

Factors in national-language development: The Buryat example

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Abstract

As is true of many of Russia's other multinational republics, Buryatia has its own ethnolinguistic problems. Chief among them is the problem of contact between minority languages (such as Buryat) and the language of the larger nation (Russian). In the last decade the Buryat language situation has been the focus of research and discussion within the Buryat community.

Most researchers note that, in spite of Russia's ten-year democratization, the ethnolinguistic situation in the majority of the republics is essentially unchanged. The process of internationalization (as part of globalization) and russification is proceeding. Passing of the language law has not influenced the language situation either.

To investigate the ethnolinguistic situation in Buryatia, we needed an ethno-socio-psycholinguistic approach that would allow us to study the interaction of languages and their speakers. This approach allowed us to identify the maximum number of factors that influence the ethnolinguistic processes (historical, social, cultural, psychological, legal, linguistic and so on). The results of the investigation showed that the main factors of ethnolinguistic transformations and prevalence of Russian-speaking people (Buryats are about 25%) lead to weakening of cultural-language steadiness, to the loss of some elements of ethnic originality and to the gradual loss of the mother tongues.

This paper describes the ethnolinguistic research that took place in the Buryat language community and its general conclusions. The paper also describes some of the efforts of Buryat mother tongue speakers to strengthen and maintain their language.

Background

The Buryat language is member of the Mongolian language family and has many dialects of its own. It has a well-developed literary language and the level of literature norms is quite high. Buryat has a variety of written styles, but as in most national languages of the USSR, its official, business and scientific styles were not developed enough to ensure its use in multiple domains.¹

Of the total half-million Buryats worldwide, most live in Russia, specifically around Lake Baikal in three parts of Siberia—the Buryat Republic and national regions in the Irkutsk and Chita districts. Outside Russia, Buryats live in Mongolia and China.

Ten years ago Buryats made up 25% of the population of the Buryat Republic. Of course, as in any other multinational republics, there are many mixed marriages. Today the percentage of Buryats has grown to more than 30% (Russians totaling 61%).² The main cause of the increase in the percentage of Buryats in the Republic is the active process of migration of Russians from the Republic.

With people of different nations, different cultures (Russian and Buryat) and different religions (Christianity, Buddhism and Shamanism) living in Buryatia, the Republic has a unique ethnocultural situation.

It is not surprising that the disintegration of the USSR has resulted in essential changes in the language situation in post-Soviet society. Recently, an active revision of many of the previously stable

¹ I am aware that some Mongol and Chinese linguists claim that Buryat is not an independent language, but is a dialect of Mongol language.

² The results of the last general census (перепись) were not yet published at the time of this writing.

Soviet sociolinguistic views and opinions has been undertaken. Formerly considered as very positive, the process of accelerated and mass learning of Russian by all the Soviet nations now needs a more critical approach. It is evident that in these modern times, most of the population wants to master Russian. One consequence is that, on the whole, minorities have the tendency to lose their languages.

Sociolinguistic study of Buryat

Like other multinational republics in Russia, Buryatia has its own language problems. Among the most critical ones are the current state of the Buryat literary language and the prevalence of Buryat-Russian bilingualism. The language situation in Buryatia has become extremely complicated and alarming. It is not only the question of how to preserve the Buryat language but a problem of how to slow down the process of a rapid loss of the indigenous language, especially by young Buryat people.

In 1989-1990 and 1999-2000, a group of researchers, under the leadership of G.A.Dyrkheyeva, conducted extended sociolinguistic research (more than 3500 questionnaires) of the ethnographic situation of Buryatia. The purpose of the research was 1) to ascertain the character of the social and linguistic factors influencing the language; 2) to reveal the influence of social-democratic factors on its development and functioning; 3) to ascertain the functional role and features of Buryat-Russian bilingualism; and 4) to determine which of these factors is the most decisive in the assignment of social functions to the contact languages. The main findings were that: modern Buryats know Russian better than they know the Buryat language. None of the respondents said that they do not understand Russian, but 1,5% of respondents said that they do not understand Buryat; 4,5% understand but do not speak Buryat; 21% cannot read the language and 28,8 % said they cannot write it. Special attention was paid to the functioning of Buryat and Russian among students. The results obtained in the polls of the students were compared to the indices of adult respondents at the end of the 80s and 90s. The general tendency is deterioration in the status of the Buryat language. Because the spheres of its application remain very limited, there are no incentives to master the language.

Factors affecting language maintenance and/or loss

As you know, language changes are associated with the complex interaction of historical, social, economic, cultural, psychological, legal, linguistic and other factors. Examples are the territory where we live, its geographical position, population, national and social stratification, the level of education, confessional affiliation and race, national history, economy, the duration and intensity of cross-cultural contacts, migration processes and so on. Most of these factors influence language situations indirectly. For example, the industrial development of Siberia, including Buryatia, in the pre-revolutionary and Soviet periods led to an increase in the Russian population and to the migration of Buryats to the cities. This then resulted in the increase in Buryat-Russian bilingualism and an increase in the number of Russian-speaking Buryats. For Buryat, the vast spaces, remoteness from the political and cultural centre of Russia, severe climate, low population density, underdeveloped transport and communications, low living standard, migration, and other factors influenced language use. For example, territory dispersed-ness did not help to unite the Buryat literature form but was very good for preserving Buryat dialects.

An interesting factor contributing to the support of a language is the society's ethno-social organisation. For example, birth-tribe organisation of most Siberian peoples help to maintain their languages. On the other hand, the Buryat and other investigators found that the inner- and extra-language divisions (as when language bearers live in different districts and even countries) is a problem for Buryat language maintenance. This relates to the issue of national and language consolidation. In addition, the powerful influence of education and mass communication is well known. In Russia the state educational system, naturally, gives priority to Russian and spread it through TV.

Inter-lingual factors include the number of languages in contact with Buryat, their relationship, the level of their development (traditions of writing, status of literary language, development of scientific and professional terminology and so on), presence of language laws, language policy and others.

Additional causes of language crisis are impoverishment, loss of norms, bad knowledge of orthography, lexicon and so on.

So there are inner, extra, objective and subjective factors. In the past, subjective factors (value orientations of the people, the degree of national tolerance, the level of international education and so on) were not taken into account. Sometimes (especially during Soviet times) the move to Russian was considered to be a manifestation of nationalism.

Now the number of subjective factors is growing. For example, in pre-revolutionary times the number of literate Buryats was very small. Language developed very slowly. Most of the population had no choice; they did not make any decisions. Today, when there are language or any other problems, they can voice their opinion and refuse if they do not agree.

One of the most influential subjective factors affecting languages is national self-consciousness or self-identity. Today we know that this factor competes with language as the marker of ethnic identification. So it influences the position of language in the society. Buryats have a very high degree of national self-consciousness. But some scientists argue that Buryats are losing their mother tongue because Russia is an “open” nation. Purism, defending culture originality, earnest (ревностное) caring (бережное) attitude to the language is not a characteristic of Buryats. In their history there were no great wars and struggles for survival, there was no ethnic assimilation. That’s why cosmopolitanism and devotion to all-nation interests is their national psychology / mentality.

In the last decade the Buryat language problem has been discussed within the all-Buryat community. This problem is considered to be the most important ideologema of Buryat national self-consciousness. There are many debates about the question of whether the Buryat language is the main characteristic of the Buryat nation. Many Buryats live in other cities (Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and so on) and do not know their own language but they consider themselves Buryats. Our investigation confirms this fact. Many Buryat respondents answer that they are related to each other through culture, nature, earth. But all the investigations of Buryat scientists show that the pivot of Buryat *culture* is the Buryat language.

Today the most important factor influencing languages in Russia is the language policy. In 1992, as many other republics of Russia, the Law on the 'Languages of the Peoples in the Buryat Republic' was accepted. The Russian and Buryat languages were proclaimed as state languages. Unfortunately, economic and other difficulties, characteristic of the current situation in Russia, hamper the Law’s implementation. So the legal situation for the Buryat language is now favourable and, in spite of difficulties in implementation, some changes in the language situation are taking place. But as I have said, despite the fact that the Law exists, the research carried out in 1999-2000 found that the number of Buryats who named Russian as their native (mother) language is growing. All the parameters of Buryat-Russian bilingualism are expanding. The task now is to identify the factors that will and must promote the conservation and development of Buryat, to learn how the Law has influenced the situation of Buryat and whether it has resulted in any improvements in the sociolinguistic situation. We also need to know how to raise the prestige of Buryat. So, the main goal is to reveal the main factors which influence the social prestige of Buryat.

Буряты, как и любая другая малая народность, испытывали и испытывают на себе влияние не только господствующего языка государства, с которым контактируют или в состав которого входят, но и языка религии данной страны. Так, до революции тибетский язык оказывал сильное влияние на языки монголов-буддистов, а русский – на язык крещеных бурят. Сейчас в связи с возрождением буддизма, шаманизма, открытием церквей и дацанов видится перспектива возрождения бурятского языка, языка общения в дацанах, языка шаманских заклинаний. Можно также добавить, что именно религиозная монолитность усиливает внимание к национальному языку, способствует распространению грамотности на этом языке, хотя до сих пор сохраняется

территориальная, религиозная и языковая разобщенность. Кроме того, как считает Т. М. Михайлов, роста религиозности не произошло, но изменилось отношение к религии, ее ценностям. Религия становится частью культуры, одним из важнейших факторов этнической идентификации личности.

Thus, factors that determine the functioning of the Buryat language today are multiple and diverse. Objective factors are the size of the Buryat population, its share in the total population of the republic, and the language and educational policies of the state. Subjective factors are national self-consciousness and the “openness” of a nation. We can see the most important factors of modern Buryat-Russian bilingualism in the following table table:

Table 1. Factors influencing Buryat-Russian bilingualism

Positive Factors	Negative Factors
2. The law on the 'Languages of the Peoples in the Buryat Republic' was accepted.	1. Russian-speaking population has advantages; Buryats are dispersed (living in the Republic and in another districts, autonomies).
3. There are attempts to preserve traditional economy and culture. National-culture centers and associations of countrymen have been established.	2. The Law is not working on full scale; Buryat language is not used in official business, legal procedures, services, or commerce.
4. The population of Buryats is growing.	3. On the whole, destruction of the traditional economy and loss of national spiritual values is moving faster than attempts to restore and develop them.
5. For the present, the parameter “Buryat native-speakers of different age groups (who know and speak their native language)” is maintained.	4. Migration from villages is growing. The number of mixed (international) marriages is growing too.
6. Buryat language classes and teaching of various subjects in Buryat were restored. First it was introduced in municipal schools.	5. The number of young Buryat native-speakers is decreasing.
7. There is a sufficient worked out normative base for Buryat literary language.	6. Only around 40% of schools offer Buryat language classes (in different programmes). The system of secondary and higher education is entirely in Russian.
8. Today Buryat-language problems are	7. For the present there is no common Buryat literary language. Publications in Buryat have essentially been reduced. There is no common information space, such as national TV channel.
	8. The number of Buryat language courses

<p>realised better by Russian population of the Republic.</p> <p>9. National and religious self-consciousness is growing. To be more accurate, the attitude to religion and its values is changing. Religion becomes a part of the culture and one of the main factors of ethnic identification.</p> <p>10. There is a state (Mongolia), where related language-speakers live.</p>	<p>and textbooks are inadequate for those who want to learn it.</p> <p>9. There is now national idea, which would promote to the national consolidation.</p> <p>10. Mongolia is now trying to return to the old Mongolian written language. Mongolian lexical transformations are characterised by significant differentiations from Buryat.</p>
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Most researchers note that, in spite of ten years democratization in Russia, with favorable conditions created for national revival and a more active cultural life, the ethnolinguistic situation in most of the republics is still essentially unchanged. The processes of internationalization (as part of globalization) and russification is proceeding. Passage of the language law (I am one of the authors of the Law on the Languages of the Peoples of the Buryat Republic) has not influenced the language situation either. My investigation of the specific features of the ethnolinguistic situation in Buryatia showed that we need a composite ethno-socio-psycholinguistic approach to studying the interaction of languages and their speakers. It is necessary to understand all the factors (historical, social, cultural, psychological, legal, linguistic and so on) that are influencing the ethnolinguistic processes

The investigation found that the main factors influencing ethnolinguistic transformation are the geopolitical and socio-economic conditions of the minority language communities. Living in scattered communities with a prevalence of Russian-speaking people leads to weakening of cultural and linguistic steadiness, to the loss of some elements of ethnic originality, and to the gradual loss of mother tongue.

A study of the history of Russian and national language contact reveals that these relations were not formed quickly. During the Soviet era, emphasis was on assimilation. Passing of the language laws in all the post-Soviet republics and in the autonomous republics in Russia is a response to the long-term exclusion of national languages from the different public domains and neglect of the social and language interests of the national groups. The language laws are also a result of the desire of the speakers of the national languages to protect and use their languages, to pass the languages on to their children, and also to revive and develop their cultures.

Under modern conditions and with the existing language policy, the possibility of Buryat language revival is quite feasible. Although the improvements in this sphere have been insignificant to this point, the re-evaluation of the national and language factors and the awakening consciousness of inhabitants of Buryatia are significantly positive factors. Now the bilingualism question is being discussed calmly and treated with tolerance. On the whole, language nihilism has disappeared.

These positive changes, though seeming to be insignificant, began taking place an all-Russian context and now are closely associated with the rising ethnic-consciousness and religious revival that we can observe in many Siberian regions.