

## Kazakh and Russia divide in Kazakhstan: Linguistic and social inequality

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### Abstract

The survey results presented in this paper provide evidence that economic inequality in Kazakhstan runs along the ethnic and language boundaries. Proficiency in Russian provides economic advantages while proficiency in Kazakh only seems to act as a economic penalty. However, access to a standard prestige-bearing variety of Russian is restricted – Russian is evidently a new “bourgeois resource” (Blommaert 2003). This phenomenon highlights the problem of current language policy – promotion of Kazakh a language of education perpetuates pre-existing social equality in modern Kazakhstan society.

**Keywords:** Linguistic inequality; linguistic resources; forms and contextual spaces

### 1. Introduction

This paper is based on view that inequality occurs when people differ in their linguistic repertoires and “in what they can do with it” (Blommaert 2003: 5). Describing how languages are distributed in society is a key to understanding inequality and thus “discussions of language rights should start from assessment of the real potential and constraints of linguistic resources, not from idealized and stratified conceptions of language and society” (Blommaert 2003: 1).

### 2. Data

The paper is based on the results of a mass survey of 2,255 respondents of various socio-demographic backgrounds (ethnicity, age, gender, income, place of residence, and level of education) that took place between November of 2005 and February 2007 (see Smagulova 2008 for detailed description of the survey)

### 3. Results

The results of the survey results hint at differences in access to forms – Kazakh, Russian and English; also the data reveal differences in access to contextualized spaces. Firstly, people with lower income are more likely to report lack of proficiency in Russian. Secondly, people with lack of expertise in Russian appear to have limited or no access to spaces (in our case, higher paid workplaces) where knowledge of Russian is required.

This paper begins by presenting the reports on proficiency in Kazakh and Russian sorted by reported income level. Table 2 shows the percentage of Kazakh and Russian fluent speakers in the entire sample, among ethnic Kazakh and among ethnic Russian speakers by income. The table demonstrates several things. Firstly, it demonstrates that Russian is a more prevailing language as people in all economic groups are more likely to claim fluency in Russian than fluency in Kazakh. Secondly, it shows that the percentage of Kazakh speakers decreases while the percentage of Russian speakers increases with the increase in monthly income. The trend is especially evident among Kazakhs: respondents who claim to earn \$500 or more are twice more likely to claim to be fluent Russian speakers (44.8% vs. 85.9%).

Table 1

*Reported oral proficiency in Kazakh and Russian by income*

	Fluent Kazakh speakers in the whole sample	Fluent Russian speakers in the whole sample	Fluent Russian speakers among ethnic Kazakhs	Fluent Kazakh speakers among ethnic Kazakhs
< \$50	217 (54.9%)	270 (68.4%)	94 (44.8%)	179 (85.2%)
\$ 50-100	374 (53.4%)	505 (72.1%)	153 (48.6%)	277 (87.9%)
\$ 100-300	343 (48.9%)	593 (84.5%)	194 (69.8%)	225 (80.9%)
\$ 300-500	80 (39.6%)	179 (88.6%)	59 (83.1%)	51 (71.8%)
> \$ 500	68 (49.6%)	117 (88.0%)	55 (85.9%)	50 (78.1%)
Total	1150 (51.0%)	1739 (77.1%)	555 (54.3%)	782 (75.5%)

To discover whether the use of Kazakh at work is linked to the income level, the next table summarizes the reports on use of languages at work by different income groups.

Table 2  
*Languages at workplace by monthly income*

Languages	Kazakh	Russian	Kazakh and Russian	Kazakh, Russian and English	Russian and English	Kazakh and English
<\$50	61 (15.4%)	116 (29.4%)	42 (10.6%)	2 (0.5%)	3 (0.5%)	
\$50-100	120 (17.1%)	233 (33.3%)	133 (19.0%)	14 (2.0%)	16 (2.0%)	1 (0.1%)
\$100-300	82 (11.7%)	274 (39.3%)	225 (22.5%)	26 (3.7%)	28 (3.7%)	2 (0.3%)
\$300-500	17 (8.4%)	88 (43.6%)	39 (19.3%)	12 (5.9%)	14 (5.9%)	
>\$500	6(4.5%)	42 (31.6%)	29 (21.8%)	17 (12.8%)	12 (12.8%)	
Total	306 (13.6%)	792 (35.1%)	408 (20.0%)	73 (3.2%)	74 (3.3%)	3 (01%)

Table 2 shows that Kazakh is more likely to be used by those who earn less. The respondents who reported higher income also reported to use more Russian and English: a quarter of the respondents who said they earn more than \$500 a month use English at work; in contrast, only one percent of the informants from the lowest income group claim to use English. This and the fact that a combination of Kazakh and English is reported by just a few respondents allow us to infer that knowledge of English presupposes proficiency in Russian.

#### 4. Conclusion

To summarize, the results described in this section demonstrate that economic inequality correlates with language proficiency. Russian proficiency is linked to higher income while the lack of Russian proficiency appears to act as an economic penalty. However, while Russian is a valuable linguistic resource linked to upward social mobility, access to a standard prestige-bearing variety of Russian is restricted – Russian is evidently a new “bourgeois resource” (Blommaert 2003). This phenomenon highlights the problem of current language policy: lack of proficiency in standard Russian due to current language policy in education leads to reproduction of social equality in modern Kazakhstan society.

#### References

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