

William Fierman
Professor Emeritus, Ph.D.
Indiana University (Bloomington)

REFLECTIONS ON REVERSING KAZAKH LANGUAGE SHIFT: MIGHT ALMATY FOLLOW BAKU'S PATTERN?

Бұл мақала кеңес дәуірінен бергі уақыттағы Қазақстандағы тілдік тепе-теңдік мәселесін қарастырады. Кеңестік дәуірде орыс тілінің әсерінен қазақ тілі өзінің басымдығын жоғалтуы кеңестік тілдік саясат пен демографияға тән екендігі дәлелденеді. Қазақстанның тілдік тепе-теңдігі Оңтүстік Кавказ және Балтық республикаларымен салыстырылды. Қазақстан тәуелсіздік алғаннан бері қазақ тілі орыс тілінен басымдығын қайтара бастады. Мақалада қазақ тілінің Қазақстанның ең ірі қаласында (Алматы) кенжелеп дамуы Бакудегі азербайжан тілінің мәртебесін қалпына келтіру үдерісіне ұқсайтындығы айтылады.

Language policy in Kazakhstan has changed radically over the last 30 years, most notably as a result of overall political change and demographics. In this paper is given a brief overview of these shifts and their relation to one another.

To start with, 30 years ago the political unit which we know today as the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) was one of the fifteen union republics of the USSR. Despite the overall Soviet policy of linguistic russification, inside this republic the Kazakh language remained in widespread use in rural areas, including in schools; indeed, even in the late Soviet era, the majority of Kazakh children studied in Kazakh. In addition, though dwarfed by those in Russian, a large number of Kazakh-language periodicals and books were printed in the Kazakh SSR. Many Kazakh-language television and radio programs were also broadcast, though even in the Kazakh SSR the availability of programming in Russian was much greater. At the end of the Soviet era, Azerbaijani was used much more in Baku than Kazakh was used in Almaty or, for that matter, in almost any major Kazakh SSR city. Nevertheless, in Baku and the certain other areas of the Azerbaijan SSR as well, Russian was the main language for interethnic communication. Russian was used in many settings because Soviet policy specified this role in inter-ethnic communication; by and large, minorities in Baku did not know Azerbaijani, but they did know Russian. At the time of the last Soviet census, 1989, non-ethnic-Azerbaijanis still constituted one third of Baku's population. Kazakhstan is not Azerbaijan, and Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, is not Baku. That said, in looking ahead another decade or two, it seems likely that Kazakh will continue to displace Russian in a number of parts of the language environment. In thirty or forty years the linguistic environment there may in many aspects resemble today's Baku.