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LANGUAGES OF THE PEOPLES OF THE SOVIET UNION

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Abstract

The languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union are comprised of hundreds of different languages and dialects from several different language families. The Soviet Union was a multilingual state with over 120 languages spoken natively. From 1918, a new education policy was created which enabled all nationalities in the Soviet Union to have the right to education in their own language. In 1960, the school educational laws were changed and teaching became more dominated by Russian. East Slavic languages which include Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian dominated in the European part of the Soviet Union, the Baltic Languages; Lithuanian and Latvian, and the Finnic language; Estonian were used next to Russian in the Baltic region, while the Moldovan (the only Romance language in the Union) was used in the south east region. In the Caucasus, alongside Russian were Armenian, Azen and Georgian. In the Russian far north were several minority groups who spoke different Uralic languages; most of the languages in the Central Asia were Turkic with the exception of Tajik, which is an Iranian language. In this work, the evolution, diversification, origin and status of the major language families and groups are analyzed with a view to ascertaining their position in the present day states of the former Soviet Union.

Keywords: Languages, Dialect, Soviet Union, Nationalities, States.

Introduction

The languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union are hundreds of different languages and dialects from several different language groups. The formerSoviet Union was a multilingual state with over 120 languages spoken natively. The government policy on education allowed the development of all existing languages and encouraged their usage in their areas of predominance with Russian language as the lingua franca or state language. According to Comrie (1981), although the USSR did not have de jure an official language over most of its history until 1990, and Russian was merely defined as the language of interethnic communication, it assumed de facto the role of official language

On the second level were the languages of the other 14 Union Republics. Of these fourteen languages, two are often considered varieties of other languages: Tajik of Persian, and Moldovan of Romanian. Strongly promoted use of Cyrillic in many republics however, combined with lack of contact, led to the separate development of the literary languages. Some of the former Soviet republics, now independent states, continue to use the Cyrillic alphabet at present (such as Kyrgyzstan), while others have opted to use the Latin alphabet instead (such as Turkmenistan and Moldova – although the unrecognized Transnistria officially uses the Cyrillic alphabet).

Also, the Autonomous republics of the Soviet Union and other subdivision of the USSR lacked even this de jure autonomy, and their languages had virtually no presence at the national level (and often, not even in the urban areas of the republic itself). They were, however, present in education (although often only at lower grades). Some smaller languages with very dwindling small communities, like Livonian, were neglected, and were not present either in education or in publishing.

Several languages of non-titular nations, like German, Korean or Polish, although having sizable communities in the USSR, and in some cases being present in education and publishing, were not considered to be Sovietlanguages. Which means, Finish, though not generally considered a language of the USSR, was an official language of the Karelia and its predecessor as a Sovietrepublic. In the same category, Yiddish and Romany were considered Soviet languages.

The languages of the peoples of the Soviet Union belong to different language groups. Notable among the groups were the:

Indo-European Language Family

The Indo-European languages are a language family of several hundred related languages and dialects. According to the *Ethnologue.com*, there are about 445 living Indo-European languages with over two-thirds (313) of them belonging to the Indo-Iranian branch. The most widely spoken Indo-European languages by native speakers are Spanish, English, Hindustani (Hindi and Urdu), Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, and Punjabi, each with over 100 million speakers, with German, French and Persian also having significant numbers. The source adds that, today, about 46% of the human population speaks an Indo-European language as a first language, by far the highest of any language family. Membership of these languages in the Indo-European language family, according to the Wikipedia, is determined by genetic relationships, meaning that all members are presumed descendants of a common ancestor, Proto-Indo-European. (The word "genetic" here has nothing to do with biological genetics; it refers to relationships between languages). Membership in the various branches, groups and subgroups of Indo-European is also genetic, but here the defining factors are *shared innovations* among various languages, suggesting a common ancestor that split off from other Indo-European groups. For example, what makes the Germanic languages a branch of Indo-European is that much of their structure and phonology can be stated in rules that apply to all of them. Many of their common features are presumed innovations that took place in Proto-Germanic, the source of all the Germanic languages.

Indo-European language also included the languages of the Slavonic, Baltic and Iranic groups, as well as Cipsy, Armenian, Moldavian and the Yiddish. The Slavonic languages include: Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian which have the largest number of speakers. The Russian language which is the original language of Russian people later became a language of internationality usage among the peoples of the formerSoviet Union. The Russian language spoken by more than 110 million people of the Slavonic group is one of the most widespread and developed languages of the world. The second language with widespread among the Slavonic languages is the language of the Ukrainians. It is spoken by more than 35 million speakers and is predominant in the former Ukrainian SSR of the Soviet Union. Presently, it is the national and official language of the state of Ukraine. And the Belorussian, the national

language of the Belorussians, who made up the basic population of the former Berorusian SSR of the former Soviet Union and the present Belorussian state. The language has about 8.2 million speakers. Both Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian make up the East Slavonic language group and its existence can be dated to 10th century.

The Baltic languages are second in terms of widest distribution on the basis of number of speakers after the Slavonic in the Indo-European family. They are spoken by the Lithuanians who were the inhabitants of the Lithuanian state with more than two million speakers.

Also, in the Indo-European family is the Latvian language spoken by the inhabitants of the former Lithuanian SSR of the former Soviet Union. It has more than 1.6 million speakers. Other languages under this group include Moldavian spoken by the Moldavians and which represented the romance group of languages on the territory of the former USSR. It has about 2,024,500 speakers.

The Iranic language group is comprised of Tadzhik, the language spoken by the largest of the Iranic speaking peoples of the former Soviet Union. It has more than 1.2 million speakers and it is the national language of the Tadzhiks; the Ossetian – which is the language of the Ossetians, who are the inhabitants of the North Ossetian. This language has two dialects – Ironi and Digor. Also, Ossetian is the language of the people of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region and there are over 355,000 speakers in the region. Other languages under this group include the Kurdish, Talyshi, Tat and Yagnobi.

The Kurdish is spoken by the Kurds of the former USSR. They are now in the present counties of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkmen. It has about 46,000 speakers. The Talyshiis the language of the Talysh people living in the eastern part of the present state of Azerbaijan with about 77,000 speakers. While Talyshi is spoken by people living in the southern part of the country, the Tat is spoken in the northern part of Azerbaijan and the Daghestan. The Tat has about 30,000 speakers and the Yagnobi is the language of the Yagnob people of the Tadzhik. Pamiri language is also spoken in Tadzhik. Other languages that belong to the Iranic languages include Shugin, Rushani (with Oroshori, Bartangi and Khufi as dialects), Munjani, Ishkashni, Wakhi and Yazgulami. These languages, however, have few speakers with none exceeding several thousands; though with exception of Shugnis which has more than 18,000 speakers.

Among the Indo-European languages in the former Soviet Union is the Gypsy language, spoken by about 70,000 people. The Yiddish is the language spoken by a section of the Jewish population of the former Soviet Union. While the Gypsy represents the Neo-Indian group of the Indo-European languages, the Yiddish belongs to the Germanic group. In the Semitic language group is the Neo-Sprian which is spoken by the Aisors. It has some 20,000 speakers.

The Finno-Ugric Language Family

The Finno-Ugric, sometimes referred to as Finno-Ugrian or Fenno-Ugric is a traditional grouping of all languages in the Uralic language family except the Samoyedic languages. It is commonly accepted status as a subfamily of Uralic is based on criteria formulated in the 19th century and is criticized by some contemporary linguists (Tapani, S. 2001). Uralic languages, Hungarian, Finnish, and Estonia are all included in Finno-Ugric, although

linguistic roots common to both branches of the traditional Finno-Ugric language tree (Finno-Permis and Ugric) are distant. Tommola, H. (2010) argues that the term Finno-Ugric, which originally referred to the entire family, is sometimes used as a synonym for the term Uralic, which includes the Samoyedic languages, as commonly happens when a language family is expanded with further discoveries. But according to Salminen (2002), attempts at reconstructing a Proto-Finno-Ugric protolanguage, a common ancestor of all Uralic languages except for the Samoyedic languages, are largely indistinguishable from Proto-Uralic suggesting that Finno-Ugric might not be a historical grouping but a geographical one, with Samoyedic being distinct by lexical borrowing rather than actually being historically divergent. It has been proposed that the area in which Proto-Finno-Ugric was spoken reached between the Baltic Sea and the Ural Mountains (Campbell 2004).

The four largest groups that speak Finno-Ugric languages are Hungarians (14.5 million), Finns (6.5 million), Estonians (1.1 million), and Mordvins (0.85 million). Three (Hungarians, Finns and Estonians) inhabit independent nation-states. Hungary, Finland, and Estonia, while the Mordvins have an autonomous Mordovian Republic within Russia. The traditional area of the indigenous Sami people is in Northern Finno-Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula in Northwest Russia and is known as Sapni. Some other Finno-Ugric peoples have autonomous, republics in Russia: Karelians (Republic of Karelia), Komi (Komi Republic), Udmurts (Udmurt Republic), Mari (Mari El Republic), and Mordvins (Moksha and Erzya: Republic of Mordovia). Khanty and Mansi peoples live in the Khagty – Mansi Autonomous Okrug of Russia, while Komi-Permyaks live in Komi-Permyak Okrug, which used to be an autonomous Okrug of Russia, but today is a territory with special status within Parm Krai.

Linguistically, according to Gyarmathi (1983), the linguistic reconstruction of the Finno-Ugric language family has led to the postulation that the ancient Proto-Finno-Ugric people were ethnically related, and that even the modern Finno-Ugric-speaking peoples are ethnically related. Such hypotheses are based on the assumption that heredity can be traced through linguistic relatedness although it must be kept in mind that language shift and ethnic admixture, a relatively frequent and common occurrence both in recorded history and most likely also in prehistory, confuses the picture and there is no straightforward relationship if at all, between linguistic and genetic affiliation. All the same, the premise that the limited community of speakers of a proto-language must have been ethnically homogeneous remains accepted.

The Caucasian Language Family

According to the Wikipedia, the Caucasian languages are comprised of the Kartrelian group which are Georgian Megrelo-Chan and Svan and the Vakh (or Veviakh) group which consists of Ingush and Chechen languages.

The Georgian is the national language spoken by Georgians in the present Georgian State. And the speakers of this language form the basic population of the country. The language has over 2.2 million speakers. It is distinct from others because it is the only Caucasian language with an ancient script, which can be traced from the 5th century. It has Imerian, Kartli and Kakhetin as its main dialects. The Megrelo-Chan (or Zan) language has two dialects; Megrel which is spoken in the western part of Georgia by about 300,000 people and Chan (Laz) which has 2,000 speakers reading in Adjar. Although these are considered as

dialects, some linguistics regards them as independent languages. The Svan language is spoken by the Svanetians who inhabit the territory of Georgia. It has about 13,000 speakers. In the group of Caucasian languages is also the Abkhazo-Adygei which consists of Kabardin-Cherkess with more than 175,000 speakers living in the territory of the Kabarchi-Balkar and Karachaero-Cherkess regions. Others are Adygei, the language of the Adygei with about 88,000 speakers, Abkhaz, spoken by Abkhaz people of about 59,000 population; Abazin which has Tapanta and Shkarana as main dialects is spoken by the Abazins living in the Karachaero-Cherkess. It has about 14,000 speakers.

Among the Caucasian languages also is the Vakh (or Veinakh). It consists of the Chechem and the Ingush languages and it is dominant among the Chechem-Ingush regions and has about 500,000 speakers. Many scholars believe that Vakh is related to Daghastani and Kartrelian. Other languages under this family include Bats and Kistin languages. Both languages are dominant in the Georgian regions and each has about 2,500 speakers.

The Tungusic Language Family

The Tungusic languages (also known as Manchu-Tungus, Tungus) form a language family spoken in Eastern Siberia and northeast China by Tungusic peoples. Many Tungusic languages are endangered, and the long-term future of the family is uncertain. According to Hammarstrom, H. et al, (eds.) (2016) there are approximately 75,000 native speakers of the dozen living languages of the Tungusiclanguage family. Some linguists consider Tungusic to be part of the generally rejected Altaic language family, along with Mongolic, and sometimes Koreanic and Japonic.

The term "Tungusic" is from an exonym for the Evenks people used by the Yakuts ("tongus') and the Siberian Tatars in the 17th century meaning "pig". It was borrowed into Russian and ultimately into English as Tungus". It became a broad term for speakers of the whole family, Tungusic. The use of Tungus is now discouraged and the Russian government now prefers to use the endonym "Evenks" officially.

Many linguists are not clear on the source and origin of the Tungusic languages. While some estimate the divergence of the languages from a common ancestor spoken somewhere in Manchuria around 500BC to 500AD, others favour a homeland closer to Lake Baikal. While the generalform of the protolanguage is clear from similarities in the daughter languages, there is no consensus on detailed reconstructions. According to Roberts (2016) as of 2012, scholars are still trying to establish a shared vocabulary to do such a reconstruction.

According to West (2010), some sources describe Donghu people of 7th century BC to 2nd century BC Manchuria as Proto-Tungusic. Other sources sharply criticize this as a random similarity in pronunciation that has no real basis in fact (Pulleyblank, 1983).

Tunguisc research states that the earliest accounts of Tungusic languages came from a Dutch traveler, Nicolaas Witsen, who published in the Dutch language a book titled *Noord enOastTartarye,* (literally "North and East Tartary") which described a variety of peoples in the far east and included some brief word lists for many languages. Following his travel to Russia, he published his collected findings in three editions, 1692, 1705 and 1785. The book includes some words and sentences from the Evenki language (then called "Tungus").

It is pertinent to say that Tungusic is today considered a primary language family. In the past, some linguists have linkedTungusic with Turkic and Mongolic languages in the Altaic language family. However, the link is still unproven. Others have suggested that the Tungusic languages might be related (perhaps as a paraphyletic out-group) to the Koreanic, Japonic, or Ainu languages as well.

The Daghestan Language Family

One of the characteristics of languages of Daghestan is their exceptional varieties. According to the Wikipedia, the most developed languages in this group include Avar which its dominance extended to people living in Azerbaijan with about 160,000 speakers; the Dargin with about 140,000 speakers, Lezgin and Lak with about 134,000 and 42,000 speakers respectively. Amongst them also is Tabasaran which has about 34,000 speakers. All these are written languages of Daghestan and are used in teaching, publishing literature, in the theatre and also on radio and television.

The less developed languages of this family are unwritten and are spoken by a number of small peoples who are both culturally and linguistically related. They are divided into small groups: The Andi-Dido, Dargin and Lezgin groups. Those in the Andi-Dido group are Andi language with about 8,000 speakers, Karata with about 6,000 speakers, Tindi or Tindal with about 5,000 speakers. Also are Krandi (Bagulal or Bagvalal) with about 5,5000 speakers, Akhvakh with about 3,000 speakers, Botlikh and Dido with about 3,5000 and 7,000 speakers respectively. Others are Chamalal which has about 5,500 speakers, Kapuchi-Gunzeb with about 3,000 speakers, Khvarshi and Ginukhwith about 1,800 and 200 speakers respectively.

The Turkic Language Family

Dybo (2007) posits that the Turkic languages are a language family of at least thirty-five languages spoken by Turkic peoples from Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean to Siberia and Western China. Katzner (2002) adds that, the Turkic languages originated in the region of East Asia spanning Western China to Mongolia, where Proto-Turkic is thought to have been spoken, according to one estimate, around 2,500 years ago, from where they expanded to Central Asia and farther west during the first millennium.

Turkic languages are spoken as a native language by some 170 million people, and the total number of Turkic speakers, including second- language speakers, is over 200 million (Brigitte 2008). And according to Katzner (2002), the Turkic language with the greatest number of speakers is Turkish, spoken mainly in Anatolia and the Balkans, the native speakers of which account for about 40% of all Turkic speakers.

The Turkic languages are usually considered to be divided equally into two branches; Oghur, the only surviving member of which is Chuvash, and Common Turkic, which includes all other Turkic languages including the Oghuz subbranch. The characteristics of the Turkic family show some similarities to the surrounding East Asian language families of the Mongolic, Tungusic, Koreanic, and Japonic languages leading to the controversial Altaic language family. The controversy brought about by the seeming similarities with the Uralic languages family cause these families tobe regarded as one for a long time under the hypothesis of Ural – Altaic languages (George van Drien,2001). This not withstanding there

is insufficient evidence to conclude theexistence of either of these macro families, the shared characteristics between the languages being attributed presently to extensive prehistoric language contact.

It is established that there was extensive contact between Proto-Lurks and Proto-Mongols approximately during the first millennium BCE; the shared cultural tradition between the two Eurasian nomadic groups is called the Turco-Mongol tradition. The two groups, according to Clark (1980) shared a religion, Tengrism, and there exists a multitude of evident loanwords between Turkic languages and Mongolic languages. Although the loans were bidirectional, today Turkic loanwords constitute the largest foreign component in Mongolian vocabulary. The most famous of these loanwords include "lion" (Turkish: aslant or arslan; Mongolian: arslan), "gold" (Turkish: altin, Mongolian: altan or alt), and 'iron" (Turkish: demir; Mongolian: tomor).

Conclusion

Although the Soviet Union was a multi- language country, with numerous different languages and the dialects, Russian language, played vital role in integrating the different union republics, being the lingua franca and official language of the country. This was as provided in the education policy of the country. This, however did not go very well with the different republics as the usage of their languages were restricted to their republics, regions and localities and had virtually no presence at the national level (and often, not even in the urban areas of the republics).

This notwithstanding, the different language families served as identity and unifying instrument for the speakers of the language. Again, several languages of non titular nations, like German, Korean or Polish, although having sizable communities in the USSR, were not considered to be Sovietlanguages. On the other hand, Finnish, although not generally considered a language of the USSR, was an official language of the Karelia and its predecessor as a Sovietrepublic. Also Yiddish and Romany were considered Sovietlanguages.

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