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Construction of Youth Identity via Language in Kyrgyzstan: A Study of Russian and Kyrgyz

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This paper explores the issues of youth language in Kyrgyzstan in order to research how youth, Bishkek born, and newly arrived young people from all parts of Kyrgyzstan use the language to construct identities in communication. The language of young people is one of the central topics in Sociolinguistics, that is a gap, subject to research in Kyrgyzstan. As Paul Kerswill argues ‘Youth language’ is labile, contingent and transient, subject to fashion, serving as a badge of nonconformity, but above all constructing for its speakers a set of complex identities for deployment as markers of different stances in relation to varying interlocutors and shifting conversational contexts’. This study will submit the data collected via public places, public transport, places of leisure and bazar areas. Also the survey will be conducted among students in Kyrgyz universities. As the preliminary research shows, the many educated young people are bilinguals in Kyrgyzstan. There are two reasons to speak Russian: a)Necessity of learning scientific and technical literature in education; b) Russian is associated with Urbaneness, civilization and belonging to educated subculture. At the same time, in comparison with Students of the 1990-2000, current students especially Bishkek born young people, learn Kyrgyz; especially ethnic Kyrgyz students display good proficiency in Kyrgyz, while this rate of Kyrgyz language use in 1991-2000 was very low. But Kyrgyz spoken by young people, resembles *Pidgin Kyrgyz*, creolized language belongs to youth community. The elements of *Pidgin Kyrgyz* is frequently practiced in social media. Even the young people whose mother tongue is Kyrgyz, use informal mixtures of two languages (Kyrgyz-Russian, Kyrgyz-Turkish and Kyrgyz-English) in conversation. The paper also will analyze the influences of code switching (mainly Kyrgyz-Russian) to the development of the Kyrgyz language. In the course of the research, interactions occurring between young

people will be examined to study how the increasing linguistic diversity within the national population might be harmonized with the national identity.

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is one of the post-soviet countries, that passed bilingual law: Kyrgyz and Russian are the official languages for 6 million people in the country. As a soviet country Kyrgyzstan was one of the most of russified countries in Central Eurasian region. Russian remains as the dominant language especially in education and business. As Kyrgyzstan got independence, the cultural and linguistic influence of Soviet times continues. Alongside the independence movements, Kyrgyzstan advocates Kyrgyz as a national language and as the language of education and business. Kyrgyzzification process becomes a widespread endeavor. Sociolinguistic situation in the country greatly influences the young people living in Kyrgyzstan. Youth comprises 1 769452 people of 14-28 by the January 1, 2015 and it forms 30% of the whole population. 63% of the young people reside in the rural areas.

The ethnic, social and linguistic contents of the youth are very diverse. However the language of youth is not studied in the framework of sociolinguistic research in the context of Kyrgyzstan. As Paul Kerswill (2013) argues the term “youth language” is used in inverted commas, because “languagehood” is contested by both researchers and users. A major strand of youth language research concentrates on these new urban ways of speaking as markers of identity: they are seen primarily as registers, or styles, reflecting young people’s particular communicative choices (Kerswill 2013, p. 2).

Svendsen and Royneland (2008) and Quist (2008) state that Europe urban youth languages are studied as varieties, or lects, distinguishable from other varieties or lects by applying descriptive linguistic techniques.

Youth language construction is mainly studied in North European and Sub-Saharan African region. London youth language is studied by Kerswill (2013), Dutch Nortier and Dorleijn (2008), Danish (Quist 2008), Swedish (Kotsinas 1994) and German (Wiese 2009), as well as the labelled urban youth languages Nouchi (Ivory Coast), Camfranglais (Cameroon), Sheng (Kenya), and several others (Kiessling and Mous 2004).

However, youth language topic is not analyzed in the post-soviet sociolinguistics as a separate object of study. It was reflected in the papers and books related to language

policy by Druviete 2000, Pavlenko 2008, Bilaniuk 2007, Orusbaev 2007, Smagulova 2012, etc. Sociolinguistic changes in transformed Central Asian societies were analyzed in detail by Schlyter 2013, Korth 2005, Landau, Kellner-Heinkele 2012.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the youth language construction in Kyrgyzstan. The gained study will help to provide insight on how language of youth is constructed and negotiated in the multilingual landscape of Kyrgyzstan.

Significance of the Study

This study will add to the existing literature on youth language construction, specifically in the post-soviet context. There have been very few studies conducted on youth language construction in Central Eurasian region.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows: 1) How is youth language is constructed and negotiated in Modern Kyrgyzstan? 2) What are strategies and specific features of youth language in Kyrgyzstan?

The research place: Bishkek

Bishkek is the most populated city in Kyrgyzstan. Its population comprises 1 million people. From the foundation of the city to the mid-1990s, ethnic Russians and other peoples of European descent (Ukrainians, Germans) comprised the majority of the city's population. According to the 1970 census, the ethnic Kyrgyz were only 12.3%, while whites were more than 80% of Frunze population. Now Bishkek is a predominantly Kyrgyz city, with around 66% of its residents Kyrgyz, while European peoples make up less than 20% of the population.

Young people in Bishkek use an urban, youth sociolect that mixes Kyrgyz, Russian, and other minority languages and shares many features with slang and jargon, to shape a new, hybrid identity. That Bishkek urban youth sociolect signifies the communications and efforts of youth's identity construction. The practices of family, religion, school, and mass media, Internet reflect Kyrgyzstani youth with different possible identities. The family discourse comes to them in ethnic languages (Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, Dungan Chinese, Tatar, Azeri, Turkish, Uighur), that render history and heritage. The voice of education asks them to place Russian at the center

of a multilingual context, but does so in Kyrgyz. The religion calls to them in Arabic, Russian and native languages. The media comes to them in Kyrgyz, Russian and English. Each of these languages symbolizes specific behavior and principles of existing and young people react via language. Bishkek urban youth sociolect signifies the construction of a linguistic third latitude between the global, represented by a transnational post-soviet Central Eurasian culture, and the local, represented by tradition.

The major groups of youth use the following languages:

1. Monolingual young people (either ethnic Kyrgyz or Slavs)
2. Russian speaking young people both Kyrgyz (who do not speak Kyrgyz) and non-Kyrgyz.
3. Bilinguals (mainly Russian-Kyrgyz, Russian-Uzbek, Russian and other minority languages)
4. Kyrgyz speaking young people originally arriving from regions. However, most of them understand Russian.
5. Young people who know Kyrgyz, Russian, English and Turkish (Chinese).

The young people between 17-22 were born after independence of the Kyrgyz Republic and their childhood narratives faced transit period, that also impacted the linguistic situation of them.

Data collection

A sample of 100 words and sentences that are commonly used in Bishkek urban youth sociolect in social media and daily conversation in informal settings was collected. Each word in the corpus has informal slang meaning and they are verified by the users of it.

Subjects

A sample of 60 students from a University in Bishkek and 20 young people working at different places of Bishkek participated in the study.

Instrument

The respondents answered a questionnaire-survey consisting of open-ended questions to find out the situation of youth language construction in Kyrgyzstan.

Data analysis

Young people's responses to the questionnaire-survey are reported qualitatively.

Results and discussion:

Position of the Kyrgyz language as the core part of the youth identity

Three sociodemographic factors are likely to impact upon language use and identity formation in Bishkek: 'immigration, multilingualism, and relative social deprivation (Kerswil, 2013).

Research shows that most of the students at the selected university are Russian speaking. More than 60% students speak Russian as their A-language, and ethnic background of them mainly comprises Kyrgyz. These young people, being born in 1995-1998 in the Kyrgyz families, got school education in Russian, talk in Russian in the family. In the course of interview several reasons of speaking Russian as the native language by Kyrgyz are revealed:

1. Their parents (age of 40-45) are Kyrgyz, originally Bishkek born and they speak Russian as their A-language and have taught Russian to their children. They rarely use Kyrgyz in the family or do not use them.

2. Their parents (age of 40-45) are Kyrgyz, originally from regions of Kyrgyzstan and they speak Kyrgyz. They faced language obstacles in education in Russian at the colleges and universities in 1991-2000. For that reason, they sent their children to Russian schools, but they speak Kyrgyz and Russian in the household situations. They read in Kyrgyz and watch TV in Kyrgyz.

3. Their parents (age of 40-45) are Kyrgyz, originally from regions of Kyrgyzstan. Sociodemographic factors characterized by internal and external migration, made them send their children to Russian schools in Kazakhstan and Russia. They usually work in market and business areas.

4. Lack of appropriate schools conducting education in Kyrgyz in Bishkek and lack of current methods of teaching Kyrgyz are another obstacles to develop the language.

5. Decline of publishing books in Kyrgyz. As the professor W. Fierman (2016) states, in order to promote the language, Kyrgyzstan has to make efficient language products (books, manuals, TV and radio products) for the people (Radio Free Europe, 2016).

Research shows that the Russianized young Kyrgyz have proficiency in colloquial Kyrgyz in daily conversation. They use it at buses, bazaars and villages, when they visit their relatives. Within the experiment, 10 young Kyrgyz out of 20 Russianized Kyrgyz use “Toktotup koiunuzchu” (‘Could you stop’ in Kyrgyz) at the bus stop, when the others use “Ostanovite, pojaluista” (‘Could you stop’ in Russian). In addition, language use situation depends on the passengers and a driver of the bus. Sometimes the elders can scold the young people in public places for speaking Russian and young Kyrgyz feel remorse and try to use Kyrgyz.

The word “ostanovka” has Kyrgyz version ‘ayaldama’, but it does not penetrate into practice. Therefore, everyone practices Russian word ‘ostanovka’.

There was a question in survey: what language do they recognize as the mother tongue for the Russianized Kyrgyz? All the Kyrgyz young people consider Kyrgyz as their mother tongue, despite the fact they do not speak it properly. Survey asked whether they sense some feeling for not knowing Kyrgyz. 30% of the respondents feel shame that they do not know Kyrgyz and have intention to learn better. The others (70%) feel that Russian is comfortable language for them and they will use in future. 10% of the respondents think that Kyrgyz should be used in all official documents, official ceremonies in order to highlight the role of a native language, thus prohibiting the use of other languages. They identify themselves ‘*orustashkan kyrgyz*’ (Russianified Kyrgyz) and their language as half Kyrgyz (*chala kyrgyzcha*). At the same time, young people develop their proficiency of Kyrgyz in order to get public jobs where knowledge of Kyrgyz is a requirement. Kyrgyz parents started to hire private lessons of Kyrgyz for their children. So, Kyrgyz language is being promoted slowly. The research also identifies that ethnic Kyrgyz of 40-45 are coming back to ethnic roots and thus learning Kyrgyz and practice it daily life and social media.

Research shows that students of ethnic minorities (25%), besides Slavs (5%), are bilinguals, use their native languages (Uzbek, Turkish, Azeri, Tatar, Dungan Chinese, Uighur) in the family. Absence of education in Korean made Koreans be deficient in native tongue. Slav students show very little proficiency of Kyrgyz, as there is no high need for learning it, they consider.

Vocabulary change in the bulk of the Kyrgyz language actively translates Russian loan words in mass media and education. For example, *avtobus-unaa* (*bus*); *samolet-uchak* (*airplane*); *usluga- tolom* (*utilities*); *store- dukon* etc. Most of them are codified

and included in the dictionaries. However, young people tend to use Russian cognates. Many do not read in Kyrgyz, do not watch the news on Kyrgyz T.V. which broadcasts in Standard Kyrgyz. They do not search for Kyrgyz equivalents. As in Sounkalo's (1995) study, this approach reflects native-language lexical deficiency.

In the course of research some depth interviews have also been conducted among monolinguals or ethnic Kyrgyz (40%) at the selected university, whose background is from regions, rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. The survey shows that the first impression that attracts their attention in the city has been the use of Russian everywhere. They feel inferiority complex of not knowing Russian. Those young people try to learn Russian, attend courses and private lessons to have proficiency in Russian. They wish to send their children to Russian schools in case they will live in Bishkek. At the same time, they are proud of being Kyrgyz and value ethnic heritage. Sociolinguistic experiment was conducted in the banks and taxi services of Bishkek, in order to observe the reaction of young bank assistants and taxi call center assistants for language use. If someone addresses in Kyrgyz, then the response comes in Kyrgyz. It means that public officers are bilingual.

Code switching as the main strategy for the young people in communication

According to the bilingual character of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek youth tends to use code switching as the main strategy in communication. Language choice gives identification of individuals with a social role related to the interlocutor's status (Scotton 1979). A disidentification, by means of a marked or unexpected language choice, produces an emotional response from others involved in a given role relationship. Threat to one's identity may occur in the process of learning second language, because second language learning involves acquisition of alien culture and codes of different ethnolinguistic community. Clashes of cultural identity may lead to choose one code or another in different speech circumstances. Language usually expresses culture. World view, self-identity, thinking, feeling, acting, and communicating of the individuals may be disturbed by shifts from one language and culture to another. Moreover, language may mark group identity, besides its input to individual identity. It is also a linguistic division between members of multilingual communities, language the person speaks presents significant knowledge about the dominant cultural group, he/she belongs to. Joan Swann and Indra Sinka argue that code switching may vary in definition (Swann & Sinka, 2007). Ahmad Abdel Tawwab

Sharaf Eldin highlights that ‘any person who is capable of switching codes must be a competent bilingual or multilingual (Ahmad Abdel Tawwab Sharaf Eldin, 2015).

John J. Gumperz defines ‘conversational code-switching’ as the ‘as ‘the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems. . . . as when a speaker uses a second language either to reiterate his message or to reply to someone else’s statement’ (Gumperz, 1982). Kathryn Woolard characterizes code switching as ‘the investigation of as ‘the investigation of an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange’ (Woolard, 2004). Ahmad Abdel Tawwab Sharaf Eldin claims that ‘the term ‘code switching’ differs from other language interaction phenomena, such as lexical borrowing. Lexical borrowing is the result of lack of a lexical terms in the speakers repertoire while in code-switching (Ahmad Abdel Tawwab Sharaf Eldin, 2015).

Research shows that young people practice Russian-Kyrgyz code switching both in the Kyrgyz and Russian sentences. They explain the reasons of code switching as the comfortable way to express the ideas. Forexample: *Kechee u menya dnuyha boldu. Mamam ekoobuz na bazar poshli, produkta satyp aldyk. Ona maga sumku podarila.* The sentences have Kyrgyz structure: SOV, it means that she is trying to speak Kyrgyz to her peers, as the sign of solidarity to speak Kyrgyz. See the figure 1.

Figure 1.

Senten ce	Struct ure	Russia n words	Kyrgy z words	Meani ng of the sentence
u menya dnuyha boldu’	SOV Kyrgyz	u menya dnuyha (dnuyha is a youth slang from den’ rojdeniya (birthday)	Kechee boldu’	It was my birthday yesterday

Mama m ekoobuz na bazar poshli, produkty kupili.	SOV Kyrgy z	Mama m, na bazar, poshli, produkty, kupili.	ekoob uz	My mother and me went to the market and bought some food products.
Ona sumku maga podarila.	SOV	Ona, sumku, podar ila	maga	She gave a bag to me.

The example was used by one Russian speaking Kyrgyz student, who tries to use her Kyrgyz to peers, as they are not Russian speaking. ‘Speakers may switch from one code to another either to show solidarity with a social group, to distinguish oneself, to participate in social encounters, to discuss a certain topic, to express feelings and affections, or to impress and persuade the audience (Ahmad Abdel Tawwab Sharaf Eldin, 2015). However, she is incompetent in Kyrgyz, knows and practices conversational Kyrgyz learnt at home. Her family is bilingual, but Russian dominates. Janet Holmes argues that ‘a speaker may. . . switch to another language as a signal of group membership and shared ethnicity within an addressee’ (Holmes, 2000).

The following example is taken from a family conversation, where a student lives with her grandmother. The grandmother is monolingual, she speaks Kyrgyz only, but understands Russian, while granddaughter speaks only Russian, but understands Kyrgyz:

Grandmother: - Kyzym keldinbi (Entirely in Kyrgyz- Daughter, are you here?)

Granddaughter: - Da, prishla. Privet. (Entirely in Russian- Yes, I am, hi there)

Grandmother: Tamak ichesinbi? (Entirely in Kyrgyz- Do you want to eat?)

Granddaughter: Net, uje poela (Entirely in Russian- No, I have already had lunch).

Language interchange in conversation is very typical for Russianized Kyrgyz youth. As the research shows, bilingual young people usually know Russian better, though they understand Kyrgyz.

Another code switching example was taken from gold seller young lady (20-25) at the Gold Store: *Algan altyn kayra* (Kyrgyz words) *_ obmen i vozvratu ne podlejit* (Russian words). ('Goods once sold will not be taken back or exchanged). In this example, she is Kyrgyz speaking, but she uses Kyrgyz-Russian code switching in order to show her social status, that she is competent Russian as well. Knowing Russian is associated with education and urbaneness in Kyrgyzstan. I argue that if code switching continues on this increasing level, in some years we will get new Pidgin Kyrgyz, with simplified grammar and changed vocabulary. Some 25 talks on Facebook are analyzed and youth intentionally violates the rules, shortening grammatical endings (case endings and postpositions) of the agglutinative Kyrgyz and using the same sounds for the different phonetic situations. Children exposed to this hybrid language; they will learn a distorted language that will affect their linguistic development. Children need to build their lexical repertoire in Kyrgyz. If adult students get into the habit of code-switching, Kyrgyz words substituted by foreign words will die

Youth slang in Kyrgyzstan

Youth language is often characterized as bad language; behavior and values of young people are considered as isolated from cultural values of older generations and from national traditions and mentality. Especially youth behavior is often criticized by elders: youth life uses much consumption and pomposity which prevail over creativity, youth values carry potential risk to lose the cultural basis of society.

Bishkek urban slang existed in the previous decades as well. They come from from various cultural environments. Their casual expressions are usually spread by the media as well as by bloggers on Facebook and Twitter. Each group of youth may have their private spoken code which they may or may not share with other young people ; hence, a word or phrase could lead to more than one interpretation. In the course of research a sample of 100 youth slang has been collected. 60 slang words are used in Russian, while 40 of them are slang words in Kyrgyz. Most of the slang words express emotions and feelings. For example: *офигеть, обалдеть, капец,(и др. варианты) класс, супер, жесть, круто, прикольно, по полной прет, зай, короче, тупа, , прикинь, ваще, потеря потерь, в смысле, черт,чмо, бакс, блин,*

аапунетъ, днюха, предки, пушка, чувак, телка, пацан, чикса, мырк, мыркушка, мыркотня, ужас, хачик etc.

Examples of Kyrgyz slang are also coined out of the neutral vocabulary and usually they have same sarcastic, humoristic effect. Most of them have subculture character, thus speakers of the literary language do not understand them. For example, *кудай сактасын, тимеле, девеле, жөн эле, калп эле, чын элеби, Дос, айтпа, ,окай, коой(чу),жан, кыйкырат, жардың, таиш, зыңк, кыйтылдайт ко, кыйт ко, дадил, даңгал, галдир, ашкабак, сака, өл, катык.*

In addition, young people tend to use vulgar words, which they refused to include into the research corpus. These words are mainly used by males to refer to activities usually engaged in fast driving, fighting and playing computer games. Some words are genderlects, i.e. they refer to females or males.

Bishkek urban slang often uses the word “*myrka*” for females and “*myrk*,” “*myrkotnya*” for males. The sociolect “*myrk*” became popular; it is even used in newspapers as the media slang. Etymology comes from very old Kyrgyz way of calling a person with a congested nose who talks through it. “*Myrk*” was a label for the male person, usually from province, who couldn’t adapt to the city life, who did not speak Russian. The genderlect “*myrka*” is used for the females usually have a provincial style of clothing, who also do not know Russian. Facebook users and bloggers often practice the words “*myrk*” and “*myrka*” for the both males and females who are lack of manners, but label for not speaking Russian is gradually lost. Internal migration in the country brings thousands of people to Bishkek and upper class, wealthy youth calls provincial people as “*myrks*”, thus constructing labeling identity for those marginalized groups.

Youth slang ‘*mankurt*’ is practiced by young Kyrgyz speaking people towards the youth for being ignorant of their native language and national heritage. *Mankurt* is as a term refers to unthinking slave in Turkic mythology, used by Chyngyz Aitmatov in his novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*.

There are two terms define young people by their constructed identity: Kyrgyz and Russianized Kyrgyz: *Kyrgyz (Кыргыз)* is applied for people who speak Kyrgyz and respect national culture, whereas *Kirgiz (Киргиз)* (from Russian manner of spelling of Kyrgyz). The labels are still vital and young people construct identities in

behaving and communicating accordingly. Cultural misunderstandings may occur due to different values and behavior.

Some slang words are created out of pop-culture, for example, the word “kokosha” is blended from “Coco Chanel”; it is applied for the young lady who is very stylish. The word “hachik” is used for the man, who has bad style of clothing.

There is another story for the ethnic Kyrgyz, coming back to historical homeland from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China. They usually show low proficiency in Russian, their Kyrgyz has some shared linguistic features with Tajik, Uzbek, Uighur and Chinese. A series of short speech samples was compiled from interviews of the young people in Bishkek. These extracts varied systematically in terms of their dialectal features. The recordings were presented to the students of the University, who were asked to judge the voices in terms of their owners’ regional background. The voices judged to belong to Kyrgyz youth from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were more likely to be located in southern part of Kyrgyzstan. Obviously, this variety is a vernacularised form of speech, and it is characteristic of parts of suburbs of Bishkek as a new social dialect, where immigrants live.

Youth slang often is used to express approval or disapproval of something or someone, label anti-social behaviours, classify (neutral and positive), refer to technology (gaming, social-networking, the Internet, etc), refer to parties, dancing, music and leisure and others.

Conclusion

Youth language construction is one of the important topics in Central Eurasian sociolinguistics. Youth language is an extremely perspective topic for research. The paper argues about language use by young people in Kyrgyzstan. Also, the phenomenon of code switching is analyzed. This study demonstrates that many of the most of the young people employ code-switching as a tool to enhance their interaction with peers. The research has summarized the results of his study in Youth language and has presented the results of the analysis of examples of Kyrgyz and Russian slang words that are used by young people.

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