



**BRITTA KORTH**

# **Language Attitudes towards Kyrgyz and Russian**

**Discourse, Education and Policy  
in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan**

Peter Lang

# 1. Introduction

This research sprang from a confusing experience that I had on my very first day as a German teacher at the Osh State University in Kyrgyzstan, a small mountainous state in Central Asia, which was part of the Soviet Union until 1991, after which it became an independent Republic.

Before I arrived in Osh in the summer of 1998, I knew little about the linguistic situation in southern Kyrgyzstan. This is due to the fact that little had been written about it at that time, and because the scarce accounts about how the three main languages Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian were spoken were personal stories, and I had thus heard as many stories as I had asked persons. My Russian friends in Switzerland had advised me not to learn Kyrgyz, because they esteemed it a “wild” language; a characteristic for a language which made little sense to me. Being aware of my interest in languages, they seemed to be afraid that I would catch some disease by acquiring the local language in Kyrgyzstan. Others had told me that the best Russian is spoken in Kyrgyzstan, and that local languages do not play any major role in society.

On my first day at the university, the Kyrgyz speaking head of the German department introduced me to my students. After I had taught my first course to a group of students, he seemed to feel obliged to excuse the students’ performance with the following words: “Don’t worry about the students’ level of knowledge; we also have a good group, a European group.” At that time I had no idea that Kyrgyz and Russian speaking students were divided into different educational groups, nor could I have presumed that “European” and “National” were synonyms for Russian and Kyrgyz respectively, and that it was “common knowledge” that Russian speakers achieve better academic results.

During my work in Kyrgyzstan I sought (and found) answers to questions about how language attitudes toward both Kyrgyz and Russian were created by or reflected in the educational system, and what role the country’s language policy played in this process. Thereby I also came to

understand what it means to be a Kyrgyz or a Russian speaker and that the division into Kyrgyz and Russian language groups is more than just a linguistic division. Although Kyrgyz politicians had declared Kyrgyz the state language after independence and aimed to have Kyrgyz function in all public spheres by 2000, today Kyrgyz speakers with little Russian competence are still disadvantaged, when it comes to professional and educational opportunities in Kyrgyzstan. Why, despite all the states's effort to revive the state language, is it so difficult to achieve the full functioning of Kyrgyz in all public spheres?

This research addresses this question by investigating how attitudes towards the two main languages in Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz and Russian) are expressed and how speakers explain the formation of these attitudes. Since the educational system plays an important part in the formation of language attitudes, I also examined the role of language in the educational system in Kyrgyzstan. The political, individual and educational perspective on language attitudes made this research an interdisciplinary endeavour which incorporates theories and methodology from related fields such as social psychology, cultural anthropology and sociolinguistics. Section 2 explores the relationship between policy, the personal experience of being a speaker of a certain language and the educational system. Reflections about methodology and a description of the actual field research can be found in Section 3. A historical overview is given in Section 4. An overview of the last 13 years' policy with regards to language and education is part of this section. As one of the newly independent states, Kyrgyzstan is undergoing major socio-political changes and is now in the process of defining and formulating a new language policy, a new ideology and a new identity. In this process language plays a central role for the formulation of the state identity. In order to understand how the Soviet Union's heritage influences contemporary perception of languages and their speakers, I discuss the tsarist and the Soviet language and education policy. I then continue this discussion of language attitudes in Section 5, by presenting an analysis of the main findings of my empirical research. The focus is therefore kept on language attitudes, motivation for language-learning and the concept of ethnic and other group belonging as defined through language. Due to the central role of this section, a summary is provided

at the end. Section 6 continues the analysis of the empirical research with a focus on the role of the educational system and the traditional methods of language teaching in the Kyrgyz Republic. The first part of this section, which explains the popular perception of the linguistic division in schools, is another cornerstone in this research: This subsection is thus also summarized. The final section concludes by repeating the main thoughts and arguments of the previous sections and by suggesting further inquiries and measures, which the Kyrgyz government could undertake in order to create a more egalitarian education environment.

In order to provide the reader with more than just the quotations from different interviews, I included one interview in the Russian original and in its English translation in the annex. The transcription in the annex is a slightly adapted version of the transcripts which I used for the analysis. Since contents and the construction of arguments are of more importance than paralinguistic features I presented the interview in a textualized version. In all quotations and in the annex, pauses are noted with (.), while (...) indicates passages which have been omitted, either because they were not comprehensible, or because I chose to shorten the transcript in order to provide the most relevant information. I added explanations about the context, where needed, in [...]. The translation into English follows the same system and is kept in a colloquial form. Since I chose to remain as close to the original text without distorting comprehension, the interview in English may sound slightly unnatural.