

A Study on Language Competence and Use by Ethnic Kyrgyz People in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Results from Interviews

Nami ODAGIRI

Doctoral Program in Literature and Linguistics
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Tsukuba

Abstract

In this article the author discusses the case of Kyrgyzstan and examines the language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people. Based on the results of semi-structured interviews with thirteen ethnic Kyrgyz people, features of Kyrgyz language use are clarified. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the titular languages of each ex-Soviet state were promoted as 'state languages' and positioned as a symbol of national integration. Previous studies on this topic indicate the tendency that the influence of each state language is growing, while the role of Russian language which enjoyed the highest prestige during the Soviet era is shrinking. Details of the dynamics of the relationship between state language and Russian language in each state, however, have not been fully discussed. Through the analysis of interviews, the author will attempt to clarify three characteristics of the language competence and use of language by ethnic Kyrgyz people, namely, 1) diversity in language competence among ethnic Kyrgyz people; 2) aralash (mix) use of Kyrgyz and Russian; and 3) language use in relation to ethnicity. In conclusion, based on these results, the author will discuss the features of state language in the context of Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords: Kyrgyz, Russian, state language, official language, post-Soviet area

要旨

本稿は、旧ソ連のキルギス共和国を事例とし、13人のキルギス人を対象としたインタビュー調査を基に、キルギス人の言語使用を検討し、その特徴を明らかにするものである。ソ連解体後、旧ソ連諸国の各基幹民族語は、それぞれの共和国の「国家語」として推進され、国民統合の象徴として位置付けられてきた。このようなテーマを扱う従来の研究を踏まえると、ソ連時代に最も権威ある言語であったロシア語の地位は現在低下しつつあり、その一方で各基幹民族語の影響力がますます高まりつつある傾向にあるといえる。しかし、個々の共

和国におけるロシア語と各基幹民族語のせめぎあいの詳細な実態は、未だ完全には明らかにされていないのが現状である。本稿では、インタビュー調査の分析の結果、キルギス人の言語能力・言語使用の特徴として、以下の3点を指摘する。(1)キルギス人の言語能力の多様性、(2)キルギス語とロシア語の併用および二言語間のコード・スイッチング、(3)民族に応じた言語使用。最後に、これらの結果を基に、キルギス共和国の文脈における国家語の普及の特徴について言及する。

キーワード：キルギス語、ロシア語、国家語、公用語、旧ソ連地域

1. Introduction

The post-Soviet area might be an attractive arena to explore the status and concept of ‘state/national language’¹ in the modern world. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the titular languages of each ex-Soviet state were promoted as the ‘state language’ and positioned as the symbol of national integration. In light of the results from previous studies on this topic (Landau and Kellner-Heinkele 2001; Pavlenko 2008; etc.), the author of the present study could point out the general tendency that the influence of each state language is growing, while the role of Russian language, which had enjoyed the highest prestige in the Soviet era, is shrinking, though its influence has not been completely excluded.² However, many previous studies are general or comparative which involve two or more states of the ex-Soviet region and details of the dynamics of the relationship between state language and Russian language in each state have not yet been fully explored. Moreover, as previous studies were mainly concerned with the legal and social status of language, aspects of language used by people in their daily lives in the area have not been fully discussed.

This article, therefore, will focus on the case of Kyrgyzstan and will attempt to examine the language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people and clarify the features of the Kyrgyz language, based on the results of semi-structured interviews with thirteen ethnic Kyrgyz people from the major ethnic group of Kyrgyzstan.³ In addition, results of other interviews, participant observations and data from informal conversations conducted during several field trips since 2007 are partially included. Details and significance of the methodology employed in this article will be discussed in section 3.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the few ex-Soviet states which accords a certain legal status to the Russian language.⁴ In this state, Russian was designated as the ‘official language’ in 2000 through a language law (Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki 2000.5.25), and its status was further confirmed by the Constitution in 2001 (Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki 2001.12.4). However, people are highly concerned about the issue and even afterwards, there are continuous discussions in the political arena and mass media on whether to maintain the official status of the Russian language or not. Therefore, this article will attempt to reveal the dynamics of language use in daily life in the context of Kyrgyzstan where Russian language enjoys a relatively high legal status. Through this examination, this study hopes to contribute to the efforts of clarifying the aspects of various national/state languages in the modern world.

In the next section, the author will describe the developments of language policy during the Soviet era and after the independence of Kyrgyzstan.⁵ Then the language competence and language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people, based on the results of interviews, will be discussed.

2. Language policy in the Soviet era, during perestroika and after independence

During the Soviet era, Russian became a socially-politically prestigious language and was widely used in spheres such as administration, higher education etc., it was positioned as ‘the language for inter-ethnic communication’, though without any legal base, and therefore many parents wished their children to be educated in Russian for their future happiness and social success (Alpatov 2000: 107). On the other hand, the Kyrgyz language was often associated with a negative image and Kyrgyz speakers were derisively referred to as ‘sheep’.⁶ However, during perestroika, intellectuals such as writers and scholars became more conscious about the loss of Kyrgyz language and campaigned for its revival. In consequence, a language law was passed in 1989 which designated Kyrgyz as the ‘state language’ (*mamlekettik til* in Kyrgyz, *gosudarstvennyi iazyk* in Russian) of Kyrgyzstan (Zakon Kirgizskoi SSR 1989.9.23). This kind of phenomenon can be observed not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in all ex-Soviet Republics, beginning with the adoption of the language law in Estonia.⁷

Then, what does the term ‘state language’ mean? In article 2 of the language law of 1989, it is defined as follows:

Kyrgyz as state language is one of the symbols of state sovereignty of Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic and functions in all spheres of state-social activities in the fields of economy, academy, technology, education, culture and communication among citizens.

Thus, state language is defined as the symbol of the state and the language which functions in all spheres of state-social activities.

After the independence of Kyrgyzstan and the designation of Kyrgyz as the state language, the development and spread of Kyrgyz language was extensively pursued and various measures were adopted for that purpose. For instance, efforts were made for the transition from Russian to Kyrgyz of documentation, the creation of new terminologies in Kyrgyz, the publication of dictionaries and textbooks in Kyrgyz, etc. However, it was not an easy process. It was thought that the main cause of emigration by the Russian speaking population, including many intellectuals and skilled workers, creating a serious social problem, was the promotion of the Kyrgyz language as the state language. In addition, it was impossible to immediately make the transition from Russian to Kyrgyz language for all state-social activities. This ultimately led to the designation of Russian as an official language in 2000.

Of course, designation of Russian as an official language did not represent a total abandon of the promotion of Kyrgyz and the endeavor to develop Kyrgyz language continues today. September 23, 2009, exactly twenty years after the adoption of the language law in 1989, the Day of State Language was actively celebrated. In a speech during the memorial ceremony, the then president placed this celebration as “the festival for all of us: ethnic Kyrgyz and other ethnic groups” and emphasized that “the state language must be the primary medium of communication in social, political, economic and cultural activities.”⁸ For the celebration of the day, slogans such as “the fate of the language is the fate of the people”, “you become a nation with your language” were set up in front of the central square in Bishkek, the capital.⁹ Even before this twentieth anniversary, the Day of State Language had been celebrated every year and associated events were organized under slogans like “State language: language for all of us” in 2005 (Zhumagulov 2007: 107-8). In addition, pursuant to the language law which was amended in 2004 (Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki 2004.2.12), it was stipulated that

“Kyrgyz as state language is also regarded as the language for inter-ethnic communication” (Article 3).

It could be said that these efforts were aimed at establishing Kyrgyz not only as the language for ethnic Kyrgyz people, but also as the language for all people who live in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, while giving a comparatively higher status to Russian, there were consistent efforts to promote Kyrgyz as the state language. Some twenty years after the designation of the state language, how then do people actually use languages in their daily lives? Does their language use reflect the development of language policies? In the next section, these questions will be explored based on the results of the interviews.

3. Interview settings

The interviews, each of which took 15-40 minutes, were conducted during a field trip to Kyrgyzstan from August 4th to 31st, 2011. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author with the help of a local assistant. Note that the English translations of the quoted speech of informants throughout this article might seem highly casual or unnatural as, with the aim of respecting the original translation, they are literal translations from the Kyrgyz or Russian languages.

An interview survey is usually classified as ‘qualitative research’, which is “a general term for descriptive and intensive researches, contrasted with ‘quantitative research’ which is represented by statistical research” (Hamashima et al. 2005: 236). A certain amount of quantitative data on language competence and language use in the ex-Soviet region are available from several sources: 1) Census, in which the population is asked about their language competence; 2) *Evraziiskii monitor* (2007) and *Evraziiskii monitor* (2011), reports on a large-scale survey¹⁰ in the ex-Soviet region which is conducted every six months and includes a question on language use at home. These quantitative data enabled the author to conduct a comparative analysis of different states and different time spans. However, they do not describe details of language use and attitudes of people towards certain languages. Therefore, employing the qualitative method, this article aims at an in-depth discussion of language use in Kyrgyzstan.

The following table shows general information on the informants (Table 1). Most informants live in Bishkek (see Fig. 1 below), which is known to be a multi-ethnic region and hence a Russian-speaking region, while rural areas are known to be dominant-Kyrgyz.

Table 1: General information on informants

Number	Sex	Age ¹¹	Occupation	Place of residence (See Fig. 1 below)	Place of birth	Language of instruction in school
(1)	F	26	Chinese teacher	Bishkek city	Talas oblast	Kyrgyz
(2)	F	31	Japanese/ Russian teacher	Bishkek city	Ysyk Kol oblast	Russian
(3)	F	30	Japanese teacher	Bishkek city	Naryn oblast	Kyrgyz
(4)	F	30	Housekeeper	Bishkek city	Chui oblast	Russian
(5)	M	30	Entrepreneur	Bishkek city	Bishkek city	Kyrgyz
(6)	F	21	Student	Bishkek city	Bishkek city	Russian
(7)	F	25	Interpreter, Russian teacher	Bishkek city	Osh oblast	Kyrgyz (1st -8th year), Russian (9th -11th year)
(8)	F	55	Cleaner	Bishkek city	Chui oblast	Kyrgyz
(9)	F	32	Kyrgyz teacher	Chui (Kant city) ¹²	Naryn oblast	Kyrgyz
(10)	M	52	Farmer	Chui oblast	Chui oblast	Kyrgyz
(11)	F	46	Russian teacher	Chui oblast	Osh oblast	Kyrgyz
(12)	F	67	Pensioner	Talas oblast	Talas oblast	Kyrgyz
(13)	M	46	Farmer	Talas oblast	Talas oblast	Kyrgyz



<http://www.freemap.jp/asia/asia_kyrgyzstan_all.html>

Fig. 1: Map of Kyrgyzstan

After providing the information above, the informants were asked about when and how they used a certain language in their daily lives, to evaluate their own language use, and about which language they regarded as their ‘mother tongue’.¹³ The interview method used in this study was the ‘semi-structured interview’ method, in which core questions prepared in Kyrgyz and Russian are asked in advance, informants were asked about other related issues depending on the process of the interviews and they were encouraged to share opinions which they deemed important.¹⁴ The interviews were conducted either in Kyrgyz or Russian or in both. Before the interview, informants were advised that they could answer in Kyrgyz or Russian or both.

Informants were selected from among the author's acquaintances as the interviews included questions concerning personal experiences and thus required a certain level of relationship and trust between the researcher and the informants. The selection of informants reveals certain limitations of this study: firstly, this study involved only ethnic Kyrgyz and thus does not discuss the language use of other ethnic groups; secondly, the interviews conducted did not include people presently living in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan (although some informants originated from that area), which is known to have a different language situation from that of the northern part of Kyrgyzstan, including the capital Bishkek. These restrictions shall be addressed in further studies by the author.

Through the analysis of interviews, the following characteristics of the language competence and language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people were clarified: 1) diversity in language competence among ethnic Kyrgyz; 2) mixed use of Kyrgyz and Russian; and 3) language use in relation to ethnicity. The author shall discuss each topic individually in the sections below.

4. Mother tongue and language competence

The results show the diversity in language competence among ethnic Kyrgyz people. Although both Kyrgyz and Russian languages are legally recognized, as state language and official language respectively, this does not necessarily mean that the people, including ethnic Kyrgyz people, have high competence in both languages. Similarly, belonging to a certain ethnic group sometimes means that a person directly acquires his or her language and uses it, while in other cases ethnicity does not reflect the language which a person actually acquires and uses.

According to the census of 2009, nearly 99.9% of ethnic Kyrgyz indicated Kyrgyz language as their mother tongue. At a glance, this data seems to show that being ethnic Kyrgyz always presupposes an ability to use Kyrgyz language. However, as Shibuya (2007: 175) argues, while the concept of mother tongue in the Soviet era had taken on an inviolable position as the term was at the core of the nationality policy, its definition was ambiguous and uncertain. Therefore, when people were asked about their mother tongue in the census, as the definition of 'mother tongue' depended on the respondents' subjective point of view, some chose the language which they knew best while others chose the language of their ethnicity even when they were almost incapable of using it.

In this case, although 99.9% of ethnic Kyrgyz indicated the Kyrgyz language as their mother tongue, it is possible that the concept of mother tongue was more connected to ethnicity than to their actual ability to speak, read or write Kyrgyz.

In fact, when informants were asked about their mother tongue(s), the language(s) they speak best and the language(s) they read and write best in the interviews, every informant indicated Kyrgyz as their mother tongue. No informant indicated two or more languages as their mother tongue, though some informants could speak, read or write better in Russian than in Kyrgyz.

For example, although informant (6) answered that she was fluent in both Kyrgyz and Russian, at the same time she said she spoke better Russian because “sometimes when I read and write I encounter unknown words in Kyrgyz which I don’t understand”. Similarly, informant (4), who considered herself bilingual, explained that she could not read Kyrgyz. In spite of this, Russian was never referred to as the mother tongue. In addition, although some informants considered themselves perfectly bilingual in Kyrgyz and Russian, they never referred to Russian as their mother tongue.

As for competence in Russian, according to the data of the 2009 census, about 45.2% of ethnic Kyrgyz people acquire Russian as their second language. In the interviews, all informants declared that they knew Russian, while their competence in Russian seemed to differ. For example, informant (12) explained that her competence of Russian was lower than it had been during the Soviet area, when there were more opportunities to communicate in Russian.

How then was this difference in language competence among ethnic Kyrgyz brought about? As Korth (2005: 218-219) argues, choice of language of instruction in school and place of birth and residence have major impacts on one’s language ability in the context of Kyrgyzstan. Actually, focusing on three informants who attended a Russian school,¹⁵ excluding informant (7) who changed to a Russian school after ninth year, informant (2) speaks Russian best, (4) and (6) speak better in Russian although they do have high ability in speaking in both languages, and all of them write better in Russian

It is worth pointing out that some informants who were brought up in rural areas and graduated from Kyrgyz school answered that they read and wrote better in Russian. Informants (1) and (3), who were brought up in rural areas and graduated from Kyrgyz school, explained that they read and wrote better in Russian. Informant (3) explained

that it was difficult to read in Kyrgyz and the contents of Kyrgyz books were incomprehensible, although she does try to read them. This result may possibly indicate that there are less chances to read and write in Kyrgyz even for those who were brought up in rural areas and graduated from Kyrgyz school. The author will discuss this point in detail in the following section.

Thus, even among ethnic Kyrgyz people, differences were observed in language competence in Kyrgyz and Russian. In particular, it is worth noting that differences exist between the ability to speak and the ability to read or write, which is attributable to various factors. Even between those who consider themselves ‘bilingual’, some claim that they cannot read Kyrgyz, although they all indicate Kyrgyz as their sole mother tongue.

5. Dynamics of language use

How then do these people actually use languages in their daily lives? In this section, the author will argue that the language use of Kyrgyz is characterized by 1) a mixed use of Kyrgyz and Russian; and 2) language use in relation to ethnicity. Beforehand, the author will refer to the results of the micro census of 1994 for comparison with the results of the interviews (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Language use in relation to occasion (% in 1994)

Home		School		Workplace	
Kyrgyz	Russian	Kyrgyz	Russian	Kyrgyz	Russian
97.8	1.8	87.4	12.3	82.6	17.0

(Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2001: 95, Table 5.4,
partly revised by the author.)

Thus, these results show that, while 97.8% of ethnic Kyrgyz use Kyrgyz language at home, the proportion of those who use Kyrgyz in school or university (87.8%) and in the workplace (82.6%) are less. Further, let us add the variable ‘region’ to the analysis. Table 3 shows the language use of ethnic Kyrgyz in relation to context and region (whole country versus Bishkek).

**Table 3: Language use in relation to context and region
(% in mid 1990s)**

	Home	School	Workplace
whole country	98	87	83
Bishkek	70	-	20

Korth (2005: 126)¹⁶

Thus, when looking at language use at the national level, Kyrgyz language is highly used in all occasions, although the proportion differs in relation to context. However, the proportion of use of Kyrgyz drastically falls in Bishkek, with 70% at home and 20% in the workplace respectively.

The results of the interviews show a similar tendency. In fact, while six informants out of thirteen used exclusively or mostly Kyrgyz language at home (three residents of Bishkek, and three residents of rural areas), only two informants (one resident of Bishkek and one resident of rural areas) explained that they exclusively or mostly used Kyrgyz in places other than at home. The results of the interviews indicate that Russian language tends to be more used in the following contexts: mass media, workplace and other contexts in which people use written language. For example, informant (8) who exclusively used Kyrgyz at home explained that she mostly used Russian in the workplace, including writing job applications.

However, one language never simply and uncompromisingly corresponds to a single context or region. When informants were asked “which language do you use, say, at home, or in the work place?”, the most frequent answer was *aralash* in Kyrgyz and *vperemeshku* or *smeshanno* in Russian, which all mean ‘mix’.

5. 1 *Aralash* (mix) use of two languages

On a same occasion, informant (4) used languages, when conversing with relatives, in the following way: “with relatives, well, with my own relatives, I speak in Russian, but with my husband’s relatives I speak in Kyrgyz.” As she explained, among her own relatives “in principle we always use Russian.” Then, even at home, “I speak in Kyrgyz because my parents-in-law speak in Kyrgyz,” but “with my husband and sister in-law, I speak in Russian.”

Similarly, in other cases, informants used both Kyrgyz and Russian and, as informant (11) explained, “it always depends on how and to whom we speak”. For example, with regards the choice of language when reading newspapers and watching TV, informant (8) explained that “whichever program on TV or radio comes into our favor, we watch it. For example, if we like Russian drama series, we watch them. Yeah, two languages are equal.”

In addition, even when speaking in one context in a conversation with the same person, ‘code-switching’ between Kyrgyz and Russian was often observed, which is defined as “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (Gumperz 1982: 59). Generally, the reasons for this are thought to be as follows: consciousness of camaraderie with the listener (barometer of friendship), choice of topic, social and cultural distance with the listener, and so on (Iwata 2003: 239). Interestingly, code-switching is usually observed in conversations among ethnic Kyrgyz people, whereas Russian is used exclusively in inter-ethnic communication, as the author will argue in 5.2.1.

Note that a distinction has often been made in research literature between ‘code-switching’ and ‘code-mixing’; the former indicates the ‘intersentential’ alternation of languages, while the latter is ‘intrasentential’, as Ritchie and Bhatia (2004: 337) illustrate. However, the distinction between the two terms is controversial and some scholars doubt its usefulness (ibid.). Therefore, in this article, the author does not distinguish between the two terms and uses the term ‘code-switching’ as a cover term for both.¹⁷ Additionally, the author will use the term ‘mix’ interchangeably with ‘code-switching’ in referring to the word *aralash* which often appears in the comments of informants.

5. 1. 1 Examples of code-switching between Kyrgyz and Russian languages

The following data from informal conversation between informants (6) and (9), which was recorded in 2010, illustrates how code-switching between Kyrgyz and Russian happens. The first text gives the translation of the transcript in English, and the second gives the original version of the transcript written in Kyrgyz and Russian using Latin characters. In both cases, the parts which were uttered in Russian are indicated by boldface and personal names (assumed name) are underlined.¹⁸

(Translation in English)

- 01 (6): **Simply type of character different**
02 (9): Akylai must be very soft, huh?
03 (6): **Yeah, Akylai is soft, such, how should I say, **such****
04 (9): **Naive::**
05 (6): **No, she's not naive**
06 (9): **Naive**
07 (6): **Not such really, but maybe for boys:: naive, but as for feminine parts, well, but any girl may be naive. But so she:: but she is such positive, good**
08 (9): What about Nurzad?

(Original version in Kyrgyz and Russian)

- 01 (6): *prosto tip kharaktera raznyi*
02 (9): *Akylai ayabai zhumshak bolush kerek ee?*
03 (6): ***Da, Akylai zhumshak, myndai, kandai desem, **takaia*****
04 (9): ***Naivnaia::***
05 (6): ***Net, ona ne naivnaia***
06 (9): ***Naivnaia***
07 (6): ***Ne tak priamo, no mozhnet byt' erkekerge:: naivnaia, no po zhenskoi chasti, smysl, no liubaia zhe devushka naivnaia. No tak ona:: no ona takaia pozitivnaia, zhakshy***
08 (9): *Nurzad ezhechi?*

In the third line, informant (6) began with Russian, and suddenly she switched to Kyrgyz, and then back to Russian. In the seventh line, while speaking basically in Russian, she sometimes inserted Kyrgyz words ('for boys', 'good').

This kind of code-switching is also frequently observed in interviews in which informants were allowed to speak in both Kyrgyz and Russian. Here are some

examples of code-switching between Kyrgyz and Russian (utterances in Russian are indicated by boldface):

- 1) Code-switching by sentence (informant (5); although the interview was started in Kyrgyz, he often switched between Kyrgyz and Russian):

Often I watch news in Russian, Russia's channels are in Russian. **Their news are just better now, so.**

*Kobuncho oruscha zhanylyktardy, rossiianyn kanaldar oruscha da. U **nikh prosto luchshe da, novosti seichas, poetomu.***

- 2) Code-switching by clause (informant (2); the interview was held mostly in Russian):

well if these newspapers, books, often in Russian, **Russian, TV also.**

*nu esli vot eti gazeta, kunigi kobuncho oruscha, **russkii, televizor tozhe.***

- 3) Code-switching by clause and word (informant (11)):

Depending on how with whom as always, mixing.

Smotrya kandai s kem kak vseгда da, aralashtryyp.

- 4) Insertion of adverbs and parenthetical expression (informant (13); the interview was held exclusively in Kyrgyz):

(...) some people think, when they come to the capital, **this means** they have to speak in Russian (...)

*(...) keebirler oiloit da, shaarga kelseм **znachit** oruscha suilosh kerek dep oiloit da (...)*

When we speak we just speak in Kyrgyz, **only** documents we fill in in Russian.

*Suilogondo kyrgyzcha ele suiloibuz, **tol'ko** kagazdy oruscha tolturabyz da.*

5. 1. 2 Attitudes towards *aralash* use

Thus, based on the results of the interviews, it could be concluded that language use of ethnic Kyrgyz is characterized by the *aralash* use of Kyrgyz and Russian. How then do ethnic Kyrgyz people relate to this feature of language use?

As argued in 5.1, code-switching is known to have some functions such as barometer of friendship. However, in the discourses of promotion of Kyrgyz language, it is described as something which prevents the development of Kyrgyz and thus should be avoided. For example, in 2011, the head of the State Language Commission¹⁹ sent a claim to the chairperson of the parliament of Kyrgyzstan, requiring the members of parliament to speak in 'pure' Kyrgyz without mixing (Barakelde 2011.1.29). It is because many parliament members are known to usually speak in a mixed manner when appearing on TV; as informant (1) informed the author "I haven't heard them speak solely in one language."

However, in the interview survey, only informant (12) who lives in a rural area and exclusively uses Kyrgyz, especially since independence, clearly asserted that mixing is "bad" and "we must speak in Kyrgyz". In principle, the other informants had comparatively positive attitudes towards the mixed use of languages. For example, informant (4) who is from Russian school said that she mixes the two languages and she thinks "it's alright". Also, informant (13), who lives in a rural area and almost exclusively uses Kyrgyz in his daily life, considered that "it's OK" to mix Russian and Kyrgyz because "when you go to Russia, Russian language will help you. If you go to other countries, you will be speaking Russian." As Russia is the main receiving country of migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, for informant (13), who lives in a dominant Kyrgyz environment and who has sent his daughter to work in Russia, the mixed use of Russian and Kyrgyz is an effective way to improve his competence in Russian. Thus, while some lamented the mixed use of two languages, others had comparatively positive attitudes towards it.

However, positive attitudes to mixing languages are not unconditional and some informants thought that mixed use should be avoided in certain cases. Primarily, mixing Russian is regarded as something which is unavoidable and happens automatically and unconsciously, although it would be better to make an effort to avoid mixing. In this regard, informant (10) explained:

As much as you can, you should make an effort not to mix, as much as you can. But we find ourselves automatically mixing Russian, mixing such words as *konechno* (of course), these words have just entered the Kyrgyz language.

The comment of another informant shows how this automatic and unconscious mixing takes place: while informant (1) was explaining that she unconsciously mixes Russian and Kyrgyz she suddenly became aware that that was exactly what she was doing while she was speaking to the author (utterances in Russian are indicated by boldface):

I often mix such Russian words as ‘**of course** (*konechno*)’, ‘**pass me** (*peredai*)’ and ‘**OK** (*ladno*).’ (...) When I am in rural areas, I make an effort to speak in Kyrgyz without adding Russian words (...) But, when I am at home, when I speak **freely** (*svobodno*), see, I now mixed the word ‘**freely** (*svobodno*)’ when I wanted to say the word ‘freely (*erkin*)’. I mix like this and I don’t do it on purpose. Unconsciously, without thinking. Sometimes I speak in Russian when I can’t remember a word in Kyrgyz.

Further, she argued that she would not be able to talk about anything without mixing:

Mmm, we’ve learned that way, we continue to speak that way, and it’s unavoidable. We use Russian words for new technologies as we don’t have them in Kyrgyz, for example, refrigerator (*kholodil’nik*), TV (*televizor*), it’s impossible not to mix these words. (...) All home electronics are in Russian, so it’s unavoidable. We can’t go anywhere. Then we won’t be able to speak even in Kyrgyz. We’ll be speaking in Kyrgyz like this; pass me ‘THAT’.

Note that the use of such words as refrigerator or TV in the comment above may not be classified as ‘code-switching’. Rather, this would be classified as ‘borrowing’, which is defined as “the incorporation of lexical elements from one language in the lexicon of another language,” whereas “code-switching is the use of two languages in one clause or utterance” (Muysken 1995: 190). In other words, a distinction between code-switching and borrowing should be made in terms of level of assimilation or integration of a certain word in the recipient language. Therefore, the use of such words, as TV for example, which are already included in Kyrgyz dictionaries (e.g. Akmataliev 2010) is classified as borrowing. In fact, modern Kyrgyz contains a vast amount of borrowed or Russian-origin elements, which is characterized as three points: 1. lexical borrowing from Russian; 2. calquing of Russian phrases; and 3. semantic influence (Krippes 1998: xviii). According to an estimation by Orusbaev (1980: 29), by the 1970s, 70-80% of modern Kyrgyz terms, especially in spheres of science and technology, consisted of borrowed words from or via Russian.²⁰

Nonetheless, as Van Dulm (2007: 9) states, it is worth noting that the distinction between code switching and borrowing, specifically between single-word switches on the one hand, and borrowed words on the other, is not always clear-cut. Therefore, what is important here is whether people are aware of the distinction between code-switching and borrowing or not, or even that when people think they are speaking in ‘Kyrgyz’ without code-switching, their speech could include a vast amount of elements of Russian origin. Thus, while efforts are made to speak in ‘pure’ Kyrgyz as mentioned earlier, in the situation of long-term linguistic contact between Kyrgyz and Russian languages, people cannot choose but to have realistic attitudes towards mixed use and regard it as something unavoidable.

Still, some informants pointed out that it was better to speak without mixing in official occasions such as in public speech, although “it’s okay” to mix in daily conversation. For example, informant (3) explained:

For example, when simply speaking like this, it’s OK to mix. But when speaking in official occasions, mixing doesn’t sound good. For example, when you appear on TV, if you speak one word in Kyrgyz and another word in Russian. But when you are with relatives or friends, it’s OK. (...) Mmm, when you make a speech, it’s better to use one language. Either Russian or Kyrgyz.

It is worth noting that positive attitudes towards mixing are conditional, that is to say, only if, in certain situations, one can speak properly in Kyrgyz or Russian. Similarly, informant (5), who expressed a positive attitude towards mixed use said “(I relate to mixing) positively. It depends on people. At one’s convenience”, meanwhile, the informant insisted “what is important is that s/he recognizes the value of both languages and does not forget these languages.” During Soviet rule, while competence in Russian language was thought to be an essential factor for social success, a lack of competence in Kyrgyz language was no reason for shame. On the contrary, it was considered natural or even modern (Korth 2005: 155). However, nowadays everyone is required to be proficient in Kyrgyz. Why then is it important to be proficient in Kyrgyz? In 5.2.2 below, the author will discuss this point in terms of relationship between ethnicity and language.

Thus, one feature of language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people (mainly of those who live in Bishkek) can be characterized as an *aralash* use of Kyrgyz and Russian, and it would seem that people have realistic attitudes towards this kind of language practice against the background of long-term linguistic contact between Kyrgyz and Russian. However, at the same time it would also seem that in certain situations it is better to make an effort to use one single language.

5. 2 Language choice in relation to ethnicity

5. 2. 1 Russian as the language for inter-ethnic communication

Another feature of language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people clarified by this study is the language choice in relation to ethnicity. While an *aralash* use of the two languages was observed in conversations among Kyrgyz people, Russian language was exclusively used in inter-ethnic communication, at least among the informants of this study.

Of course, as long as Kyrgyz is the ‘state’ language of Kyrgyzstan, some argue that anyone who lives in Kyrgyzstan, regardless of ethnicity, should speak Kyrgyz, as mentioned in section 2. In fact, the low acquisition rate of the Kyrgyz language by other ethnic groups has been recognized as a major problem in the discourse of the promotion of Kyrgyz. However, among the informants, it was commonly held as a rule that they should use Russian when talking with other ethnic groups. For example, when informants were asked in which language they would ask a mini-bus²¹ driver to stop, many informants answered that if the driver was Kyrgyz, they would speak in Kyrgyz, and if the driver was Russian or of another ethnicity, they would speak in Russian (informants (1), (4), (6), (7), (8); it should be noted the author never mentioned the supposed driver’s ethnicity).

Many informants gave similar responses for other occasions. For example, informant (8) said that she spoke in Russian with Russian friends and in Kyrgyz with Kyrgyz friends. Similarly, informant (9), who is a Kyrgyz teacher, said that “sometimes we have Russian students in our classroom, and I speak Russian with them.”

As for those informants living in dominant Kyrgyz-language rural areas, informants (10) and (13) both explained that they sometimes used Russian during work when they met Russian speaking people. Informant (11) even insisted that it was unacceptable to speak Kyrgyz with other ethnic groups because they would not understand it.

This does not mean, however, that ethnic Kyrgyz people never expect other ethnic groups to speak Kyrgyz. As informant (3) explained:

For other ethnic groups, we must not expect them to know Kyrgyz on the basis that they live here. It's good if they do know Kyrgyz, but we must not relate to them badly on the grounds that they do not know Kyrgyz.

Similarly, another informant (7), who shared the experience of being pleased to hear a Russian man speak a word in Kyrgyz on a mini bus, also said, as informant (3) above, "I don't think other ethnic groups should have to know Kyrgyz. They must know their own languages. It's good if they also know Kyrgyz."

Thus, these examples reflect a reality different from the discourse which positions Kyrgyz as the language for all citizens of Kyrgyzstan regardless of their ethnicity. It was common among informants to find that they did not think other ethnic groups should speak Kyrgyz, although they considered it desirable if they did. For them, the language in which they speak to other ethnic groups was Russian. This means that Russian is recognized as the language for inter-ethnic communication while Kyrgyz is not.

5. 2. 2 The meaning of the Kyrgyz language for ethnic Kyrgyz people

However, it is generally held among informants that competence in Kyrgyz language is indispensable for an ethnic Kyrgyz person, although they do not expect people of other ethnic groups to speak the language. For example, informant (13) insisted "If you are Kyrgyz, you should know the Kyrgyz language. It is indispensable you know the language. You should speak Kyrgyz." Similarly, informant (1) asserted that "as long as a person is Kyrgyz, then above all s/he has to know his/her own language. S/he has to know his/her own tradition. (...) I think it's a shame if people don't know Kyrgyz."

Why then is it important for ethnic Kyrgyz people to know the Kyrgyz language? As for the reason, informant (8) insisted:

Now you should know your own mother tongue, how can I live without knowing my own mother tongue? A mother tongue is irreplaceable for everyone.

In addition, there were some cases in which people consciously chose Kyrgyz. For example, informant (4), who graduated from Russian school, said that she wanted to send her son first to a Russian kindergarten and subsequently to a Kyrgyz school, so that he would know both Russian and Kyrgyz languages. It is worthwhile to compare the choice of school with that of the Soviet era, when people preferred to send their children to Russian schools (see section 2). In another case, in an interview taken in 2008 by the author, a 27-year-old woman said that when she speaks to the driver on a mini-bus, as she does not want to be criticized when she speaks Russian, these days, she makes it a rule to speak Kyrgyz. Also, when she comes across sophisticated people speaking Kyrgyz, she thinks she must speak Kyrgyz as well.

It is worth noting that in all the cases above, the necessity to be competent in Kyrgyz is stressed without any concrete reason. At least, the importance of Kyrgyz language is not explained in terms of its practical utility, whereas that of Russian usually is. Kyrgyz is positioned as the mother tongue of all ethnic Kyrgyz people regardless of their competence in Kyrgyz language (see section 4) and competence in Kyrgyz language is regarded as an essential element of being Kyrgyz.

This leads to a situation in which those who do not have enough competence in Kyrgyz language are called *Kirgiz* or *chala Kyrgyz*, as informant (7) explained, the former indicating a Russified pronunciation of ‘Kyrgyz’ and the latter indicated ‘half Kyrgyz’, thus both are used as derogatory terms for Russified Kyrgyz.²²

Informant (6) who complained that she had a ‘strong accent’ when she spoke Kyrgyz, shared the experience of when she could not speak Kyrgyz. She lamented that while it was desirable she speak in Kyrgyz without mixing Russian, she explained that “it’s hard” for her and that “I can’t speak only in Kyrgyz.” She further added:

For example, when I go to rural areas, I always speak in Kyrgyz and sometimes make mistakes. Then I feel ashamed and start to speak in Russian, because I don’t know Kyrgyz well enough. But I feel more confident when I speak in Russian.

As argued in section 5.1.2, lack of competence in Kyrgyz was no reason for shame and it was rather considered natural or even modern during the Soviet era. However, here the informant was worried about her accent in Kyrgyz language and ashamed when she

could not speak Kyrgyz and had to switch to Russian, although she still recognized Kyrgyz as her mother tongue.

Thus, while people other than ethnic Kyrgyz people are not required to have competence in Kyrgyz language of necessity and, as a rule ethnic Kyrgyz people use Russian language with them, knowledge of Kyrgyz language is required to be ethnic Kyrgyz, that is, Kyrgyz language is regarded as the main component of ethnic identity.

6. Conclusion

In this article, through the analysis of interviews, the following characteristics of language competence and language use of ethnic Kyrgyz were clarified: 1) diversity in language competence among ethnic Kyrgyz people; 2) mixed use of Kyrgyz and Russian languages; and 3) language use in relation to ethnicity. What then do these results tell us about the situation of the Kyrgyz language as the ‘state language’ of Kyrgyzstan?

As examined in section 2, while designating Russian as an official language, a process was undertaken to position Kyrgyz as the state language and thus the language for all who live in Kyrgyzstan. However, results from the interviews show that Russian is still used extensively, at least in the capital, and the language use of ethnic Kyrgyz people is characterized as a ‘mixed’ use of Kyrgyz and Russian. Moreover, attitudes towards mixed use are positive and Russian is recognized as the language for inter-ethnic communication. At a glance, these results seem to testify that there is a gap between official language policy and language situation in reality.

However, as discussed in the previous sections, significant changes are being brought to the Kyrgyz language. Now there are those who consciously make an effort to speak Kyrgyz in certain situations, unlike in the past when Kyrgyz speakers were associated with a negative image. Moreover, although Kyrgyz is not recognized as the language for all the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, competence in Kyrgyz language is regarded as an essential factor in being ethnic Kyrgyz and thus those who do not have enough ability in Kyrgyz language are blamed for a lack of competence in their own mother tongue.

These results indicate a tendency towards Kyrgyz language which emerges from the long term contact and relationship between Kyrgyz and Russian. In conclusion, the characteristic of promotion of a state language in the context of Kyrgyzstan could be described as the promotion of Kyrgyz language without completely excluding Russian language.

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- ¹ Generally, the language which is positioned as the symbol of national integration is referred to as 'national language' in English literatures. However, in the context of ex-Soviet regions, the language is called '*gosudarstvennyi iazyk*' in Russian, which is literally translated as 'state language'. If we literally translate 'national language' into Russian, it becomes '*natsional'nyi iazyk*', which rather implies 'ethnic language'. Therefore, in this article the author exclusively uses the term 'state language', while juxtaposing the two terms when referring to other contexts.
- ² Pavlenko (2008) treats Belarus as an exception and points out that Russian is still used as a dominant language there.
- ³ The population of Kyrgyzstan is 5,362,793 (according to the census of 2009). The three major ethnic groups are as follows: Kyrgyz, which accounts for 71.0% of the population; Uzbek, which accounts for 14.3% of the population and Russian, which accounts for 7.8% of the population. In addition to the above, as many as 100 other ethnic groups are reported to live in Kyrgyzstan.
- ⁴ Among fourteen ex-Soviet Republics excluding Russia, only three states (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) give a certain legal status to Russian (Usuyama 2005: 199). Belarus gives the status of state language to Russian along with Belarusian (Constitution of 1996). Kazakhstan stipulates that "Russian is officially used along with Kazakh" (Constitution of 1995). Kyrgyzstan designates it as the official language. For comparison, Tajikistan stipulates Russian as 'the language for inter-ethnic communication' in the constitution (Oka 2004: 87-88).
- ⁵ As for detailed discussion on the development of language policy after perestroika, see Odagiri (2011).
- ⁶ Information from a man in his 30s in 2011.
- ⁷ By 1978, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia had already declared their titular languages to be the state language in their constitutions (Neroznak 2002: 6).
- ⁸ The author refers to the manuscript of a speech which is published in Kyrgyz Tuusu (2009.9.25).
- ⁹ From a field note by the author in 2009.
- ¹⁰ For example, the survey involved 15,127 people in October-November 2007.
- ¹¹ As of September 1, 2011.
- ¹² In the comparison of capital versus rural areas, this informant is included in the former group.
- ¹³ The concept of 'mother tongue' shall be discussed in section 4 in detail.
- ¹⁴ In this paper, only part of the results of the interviews is analyzed. The interviews included other questions such as attitudes towards language policy promulgated by the government, prospects for the language situation in the future and so on. These themes shall be discussed in further research to be carried out by the author.
- ¹⁵ 'Russian school' stands for schools in which Russian is used as the language of instruction. Similarly, 'Kyrgyz school' stands for schools in which Kyrgyz is used as the language of instruction.
- ¹⁶ Original source: ASANKANOV Abylabek (1997). *Kyrgyzy: Rost natsional'nogo samopoznaniia*. Bishkek. p. 74, Table VIII.
- ¹⁷ Ritchie and Bhatia (2004: 337) use 'language mixing/switching (LM/S)' as a cover term for both code-mixing and code-switching.
- ¹⁸ The mark ':::' stands for extended pronunciation.
- ¹⁹ The organization which is set under the president of Kyrgyzstan and in charge of development of state language.
- ²⁰ Moreover, borrowed words after this period were pronounced closer to Russian pronunciation, which is different from the early 1900s when people pronounced Russian words with an accent (Orusbaev 1980: 29).
- ²¹ Mini-buses, which are called *Marshrutka*, drive along fixed routes and passengers can ask the driver to stop at any place.
- ²² These expressions are used in daily conversation. For example, a girl who was born and lived in a rural area went to her relative's house in the capital for a while for her school holidays. When she was leaving the capital a few days later and asked by her relative if she wanted to stay there longer, she answered "no", the reason she gave was "it's hard to live with half Kyrgyz" (field note by the author in 2011).

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