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Minority Language Education in Russia: An Example of Social and Cultural Reproduction and Correspondence Theories

NADEZHDA BRAUN

The Russian Federation’s ethnic and linguistic diversity is underrecognized in the educational research space. Whereas conversations about the importance of Indigenous languages and cultures in Western nations, such as Canada, Australia, and the United States are increasingly prominent, many are unaware of the Indigenous languages present in what is now the Russian Federation. Part of the reason for this lack of knowledge is Russia’s own self-presentation. Russia frequently portrays itself (and is portrayed) to the West as a single, monolithic, ethnically Russian nation-state, rather than the diverse country that it is (Prina, 2018).

However, Russians are very aware of the ethnic diversity within their country and the Russian language distinguishes between those who are ethnically Russian (русские - rouss-ki-yeh - russkie) and those who are Russian citizens but are not ethnically Russian (россияне - ross-ee-yan-yeh - rossiiane) (Kuzmin, 2015). After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, rossiiane was the preferred terminology to highlight a united, multicultural Russian Federation, rather than a Russian ethnic identity (Blakkisrud, 2016). Individuals representing 193 different ethnic identities live in the Russian Federation, and at least 100 of these identities are Indigenous. Diverse identities represent approximately 20% of the population in the Russian Federation (Kuzmin, 2015; Prina, 2016). However, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) lists 131 of Russia’s languages as endangered (Font, 2014). Many of these languages have fewer than 50,000 speakers, and represent the Indigenous languages of the Far North, Siberia, and the Far East (Kuzmin, 2015).

At the same time, the structure of the Russian Federation emphasizes the ethnic and linguistic diversity through its administrative designations. Two of these designations, autonomous okrugs and republics, are reserved for states with a large ethnic minority population, and the minority or Indigenous language can then be designated as an
official state language by in the republics. Autonomous okrugs may have a “titular language,” but it is not a state or “official” language (Zamyatin, 2012a and b). Of note is that the literature on linguistic diversity in Russia uses both “minority” and “Indigenous” as terms to describe languages. Consequently, I use both terms interchangeably here, as both are accurate descriptions of many of the languages in Russia. Although there are minority languages, such as Armenian or German, within the Russian Federation that are not indigenous to Russia, they are beyond the scope of this discussion.

The outward presentation and nationalist foreign policy of the Russian Federation conflicts with Russia’s internal recognition of diversity, and particularly linguistic diversity, which will be further explored in this article. Although there is literature, as cited here, that discusses the problematic minority language policies in the Russian Federation, the literature does not apply social and cultural reproduction theory or correspondence theory to this topic. This article seeks to address this gap by applying these two theoretical perspectives, social and cultural reproduction theory and correspondence theory, to explore how Russia, despite the recognition of ethnic and linguistic diversity, promotes a singular “Russian” identity through the maintenance of Russian as the dominant language. The application of both theories provides lenses through which to view this problem, while also providing frameworks for solutions.

I first give an overview of social and cultural reproduction and correspondence theories and how both theories inform the maintenance of the status quo in minority and Indigenous language teaching in Russia. I then provide the historical-political context for the study of minority and Indigenous languages in what is now the Russian Federation. Next, I discuss effective methods of minority and Indigenous language teaching. I then present the state of minority language teaching in Russia, including some examples of specific regions and languages: Chuvash in Chuvashia and Nenets, Khanty, and Selkup in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO). Finally, I provide conclusions and discuss future lines of inquiry in this area.

1. Theoretical Perspectives
Social and cultural reproduction and correspondence theories are both derivatives of Marxist theory, which applies a critical lens to analyze existing
power structures (Kubow, 2007). Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural reproduction proposes the idea that current hierarchical structures are reproduced through the educational system. In particular, the "educational system...[contributes] to the reproduction of the structure of class relations and by concealing, by an apparently neutral attitude, the fact that it fills this function" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 258). Hierarchical structures are created and maintained using cultural capital, where the "language and knowledge [of the dominant class] act as a kind of currency" in society (Kubow, 2007, p. 99). Putin, for example, at the beginning of his rule, referred to Russianness most often as rossiiskii (the adjective form of rossiiane), as in his 1999 speech where he referred to the "primordial, traditional Russian (rossiiske) values" (as cited in Blakkisrud, 2016, p. 251). Gradually, however, he has prioritized the ethnic Russian majority in his rhetoric, emphasizing their centrality to the Russian state (Blakkisrud, 2016). In Russia, despite the nominal recognition of linguistic diversity, Russian is prioritized at the expense of minority and Indigenous languages, as these languages are not seen as "valuable" by the ethnically Russian population.

Correspondence theory emphasizes the correlation between school and the workplace, wherein students are prepared to enter the "modern, industrial workplace" (Kubow, 2007, p. 49). Bowles and Gintis (1975), "document the proposition that schools produce ‘better’ workers primarily through the structural correspondence of the social relations of education with those of capitalist production" (Bowles and Gintis, 1975, p. 77). Since minority and Indigenous languages are perceived as not having a place in the modern workplace, the languages are not prioritized (Laptender, 2016; Zamyatin, 2012a). Both social reproduction and correspondence theories criticize the maintenance of the status quo through schooling. In Russia’s case, the status quo is the maintenance of the dominant Russian language at the expense of minority languages.

2. Historical Context
Historically, minority and Indigenous languages were undermined through the conditions explained by social and cultural reproduction and correspondence theories. Therefore, to understand the current linguistic context in the Russian Federation, we must look back at the historical-political linguistic context of the past 100 years. During the 1920s, the early period of the Soviet Union, there was support for minority ethnic
groups, which led to the creation of “titular nations,” so called because they are named after the largest minority ethnic group in the region (Alpatov, 2000; Suleymanova, 2018; Zamyatin, 2012a). This also led to the creation of alphabets and education systems to teach minority and Indigenous languages, called “national schools” (Suleymanova, 2018; Zamyatin, 2012a). In 1958, the Soviet Union passed the Soviet education reform, where parents chose the language of instruction (Alpatov, 2000; Zamyatin, 2012a). This ultimately led to the “virtual dismantling of the national schools system which taught in the languages of the many titular peoples of the USSR” (Zamyatin, 2012a, p. 19). Ultimately, in the 1980s, less than half of the minority and Indigenous population of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic were studying in national schools where minority languages were primarily taught (Zamyatin, 2012a).

With the fall of the Soviet Union, and the decentralization of the education system, there was a resurgence in interest in ethnic identities and rights, leading to 34 languages being enshrined in the constitution of the Russian Federation as “government languages” (Bodarenko & Putilo, 2019). This situation also led to a renewed increase in the teaching of minority languages (Zamyatin, 2012a).

With the rise of Vladimir Putin, however, Russia has seen a shift away from multiculturalism towards Russo-centrism (Suleymanova, 2018). In the education context, this culminated in the 2018 passing of a federal law “giving schoolchildren and parents the right to choose which language would be taught to the child as their native language” (Tishkov, 2019). Much like the 1958 Soviet education reform, this law is leading to a situation where “parents [are] forced to choose Russian for their children, rather than their native language, as a language of opportunity” (Zamyatin, 2012a, p. 19). Situating Russian as the “language of opportunity” is a perfect example of correspondence theory, where families must choose Russian for their children to succeed in the economic sphere.

3. Effective Minority and Indigenous Language Teaching
Part of maintaining the dominance of the Russian language in Russia happens through inadequate provision of Indigenous language instruction. However, to understand the ineffective language teaching strategies used, we first need to understand what effective language teaching strategies are. Effective approaches to minority and Indigenous language instruction
are well documented, although not always practiced, throughout the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Disbray et al., 2018). There are many components to successful and effective minority language instruction, but “research... shows two factors are strong predictors of high language proficiency achievement; the number of teaching hours per week and continuity of teaching across the school years” (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011, p. 100; Enever, 2011 in Disbray et al., 2018). Because both factors are necessary, the most effective programs are usually bilingual or immersive language programs for the target (minority or Indigenous) language. The literature on Russia uses the term “language of instruction” to refer to bilingual or immersive programming, as opposed to a subject language, where the language is taught as a separate class. Only 41.5% of Indigenous students were being taught their native language as a subject in 2012-2013, whereas only 10% are learning their native language as the language of instruction (Zamyatin, 2017). Additionally, high-quality instruction and resources are critical to learners’ success (Enever, 2011; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006, in Disbray et al., 2018). In the Russian Federation, materials for minority and Indigenous languages are frequently limited or outdated (Font, 2014; Iksanova, 2022; Laptender, 2016). Finally, the status of the language and the ability to use the language in everyday life are also contributing factors to the successful learning of minority and Indigenous languages (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011 in Disbray et al., 2018). In most Russian cities, Russian is the primary language taught and spoken, with minority and Indigenous languages pushed out of the public sphere (Font, 2014; Laptender, 2016). Few effective teaching practices for minority and Indigenous language instruction are commonly present in the Russian education system.

The Russian education system is, in many ways, set up so that Indigenous languages can be taught effectively and with autonomy (Prina, 2020). All students legally have the right to receive their education in any official language of the Russian Federation (Arutyunova & Zamyatin, 2021). Since many Indigenous languages are recognized by the government as official regional languages, many students have the right to receive an education in their native language. This right also means that students must be taught in a language that reflects the “will of the parents” (Zamyatin, 2012a, p. 33). However, as mentioned in Disbray et al. (2018), the status of the Indigenous language in the community is
a key factor in the success of Indigenous language programs. Since this linguistic right also extends to citizens who are ethnically Russian, there is often pushback when “state and native languages [are] being taught at the expense of Russian” (Zamyatin, 2012a, p. 34). Kuzmin (2015) offers an additional example to mandatory teaching of Indigenous languages:

One of these problems is that certain ethnic autonomies promote their languages at the expense of Russian, on whose use and tuition limits are imposed. Local authorities’ dedication to their language occasionally leads to absurdities, for instance, teaching it to ethnic Russian children since the age of four, when they don’t properly speak even their native Russian. (p. 42)

However, as noted by Disbray et al. (2015), “there are advantages to acquiring new languages early,” including improvement in the language skills of one’s first language. Regardless of the facts of language learning, the pushback against the teaching of Indigenous languages serves as a powerful deterrent for families considering the pursuit of Indigenous language instruction in Russia (Bowring, 2018). This social deterrent is a powerful example of social reproduction theory, as the dominant language is reproduced through the imposition of the dominant ethnic group (Russians) on minority language speakers.

4. Minority Language Teaching and Workforce Preparation in Russia

The language requirements of the Russian education system are another powerful deterrent to the pursuit of Indigenous language instruction. Although students have the right to study in any official language of the Russian Federation, at a minimum, it is required to teach Russian as a subject in all levels except for pre-school (Zamyatin, 2012a). Additionally, one of the required subjects on the final state exam needed for entrance to university is Russian. Students have an option to take an exam in a minority language, but this examination is completely optional for university admissions. Font (2014) elaborates on this issue:

‘the Unified State Exam somehow may make education in the national tongues seem worthless, until school-leavers decide to study these languages at the universities’. In fact, examination
systems have been pointed to in the literature as being able to exercise pressure and control on the language decisions of pupils, parents and teachers. (Protassova, 2010, p. 165; Spolski, 2009, p. 98 in Font, 2014, p. 62)

These exams serve as an example of correspondence theory at work. To access the workforce, students must first pass a series of examinations, including Russian. This necessitates a level of Russian proficiency on the exam, leading schools and families to prioritize the study of Russian over the study of minority languages.

5. Examples of Minority Language Teaching in Russia
Social and cultural reproduction and correspondence theories can help to explain the status of many minority and Indigenous languages in Russia. The four languages examined here were chosen for their geographic and linguistic diversity, since they represent two different regions, Chuvashia and the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO), and two different linguistic branches, Turkic and Uralic (Font, 2014; Laptender, 2016).

5.1. Chuvash
The Chuvash language provides an excellent example of the maintenance of linguistic hierarchy in the Russian Federation. Chuvash has about 1 million speakers and is a state language in the titular Republic of Chuvashia. In the Republic of Chuvashia, about 67.7% of the population identify as Chuvash. Despite the clear Chuvash majority, 90.2% of children in the republic study in Russian, even though Chuvash is a compulsory subject of study for all students. Chuvash is usually the language of instruction (immersion) in rural schools until the fourth grade (Font, 2014). Upon entering fifth grade, students move entirely to Russian language instruction, except for one hour a week for the subject ‘Culture of the native land’ (kul’tura rodnogo kraya), taught in some small villages (Font, 2014).

Due to the legal right to choose the language of instruction, families can choose between “Chuvash,” “Tatar” (another minority language with its own titular republic, Tatarstan), and “Russian” schools. In “Chuvash” schools, more time is dedicated to Chuvash, whereas in “Russian” schools it only receives a maximum of three hours per week. By comparison, Russian is usually taught for five or six hours per week, with two further
hours devoted to Russian literature” (Font, 2014, p. 68). However, there are no Chuvash schools available in urban areas, which significantly decreases the number of students that have access to more intensive study of Chuvash. Additionally, even in “Chuvash” schools, the Chuvash language is generally taught for a maximum of two hours per week in upper secondary school (10th and 11th grade) (Font, 2014).

As previously discussed, the number of hours per week and number of years dedicated to the study of an Indigenous language are critical to fluency in that language. In decreasing access to more intensive language education in urban areas and limiting the number of years of immersive study to primary school, education authorities send a clear message that Chuvash is beneath Russian in the language hierarchy. Due in part to these language policies, Chuvash has seen a 14% decline in the number of speakers between 2002 and 2010 (Font, 2014). As Font (2014) notes, “a substantial language shift is occurring in Russia which is affecting even large nationalities with republican structures” (p. 53). This language shift is further demonstrated by the suggestion that less than 4% of students were “receiving an education through the medium of a minority language” in 2006-2007 (Prina, 2016, p. 132).

5.2. Nenets, Khanty, and Selkup

Indigenous language teaching in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO) provides another example of both social and cultural reproduction and correspondence theories at work in the Russian Federation. Within this region, there are three major Indigenous languages spoken: Nenets (both Tundra and Forest Nenets. Forest Nenets makes up only 5% of Nenets speakers.), Khanty, and Selkup. UNESCO considers both Nenets and Khanty to be endangered languages, and Selkup and Forest Nenets are critically endangered (Laptender, 2016). All three languages are considered “native languages” of the YNAO. Unlike Chuvashia, only 8.2% of the population of the YNAO is Indigenous. However, as of 2002, this region had one of the highest rates of Indigenous people who can speak their native language, with a rate of 80% (Laptender, 2016). Moreover, Nenets, Khanty, and Selkup all increased their numbers of speakers between 2002 and 2010, in contrast to most minority languages (Laptender, 2016). At the same time, evidence of social-cultural reproduction theory and linguistic hierarchies remains in the YNAO schools.
The education system of the YNAO presents some challenges, simply because of the rough terrain of taiga and tundra. To combat the rough terrain, both boarding and nomadic schools are an important part of the education system and serve mostly Indigenous families. These schools are critical, as often the Indigenous languages are more widely taught in boarding and nomadic schools due to the high percentage of Indigenous students. However, as in Chuvashia, there are not any schools using Indigenous languages as the language of instruction in urban areas (Laptender, 2016). Throughout the educational process, in both urban and rural settings, as well as at all grade levels, Russian is the primary language of instruction. Indigenous language classes are most frequently taught as an additional subject, which is not as effective as using the language for the method of instruction. Laptender (2016) notes that “it appears that the focus in these classes on native pupils’ languages is not substantial enough in order for students to actively use their native language” (p. 25). Another struggle is the lack of teachers and teacher training. Post-upper-secondary graduation, there are few options for the study of the Indigenous languages of the YNAO. Students can take optional Indigenous languages classes at the YNAO pedagogical branch of the vocational school. However, to study these Indigenous languages in higher education, students must leave the okrug and go to Herzen State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg (Laptender, 2016). During the 2014-2015 school year, 16 students were studying Nenets, 10 studying Khanty, and 5 studying Selkup at the Institute of the Peoples of the North in St. Petersburg. However, many graduates are unable to find jobs using these languages upon graduation (Laptender, 2016). Against this backdrop, the inadequacy of time devoted to language instruction continues to impede Indigenous language stability or growth in the region. This disconnect and disinvestment in teacher preparation is representative of social-cultural reproduction, where Russian is reproduced as the dominant language since the Indigenous languages are not given sufficient time and resources. Correspondence theory is once again at play here, too, as students are not taught their native languages in school because of a “lack of economic value” and then are unable to find jobs using their language skills because the language is not valued by the government.
6. Conclusions
Despite recognition of its linguistic diversity through the establishment of republics and recognition of the right to learn in one’s native language, Russia has propagated a language policy that serves as an example of social and cultural reproduction and correspondence theories, reinforcing the existing linguistic hierarchy with Russian at the top. Russia’s approach to Indigenous languages flies in the face of effective language teaching practices. These practices hold that the number of hours and years of instruction should be maximized to achieve the highest level of proficiency (Disbray et al., 2018). Indigenous language instruction in Russia is minimized across diverse languages and regions, in number of both hours and years of instruction, as Indigenous language instruction is largely absent from urban areas, where the majority of the population lives. Minority and Indigenous language teaching practices in both the Republic of Chuvashia and the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO) provide evidence of this minimization. If minimization continues, “there is a real risk that these vibrant languages will become languages in need of revitalization, a task more difficult than fostering and maintaining multilingualism” (Disbray et al., 2018, section 13). Russia instead needs to identify a language policy that promotes multilingualism and diversity instead of homogenization and assimilation, enabling the country to celebrate its diversity, not just nominally, but authentically (Arutyunova & Zamyatin, 2021; Iksanova et. al, 2022; Saarikivi & Marten, 2012).

Further lines of study will be helpful in this endeavor. First, comparative studies of minority and Indigenous language teaching in Russia and other linguistically diverse countries (e.g., the United States, Indonesia, Australia, Kazakhstan, etc.) are needed to uncover effective minority language-maintenance practices worldwide. Second, an analysis of access to both language materials (e.g., textbooks) and teacher training programs for minority and Indigenous languages should be completed. Furthermore, research questioning if there are any minority languages that do not have decreasing numbers of speakers in Russia should be carried out. If so, how and why? Finally, further evaluation of variation in laws and policies among different administrative districts (e.g., autonomous okrugs and republics) and their impact on minority language learning is needed. These lines of inquiry will help to determine
the extent of minority and Indigenous language instruction and loss throughout Russia. With these questions answered, one can determine effective policies to mitigate the language hierarchy described by social and cultural and correspondence theories, preventing further language extinction.

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