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**“The Human Rights of
Linguistic Minorities and
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Language Policies in Present-Day Central Asia¹

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Current language policies in Central Asian states developed in parallel with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and were left in the hands of persons trained in Soviet-style state bureaucracy. In 1989–1990, language laws were passed in the five republics of Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikstan and Turkmenistan laying down the rights and obligations in the use of languages. Ensuing language reform has been devoted to corpus issues - first and foremost the question of a change-over to Latin script, but also lexical revision. Even though the implementation of Central Asian language laws is slow and hesitating, the intensified preoccupation with linguistic matters in the newly-independent states of the region has made people more conscious of their own linguistic destiny and language identities. This concern among language users will add further dynamism to linguistic issues and influence both official language reform and developments for which there are not yet any definite plans.

Within a period lasting less than a year, between July 1989 and May 1990, and as part of a political development that culminated in the final disintegration of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian languages Tajik (Iranic), Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek and Turkmen (Turkic) were proclaimed the official languages and ultimately the state languages of their respective eponymous republics and would-be sovereign states (Carlson 1994). These languages were already defined and, to varying degrees, developed as standardised, sovietised, languages.²

The proclamation as official languages was no surprise to anyone and was instead part of a general trend among the Soviet republics. Similar developments could be identified occurring in other parts of the union. Furthermore, it was a generally held belief or expectation that the conferring of official status to such languages

¹ This article originates from a speech delivered on 27 June 1998 at the International Conference of Asian Scholars in Leiden, to which the author was invited in her capacity as Turkologist and Head of the Stockholm Forum for Central Asian Studies (FoCAS).

² See, for example Lewis 1972 as well as articles in Kirkwood 1985 and Kreindler 1985; for Uzbek, see especially Fierman 1991.

was but a natural course of events and the fruit of the endeavours of groups of people, possibly the majority of people, in the republics in order to gain autonomy or even independence. This expectation was reinforced – not least among linguists in the West – by the final collapse of Soviet socialism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The symbolic impact of language is also generally recognised; it easily becomes a feature of identity or an index of cultural belonging of some sort or other. In Western thinking, the symbolism of language has acquired a significant political dimension as a result of the inclusion of language in definitions of ethnicity and nation.

In 1991, as the Soviet Union was split up and new states involuntarily came into existence, the idea of nation-state grew strong and nation-building became an important political goal with language as one of its focal points. The Central Asians were already familiar with this mainly Western idea of nation-building; as members of the Soviet state they had, after all, experienced its impact for the past seventy years. However, they had never before experienced it as a sovereign people, left as they were with the responsibility of determining the features of nationhood for themselves.

1. Language policy

Another conceptual problem that the Central Asians are facing is that of language policy. Their legacy here is, quite naturally, Soviet language policy which during the Soviet era became highly centralised, being as it was designed and controlled by the central authorities in Moscow and first and foremost characterised by the dominance and influence of the Russian language. The men and women in charge of current language laws and their implementation were brought up with this kind of language policy. Consequently, present-day Central Asian language policies are centralised rather than decentralised, though this time at the local level instead of at a broad all-union level. Further, the languages to which the present-day language policies in the former Soviet Union are applied are former standardised Soviet languages and, as such, are more or less russified languages.

Definitions of language policy vary in the linguistic literature; from narrow definitions confined to state or authority intervention affecting language (cf. e.g. Coulmas 1985), to broad definitions which include not only decisions and actions but also public and official attitudes to language (cf. e.g. Schiffman 1996). For my own research on the language situation in Uzbekistan, I have chosen to adopt a rather narrow definition of this notion. In a report from this project, *Language Policy in Independent Uzbekistan*,³ language policy is explained to be that which an authority, for example, the government of a country, both allows and stipulates as far as language practice is concerned. Language reform – a related notion – is

³ Schlyter 1997. An abridged and slightly altered version of the same article was published as Schlyter 1998.

promoted, on the one hand, by language policy and, on the other, by language planning and its implementation (cf. Appel & Muysken 1987).

The notions of language policy and language reform are often treated as if they are, first and foremost, concerned with language or languages. In fact, they are not. Rather, they are concerned with language practice, or more precisely, with the language users. In the figure below, language community and language reform are shown as two separate but interrelated entities. The language community is represented by the whole square and the language reform process by the spiral. These two entities, language community and language reform, are interrelated by the features of the former, that is, by the language community and most prominently the members of this community. Features to be included are socio-demographic structure, language habits, changes in language habits, language attitudes and a phenomenon called language reform awareness. In my framework of linguistic research the notion of language reform awareness refers to the fact that people must be informed and kept aware of the language reform process and must somehow be convinced of its righteousness in order for the language reform to be realised and take effect.

The aforementioned features characterising the members of a language community not only constitute the prerequisites for and the promotive force behind the processes of language reform, but they are themselves also affected and possibly altered by these processes:



At present, Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian state to have a language policy in the sense of a strategy for fundamental change of language practice in the country. For other states and nations it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of tendencies or inclinations in linguistic matters, rather than fully-fledged language policies.

The degree of the public's language reform awareness and engagement in the process is dependent on the general sociopolitical importance of linguistic matters. In Uzbekistan today, for example, the language issue is not as politically hot as it was just a few years ago. Uzbek has been established as the state language and is safe in this respect. At the same time there is some fatigue caused by practical intricacies and the slowness of language reform, particularly among politicians who are constantly faced with more urgent problems in other areas of society (cf. Fierman 1995). It ought to be mentioned, however, that an impressive amount of language reform work has been undertaken already in Uzbekistan. The Uzbeks are admittedly embracing a fairly broad-scale language policy which includes both alphabet and vocabulary. This is, however, no indication that the Uzbeks always know what they are doing or what they want to do.⁴

2. Alphabet reform in Uzbekistan

One intricate circumstance in the case of Uzbek language policy is the presence of the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakistan within the state borders of Uzbekistan. Karakalpakistan is, to a certain degree, allowed its own autonomous language policy, as is stated more or less emphatically in the Uzbek state language laws. However, thus far, there have been hardly any discernible signs of any independent Karakalpak language policy. Instead, the decision makers in the Karakalpak capital Nukus seem to closely follow the decisions already taken by the central government in Tashkent. The modified Karakalpak Latin alphabet introduced in 1995, for example, showed the same changes as the revised Uzbek Latin alphabet which had been presented a few months earlier, and the same deadline of September 2005 was set down for the change-over to the new Karakalpak alphabet.

The two alphabets that have been so far proposed for Uzbek in 1993 and 1995 respectively, have been heavily criticized even by the Uzbeks themselves, including Uzbek linguists. From a linguistic point of view, the alphabets proposed can hardly be regarded as improvements on the current Cyrillic alphabet; they are more or less just schemes for Cyrillic-Latin transliteration. The preparations for the change to Latin script continue at a rather slow pace. Nevertheless, a detailed plan has been conceived for the implementation of the Latin alphabet for Uzbek, at least in Uzbek schools and higher institutes (cf. Schlyter 1997: 35f.).

⁴ Cf. the concluding comments in Schlyter 1997/1998.

3. Language reform in other Central Asian republics

In Kazakhstan in particular, but also in Kirghizistan, the proportions of Russian speakers in the overall population have been much higher than in the other three states in the former Soviet Central Asia. This situation has had an impact on language attitudes and the manner in which language issues are handled, not least the Russian language issue. In the latest version of the Kazakh constitution from 1995, Russian was elevated from its status as the language of interethnic communication to the status of official language, while Kazakh simultaneously remained the sole state language.

The requirements on proficiency in the state language were reduced considerably as a result of a new language law in July 1997 which was written in Russian, as is still the rule with Parliament laws in Kazakhstan (cf. Dave 1996a, b and Eschment 1998). In Kirghizistan, Russian was given the status of official language in certain regions of the country through a presidential decree in 1994, and in 1996, through an amendment to the constitution (Pannier 1996), Russian was *de facto* made into the second official language of the republic. This was in direct contrast to statements in the Kirghiz 1989 state language law, which stated that Russian should be phased out as a language of official government work by 1999.

To date, no recent Parliament law concerning the alphabets of the respective state languages exists in either of the two republics, even though the change-over to Latin script is subject to commissioned discussions and work.

The first Central Asian republic to make its national language the state language of the republic was Tajikistan. Tajikistan has a large Uzbek population, and concessions were made in the Tajik language law of 1989 for the practice and teaching of Uzbek, in the same manner as concessions were made for the usage of the international Russian language and Russian-Tajik bilingualism in the republic. Provision was also to be made for the preservation and use of minority languages in Gorno Badakhshan. With little or no further alteration, the entire Tajik language law came into effect on 1 January 1990 and was met with demands for a gradual implementation of the law.

Subsequent language laws in the other Central Asian republics were provided with timetables giving different deadlines for different articles or sets of articles. Generally speaking, transition periods of around 10 years duration for the complete implementation of all articles of the language laws were envisaged. However, long before the 10 year period had come to an end, it became obvious to those in charge that this was an unrealistic deadline. In Uzbekistan, the transition period has been prolonged through statements in new revised language laws.

As for Tajik alphabet revisions, there have appeared no official decisions or concrete proposals so far. On the other hand, the Arabic script has made its way back more strongly in this republic than in the others. However, the Latin script has its proponents even among the Tajiks. As regards Tajik in Uzbekistan, this is a

sensitive question and one which should be politely avoided, at least during interviews at the Ministry of Education in Tashkent. During the author's visits in Samarkand and Bukhara in May 1996, some of her interlocutors at the universities there were of the opinion that there should be cooperation and coordination between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the alphabet issue, since the Uzbek and Tajik languages and literature are so closely intertwined and ought, therefore, to employ the same type of script. This would not, however, be an easy task.

The last republic to proclaim its state language was Turkmenistan. A Turkmen Latin alphabet was adopted in 1993 which included some inconvenient special letters not found in any other Turkic Latin alphabet (Simsir 1995; Schlyter 2001). According to Charles F. Carlson (1994), Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian republic to put its national language on a par with Russian as an international language. Less reliable sources suggest that an attempt was made in 1993 to put English ahead of Russian as the second official language of the Turkmen state. Similar rumours have circulated concerning English in Kirghizstan. Such measures, whether true or not, would be of no great significance for a rather long time to come, since, after all, language practice presupposes language knowledge.

4. A Turkic Common Alphabet

With these developments of new Central Asian Turkic alphabets, the attempts at creating a basic, or general, Turkic Latin alphabet seem to have been seriously hampered. At the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey was active on this issue. The first in a series of alphabet conferences in Turkey was held in November 1991 at the Marmara University in Istanbul (Devlet 1992). The basic Turkic alphabet adopted there has appeared from time to time in publications where it is presented as the valid new Turkic Latin alphabet. However, as things now stand, not only Uzbekistan, Karakalpakistan included, but also Turkmenistan and possibly also Kazakstan have introduced alternative alphabets that are not just modifications of the basic Turkic alphabet but alphabets which differ on certain fundamental points from the Turkic one.

Turkey seems to have become quite disenchanted by the recent development, but this country maintains its interest in its Central Asian brethren and is now approaching them in other ways: for example, through small business and not least education where not only a Turkic-Turkish alphabet but the Turkish language itself is being launched.

5. Language and identity

With new socio-political contexts emerging in present-day Central Asia, most identities in this region are in a sensitive state of readjustment and redefinition, be they ethnic, cultural, national or any combination of these. The new conditions may

have effects on every single individual, no matter if he identifies himself in the first place with a majority group or a minority group.

The designations of titular populations, such as Uzbeks and Kazakhs, are slowly and to varying degrees changing from ethnic terms to names of citizenship with particular implications as regards at least statehood but most probably also nationhood. The proclamation and promotion of state languages is a measure to the same effect. What impact this order might have on other ethnicities in the respective republics seems to have been a much eschewed issue so far, which could be interpreted as either avoidance of a very intricate problem or deliberate quiescence of a uniformation policy that could stir up people's feelings to dangerous confrontations. In my own research on current language policy in Uzbekistan I have been met with confusion combined with some irritation when asking responsible officials about the effects of new state language laws on minority languages in the country:

Surprisingly little attention has so far been paid to the fact that the adoption of Uzbek as a state language is a measure of national re-identification that affects non-Uzbek nationals as much as, and in one important sense, even more than it does ethnic Uzbeks. These other nationals, who are now expected to become Uzbeks both where state loyalty and national (= "nation-state") identity are concerned, may have found Russian a more neutral interethnic and official language, insofar as this language was equally foreign to all indigenous groups, ethnic Uzbeks included, and did not interfere with group identities at a lower level. The uncertainty among officials as to the fate of Tadjik script in Uzbekistan in the event of a change of Uzbek alphabets and possibly a simultaneous change of Tadjik alphabets in Tadjikistan indicates that not all aspects of the effects of the Uzbek language reform on the statuses and corpora of minority languages in the country have been fully considered. [Schlyter 1997, pp. 40f.]⁵

6. Concluding Remarks

The five state language laws passed by the Central Asian Supreme Soviets in 1989 and 1990 were first and foremost language status laws which laid down the rights and obligations in the use of languages and the choice of language in specific public settings and official functions. To a much lesser extent, and merely in the form of general comments or recommendations, the laws referred to language corpus issues such as alphabet, vocabulary and grammar. These matters were to be later regulated by additional laws and proposals within the few years following the first round of enactments of state language laws and while they were simultaneously the focus of attention in public debates incited by the work performed on establishing state languages.

Much of the follow-up work of language law implementation in Central Asia at the present moment is concerned with not the status but the state of languages. In this

⁵ For comments on other minorities, such as Qaraqalpaqs, Koreans and Arabs, see Schlyter 2001 and Schlyter, in print.

regard, arguments are often put forward concerning the necessity to improve not only people's proficiency in the state language of their republic, but also the very corpus of this language. In the lexical field, responsible linguists call for moderation and caution against the threat of anarchy through the allowance of too much spontaneity. At the same time there is greater eagerness among language users in general to resuscitate older vocabulary or to create words from indigenous language material in order to counterbalance the Russian influence on Central Asian lexical stock. Evidence of this is, for example, the use in Kazakstan of *egemendik* (Turkic) instead of *suverenitet* (Russian) meaning 'sovereignty', in Turkmenistan, the use of *otly* (Turkic) instead of *poezd* (Russian) meaning train, and in Uzbekistan, the use of *tajjoragoh* (Arabic and Persian) instead of the Russian *aeroport* for 'airport'. In the fields of new technology and new socio-political and economic paradigms, the principle of internationalism seems to be favoured and there is no bias against Western terminology, including Russian: for example, in Uzbekistan Russian *komp'juter* is used together with *biznes*, *menezher* (English).

When a nation becomes a state, bureaucracy generally makes its entrance into the organisation of that state. The Central Asian language policies, or attempts at language policies, are good examples of this. They are bureaucratic state language policies. With the inclusion of bureaucracy, dynamism and flexibility are easily lost. On the other hand, the republics being considered in this article belong to a still larger Central Asia which is today, in most of its composite parts, in a process of cultural metamorphosis or transformation. In the vicinity of these republics there are language movements which are not necessarily supported by any state bureaucracy and which may, therefore, have stronger features of spontaneity. Mongolian attempts at reintroducing the Uighur-Mongolian script might be an example of something in between state policy and non-official trends (Campi 1991).

The fate of Central Asian minority languages, which are now under the regiment of new official language policies and linked to quite different conditions than they were just a decade ago, offers another challenging field for future linguistic research (Schlyter 2001). In a recently established research project, "Modernity in the Eastern Islamic World" at the Stockholm Forum for Central Asian Studies, the effects of present-day state language policies in Central Asia on language minorities in this region will be one of the topics to be studied.⁶

This paper has focused on official language policies or strategies in the newly-independent Central Asian states. As is the case for any political activity, there is also a non-official aspect. Language debate and enforced changes of linguistic behaviour, of which one impact is the abovementioned 'language reform awareness', may also cause reactions and linguistic changes that are in opposition to the

⁶ For further information about this project, see the Stockholm Forum for Central Asian Studies website at <http://www.orient.su.se/focas.html>.

official language reform work or some development for which there is not yet any definite plan.

The current linguistic awareness and cultural transformation in large parts of the Central Asian region will be of immediate interest to researchers. Furthermore, this transformation might well add dynamism to linguistic issues and have influence on attitudes towards language and culture even in state bureaucracies.

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