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“Kazakhs should speak Kazakh”: Language Policy Realization in Urban Kazakh Families

ASSEM AMANTAY, AIGERIM MYRZABAYEVA, AND AKMARAL KARABAY

The Kazakh government’s after-independence language policy of “Kazakhization” has had a positive impact on the revitalization of Kazakh as an official language. The research shows that the urban Kazakh people tend to support the policy of their indigenous language revitalization, but when it comes to language use at home, the Kazakh language is not extensively used in this context (Smagulova, 2008, 2011). Informed by Spolsky’s framework of language policy, this small-scale research of four urban Kazakh families examined parental ideologies towards the Kazakh language revitalization and the actual linguistic practices and the management strategies used in the home. This study revealed that while all four Kazakh families admitted the significance of the Kazakh language and supported the idea of its revitalization in the country, their language choices and efforts to maintain Kazakh vary from family to family. The findings offer new insights for researchers, policymakers, parents, and educators interested in understanding the revitalization of the Kazakh language.

Keywords: Kazakhization, language revitalization, family language policy, urban Kazakh families

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet language policy was aimed at raising the status of Kazakh as the state language and promoting the process of “Kazakhization”. This state language policy has had a positive impact on the revitalization of Kazakh as an official language (Smagulova, 2011). After 26 years of independence, the Kazakhization process continues. By 2025, the Government of Kazakhstan aims to have 95 per cent of its multiethnic, but Kazakh-dominant population speaking Kazakh (Nazarbayev, 2012). It intends for the Kazakh language to take a leading role in all spheres of life (Nazarbayev, 2012), including home and family domains. In order to understand how the revitalization of the Kazakh language has been implemented by the Kazakh families at home, this study is aimed at exploring the nature of diversity in what parents claim about practicing Kazakh and how they actually practice it at home.

Limited research has been conducted on the language situation in Kazakhstan. One 2013 survey conducted among 1000 respondents permanently living in Almaty, aged 17 to 65, showed that 42.3 per cent of the respondents claimed to speak only Kazakh, whereas 57.7 per cent reported speaking both Kazakh and Russian languages (Galat, 2013). Compared to the 2010 survey, the more recent study shows a 7.3% increase in the percentage of people who spoke only Kazakh, and a decrease of 7.3% in the usage of two languages (Galat, 2013). The number of people who speak Kazakh is growing, but it does not necessarily mean Kazakh is the dominant language of choice at home. It may appear that the government’s after-independence language policy of Kazakhization has had a positive impact on the language revitalization, so more and more Kazakhs have strong beliefs that the Kazakh language should be spoken widely and transmitted to the younger generation via active use at home (Smagulova, 2011); however, in reality Kazakh is not extensively used in urban homes.

Therefore, we aimed to understand what parents think about the Kazakh language, as well as how they use and manage it at home. In order to define language beliefs and actual practices, we chose a theoretical framework that relates to societal bilingualism and that can be applied to families: Spolsky’s (2004) model of language policy “ideology—practice—management”. Spolsky explains language *ideology* as beliefs about and usage of language(s); in this study, we focus on parents’ beliefs about Kazakh. *Practice* is defined as the de facto habitual feature; we were interested in the ways family members actually use language. *Management* is understood as the collection of efforts to control or influence language usage; we sought to document the ways parents intervene, plan, and modify their children’s language behaviors. Based on this framework, the study is guided by the following two research questions:

1. What are parental language ideologies about the Kazakh language and its revitalization at home?
2. How do families practice and manage Kazakh at home?

The results of this case study could bring benefits not only for research bank adding knowledge on the given topic, but also for the local language policy makers and educators in understanding Kazakh parents' perceptions towards Kazakh as well as their practical applications of ideology at home environment.

Literature Review

There have been a number of studies about language ideologies and linguistic practices in the private domain through the lenses of family language policy (FLP) in the world (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King, 2013; Ren & Hu, 2013). It is also important to note that FLP is best utilized "on the balance between and use of languages within the family unit" (King and Fogle, 2013, p. 172). Therefore, this study focuses not only on the children, but all members of the unit and interaction among them in the home domain.

Numerous empirical studies emphasize the complexity in family language ideology and practice. Tuominen (1999) reports that bilingual parents who are non-native English speakers, living in Washington State (US), want to raise their children to speak their native language. Yet, their wishes do not coincide with the language practice since the language spoken between these parents and their children was most often not the native language, but mixed. In contrast, in Sandel's (2003) study, rural Taiwanese parents restrict their children to use L1 (Tai-gi language) in order to immerse them fully into the Mandarin language. Although the parents have positive perceptions toward using and maintaining L1, their language policy was enacted in conflict with their beliefs due to the demands of the modern world (Sandel, 2003).

Other studies highlight several factors influencing the construction of a family language policy. Studying three Singaporean multilingual families, Curdt-Christiansen (2015) revealed that the economic value associated with English influences the parents to "explicitly and implicitly, deliberately or unintentionally choose the preferred code in their everyday linguistic practices" (p.13). In another study, Curdt-Christiansen (2009) found various factors such as parental attitudes, home environment, media and interactions covertly affecting on language ideology of family members.

Family plays a significant role in language development (Fishman, 1991; Pillai, Soh & Kajita, 2014; Schwartz, 2008; Spolsky, 2004). Interestingly, some researchers highlight different roles of family members as language policy-makers. For example, Ochs (1988) and Ruby (2012) suppose that grandparents play a more powerful role in language acquisition and maintenance than other family members. More precisely, Ruby (2012) noticed that a grandmother in his study greatly influenced her granddaughter in learning her mother tongue. Conversely, Tse & Ingram (1987) and Okita (2002) suggest that the mother's role is stronger.

Although the language policy in the family level has been discussed across the world, little research attention has been given to the Kazakhstani context. Even less has been given to Kazakh as an indigenous language for the urban Kazakh people. As the most fruitful and recent source on the language socialization on a family level, Smagulova (2011) highlights that "adults' home language practices including speech patterns do not match the explicit language ideology [of Kazakhization]" (p. 2). Even if her public survey shows that nearly 60% of urban Kazakh youth use Kazakh as a home language, the findings of the ethnographic investigation revealed that parental language policies contribute to raising Russian-speaking children. She found out that in the urban families Russian is predominantly used for "serious tasks", while Kazakh is associated with "baby talk" and as a school subject.

These studies have thoroughly examined the nature of language practices and language ideologies in the private domain, among family members, in regard to child language development, but more research is needed to investigate FLP in the local context, which is quite different from the mentioned studies. The peculiarity of this context is that many Kazakh families, especially residing in the northern and central part of the country predominantly use Russian, even if they could know Kazakh. One might assume that Kazakh serves as L1 for Kazakhs, but it is not always the case.

Methods

Aiming to examine the complex nature of family language ideologies parents possess and their practices, particularly the speech patterns they produce, we applied a *case study qualitative design* which is used to explain, describe, illustrate with an evaluation and enlighten the differences in situations that has no clear and single-set of outcomes (Yin, 2014).

Sampling and Participants

Initially, we considered homogeneous sampling in selecting families, as we hoped to include a group of society that shares common characteristics (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). Hence, the main criterion was to choose ethnically Kazakh families with two multilingual parents and at least one child. However, due to challenges that

will be explained below, opportunistic sampling was utilized. In the end, we were able to study four cases in three cities located in different parts of Kazakhstan: Astana (central), Almaty (southeast) and Shymkent (south). These cities are the most urban in the country, according to a recent estimation which shows that Almaty is the most populated city (1,768,303 people), Astana is the second (1,002,900), and Shymkent is the third (932,419) (“Chislennost naseleniya”, 2017; “Naselenie Shymkenta”, 2017).

In total, 8 parents participated in the study (7 were interviewed and observed, 1 was only observed). Aiming to keep confidentiality in relation to the participants, the following nicknames were employed for the families and included the following family members:

- Case 1: the Adambay family from Astana, 42-year-old parents and two adult children (ages 23 and 25);
- Case 2: the Beisen family from Astana, 27-year-old parents and two young children (ages 1 and 4);
- Case 3: the Cumar family from Almaty, 38-year-old parents and two daughters (ages 11 and 13).
- Case 4: the Dauletbay family from Shymkent, 31- and 27-year-old parents, two daughters (ages 4 and 5), and two grandparents.

Data Collection Procedures

We relied on friends and relatives to both sides of the researchers and the participants to provide access to the research sites and to organize meetings. We took a short questionnaire on the background information of each participant, including questions on age, speaking languages and levels of proficiency as well as a number of children and language of their education. The results helped us design 15-30-minute semi-structured individual interviews to get in-depth data and personal experience (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), which is quite important for extracting information on ideology. In turn, the interview protocol was divided into three parts. The first two parts had warm-up questions about the parents’ childhood language, the ways they learned the languages, questions on parents’ beliefs about Kazakh and its revitalization at the home context, the role of Kazakh in their lives, and the role of family in Kazakh language revitalization. The last part contained questions about language use, languages used with one’s spouse, children and other family members, and the family’s efforts to develop their children’s Kazakh.

After the interviews, semi-structured observations were carried out for 1-2 days from 30 minutes to 3 hours each. Most observations were done at the household, but we also had a chance to observe two families outside their home (for instance, at a relative’s house and during a road trip). In one case, the researcher observed the family interaction in the presence of guests. An observation protocol was used to focus attention on speech patterns of parents and children, the family’s choice of media, and non-verbal signs of language policy. Photos and a few videos were also recorded.

Overall, three major challenges occurred during the data collection. As any researcher, we faced difficulty finding participants. Three families who initially agreed withdrew from participation; one father declined to be interviewed. Interruption by children or guests during the interviews was another challenge. The final challenge was time constraints, as interviews require considerable time, and observations were managed only once or twice instead of three times as planned.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues were diligently considered in the given research. Approval was received from NUGSE Research Committee in 2016, and all data was collected responsibly: the research purpose was explained; participants were informed about a voluntary nature of the research and possibility not to answer any questions in the interview; and all agreed participants signed a consent form which allowed us to interview and observe them and their children at home.

Results

While exploring family language policies, including ideologies and practices within the urban Kazakh families, three themes corresponding to Spolsky’s (2004) framework emerged: parental language ideologies about Kazakh, family language practices, and language management strategies.

Parental Language Ideologies About the Kazakh Language

The data from the interviews with parents revealed several language ideologies. The dominant language ideology which was explicitly and frequently stated by the majority of the interviewees was that “Kazakhs should speak Kazakh”. All parents emphasized the importance of the Kazakh language and its revitalization as well as

their positive perception of this state language policy. The Adambays stated that “every Kazakh person must know the Kazakh language and use it actively”. The Beisens also believed that a Kazakh should know and speak Kazakh. The data indicate the dominant ideology of ethnic identity as a key factor to the language revitalization.

Two parents expanded their pro-Kazakh ideology by connecting Kazakh to intergenerational and historical roots. The mother of the Cumar family mentioned that “There was a moment when I found out that not speaking the native language makes me weaker... It breaks the connection between generations”. The Dauletbay mother also stated that Kazakh is “a language of blood and ancestors”. These statements reveal that parents place a strong value on Kazakh as a language of the past and their cultural traditions which Kazakhs should respect and follow.

The data also revealed that the state language policy is influential for their parental language ideologies. The Dauletbays family stated that “it is our state language; therefore, it should go near us”. This language ideology echoed the official Kazakh language policy stating that Kazakh is a state language.

In addition, one participant considered Kazakh as a spiritual fulfillment, mentioning that “language is strength, it is important for every nation because you cannot become happier, stronger and more spiritual without knowing the native language” (Dauletbay mother). She appears to believe that Kazakh as a native language is important for her in order to feel happy.

All in all, the data revealed that the dominant language ideology held by parents is closely related to their cultural identity; in other words, “Kazakhs should speak Kazakh”. Their explicit language ideologies framing Kazakh as a language of the ethnic identity, Kazakh as a language of the past, Kazakh as the state language, and Kazakh as a symbol of spirituality, were expressed by the participants, each with a different background but all living in Kazakhstan.

Family Language Practices

The assessment of language choice among the Adambays observed and reported by the family member revealed that they all code-switched Kazakh and Russian at home. For example, during one home observation, the Adambays welcomed two middle-age brothers and their wives. The housewife prepared a big table of food for the guests. According to Kazakh tradition, women serve the guests by bringing the food from the kitchen to the living room, pouring tea, washing the dishes and all businesses related to serving the table. In the kitchen, there was an evidence of code-switching by the housewife (our participant) talking to her woman-guest. The housewife said: “Принеси табак” (*Prinesi tabak*; Can you bring a bowl?) whereas *prinesi* stands for *bring* in Russian and *tabak* stands for *a bowl* in Kazakh. Another example of code-switching was “Давай мен посуданы жуайын?” (*Davai men posudany zhuaiyn?*; Let me wash the dishes?). Here *davai* and *posudany* stand for *let me* and *dish* respectively in Russian, whereas *men* and *zhuaiyn* stand for *me* and *wash* respectively in Kazakh. Even though Kazakh observed in these examples of code-switching, the dominant language of parent-parent and parent-child language choice was reported and observed to be Russian.

Similar examples of code-switching were captured in other families as well. For instance, the father of the Beisen family reported that they have a “Kazakh by default” family language policy, as he thought that home is the only place for their child to acquire Kazakh. Both parents spoke Kazakh to their young daughter at home during the observation. The daughter spoke Kazakh to her parents during lunch, although the processes of playing games and watching cartoons were in Russian. During the interview with the mother, the father entered the kitchen and started joking to us in Russian. The mother reported later that they could speak Russian when they need to say something secret in the presence of their children in the same room or if they talk about his job matters or her hobby of sewing with some terminology which they know only in Russian. The subject of interaction appears to play a role in the language choice in the Beisen family.

Besides the topicality of interaction, language choice in favor of Kazakh seems to be determined by the cultural behaviors. According to the mother’s interview from the Cumar’s family, Kazakh is mostly used in the communication with their grandparents. The mother said: “For as long as I can remember, my parents and I and all our relatives have spoken Russian. I spoke Kazakh only when I was in my grandmother’s village in the summer”. There is a non-written rule to speak Kazakh with older people to show respect. She also stated that she was not competent in Kazakh. She remembered the life moment when she spoke Kazakh while living with her parents-in-law. When they moved out, the Cumars started speaking only Russian again. The observation of this family having a dinner showed that all family members including the guests who visited them spoke only Russian. Later the children went to their room with the guests’ children to play computer games. It was noted that Russian was the only language of choice during this captured interaction. This language choice shift to Kazakh was not captured due to the absence of elder generation at home at the period of observation.

For the Dauletbays the language choice at home was only Kazakh. The parents stated that Kazakh is the only language of family communication no matter to whom they are speaking, whether it is the spouse, their two daughters, sisters, or other relatives. The mother stated: “Actually, all members in my family speak Kazakh”. Although it was hard to catch the moment the mother says Russian words such as *машина, холодильник, сотовый телефон, сумка, ЖД вокзал* (*mashina, holodilnik, sotovyi telefon, sumka, ZhD vokzal*, meaning car, refrigerator, mobile phone, bag, railway station) were used periodically in her speech. These examples of the Russian words in the mother’s interactions with her family showed that a language other than Kazakh was present, but not prevailing, in the family communication.

The analysis of the family language interactions showed the complexity of language choice in urban Kazakh families. Code-switching appeared to be a common language practice. Language choice could shift to Kazakh from Russian when the cultural behaviors like showing respect to older generation or to Russian from Kazakh when the topic of interaction was connected to the parent’s occupation. The language practices in these families showed that Kazakh is not the only language choice of family members no matter where they reside. In some cases, Russian was more dominant in family communication; in others, Kazakh was prevailing.

Language Management Strategies

The parents’ aspiration to revitalize Kazakh influenced them to provide different opportunities and resources or their children in Kazakh, so they could acquire and learn it. We present two particular efforts the families put in order to support their children’s Kazakh acquisition - home literacy practices and medium of instruction at school or preschool.

One way parents attempted to support Kazakh was to provide home literacy resources such as books, television and children’s literacy resources in Kazakh. Collecting books in Kazakh was indicated during the observation as a common literacy practice among the Kazakh families. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the books in Kazakh varied from the classical literature (e.g. Abay) and novels, to the heritage books about the cultural traditions and customs (e.g. Тоғ, Беташар; *Toi, Betashar*). The Adambays kept the books for adults and children on the same shelf and included books in Russian and even English (see Figure 1). The Cumars had a library predominantly of Russian books and no children literature in Kazakh. The Beisens were an exception of the Soviet tradition to collect books at home, as this family did not appear to have a library.



Figure 1. A collection of adult and children books in Kazakh and Russian in the Adambays' home



Figure 2. A collection of Kazakh literature in the Cumars' home

Besides providing books in Kazakh, children were exposed to Kazakh while their parents watch TV programs and movies at home. The mother from the Adambay’s family reported that she had been regularly watching the Indian soap opera named “Kelin” in Kazakh. It was broadcasted on the local Kazakh TV channel. The fathers from the Adambays and Dauletbays preferred to watch local and international TV news in Kazakh. The print literacy resources like magazines (*Ли́за, Добры́е советы; Liza, Dobrye soveti*), newspapers were only in Russian in the families like the Adambays and Cumars (see the Figure 3). Even though their children did not necessarily watch these movies and TV programs with their parents, these implicit efforts could bring access to the Kazakh language for their children.



Figure 3. A collection of magazines in Russian in the Adambays' home

As one of explicit language management efforts, the parents of the Dauletbay family intentionally switched on the children TV channel called *Balapan*, which broadcasts cartoons only in Kazakh. The mother stated: “... when watching TV, I let my daughters to watch only programs in Kazakh on *Balapan*[...] No Nickelodeon or any other Russian channels: it influences my children’s language”. It is important to note that there is only one children TV channel *Balapan* in Kazakhstan which is broadcasted only in the Kazakh language.

Some families also have children literacy resources. For instance, the Beisens bought a talking toy like a colorful dog and interactive animal map for their Kazakh speaking daughter. As shown in Figure 4, she could press any picture of an animal and hear its name pronounced in Kazakh. It is important to note that these speaking toys also produced the words in Russian and English.



Figure 4. An animated animal map in Kazakh, Russian and English in the Beisens' home

One of the prevailing attempts reported by the parents to support their children’s Kazakh development was choosing the medium of instruction for preschool and school. In the Cumar family, the mother said: “To compensate the lack of Kazakh at home, we sent [the children] to a school with Kazakh medium of instruction, so that our children could gain knowledge [of the language] that we could not provide”. Her aspiration to improve her children's Kazakh proficiency at the Kazakh school was not met as she complained that her children did not have a rich vocabulary. The Beisen and Dauletbay children went to Kazakh medium of instruction kindergartens and their parents planned to send them to Kazakh schools.

Overall, the findings revealed the diversity and complexity of language ideologies, language practices and efforts to maintain Kazakh at home across these four case families. The finding also described in this section appeared to imply that Kazakh is perceived as a language of the past and as the state language. The study documented the language practices such as code-switching and parental efforts of language management such as home literacy environment and choosing Kazakh medium of instruction school and preschool for their children. This inquiry was not aimed at comparing these families with different background, but at identifying their family language policy.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through triangulating the interview and observation data, this paper attempted to document the family language policy of four Kazakh families, thereby examining parental *ideology* towards the Kazakh language revitalization, their actual linguistic *practices* and *management* among urban Kazakh families.

Our main finding is while all parents from the urban Kazakh families admit the significance of the Kazakh language and support the idea of its revitalization at home, they appeared to practice Kazakh quite differently, ranging from very little use to Kazakh being the only language choice. The findings coincide with the results of Smagulova (2011), who also concluded that parental ideology and practices towards the Kazakh language are different because they thought and said that they mostly used Kazakh at home, but indeed used Russian or did not speak Kazakh as the dominant language.

In terms of ideology, some participants connected the Kazakh language with the culture and history. Similar social and cultural factors of the language perception are also mentioned by several authors (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Pillai et al., 2014). Examining the case of the Acehnese language in Malaysia, Pillai et al. (2014) concluded that by speaking their mother-tongue, people maintain not only the language, but also their culture. Earlier, Curdt-Christiansen (2009) discovered that a language and a culture may shape an identity of a person, concluding that identity is shaped through language and components of culture. That means that language plays a significant role in our life, not merely as a communicative tool, but more deeply. Language can give us an understanding of who we are, forming our beliefs and attitudes, actions and habits.

This inquiry may not show the closest picture of how family ideologies and practices differ in terms of language due to several limitations of the study. The first is the small sample size of four Kazakh families. This sampling was based only on the ethnicity of the parents, and does not reveal factors like their age, years of marriage, occupation, social-economic status and others which may affect parental ideologies. In addition, it does not illustrate parents' perspectives from other nationalities of our multiethnic society about the Kazakh language revitalization. Also, observations were carried out in the home domain among family members and limited to linguistic practices between each other only. Observations in the public domains such as public family meetings (funerals, big family gatherings, weddings) would allow future researchers to witness more possible speech patterns. A longer ethnographic study would develop an in-depth understanding of how the parental ideologies among families vary and how their beliefs and language practices are different and similar within each family.

This case study may contribute to the wider investigation for local researchers, for policy makers in taking necessary steps in fully implementing the "Kazakhization" policy, and for better cooperation of a teacher-parent relationship to increase children's performance in the Kazakh language at school. Although it was not our primary goal, we observed growing families' awareness in identifying the role of the Kazakh language during and after the data collection. While describing their ideologies and practices, participants became more aware of their family language policy and started making some attempts towards the revitalization of the Kazakh language.

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