



MULTILINGUALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This article analyzes the phenomenon of multilingualism in Central Asia, focusing on Uzbekistan, from historical, political, educational, and social perspectives. It explores the historical roles of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages, the dominance of Russian during the Soviet era, and the post-independence strengthening of Uzbek as the state language. The article also examines current multilingual education across seven languages in Uzbekistan, urban-rural disparities in language usage, digital equality, and language rights of minority groups. It concludes with practical recommendations to improve multilingual policy implementation and language inclusion.

Keywords: multilingualism, language policy, education, Russian language, English language, state language, national identity.

Introduction: In today's era of globalization, the interaction of languages, their roles in society, and their place within the education system have become increasingly important topics. For multiethnic states in particular, multilingualism plays a crucial role in ensuring social stability, preserving cultural diversity, and enhancing the quality of education. The Central Asian region — and Uzbekistan in particular — has historically been characterized by linguistic diversity. Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages coexisted for centuries and were widely used in science, literature, and religious scholarship[2]. During the period of Russian imperial and later Soviet rule, the Russian language became the dominant means of communication across the region. Following independence, Uzbek was established as the state language and has since become a key instrument in the formation of national identity. At the same time, Russian, Karakalpak, Tajik, Kazakh, and English continue to be actively used in society, especially in education and the media. Currently, education in Uzbekistan is conducted in seven languages: Uzbek, Russian, Karakalpak, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz[1]. This reflects not only the legal status of multilingualism but also its practical implementation in everyday life. However, the effectiveness of multilingual policies, the challenges they face, and ways to address those challenges require further scholarly analysis and discussion. This academic article examines the phenomenon of multilingualism in Uzbekistan from historical, political, social, and pedagogical perspectives. The research aims to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the historical foundations of multilingualism in Uzbekistan?
 2. How has language policy evolved since independence?
 3. How is multilingualism implemented in the education system, and what challenges exist?
 4. How does multilingualism affect the cultural identity of Uzbek society?
- The relevance of this topic extends beyond linguistics and sociology, intersecting with national policy, education, information technology, and broader social cohesion[4].
Central Asia, and particularly the

territory of Uzbekistan, has historically been a multiethnic and multilingual region. For centuries, Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages played significant roles in science, literature, and political communication. In the region of Mawarannahr, Arabic served as the language of religious sciences, Persian was the language of diplomacy and poetry, while Turkic (specifically Chagatai) functioned as the vernacular of the people. During this period, multilingualism was a natural phenomenon among the educated class[3]. In the late 19th century, with the expansion of the Russian Empire into Turkestan, the Russian language emerged as the new political language in the region. The Russian administration began to use Russian in its bureaucratic and military institutions. As a result, the local elite felt a growing need to learn Russian. However, during this period, multilingualism was not voluntary, but rather viewed as a tool of political pressure[5]. During the Soviet era, multilingualism was formalized, but the Russian language dominated. Although each republic had its own “national language” (e.g., Uzbek), Russian retained a superior position as the main language of communication and education. Russian was especially dominant in higher education, science, and technology[6].

The 1958 Soviet Language Policy made the Russian language a compulsory subject. This policy lowered the social status of the Uzbek language, but most of the population became bilingual. During this time, Russian–Uzbek bilingualism became widespread[7].

On the eve of Uzbekistan’s independence — on October 21, 1989 — the Law “On the Adoption of the Uzbek Language as the State Language” was passed. This historic law granted Uzbek official status, while also emphasizing the importance of respecting the languages of other ethnic groups. In the Republic of Uzbekistan, Uzbek is the sole official state language. However, in accordance with legislation, the Karakalpak language holds official status within the Republic of Karakalpakstan. Although Russian does not have *de jure* official status, it is still widely used *de facto* — particularly in urban areas, higher education institutions, official documentation, banking, and healthcare systems.

In 1993, the transition to the Latin script began; however, this process has not yet been fully completed. These orthographic changes have further intensified linguistic disparities. At present, the Uzbek government is pursuing a policy of promoting the English language, developing Uzbek into a language of modern science and technology, and creating a favorable environment for the use of minority languages. According to a presidential decree issued in 2020, the exclusive use of the Uzbek language in all state institutions and official documentation was mandated[8].

Today, education in Uzbekistan is conducted in seven languages: Uzbek, Russian, Karakalpak, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz. According to 2024 UNESCO data, 78% of general education schools operate in Uzbek, 11% in Russian, and the remainder in other minority languages[3]. In Karakalpakstan, most schools offer instruction in the Karakalpak language, but in higher grades, Russian tends to dominate. Moreover, many schools provide bilingual or multilingual instruction. In higher education, the number of academic programs taught in Russian and English is growing. For instance, international university branches in Tashkent — such as Westminster International University, Turin Polytechnic University, Inha University, and Webster University — deliver instruction in English. Many public universities — including the National University of Uzbekistan, the Uzbek State University of World Languages, and Navoi State University — are expanding their English-language academic offerings. This trend is positioning English as the country’s third most influential language[7].

Among urban youth in particular, code-switching between Uzbek and Russian, or Uzbek and English, is widespread. On platforms like Telegram and Instagram, written language is often mixed across all three languages. This ongoing process is reshaping both cultural and linguistic identity.

Language is one of the fundamental elements of national identity. In Uzbekistan, the consolidation of the Uzbek language as the state language, especially after independence, has played a central role in fostering a sense of national identity. At the same time, the practical dominance of the Russian language remains strong, which in some cases leads to a form of “cultural identity duality” (Zaripov, 2020). The rapid spread of the English language among youth is giving rise to a notion of “global identity.” Many young people associate learning English with success and personal freedom[8].

Uzbekistan is a multiethnic country, home to Tajiks, Karakalpaks, Kazakhs, Russians, Turkmens, Tatars, and others. Education in the Tajik language is primarily available in Bukhara and Samarkand, with over 300 schools offering instruction in Tajik. In the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the Karakalpak language holds official status. However, these languages do not enjoy equal opportunities. Several studies have pointed out a shortage of updated textbooks, qualified teachers, and digital resources in both the Karakalpak and Tajik languages (UNESCO, 2023).

A majority of urban residents speak two or even three languages. In the capital, Tashkent, the dominance of the Russian language is particularly evident. A large portion of the population communicates in Russian, and in some cases, young people may not even be proficient in Uzbek. In rural areas, the Uzbek language is clearly dominant, but the level of interaction with foreign languages is significantly lower. This urban–rural divide highlights the regionally uneven development of multilingualism policies.

In multilingual schools, there is a shortage of qualified teachers, high-quality textbooks, and linguistic materials. Notably, Tajik and Karakalpak textbooks may be more than 10–15 years old, creating a serious barrier to quality education. Since official documents are only maintained in the Uzbek language, some ethnic minorities face difficulties in communicating in their native languages. This poses challenges to democratic participation. Many digital platforms — such as government portals, testing systems, and mobile applications — operate only in Uzbek and English. The absence of versions in Tajik, Karakalpak, and Russian undermines digital equality[1].

Recommendations: Updated

textbooks and digital resources should be developed for every national language.

Dedicated programs should be introduced to train multilingual teachers.

Government portals and services should be available in all major national languages.

Inclusive language policies are needed to reduce linguistic disparities between urban and rural areas.

Conclusion: Multilingualism in Uzbekistan is a complex social phenomenon rooted in historical legacies, Soviet-era language policies, and post-independence reforms. While Uzbek holds an essential position as the state language, Russian, Tajik, Karakalpak, and English are actively used in daily life. Although the current multilingualism policy yields positive outcomes, numerous challenges remain. Updated strategies in multilingual education, communication, and digital access are essential to further unlock the potential of Uzbekistan’s multilingual society.

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