

## Conference Paper

# Influence of Bilingualism on Russian Peoples' National Self-Identity

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## Abstract

The article reveals how language relates to ethnic identification as a key component of a bilingual's national self-identity. The research problem characterises the aim of the study, which isto establish how bilingualism influences Russian peoples' national self-identity. The literature review demonstrated associations between language, linguistic consciousness, and national self-identity in social and human sciences as well as philosophy of language. Analysis and synthesis of scientific sources allowed substantiating the role of bilingualism and dialogue of culture in developing Russian people's national self-identity. Specific features of bilingualism in Russia include monolingualism, dominance of the Russian language, a low level of acquiring a foreign language, and national-Russian bilingualism. The national-Russian bilingualism is inherent to the Republic of Buryatia and the Republic of Kalmykia. With dialogue of culture grounded, competence in languages on these territories is regarded as impetus for Russian people's national self-identity to grow. The bilingual society seeks to revive the status of their national languages and develop their nations, without heading for monoligualism. Hence, bilingualism describes a positive influence on the national self-identity of the Buryats and Kalmyks.

**Keywords:** bilingualism; language; dialogue of culture; national self-identity; Russian peoples

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Received: 12 March 2019

Accepted: 17 April 2019

Published: 25 April 2019

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Individual and Society in the Global Era Conference Committee.

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## 1. Introduction

Bilingualism is a phenomenon of speaking and understanding two or more languages (dialects) on a regular basis, with people using them in their everyday life known as bilinguals [1]. A growing interest in bilingualism that has recently been observed is connected with a growing number of bilinguals [7] due to an ever increasing role of a global language, with English serving as such. Being a multi-aspect phenomenon, bilingualism has

been subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny. The following aspects of bilingualism have drawn considerable interest in the international scientific community: understanding different features of the language policy to which the countries adhere [13], establishing its role in the formation of self-awareness [6], describing the interaction between the language and national identity [3], understanding socio-cultural foundations of bilingualism [10], studying the impact of bilingualism on the expression of emotions and thoughts of a bilingual person [1], establishing the connection between national identity and second language learning [12]. Socio-cultural aspect of bilingualism helps to establish its social prerequisites and the reasons for its emergence, which, in its turn, helps to investigate the distribution of social functions of both languages of bilinguals. It also makes it possible to analyse the distribution of social functions between both languages as well as investigate the impact bilingualism exerts on the formation of national identity and the connection between bilingualism and ethnic identity.

The number of people in the world having a command of two or more languages constitutes more than a half of the world's population [7], thus in many countries this phenomenon is considered to be a norm rather than an exception. Thanks to this, the issue of formation of national self-identity becomes urgent due to the unification of ethnic national forms, on the one hand, while on the other its urgency is conditioned by the pursuit of separate ethnic groups to preserve their unique national identity, language and culture.

The language is directly connected with the process of ethnic identification, which, in its turn, presents a key component of a person's national identity. The problem of formation and development of this phenomenon has drawn particular attention of Russian researchers [17] because historically Russia has been a multinational state, social and cultural changes in which often affect the interethnic relations. Historical processes of interaction among the peoples of Russia resulted in the formation of a bilingual situation, in particular, in the Republics of Buryatia and Kalmykia. Naturally then the following questions arise: the influence of bilingual environment and cultural values on the process of personal ethnic identification and the formation of its national identity. This research problem has determined the goal of the present study: to identify the influence of bilingualism on the national identity of the Russian peoples. In this regard, it is necessary to consider the role of the language and the dialogue of cultures in the formation of national identity. Describing the characteristic features of bilingualism in Russia will enable the researchers to focus on how it manifests itself in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation.

## 2. Literature Review

Theoretical foundations for the research of bilingualism necessary for the understanding of its influence on the national identity are rooted in the general theory of understanding of the language as an independent object of analysis in social and humanitarian sciences as well as the philosophy of the language. The connection between bilingualism and national identity can be traced in research devoted to the discussion of unity of the language, culture and historical past of a certain ethnic group.

Research of national identity is grounded on the premise that the language is a factor uniting people into a certain national group. According to G. Vico [5], understanding the spirit of a people becomes possible not only thanks to the study of myths and rituals of different peoples but also thanks to the historical analysis of the language of these peoples. The language often presents the criterion based on which we identify ourselves with a certain ethnic community, which shares a common origin and faith as well as language and culture.

Mastering the language has an impact on the essence of a person's consciousness because in this case the linguistic worldview characteristic of a particular language and linguistic consciousness is formed. Linguistic worldview is characterised by certain specific features in the description and interpretation of interconnections between the phenomena and objects of surrounding reality. The perception and interpretation of these phenomena and objects are impossible without the existence of a certain sign system represented by the language. Reflecting the material world, a person creates a subjective worldview different from that of another person. The formation of the worldview occurs not only at the level of an individual person but also at the level of a whole ethnic group.

The outstanding Russian psychologist P. Ya. Galperin in his works devoted to the study of the language pointed out that the language not only names the objects and phenomena of reality but also performs refraction from the perspective of ethnic speech stereotypes. The researcher recognized the existence of linguistic consciousness different in different peoples of the world, being a form of common consciousness [16]. Developing the ideas of linguistic consciousness, Yu. N. Karaulov distinguishes grammatical, cognitive and motivational psychoglosses in its structure. Grammatical psychoglosses form the part of the language which is based on conscious perception; cognitive psychoglosses are responsible for the worldview of a specific language community. Motivational psychoglosses reflecting the national character of a people are the most important in this context [20]. It means that the linguistic worldview is expressed verbally, i.e.,

through the system of linguistic means. At the same time, it is influenced by the language, which forms a national mindset with the help of mental experiences.

The person is characterised by the consciousness that has been formed by his /her native culture and the language. Native speakers of different languages functioning based on the worldview framed by their culture can be aware of and understand different phenomena and objects in a different way. Thus, the language unites people into groups, determines cultural and ethnic identity of a person and influences the formation of national identity and self-identity. G. Hegel was one of the first philosophers to point out that there is a connection between social and individual self-identity. He wrote that at a certain time slot the *Weltgeist* chooses a certain people and gets embodied in its spirit. This spirit exists in its religion, culture, traditions, a form of the government and political laws, actions and deeds. Besides, the philosopher claimed that national self-identity, which predominantly consists of contemplating oneself in others must contain affective evaluation [8].

Enculturation through the native language influences the formation and development of a person's national identity. However, it is impossible to feel one's own cultural identity within the framework of a single cultural space because it can only be perceived when compared with the other nations. It is conditioned by the fact that national and ethnic identity are formed in the same way as self-awareness of an individual. Thus, K. N. Khabibullin considers that the formation of national self-awareness is directly "connected with the cognition of the nature of ethnic relations with the others, the knowledge of the past and present of the relations that existed with these "others" [25]. It is important to understand the degree of interpretation of these relations from the perspective of national justice, both positive and negative. From this perspective it is supposed that many phenomena of culture, including the language, unite people into a certain ethnic group. On the other hand, these phenomena present a factor, which distinguishes the given group from the other similar ethnic entities. M. Buber considers the subjective psychological side of people's shared identity characterised by the notions "we" and "they", with "we" and "they" opposed to each other and the other way round. What contributes to the consolidation of ethnic differences is opposing your own community to the other ones which helps to consolidate it.

The observations made by the scientists manifested in social and humanitarian research studies on philosophy of the language support the idea that the language influences national identity. Nevertheless, due to social and economic conditions for every country and even its constituent entities this influence is special in nature, which has to be taken into account when describing its specific features. Thus, the question

of the specific features of the influence exerted by bilingualism on the national identity of the peoples in Russia has to be considered.

### 3. Methods

This research study is based on the lingua-cultural approach [11], which determines the interrelation between the language and culture, thus it describes the influence on the national identity because its basis is formed by the national culture and ethnic self-identification. This approach makes it possible to understand how the language embodies cultural values of the peoples as well as what their language and cultural differences are. These differences have a mutual impact on each other when the research is aimed at comparing different languages in the context of bilingualism. It is from this perspective that the dialogue of cultures is considered as a factor contributing to the formation of national self-awareness.

Theoretical analysis and literature review were used to determine the impact of bilingualism on national self-awareness of the peoples of Russia. In particular, literature devoted to the discussion of formation of national self-awareness on the basis of dialogue of cultures that underpins bilingualism was reviewed; also, generalized experience in describing bilingualism in the Russian context was studied. As the result of literature review on bilingualism and its synthesis situations of national bilingualism based on the examples of peoples inhabiting the Buryat and Kalmyk Republics as the entities of the Russian Federation were described. Using these research methods helped to describe the impact of bilingualism in these republics on the national identity of the Buryat and Kalmyk peoples.

### 4. Results

The dialogue of cultures contributes to the formation of national identity because a dialogue supposes that a person establishes equal relations with something situated beyond him. In other words, a man establishes communication with other people, nature, cultural values, historical events which are perceived as equal partners, having mutual influence on each other. A man as a social creature reveals her/his “raison d’etre” when s/he appeals to another person. In this regard, M. Buber claims that a man only finds his/her identity, his/her meaning and purpose of life and his/her fate in a dialogue [4].

M. M. Bakhtin expressed similar ideas: he recognized the dialogue as the main factor in human existence, because self-awareness of the I-personality is only possible if You-personality exists. We can only understand our own culture and recognise its uniqueness when we find ourselves in the state of “non-presence”, that is why the culture of origin, its values and the native language reveal themselves more fully through another culture. It is necessary to point out a special significance of the fact that dialogical interaction of two cultures does not result in their blending or fusion. The cultures coming into contact with each other preserve their integrity, while they are also enriched by the other culture [15]. This idea makes the understanding of bilingualism very important.

Yu. M. Lotman adhered to a similar idea: he considered culture as a semiotic space with its nucleus and borders. By interpreting his ideas it is possible to consider each person as a semiosphere of a kind, with its own borders and the core. The core presents interiorised national cultural values which have become a part of a person; the interaction with other cultures takes place on the border leading to a mutual exchange of meanings but not always touching the core [22]. Thus, under conditions of a bilingual environment a man starts communicating with another culture because usually what stands behind each language is a separate national culture associated with its own semiosphere, with one of the them being a primary one formed by the native language. In its turn, such communication promotes self-cognition by the culture resulting not in the elimination of borders but singling out oneself among the others because a broader cultural context is a path to a better understanding of your own unique I-Personality.

The description of the dialogue of cultures determines specific features of bilingualism in Russia. The situation with its spread and functioning is rather inhomogeneous. The Russian Federation is a multinational state occupying a vast territory; the disintegration processes in the 1990s led to an ever increasing role of the Russian language as the second one [9]. Diversity of languages and cultures as well as the historical heritage of the country, social and economic transformation in the recent years predetermine certain specificity in the development of bilingualism in Russia and the linguistic situation in the country on the whole. In particular, several distinguishing features characteristic of this country can be singled out.

1. *Monolingualism*. At present, the overwhelming majority of the population in Russia is multilingual despite its language, cultural and ethnic diversity. Unlike the developed West European countries, the majority of people living in Russia know one language: they predominantly speak only Russian. Traditionally monolingualism is associated with conservatism in the language, “in an attempt to preserve the borders and norms of the language and communication environment, a correlation

between the native language user and his/her activity in the surrounding world” [21]. Among the other reasons for multilingualism in Russia such social and historical reasons can be named as the notorious “Iron Curtain” or a long-term isolation of the country during the soviet period.

2. *The dominance of the Russian language.* The Russian language is the state language of the Russian Federation. However, even though other languages function on the territory of Russia along with the Russian language, its spread exceeds that of all the other languages taken as a whole manifold [14]. This language is considered to be the native one not only by ethnic Russians but also the representatives of national minorities, which thanks to the knowledge of the Russian language get acquainted with the world culture, receive education and build their careers. In addition, during different periods in the historical development of Russia the Russian language performed and continues to perform the function of the language of interethnic relations, uniting different peoples in a multinational country.
3. *A low level of knowledge of a foreign language.* The importance of knowing foreign languages is not denied in Russia. In particular, the preference is given to the English language, that is why it is taught in the institutions of general and professional education and presents unconditional advantage for successful career growth. It is also evident that the popularity of English as a global language is growing from year to year [3]. However, in reality only a small percentage of the population can demonstrate the knowledge of the language: it is considerably higher in the capital and megapolises than in small cities and those situated in geographically remote locations.
4. *Nationally-Russian bilingualism.* In the republics and autonomous regions of Russia where non-Russian ethnic groups live, national Russian and Russian national bilingualism is spread. Since the knowledge of Russian as the intermediary language in the country can be considered as an indispensable condition for socialisation of the representatives of national minorities, the second type of bilingualism is much less common. It is the situation when a representative of an ethnic group considers Russian to be his/her native language and has its better mastery than that of the language of his/her nation. As a rule, knowing the national language, which is often only used in everyday communication, is considered desirable but not necessary. It is necessary to point out that the phenomenon of national-Russian bilingualism in Russia is rather heterogeneous, difficult to classify and typify. R. S.

Nagapetyan claims that “bilingualism of non-Russian peoples in Russia is heterogeneous with regard to age, territory and social factors” [24]. The point at issue here is both authentic bilingualism and poor knowledge of the Russian language; on the other hand, what is implied is almost complete absence of knowledge of the native language, the language of minority.

## 5. Discussion

First of all, it is necessary to discuss natural National-Russian bilingualism on the territory of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. There bilingualism presents a factor influencing the formation of national identity of individual persons and ethnic groups as a whole. Natural National-Russian bilingualism is spread in the in the Republics of Buryatia and Kalmykia.

According to the results of a research study conducted in the end of the previous century by the scientists from the Buryat State University, the majority of bilinguals on the territory of the Buryat Republic are the Buryats. The authors state that there is a partial mismatch between national and ethnic affiliation on the one hand, and language affiliation, on the other among the population of the republic. They also point out an ever increasing role of the Russian language as the second native language of the Buryats. Nevertheless, for a considerable part of the representatives of the titular nation the Buryat language was the first language of communication in the early childhood (41,9% among the country dwellers and 15,2% among the city dwellers) [19], in other words, the status of the Buryat language at the time the research study was conducted was rather strong.

According to the more recent data, 98,6% of the citizens of the Buryat Republic have the level of proficiency in the Russian language sufficient for their social advancement [18]. The tendency for the replacement of the Buryat language by the Russian language in professional, household culture and other areas of communication has been preserved. Many Buryats consider that the main factor unifying the nation is not the language but their origin, history, culture, customs and traditions. The Buryat national intelegensia plays a significant role in the revival of the status of the Buryat language because it is necessary to improve the degree of national identity and thus further advance the development of the Buryat nation.

The enumerated factors make it possible to suppose that the role of the language in the structure of national self-awareness of the people becomes less significant as the loss of the national language by the ethnic group becomes more pronounced. The



influence of bilingualism on the discussed processes is evident: along with the native language another language exists that performs the main communicative function in the areas of education, politics and economy, with the majority of population considering it as having higher prestige.

The situation described in Buryatia is practically the same in all the regions of the country inhabited by small peoples the total size of the population of which sharply differs from that of the Russian population. In the Republic of Kalmykia they understand that only 43,4% of the Kalmyk students speak the Kalmyk language and write in it [23]. The researchers suppose that the language loss contributes to the disappearance of the other ethnic features, including the national features of character, national psychology and national identity as a whole. The described situation is partially connected with the national policy aimed at the creation of a bilingual society [2]. It is noteworthy that according to the results of the sociological survey, the level of national self-awareness of the Kalmyk students is higher than its level among the Russian students [23]. The Kalmyk students are more concerned about the problem of preserving their national traditions and customs, knowledge about the history and culture of their own people. For the overwhelming majority of them it is very important to be aware of themselves as the representatives of their own nation. On the basis of the mentioned factors it is possible to predict that under the conditions of bilingualism the disappearance of the language and the understanding of this process by the Kalmyk youth present consolidating factors in the attempt of the Kalmyk people to preserve their ethnic identity.

The bilingual situation characteristic of the representatives of the groups of Mongolian peoples living in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation is similar to that observed in the Republic of Tatarstan. Foreign researchers undertook a study to compare the influence of bilingualism on the national identity of the inhabitants of Malaysia and the Republic of Tatarstan. In the latter the status of bilingualism is officially recognised in the country's legislature: there are two official languages, the Tatar and Russian languages. It seems that the boundaries between the language and national identity of the Tatar people has been eliminated because of mixed marriages, the absence of a single language spread over the whole territory of the country, absence of cultural borders and the promotion of the official language policy [3]. Still, a profound willingness to preserve the Tatar language and culture exists in the country, although there is awareness of the necessity to become proficient in the Russian language to develop socio-cultural ties. The Tatars prefer to use their native language for everyday communication, while they use Russian for business communication. Nevertheless, there is a certain degree of concern about the preservation of national identity, language and culture.

The examples of how bilingualism functions in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation and its intersectionality with the development of national identity of the people given above makes it possible to single out certain tendencies. On the one hand, it is necessary to consider the language as the core of national self-identity, while the proficiency in two or more languages as the stimulus for its development. It is connected with the fact that the uniqueness of your own ethnic group is understood better only in the context of contrasting the notions of “ours” and “theirs”, i.e., in the process of interaction with the objects and values of a foreign culture. On the other hand, no decrease in the level of national self-identity and transition to complete monolingualism in the process of losing their national languages by the peoples of Russia has been observed. In this case in the consciousness of the ethnic community the language stops being the leading ethnic differentiating factor, giving way to the origin, customs and traditions.

## 6. Conclusion

Bilingualism, which is directly connected with the process of the person's ethnic identification, is widely spread around the world. This situation makes it necessary to study its influence on the formation of national identity not only in the world but also in Russia. Research studies in social and humanitarian sciences and philosophy of the language helped the researchers to trace the interconnection between bilingualism and national self-awareness. In particular, the language is considered as a criterion permitting to establish a correlation between an individual personality with a specific national community. In this context mastering the language makes an impact on the content of the person's consciousness and his/her linguistic consciousness through the system of linguistic means typical of the native culture. The interconnectedness of the social consciousness and individual self-awareness determines the specific features of national self-awareness of a person. Its formation and development can be traced in the process of acquiring national cultural values mediated by the native language.

The theoretical significance of this research correlates with its focus on the social and economic conditions in Russia, which determine the specific features in the development of different languages in the context of bilingualism. What lies at the core of the development of bilingualism is the dialogue of cultures, a factor in the formation of national self-identity. Statements about the role of this dialogue in the formation of a person and his/her self-awareness as well as those about the interaction between the dialogic communication and another culture support this statement. These specific

features are taken into account in the specificity of development of bilingualism in Russia and the language situation in the country as a whole. They are characterised by monolingualism, with the dominance of the Russian language and a low level of foreign language proficiency in the presence of National-Russian bilingualism.

The practical value of research is determined by the fact that on the territory of the entities of the Russian Federation National-Russian bilingualism is primarily spread. In the Buryat and Kalmyk Republics bilingualism is justified as a factor influencing the formation of the national self-identity of separate individuals and ethnic groups as a whole. The Buryat national intelligentsia is aimed at the revival of the status of the Buryat language and the development of the Buryat nation. The national politics in the Kalmyk Republic is aimed at the creation of a bilingual society in which the language is considered as the core of national self-awareness. In these republics bilingualism serves as a stimulus for national self-awareness on the basis of the dialogue of cultures. This research can be further developed by describing the specific features of the development of bilingualism in all the constituent entities of the Russian Federation at the present stage.

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