

THE ROLE OF UZBEK AND ENGLISH IN CONTEMPORARY UZBEKISTAN: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF YOUTH LANGUAGE PRACTICES

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Abstract. This study explores the sociolinguistic roles of Uzbek and English in contemporary Uzbekistan, focusing on language use, attitudes, and future trends among young people. The research is based on survey data collected from 300 students at the Uzbekistan State World Languages University and semi-structured interviews with university instructors. The findings indicate the emergence of functional bilingualism: Uzbek dominates everyday communication and cultural identity, while English is strongly associated with education, career advancement, and global integration. Statistical analysis shows high motivation toward English acquisition alongside strong emotional attachment to Uzbek.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, bilingualism, Uzbek language, English language, language policy, youth, Uzbeki

Annotatsiya. Ushbu tadqiqot zamonaviy O'zbekistonda o'zbek va ingliz tillarining sotsiolingvistik funksiyalarini, ayniqsa yoshlar orasida til foydalanish, tilga munosabat va kelajak tendensiyalarini o'rganadi. Tadqiqot O'zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universitetining 300 nafar talabasi orasida o'tkazilgan so'rovnomma ma'lumotlari hamda universitet o'qituvchilari bilan o'tkazilgan yarim tuzilmali intervyular asosida amalga oshirilgan. Natijalar funksional bilingvizmning shakllanayotganini ko'rsatadi: o'zbek tili kundalik muloqot va madaniy identitetda ustunlik qiladi, ingliz tili esa ta'lim, kasbiy rivojlanish va global integratsiya bilan chambarchas bog'liq. Statistik tahlil ingliz tilini o'rganishga yuqori motivatsiya mavjudligini, shu bilan birga o'zbek tiliga kuchli emotsional bog'liqlik saqlanib qolayotganini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: sotsiolingvistika, bilingvizm, o'zbek tili, ingliz tili, til siyosati, yoshlar, O'zbekiston

Аннотация. Данное исследование рассматривает социолингвистические функции узбекского и английского языков в современном Узбекистане с акцентом на языковое использование, отношение к языкам и будущие тенденции среди молодежи. Работа основана на данных анкетирования, собранных среди 300 студентов Узбекского государственного университета мировых языков, а также на результатах полуструктурированных интервью с преподавателями вуза. Результаты показывают формирование функционального билингвизма: узбекский язык доминирует в повседневном общении и в сфере культурной идентичности, тогда как английский язык тесно связан с образованием, карьерным ростом и глобальной интеграцией. Статистический анализ выявляет высокую мотивацию к изучению английского языка при одновременной сильной эмоциональной привязанности к узбекскому.

Ключевые слова: социолингвистика, билингвизм, узбекский язык, английский язык, языковая политика, молодежь, Узбекистан

Introduction

Language shift occurs when speakers gradually abandon their ancestral languages and adopt more dominant ones, often under social, political, or economic pressures. This process contributes to the ongoing and irreversible decline of global linguistic diversity. In response, language maintenance efforts seek to resist such loss. Communities support ethnolinguistic minority communities in preserving their endangered languages through various means, such as developing writing systems where needed. (Brenzinger, 2006).

Toward the close of the twentieth century, profound transformations in Uzbekistan's socio-political sphere significantly influenced both its language policy and overall linguistic environment. The period leading up to independence was marked by instability, as the Soviet system began to disintegrate, ideological control weakened, and a growing sense of national consciousness emerged. Under these circumstances, language-related concerns became increasingly central in public discourse. Language came to be understood not merely as a tool for communication, but as a key social institution that embodies national identity and mirrors ongoing political transformations (Tursunov, 2026). By the 1980s, Soviet leadership pursued policies aimed at reinforcing Russian as the primary language of interethnic communication, viewing it as a tool for deepening integration across the Union. Its privileged status in key domains—such as professional training, higher education, the military, and state administration—necessitated the development of a cadre of specialists in peripheral republics who were proficient in Russian and able to operate effectively within a centrally controlled system (Mustafayeva, 2021).

From the perspective of this study, such policies can be seen as a double-edged phenomenon. On the one hand, the promotion of Russian as a common medium of communication did facilitate administrative coordination, mobility, and access to broader scientific and professional networks across the Soviet space. On the other hand, this top-down prioritization of a single dominant language inevitably contributed to the marginalization of local languages, including Uzbek, by limiting their functional domains and prestige in key institutional spheres. As a result, linguistic hierarchies were reinforced, and the natural development of national languages was constrained. In my view, while the integrative intent of these policies cannot be entirely dismissed, their long-term impact underscores the tension between political unification and the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity.

In the context of globalization, language dynamics in post-Soviet societies have undergone substantial transformation. Uzbekistan, since gaining independence in 1991, has actively promoted the Uzbek language as a symbol of national identity while simultaneously encouraging the learning of foreign languages, particularly English (Fierman, 2009).

English has emerged as a global lingua franca, influencing education systems, labor markets, and digital communication worldwide (Crystal, 2003). In Uzbekistan, this trend is especially visible among young people, who increasingly view English as essential for academic and professional success.

At the same time, Uzbek continues to function as the primary language of social interaction, cultural expression, and national unity. This dual-language environment creates a unique sociolinguistic situation where both languages coexist but serve different roles.

Literature Review

Language and identity are closely interconnected. According to Fishman (1999), language serves as a key marker of ethnic and national identity. In post-colonial and post-Soviet contexts, language policy often plays a central role in nation-building. Crystal (2003) emphasizes that globalization promotes the spread of dominant languages, especially English, but does not necessarily eliminate local languages. Instead, new forms of bilingualism and multilingualism emerge.

In Central Asia, researchers note a shift from Russian dominance toward English as the main foreign language (Smagulova, 2008). Meanwhile, Uzbek has been strengthened by state policies that promote its use in administration and education (Fierman, 2009). Studies on youth language practices show that young people often lead linguistic change, especially in adopting global languages and digital communication styles (Pavlenko, 2008). However, empirical research specifically focusing on Uzbek-English bilingualism among university students remains limited, which makes this study relevant.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of language use, attitudes, and policy-related perspectives in the context of Uzbekistan. By combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research ensures a more reliable and multidimensional analysis of the topic.

The study involved a total of 300 university students aged between 18 and 24. All participants were selected from the Uzbekistan State World Languages University, which provides a relevant academic environment for examining multilingual practices. The sample included students of mixed gender and diverse academic backgrounds, allowing for a broader representation of linguistic behavior and attitudes within the student population.

To collect the necessary data, questionnaires were used:

Questionnaire (Quantitative method)

A structured questionnaire was distributed among the 300 students to collect quantifiable data on language-related behaviors and perceptions. The questionnaire examined three main areas:

Patterns of language use in different environments, including home, university settings, and online communication.

Students' attitudes toward both Uzbek and English languages, particularly in terms of identity, usefulness, and prestige.

Their future language preferences in academic, professional, and social contexts.

This instrument helped to identify general tendencies and measurable patterns in language behavior.

The collected data were analyzed using both statistical and interpretive methods.

Descriptive statistics (quantitative analysis):

The questionnaire data were processed using descriptive statistical techniques, particularly percentage-based analysis. This allowed for a clear presentation of trends in language use and attitudes among students.

The findings from the questionnaire reveal clear patterns in how students use different languages across various communication contexts, including home, social interactions, university settings, and online platforms.

At home, Uzbek remains overwhelmingly dominant, with 92% of respondents reporting it as their primary language of communication. Only a very small proportion of students use English (2%) or Russian (4%) in the home environment, while 2% reported a mixed-language approach. This indicates that Uzbek continues to function strongly as the main language of family interaction and cultural identity.

In communication with friends, Uzbek is still the most widely used language at 78%, although its dominance is slightly reduced compared to the home context. The use of English (5%) and Russian (8%) remains relatively limited, but the presence of mixed-language communication (9%) suggests that students are more flexible and adaptive in informal peer interactions, often blending languages depending on context and social group.

In the university environment, a noticeable shift in language use can be observed. Uzbek is used by 54% of students, while English usage increases significantly to 36%. Russian accounts for only 5%, and mixed language use remains at 5%. This distribution reflects the academic importance of English, particularly in higher education settings where it is increasingly used for instruction, reading materials, and professional development.

The most striking results appear in online communication and social media use. Here, English (45%) slightly surpasses Uzbek (40%), indicating a strong digital presence of English among students. Russian remains minimal at 5%, while 10% of respondents reported using a mixture of languages. This suggests that digital spaces encourage greater linguistic flexibility and expose students to global communication trends, where English plays a leading role.

Overall, the data demonstrate a clear functional distribution of languages: Uzbek is dominant in private and informal domains, while English becomes increasingly prominent in academic and digital environments.

The survey results reveal strong and largely positive attitudes toward both Uzbek and English, but with clearly differentiated roles assigned to each language by students. A very high proportion of respondents (89%) agreed that Uzbek is essential for maintaining national and cultural identity. This demonstrates that Uzbek is not only viewed as a means of communication, but also as a core symbol of heritage, belonging, and emotional connection to society.

At the same time, 85% of students consider English to be necessary for future career development. This reflects the perception of English as a global language of opportunity, closely linked to employment prospects, international communication, and professional advancement. In addition, 67% of respondents expressed a desire to become fluent in both Uzbek and English. This indicates a growing awareness of bilingual competence as an important skill in a globalized world, where success increasingly depends on the ability to operate in multiple linguistic environments. Interestingly, 74% of students agreed with the statement that English is more useful than Uzbek on a global scale. While this does not reduce the perceived value of Uzbek in local contexts, it highlights the strong association between English and international mobility, science, technology, and global communication.

Overall, these findings suggest that students do not view the two languages as competing alternatives, but rather as complementary tools serving different purposes.

The data on academic language preferences show a relatively balanced but slightly Uzbek-oriented distribution. A majority of students (58%) still prefer to use Uzbek for academic writing, while 42% favor English.

This pattern suggests that Uzbek continues to play an important role in intellectual expression and learning, especially in explaining complex ideas in a familiar linguistic framework. However, the fact that nearly half of the respondents prefer English indicates a noticeable shift toward its growing academic relevance. This tendency reflects the increasing influence of English in higher education, particularly in fields such as science, technology, business, and international studies. It also suggests that students are gradually becoming more comfortable with expressing academic ideas in English, which may signal a future transition toward more English-medium academic practices.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly indicate the presence of functional bilingualism in Uzbekistan, where different languages are assigned specific social and communicative roles. This aligns with Fishman's (1999) theory of domain-based language use, which suggests that languages coexist by serving different functions within society.

In the case of Uzbekistan, Uzbek primarily operates within emotional, cultural, and interpersonal domains. It is the language of family communication, identity formation, and social cohesion. English, on the other hand, is increasingly associated with academic achievement, professional success, and digital communication, particularly in globalized contexts. Despite this shift, the strong emotional attachment to Uzbek, as reflected in the 89% agreement rate regarding its importance for identity, suggests that its symbolic and cultural role remains highly stable.

In conclusion, Uzbek continues to function as the core language of identity, culture, and social interaction, while English is increasingly serving as the language of globalization, education, and professional advancement. Rather than competing directly, the two languages appear to be developing complementary roles within society.

The future linguistic landscape is therefore likely to be characterized by coexistence, functional differentiation, and growing bilingual competence among the population. The main challenge moving forward will be to maintain a balanced linguistic ecosystem in which English supports national development without undermining the cultural and intellectual significance of the Uzbek language.

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