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# Mobilization of Language as an Indicator of Ethnic Identity in the Social Practices of Kazakhs in Mongolia

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## Abstract

The purpose of the article is to identify the role of the Kazakh language in the processes of ethnic external identification and internal self-identification via cognitive anthropology as the method that included observation, semi-structured interviews, and case studies. As a result of theoretical and empirical research, it was revealed that the role of the Kazakh language in the formation of the ethnic identity of the diaspora remains an important indicator of ethnic identity. In conclusion, Kazakh language for representatives of diaspora remains an important indicator of ethnic consciousness.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Kazakhs, Mongolia, Ethnic Identity.

# Mobilización del lenguaje como indicador de identidad étnica en lo social

## Resumen

El propósito del artículo es identificar el papel de la lengua kazaja en los procesos de identificación externa étnica y autoidentificación interna a través de la antropología cognitiva como el método que incluyó observación, entrevistas semiestructuradas y estudios de casos. Como resultado de la investigación teórica y empírica, se reveló que el papel de la lengua kazaja en la formación de la identidad étnica de la diáspora sigue siendo un indicador importante de la identidad étnica. En conclusión, el idioma kazajo para los representantes de la diáspora sigue siendo un indicador importante de la conciencia étnica.

**Palabras clave:** diáspora, kazajos, mongolia, identidad étnica.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the present time, the theme of ethnicity from the sphere of material culture goes deeper into the sphere of spiritual culture, the sphere of consciousness, self-consciousness; the role of language and conditions of its mobilization are updated as the most important factors of ethnic identification and self-identification (FINKE, 2013).

At the same time, the questions of ethnic identity and the problems of its preservation remain in the agenda in connection with the globalization and integration processes, gaining steam in recent years. The propagation in all regions of the world of the same cultural norms and standards that destroy local traditions and ethnic color

causes the desire to preserve the uniqueness of their culture and to realize their ethnic identity. Diasporas are especially subjected to threat of loss of ethno-cultural originality. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the diaspora is to preserve its ethnic identity, which is expressed in the awareness of the person or group of its ethnicity. It is known that its main indicators are language, peculiarities of material and spiritual culture, stereotypes of behavior, etc., which perceive as cultural symbols and allow people to highlight their ethnic community and simultaneously feel their belonging to this community.

Considering that ethnicity is an interpreted prism and the way of explaining the social world (BRUBAKER, 2005), then it cannot be studied as the independent field of knowledge. Therefore, ways of understanding, vision, and explanation of the social world through the prism of ethnicity can be studied in conjunction with other un-ethnic ways of vision and existence. The Norwegian anthropologist ERIKSEN (1993) wrote: "If the person goes outside to see ethnicity, he will find it, and thus, he will contribute to its designing" (ERIKSEN, 1993: 14). In order to study ethnicity, it is necessary to add ethnicity to the non-ethnic context.

Therefore, our research strategy consisted of observation of use and application of Kazakh language in everyday life of Kazakhs of Mongolia, or in other words - placing people in the context of their own banalities (DIENER, 2009).

Really, the ethnography of everyday life allows observing the daily contexts – actions, the talks, behavioral models, situations, etc.,

in which the values take the importance as the ethnic categories and processes by means of which the ethnicity actually functions in ordinary life. Therefore, the studying of the speech behavior, language attitudes, features of use of the native language by the Kazakh diaspora of Mongolia in everyday life, allows revealing - when and under what conditions there are the actualization and mobilization of the language as the indicator of ethnic identity.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The factors determining the status and position of the Kazakh language in Mongolia will be considered in this section. This is, firstly, strictly speaking, a policy in narrow sense of this word, i.e. legislative and other official statements about rules of the use of languages in society. The second, rather independent public sphere, determining the status of different languages, is the system of school education. Our third point of view – is existing of language, or how languages are used in people's daily lives and what they are.

Analysis of previous studies showed that, firstly, despite the fact that Kazakhs of Mongolia were and remain in the focus of attention as Kazakh scientists (BAIGABATOVA, 2012), and Western anthropologists (FINKE, 2004), the research of the processes of designing the ethno-cultural identity of Kazakhs, living in Western Mongolia, still remains a poorly studied theme. Secondly, in studying

the phenomenon of ethnicity in general, there are observed tendencies of its politicization and ideologization; it is emphasized the special role of the state, ethnic entrepreneurs, ethnic communities, elite in its designing.

However, the materials of our field researches show that all the above-mentioned in the case of the Kazakh diaspora of Mongolia does not find its confirmation. We are faced with the case of the region where there is a lack of ethnic tension in everyday life, there are no power tools and institutions for imposing identities, there are no large ethnic organizations-centers that design ethnic identity and thus contribute to the consolidation of Kazakhs, who express their interests, speak on their behalf, etc.

The analysis of the content of the conducted interviews allowed to conclude that the question about ethnic origin is on the periphery of the identity matrix of our interlocutors, both Kazakhs, and Mongols. Daily worries are very rarely interpreted and explained in ethnic terms. There are Kazakhs, as well as Mongol neighbors, graze the cattle, raise children, do everyday affairs, without thinking about their or others' ethnic identity, or thinking about it very rarely (ADAMS, 2009). And such situation remains for more than one and a half centuries.

Kazakhs moved to the territory of modern Mongolia in 1960-1970 from neighboring Xinjiang\* (\*the territory of modern Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region – the region in the north-west China). The main reason for the relocation was the events, connected with the uprisings of Taipins and Dungans in China, which required the

solution of the land problems. In order to resolve the arisen situation, the Chinese Government begins development of new lands, which directly affected the Kazakh nomads' camps in Xinjiang; so, they were left without their land, they were forced to migrate in search of new pastures to neighboring Mongolia. According to WERNER & BARCUS (2010) the Muslim uprising in Western China was favorable for the militant Kazakhs-kireis. They crossed the Kyran River, passed the Altai Mountains and occupied uryankhay's lands to Bulgyn and Saksay (AZHIGALI & BAYGABATOVA, 2012).

### **3. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS**

During the research in the language landscape of Western Mongolia, it was revealed existence of bilingualism – free proficiency and use by the Kazakh diaspora of both the native and state language. The analysis of speech practices of informants showed that Kazakhs of Mongolia in everyday life, in fact, are bilinguals and successfully communicate in both Kazakh and Mongolian languages, depending on the situation. In addition, the older generation has sufficient knowledge of Russian, and young people are actively learning English. It was interesting to find that not only the Kazakhs of Bayan-Ulgiy speak Mongolian language, but also part, living nearby, of the Khalkha, Uryankhayts, Tuvinians, Derbets, also have sufficient knowledge of Kazakh language and often resort to it in communication with friends,

pals, neighbors – Kazakhs (BRUBAKER, FEISCHMIDT, FOX & GRANCEA, 2006).

At the same time, during the interview, it was possible to observe frequently quite significant penetration of elements of Mongolian language into Kazakh speech. And, the respondent was younger the more Mongolian words were used, while the older generation of Kazakhs very rarely resorted to the Mongolian language. We fixed several cases when our Kazakh respondents of middle age, not having found (or not remembered) during the conversation the right word in their native language, asked each other for help. One of our informants, 43-year-old Ongarbay M., the resident of Khovd, talking about this situation, noted that there is strong contamination of the native language in our daily communication. But it is not the Mongols' fault, and it is not the consequences of Mongolia's government policy, this is our own fault.

The Kazakh children of Khovd aimak, unlike Bayan-Ulgiy, especially the younger age group, communicate among themselves mainly in Mongolian. When we paid the attention of their parents to this fact, they immediately made the comment to them that at home it is necessary to speak in Kazakh, explaining it as the influence of kindergartens and schools. There are no Kazakh-language educational institutions in Khovd aimak. Our children go to the Mongolian garden, attend the Mongolian school, therefore, they already communicate with each other and sometimes and with us – with parents, in Mongolian.

This situation with the condition of the Kazakh language is alarming among the older generation of the Kazakh diaspora. According majority of our informants, the native language is one of the main components and signs of ethnic origin in the context of the foreign-language environment, in this case, in space of Mongolia. The resident of Ulgiy, 83-year-old Kamza Kakharmanuly reasoned in our conversation: Both Kazakhs and Mongols have the same way of life: graze cattle, do housework, live in felt houses, roam from place to place in steppe. We have a lot in common. I consider that the main differences between these two nations are religion and language. Therefore, it is especially important to speak with each other in Kazakh, it should be kept, protected, not forgotten, and our children have to be taught the language.

In this regard, most of our informants note a positive influence on children of the Bayan-Ulgiy aimak of the Kazakhstan Kazakh-lingual children's channel Balapan. We have the possibility to watch the Kazakh channels and to listen to the Kazakh radio. Our children read books, newspapers and magazines received from Kazakhstan. All this also well contributes to the development and preservation of our native language, - Marzhangul Sh., 58-year-old resident of Ulgiy notes.

Observing everyday life, the usual social interactions in the family, participating, including in joint meals, we revealed that daily, unobtrusively, giving examples from life, the older generation by means of the native language tries to transfer to young people

knowledge about traditions, customs, morality, the system of norms and values, in other words, the cultural code of the Kazakh people. Such social practices are quite effective and have a great influence on the formation of the ethnic identity of the younger generation. In addition, the use of Kazakh language creates a sense of solidarity and kinship with their own group and acts at the same time as the marker of interethnic differentiation.

As it is noted from the conversation with Aizhan N., 19 years old, student of the university: We do not speak Kazakh in Ulan Bator at all. Mongols do not like it when we speak in Kazakh. They do not make us comments, but it is felt from their views. When we need to talk to our parents, we try to find the secluded corner so that we can not be heard. When we see Kazakhs, we are very happy with each other. Although, according to the first impression, it is very difficult to distinguish Ulan Bator's Kazakhs from Mongols. Especially, when these Kazakhs are from Nalaikh. They even have different Kazakh language... We are forced to live in Ulan Bator according to the Mongolian rules and to speak only Mongolian. Together with it, she notes that despite it, we never forget that we are Kazakhs.

However, family communication in the native language can be insufficient. Anargul K. tells: I was brought up at the grandmother for small years. I was four years old when we moved to Ulan Bator. Only I and our older brother learned to speak Kazakh in the family. My younger brothers and sisters grew in other language environments therefore they have weak Kazakh language.

Language acts as an indicator, finding the most reliable signs of ethnic origin in public space. There are a lot of signs, billboards, and indexes in Kazakh on the streets of the Bayan-Ulgiy aimak. There are rather widespread cases when the names of the public places, including shops, restaurants, cafe, dining rooms, hairdressing salons, photographic studios, the owners of which are Kazakhs, are presented in Kazakh language, and the words shop, hotel, dining room, hairdressing salon are written in Mongolian. This, as the owners explain, emphasizes their ethnic origin: Kazakhs should call everything their own in Kazakh.

It is also the important fact that, for example, in Ulgiy, the owners and maintenance staff of hotels with Kazakh names Bastau, Duman, Bayolke are Kazakhs, while the hotel Tsambagaraav is only Mongolian. This is also the case with catering places. Thus, the menu of Mongolian restaurants and cafes is formed only in Mongolian, although, about 90 percent of the population of Ulgiy are Kazakhs.

The visualization of Kazakh language in public space in this way, in our opinion, is some message directed on their own origins. In other words, according to most of our interlocutors, the language, in such way, contributes to the formation of the sense of group identity. The native language and communication remain the most important factor in preserving the ethno-cultural identity of the Kazakhs of western Mongolia, performing the functions of the basic element in ethnic external identification and internal self-identification.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

It was revealed in the process of the conducted research that the major factors, determining communicative conditions of speech behavior of representatives of the Kazakh diaspora in Mongolia, are the language landscape, the legislation, the system of school education and psychological climate which sometimes help, sometimes interfere with use and preservation of the native language.

The research allowed to reveal the following strategy of the language mobilization of representatives of the Kazakh diaspora of Mongolia: 1) the actual use at home, with relatives, with neighbors, with friends, at work, etc.; 2) their ideas about the role and the importance of Kazakh in everyday life, the need of knowledge of the native language as main marker of their ethnic identification; 3) their experience of the need in proficiency in the state language caused by the legislation of the country of residence by social practitioners.

Thus, three main components can be marked out in determining the role of language in the formation of the ethnic identity of the diaspora on the example of the research of the Kazakh diaspora of Mongolia:

- Kazakh language for representatives of diaspora remains the important indicator of ethnic consciousness;

- The native language is the dominating way of emergence and manifestations of the ethnicity in the interaction of ethnic community with representatives of both foreign, and own ethnic group;

- The language of the country of residence as majority language, in our case, is Mongolian, regularly serves as way of speech interaction of the Kazakh diaspora, both with the local population and the state.

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