

## Bilingualism in the Multilingual Society of Uzbekistan: Generational Patterns and Social Contexts

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### ABSTRACT

*Uzbekistan's history as a vibrant crossroads of cultures and trade has given rise to a complex and dynamic multilingual society. While much attention is often given to the relationship between Uzbek and Russian, a truly comprehensive understanding of Uzbekistan's linguistic landscape requires acknowledging the presence and vitality of a range of other languages spoken by various ethnic communities. This article aims to provide an evidence-based overview of multilingualism in contemporary Uzbekistan, focusing on the presence and role of these minority languages, while also considering the interplay between language policy, education, and national identity. It presents the findings of an original survey conducted among 144 residents of Uzbekistan, aged 10 to 50+, examining the prevalence and patterns of language use across different age groups and social contexts. The study explores the self-reported proficiency and usage of Uzbek, Russian, English, and other minority languages, analyzing the factors that influence language choices and attitudes toward linguistic diversity. The results shed light on the evolving linguistic landscape of Uzbekistan and its implications for identity, education, and social mobility.*

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, multilingualism, language survey, language use, linguistic identity, empirical study.

## INTRODUCTION

Language serves as far more than a mere tool for communication; it is a deeply intertwined component of individual and collective identity. The connection between language and identity has been a central concern in sociolinguistics, anthropology, and other related fields for decades. Language, the primary means through which we communicate and express ourselves, is also a crucial marker of who we are, where we belong, and how we perceive ourselves and others (Edwards 2009).

Our linguistic repertoire, the range of linguistic resources we possess, is a significant aspect of our individual identity. The way we speak, the languages we know, and the accents we use contribute to our sense of self and how we present ourselves to the world. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) argue that individuals create acts of identity through their linguistic choices, shaping their social reality and negotiating belonging. This process is often subconscious, but it plays a critical role in shaping our self-perception and how we are perceived by others.

For example, code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages or dialects within a single conversation, can be a powerful tool for expressing multiple identities (Gumperz 1982). It allows individuals to navigate different social contexts and to signal their belonging to different communities, demonstrating the fluidity and complexity of individual identity.

Language also plays a vital role in constructing and maintaining social identities. Language is a powerful marker of group membership and can be used to distinguish between “us” and “them” (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Shared linguistic practices, such as a common dialect or jargon, can create a sense of solidarity and belonging within a social group. Conversely, linguistic differences can lead to social divisions and discrimination.

Linguistic attitudes, often based on accent or dialect, can be used to reinforce social hierarchies and to marginalize certain groups (Lambert 1967). The notion of a “standard language”

often serves as a tool for linguistic discrimination, favoring those who speak the standard and stigmatizing those who do not. This can have significant consequences for individuals in areas such as education, employment, and access to resources.

The relationship between language and national identity is particularly complex and often politically charged. Historically, language has been used as a tool for nation-building, with a single language often promoted as a symbol of national unity and cultural heritage (Anderson 1983). Language policies, such as official language declarations and language education programs, are often implemented to promote national identity and to foster a sense of collective belonging.

However, the promotion of a single national language can also lead to the marginalization of minority languages and the suppression of linguistic diversity. Linguistic minorities may face discrimination and social exclusion if their languages are not recognized or supported by the state (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). This can lead to linguistic insecurity and the erosion of cultural heritage.

Globalization has further complicated the relationship between language and identity. The increasing mobility of people, the spread of global media, and the dominance of English as a global language have led to new challenges for linguistic diversity and identity construction. The spread of English can lead to language shift, where individuals abandon their native languages in favor of English, perceived as a language of opportunity and upward mobility.

In contrast, globalization has also created new opportunities for linguistic identity expression and revitalization (Heller 2011). The internet and social media provide platforms for linguistic minorities to connect with each other, share their languages and cultures, and advocate for their linguistic rights. The rise of multilingualism and the recognition of translanguaging as a legitimate communicative practice, reflect the increasingly complex and fluid nature of identity in a globalized world (Canagarajah 2013).

The increasing interconnectedness of the modern world has diminished the importance of geographical boundaries, a reality

reflected in the high rates of bilingualism worldwide. Grosjean (2010) points out that over half of the world's population can speak at least two languages, indicating that multilingualism is now the norm in many countries. This widespread phenomenon has generated significant interest in bilingualism, resulting in a wealth of scholarly research exploring its various aspects. The diverse ways individuals use language are shaped by a range of influences, spanning politics, the environment, religion, culture, economics, education, and technology. As Wei (2000) explains, language choice can also be a deliberate way for people to express different parts of who they are within their daily lives. Furthermore, the existence of approximately 7,097 languages currently spoken across the globe (Ethnologue: Languages of the World 2024) emphasizes the vast linguistic diversity that characterizes human communication and the construction of identity.

Grosjean (2013) identifies a positive correlation between widespread multilingualism and increased rates of bilingualism, citing Asia and Africa as prime examples. Uzbekistan provides a compelling case study, as its historical context and geographical location have fostered a linguistic environment where multilingualism is the norm, commonly encompassing Uzbek, Russian, and other languages. While Uzbekistan boasts considerable ethnolinguistic diversity, studies on bilingualism and its various forms are underdeveloped. It is believed that robust research in this area could significantly benefit bilingual people in Uzbekistan, fostering a positive developmental journey and promoting advanced literacy in both their languages.

The linguistic landscape of Uzbekistan has been shaped by centuries of cultural exchange and political influence. Prior to the Soviet era, Persian and Turkic languages held significant sway in the region (Schlyter 2003, Djumabaeva & Kengboyeva 2021). However, with the establishment of Soviet rule, Russian became the dominant language of administration, education, and industry. This led to widespread bilingualism, with many Uzbeks acquiring proficiency in Russian alongside their native language (Fierman 1991). While the promotion of Russian aimed to foster Soviet identity and integration, it also inadvertently created a

class of bilingual Uzbeks who were able to access opportunities not available to monolingual speakers.

During the Soviet era, Russian was actively promoted as the lingua franca throughout the Union, including Uzbekistan (Kirkwood 1991). This promotion led to the widespread adoption of Russian in administration, education, and industry, making it a crucial language for social and economic advancement. As a result, a large segment of the Uzbek population became bilingual, fluent in both Uzbek and Russian. Fierman (1991) details how this language policy, while intended to foster Soviet unity, inadvertently created a system where bilingualism conferred significant advantages.

While Uzbek and Russian are undoubtedly the most widely spoken languages in Uzbekistan, the country is also home to numerous other languages spoken by distinct ethnic groups. According to the Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2024), some of the key minority languages spoken in Uzbekistan include:

- **Tajik:** Spoken primarily in Samarkand and Bukhara, Tajik has a long historical and cultural connection to the region.
- **Kazakh:** Spoken by the Kazakh minority, particularly in the Karakalpakstan region.
- **Karakalpak:** An autonomous language spoken in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, holding official status alongside Uzbek.
- **Kyrgyz:** Spoken by the Kyrgyz minority, primarily in the eastern regions of Uzbekistan.
- **Turkmen:** Spoken by the Turkmen minority, primarily in border regions.
- **Tatar, Uyghur, Korean:** Spoken by smaller, but established communities who have resided in Uzbekistan for generations (“State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics” 2021).

Uzbek is the primary language of instruction in most schools, in addition, some schools and classes are conducted in minority languages, particularly Russian, Tajik, Kazakh, and Karakalpak

(UNESCO 2019). The availability of minority language education depends on factors such as the size and concentration of the ethnic group in a particular region, the availability of qualified teachers, and the allocation of resources. There are ongoing efforts to improve the quality and accessibility of minority language education to better serve the needs of diverse communities (“Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan” 2022).

Since its independence, Uzbekistan has actively pursued economic reforms and closer integration with the global community. This has resulted in an increased emphasis on English, recognized as a key language for international communication, trade, and access to information. While Uzbek remains the state language and Russian retains a significant presence, English has emerged as a third major language, influencing education, employment prospects, and the aspirations of many Uzbek citizens (Saidov 2013). This article analyzes the ascendance of English in modern Uzbekistan, exploring its drivers, its implications for society, and the complex interplay between English and the existing multilingual landscape.

The Uzbek government has prioritized improving English language education as part of its broader efforts to modernize the education system. This has involved a number of initiatives:

- **Early introduction of English:** English is now typically introduced in primary schools, often as early as the first grade (“Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan” 2022).
- **Teacher training:** The government has invested in training programs to improve the skills and qualifications of English language teachers. This includes providing opportunities for teachers to participate in professional development workshops and to study abroad (“US Embassy in Uzbekistan” 2024).
- **Curriculum development:** Efforts have been made to develop modern and engaging English language curricula that align with international standards (“Cambridge Assessment English” 2019).

- **English language testing:** Standardized English language tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, are increasingly used to assess students' English proficiency and to determine eligibility for university admissions and scholarships.

English proficiency has become a valuable asset in the Uzbek labor market, enhancing employment prospects and earning potential. Many employers, particularly in sectors such as tourism, finance, and technology, prioritize candidates who are fluent in English (“British Council” 2015). This has created a strong incentive for individuals to invest in English language learning.

#### METHODOLOGY

This study explored the peculiarities of bilingualism in the country, a survey was conducted among 144 participants through both online and paper formats. The respondents, ranging in age from 10 to over 50, completed the survey in either Uzbek or Russian, reflecting the diverse linguistic landscape of Uzbekistan. This study aims to analyze how bilingualism manifests across different age groups, the factors influencing language preference, and the broader implications of bilingual communication in Uzbek society.

#### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 144 participants, aged 10 to 60, residing in Uzbekistan, completed the survey. The sample was designed to reflect the diverse demographics of the country, with representation from both urban and rural areas, as well as different ethnic backgrounds.

#### DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data collection took place between 20.11.2024 and 30.11.2024. The questionnaire was administered using both online and paper formats to maximize participation. The online version of the

questionnaire was created using Google Forms and Survio, distributed through social media platforms. The paper version of the questionnaire was distributed in person by the researcher and research assistants in a secondary school number 19 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. For participants under the age of 18, parental consent was obtained.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and their language use patterns.

The qualitative data collected through the open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involved identifying recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses and categorizing them into meaningful codes. This process was conducted iteratively, with the researcher and research assistants independently coding the data and then comparing their findings to ensure inter-coder reliability.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

In the survey the following four questions were asked:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your native language?
4. How many languages do you speak?
5. What language do you use in your family?

Survey results are demonstrated in the following tables:

Table 1. *Age distribution of survey participants*

Nationality	Number	Percentage
Uzbek	125	87%
Russian	2	140%
Kazakh	5	350%
Tatar	3	2%
Korean	2	140%
Karakpak	2	120%
Others	5	350%

Table 2. *Nationality of participants*

Age	Number of participants	Percentage
From 10 to 20	37	2570%
From 21 to 30	21	1460%
From 31 to 40	49	34%
From 41 to 50	29	20%
50+	8	560%

Table 3. *Native language of participants*

Native language	Number	Percentage
Uzbek	121	84%
Russian	14	970%
Kazakh	2	140%
Korean	2	140%
Tatar	2	140%
Tadijk	1	70%
Others	2	140%

Table 4. *Number of languages spoken by participants*

Languages spoken	Number	Percentage
Only Uzbek	27	19%
Only Russian	20	1390%
Two	50	3470%
Three	28	19%
Four	18	1250%
Five	1	70%

Table 5. *Languages spoken in the families of the participants*

<b>Family language</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Uzbek	73	51%
Russian	35	24%
Kazakh	1	70%
Korean	0	0%
Tatar	0	0%
Tadjik	2	140%
Karakalpak	1	70%
English	1	70%
Russian, Uzbek	19	13%
Russian, Korean	1	70%
Russian, Uzbek, English	3	210%
Uzbek, Tadjik	2	140%
Serbian	1	70%
Karakalpak, Russian	1	70%
Uzbek, Russian, Turkish	1	70%
Farsi	1	70%
Russian, Azerbaijan	1	70%
Uzbek, English	1	70%

## RESULTS

The survey data, collected from 144 residents of Uzbekistan, provides a detailed snapshot of the country's contemporary linguistic landscape. The results highlight the complex relationship between ethnicity, native language, and the daily use of Russian and Uzbek in the domestic sphere.

### *Demographic profile of participants*

The study analyzed valid responses from 144 participants (N=144). The age distribution was relatively balanced across the younger and middle-aged cohorts, with the largest group being adults aged 31–40 (34.0%), followed by youths aged 10–20 (25.7%).

In terms of ethnic composition, the sample was predominantly Uzbek, accounting for 86.8% (n=125) of respondents. The remaining population consisted of diverse ethnic minorities, including Kazakhs (3.5%), Tatars (2.1%),

Russians (1.4%), Koreans (1.4%), and Karakalpaks (1.4%). This demographic spread generally mirrors the broader ethnic makeup of Uzbekistan, allowing for valid inferences regarding minority language vitality.

*Native language vs. ethnicity*

A comparison of “Nationality” (Table 2) and “Native Language” (Table 3) reveals a notable discrepancy that suggests a shift toward the Russian language among non-Russian ethnic groups. While only 1.4% of participants identified as ethnic Russians, 9.7% (n=14) identified Russian as their native language. Conversely, while 86.8% of participants identified as ethnic Uzbeks, a slightly smaller percentage (84%) claimed Uzbek as their native language. This data indicates that for a segment of the population – likely urbanized ethnic minorities or localized elites – Russian has superseded the heritage language as the primary mother tongue.

*Prevalence of multilingualism*

The survey results strongly support the hypothesis that multilingualism is the norm in Uzbekistan. According to Table 4, the majority of respondents are at least bilingual:

- **Bilingualism:** The largest single group of respondents (34.7%) reported speaking two languages.
- **Multilingualism:** A significant portion of the population is multilingual, with 19% speaking three languages and 12.5% speaking four languages.
- **Monolingualism:** Monolingualism is a minority phenomenon. Only 19% of respondents reported speaking “Only Uzbek,” and 13.9% reported speaking “Only Russian”.

These findings align with the study’s introduction, which posits that the average citizen navigates a tripartite linguistic environment (Uzbek, Russian, and increasingly English).

## LANGUAGE USE IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE (FAMILY LANGUAGE)

Table 5 provides the most critical insight into “acts of identity” and language maintenance. When asked which language is used within the family, the data shows a much higher prevalence of Russian than ethnicity or native language statistics would predict.

- **Russian dominance in home:** While only 9.7% identified Russian as their native language, 24% (n=35) of participants reported using Russian as their primary family language.
- **Code-switching:** The phenomenon of code-switching is evident, with 13% (n=19) of households reporting the use of a “Russian/Uzbek” mix.
- **Uzbek maintenance:** Uzbek remains the dominant home language for 51% of participants, significantly lower than the 86.8% who identified as ethnic Uzbeks.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The data reveals a clear linguistic hierarchy. While Uzbek is the demographic and national dominant language, Russian retains a “covert prestige,” evident in its high usage rates in family settings (24% exclusive use) and its role in bilingual households. Furthermore, the presence of distinct “Russian-only” speakers (13.9%) alongside “Uzbek-only” speakers (19%) highlights a potential linguistic divide, bridged by the large plurality (34.7%) of bilingual citizens.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence of a complex and shifting linguistic landscape in Uzbekistan, confirming the hypothesis that multilingualism is not merely an educational goal but a lived reality for the majority of the population. By interpreting the survey data through the theoretical lenses of “acts of identity” (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985) and social mobility, we can discern three critical trends: the enduring prestige of Russian, the resilience of Uzbek, and the emerging role of trilingualism.

One of the most significant findings of this survey is the disparity between ethnic identity and language use. While only 1.4% of participants identified as ethnic Russian, a substantially larger portion – 9.7% – claimed Russian as their native language, and 24% reported using it as their primary family language.

This suggests that Russian continues to hold what sociolinguists term “covert prestige.” Despite the post-independence shift toward Uzbek nation-building and the removal of Russian as an official state language, it remains deeply embedded in the private lives of citizens. The data indicates that for many non-Russian ethnic minorities (such as Tatars, Koreans, and even urban Uzbeks), Russian serves as a supra-ethnic home language. This aligns with Fierman’s (1991) observation that Soviet language policies created a class of bilinguals for whom Russian was a tool of social advancement. The fact that 13.9% of respondents speak only Russian further highlights that, for a specific segment of society, it remains possible to navigate daily life in Uzbekistan without fluency in the state language.

The survey results validate the theoretical framework that language choices are “acts of identity” used to navigate social contexts. The finding that 13% of families utilize a mix of “Russian and Uzbek” points to the prevalence of code-switching. As Gumperz (1982) noted, code-switching allows individuals to signal belonging to multiple communities simultaneously.

In the context of Uzbekistan, this likely reflects a “translingual practice” where families merge the cultural intimacy of Uzbek with the technical or modern associations often linked to Russian. This hybridity suggests that for many modern Uzbek families, identity is not singular but fluid, negotiating a space between traditional heritage and post-Soviet cosmopolitanism.

The data on polyglotism is particularly encouraging regarding recent educational reforms. With 34.7% of participants speaking two languages and 31.5% speaking three or more, the population is well-positioned for the “Third Renaissance” goals of global integration.

The presence of English in the linguistic repertoire – represented by 2.1% of families already using a “Russian, Uzbek, English” mix – suggests that the government’s “Early Introduction of English” policy is beginning to permeate the domestic sphere. While English has not yet displaced Russian as a lingua franca, its appearance in family language data indicates it is moving beyond the classroom to become a part of the communicative repertoire of the younger generation.

Finally, the results raise questions about the vitality of smaller minority languages. While the survey included Kazakh, Tatar, and Karakalpak participants, the “Family Language” data shows very low exclusive retention of these languages (e.g., 0.7% for Kazakh and 0% for Tatar exclusive use). This contrasts with the 3.5% of participants who identified as Kazakh. It appears that smaller ethnic groups may be shifting toward Russian or Uzbek as their primary home language, a phenomenon known as language shift. This highlights a potential area for future policy focus: ensuring that the promotion of global languages (English) and the state language (Uzbek) does not inadvertently accelerate the erosion of Uzbekistan’s rich historical diversity.

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