How Perceptions of the English Language Have Changed in Kazakhstan: A Narrative Analysis

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Valerie Sartor
Instructor, Defense Language Institute, Lackland Air Force Base
vallerina57@gmail.com

Abstract

This study provides an overview of how perceptions of the English language in Kazakhstan have altered over time due to political, economic, social and technological changes. The sociocultural framework includes language commodification and critical pedagogy concerning Indigenous languages; the methodological approach is narrative analysis combined with Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Three generational shifts were identified, each reflective of sociocultural changes that have occurred as Kazakhstan has transitioned from Soviet republic to modern Indigenous nation: from the Soviet Era/Soviet Man; to Independent Kazakhstan/Patriots and Outsiders; to Modern Kazakhstan/Young Cosmopolitans. The ongoing popularity of English may eventually threaten the Kazakh language.

Keywords

Kazakhstan – English language – narrative analysis – Indigenous

1 Introduction

The peoples of Central Asian countries have been multilingual for millennia.[1] As the Russian empire expanded and transformed into the USSR in the early 20th century, Kazakhstan became a Soviet republic. Over time, the Russian language steadily gained power, taking control of multiple linguistic domains:

1 René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

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education, government, business, entertainment, and the media. Independent Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, followed a moderate path concerning all things Russian, including language. Nazarbayev also perceived the importance of supporting and empowering Kazakh as a language for national identity, while asserting that English was significant as a global lingua franca. He therefore promoted a trilingual language policy for the Kazakh nation, allowing for English to grow in importance, especially in the last decade.2 This is not an easy task. Inadequate funding, poorly paid language educators, inadequate materials, and unequal linguistic domains are only a few of the many challenges. As Kazakhstan's language policy has transformed over the course of generations, so too have generational shifts in perceptions of English occurred. These correlate with transformations in Kazakh identity politics and with beliefs about various of the country's ethnic groups.

Since I was primarily based in Karaganda during my fieldwork, this study uses data primarily collected in Karaganda. Karaganda is near several former Soviet prison camps that housed diverse peoples (Chechens, Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Koreans, etc.) as political prisoners from the 1930s until Stalin's death in 1953. Thus, Karaganda has been home—willingly and otherwise—to many ethnic and linguistic groups. My data indicated that non- ethnic Kazakhs residing in Karaganda are continuing to leave and that they view English as necessary for emigration purposes. Ethnic Kazakhs also prioritize English, perceiving the government-endorsed language as a valuable commodity that will help them improve their quality of life.

1.1 *Political Mandates*

In 2007, then-president Nazarbayev announced his desire to implement a trilingual education policy whereby pupils and students began at an early age to intensively study English in addition to Russian and Kazakh.3 Soon afterwards, trilingual education was officially mandated. Due to governmental interest in and support for trilingualism,4 there have been many positive moves in the

2 William Fierman, "Russian in Post-Soviet Central Asia: A Comparison with the States of the Baltic and South Caucasus," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 6 (2012): 1077–1100; "Nazarbayev Calls Kazakhstan to Learn English," *TengriNews*, December 1, 2013, https://en.tengrinews.kz/edu/nazarbayev-calls-kazakhstan-to-learn-english-24393/, accessed March 3, 2021.

3 Davronzhon E. Gaipov, "Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education in the Context of Globalisation," in *III ICBCB: Integrating Languages, Linguistics, Literature, Translation and Journalism into Education* (Almaty: Suleyman Demirel University, 2011), pp. 94–100.

4 For example, Resolution of the Government of Kazakhstan No. 1045 of December 31, 2019, "Implementation of Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020–2025," *Adilet*, December 31, 2019, http://adilet.zan.kz/kaz/docs/P1900001045, accessed March 3, 2021.

sphere of English teaching and learning.5 The trilingual education mandates, however, reflect a rising nationalism that favors ethnic Kazakhs.6

In 2011, along with the trilingual education mandate, government funding established a state-of-the-art university, Nazarbayev University (NU), where students attend courses entirely in English. Additionally, 20 high- caliber schools for grades 6–12, called Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), were fully funded by the government and started operating nationwide. NU and the NIS schools hire well-paid foreign instructors, who teach in English. Students attend at no cost. Significantly, students are selected for NIS schools on the basis of their test scores in the three languages—Kazakh, English, and Russian—as well as Math and Logic.7

Along similar lines, although the Kazakh authorities no longer endorse the Turkish Gülen Movement,8 elite Bilim schools—reformed Turkish-Kazakh high schools—around the country hire foreign instructors and offer advanced English instruction.9 Public schools and gymnasiums likewise offer classes in various subjects in English, ostensibly following the trilingual policy.10

In the last two decades, private language schools have also opened throughout Kazakhstan. In Karaganda, for example, over a dozen private language schools are currently in operation, the majority of which focus on teaching English. (Some also teach German and Russian.) Since 2006, the U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan has taken significant steps to promote English, funding American Corners (AC) and Education USA. The British Council, which has operated in Kazakhstan for over two decades, offers classes, workshops, and teacher- training courses in English, although they have no offices in Karaganda.

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5 Fierman, "Russian in Post-Soviet Central Asia."

6 Paul Stronski, "A Troubling Scenario for Kazakhstan," *American Enterprise Institute*, January 17, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/17/troubling-scenario-for-kazakhstan-pub-75423, accessed March 3, 2021.

7 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, "Avtonomnaia organizatsiia obrazovaniia 'Nazarbaev Intellektual'nye shkoly," https://www.nis.edu.kz/ru/about/history/, accessed March 3, 2021.

8 Dylan Matthews, "Turkey's Coup: The Gülen Movement, Explained," *Vox*, September 13, 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/7/16/12204456/gulen-movement-explained, accessed March 3, 2021.

9 Davronzhon Gaipov, Yusuf Yaylaci, Kurtay Çiğ, and Selim Guvercin, "Formation of Multilingual Educational System in Kazakhstan: Kazakh-Turkish High Schools," *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 103 (2013): 416–424.

10 Zhilbayev, Zhanbol O., et al. "Promotion of Trilingual Education in Kazakhstan Schools: Online Monitoring Results." *Журнал Сибирского федерального университета. Гуманитарные науки* 12.2 (2019).

In addition to the growth of English-language resources in Kazakhstan, and specifically in Karaganda, technological resources are now abundant. Since the advent of the Internet in the early 1990s, Kazakhs have jumped on the information and technology bandwagon. Under the leadership of former President Nazarbayev and current President Tokayev, the use of technology in all domains—education, finance, entertainment, commerce, government, and home—has increased in Kazakhstan.[11] Kazakh people of all ages use smartphones and report having Internet in their homes, offices, and schools. The growing popularity of English and technology have impacted how Kazakhs identify themselves and how their world connects to the global community.

1.2 *Narratives and Technology*

Humans create their sense of reality though the stories they tell themselves and others, and those that they hear and experience from other people, books, art forms, and the media at large. Today, more than ever before, technological advances mean that narratives are widely disseminated and available in a variety of genres, expressing a range of points of view, and varying in their degree of truth. The narratives we absorb and choose to believe can have a significant impact on our identity, as well as our ability to learn, because they motivate and inspire us by ascribing value to what we study and believe. Narratives on the English language in Kazakhstan are a case in point.

Narratives about English in Kazakhstan are socially constructed and culturally framed and arise from a series of sociocultural circumstances. Such cultural narratives build strength as they are consolidated by repetition and become incorporated into belief systems. This study asserts that themes derived from culturally constructed narratives addressing English language perception in Kazakhstan correlate to specific sociocultural factors: 1) historical and political circumstances, past and present; 2) economic and social changes that have happened since Kazakhstan gained independence; and 3) the rise and use of Internet technology and social media, particularly among Kazakh youth.

Narrative archetypes, or *imagoes*,12 can analyze shifts in perceptions that are grounded in historical context. In this study, imagoes illustrate symbolically how the value of the English language has shifted between generations of Kazakhstanis. I identified the following *imagoes*: from the Soviet Era/

11 National Research Council, *Science and Technology in Kazakhstan: Current Status and Future Prospects* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 2007).

12 Dan P. MacAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

Soviet Man; to Independent Kazakhstan/Patriots and Outsiders; to Modern Kazakhstan/Young Cosmopolitans.

To further investigate the power of narrative over perceptions of English in Kazakhstan, I employ one aspect of Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical idea of dialogism. Dialogism, like imagoes, connects individual identity to group consciousness. As a post-Soviet nation, Kazakhstan has over time dramatically changed its narratives regarding how a language such as English holds value, as well as how languages in general represent power and progress.

Language choice is never neutral. Narratives around the value of English have evolved as Kazakhstan has transitioned into a modern post-Soviet nation. The shift toward English, coupled with the continued predominance of Russian, has also impacted how citizens of Kazakhstan perceive the Kazakh language. To them, English seems to symbolically represent economic opportunity, social equity, and membership in the global community (although whether it does so in practice is a different matter). How this linguistic perception has been shaped and how it is viewed in an emerging trilingual country is the subject of this article. An exploration of the perceived value of English in Kazakhstan is a much-needed contribution to linguistic research in Central Asian countries, which is still a relatively new field.

This article is arranged as follows. First, the theoretical framework is presented, followed by sections on methodology and participant information, which detail narrative analysis techniques and participant recruitment as well as explaining how Bakhtin's dialogism meshes with narrative analysis. Coded data is then presented, analyzed, and discussed.

2 Theoretical Framework

This sociolinguistic research draws on two areas of critical scholarship: 1) the English language as a commodity; and 2) the English language as a threat to Indigenous languages.

2.1 *English as a Commodity*

The Canadian scholar Monica Heller has examined how dominant languages, such as English, serve as resources with growing global economic value in areas such as tourism, marketing, language teaching, translation, communications, and performance art.13 She terms this phenomenon the "commodification of

13 Monica Heller, "The Commodification of Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2010): 101–114.

language." Similarly, David Block writes of today's English language learners as "global citizens/cosmopolitan consumers" because they perceive English as the gateway to the global connections they wish to have and the global communities they seek to join.14 The notion of education as a commodity for global citizens arises from contemporary neoliberal education, which has caused students everywhere to become critically conscious of the value of what they are studying. Language learners in Kazakhstan consider how learning English will enhance their worth, both domestically and abroad.

My respondents reported that they studied English because it was a tool that would help them to get better jobs, improve their life outcomes, and enjoy a better quality of life. This is in line with Bonny Norton's finding that language learners dedicate themselves to learning English in order to transform their identities as they attempt to reach an economically equitable playing field.15 It is also useful information in light of Zoltán Dörnyei's research on language learner motivation, which seeks to help teachers understand motivational fac- tors in order to engage their language students.16

De Costa, Park, and Wee, who explored motivation among Koreans learning English, use the term "linguistic entrepreneurship" to describe learners who invest in languages in hopes of gaining social and economic capital.17 In their view, this term has evolved semantically: having initially been used to describe someone who acts as a broker between linguistically and culturally diverse groups, they consider it to now refer to someone who acknowledges language learning as a form of entrepreneurship that is undertaken to enhance one's human capital. De Costa has described the immense financial and emotional investments some Korean families make over the course of many years to ensure that their children achieve high levels of English proficiency.18

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14 David Block, "Globalization and Language Teaching," in *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*, ed. Nikolas Coupland (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 287–304, 300.

15 Bonny Norton, *Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation*, 2nd ed. (Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2013).

16 Zoltán Dörnyei, "Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning," *Language Teaching* 31, no. 3 (1998): 117–135; Zoltán Dörnyei, *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition* (London: Routledge, 2014); Zoltán Dörnyei and Letty Chan, "Motivation and Vision: An Analysis of Future L2 Self Images, Sensory Styles, and Imagery Capacity across Two Target Languages," *Language Learning* 63 (2013): 437–462.

17 Peter De Costa, Joseph Park, and Lionel Wee, "Language Learning as Linguistic Entrepreneurship: Implications for Language Education," *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 25, no. 5–6 (2016): 695–702.

18 Peter I. De Costa, *The Power of Identity and Ideology in Language Learning: Designer Immigrants Learning English in Singapore* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016).

The implication is that Koreans who achieve near-native English fluency must have access to significant financial resources and hope for a profitable payback. Some wealthy Kazakhstanis certainly make similar investments, but Kazakhstan's status as a post-Soviet country that only gained independence relatively recently puts it in a unique position. Moreover, in contrast to South Korea, Kazakhstan and the city of Karaganda (the research site) are home to great ethnic diversity; motivation could plausibly vary depending on ethnicity as well as age.

Additionally, the Kazakh leadership and the Ministry of Education are pushing all their citizens to learn English—not only to improve their own individual lives, but also to bring Kazakhstan as a nation into the global community.19 In this sense, Kazakhstan somewhat resembles multiethnic China, which, since the early 1980s, has transformed from an inefficient communist economy into a dominant world presence many of whose citizens use English to communicate and transact business.20 The Chinese government has called upon its people to become highly proficient in English as almost a moral and civic imperative.21 Likewise, with independence in 1991, the Kazakh government transitioned from Cold War circumspection toward those who study English to exhorting Kazakh citizens to serve their country by becoming not just bilingual, but multilingual in Kazakh, Russian, and English.22

2.2 *The English Language as a Threat to Indigenous Languages*

The Kazakh sociocultural context is complex due to the diversity of its citizens and because English is one of three competing languages: English, Russian, and Kazakh. Following Steve Sabol, I define the once-nomadic Kazakhs as a uniquely modern Indigenous People who have reclaimed their homeland and language while simultaneously becoming members of the global community and economy.23 For this reason, critical research addressing Indigenous lan-

19 "'Agylshyn tili Qazaqstannyn bolashagy ushin' degen taqyrypka shygarma kerek," *Baribar*, https://surak.baribar.kz/125042/, accessed March 3, 2021.

20 David L. Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

21 Shuang Gao, "Multilingualism and Good Citizenship: The Making of Language Celebrities in Chinese Media" (paper presented at the Sociolinguistics of Globalization conference, Hong Kong University, June 3–6, 2015).

22 "N. Nazarbaev: 'Ush tilde bilu—bul zhahandangan alemge zholdama degen soz,'" *Inform.kz*, April 23, 2015, https://www.inform.kz/kz/n-nazarbaev-ush-tildi-bilu-bul-zhahandangan-alemge-zholdama-degen-soz_a2768815, accessed March 3, 2021.

23 See Steven Sabol, *"The Touch of Civilization": Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2017).

guage loss and revitalization is discussed alongside theories addressing language commodification.

In my view, English poses a threat to modern Kazakh language and culture. Powerful Western cultural values are carried by English. Moreover, it is following in the footsteps of Russian, a colonizer language that continues to impact Kazakh language choice.24 An Indigenous sociocultural framework helps to highlight the similarities between other Indigenous groups (specifically the Navajo Nation) and Kazakhstan in terms of their classification of English as a linguistic commodity. This framework also addresses Indigenous language shift.

Like the Navajo, citizens of Kazakhstan—both ethnic Kazakhs and non-ethnic Kazakhs—live on sovereign lands under governmental decrees and schools that both advocate the preservation, appreciation, and teaching of the native language and exhort inhabitants to learn English, the so-called global language. The Kazakh leadership further encourages citizens to continue to tolerate and respect Russian, the former colonizer language. Thus, like the Navajo, Kazakh language learners have complex linguistic and social relationships with their peers, their families, their communities, their nation, and the outside world.

Tiffany Lee's research on Navajo youth identity provides a point of departure for identifying major similarities between the two groups.25 She indicates, for instance, that Navajo youth struggle between participating in the dominant Western culture, a culture that is reinforced and carried by American English, and honoring and upholding traditional Navajo ways and worldviews, which are embedded in their Navajo language. For Kazakhs, this clash is even more complex, as they have endured multiple waves of linguistic invasion. For ethnic Kazakhs, the first colonizer language was Russian, while non-ethnic Kazakhs have since independence faced pressure to achieve high levels of proficiency in the Kazakh language.26

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24 "Zhasulan Isa: UIAT ZHOK ZHERDE, ZAN, ZHOQ!" *Qazaq Uni*, November 5, 2020, https://qazaquni.kz/kogam/152962-zhasulan-isa-uiat-zhoq-zherde-zang-zhoq, accessed March 3, 2021.

25 Tiffany S. Lee, "'If They Want Navajo to Be Learned, Then They Should Require It in All Schools': Navajo Teenagers' Experiences, Choices, and Demands Regarding Navajo Language," *Wicazo Sa Review* 22, no. 1 (2007): 7–33; Tiffany S. Lee, "Language, Identity, and Power: Navajo and Pueblo Young Adults' Perspectives and Experiences with Competing Language Ideologies," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 8, no. 5 (2009): 307–320.

26 Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

The English language appeals to Kazakhstanis of all ethnicities, but language use varies by generation. Some older Kazakhstanis know more Kazakh than Russian, but many speak only Russian due to Soviet-era dictates. Likewise, older Navajo generally have higher levels of linguistic competence in Navajo than contemporary youth, yet many of these elders were forced to speak English due to politics, government mandates, and boarding school policies. Older generations in both Kazakhstan and the U.S. were forced to accept colonizer languages, but some refused to fully assimilate into the dominant culture. Yet due to fear and pressure to assimilate, many Navajo and Kazakhs chose to raise their children in the dominant language (English and Russian, respectively). Moreover, the linguistic domains of education, commerce, information, and entertainment became established in the colonizer language—which in turn lowered the prestige of Navajo and Kazakh.

Lee reported that Navajo youth feel conflicted with regard to language. She interviewed high school students and young adults with varying degrees of fluency in Navajo.27 Her findings indicated that sociological problems, such as peer pressure to use English rather than Navajo, influenced their language choices and motivation. According to Lee, for students in school, the desire to conform is almost overwhelming, so even if a Navajo student can speak her language, she may choose to use only English at school in hopes of being accepted by her peers.

Likewise, many of my own young respondents (or the children of older respondents) primarily used Russian at school and English and/or Russian on social media. "No one really speaks Kazakh at school except at the Nis schools," "No one really speaks Kazakh at school except at the NIS school said one 16-year-old teen in Karaganda on November 24, 2019, "because our books are in Russian, our classes are in Russian. There are no good textbooks in Kazakh for most school subjects. None of my non-Kazakh friends really understand Kazakh or want to try to speak in Kazakh." This issue of poor quality and inadequate educational materials remains ongoing in the cases of both Kazakh and Navajo. This compounds the problem that students speak their native language poorly, as if textbooks are in Russian or English, respectively, parents of all socioeconomic classes would prefer that their children study in that language as opposed to their native language.

Lee's Navajo respondents also felt reluctant to continue trying to use their native language if they were ridiculed or teased by peers, family, or strangers. They were sensitive to criticism and felt shamed by any linguistic imperfections. Lee found that this lowered their motivation to learn their native

27 Lee, "'If They Want Navajo to Be Learned.'"

language, both in and out of school.28 My Kazakhstani respondents of all ages similarly reported that they had felt awkward or shamed, sometimes by strangers, when they spoke imperfectly in Kazakh. One participant, aged 60, said on December 6, 2019: "It wasn't my fault I was raised in Russian. But later, learning English, no one ever shamed me for trying to speak English. I still speak almost no Kazakh, and I work for the U.S. embassy using only English and Russian." When teased or shamed, both Kazakhstanis and Navajo found it difficult to remain motivated.

Some of Lee's participants reported that they thought it was cool to use English, given that schools predominantly used English. Students would even criticize their peers for speaking only Navajo, employing the derogatory term "john" to label the monolingual Navajo speaker as rural or uneducated. Similarly, most Kazakh participants under the age of 25 reported that "English [was] cool" and deployed the Kazakh term "oralman" (Kazakh repatriates) to label as rural and/or barely literate those who only spoke one language.29

For both Navajo and Kazakhstanis, the status of the indigenous language was lowered by colonization. In the eyes of Navajo, English is the language of the educated, the financially secure, the successful. Similarly, to Kazakhstanis, Russian is still the language of the literate, although English is fast becoming a symbol of modernization and financial success.30 The Navajo and Kazakh languages, by contrast, symbolically represent rural, poorly educated folks.

Kazakhstanis of all ages, despite being less than perfectly fluent in Kazakh, reported that they did not feel highly motivated to perfect their language skills because only certain governmental posts required flawless Kazakh. Data indicate that most workplaces instead require Russian fluency, or they seek candidates who are bilingual in Russian and English. This leads Russophones who want jobs to focus on learning as much English as possible. English, not Kazakh, represents financial opportunities, both in Kazakhstan and abroad.

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28 Ibid.

29 "Oralman" is perhaps better known as the term commonly used to describe ethnic Kazakhs who have returned to the homeland since Kazakhstan became independent. These returnees fled during the Stalin era to escape famine and forced collectivization. When they began returning to Kazakhstan, many identified as illiterate herders from Mongolia and China, yet they spoke flawless—if old-fashioned—Kazakh. Returnees, whom the Kazakh leadership now prefers to call "kandas," were reportedly often resented because their perfect command of Kazakh entitled them to subsidies and jobs despite their lack of education or experience living in contemporary Kazakhstan. See Darkhan Umirbekov, "Kazakhstan: Words Mean Everything in Ethnic Kazakh Debate," *EurasiaNet*, October 10, 2019, https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-words-mean-everything-in-ethnic-kazakh-debate, accessed March 3, 2021.

30 Fierman, "Russian in Post-Soviet Central Asia."

Economic factors also determined the linguistic choices of Navajo. Lee found that few good jobs exist for Navajo people who speak only Navajo.31 Within the Navajo Nation, the Navajo language is spoken, even required, in governing bodies, but since young people are not active participants in these entities, they often lack motivation to master Navajo. Lee concluded that for Navajo, learning their language had become a burdensome task. Many Kazakhstanis reported feeling the same way.

In recent decades, ever fewer Navajo families have spoken Navajo at home and proficiency in Navajo has declined. In addition to peer pressure, fear of ridicule, and the sense that Navajo is an outdated language, the Navajo Nation is surrounded by American media and government; business, entertainment, commerce, and social media are almost exclusively in English. Kazakhstan is similarly barraged with English via the Internet, international business opportunities, and educational opportunities.

To date, the Kazakh language is not endangered.32 Nevertheless, this study illustrates how English as the second "colonizer" language is changing the way in which Kazakhs view their native language and their culture. The older generation of Kazakhstanis endured Soviet oppression, which extended from loss of life to denigration of their language and culture.33 Many assimilated, accepting Russian culture and language as dominant over Kazakh. Currently, English is powerful in multiple linguistic domains—entertainment, social media, education, commerce, and the workplace—while Russian remains a lingua franca for many of the post-Soviet world. Whether English will replace Russian—as is taking place in the Baltic states34—and whether the Kazakh language will thrive in the future is unknown.

3 Methodological Approach: Narrative Analysis

The study traces shifts in perceptions and valuations of the English language in Kazakhstan over time in response to political, economic, social, and technological changes. The methodological approach chosen was narrative analysis in the form of listening to live speech, as this offered a nonjudgmental

31 Lee, "Language, Identity, and Power."

32 Bhavna Dave, "National Revival in Kazakhstan: Language Shift and Identity Change," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1996): 51–72.

33 Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

34 Fierman, "Russian in Post-Soviet Central Asia."

approach.35 The information gained from these narratives was used to analyze how English is perceived in relation to complicated historical, economic, and political events in Kazakhstan, employing the concept of imagoes, which has long been employed in multidisciplinary research.36

Simply put, imagoes are powerful symbolic characters. Dan P. MacAdams delineated four criteria for imagoes.37 First, they are archetypes, not living people. Second, they represent only part of a person's life story, not the entirety of it. Third, they can be perceived as either positive or negative and used as guides for becoming someone we wish to be or avoiding becoming someone we abhor. And fourth, imagoes are unique in the sense that people may interpret them differently, even though they represent someone or something recognized by all. In this study, for example, the image of the Soviet Man (which, at the time the term was coined, applied to both sexes) is an imago that, to those who grew up under Soviet rule, broadly represents an idealized and personified Soviet citizen. For later generations, however, the representation may be considered outdated, isolated, and filled with colonial vestiges.

Data were collected in the city of Karaganda, Kazakhstan. The city was chosen because this was where I was posted as an exchange scholar and because it has a historically diverse ethnic population. The city, located in Karaganda Province, is situated in central Kazakhstan. Karaganda State University is one of the many prestigious universities established in the city during the Soviet era. The city is home to approximately half a million residents.

I interviewed Karaganda residents and employed active listening without judgment. This technique also avoided any negative impact on participants, who spoke freely but anonymously. Interviews were conducted from September 2019 through February 2020; additional interviews were conducted via Zoom in September 2020. I also interviewed William Fierman, a celebrated expert on Central Asian language policy and Kazakhstan, three times. To protect participant privacy, no recordings or videos were made; instead, copious notes were taken, reviewed, and rewritten within 24 hours of each interaction. In terms of positionality, I had positively interacted with many participants for educational proposes before conducting any research. These prior relationships made it easier to arrange interviews, focus groups, and extended informal conversations concerning the English language.

35 Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998).

36 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Bollinger Foundation, 1949).

37 MacAdams, *The Stories We Live By*.

The participants in this study consisted of six individuals aged 55–75; 17 individuals aged 25 to 48; and 23 individuals aged 16 to 21. Thanks to my extended informal access to older colleagues, with whom I had numerous informal conversations and also conducted individual interviews, few study participants were needed for this group.

Four focus groups of 10–12 people were held at a public library that housed American Corners; these groups often included parents with their children. One focus group included participants in the 25–48 age range, with parents between the ages of 36 to 48. Additionally, 11 participants in another focus group were younger, aged from 16 to 23. They preferred to be individually interviewed in coffeeshops. The younger participants, who were between 16 and 23 years of age, comprised the highest proportion of respondents for two reasons: they were easy to approach and eager to talk, and they often brought friends with them to interviews and focus groups because it was considered "cool" to interact in English with a native speaker. To avoid any bias in responses, I made sure not to interview my students. Interviews and focus groups were held in classrooms, coffee shops, and at American Corners. All interviews were initially held in English to ascertain that participants had high levels of English language fluency, but once this was verified we often used both English and Russian for discussion purposes.

Participants varied in age, ethnic identification, socioeconomic status, and occupation (see Figure 1). Seventy-five percent of participants were non- ethnic Kazakhs. Many self-identified as Russian-Kazakh, German-Kazakh, Korean-Kazakh, or Ukrainian-Kazakh, or else stated that they were of mixed heritage (Georgian-Russian-Kazakh, Chechen-Russian, Russian-Uzbek, etc.). Due to the sensitive nature of ethnicity, participants were never asked to disclose their ethnicity. Participants under the age of 25 were students. Those aged

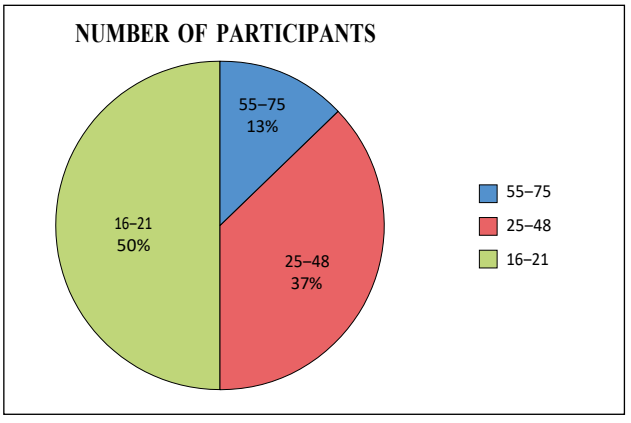

Figure 1
Participants
Source: Compiledby the author

25 to 55 held a variety of jobs, including medical doctors, cosmetologists, IELTS (a high-stakes English test38) trainers, pilots, translators, and professional white-collar workers. The six older participants were all academics in various pedagogical departments; two served as administrators as well as scholars.

Participants were recruited in several ways. I asked Kazakh university colleagues for interviews and had many conversations with them. I also interviewed and held focus groups with teachers and university instructors after conducting teacher-teaching workshops. Following regular weekend talks and test prep sessions at U.S. embassy-funded spaces—e.g., American Corners and Education USA—I requested interviews and focus groups from youth and adults who regularly attended my talks and conversation groups. Site hosts at these embassy spaces were likewise interviewed, as well as arranging for me to visit various Kazakh public schools, where I was able to conduct focus groups with students and English language instructors. Younger students often came to focus groups with their parents, which enhanced data collection by offering multiple narratives and perspectives.

After preparing a series of open-ended questions (see Figure 2), I simply listened to people talk about their lives and gently directed the conversation toward their views on the English language and its relationship to their lives. Participants recruited from American Corners frequently spoke for over an hour, with both youth and their parents expressing anxiety, even desperation, as they spoke of their desire to use English to move abroad. Some asked me for advice on immigration; I directed them to the AC coordinator. Through "active listening" and follow-up questions, the stories that I heard deepened and expanded.39

Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. (age, family, hobbies, job)
2. How many languages do you speak? Which language is your best?
3. Why do/did you study English? (Tell me more.) Is English useful?
4. What will you do/have you done with your English?
5. How does your family feel about you studying English (younger participants).
6. How did you learn English? What do you recommend to others if they want to learn to speak English fluently?

Figure 2 Open-ended research questions
Source: Compiled by the author

38 The IELTS website is available at https://www.ielts.org/en-us.

39 Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London: SAGE, 2013), 63–65.

Each interview and focus group resulted in detailed handwritten notes that were expanded upon and annotated within 24 hours of the interview. During informal conversations, I asked permission from the speaker to note down information. I reviewed and reread these notes multiple times to elucidate core patterns as well as themes that consolidated with other narratives.40

Throughout the study, I sought to remain neutral regarding data, participants, and U.S. State Department and Kazakh governmental policies when addressing English language teaching, (work and) study abroad, and immigration procedures. Readers should note, however, that the data are and should be treated as narrative, as opposed to "truth" or "untruth." The study sought to investigate how and why a narrative is constructed in a certain way. Understanding motive—in this case, how sociocultural factors have impacted Kazakhstani perceptions of the English language over time—was key.

Because narrative analysis spotlights specific passages and then reinterprets them in the context of what is said elsewhere,41 it is appropriate to employ Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Dialogism demonstrates that narratives can be co-constructed. This study explored broader social discourses that impacted how people in Kazakhstan perceived English.

4 Narrative, Bakhtin, and Dialogism

Like Bakhtin, many social scientists assert that reality is socially constructed. Squire wrote that people "make sense" of themselves and the world via personal narratives.42 Indeed, we construct personal life narratives to make sense of our lives.43 Our stories result from our internal memory and also from others, who offer external validation. They are thematic, connecting to contextual events. People tell stories in various ways to create personal and cultural narratives, but they may change with the generations.44

Because narratives can be co-constructed, dialogism segues neatly with narrative analysis, as it encompasses not only individual narratives, but also the entire continuum of internal and external narratives, such as those explored

40 Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, *Narrative Research*. 41
Ibid., 12.

42 Corinne Squire, "Experience-Centered and Culturally-Oriented Approaches to Narrative," in *Doing Narrative Research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE, 2011), 41–63, 42–43.

43 MacAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 12.

44 Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Creation of Self," in *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: Practice, Theory, and Research*, ed. Lynne E. Angus and John McLeod (London: SAGE, 2004), 3–14.

here.45 Narrative analysis is based on the premise that since stories are constructed around a core of historical facts or life events, it follows that we create our identities and self-narratives from other narratives situated in our common culture. Bakhtin's dialogism emphasizes the immersive and holistic quality of narratives, their thematic nature, and their dynamic evolution. Sociocultural context is crucial, as narratives are fluid and shift over time.

From a sociocultural perspective, human actions and language are always grounded in context. Competing histories and narratives exist in all kinds of political systems, including contemporary Kazakhstan. This is because narrative not only illuminates personal experience, but also encompasses group membership and history. Narrative therefore helps us understand how people adapt to sociological changes occasioned by political, economic, and social shifts.

Dialogism represents the universality of dialogue in any given discourse, with at least two other "voices" interacting in any given linguistic construction, including narratives.46 Dialogism demonstrates how powerful narratives are: they are situated not only with the speaker and listener, but also historically and politically.

Bakhtin had many thoughts concerning language. For this study, I focus on his idea that although language allows individuals to create unique utterances, this language belongs not solely to a specific individual, but to that person's group(s) *and* the socioculturally specific setting where it was generated.47 Since language is not inanimate, narratives are context- and time-based. They serve as agents, consciously and unconsciously motivating both speakers and recipients to adhere to certain ways of thinking, believing, and doing.

By looking at language as a tool for creating reality, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which extends into narrative (internalized or spoken, conscious or unconscious), becomes an ongoing, influential exchange between what has already been said/created and what has not yet been but will be said/created.48 Bakhtin's dialogism allows us to view narratives on a continuum, as evolving instruments that demonstrate how citizens of Kazakhstan have valued and revalued the English language over time.

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45 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

46 Ibid.

47 James V. Wertsch, "Narratives as Cultural Tools in Sociocultural Analysis: Official Historyin Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia," *Ethos* 28, no. 4 (2000): 511–33.

48 Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *M.M. Bakhtin: Life and Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

5 Overarching Data Patterns

Three significant time periods emerge from an analysis of participants' narratives.

First, before Kazakhstan became independent, those who studied and spoke English belonged to an esoteric class of scholars, translators, and teachers. During the Soviet era, English experts were often considered suspect, especially if they had contact with native speakers or had traveled abroad. Second, while the breakup of the USSR and consequent independence of Kazakhstan in December 1991 led to widespread celebration, the economic situation was uncertain and chaotic. This spurred a rise in migration that continues to this day; it also triggered nation-building in the government and among the citizenry. Third, as in the Western world, the generation that has grown up since 2000 is what Jean Twenge terms the "iGen"—highly connected youths born with smartphones and technology.49 The modern young Kazakhs interviewed for this study seemed to project an international outlook. They proudly identified themselves as tech-savvy, cosmopolitan multilinguals; they are influenced by contemporary Western values of gender equality and freedom to leave their country.50 Many speak English better than Kazakh, and better than theirEnglish teachers.

Certainly, given that these participants were all visiting locations where English was taught, self-selection bias is apparent. It should be noted, however, that participants came from both upper- and lower-income families. Both achieved high levels of language proficiency in English, and some from lower-income families had opportunities to study or travel abroad. In my view, several factors contributed to linguistic success. First, every one of my respondents stated that they had Internet at home. Some low-income participants reported access to free English immersion summer camps offered by Peace Corps volunteers. Others attended State Department-funded English Access camps and workshops for economically disadvantaged youth. Many people— young and old, rich and poor—devotedly attended English Corners, which are free and offer English language training, American culture in the form of movies, renowned American guest speakers, and presentations from Fulbright English Teaching Assistants posted around the country. The Kazakhstan

49 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood *and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

50 Ulan Bigozhin, "'We Love Our Country in Our Own Way': Youth, Gender, and Nationalism" in *The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 115.

Bolashak Scholarship has helped fund many less economically fortunate students' English studies abroad.51 The British Council also offers English language training, both paid and unpaid, in Kazakhstan.

6 The Soviet Era, 1920–1991

During the Soviet era in Kazakhstan, Russian—the colonizer language—was the language of the elite, the educated, and those who served as elected members of the Communist Party.52 Kazakh, by contrast, was denigrated and muted; people spoke it discreetly, mostly at home, as a "kitchen language." As in other parts of the USSR, German was a popular second language for pedagogues in the hard sciences. English was considered an esoteric language; it was perceived as the language of Mark Twain and Shakespeare yet tainted because it was the enemy tongue. The imperialist, the capitalist, and the Westerner were all equated with English.

Kazakhstan did not declare independence until December 1991, making it the last of the Central Asian countries to do so. Newly elected President Nazarbayev, a moderate but dyed-in-the-wool communist apparatchik from the now-defunct Soviet system, took power. He understood the need to maintain harmonious relations with Russia, as the two countries share a massive border. Today, they remain economically interdependent, and Russian is still the primary language for educated Kazakhs.53

The Soviet Era narrative with respect to English was comprised of three core components:

1. *English is not important; English is an esoteric language for philologists; English is the speech of the enemy*. Because of the vast changes in politics and economics precipitated by the collapse of the USSR, core myths situated within the Soviet narrative that idealizes "Mother Russia" while attacking the Western world and Western values (many of which are carried by the English language) have either been muted or evolved. Soviet ideology promoted the idea of gradualism and continuity, of being part of the USSR and separate from the Western world. This greatly reduced the role of English for those who grew up under the Soviet umbrella. The political and linguistic restrictions of

51 Education USA, "Bolashak International Scholarship," United States Departmentof State, n.d., https://educationusa.state.gov/scholarships/bolashak-international-scholarship-0, accessed March 3, 2021.

52 William Fierman, "Language and Education in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Kazakh-Medium Instruction in Urban Schools," *The Russian Review* 65, no. 1 (2006): 98–116.

53 Fierman, "Russian in Post-Soviet Central Asia."

the Soviet period also limited professional or personal interactions with the international community.

2. *English is not needed in most workplaces; we speak Russian here*. Whatever their ethnicity, Kazakhstanis raised under Soviet rule have a different sense of identity and of their role as citizens in society—as well as different perceptions of government and work—from those born after Kazakhstan became independent or those who have come of age since the Internet became easily accessible around 2010.

In the Soviet era, communications and educational information were centralized; everything came from Moscow. To succeed at work, to succeed politically, and to have any opportunity to travel within the USSR, native-level proficiency in Russian was required. Since Kazakhstan's independence, Kazakh has gained significant prestige in the domains of government, work, and education, but Russian retains primacy as the language of the intelligentsia.

3. *English conveys propaganda; we tell the truth in Russian*. During the Soviet era, schools explicitly taught history in order to teach children to be loyal to the USSR. Soviet schools had standardized texts; a youth in Kazakhstan read the same text as a youth in Vladivostok. This official history left scant room for competing voices in other languages.54

The "Soviet Era" group of study participants, born in the 1950s and 1960s, are the oldest group of respondents. Their generation lived the bulk of their lives under Soviet rule. Among this generation, educated people—often linguists or pedagogues—continue to watch Russian news, scan Russian news feeds, and generally accept these sources as reliable. Those who are ethnic Kazakhs and have native proficiency in both Kazakh and Russian may also watch or read Kazakh-language news, although this is limited in comparison to its Russian-language counterpart. Overall, this group did not express a desire to source non-academic information in English.

7 The Immediate Post-Independence Crisis Years, 1991–2001

Ethnic Kazakhs reported that independence was a tremendously positive event: borders were opened, the Kazakh language gained prestige, and a growing sense of national indigenous identity started to take root. Nevertheless, most Kazakhstanis of all ethnicities suffered a decade of severe economic hardship after the USSR collapsed. In the years immediately following Kazakhstan's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union, those of

54 Wertsch, "Narratives as Cultural Tools."

Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian, Polish) and German descent emigrated en masse to Russia and Germany. Those of Russian descent felt usurped and uncertain; many emigrated to Russia.55 The post-independence narrative in regard to English contains the following core components:

1. I am leaving to give my family better options and greater security in the future, instead of betting on Kazakhstan. Good English is needed to emigrate to non-Russian-speaking countries and even other parts of the post-Soviet world. Many non-ethnic Kazakh respondents aged between 25 and 45 repeatedly stated that they felt financially insecure. Some told stories of losing their livelihoods or having salaries delayed for up to six months during the decade after independence. They felt that job security and future jobs for their children were at risk, as the best positions would be given to Kazakhs.

2. My country's educational institutions are corrupt and teachers have poor salaries and funding; education is not up to global standards. I want to work for international companies that are not corrupt, so I must have good English. Both ethnic Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups aged between 25 and 45 spoke candidly about corruption. Slavic participants all expressed the view that post-Soviet corruption was worse than during the Soviet era. Many expressed frustration that they saw no possibility that they or their children would get a quality education. They saw English as a way to access quality academics or lucrative employment abroad without resorting to bribes.

3. I am afraid of more recession and economic catastrophes. I need good English in case I have to leave, temporarily or forever. Parents who ranged in age from their early 40s to late 50s, and who were both ethnic Kazakhs and minorities, recounted stories of the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent economic chaos and deteriorating ecological conditions. Many young adults still living at home reported feeling "great pressure" to become highly proficient in English. One young adult quoted his mother as saying that English was "the magic key to prosperity."

In Kazakhstan today, ethnic migration has slowed but remains ongoing.56 Slavic and European respondents repeatedly reported feeling unwelcome in Kazakhstan. Many spoke of hardships after independence and felt that their struggles were due to discrimination. During the collapse of their country's economy, they lost prestigious jobs and watched as ethnic Kazakhs occupied

55 Charles M. Becker, Erbolat N. Musabek, Ai-Gul S. Seitenova, and Dina S. Urzhumova, "The Migration Response to Economic Shock: Lessons from Kazakhstan," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 33, no. 1 (2005): 107–132.

56 Olga Simakova, "What Does Net Migration in Kazakhstan Tell Us?" *CABAR Asia*, October 31, 2016, https://cabar.asia/en/olga-simakova-what-does-net-migration-in-kazakhstan-tell-us/, accessed March 3, 2021.

these positions. This group also feels anxiety about difficulties associated with learning the Kazakh language.

8 Contemporary Era, 2001–2020

In 2007, President Nazarbayev began advocating the "trinity of languages," indicating that Kazakh, Russian, and English were all necessary to the construction of a strong and literate nation. The contemporary narrative regarding English contains the following core components:

1. *English is cool. It helps me connect to foreign friends, access music and entertainment, and play games, and I need it to pass IELTS (a gateway exam for study abroad)*. These respondents are students, generally under the age of 20; they have not yet seriously thought about careers or salaries. Their focus is communicating with global peers and building an imagined community via similar tastes in music, visual posts, video games, and other media. For this group, attaining a high IELTS score holds the promise of greater access to international peers and international educational opportunities.

2. *English tells the truth. I read in English and I see the way other countries operate. I do not like authoritarian leadership and economic mismanagement. I need to be fluent to understand what is really going on in my country and the world*. This sentiment was expressed by respondents ages 18–30 from a range of ethnic backgrounds. All were students and serious about their education.

3. *My English is like a special vehicle that lets me travel anywhere and be modern*. As already mentioned, the majority of participants were aged 25 and below. They saw English as a way to go abroad: for the Work-Study American Program, as tourists, or as exchange students. They wanted to become more mobile and use English on their travels.

4. *I am in search of work in wealthier parts of the world. I believe uprooting my life here is worth the risk in the long term. English is the language of global business; I will be paid fairly, be judged fairly, and live more comfortably*. This desire was expressed by young people aged 18–21. Among slightly older non-ethnic Kazakh respondents (those aged 25–35), many considered the change of presidents in 2019 a "farce" and cited discrimination. But those who were children during their country's economic collapse frequently told me that their parents, whether ethnic Kazakhs or not, "pushed them to learn English" so that they would be able to "survive" or "escape" in the event of a recurrence of economic woes. Anyone who used English at their place of work would get "bigger salaries, better benefits" than those who used only Russian or Kazakh. Study participants aged 25–55 also frequently stated that the "English-speaking world

was not corrupt like the Central Asian world," suggesting by this that people in English-speaking countries were hired based on merit and were paid well by Kazakh and Central Asian standards.

Thus, the contemporary narrative around English has created a story that is attractive to many, especially younger people. As in other parts of the world, English has become a prestigious and necessary language. "Kazakh is not really useful anymore; English is," said one 19-year-old ethnic Kazakh. Young people aged 18–35 unanimously believed that if they spoke English well, they would find a job with a high salary, paid perhaps in dollars or euros. For some individuals, English also represents a chance to access an elite higher education and become part of the academic elite. Members of minority ethnic groups all perceived high levels of English fluency as key to resettling abroad, perhaps permanently. This narrative serves as a powerful motivation for youth to study English and reach the required IELTS gateway score of Band Seven, which is necessary for graduate studies and to work abroad. For youth, English has a reputation for being a "cool" language.

9 Analysis

The patterns and themes that emerged from narrative analysis reflected generational shifts in perceptions of the English language. These shifts can be illustrated via imagoes, symbolic archetypal characters that dominate stories. In compiling and coding the data from focus groups, interviews, and informal conversations, four imagoes came to light: The Soviet Man (connotes male or female); The Patriot; The Outsider; and The Young Cosmopolitan.

For those who identify with the Soviet Man, English is solely an intriguing and esoteric academic tool. This Soviet Man imago—an idealized version of a selfless, hardworking patriot, irrespective of linguistic or cultural background—was reflected by all of my older respondents, who grew up, were educated, and lived the bulk of their lives under the Soviet system.

One theoretical linguist, a 67-year-old ethnic Kazakh woman, summed up this perception of English (November 7, 2019, Karaganda) as follows:

> Of course I'm interested in English, but only academically. My regular life, my private life, is conducted in Russian, the language I was educated in. I'm proud of that. I have dedicated my life to my research in corpus linguistics and lived through many hardships. I'm not interested in emigrating. I just want to live quietly, retire in a few years, maybe attend an

> international conference or two if possible, and be acknowledged for my contributions to the academy.

Her identity as a Kazakh was linked to her role as a member of the Soviet intelligentsia. The fact that she is proud of being a Russian speaker also suggests her appreciation of the Soviet era (or assimilation into that system). She reinforced this impression by recounting how life under Soviet rule brought many conveniences, such as washing machines and equipment for university laboratories, and also allowed her to travel around the USSR for personal and professional reasons.

In contrast, post-independence participants were clearly divided along ethnic lines in their perceptions of the value of English. The majority of Kazakhstanis who identified as minorities, specifically those of European and Slavic heritage, expressed discomfort at the thought of staying in Kazakhstan. This group took on the Outsider imago. "I see all the good jobs going to the Kazakhs, not to people like me," said one 27-year-old ethnic Russian woman (December 8, 2019, Karaganda). A respondent of Polish heritage said, "Corruption has gotten worse since they [Kazakhs] took over; there is no chance for me to get on well here" (December 8, 2019, Karaganda).

Many members of this group related positive childhood experiences growing up alongside ethnic Kazakhs, but now felt that times had changed; they no longer belonged as they had in the past. Others openly stated that discrimination and corruption would keep them from having prosperous and full lives. To this end, a 33-year-old Ukrainian woman asserted, "We need to leave, and English is the way out. That, along with some skills or education, will help us build new lives abroad" (February 23, 2020, Karaganda).

These post-independence participants perceived English as an instrument for immigration. Many were already highly educated but believed that they needed to be highly proficient in English in order to work abroad or emigrate. Most ethnic Kazakhs, meanwhile, identified with the imago of the Patriot. Even those who wanted to live and work abroad were unwilling to say that they wished to leave permanently. Generally open about corrupt practices, many ethnic Kazakhs expressed positive feelings toward their country and government. "Sure, there is corruption, but there was corruption under the Soviets, too," said a 30-year-old ethnic Kazakh man, adding, "I am still training to be a pilot and will do my final work abroad. But I needed good English to qualify, not a bribe" (February 3, 2020, Karaganda).

"The borders are open, we can travel, and we have our country back," said a 29-year-old ethnic Kazakh female who is a professional IELTS trainer. "I have no

> desire to leave; I'm 100% Kazakh. But I do want to go abroad, to travel, to attend meetings, and to see the world. We can do that now; we are a free country. My English makes it very easy for me to arrange trips; I have a great job. I'm not planning to leave my country or even my city" (December 7, 2019, Karaganda).

These post-independence ethnic Kazakhs perceived English as a valuable tool for employment—but employment that would not threaten their status as patriotic citizens. They wished to serve their nation in some way. For them, English has merit because it offers educational possibilities and prestigious jobs. This group did not mention emigration.

The last group interviewed consisted mostly of youth born in 2000 or later. These young people, both ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic minorities, all fit the imago of young cosmopolitans. Those still in high school reported spending a minimum of three hours per day using English for leisure and communication, in addition to taking English classes and college preparatory courses. The majority of young people—both high school and university students—also went to great lengths to teach themselves English. Many programmed their phones in English (as opposed to Russian), played video games in English with other young people around the world, and regularly participated in English extracurricular activities sponsored by American Corners (e.g., talks, English language competitions, field trips, and games).

Their motivation seemed both extrinsic and intrinsic: they want to become highly proficient in English and able to interact with other young people around the globe. This group was generally too young to have entered the workforce. Those that had, however, held part-time jobs and did not speak of English in relation to employment beyond statements such as "English fluency means I can work for an international firm and make big money."

10 Discussion

In addition to diversifying the sale of its vast natural resources, selling to Europe and China where once it would have sold only within the USSR, Kazakhstan's government has been working to attract foreign investment and to build a highly multilingual, literate society of workers. After a decade of economic chaos in the 1990s, governmental resources began to be allocated to English language education; private language schools have also mushroomed. Yet emigration from Kazakhstan has continued, primarily among non-ethnic

Kazakhs. These people are highly educated as well as multilingual; losing them as citizens constitutes brain drain.57

Many non-ethnic Kazakhs feel unwelcome and insecure. The government's policy of Indigenous nationhood-building has promoted Kazakh language and culture. But corruption—governmental and otherwise—remains common in all spheres of life.58 Although President Nazarbayev ostensibly resigned from office in March 2019, he continues to rule from the shadows.59

Thus, leadership and economics in Kazakhstan remain uncertain. The result is continuing migration, especially among non-ethnic Kazakhs. The ethnic Kazakhs in my sample are also cognizant of the value of English; they see it as a useful instrument for accessing educational opportunities abroad and gaining employment with international firms. Nevertheless, few ethnic Kazakhs stated that they wished to emigrate permanently.

Likewise, parents and elders who grew up in the Soviet era are too assimilated or set in their ways to leave Kazakhstan. Those whose careers are connected to English were raised in an environment that treats this language as solely an academic subject. They may be linguists, translators, pedagogues, or professors with great expertise in English. However, they indicated little interest in or contact with the language outside of the academy, as the activities of their daily lives are conducted in Russian and/or Kazakh. In essence, this group perceives English solely as an academic tool.

Contemporary Kazakh youth make up the final group researched. They often appeared to be the most tech-savvy and linguistically adept. These young people, who ranged in age from their teens to early twenties, displayed enthusiasm and creativity regarding their use of English. Their motivation seemed rooted primarily in their interest in entertainment and communication, although learning English well is also fundamental for their education. They speculated about using English and other languages in their future profession, but first and foremost identified as young cosmopolitans who felt at ease

57 Bruce Pannier, "A New Wave of Ethnic Russians Leaving Kazakhstan," *RFE/RL*, February 9, 2016, https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-kazakhstan-ethnic-russians-leaving/27541817.html, accessed March 3, 2021.

58 "Watchdog Faults Eastern Europe, Central Asia on Failure to Fight Corruption," *RFE/RL*, January 23, 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/watchdog-faults-eastern-europe-central-asia-on-failure-to-fight-corruption/30392859.html, accessed March 3, 2021.

59 "Kazakhstan's Omnipresent President" (video), *RFE/RL*, December 12, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/nazarbaev-kazakhstan/28911840.html, accessed March 3, 2021.

interacting in multiple languages, with English being the most useful for their leisure and communication purposes. Whether they will leave or continue to reside in Kazakhstan is unknown.

This study highlights several significant challenges for teachers and students of English. In Kazakhstan, the advent of freedom and independence has been accompanied by endemic corruption and brain drain. Public-sector professors and teachers of English do not earn wages that could support a middle-class lifestyle or allow them to advance as professionals. These low salaries not only lower morale, but also promote bribes. Corruption was so common at Karaganda State University that posters strongly discouraging it were periodically put up in university corridors (see Figure 3). Moreover, the rector of the university was removed during the academic year for accepting a USD$5,000 bribe.60 Those in the private sector may earn more, but their jobs are not secure; salaries are also relatively low. Based on information provided by study participants, it was clear that students can earn a university degree by "compensating" their teachers or by having excellent connections. This type ofcorruption destroys excellence in teaching.

A second factor concerns ongoing migration from Kazakhstan. This study focused on the ongoing emigration mostly of ethnic minorities who recognize English as a necessary tool for emigration. Interviews with some ethnic Kazakhs indicated that they, too, wished to emigrate and search for a better quality of life in English-speaking countries. Many parents expressed despair;

Figure 3 Corruption poster at Karaganda State University
Source: Photo taken by the author, November 18, 2019

60 "KazObraz. Rektora KarGU podozrevaiut v dache vziatki $5 tys. Glave AO 'Fond Nauki' MON RK," *CentrAsia*, September 10, 2019, https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1568097960, accessed March 3, 2021.

they saw no bright future for their children in light of the current political and economic situation. Although loath to see their children and relatives leave the country, they encouraged them to master English in order to study abroad and possibly remain there.

The increasing presence and prestige of English, seen as a language for modernization, seems both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, those Kazakhstanis who are highly proficient in English have more education and job opportunities. On the other hand, increasing interactions in English create internal pressure: like other Indigenous peoples, Kazakhs are questioning whether identity rests upon their linguistic competence in Kazakh and whether they should remain in their traditional homeland.61 Young ethnic Kazakhs who surf the Internet and interact with Westerners in English are veering away from traditional norms and beliefs, just as dominant Western values have caused Navajo youth to consider their language old-fashioned and/ or outdated.62

Moreover, with nationalism in Kazakhstan on the rise, many non-ethnic Kazakhs of European heritage with high levels of education are choosing to emigrate. The Kazakh government has not provided incentives for them to remain in their homeland, even as it has invested significant time and money in repatriating ethnic Kazakhs from Mongolia, China, and other regions.63 Many of these returnees have native proficiency in Kazakh but know little or no Russian or English. The governmental funds used to repatriate and support these people symbolically represent the narrative that Kazakhstan should belong to ethnic Kazakhs.

Kazakhs have stoically endured (and many have even forgiven) Soviet indoctrination in the form of Russian education, politics, and collectivization. Non-ethnic Kazakhs also suffered under the yoke of the USSR: many in fact came to be Kazakh citizens via Stalinist policies that exiled them to cities like Karaganda, where they eked out an existence as slave laborers. Now the Kazakh people are experiencing a second, powerful wave of indoctrination, this time coming from the West. This English language wave arrives on the Internet via social media, entertainment, and websites. It also arrives via connections with people in and outside Kazakhstan: foreign businessmen, travelers, and teachers.

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61 Sheila E. Nicholas, "'How Are You Hopi if You Can't Speak It?': An Ethnographic Study of Language as Cultural Practice among Contemporary Hopi Youth," in *Ethnography andLanguage Policy*, ed. Teresa L. McCarty (New York: Routledge, 2010), 69–92.

62 Lee, "Language, Identity, and Power."

63 Holly Barcus and Cynthia Werner, "The Kazakhs of Western Mongolia: Transnational Migration from 1990–2008," *Asian Ethnicity* 11, no. 2 (2010): 209–228.

Russian educational policies and Soviet attitudes assigned an inferior status to the Kazakh people, culture, language, and worldview. This unconscious and ongoing sense of inferiority may be why so many Kazakhs associate Western ways and the English language with a better, more modern life. Perhaps, too, some Kazakhs have overlooked the negative aspects of their Russian colonial history. Some members of younger Kazakh generations think that modernization—that is, joining the global economy on Western terms—is inevitable and that English offers more benefit than harm to their lives.

11 Conclusion

Over the past few decades, there has been a great deal of discussion about narrative and its relationship to human consciousness—and, consequently, one's sense of reality. The epistemological implication of Bakhtin's argument is that knowledge, and hence the construction of reality, is a social construct. This study has highlighted socially constructed narratives to propose various themes with respect to Kazakhstani perceptions of the English language over time.

The renowned scholar of the sociology of language Joshua Fishman64 and other sociolinguists, such as Dell Hymes,65 have written for decades about the significance of social situations with regard to language use and language choice. Fishman examined how interactional context determines language choice. He found that cultural change takes place when a group discontinues its native language. Cultural change also occurs when a group shifts toward incorporating an additional language or languages. Change further arises when native speakers marry speakers of other languages, leave their home- lands, and/or stop observing rituals and traditions, especially those that are conducted in their native language.

Native American researchers have shown that maintaining the native language in the home and observing religious ceremonies have a positive impact on preserving Indigenous languages. Significantly, however, Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, a Navajo scholar, found that children of bilingual Navajo parents were able to sense whether their family members respected the Navajo

64 Joshua Fishman, *Language and Ethnicity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1989), 212; Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1991), 40–45.

65 Nessa Wolfson and Joan Manes, eds., *Language of Inequality* (Berlin: Mouton, 1985).

language as equal to English.66 If they felt that their parents used Navajo less and accorded it less respect, this impacted their own motivation and language learning.

Similarly, my own research indicated that young people were aware of how their parents and grandparents felt about Russian, English, and Kazakh. One young woman, aged 27, stated: "My father and grandparents taught me that speaking good Kazakh was a responsibility, not only to myself, but to my future children, and to my country. I also speak excellent Russian and English, because to survive as a person, spiritually and economically, I need all three" (February 21, 2019, Karaganda). Not all Kazakh families, however, preserve Kazakh so stringently. This study has shown that English has become a highly popular language because it is both a linguistic commodity and a prestigious symbol of modernization and connection to the global community. At present, both English and Russian carry more prestige than Kazakh: English is taught for more hours per week than Kazakh in most Kazakh schools, for example. Family language choices as well as school policy impact how Kazakhs appraise language.

Lee determined that schools greatly influenced L1 language learning among Native youth.67 Much has been written concerning the hidden curriculum in U.S. schools. For Indigenous people such as the Navajo, school philosophy, goals, and curriculum can profoundly impact students' sense of self, their language choice and use, and their future lives. Swisher and Tippeconnic have asserted that Native culture is seen as inferior to the dominant culture documented when paired with culturally non-responsive curricula.68 In contrast, when a school in Quebec incorporated and honored the Indigenous Montagnais language, students became more enthused about learning it.69

My respondents, both ethnic and non-ethnic Kazakhs, had positive opinions of English and mixed feelings about the Kazakh language curriculum. "If I get only one hour a week of Kazakh and four hours of English, well, it's obvious that English is more important," said one Kazakh youth, aged 17, who attends a public school (November 14, 2019, Karaganda). Those who attended

66 Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie, "Navajo-Speaking Parents' Perceptions of Reasons for Navajo Language Attrition," *Journal of Navajo Education* 13, no. 1 (1995): 29–38.

67 Lee, "'If They Want Navajo to Be Learned.'"

68 Karen Gayton Swisher and John W. Tippeconnic III, *Research to Support Improved Practice in Indian Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1999), 296.

69 Marcelline Picard-Canapé, "The Future of the Montagnais Language," in *Quebec's Aboriginal Languages: History, Planning, and Development*, ed. Jacques Maurais (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1996), 274–280.

prestigious NIS schools, however, expressed a different outlook. They were highly proficient in Kazakh and Russian, but also eager to master English. To qualify for admission, a NIS administrator interviewed on November 20, 2019 in Karaganda explained that prospective students must pass rigorous language exams in Kazakh, Russian and English. Pupils study in all three languages.70 Sadly, seating is limited in the NIS schools.

Other educational institutes rarely promote the Kazakh language, and many have poorly paid and poorly trained English teachers. A 17-year-old ethnic Russian respondent explained: "I understand a little Kazakh, but hey, it's just to chat with my buddies, it has no use, and no one pays any attention in Kazakh language class. English is the important class, but our teacher really doesn't speak good English" (November 8, 2019, Karaganda).

Schools everywhere do more than teach linguistic proficiency. Language does not simply transmit impersonal information; it carries profound cultural concepts. The Navajo scholar Fred E. Jones has explained the diametric opposition between Western and Native cultures when it comes to defining the purpose of education.71 For Jones, Navajo education is a long process that seeks to help youth attain spiritual, emotional, and cultural wisdom. In contrast, he found Western education akin to teaching young people to take personal control of their lives, a commodity designed to help students assimilate into mainstream culture and, ultimately, to attain a prestigious and well-paying job. "Traditional Kazakh education is becoming a memory," said one mother of two teen boys. "I was raised speaking Russian, my husband is ethnic Russian, and we don't ride horses on the steppes. I am Muslim, my husband is Orthodox. We don't attend many religious ceremonies. But we do keep the spirit of being Kazakh alive: generosity, integrity, hospitality. My kids speak no Kazakh, but they are Kazakhs nonetheless" (December 23, 2019, Karaganda). Whether one participates in Indigenous educational practices or not, the hard fact is that Kazakhs need Western educations—and many need to master English—in order to survive and thrive in today's world.

The English language has garnered attention for different reasons, depending whose perspective is presented. English is perceived as a useful resource for ethnic Kazakhs who wish to remain in Kazakhstan while enhancing their leisure and work lives through travel abroad and international education. Conversely, for "European" minorities who wish to leave Kazakhstan, a strong

70 https://www.nis.edu.kz/en/programs/trilingualism/.

71 Fred E. Jones, "Coming of Age in Navajo Society: Adult Roles and Development," *Journal of Navajo Education* 6, no. 3 (1989): 12–19.

command of English is considered imperative. Individuals equate English with the West and Western values; in particular, they link the English language to the possibility of a more prosperous life and equitable employment opportunities. Finally, for Kazakh youth of all ethnicities born after the year 2000, English serves as a linguistic pathway to membership of the cosmopolitan global community, regardless of where they wish to reside. If English, rather than Kazakh, is seen as the route to a better life, then Kazakh culture will not survive unscathed. It is unwise to disregard the danger a dominant language may pose to an Indigenous culture.