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CHANGE OF GRAPHICS IN KALMYKS AND RUSSIAN
LANGUAGE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

The paper is a review of the issues of the writing change in general and the Kalmyks writing system in the context of ideological significance of the Russian language and the Cyrillic alphabet. The relevance of the stated topic is related to the problem of the integral study of language, writing, and culture. The letter is considered as a tool of communication, as a language code of an ethnos. The choice of writing graphics often has a political connotation, associated with the ideological orientation of the state. The graphics change essentially means that subsequent generations are deprived of the opportunity to read texts in the old script. This is what happened with the Kalmyks. In the first half of the 20th century. The Kalmyk language and its speakers were shocked three times, starting from scratch three times: in 1924, a new script based on Russian one was introduced for the Kalmyk idiom, in 1930 it was translated into Latin, and in 1939, back into Cyrillic. Three generations of the Kalmyks grew up without knowledge of their national script, and the continuity of the literary tradition was broken.

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1. Introduction

Language policy is one of social factors influencing the functioning and development of languages in the state (Shvejcer, 1971). This is especially true of such a multinational state as the former Soviet Union, where the language issue has always been inseparable from the national one. Currently, it is inevitably projected onto the contemporary linguistic situation in post-Soviet Russia. From this point of view, the study of historical experience seems to be particularly relevant.

The domestic historiography of this issue for the period under consideration is characterized by a small number of works. In the 20–30s of the 20th century, the works of Soviet scientists (Polivanov, 1926) laid the foundations for the theory and practice of sociolinguistic studies of writing systems, which were further developed in the works of subsequent generations' scientists. A number of works by foreign authors are devoted to the given issue, for example, Grenoble (2003). The historiography of this period is represented by the works of Mongolian scholars devoted to the Oirat writing and its reforms (Burykin, 2016; Badmaev, 1970; Bitkeev, 1995; 2009; Luvsanbaldan, 1986; Nominhanov, 1976; Omakaeva, 2018; Omakaeva et al., 2019; Poppe, 1966; Rinchen, 1966; Vladimircov, 2005).

The problems of the language and translation of the Oirat monuments are analyzed in the papers of the linguist Yakhontova (Oirat Dictionary of Poetic Expressions, 2010).

2. Problem Statement

The relationship history between writing and power is a significant fragment of our country history in general and the Kalmyk people in particular. The historical evolution research of the written tradition and its variations in the Kalmyk continuum is considered by the authors as a required link in comprehending the mechanisms, methods, features, and patterns of such interaction.

3. Research Questions

The research question is writing in its relation to the people history in historical dynamics. Particular attention is drawn to the relationship history between writing and power in Kalmykia in the post-revolutionary period of the first half of the 20th century. At that time, the state launched a large-scale work on the intensive development of small and marginal languages (Mechkovskaya, 2001).

The question of whether the given people has own national script and the time of occurrence, as well as the literature created on this script, and the preservation degree of monuments, is relevant for the full characterization of particular society or ethnic group. The writing originality of each particular people is created by the historical path uniqueness.

The issue related to the relationship between history and writing (a set of written means of communication, including graphics, alphabet and spelling) is also in demand in the context of the study of historical and cultural heritage. It is no coincidence that the two concepts of history and writing stand side by side: writing as a tool of written communication has played and is playing a significant role in society as a symbol of ethnic identity. In the entire world history, it is probably complicated to find such a people who have used more than a dozen of various types of writing and graphic systems with diverse regional

and local variations during their long history (Shagdarsyren, 2001). Mongolian-speaking peoples, including the Western Mongols (modern-day Kalmyks living in Russia, and the Oirat-speaking ethnic groups in Mongolia and China), are a prime example of this kind.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the paper is to reveal the prerequisites, conditions, and circumstances for the modernization of the Kalmyk writing system in the Soviet era. The following tasks were set to achieve the purpose: 1) theoretically comprehend the writing phenomenon in the aspect of changing graphics on specific historical regional material, which inevitably results in a violation of cultural continuity; 2) description of the theoretical and methodological base based on the analysis of scientific literature on the stated topic; 3) historiography analysis of the issue and controversy regarding the graphic basis of writing.

5. Research Methods

The research basis is an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the complex application of methods of historical, source study, historiographical, and textual survey of written sources. The structural-functional method allows us to consider the features of the state language policy. Problem-chronological, systemic, comparative, and classification methods are applied.

6. Findings

It is believed that writing originated among the Mongols with the emergence of statehood. However, some Mongolian scholars suggest that this happened much earlier, long before the emergence of a unified Mongolian empire: the writing of the Mongols' ancestors arose about two thousand years ago. It is referred to a rudimentary form of writing – carved on stone (rocks and cave walls) and carved on wood graphic images found during archaeological excavations. The so-called “picture writing” is called pictograms. Most of the drawings on the stone are dedicated to hunting scenes; there are Buddhist prayer formulas.

Besides, carving with a bone on a tree was an ancient form of writing among the Xianbei, like the Xiongnu. Mongolian scientists tend to conclude that the Xianbei tribes participated in the ethnogenesis of the Mongols and were Mongol-speaking (Syhbaatar, 1969, 1971).

In the 13th century, a letter borrowed from the Uighurs became the state script of the united Mongol Empire. This common Mongolian script “Khudma bichig” with slight modifications has survived to this day and is applied by the Mongols living in China. After the collapse of the Great Mongol Empire, the Mongolian script on the basis of the Uyghur remained the state official script. The written tradition of the Mongolian peoples is of particular interest in the context of Buddhist theory and practice (Abaeva, 2014).

The formation history of independent written traditions among the Mongolian peoples is fascinating (Lytkin, 1859). Due to historical circumstances, we consider the Kalmyks' written culture as

an outcome of further development of the Oirat cultural substrate, largely due to the Eurasian peoples' influence living within new territory of the ethnic group.

There are monographic studies in the literature devoted to the writing of the Mongolian peoples, including the Oirat one (Kara, 1972), but a rigorous research of the writing various types applied in the past by the Oirats and Kalmyks, descendants of the Oirats in the 20th century, is required, as well as the relationship of writing with the history and culture of the people in the context of all its external and internal relations.

The historical stages in the evolution of Kalmyk writing have been considered in a number of works (Pavlov, 1962; 1968). Thus, in the book "Modern Kalmyk language. Phonetics and graphics" the history of Kalmyk writing is briefly outlined on a large archival material, including the Soviet era. Nevertheless, there are no serious generalizing works of a theoretical and practical nature.

We have divided the bibliographic literature on the research problem into three main groups of works published in the period under study, the post-war Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The first group of sources contains valuable factual material, the authors of which are direct participants in those distant events.

The second group is represented by the works of Soviet researchers, which note the desire to show the unproblematic progressive socio-cultural development of the USSR peoples, their equal position in the social structure of the state, the complete eradication of any outdated traditions, superstitions and other views that are not characteristic of Soviet people.

The third group of sources includes studies of the post-Soviet period (from the early 1990s to the present).

The period of indigenization (the choice of an alphabet for the Kalmyk language) was the first stage in the implementation of the Soviet language policy among the Kalmyks. The success of socialist construction in Kalmykia depended on a speedy solution to the literacy problem of the titular inhabitants, but the old Kalmyk script "todo bichig" ("clear writing"), which was created in 1648 by the great Oirat educator Zaya Pandita Namkai Jamtso, was a barrier on this path in reliance on old Mongolian writing. The well-known Mongolian academician Rinchen (1966) wrote with admiration at one time:

Already in the first years of the existence of the Kalmyk or Oirat writing, the literary language of the Kalmyks was so developed by a galaxy of talented students, associates of Zaya Pandita, which made it possible to create brilliant translations of the most complicated philosophical, medical, and other texts that are unthinkable among nations who have just created signs to represent the sounds of their speech. (p. 60)

The Oirat vertical script was replaced by Cyrillic in 1924, the transition to the Latin alphabet followed in 1930, and in 1937 it returned to the Cyrillic alphabet (Omakaeva, 2010). Generally, not only the linguistic aspect was taken into consideration when developing a large-scale language project to translate the writings of the USSR peoples onto a single graphic basis, but also the socio-historical context of the era, and political, psychological, pedagogical, and sociolinguistic factors. The outstanding Soviet linguist Polivanov (1926) called the new national scripts "morsels of a revolution in a narrow

technical area of spiritual culture - in graphics” (p. 3), thereby indicating the connection of “graphic revolutions” with the political slogans of the revolution. It is no coincidence that the new alphabet gained the figurative name “Alphabet of October” (1934).

The transition to the Latin alphabet, apparently, was caused by the fact that the Latin alphabet was perceived as an international alphabet, and the writing of the future (Lunacharskij, 1930; Yakovlev 1933, 1936). It is more suitable for the Kalmyk language, since it has specific sounds (vowels and consonants) that is not reflected in Cyrillic. Therefore, the romanization task was to create a script that did not have the shortcomings of Cyrillic writing.

Nevertheless, everything returned to normal: some additions were made to the Cyrillic alphabet in order to fully reflect the phonetic features of the Kalmyk language (Alphabet of the Kalmyk language on a Russian basis ... 1938).

Famous Kalmyk linguists Badmaev (1931), Pavlov (1933), Nominhanov (1976), who published the article “Language Construction in Kalmykia” in the journal “Revolution and Writing” in 1932, took an active part in language scientific conferences. The issues of language construction of the given period are analyzed from diverse points of view in the works of modern researchers (Darvaev, 1990; Kitlyeva, 2007; Kadyrkulova et al., 2019; Omakaeva, 2018).

It is significant to comprehend the very situation associated with the alphabet change in the 20-30s of the 20th century (first the alphabet cyrillicization and its abolition, then the romanization and its abolition) in order to objectively assess the causes and consequences, without going to extremes. It is completely wrong to show the people's refusal from their national script only in a negative way, and even more to give a hyper-positive assessment of the adoption of the Russian graphic system. Moreover, not enough facts and events of that time are known, especially with regard to the activities of specific individuals, direct participants and executors of the writing reform in Kalmykia. Scientists have to figure out what aspects of the language reforms experience of the Stalin era can be valuable today and in the near future.

Unfortunately, we have to state that the alphabetical leapfrog led to the loss of the national written tradition of the Kalmyks. The Kalmyk people turned out to be essentially cut off from the rest of the Mongolian-speaking world, the richest treasury of national and translated literature (including Buddhist), and folklore.

In recent decades, Oirat studies have intensified work on the study of Oirat writing, and the publication and translation of Buddhist written monuments as cultural and historical sources. Various things have been done in this regard in Mongolia by the “Tod nomyn gerel” public organization (responsible director is Na. Sukhbaatar), which publishes the “Oiratika Library series.”

In 2015, Elista hosted a scientific conference “Oirat writing and historical and cultural heritage of the Mongolian-speaking peoples: yesterday, today, tomorrow”, held by the public organization “Bilgin Dala”, KIIH RAS and KalmSU under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which was dedicated to the 360th anniversary of the visit of Zaya Pandita Namkhai Jamtso to the Kalmyks and the beginning of the “todo bichig” spread in Russia. The scientific forum served as a new turn in the history study of the Kalmyk nation and their written heritage, updating

a whole range of both old, previously existing, and new, recently emerging issues of a theoretical, methodological and practical nature.

7. Conclusion

Thus, the study of processes' mechanisms that influence the conduct of language policy in society is possible only in the context of historical development. The dynamics analysis of the language policy carried out in Kalmykia in the 1920s–1930s and historical experience in general have revealed that the key to creating an optimal situation in a country or region is the right choice of language policy, which can be both constructive and destructive. All significant linguistic reforms of writing were carried out exclusively on the initiative and in the interests of the state, and the driving forces of reforms were purely political interests of the authorities.

The written tradition study, as well as the samples of writing, is essential not only from a scientific point of view, but also for the written heritage preservation of the past as a national treasure for posterity. The study has showed the significance of practical knowledge of the Oirat (Old Kalmyk) writing, which, in our opinion, is the key to comprehension of largely tragic history and the vast treasury of the Kalmyks spiritual culture.

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