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Rethinking cultural identities in the context of globalization: linguistic landscape of Kazan, Russia, as an emerging global city

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Abstract

The article looks at two possible directions of cultural identity changes taking place in the era of globalization, analyzing the underlying forces and motivation behind certain shifts in linguistic and cultural behavior. Conformity to the leading dominant culture acquired through lingua franca at the expense of erasing parts of one's original mother tongue and cultural identity is juxtaposed to deliberate preservation and enhancement of minor cultural identities and minority languages. Linguistic landscape of Kazan is analyzed as an example of initially bilingual urban entity turning multilingual due to globalizing trends.

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1. Introduction

The concept of cultural identity as a key factor of personal, social and national self-identification has acquired special meaning in the era of globalization. Political, geographic, social and cultural community borders get crossed ever so often as people become part of global employment market. Therefore it is essential to understand the mechanisms of change taking place in the cultural identities of migrants and recipient nations' representatives.

In our paper we will be looking at definitions of cultural identity, study cultural identifiers and linguistic components making up its essence in order to answer the questions:

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- How do cultural identities change in the context of globalization?

- What determines the direction of this change?
- What vector of change is preferable and why?

The linguistic landscape of Kazan, Russia, will serve as an example of these changes in action. Pragmatic spheres and functions of Russian, Tatar and English will be defined in accordance with political, economic and social forces affecting this initially bilingual city now turning into a multilingual global one.

2. Defining cultural identity

The easiest way to define cultural identity would probably be to say that it actually means the feeling of belonging to a certain social or cultural group. Such deliberate simplification of this term would then require a lot of extra information to clarify what exactly one is dealing with.

According to Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication, it is “the definition of groups or individuals (by themselves or others) in terms of cultural or subcultural categories (including ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and gender) and in stereotyping, this is framed in terms of difference or otherness” (Chandler and Munday, 2011, p.137). Being an integral part of any person's self-conception/self-perception, it is undoubtedly related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture (Moha, 2005). What is essential, however, is the mechanism of creating the notions of cultural differences or similarities. Therefore, in our research we will be looking at cultural identity as a sociolinguistic factor either bringing individuals together on the basis of a shared cultural mindset/ language/ lifestyle/ traditions etc., or alienating people from their original social and cultural communities in the case of sociolinguistic migration and other factors caused by worldwide globalization processes.

3. Cultural identifiers and globalization

In recent decades that were marked by a very tangible rise of globalization processes throughout the world, a lot of research has been conducted in order to analyze the social and cultural impact of migration, resulting in conventional world culture map breakdown. Following J. Blommaert's idea that the global world “has not become a village, but rather a tremendously complex web of villages, towns, neighbourhoods, settlements connected by material and symbolic ties in often unpredictable ways” (Blommaert, 2010, p.1), it is becoming ever more obvious that in order to understand this complexity and evaluate the consequences of these new social tendencies adequately, a more versatile and in-depth sociolinguistic analysis is required.

An individual as a subject and object of globalization needs to be identified/self-identified by a whole new set of identity markers. Therefore new forms of identification emerge breaking down the understanding of an individual as a coherent whole subject into a collection of various cultural identifiers (location, gender, race, history, nationality, language, sexuality, religious beliefs, ethnicity, aesthetics etc). But taken separately, all these identifiers subsequently bring together a solid picture of a person as an active participant of the global world. According to P. James, “categorizations about identity, even when codified and hardened into clear typologies by processes of colonization, state formation or general modernizing processes, are always full of tensions and contradictions. Sometimes these contradictions are destructive, but they can also be creative and positive” (James 2015, p.174).

The undoubtedly positive side of having to deal with the new global reality of often contradictory and elusive phenomena is that it calls for a more anthropocentric approach, making an individual (with his/her own set of cultural identifiers including language) the key figure in shaping not only local communities, but actually drawing a whole new picture of a global world.

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