



## Language Processes And Bilingualism In Polyethnic Environment: The Envestigation In The Republic Of Tatarstan

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### ABSTRACT

The contemporary globalizing society incorporates human beings into complicated relations of the multicultural environment influencing them in different ways which results in various combinations of ethnic and poly-ethnic identity in their consciousness. If it takes the form of eclectic fragmentation of cultural influences, the product is a painful identity crisis. However, this cannot be completely avoided either because of the rapidly gaining speed of globalist tendencies or because of the poly-ethnicity of the Russian society itself. The material of this article is the results of studies of the situation and trends in this field. These investigations were conducted by us at regular intervals since 1989 in the multinational city of Naberezhnye Chelny (the Republic of Tatarstan). The late 80-s and early 90-s brought about a situation when the silence on negative processes in the sphere of inter-ethnic relations was replaced by rapid dynamism and sharp contradictions associated with the end of the Soviet era. It was the interethnic sphere that was most of all affected by those contradictions. Naberezhnye Chelny is a mono-industrial city in the Republic of Tatarstan with the multinational population which emerged in the period of the construction of the KAMAZ plant. At present it is inhabited by more than 530 thousand people, including 47,4% of Tatars and 44,9% of Russian citizens. The rest are representatives of other diverse nationalities. The Republic of Tatarstan itself as a part of the Russian Federation is a visible example of a multi-ethnic and multicultural space. It is home to representatives of 115 nationalities. Official languages: Tatar, Russian. Tatars make up 53.2 % of the whole population, Russians — 39.7 %.

Methods of a longitudinal research allow making a comparative analysis of the empirical data that have been accumulating for several decades since 1989. The last empirical survey was conducted by us in 2017. This survey of Naberezhnye Chelny residents aged over 18 was carried out according to a stratified (regionalized) sample (N = 650).

The article reflects the contradictions between ethnic groups on lingual issues, the different attitude of Russians and Tatars to bilingualism. It reveals their peculiarities in understanding these

problems and underlines the necessity of either compulsory or optional learning of the Tatar language at school. The article also reflects the evolutionary dynamics of the assessments themselves.

The article reflects the contradictory estimates of the processes of national development and the state of interethnic relations by the respondents, their attitude to the Tatar and Russian languages, as well as the evolutionary dynamics of the assessments themselves.

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## 1. Introduction

Diverse challenges of the modern time are related to fundamental shifts taking place at all levels (from personal to planetary ones) and in all spheres (ideological, scientific, ethno-cultural, technical, economic, etc.). These processes can have a positive trend, if they lead to a juxtaposition of national cultures and their positive interaction, reflect respect for national traditions, and thus contribute to the development of countries and peoples as well as of every individual. However, there are concerns that global changes may not lead to universal harmony, but to the total neglect of national characteristics, the disappearance of cultural diversity, the suppression of personal freedoms.

In the modern world, language processes are among the most vulnerable and are deeply woven into the context of ethno-cultural, socio-economic, geopolitical, and demographic shifts. Global trends in this sphere can hardly be considered positive.

«Over the past century alone, around 400 languages – about one every three months – have gone extinct, and most linguists estimate that 50% of the world's remaining 6,500 languages will be gone by the end of this century (some put that figure as high as 90%, however). Today, the top ten languages in the world claim around half of the world's population. Can language diversity be preserved, or are we on a path to becoming a monolingual species?» – wonders Rachel Nuwer [1].

In 2009 UNESCO's *Atlas of the world's languages in Danger* provided alarming data of the world's Languages in Danger. From the 6 thousand languages in the world as disappearing were recognized 2.5 thousand. Other 199 languages were used by no more than ten people each, and 200 languages have completely disappeared in the last few decades. UNESCO calculates the viability of languages according to some criteria, including the number of speakers, the transfer of language from generation to generation, the availability of educational materials, and the attitude to the language within society. Then all the languages are classified according to 6 categories: as 'safe', 'vulnerable', 'definitely endangered', 'severely endangered', 'critically endangered', 'extinct' [2].

The problems of linguistic diversity for Russia as a multiethnic country have never lost their acuteness and relevance. As it was truly admitted by the head of the Federal Agency for Nationalities Igor Barinov: "The preservation of the languages of the peoples of the country is very important for the harmonization of national relations and ensuring civil unity. In Russia, about 193 peoples speak 300 languages and dialects... At present 89 languages are involved in modern Russian school education, of which 30 are used as the languages of instruction» [3].

But that very UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* paints a less joyful picture. According to these data, in Russia 136 languages are in danger, and 20 of them have already been declared extinct. Among the extinct languages are mentioned, for example, Ainu, Yugsk, Ubykh, etc. But apart from them, 22 more are considered to be in a critical situation (Aleutian, Tersko-Saami, Itelmen, etc.), 29 languages – in serious danger (Nivkh, Chukchi, Karelian, etc.) [2]. However, the head of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the

Russian Academy of Sciences named after N. N. Miklukho-Maclay V. A. Tishkov does not agree with these data and calls them *à myth about the extinction of languages* [4: 292]. At the same time he admits that "the domain of the existence of minority languages has narrowed, the number of those who know and speak those languages has decreased, there was observed a transition of a considerable part of the representatives of the minority peoples, if not the most of them into the domain of the Russian language" [4: 293]. According to him, there is "a language assimilation in favor of the Russian language" [4: 293]. "...But in general, it was a voluntary choice in favor of a more powerful and more important language of communication in our country. In some regions (primarily Dagestan and the Volga region), these processes were caused by the need to overcome excessive linguistic diversity through the adoption of a common language of communication, in others the language assimilation (or Russification) occurred under the influence of economic development, education, urban growth, migration" [4: 293].

In our view, both positions are not irreproachable. The UNESCO's *Atlas* classifies as endangered or threatened languages, which are state ones in the national republics and thus more or less enjoy the support of the regional authorities. Particularly the Udmurt and Kalmyk languages are called disappearing and endangered, and the Chechen and Tuvian languages are looked upon as being in the situation of concern. At the same time, it is hardly fruitful not to notice the obvious fact that Russia does not stand aside from the processes of globalization with all their positive and negative manifestations, and the sphere of language is not excluded from these processes, and it can hardly be considered a myth that the status of many languages is extremely complicated, and some of them are already in a critical situation.

The Tatar language does not belong to those languages which condition is the most alarming. Tatars are a Turkic ethnos and represent the second largest ethnic group in Russia after Russians. According to the 2010 population census, their number in Russia is more than 5.3 million people – 3.87% of the country's population [5]. However, the problems faced by the Tatar language are also very significant. Suffice it to say that by the end of the 1980s, there was only one secondary school with the instruction in the Tatar language in Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, and only one in Naberezhnye Chelny, the second largest city of the republic. By the present moment the situation has largely been corrected. Today in Tatarstan there are more than 1000 Tatar schools, in which half of the Tatar children study, and about 900 Russian schools. The Tatar language, according to the republican law on languages of 1992, became a compulsory subject at schools for all students, and article 9 of this law says that "The Tatar and Russian languages at the organizations of general and vocational education are studied in equal volumes on the corresponding levels of secondary general and vocational education» [6].

However, after about one and a half decades of the boost of national education in the regions of Russia in the post-Soviet period, the opposite trend is again noted. According to the Center for Ethno-Cultural Education Strategy of the Federal Institute for the Development of Education, from 2008 to 2015, the average number of children studying languages of the peoples of Russia in the status of their native language at general educational organizations has decreased by 34% all over the country [7: 152]. In the Republic of Tatarstan the situation is not so dramatic, it can rather be considered as contradictory. On the one hand, sociological studies show that in 2001 two-thirds of the Russian residents of the republic replied that they did not know the Tatar language, but in 2010 the share of such answers was a little bit over 50%. And within the age group of those who are younger than 25 and who studied the Tatar language at school, there are only 23% who indicated complete ignorance of the Tatar language [8: 249-250]. On the other hand, the scale of the functional use of the Tatar language in various social spheres does not grow but even decrease [9: 249-250]. "There is a contradictory trend observed: with the increase in the number of young people who studied the Tatar language

at school, the proportion of people using it in everyday life decreases" » [10: 12]

### **Materials and methods**

This article deals with the results of the studies that we conducted with a certain frequency since 1989 in the multinational city of Naberezhnye Chelny (the second largest one in the Republic of Tatarstan). The late 80-s and early 90-s brought about a situation when the silence on negative processes in the sphere of interethnic relations was replaced by rapid dynamism and sharp contradictions associated with the end of the Soviet era. It was the interethnic sphere that was most of all affected by those contradictions. In 1989 we conducted the first study on inter-ethnic relations. In this study, monitoring of the problems of ethno-cultural development and interethnic relations included the linguistic situation in the city, the attitude to bilingualism of different groups of the population, the attitude of citizens to the study and application of the Tatar language, the quality of the Russian and Tatar languages teaching at schools, as well as the evolutionary dynamics of the assessments themselves.

The obtained results were quite consistent with the stormy and disturbing atmosphere of that time. It was a period of profound social changes, of high expectations, when the search for new historical prospects was accompanied by painful damage of the previous foundations, and the explosive growth of national consciousness against the General background of interethnic tolerance was often manifested in the form of ethnic radicalism. Naberezhnye Chelny is a mono-industrial city in the Republic of Tatarstan with the multinational population which emerged in the period of the construction of the KAMAZ plant. At present it is inhabited by more than 530 thousand people, including 47,4% of Tatars and 44,9% of Russian citizens. The rest are representatives of other diverse nationalities. The Republic of Tatarstan itself as part of the Russian Federation is a visible example of a multi-ethnic and multicultural space. It is home to representatives of 115 nationalities. Official languages: Tatar and Russian. Tatars make up 53.2 % of the whole population, Russians —39.7 %.

At the early stages the development was obviously one-sided: the rapid economic growth, huge migration flows were not accompanied by the same increase in the general culture. And the traditional principles of the Tatar, Russian and other nationalities' culture were paid only minimal attention to. Later on we carried out new researches, which goals were to examine the dynamics of changes in public attitudes and moods [11; 12; 13; 14].

Methods of a longitudinal research allowed us to make a comparative analysis of the empirical data that have been accumulating for about three decades. The empirical surveys were conducted by us in 1989, 1996, 2002, 2008, 2014, and 2017. The survey of Naberezhnye Chelny residents aged over 18 was carried out according to a stratified (regionalized) sample. The peculiarity of the last empirical survey, conducted by us in October–November 2017, is that the sample set consisted of respondents aged from 18 to 35, that is of those who have already studied the Tatar language in the post-Soviet school. The sample size of 450 units of observation provides a reliable representation. Some of the results are presented below.

### **Results and discussions**

Ethno-linguistic processes in Russia and the ongoing policy of language education in Tatarstan attract the attention of researchers from different countries [ 15; 16; 17; 18; 19; 20]. At the same time, one of the most serious and difficult problems, which is ambiguously interpreted and solved in different ways in various regions of Russia and the world, is the problem of bilingualism [21; 22; 23]. Speaking about bilingualism, the well-known American sociolinguist Joshua Fishman highlights four main parameters that determine the

individual choice of language: the participants in the conversation, the relationship between them, the topic of the conversation and the situation [24].

The empirically fixed attitude of the population to this problem was one of the significant indicators of the situation and possible prospects for national development and interethnic relations in the city and region. Table 1 presents the views of Chelny residents on this issue in 1989 and 2017.

Table 1

**OPINION  
of Naberezhnye Chelny citizens  
on the problem of bilingualism in 1989 and in 2017, %**

|   | National groups |         |          |         |
|---|-----------------|---------|----------|---------|
|   | Tatars          |         | Russians |         |
|   | 1989 г.         | 2017 г. | 1989 г.  | 2017 г. |
| Bilingualism is necessary for everyone                                    |                 |         |          |         |
| Bilingualism is necessary for the representatives of the Tatar population |                 |         |          |         |
| It is necessary for officials   |                 |         |          | –       |
| It is a private matter of everyone  |                 |         |          |         |
| Difficult to answer   |                 |         |          | –       |

In 1989 more than half of the Tatars and Russians, as can be seen from the table, agreed that everyone should decide the problem of bilingualism for themselves. At the same time, one third of the Tatar respondents believed that this problem concerned everyone. Just about every sixth Russian respondent was of the same opinion. There were also noticeable discrepancies with regard to the assertion that bilingualism should concern only representatives of Tatar nationality. In both national groups, only a small number of respondents believed that bilingualism was compulsory for officials. In further surveys, it was evident that citizens' opinions evolved and depended on various social factors, including political ones. In particular, the latest survey was conducted in the autumn of 2017 under conditions of a certain political tension created in political circles and in the press.

During all the years of conducting surveys and in the conditions when the Tatar language became a compulsory school subject, the Tatar population of the city gradually increased the opinion that bilingualism is necessary for everyone (from 33.4% in 1989 to 47.6% in 2017) and accordingly the share of those who believed that it was a personal matter of everyone decreased (from 54.9% in 1989 to 35.7% in 2017). The same tendency was observed among Russian citizens until a certain time: in 1989, 17.8% believed that bilingualism was necessary for everyone, while at the time of the previous survey in 2014 there were 23.3% of those who believed so. However, by the time of our last survey in November 2017, this figure had fallen by more than half to 10.5%. At the same time, the number of those who believe that it is personal business of each person has increased dramatically.

Alongside with this, we study the opinion of the Chelny residents on teaching children the Tatar language at school. Table 2 shows the evolution of citizens' opinions on this issue since 1989 till 2017.

Table 2

**OPINION**

**of Naberezhnye Chelny citizens on the issue,  
who should study the Tatar language, in 1989 and in 2017, %**

|  | National groups |         |          |         |
|--|-----------------|---------|----------|---------|
|  | Tatars          |         | Russians |         |
|  | 1989 г.         | 2017 г. | 1989 г.  | 2017 г. |
| All the children without fail                    |                 |         |          |         |
| All the Tatar children                           |                 |         |          |         |
| All the children at the request of their parents |                 |         |          |         |
| Difficult to answer                              |                 |         |          | –       |

As it can be seen from this table in 1989 the number of Tatars who believed that all the children of the Tatar nationality should learn the Tatar language was approximately equal to the number of those who believed that the Tatar language should be taught to all the children at the request of their parents (42.2% and 41%, respectively). Among Russians, more than half (52.3%) believed that the Tatar language should be taught to all children at the request of their parents, and one third of the respondents (34.2%) believed that it is necessary for all children of the Tatar nationality.

Subsequent studies have shown that it is the problem of learning at school the Tatar language, which became one of the two state languages in the Republic of Tatarstan, where the transformation of opinions (especially among the Tatar respondents) is the most visible. In both ethnic groups, the number of those who believe that it is necessary to teach the Tatar language to all children irrespective of their nationality has significantly increased: among Russians from 8.5% in 1989 to 26.3% in 2017, and among Tatars from 14.3 in 1989 to 60.7 in 2017.

On the contrary in both groups the number of those who believed that Tatar language should be studied only by schoolchildren of the Tatar nationality has significantly decreased (in the Tatar community in 1989 42.2% thought so, and in 2017 – only 7.1%; among the Russians in 1989 this opinion was shared by 34,2%, and in 2017 – only by 10,5%).

Finally, the question of whether the Tatar language should be studied at school only at the decision of parents is extremely important, especially in the light of the fact that it was this issue that caused numerous debates in the media and political sphere, which sometimes happened to be not just tense, but not to all extend conscientious and competent. The issue of the compulsory teaching the Tatar language to all schoolchildren, including students from Russian-speaking families, was a constant subject of disputes among social activists in the Republic, and was nicknamed in the media "ethno-linguistic conflict in Tatarstan". But this debate broke out with a particular force after the statement of the Russian President Vladimir Putin at a meeting of the Council on Interethnic Relations in Yoshkar-Ola on July 20, 2017 that "forcing people to learn languages that are not native to them is as inadmissible as reducing the level and time of teaching Russian" [25]. The work of the Council resulted in some instructions, including those that concerned the situation with native languages [26]. Following these instructions a prosecutor's inspection was being carried out in Tatarstan in the autumn of 2017, and at the same time there was observed intensity of discussions among those who were of the opposite opinion.

But it is important to note that the opinions of people (especially respondents of the Russian nationality) vary depending on the processes in the educational system and various socio-political and legal factors.

If among Tatars the number of those who believe that the study of the Tatar language should depend on the desires of the pupils' parents decreased from 41% in 1989 to 27.4% in 2017, the result of the survey of Russians gave the opposite result: in 1989 such opinions were shared by 52.33%, and in 2017 - by 63.24%.



And here the following fact is important: the percentage of Russian Chelny citizens who believed that the study of the Tatar language should depend only on the parents' desire had also reduced throughout the survey years and reached 31.3% in the survey of 2014. We also tend to interpret the present 'burst' as being influenced by the political and information atmosphere of recent months.

In our study of 2017, as it has already been mentioned, the sample included only young respondents aged from 18 to 35 who had already studied the Tatar language at school. It was meant to find out their opinion on the benefit received (or not received) by them. Table 3 presents these estimates.

Table 3

**ANSWERS**  
**of young (18–35 years old) citizens of Naberezhnye Chelny to the question**  
**“What benefit have you got from studying the Tatar language at school?” got in 2017, %**

|                              | National groups |          |
|------------------------------|-----------------|----------|
|                              | Tatars          | Russians |
| It has brought great benefit |                 |          |
| It has brought some benefit  |                 |          |
| It has brought no benefit    |                 |          |

The overwhelming majority of Tatars (89%), as can be seen from the table, claim that studying their mother tongue at school was useful for them. At the same time, the number of those who believe that they have received "great benefit" (43.1%) and those who believe that they have received "some benefit" (45.9%) is approximately equal. Among the Russians, two thirds of the respondents in general are positive about the results of their study of the Tatar language, and one in three evaluates them negatively. But here the distinct majority belongs to those (58,7%), to whom the study of the Tatar language "has brought some benefit".

In studies of ethno-linguistic processes, the respondents' assessment of the prospects associated with the language training of their children is of exceptional importance. Back in 1990, we were interested in respondents' attitude to the prospects of learning the Tatar language by their children (table 4).

Table 4

**ANSWERS**  
**of the Naberezhnye Chelny citizens o to the question**  
**“Would you like your children to learn the Tatar language at school?”**  
**got in 1999, %**

| Answers             | National groups |          |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------|
|                     | Tatars          | Russians |
| Yes                 |                 |          |
| No                  |                 |          |
| I don't care        |                 |          |
| Difficult to answer |                 |          |

The vast majority of the respondents of the Tatar nationality (83.0%) wanted to give their children knowledge of their native language, while among Russians at that time the number of those who wanted their children to learn the Tatar language at school, was much less – 37.5%. In the poll of 2017 the change in methodology affected not only the age parameters of the respondents, but also the questionnaire itself. Since the linguistic legislation of Tatarstan provides for the same amount of study hours for both state languages, it was important

to find out how much of the Tatar language the inhabitants of the city consider to be sufficient at school. Their opinions are reflected in table 5.

Table 5

**ANSWERS**  
**of young (18–35 years old) citizens of Naberezhnye Chelny to the question**  
**“Would you like your children to learn the Tatar language at school?”**  
**got in 2017, %**

|                        | National groups |         |
|------------------------|-----------------|---------|
|                        | Tatars          | Русские |
| Yes, in full measure   |                 |         |
| Yes, in a small volume |                 |         |
| No                     |                 |         |
| Difficult to answer    |                 |         |

Tatars are unanimous (98%) that their children should study their native language at school, with a significant majority (70.3%) willing to give language training to their children in full. Among Russians changes are especially strong, here now the desire for their children to study the Tatar language (79.5%) also prevails, which is strikingly different from the mood of 1989, when this desire was expressed by half as many respondents. But here the majority (56.8%) considers sufficient a small amount of knowledge.

**Conclusion**

The settlement of ethnic and cultural problems accumulated in the Russian society should contribute to the development of Nations and the improvement of the interethnic atmosphere in all the regions. The materials of our research allow us to see one of the most significant problems for the Republic of Tatarstan and the whole Russian Federation in the period since 1989 till 2017. Our data proves that during the period under study the ethno-linguistic processes in the Republic of Tatarstan, although they were the subject of sharp debates and conflicts, had a general positive trend. The research also suggests that the issue of learning the Tatar language at school requires differentiated approaches to different ethnic groups. And the refusal of compulsory learning of the Tatar language at school in the Republic is, in our opinion, a step back.

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