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Introduction to Volume 56

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Introduction to Volume 56

In his recent study of the linkage between corpus and status planning in language policy formation, Joshua Fishman observes that “languages are increasingly viewed as scarce national resources (not unlike flora and fauna, agricultural or environmental resources, and all other such improvable or alterable resources whose quality can be influenced by planned human intervention).”¹ Given the particular history of language policy development in Russia and the former Soviet states in the 20th century, the appearance in mid-2005 of the new Law on the State Language of the Russian Federation is an event of considerable potential impact on the study and teaching of Russian within Russia as well as abroad. The year 2007 has been designated “Year of the Russian Language” by the Russian President.² A program of international events as well as increased support of Russian language and culture study at home is anticipated, while new official regulations on the utilization of Russian in various forms of public discourse are indicated.

For these reasons, Volume 56 of the *Russian Language Journal* offers its readers a range of scholarly perspectives on the current state of the Russian language, with a particular view on language policy and legislation. Starting with the full text of the “Law on the State Language of the Russian Federation” (No. 53-FZ), signed into law by Vladimir Putin on 1 June 2005, we offer articles by Joan Chevalier and Lara Ryazanova-Clarke that provide important historical and conceptual context to the issue. The historical background of language policy formation in the Soviet era, as heavy-handed and contradictory as much of it now appears, is essential for understanding the position that some proponents of Russian language corpus reform now take. Liudmila Verbitskaia’s reflections on “The Russian Language Today,” based on an ACTR-sponsored roundtable at the AATSEEL Annual Meeting in December 2005, provides a well-illustrated overview of the concern felt by a leading Russian expert over the current health of the national tongue. In the contributions from Viktor Zhivov, Anatoly Baranov, Elena Shmeleva and Aleksei Shmelev that follow we offer commentaries from leading linguists and language specialists on a variety of issues relating to the Law itself, followed by Patrick Seriot’s useful comparison of

¹ Joshua A. Fishman, *Do Not Leave Your Language Alone. The Hidden Status Agendas within Corpus Planning in Language Policy*. Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ/London, 2006, ix.

² See official transcript of the State Council meeting of December 26, 2006, www.kremlin.ru

the Russian Law with the corresponding French language law of 1996, which served, to some extent, as a model for those who prepared the new Russian law. The article by Vladimir Semenov and Evgenii Iurkov provides a counterpoint to the linguistic commentaries that precede it, for in it the authors present data from recent public opinion polling that demonstrate that – however problematic linguistic legislation may be from a scholarly standpoint – it still resonates strongly with an interesting cross section of popular opinion (of “folk linguists”) demonstrating very strongly held views on the “great and mighty” Russian language. Finally, as a coda to the discussion, we present Mikhail Kuz’min’s conceptual study addressing the linguistic situation within the educational system of the Russian Federation: the study and teaching of Russian as mother tongue, or as a second language in relationship to formal, school-based study of local and indigenous languages (of which there are more than 165). Professor Kuz’min’s conception was accepted in August of 2006 by the Ministry of Education as the new framework for the study and teaching of Russian in the non-Russian schools, as well as for the teaching of minority languages and cultures where those languages are native to a significant segment of the local population.

The cultures of planning, regulation, and sanctioning of language use vary greatly around the world, but the reflection of larger social and cultural changes in policy formation is evident at one time or another in all major world languages. The current focus on Russian language policy, therefore, is likely to be of interest to a broad circle of Russian specialists, most particularly in the Year of the Russian Language.

Editors

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