

## **INTRA-ETHNIC AND INTER-ETHNIC LANGUAGE CONFLICTS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

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### **Abstract**

The article is devoted to the analysis of the language conflicts that occurred in the Russian Federation in the past and have taken place in the country over the last few years. Language conflicts are clashes between communities of people, which are based on certain problems related to language. They are quite common in multinational and, therefore, multilingual countries. Language conflicts can be intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic. Intra-ethnic language conflict arises between the representatives of one ethnic group, usually it is a narrow circle of a national intellectual class. Most often, such conflicts can be observed in the process of the formation of a literary language during the selection process of a main dialect, i.e. the creation of a single standard language. A vivid example of such language formation conflict can be considered in the case study of a situation that occurred in the Republic of Mari El (Russia) at the end of the 1990s. At that time the Mountain Mari people strongly opposed the unification of the two forms of the Mari language – the Mountain (Hill) variety and the Meadow variety into one single language. That happened because the Mountain Mari people, being in the minority, feared that the Mountain Mari language would eventually disappear, and consequently, the Mountain Mari people would vanish as an ethnic group. Often a conflict arises on the grounds of choosing or changing the graphic basis of a language, as happened with the Tatar language in 1999 when it was transferred into a Latin graphic basis. Inter-ethnic language conflicts can be more heated, as they arise between the representatives of different ethnic groups and affect their national interests. This language situation can be viewed on the following example. The directive introduction of the languages of the titular groups that have the status of the state languages of the republics of Russia into the practice of compulsory school education in some republics in 2004 immediately caused conflicts of interest in different regions (namely in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Komi, Udmurtia, etc.). That step led to a decrease in the number of Russian language lessons, which instantly created conflicts between the parents of Russian children and the parents of children from other ethnic groups. As a result, there ensued the reaction from the government which stated that the Russian language is the natural spiritual framework of the entire multinational country. On the whole, the idea of cultural freedom and the voluntary study of languages is actively promoted at the governmental level. Therefore, a well-thought-out language policy is needed as a means that can mitigate and neutralize language conflicts. Moreover, the search for consensus is required in order to prevent or suppress a language conflict.

**Keywords:** language conflicts, language communities, multilingual countries

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Modern linguistic society is an interweaving of numerous linguistic options. Therefore, it is extremely important to create favorable socio-cultural conditions for the existence of languages. The relevance of this

work lies in the need to analyze language situations and study patterns in existing language conflicts in order to contribute to the maintenance of a stable state of languages and stimulate their sustainable development. The aim of the study was to systematize and classify factors that can lead to language conflicts and disagreements.

The model of the language life of a society is based on the characteristics of the existing language situation. And it is extremely important to make efforts to maintain a harmonious state of the language situation in a language group, and in general in a state, because a language is not only a means of social interaction, but also a means of expressing the sociocultural identity of any language community.

The problem of preserving linguistic diversity is currently unusually acute, and there is probably no coincidence that 2019 was declared by UNESCO the year of indigenous languages. However, it is difficult to make optimistic forecasts about the development of a favorable language situation, since it is necessary to take into account all the characteristics and particularities of language life in society. In this regard, the problem of predicting the possibility of linguistic conflicts, which can lead to the narrowing in language functions and, consequently, to the disappearance of a language, is of particular importance.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

In multilingual situations, social disagreements and other language problems, a conflict arises when the needs, rights or desires of different language groups come into conflict. This term is more specifically applied to disagreements that are directly related to the language, for example, which language will function in a particular area of communication; what language will be used in the education system; what language should be official in government organizations, etc. The causes of a conflict can also lie in a decreasing functional load of a language, contradictions in its instrumental function, limited language resources, existence of a variety of forms of one and the same language with no single standard form.

A language conflict is understood as a clash between communities of people, which is based on certain problems associated with language. There are intra-ethnic language conflicts, that is, those that arise between representatives of a single ethnic group. Most often, intra-ethnic language conflicts arise in the process of choosing the basis for a literary language. They usually have roots in the struggle for the choice of a reference dialect. It should be noted that intra-ethnic language conflicts are usually typical for a narrow circle of national intelligentsia; therefore, they are not as heated as inter-ethnic language conflicts.

Inter-ethnic language conflicts are the ones that arise among people who are representatives of various ethnic groups, within which minority language conflicts can be separately distinguished. The basis for inter-ethnic language conflicts can be formed through a struggle for the distribution of the spheres of functioning between varieties that are part of any given language situation. Inter-ethnic language conflicts rarely exist independently. They usually arise and develop in the context of general inter-ethnic tension. However, sometimes a language conflict can be one of the main incentives for a general ethnic conflict. Inter-ethnic language conflicts usually flow sharply, because they can affect the vital interests of an entire linguistic community, or even several communities.

The language situation is defined as the totality of the forms of existence (or varieties) of one language or the totality of languages in their territorial-social relationship and functional interaction within the boundaries of certain geographical regions or administrative and political entities.

The social status of a language (a variety, a dialect) is the position it occupies in relation to other languages used in this society. There are two statuses related: factual or actual status of the language and the legal status of the language. Factual status is a really existing, but not legislatively fixed position of the language in a particular society. The legal status of a language is ensured by state authorities and is fixed in state documents, but this, unfortunately, does not guarantee a stable level of language vitality.

The basis of the sociolinguistic typology of the linguistic situation within a single socio-communicative system includes the following parameters as was stated by Aleksander D. Schweitser:

- The social status of a language or languages reflected in the state documents de jure or existing de facto;
- Level of vitality of a language;
- Language varieties or language codes that exist in the social-communicative system;
- The nature of the functions of the forms of existence of a language;
- A set of social and communicative roles of all forms of the existence of a language in the considered social

and communicative system.

### **3 LANGUAGE CONFLICTS INCENTIVES**

Based on the classification of ethno-political conflicts of Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a new approach to language conflict classification is proposed. There are four general factors that can contribute to the emergence of ethnic conflict situations, and which can be considered in a narrower context, being applied to language conflicts situations. All these factors are considered as complementary elements in an ethno-political conflict, i.e., as part of it.

1. The presence of ethnocultural identity of members of an ethnic or minority language group. The more strongly the members of this language group differ from their language environment, the stronger their language identity is expressed.
2. Incentive stimulus for political struggle, such as awareness of narrowing of language functions and / or lack of hope for positive changes in this situation in the future.
3. The ability of group members for collective actions, the homogeneity of the language group, i.e., awareness of collective identity and common interests. The geographical compactness of living area of a language group. The presence of significant leaders.
4. The existence of opportunities in the political environment that increase the chances of members of an ethnic or minority language group to succeed.

A language conflict can be provoked as a follow-up to the policy of glottophagy, also called as linguocide, which is characterized by an absorption or displacement of one language by another one while in contact. Due to intensive language contacts, a minority language can be supplanted by a majority language.

## **4 CASE STUDIES**

### **4.1 Tatar Language**

Considering the probable causes of language conflicts, it is important to note that one of the most acute confrontations can have roots in the question of choosing or changing the graphic basis of the language. Often, the question of change for the writing system becomes extremely controversial, for example, as a result of a conflict of interest between supporters and opponents of such transition. The idea of transferring the Tatar language into the Latin graphic basis came in connection with the adoption of the law 'On the restoration of the Tatar alphabet based on Latin graphics' in 1999 in the Republic of Tatarstan. Fearing that this would lead to the isolation of Tatarstan from the multinational Turkic-speaking population, including the Tatar, living in various regions of the Russian Federation, a federal law was adopted in 2002 that assigned the Cyrillic alphabet to the alphabets of all state national languages.

In Tatarstan, the complex of related problems received the name 'the Russian question', the essence of it was reduced to three main problems, one of which was the status of the Russian language in the schools of Tatarstan. Giving the Tatar language the status of the state language in 1991 in practice led to its compulsory study in secondary educational institutions.

The introduction of the Tatar language as a compulsory school subject took place along with the reduction of hours allocated to the Russian language subject. The significant difference in learning hours for the Russian language along with the poor school performance of Russian-speaking students in the Tatar language began to pour into the form of protest from the parents of Russian-speaking children, up to and including going to court. In 2008, indignant parents organized an online community called 'Russian Language in Schools of Tatarstan' and there began lengthy correspondence with authorities. There was no result and then street protests flared up. Russian parents demanded that their children should have Russian language lessons in the same volume as in the whole country. In fact, there was no opposition to the Tatar language itself. Such situation arose due to the fact that the federal legislation provided parents with a choice of educational standards, and the republican legislation deprived them of that choice. As a result, the conflict intensified and turned into the main reason for the unfavorable position of the Russians in Tatarstan.

Public discontent with all these problems became so strong that it led to appeals to the government in the summer of 2017. Speaking in Yoshkar-Ola, Vladimir V. Putin actively supported the idea of cultural freedom, advocating for the voluntary study of languages. However, this statement, announced by the President, is likely to aggravate the language question, since considering state republican languages, everyone is obliged to learn Russian, and national languages are studied at the request of the parents.

## **4.2 Mary Language**

Another example of a conflict is the discussion of issues related to the status of national languages, as was the case, for example, in the Republic of Mari El in the late 1990s. According to the constitution, there are two official languages of Mari El: it is the Mari language, with its two varieties: the mountain variety and the meadow variety and the Russian language. In the law it is written as the Mary language (the meadow and the mountain). Some linguists, the speakers of the meadow Mari variety (meadow Mari people constitute the majority of the population of the republic) did not agree with the fact that the mountain Mari variety received the status of the state language, believing that the mountain Mari variety is only a dialect, and there is one literary Mari language, and this is the meadow Mari variety.

On this occasion, in the late 1990s a fierce discussion broke out on the pages of the Mari media, containing sometimes hostile attacks from the one side against the other one. Mountain Mari, accused the creators of the law of legal and linguistic inaccuracies in the wording of the law, namely, the use of brackets gives rise to debate: for some people who speak only the meadow variety, there is one and only Mari language; for others, who are the speakers of the mountain variety as their native language, there are two Mari languages. In addition, the mountain Mari were afraid that following the disappearance of the mentioning of the mountain Mari language in the legislation, the language would disappear, and consequently, the mountain Mari people would follow as an ethnic group.

## **4.3 Komi Language**

Inter-ethnic linguistic conflicts are often part of national conflicts affecting social, cultural, political problems, and therefore they can be very heated because they affect the vital interests of entire ethnic groups. The languages of the titular linguistic communities with the status of the state languages of the republics of Russia were introduced into the practice of compulsory schooling in some republics in 2004. There followed the instant reaction, a conflict of interests arose in various regions of the Russian Federation (namely, in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Komi, Udmurtia, etc.), owing to the fact that this step led to a decrease in the number of Russian language lessons, and that provoked conflict situations between the parents of Russian-speaking children and the parents of children from other ethnic groups.

In the Komi Republic, for example, parents of Russian and Russian-speaking students collected petitions against learning the Komi language in schools, statements were sent to the State Council of the Republic, to the Head of Komi Republic, to the Supreme and Constitutional Courts, and there were heated discussions in online publications. Not having achieved the expected reaction to their appeals, a boycott of the school curriculum began and the teaching of the Komi language turned into a formality. The result was a reaction from the government, where it was stated that the Russian language is the natural spiritual foundation of the entire multinational country. In general, the ideas of cultural freedom and the voluntary study of languages are actively promoted at the state level.

## **4.4 Bashkir Language**

A similar conflict arose in the Republic of Bashkortostan in the late 1980s – early 1990s and it was due to the fact that in 1922 the regions with Tatar and Russian population were annexed to its territory. As a result, in Bashkortostan 90% of the population are Bashkirs, Tatars and Russians, and, according to the 2010 census, Tatars are only 4% less in number than the Bashkirs. The conflict had its roots, first of all, in an administrative-volitional change in the structure of the national composition of the republic's population during the 1979 census, when part of the Tatar population of the western and north-western regions was recorded as Bashkirs. At the same time the clause on equal status of Russian, Tatar and Bashkir languages was removed from the 1978 Constitution. Starting from the 1979/1980 school year, the compulsory study of the Bashkir language (in lieu of the Tatar language) was introduced in schools. The Bashkir language was not only taught as a subject, but all subjects of the study cycle were taught in the Bashkir language. As a result, the number of Tatar schools fell sharply, while in those years Tatars made up 28.4% of the total population of the country, and Bashkirs were fewer in numbers – 21.9%. According to the academic year 1988/1989, there were 457 Tatar schools and 1215 Bashkir schools. This situation was painfully perceived by the Tatar population, who considered the situation as discrimination on ethnic grounds. The situation was partially improved after critics at the February plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1988.

However, there were forcible attempts to impose the Bashkir language studies for the Tatar population, which took place again in the post-Soviet period. The adoption of the law on languages in February 1999, in which the Bashkir language, along with the Russian language, received the status of the state language of

the republic. This language status granted the local authorities the right to introduce the Bashkir language in all school and university programs. This caused a sharp protest from the public, protest rallies. Incidentally, public addressed demands to the authorities to cancel this provision. Another unfavorable step for the non-Bashkir speaking population was the adoption of the law 'On State Civil Service' by the State Assembly of Bashkortostan, according to which some state positions required good competence in Bashkir language, which meant that only persons of Bashkir nationality could become public officials. Therefore, the language became an instrument of personnel policy and spurred a conflict language situation in Bashkortostan.

#### **4.5 Karelian Language**

It should be noted that the problems of creating a single literary language in a number of regions of the Russian Federation have been and still are very acute. A possible example here can be drawn from the situation in the Republic of Karelia at the turn of the 1980-1990s.

Karelia is the only republic in the Russian Federation in which the titular ethnic group is the Karelians, and the Karelian language does not have the status of the state language of the republic. Karelia is also one of the three republics of the Russian Federation where the law on languages has not been adopted. Nevertheless, it is considered a region where a very close attention is paid to the protection of the cultural and linguistic rights of peoples, especially the Karelians, Vepsians and Finns. According to the constitution, the state language of Karelia is Russian. According to the 2010 All-Russian Census, 78% of the population are Russians, 7.1% are Karelians, 1.3% are Finns, and 0.5% are Vepsians in Karelia.

On March 17, 2004, the Legislative Assembly of the Republic of Karelia adopted the Law 'On State Support of the Karelian, Vepsian and Finnish Languages in the Republic of Karelia'. The preamble of the law says: 'Karelian, Vepsian and Finnish languages constitute the national heritage of the Republic of Karelia and, along with other languages of the peoples of the Republic of Karelia, are under its protection'. At the same time, the dominant language in all areas of communication is the Russian language.

There was formed the Karelian movement group, who advocated in favour of giving the Karelian language the status of a state language and people actively supported the idea of the formation of a Karelian literary language based on its three varieties. Discussions about the principles of building a single language became especially acute after 2000.

It would seem that the situation with the Russian language should be more than satisfactory, however, back in 2007 the functioning of the Russian language caused discontent among the Russian-speaking Karelian intelligentsia, which came up with the initiative to create a public organization under the working name 'Russian North'. The initiative was supported by well-known cultural workers, musicians, librarians, public figures and journalists in Karelia. A protest against the policy of the Ministry of Culture of Karelia regarding the Russian language was expressed by the Karelian branch of the Union of Writers of Russia. Writers reproached the ministry for supporting the publication of literature in Russian in the republic. In the years 2005-2007, at the expense of budgetary funds, not a single art book of Russian authors was published. At the same time, works were regularly published in the Karelian, Vepsian and Finnish languages. The electronic media of the republic minimized broadcasts on Russian history and literature. Such information policy of the Karelia State Television and Radio Company also caused dissatisfaction, in particular, the fact that Russian-language news releases on Karelian radio were only available in the daytime, and the best evening hours were allocated to programs in national languages. Support for the indigenous peoples of Karelia was very important, but Russians were also an indigenous population in Karelia, as the observers said. Amazingly, at present, the radicals who actively advocated for the official status of the Karelian language are against this step.

The complexity of the language situation in Karelia lies in the fact that the functional development and status of languages are different: the Russian language is the state language and has a long history of normative development as a literary language, and the Karelian and Vepsian languages are young-written, mainly oral languages in the closed sphere of family and household communication, so they cannot jockey for functional influence with the Russian language.

#### **5 CONCLUSION**

The role of language in the life of a nation is great: it acts as a means of social interaction, a means of maintaining and developing national culture, as well as a means of expressing national identity. It is no coincidence that during the formation of new sovereign states, the state language is perceived as one of the most important indicators of statehood along with the emblem, anthem and other attributes of statehood. However, in a multinational society, further socialization often requires knowledge of the second language,

often also the state language, and sometimes in some areas of communication for certain social groups the third language is necessary, which can be the language of international communication.

State language planning activities are often aimed at solving problems arising from a language conflict. Moreover, it is often the language problem that makes the stabilization process difficult and requires considerable time and effort. Language conflicts are more common in multinational states and, therefore, multilingual countries and can arise in various language situations. The most acute conflicts occur in countries with a heterogeneous ethnic composition of the population and with languages that have different social status with unbalanced social functions.

Naturally, there are many reasons for national-language conflicts, namely economic, cultural, political, however, the language issue is most convenient as a trigger for a confrontation of ethnic communities. In such a confrontation, the linguistic question always has a significant place, when a particular language claims to gain the status of a state (or official) language, recognition of the linguistic rights of other compactly living linguistic communities. A model of a one-component (monolingual) law on languages, recognizing the linguistic rights of only one linguistic community and ignoring the linguistic rights of other large linguistic groups, cannot lead to other results than a language conflict, which usually occurs in historically difficult times in the context of many other extralinguistic factors.

Thus, trilingualism is the most acceptable functional model for most multi-ethnic countries (multilingualism with three components, the mother tongue + the state language + the language of international communication). In countries with the state language, which is also the language of international communication, a two-component model of the rational structure of language life is acceptable (the mother tongue, for example, for migrant families + the state language in the fields of organized communication). Social and speech adaptation of immigrants to local conditions requires the functioning of such a model of the language life for the new residents of the country.

The modern Russian system of laws on languages ensures the preservation of harmonious linguistic life throughout the Russian Federation. The rights of ethnic groups to the development of their languages are secured by the government, which contributes to the preservation of linguistic diversity in the country. Laws on the languages of the Russian Federation affirm the high status of the languages of the titular peoples of Russia, which is another factor in levelling the possibility of conflict situations. The linguistic unity of the country is achieved through the means of the wide functioning of the language of unity, the Russian language as the national language of the Russian Federation. Linguistic diversity and linguistic unity are two components of a linguistic life in the Russian Federation. This approach provides an opportunity to take into account the specifics of language situations in different regions of the country and build balanced models for the implementation of language policy, in order to avoid the possible occurrence of language conflicts. Nevertheless, it is important to note that linguistic conflicts are probably a natural characteristic of the linguistic life in a society, and also, perhaps, sometimes they can serve as an incentive for the development of a language.

Thus, the important role of language in the life of any multi-ethnic region of the Russian Federation has become apparent. In order to avoid a conflict situation, a balanced language policy, a search for consensus, and respect for human rights prescribed in laws are needed.

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