork, official communication, state-sponsored media, public signage, and secondary and higher education; (c) to derussify the grammar and vocabulary of the titular language (e.g. to replace Russian loanwords); (d) to replace Soviet-era place names with titular names; (e) to spread the knowledge of the titular language among those who did not know it; and (f) to increase levels of competence in English as an alternative to the former *lingua franca* Russian.

Research on this *intended language shift* – i.e. top-down attempts to change language practices in the public sphere and to manipulate people's language practices, attitudes, and allegiances – highlights the importance of three factors: (a) language standardization level (i.e. whether the language can be used in all domains, including technical and academic); (b) high levels of titular language loyalty among the titulars; and (c) homogeneous populations. In 1991, only two states enjoyed the combination of all three factors, Armenia and Lithuania, and there the transition to the monolingual public sphere was relatively smooth and rapid (Bulajeva and Hogan-Brun 2008; Pavlenko 2013).

In Azerbaijan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan nativization was slowed down by language corpus changes. Azerbaijan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan undertook a transition from Cyrillic to Latin script. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan had to develop new terminology and further standardize language corpora. Moldova had to resolve the identity of the titular language as Moldovan versus Romanian and to face the secession of Transnistria, which adopted three official languages, Moldovan (in Cyrillic), Russian, and Ukrainian (Ciscel 2007, 2008; Garibova and Zuercher 2009; Landau and Kellner-Heinkele, 2001; Permanov et al., 2010; Savoskul, 2001). The fastest transition to titular-language-only administration and education was accomplished by Turkmenistan (by 2000), through forceful government policies and out-migration of minorities (Permanov et al. 2010).

This out-migration reminds us that nation-building projects require everyone to buy into the monolingual dream, including linguistic minorities. Yet in 1991, the successor states were home to 36.5 million L1 Russian speakers. They could not be easily described as 'immigrants' because immigrants come to a new country with full awareness of the need to learn the local language. In contrast, these Russian speakers woke up one morning to a political and linguistic reality not of their doing and found themselves involuntary and at times unwelcome migrants in countries, where their native language was no longer sufficient for employment and education. The presence of this largely monolingual population created major challenges for nation-building efforts in Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldova, and Ukraine, where L1 Russian speakers constituted between 23 and 47% of the population (Goskomstat SSSR 1991).

The greatest challenges to nativization arose in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, where this population included russified urban titulars whose low levels of titular language competence and loyalty reflected language ideologies that linked titular languages with the rural sphere and Russian with urbanization and modernity (Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008; Fierman 2009; Giger and Sloboda 2008; Laitin 1998; Orusbaev et al. 2008). In Belarus, a popular vote in the 1995 national referendum made Russian the second state language. Today it functions as the *de facto* main language across all domains, while Belarusian plays a largely symbolic role in official documents and public spaces (Giger and Sloboda 2008). Kazakhstan (1995) and Kyrgyzstan (2000) made Russian an official language, second in status to the titular language and articulated the goal of language education as trilingual competence in the titular language, Russian, and English. Both countries still aim to complete nativization of administration, but the process has been slowed down by internal resistance and low titular literacy skills among state employees; Russian also continues to dominate academic work, the media, and the internet (Fierman 2009; Korth 2005; Orusbaev et al. 2008; Smagulova 2008; Uffelmann 2011). Ukraine has Ukrainian as a single state language yet the language law adopted in August of 2012 allows individual cities and regions to upgrade Russian to the status of regional language. Meanwhile, the country settled on *de facto* territorial bilingualism: the West speaks Ukrainian, and East and South favor Russian; Russian is also prevalent in the media and business sphere (Besters-Dilger 2009; Bilaniuk 2005; Bilaniuk and Melnyk 2008; Kulyk 2010; Taranenko 2007).

In Latvia and Estonia, the history of pre-World War II independence created a rift between the titulars and the large Russian-speaking population that settled there after the 1940 annexation by the USSR as part of a large-scale industrial migration. To encourage these Russian speakers to either assimilate or emigrate, both countries offered automatic citizenship only to citizens or descendants of citizens of the inter-war republics, while those who arrived after the war had to pass a titular language test and a history and civics test (all other successor states allowed for naturalization of all permanent residents). New language laws also imposed occupational restrictions and outlined a transition to titular-only education at all levels, creating major employment and educational hardships for speakers with low titular-language skills. They did not, however, induce either massive out-migration or rapid assimilation, and two decades later, compactly settled Russian speakers still display relatively low levels of Latvian and Estonian competence (Pavlenko 2008a,b).

Assimilation of linguistic minorities is also a challenge in Georgia, which houses compactly settled Armenian and Azerbaijanian communities with low levels of Georgian competence. To this day, Russian may be used in communication between these communities and the state authorities because Armenians and Azerbaijanis may be more fluent in Russian than in Georgian, while Georgian authorities are much more likely to understand Russian than Armenian or Azerbaijanian. Language is also a point of contention between Georgia and secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia that resist the imposition of Georgian and favor native- and Russian-medium schooling (Pavlenko 2013).

The situation of linguistic minorities in the post-Soviet countries – and in particular that of L1 Russian speakers – created a challenge for Western theories of language minority rights and the documents they inspired, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992). The Charter was articulated 'for protection and promotion of languages used by traditional minorities', many of which were perceived to be 'under serious threat' (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Pressreleases/30Years%20Action_en.asp). During the negotiations of the European Union

(EU) accession of Latvia and Estonia, the Charter was used as the legal basis for objections raised by Western European organizations to local language laws. In response to these objections, Latvian and Estonian linguists and lawmakers argued that language rights should protect speakers of the 'endangered' titular languages (e.g. Druviete 1997). This argument artfully exploited an ambiguity in the European Charter. Western theories of minority language rights focus on 'traditional minorities', numerically small communities that speak 'endangered languages' and whose rights, therefore, can be articulated in protectionist and preservationist terms as 'language rights'. The non-traditional Russian-speaking minority highlighted the need to dissociate concerns about language endangerment (*language rights*) from *speakers' rights*, i.e. the rights of speakers of all languages to use their mother tongues (Pavlenko 2011a).

## *6. Commodification: Russian in the Global Marketplace*

The study of the post-Soviet context also makes a major contribution to our understanding of how languages become imbued with value (*language valorization*) and used as commodities (*language commodification*) in the new economy. After the intense derussification of the 1990s, the sphere of Russian use in most successor states has narrowed yet the language did not go away nor was it replaced by English. Rather, Russian assumed a place alongside English as the *lingua franca* of the geopolitical region, as seen in the presidential websites and other official, business, and tourist-oriented sites. The 2000s witnessed a change of course in several countries. Armenia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan reintroduced Russian in secondary school curricula and colleges, and in Turkmenistan even in kindergartens (Nagzibekova 2008; Permanov et al. 2010). Yet, the supply does not satisfy the demand – in a recent survey, respondents in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Tajikistan stated that Russian should be offered more widely in their countries (Iatsenko et al. 2008).

Behind this change is Russia's spectacular economic recovery in the late 1990s, a combined result of economic reforms and the rising world oil prices (Filippov 2011; Kuznetsov 2011). The resurgence as a geopolitical power allowed Russia to reestablish its economic and political influence in some of the successor states: in 2008, leading destinations for Russian foreign investments in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were Belarus (58%), Ukraine (23.4%), Kazakhstan (7.4%), Armenia (4.3%), and Kyrgyzstan (3.8%) (Kuznetsov, 2011). Russia is also the main labor market of the region, with remittances from labor migrants constituting a large proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Tajikistan, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, the same countries whose survey respondents expressed the greatest desire for expanded Russian-language offerings. This turnaround suggests that new economic opportunities have led to revalorization and commodification of Russian as a useful tool in the new regional economy (Pavlenko 2012).

Russia's economic recovery also supports the maintenance of Russian indirectly, via the new media. At present, Russian TV channels are watched by 50 million viewers in the post-Soviet space and in particular in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Ukraine (Iatsenko et al. 2008; Pavlenko 2012). Their popularity is due to the higher quality of the programming (as compared to the local media), which in turn is linked to larger budgets and renewed government support – under Putin's media policy, up to 85% of Russian media receive state subsidies (Pavlenko 2012). The younger generation also uses Russian-language Internet: in Kazakhstan, for instance, young users favor Russian-language sites over Kazakh-language ones, citing their superior quality, greater variety, and higher speed (Uffelmann 2011). Together, traditional and new media support the maintenance of Russian, as either L1 or L2.

## 7. *Conclusions*

The links between revalorization of Russian and the new economy reveal that the research to date has not yet exploited the full potential of the post-Soviet context. The study of similarities and differences between linguistic regimes created by the new successor states offers a unique opportunity for comparative study of the influences shaping language maintenance and shift in the new service-based economy. What factors affect language practices now that would not have been at play a few decades ago? What role is played by regional flows, such as Russian foreign investments or the new media? Will Russian spoken in the successor states eventually diverge into regional varieties or will the new media support the maintenance of standard Russian? To answer these and related questions, future research will need to go beyond politics and into the economics of the linguistic marketplace and expand from the study of language laws and attitudes to the study of people's multilingual competencies and practices.

## *Short Biography*

Aneta Pavlenko is Professor of Applied Linguistics at the College of Education at Temple University, Philadelphia. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics from Cornell University in 1997. Her research examines the relationship between language, emotions, and cognition in bilingualism and second language acquisition. She is also interested in forensic linguistics and language policy, in particular language management in post-Soviet countries. She is the winner of the 2009 TESOL Award for Distinguished Research. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals. She is the author of *Emotions and multilingualism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005, winner of the BAAL Book Prize), co-author (with Scott Jarvis) of *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition* (Routledge, 2008), and editor of several volumes, the most recent of which are *Thinking and Speaking in Two Languages* (Multilingual Matters, 2011), *The Bilingual Mental Lexicon* (Multilingual Matters, 2009), *Multilingualism in post-Soviet countries* (Multilingual Matters, 2008), and *Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression, and representation* (Multilingual Matters, 2006).

## *Note*

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