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Revival and Threat:
**Language ideologies, policy, and
nationalism in Kazakhstan and Mongolia**

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Overview

- ❖ This talk will examine discourses of linguistic threat and revival and how they are linked to particular visions of national identity in two contexts - Kazakhstan and Mongolia
- ❖ Understood within particular frames and scales of reference - these frames are up for debate

Language threat and revival

- ❖ Language death and shift is a major concern of sociolinguistics, and sociolinguistics has therefore typically celebrated linguistic revival movements as positive, enriching and empowering forces

Language threat and revival

- ❖ However, in some cases a more critical view of “revival” seems necessary
- ❖ Discourses of ‘threat’ can be invoked even in cases where they are not clearly applicable - i.e., in relation to English in the US
- ❖ Revivals often invite questions of purity and authenticity (what exactly is being revived?)
- ❖ “A frequent critique of language endangerment discourse is that it displaces concerns with speakers on to a concern with languages” (Duchêne and Heller 2007:7)

Language threat and revival

- ❖ “Rather than assuming we must save languages, perhaps we should be asking instead who benefits and who loses from understanding languages the way we do, what is at stake for whom, and how and why language serves as a terrain for competition.” (Duchêne and Heller 2007:11)

Nationalism

- ❖ Centered on the idea that there is a natural equivalence between a nation, an ethnic group, a culture, a language, and a particular territory
- ❖ If this equivalence is not there, this is problematic for nationalists and steps should be taken to change it
- ❖ “A view of society... in which the ‘best’ society is suggested to be one without intergroup differences. In other words, the ideal view of society is monolingual, monoethnic, monoreligious, monoideological. Nationalism [is] interpreted as the struggle to keep groups as ‘pure’ and homogenous as possible” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998:195)

Language ideologies and scales

- ❖ Tracing ideologies of language is often revealing of broader social processes (Irvine and Gal 2000, Gal 2005, Kroskrity 2010, Woolard and Schieffelin 1994)
- ❖ Semiotic processes of recursion, iconicity and erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000)

Language revival as rescaling

- ❖ Revivals - a recreation of the national on a new scale level?
 - ❖ “In an ironic turn of events, following the dissolution of the USSR, the titular elites who most vocally protested the Soviet imposition of Russian have come to appreciate the need for a unifying state language – the nation building in the successor states took a turn from official bilingualism to monolingualism” (Pavlenko 2013: 266)
- ❖ Negotiations and sometimes apparent contradictions between different scale levels and how these are made relevant
- ❖ “There is no automatic link between jumping scale and empowerment” (Haarstad and Fløysand 2007: 306)

Questions

- ❖ What frames of reference are used to explain or challenge particular policies and ideologies?
- ❖ Who benefits, or does not benefit, from framing issues in these ways?

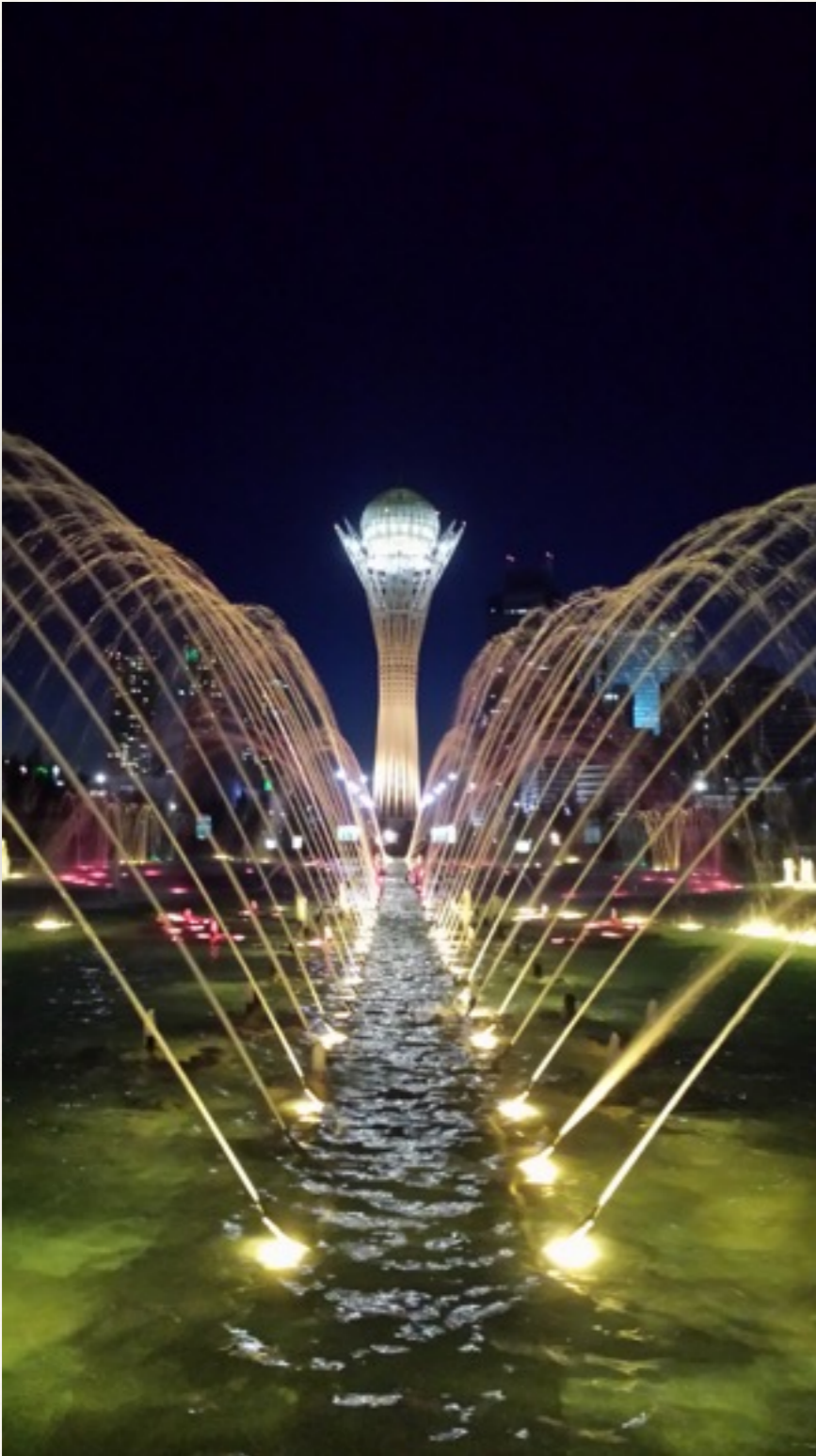
Data

- ❖ Semi-structured interviews conducted with 58 participants in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, and Almaty and Astana, Kazakhstan, in summer 2016
- ❖ Policy and document analysis
- ❖ Part of a larger project being conducted in collaboration with Umberto Ansaldo

Post-Socialist Central Asia

- ❖ Formed part of Soviet Union or under Soviet sphere of influence until collapse of USSR in 1991
- ❖ Newly independent states like Kazakhstan had to make choices about national identity and new policies, especially concerning large Russophone minorities
- ❖ Mongolia also navigating a new political system and renegotiated relationships
 - ❖ a potential model for autonomous regions within China

Kazakhstan



Kazakhstan



- ❖ Came under Russian imperial control beginning from early eighteenth century (Smagulova 2008)
- ❖ Became Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic with current borders in 1920 (Smagulova 2008)
- ❖ During Soviet period experienced massive immigration of Russian speakers, deportation / death of Kazakh speakers - Kazakhs only 40% of the population in 1989
- ❖ Extensive language shift to Russian, especially among urban populations; Russian held high prestige

Kazakhstan

- ❖ Population 17.5 million in 2015 (World Bank)
- ❖ Majority Kazakh; significant minorities of Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Germans, Tatars, Uyghurs, Belarusians, Koreans, others
- ❖ Constitutional republic with strong presidential power - Nursultan Nazarbayev has been president since 1991 (and was president of Kazakh SSR 1989-1991)
 - ❖ “soft authoritarianism” (Schatz 2008)
- ❖ Regime promotes discourse of Kazakhstan as a tolerant multiethnic and multi-religious state

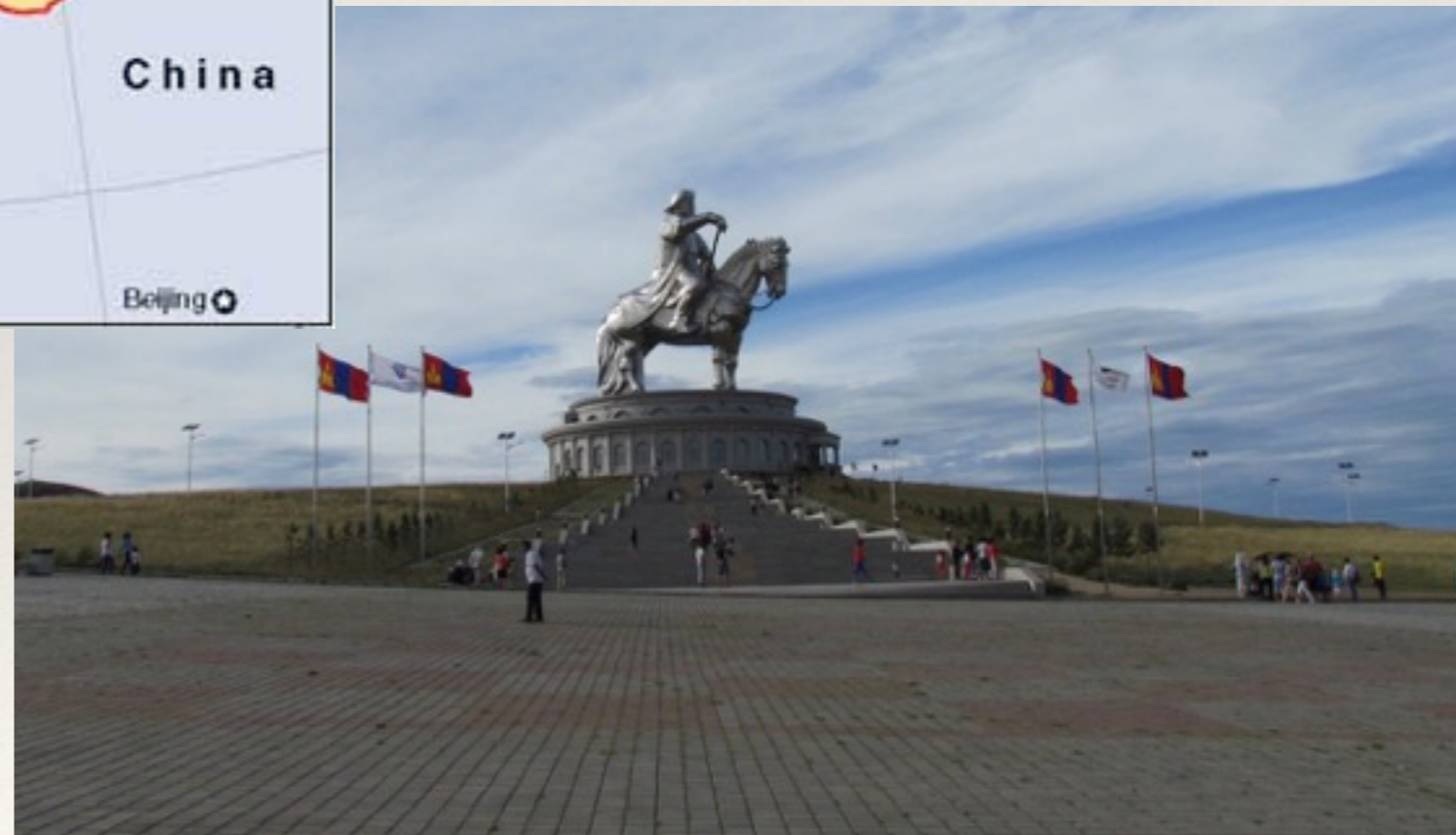
Kazakhification / de-russification

- ❖ Explicit efforts to achieve numeric dominance of ethnic Kazakhs
 - ❖ Large-scale emigration of ethnic Russians
 - ❖ Programs to encourage immigration of ethnic Kazakhs living outside Kazakhstan (“oralmans”)
- ❖ Require Kazakh for government work (although much government work is still actually conducted in Russian)

Kazakh Language Policy

- ❖ Officially: Kazakh is the sole state language
- ❖ Schools have largely been conducted in either Kazakh or Russian - few bilingual schools (and a few minority language schools) (Fierman 2006, Smagulova 2016)
- ❖ New trilingual policy announced in 2015 - move to teach world history in Russian and science subjects in English

Mongolia



Mongolia

- ❖ Population 2.95 million in 2015 (World Bank) (largely ethnic Mongolian; Kazakh minority in western Mongolia)
- ❖ Under Soviet sphere of influence from the 1920s - Soviet satellite state
- ❖ Democratization after 1990, rapid turn from Russian to English as preferred foreign language
- ❖ 2015 - Law of the Mongolian Language
 - ❖ Mongolian language exams required for civil service and university, increasing the role of traditional script, establishment of Mongolian Language Linguistic Institute and Language Policy Council

Nation-internal constructions

- ❖ Monolingualism as a national ideal - Mongolian as the natural language of the Mongolian state
- ❖ M5 [through translator]: “In the library of our university I saw a Kazakh-Mongolian dictionary and a Mongol-Kazakh dictionary. And such dictionaries could be used in comparative linguistics, but it was unpleasant, or strange or shocking for me that for example the Mongolian citizens would use a dictionary to understand the Mongolian language.”

Nation-internal constructions

- ❖ Nations within nations - divisions between “nations” reproduced at a sub-national level
- ❖ Kazakh language learning often treated as important particularly for ethnic Kazakhs (although some participants suggested this was changing)
- ❖ “Multiethnic” discourse of the new Kazakh state

Nation-internal constructions

- ❖ **K4:** The big thing right now is essentially we have two systems, like Kazakh speaking schools and Russian speaking schools. The big problem is they're actually different.... in a way I feel like it [the trilingual policy] is an attempt for Kazakhstan to prevent what happened in Ukraine, where language divide was very prominent, eventually led to you know a war. So it's like really late attempt of Kazakhstan to get rid of that division between like Russian and Kazakh school systems because again like they, they raised two different kinds of people. Two, two different kinds of citizens with different sort of loyalties. And for example to, to my knowledge they teach really bad Kazakh in Russian schools.

Nation-internal constructions

- ❖ Discourses of “purity” and authenticity can be challenging for ethnic Kazakhs as well
- ❖ Monolingual Kazakh speakers (often rural residents or recently-arrived “oralmans”) may experience difficulty since Russian has maintained many practical and prestige functions

Nation-internal constructions

- ❖ “As for me, I am sick and tired of hearing that Kazakh people must speak Kazakh, unless they are not patriotic. With the help of our Media I get the sense that Kazakh language is a language of an ‘ideal’ person, who is a highly-moral and well-mannered. It creates the feeling that Kazakh language is something sacral and sometimes you are even afraid to speak it because of the possibility to make a mistake. Maybe it is the reason why people are not minded to start speaking Kazakh?” (“aidana17”)

The limits of monolingualism

- ❖ **K19:** “Unfortunately if you know only Kazakh you have a lot of problems here in Kazakhstan. Because most people, even Kazakh, even Kazakh ethnicity people they speak Russian. and that’s why for example oralmans, people who migrated from other countries they have this kind of problem. They know only Kazakh. And when they came to Kazakhstan they have problem with finding a job. Because they can’t communicate or write this kind of letters in Russian. So it’s like a really struggle for them. But if you know only Russian I think you can really live very good life here. [...] you can easily find a job with Russian language.”

Nation-internal constructions

- ❖ So at a national level it is clearly important to ask who benefits from linguistic issues being framed in particular ways
- ❖ But the “nation” is not the only scale in play

Nation-external constructions

- ❖ Powerful neighbors of Russia and China
- ❖ The broader “international” stage

Powerful neighbours

- ❖ Both Mongolia and Kazakhstan see themselves as positioned between Russia and China
- ❖ Both contexts have a legacy of Russian control
- ❖ Anxiety, Sinophobia in both Mongolia and Kazakhstan about Chinese investment in natural resources and land
 - ❖ Land protests in Kazakhstan (Lewis 2016)

Powerful neighbors

- ❖ **M20:** “We had a great history by Chinggis Khan, we conquered half of the world and we must have to be proud of it. We have such a great country but our government’s workers didn’t think so and they’re just selling their country to China and it’s very disrespectful for us.”

Powerful neighbors

- ❖ **Kara:** Do you think there is that kind of anti-Chinese bias in Mongolia - do people talk about that?
- ❖ **M13:** Yes and I admit to having such biases myself because I think we are - Mongolia is like the version of the Native Americans who managed to get hold of their lands. You know? The Chinese have grown so much, they outnumber us by what, about four or five hundred to one, so I feel very obligated to be productive and better myself. Because I have to top that five hundred people as well as work for whoever is drunk outside the lane because he's not doing his part. And I think it's that certain kind of despise that help us somewhat unite against them.

Powerful neighbours

- ❖ **K24:** I think the government also, the elite also use this discourse. It's a very comfortable partner, comfortable image of China as a threat to utilize this discourse to talk to Beijing and say "I cannot do some things, I want your money but I cannot do some things" you know so I think it was also used to send a message to China that you know you are pushing too hard, yes we have a lot of debt to you it's like about 50 million, 50 billion or so but excuse me we cannot do this and we cannot do that. And I think China actually got that message.

Powerful neighbors

❖ **Kara:** Is there a different perception of Russians?

M13: Yes... I think if not for the World War I we would be part of China I think. It's due to socialism, the revolution in Russia that helped us - not directly retain our sovereignty. But seventy years they were in, they moved so far ahead culturally [...] It was first taste of the western and developed world I think so thanks to the Russians I think we are better off.

❖ **M20:** Russia is kinda our neighbor? We are landlocked in this big continent called Asia and China is kind of our enemy and Russia is kind of our friend.

Powerful neighbors

- ❖ **K24:** If you talk about Russia uh you know the information influence of Russia is very huge. Everyone is watching Russian televisions. You probably heard about that so when when Putin occupied Crimea, many of my relatives living in the northern part they were actually supporting Putin.

K25: mmhmm.

K24: And I actually heard from one of my educated relatives who is the businessman, he actually once said me that “why not to take our district and put it into Russian Federation and make it as Crimea”

Other neighbors

- ❖ Kazakhstan also involved in constructing a pan-Turkic community, relations with other Central Asian neighbors
- ❖ In Mongolia, Inner Mongolians often delegitimized and discursively erased

Other neighbours

- ❖ “This exclusive construction of the Mongolian national identity based on the core Halh Mongol has effectively shut off the chances for other Mongol people, outside of Mongolia, to be considered as proper Mongols” (Han 2011: 71)
- ❖ “In general the Mongols in Mongolia are not very friendly towards people from China, including Inner Mongols. To them, I am already like Han Chinese and I certainly cannot tolerate that. At least here in China we still use the traditional Mongolian scripts, and to me those people in Mongolia have been very heavily influenced by Russia and do not behave like Mongols any more.” (quoted in Han 2011: 71)
- ❖ **M17:** Some Mongolians think they already like mixed with Chinese you know? So I think now like in Inner Mongolia very few like pure Mongolians there. Most of them are like mixed. [...] But yeah they’re still using the old script so it’s good.

The “international” stage

- ❖ Policies promoting the national language are sometimes rationalized as being just like what other countries are doing
- ❖ *“The law about Mongolian language was put into effect starting on July 1. Do all countries have laws about their mother language?”*

Most countries have policies about their national language, and then implement the policies according to law. Laws about the language are like a guarantee of a country’s independence, and you need language governance to exist independently, to create your own stories, culture, traditions, and intellect through your language; to store, save, develop and pass down the language in its full, pure form.” (UB Post 2015)

The “international” stage

- ❖ Some (actual or potential) policies framed with reference to the “international” community or perceptions of “foreigners”
- ❖ The rising role of English
- ❖ Latinization in Kazakhstan
- ❖ Role of traditional script in Mongolia

Discussion

- ❖ Different scales of reference are highlighted to justify different claims of being “threatened,” “authentic,” or “legitimate”
- ❖ Revival is in this sense achieved through the realisation of the nationalist ideal on a different scale of reference

Conclusions

- ❖ Different policy moves become justifiable at different scales of reference - so it is useful to examine how these scales are invoked, contrasted, or erased
- ❖ Are these states in some ways recreating the conditions they protested against?

Conclusions

- ❖ Invocations of linguistic and cultural revival cannot be uncritically seen as positive - revival is not necessarily empowering
- ❖ May involve restrictive ideas of “purity” and “authenticity” and create new minoritized groups
- ❖ This may operate not only at the level of nation state but at other scales as well
 - ❖ Nooksack tribe in United States (Jarvis 2017)

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Thank you!

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