INTRODUCTION: A PORTRAIT OF OSH, KYRGYZSTAN

Osh, the “southern capital” of Kyrgyzstan located in the ethnically rich Ferghana Valley, is a network of streets and lanes gradually rising into a tree-lined urban landscape from surroundings of yellow hills and flatter expanses of farmland. Even from an initial cursory glance, unlikely juxtapositions perhaps only to be found in this region of the world leap out. Walking a straight course along, say Ulitsa Lenina or Kurmanzhan-Datka, one could travel from the busy bazaar where vendors sell melons, flat rounds of tandoor bread, and hard balls of dried yogurt, past Soviet blocks of apartments and smaller alleys leading into mahallas of courtyard houses, to the main government “white house” across from an imposing statue of Lenin. Osh’s face seems to be that of “two cities” which “captures the coexisting presence of divergent orientations and aspirations within the city.” But even a two-sided characterization dividing this urban space into a Soviet sector and a “traditional Central Asian” sector is too simple (Liu 2007, 66). Seemingly contradictory beliefs, habits, and identities overlap and spill out of bounded domains, manifesting themselves in various aspects of everyday life in Osh, whether in terms of religious identification, ethnic connections, national sentiments, linguistic choice, or merely commonplace practices.

In these interviews, language reveals itself to be a window onto the forces that shape cultural and national identity: it illuminates dialogues of power within a society and shapes politics, builds national solidarity, and underscores group divides. It is malleable, and
yet powerful in its malleability. To understand the variety of existing attitudes and sentiments towards the different languages spoken in Osh and, on a more general level, in Central Asia, we must examine the historical trajectory of nationality policy. The legacies of Tsarist administration and Soviet nationality policy in attempting to consolidate language and identity in Central Asian republics may have directed identity development in a particular fashion and shaped the official methodology of nation-building after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but they did not undermine the region’s diversity; in fact, they may have highlighted it.

In my attempt to trace the complexities of identity in Central Asia, I first discuss the theoretical background of nation-building and language planning, then the historical essentializing processes of nationality during Tsarist and Soviet times, both of official policy and native involvement. I then bring the discussion into post-Soviet times by examining how essentialist Soviet legacies are maintained in independent Kyrgyzstan. Finally, I look at a case study from my field research in Osh. Osh, as a reflective microcosm of Central Asian society, illustrates a linguistically dynamic conception of identity. While explicit, verbal identification is significant to notions of ethnicity, the coexistence of multiple languages within the same sphere of usage has produced an interesting phenomenon, that of habitual code-switching. In the last section of this paper, I address code-switching, along with other everyday sentiments and attitudes, in an attempt to dig under official discourse and break the essentialist model.

THEORIES OF NATION-BUILDING AND CREATION OF NATIONAL LANGUAGES

The point must first be made that idea of the nation-state—the right of each unified, distinct national entity to sovereignty—is a fairly modern concept emerging out of a specifically Western historic and cultural context in the nineteenth century. Moreover, theorists, most prominently Benedict Anderson (1983), argue that nations themselves are “imagined communities.” If unifying con-
nections are to be found on as wide a scale as the national level, then those linking threads must be forged through consciously standardized narratives of shared history and authenticated heritage. This paper is concerned with the process of nation-building in these terms, i.e., creating and promulgating an official discourse of national legitimacy and collective identity rather than the building up of state capacity and infrastructure. Language plays a key role in this cultural imagining of community. While formal Saussurian linguistics make a strong distinction between the primacy of speech over writing, when it comes to examining the political power of language, writing plays an equally, or perhaps even more, crucial role as spoken language. In a world of over six thousand spoken tongues, there are only two hundred written languages. Writing provides fixity, slows down language change, and is thus conducive to standardization and the spread of literacy. In instances of language planning and consolidations of national identity, it is writing that exerts force and fuels these processes. Anderson argues that what really swept this movement into force was the standardization of written tradition with new print technologies which widely disseminated a uniform system of written language and literature. Because all languages have degrees of dialectical variation, at some point in the history of any modern nation a moment must occur when a centralized government seeking to unify regionalized territories attempts to create a national standard language, and, through this, a unified national identity.

There are several different ways to go about establishing a standard language, and all are aided by the creation of a strong writing system, which gives fixity to amorphous orality. One method is to base the standard on a classical historical form. This normally occurs with languages with rich written traditions. For example, Modern Standard Arabic is based on the seventh to ninth century classical Arabic of the Quran and other Islamic literatures. Sometimes the creation of a standard can be completely devoid of vernacular influences. Standard German until about the nineteenth century existed almost completely only in writing; its existence comes from the molding of written language over centuries by writ-
ers who sought to write in a way most comprehensible to speakers of the different German dialects. A standard language can also be constructed by creating a more egalitarian blend of its different dialects; or an attempt may be made to trace back to an ancient “proto-dialect”. One frequent method of standardization is the emergence of one dialect’s dominance over other rivals. Sometimes this happens through more natural processes—often under the influence of writing. The Italian standard language, for instance, is based primarily on the Tuscan dialect as a result of the influence of Dante’s writings.

Sometimes the dominance of one dialect over the others is enforced by centralized authority. China, despite its projected identity as a solid and unified ancient culture, has undergone various attempts at unification, and thus many movements for language standardization. The Beijing dialect became the standard in the early twentieth century through concerted efforts by the Commission on the Unification of Pronunciation. The spread of this standard was the result of its mandatory instruction in all schools across the country. In the case of Kyrgyz, Soviet planners methodically sought to distinguish it from other Turkic languages, its linguistic neighbors. Robert Lowe writes that “language was seized upon as a key element of identity and the underdeveloped Kyrgyz tongue was given a script (Arabic, then Latin, later Cyrillic), an expanded vocabulary, grammar, dictionaries, literature, and other elements necessary to declare it formally as a separate Turkic language” (Lowe 2003, 109-110). Creating national identity through such means as standardizing language basically essentializes identity. Essentialism takes the perspective that “those who occupy an identity category are both fundamentally similar to one another and fundamentally different from members of other groups.”

While the theoretical position of essentialism is deconstructed and criticized in academic discourse as it does not take into consideration the overlapping and constantly changing nature of identities, a mentality of essentialism nevertheless guides the goals and methods of nation-building. A collective identity is solidified in opposition to a foil of alterity, an Other to heighten the sense of
sameness within a group. Heterogeneous environments are therefore conducive to strong group formations due to repeated contacts with differentiated Others.

HISTORY OF NATION-BUILDING AND LANGUAGE PLANNING IN CENTRAL ASIA

The impulse linking standard language with standard literature as the soul of national consciousness, discussed in early nineteenth century texts such as Fredrich von Schlegel’s “Literature and National Character,” spread outwards from its Western roots with European colonization, reaching Central Asia through Russian expansion. The Romantic essentializing of identity through linguistic standardization and the establishment of a polar “us” versus the Other mentality is apparent in the sphere of Central Asia throughout Tsarist and Soviet rule.

Before Russian expansion into Central Asia, the two reigning linguistic trends were acceptance and assimilation. This region, with its diverse collection of cultures, languages, and religions, was open to the influence of the languages crossing its social space. Bilingualism or multilingualism was the rule and language was seen as a tool for communication; different languages commanded different niches depending on situation and addressee. Russian movement into the steppes and Turkestan brought with it the Western Romantic idea that language is not only functional, but also a marker of shared consciousness and identity (Segars 2003, 92–94). The fixation on language as the defining feature in categorizing groups is revealed by the legal category of inorodtsy in Imperial Russia, which was meant to distinguish aliens from ethnic Russians. The evolution of the meaning of inorodtsy over the years reveals the difficulty in finding a satisfactory marker of that identity. The classification of the peoples of Central Asia caused great confusion because ethnicity in the region historically had not consisted of neat categories dividing each group clearly from others. People identified with multiple groups variably based on language, kinship, religion, and lifestyle; identity was often contradictory, but it was an accepted
norm. The Western and particularly Enlightenment sensibility compelled the classification and ordering of this space into a clearly delineated grid. The term *inorodtsy* shifted from being anchored in race to religion, finding none of these fully adequate, and finally settling on language as the most appropriate fit.

With that essentializing model of political rhetoric hanging in the air from Tsarist legacy, new Soviet rule unhesitatingly exploited this mechanism, establishing concerted language planning efforts. Discussion of the Soviet empire and its role in building the nationalities of Central Asia raised the question of whether this new empire fit a more “classical” model of colonial empire or whether it conceived itself as something else altogether. Scholars have written that it is too simplistic to see the Soviet regime as merely another colonial power which, when carving territory for the national Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, was really doing so as a “divide and rule” tactic, though admittedly delimitation did make the region easier to administer.

In reality, Hirsch argues, according to Soviet ideals, “nation” was really just a “transitional stage on the evolutionary timeline,” and they imagined the future of the Soviet Union as one devoid of nations and nationalism, an integrated socialist union (Hirsch 2000). During the Soviet period, the ultimate goal was the formation of a large socialist polity under which each of its citizens first and foremost considered himself to be a Soviet citizen. The interesting contradiction, however, is that toward the process of creating a whole, the parts first had to be separated and “strengthened,” creating a bifurcated identity of *dva potoka*. The five Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics were carefully delimited and their constituent nationalities defined and cultivated, with the official label that this was a necessary but passing stage of modernizing the native populations of the region. Arne Haugen (2003) writes that the Soviet regime strove to reproduce the nation as a modern entity—with a centralized bureaucracy, administration, education organization, and so on—in Central Asia. It seems that this school of thought long had precedence with Russian rule in Central Asia, from Catherinian notions of cultivating Islam on the steppes as a
modernizing force among the backward nomads to Ilminsky’s native language policy of first teaching schoolchildren to read with Cyrillic orthographies of their native tongue before advancing to the Russian language in hopes of improving literacy. It is not difficult to believe that nation-building was undertaken to modernize, rather than solely to weaken, Central Asia, but at the same time this goal of modernization is also intrinsically essentialist. The method of carving the region into separate republics was based on “three main principles: national-ethnographic, economic, and finally the principle of administrative order” (Haugen 2003, 181). The latter two principles often overrode the first, because Soviet administration viewed pure ethnic homogeneity as of no inherent value. To establish truly modern nations, other principles were more important—delineating areas with viable economies and ensuring that each republic be equipped with a major urban center to maintain administrative order. Language policies of this period were also motivated by the goal of modernization.

Isabelle Kreindler divides Soviet language planning into three periods: from 1917 to 1930, 1930 to 1958, and 1958 to 1985. The first period, based on Lenin’s attitudes and the slogan “national in form, socialist in content,” advocated the active promotion of native languages. The first stage of the indigenization, or koronizatsia, campaign, adopted in 1923 until 1927, stated that “administration of national republics should be made up of predominantly local people, knowing the language, way of life, morals and customs of the corresponding peoples” and that all official positions must be occupied by native representatives using the native tongue. Orthographies of Central Asia’s spoken languages were Latinized in 1926 in order to eradicate mass illiteracy, which was cast as a relic of backwardness and exploitation by the bourgeois elite. During the second phase of Soviet planning period, however, language policy took less active initiative toward native language promotion, perhaps due to an unexpected backlash and the complications that emerged out of implementation during the first phase. Qualified native officials had been scarce due to low literacy levels among the largely rural populace, and even when they were available, many
were loath to stay in positions that immersed them in a Russian-dominated environment where they often encountered bitter sentiments from their “elder brothers.”

During the second period in 1938, Russian instruction was made mandatory and the Latin writing systems put into usage in 1926 were replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet. Interestingly, Russian was pushed forth as the dominant and common language of the Soviet Union, crucial for the Sovietization process of non-Russian populations, but “on the other hand, the regime was unwilling to retreat on native-language education sufficiently to ensure that young people would learn Russian first and foremost” (Blitstein 2001, 267). Blitstein describes the realities of this program further, saying that “native-language schools in most union republics did see an increase in the time devoted to the Russian language, but the decree actually led to a decrease in the number of hours devoted to Russian in the non-Russian schools of the RSFSR, compared to schedules for years past” (Blitstein 2001, 258).

In 1958, Soviet language policy entered its third period where mandatory native-language education was eliminated and non-Russian parents were provided a choice of sending their children to Russian language schools if they so desired. The true and actuated advance of the Russian language into the space of native tongues was effected during this period through the introduction of a new type of non-Russian school. In these schools, native language and literature remained as curricular subjects, but the general medium of instruction became the Russian language. The methods of this last period persisted until perestroika in 1985.

NATIVE INVOLVEMENT IN DEFINING LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

In order to put official policies in perspective, it must be noted that the idea that the nationalities of Central Asia was created by an external, essentializing hand, is too simplistic a model. The native subjects themselves were not completely acquiescing puppets controlled by forces over which they had no say. During both the
Tsarist and the Soviet periods, the indigenous populations of Central Asia were often actively involved in the process of defining their group identities and national languages. The strongest example of this during the Tsarist era was the Jadid movement, which called for the modernization of Islam and promoted the creation of a Pan-Turkic language and nation. The Jadid movement was interesting because at the same time as it drew influence from Russia’s embodiment (to the Jadids) of Western progressive ideologies, it sought to distinguish itself as a people separate from the Russians. This led the Jadids to criticize the traditional Muslim education of the *madrasa* system as backwards and to emphasize Russified or Westernized forms of modernity and education, which entailed reformed Islam, an understanding of history, and improved literacy. In Jadid literature, such as *Tales of an Indian Traveler* by Bukharan Jadid Abdurrauf Fitrat, Russian personas often represented education and intellectuality, “models to be emulated.” Adeeb Khalid writes that “the Jadids had internalized several categories of colonial knowledge, yet their very assertion of the universality of progress subverted these categories” (Khalid 1997, 191-200). This same inspiration gotten from the Russian “elder brother,” inspired the Jadids to form a more definitive and distinct pan-Turkic identity. In hopes of unifying the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, Ismail Bey Gasprinsky, ideological predecessor of the Jadids, pursued several principles of unity, one of them being the unity of language. He proposed the usage of Ottoman Turkish as the common Turkic literary language, but ultimately this failed to flower due to nontrivial differences between the Turkic tongues spoken across such a wide area as from Crimea to the Volga to the Kazakh steppe and deep into Turkestan.

While Soviet policies in later years sought to mold its territories and the people within them, creating an environment for nationhood by giving ethnic identity real political and economic meaning, titular nationalities under the Soviet Union were not merely passive sheep in a pen. Adrienne Edgar gives examples of this in her analysis of nation-building in Soviet Turkmenistan. The Turkmen played important roles in shaping the discourse on na-
nationality, rejecting the idea of a pan-Turkic language “as linguistic imperialism,” instead “preferring to emphasize the distinctiveness of the Turkmen vernacular rather than its commonalities with other Turkic dialects” (Edgar 2004, 9). But although Turkmen intellectuals had adopted Soviet ideas on language as an essential component to shaping nationality, they were unable to divorce their conceptions of language from their traditional Turkmen genealogical and tribal basis of identity formation. Ultimately, through an essentializing process, these internal differences were covered up and the Teke dialect, which was the dialect of the largest tribe and constituted the majority of Turkmen intelligentsia emerged as dominant, and as representing the whole of a united Turkmen identity. This procedure diluted linguistic differences and succeeded because a greater goal was at hand, which was that this unity was necessary to distinguish the Turkmen as a legitimate nationality in contrast to other groups in the region. As the new Turkmen elites were drawn together from across the republic to Ashgabat, “the subdivisions within the Turkmen population came to seem less important than the huge cultural and linguistic gap between Turkmen and Europeans” (Edgar 2004, 94). This example of native involvement in identity building in Turkmenistan is merely one specific example of native groups participating in the process of nationality creation across the Central Asian space.

For example, during the period of geographic and national delineation of the Ferghana Valley, the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks adopted Soviet ideas and phraseology for ethnic categorization and administrative functionality to articulate their desires for territory. They used the standard of “psychological make-up” from Stalin’s ideology of a nation to argue for their own ideas of national boundaries. Many groups of people wrote letters to the government asking to be incorporated into a certain republic claiming that nationality should not be seen along along Tsarist- and Soviet-influenced divisions of socio-economic lifestyles, but should rather be conceived along how individuals personally believe them to be.

The people of these regions, using whatever standards and measures they have adopted, self-identify with one group or an-
other, and thus their “psychological make-up,” according to Stalinist rhetoric, determines which nation they feel they best fit into. At the same time, it is a stretch to argue that these native groups are purposefully using official frameworks in which they themselves have no faith, to subvert established order. It is apparent that they also followed these categories and definitions—as evidenced by later independent nations corresponding to earlier administrative units, and the lasting presence of the five main nationalities that emerged during the Soviet era in post-Soviet political space. Turning back to the specific case in Kyrgyzstan, we can examine how nation-building was carried over from the Soviet period into independence.

NATION-BUILDING AND LANGUAGE PLANNING IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the independent republics of Central Asia were faced with the task of maintaining national rule and unity on their own. Though independence had come undesired to Kyrgyzstan, the emerging nation was now nevertheless confronted with the need to exist as a truly independent and coherent nation-state. Until the Soviet period implemented its policies to solidify national identities, Kyrgyz society was based on kinship and lineage ties rather than national sentiments.

Soviet scholar S. M. Abramzon admits that “the question of the origins of the Kyrgyz nation is among the most complex and controversial aspects of the ethnic history of Central Asia” (Huskey 1993, 412). Adopting Soviet-styled policies and essentialist rhetoric, the independent government former Kyrgyz president Akayev created and promulgated a national ideology that sought to legitimize the nation’s existence. The Kyrgyz SSR had been one of the least “nationally conscious” republics in the Soviet Union and the challenge post-independence was that of filling the “ideological vacuum left by the discrediting of the communist system” (Lowe 2003, 114). Although a significant number of diverse ethnic minorities lived in Kyrgyzstan, the path toward building a strong Kyrgyz nation was one which muted diversity and elevated symbols of
the dominant culture and its traditions.

Although in 1989 there was an ethnically heterogenous population in Kyrgyzstan, 1999, the census reported the number of individuals identifying themselves as Kyrgyz as increased by twelve percent. The mass migration of Russians and other European groups, most of whom had higher levels of education and occupied positions in the academic, governmental, or white-collar sectors, was termed the “brain drain.” While a recent survey showed that only 12 percent of Russians had emigrated due to “linguistic reasons” (most cited “greater economic opportunities”), the government of Kyrgyzstan attempted to promote the nation as a “multi-ethnic, civic state” (Korth 2005, 119). The government sought to reassure minority groups of their welcomed status in the new nation—as exemplified by Akaev’s slogan “Civil Consensus and National Unity—Yes; Chauvinism, Nationalism and Extremism—No.” Nevertheless, the major steps taken by official policy were those which sought to foster a shared sense of Kyrgyz national pride and to ground Kyrgyz national identity in “authentic” origins, as defined by standards of the same thread of Western Romantic thought that was imported to Central Asia through Russian and Soviet rule. The contradiction in essentialist policies becomes clear here as “national consolidation is essential to avoid the kind of fragmentation and political schism arising from such division that was witnessed in Tajikistan. Yet nation-builders in their homogenizing zeal fail to harness the cultural and other diversities within the nation” (Patnaik 2003, 144).

The process of strengthening the sense of nation included an emphasis of ethnosymbols, such as the symbolism of flag design. Like the banner flown by the legendary Kyrgyz warrior Manas, the bold red flag is emblazoned with a forty-rayed sun representing the forty historical Kyrgyz tribes, and also with a tunduk, the roof of a yurt, symbolizing the Kyrgyz’s nomadic heritage. Ethnosymbols also sought to link the people and nation with the specific plot of land they now occupied. The state seal of Kyrgyzstan, for example, depicts the sun rising above the striking peaks of the Ala-Too mountains on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul. History is also
used in the legitimizing process as authorities search for “original authenticity” in order for past unity to justify the existence of a collective modern nation. Having been a non-literate culture for centuries, the oral Manas epic has seen intense and mass revival as both mythology and ancient history. The epic is not only recited, it is also reenacted at elaborate festivals on national holidays, and has inspired books, films, TV shows, operas, even comics (Lowe 2003, 117). Islam, embodied as national religious custom, is another marker of national identity, though on the official level, this appears in a glossed, superficial form. Each of these essentializing strategies for identity building could be analyzed in much greater depth, but in this paper, I will select to look at linguistic strategies in more detail.

During the last years of Soviet rule, “it was clear that Kyrgyz was one of the weakest titular languages in the Soviet Union” and, in fact, Russian had taken the position as “the first language of the urban Kyrgyz elite” (Lowe 2003, 118). Post-independence, therefore, people of the former Kyrgyz SSR found themselves liberated from policies of former “colonizers,” but habits of that earlier era still remained. And so the Russian language still found itself being used in education, administration, and even for private matters, mostly among the urban and educated population. Efforts were made to increase the usage and prestige of Kyrgyz in society, yet even these attempts contained within them the remnants of a colonial mentality and policy.

Just as the Tsarist and Soviet administrations had held on to a tenuous link between nation and language (perhaps more clearly seen during the last period of Soviet language policy, when Russian became inarguably the dominant language throughout the multiethnic Soviet Union), “many Central Asian governments have turned to the model of the modern nation-state in which the titular nation defines the state language, although this model of a mono-ethnic and monolingual state does not correspond to their social reality” (Korth 2005, 116). Even before the complete collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz parliament passed the Law on State Language, for perhaps more symbolic reasons of asserting national
pride than anything else, which made Kyrgyz the state language and Russian the “language of inter-ethnic communication” (Lowe 2003, 118). This corresponds to the current status of official languages in the independent Kyrgyz Republic, which maintains Kyrgyz as the “state language” and Russian as the “official language.” Most schools are double-tracked, meaning that parents can choose to send their children to school on either a Russian track, where the language of instruction is Russian, or a Kyrgyz track, where the language of instruction is Kyrgyz. At least in urban areas, students on the Kyrgyz track still take a Russian language subject class, and vice versa. This is reminiscent of the final period of language planning during the Soviet period, when non-Russian families could choose to send their children to an all-Russian instruction school. Nevertheless, Kyrgyz is gaining ground with purposeful planning efforts—place names have been stripped of their Soviet attributions and given Kyrgyz ones instead, and the National Commission on State Language has announced requirements that mandate the use of Kyrgyz in all official documentation. Most scholars, including Lowe and Korth, however, predict that despite the public’s general acceptance of official rhetoric enhancing the prestige of Kyrgyz, Russian will still be planted firmly as the lingua franca among the majority of people due to high ethnic diversity which most Kyrgyz-language campaigns do not specifically accommodate.

In response, other minorities employ what could be termed “strategic essentialism” in order to emphasize their voice as cohesive and legitimate within Kyrgyzstan, where they see the rise of Kyrgyz nationalism as a threat. Strategic essentialism may be used in the formation of any social identity where complexities are oversimplified for a crafted subversive purpose. For example, faced with official characterizations of Kyrgyz national identity, Uzbeks living in Osh assert their own collective identity as a firm and fixed unified whole. In my conversations with Uzbek individuals living in Osh, they asserted that historically, the Ferghana Valley has been the dominant home of the settled Uzbek population, and that the original home of the nomadic Kyrgyz was further north in the mountains around the provinces of Chuy and Issyk-Kul. This ig-
nores the complex history of settlement in the Ferghana Valley as well as the initially vague separation of Ferghana’s population into distinct and separate ethnic groups, but this is a reassertion of the legitimate belonging of the Uzbek population in a place they view as their historic homeland. They connect the language they speak to the Uzbek language spoken by over 30 million people worldwide—many more than those who speak Kyrgyz—even though the Tashkent dialect of Uzbek is different from the dialect spoken in the Ferghana Valley. In a region of the world where, only a few centuries earlier, languages were seen more as distinct but not wholly unconnected dialectical shades, this characterization nevertheless imbues the Uzbek language with a sense of power and authority in a Kyrgyz nation where it is neglected on the official level.

BREAKING DOWN ESSENTIALIZED IDENTITY

Ultimately, however, essentialist models are analyzed in order to be broken down. Bucholtz elaborates, “[I]dentity inheres in actions, not in people. As the product of situated social action, identities may shift and recombine to meet new circumstances” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2003, 376). And so those same Uzbeks described above, who in one situation emphasize the important distinctions between themselves and the Kyrgyz, may in another prioritize the distinction between their urban Russified status in contrast to rural and traditional populations. They may, while in conversation with a Bishkek native, characterize themselves as “Osh-ski,” a person of Osh; or in dealings with an Uzbek from Tashkent, actually prefer to name themselves as citizens of Kyrgyzstan. Paitnak writes:

Post-structuralists suggest that ethnic identity is a shifting, contested and negotiated category. Since it is always in the process of being constructed and reconstructed, the collapse of the Soviet Union put strains on those structures that defined ethnic identity in Central Asia, notwithstanding the attempts to create a ‘simple, given, bounded’ national entity. The nationalist project of fur-
Montgomery shows that the diversity of religious beliefs and practices including common, cultural “religion on the streets” in Kyrgyzstan and, by relation, in the rest of Central Asia is part of a process of socialization (Montgomery 2007, 366-367). The shifting identities in community customs of Islam is, from my experience, a good analogy for the performance of language as a part of this process of socialization as well. Turning back to the example of Suleiman-Too set up in the introduction, upon closer examination, it is clear that in addition to the sacred usage of Suleiman-Too Mountain as a place of religious worship, the mountain is a setting for the constantly changing values of space and community, and has come to symbolize meaning outside of the religious as well. Suleiman-Too creates a social space for the diverse population of Osh and its surrounding regions; older religious traditions and even those cultural meanings have been overlaid with a newer, socially significant purpose. Individuals, friends, families, couples, regularly climb the mountain not necessarily with religious pilgrimage in mind (though some certainly do), and for young lovers, it can serve as a venue for more amorous activities. The cemetery at the base of the mountain next to Rabat Abdullah Khan Mosque also becomes a meeting spot for Osh’s drug users. The place is seen by them as a sort of safe haven for their activities. Thus, the “multiple meanings” of this sacred space are not stagnant, but continue to accumulate through continued usage and continued acceptance of its religious, cultural, and social importance in the community over time.

Language usage and linguistic meanings are, similarly, neither stagnant nor static. Meaning in language accumulates and changes as part of the process of socialization. In the analysis of language in this final section, we shift away from essentializations of linguistic identity to the elusive moments, normalized contradictions, and continuous shifts of daily communication and linguistic attitudes in Central Asia—specifically turning back to the scope of youth in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. In order to deconstruct essentialist perspectives,
it is sometimes necessary to step away from established academic analyses and methods of cohesive interpretations, and to do so I will be incorporating my sociolinguistic field research and personal encounters with everyday life in Osh.

The general linguistic divide in Osh could be simplified into Russian versus Kyrgyz versus Uzbek, but this picture is complicated by the realization that there is often little correspondence between nationality and national language. And so both urban Kyrgyz and Uzbeks will distinguish themselves from rural populations using the Russian language—urban-educated groups speak Russian, while the rural—even those who have in recent years moved into the city—do not. A similar distinction is made in contrast to those who lead a traditional lifestyle by those Kyrgyz and Uzbeks who see themselves as modern and more “Western”—they read Russian-language literature and publications, watch the Russian “First Channel” on television—because they or their parents were educated in Russia during the Soviet period.

To further complicate matters, we can once again bring into conversation the young Uzbek-Kyrgyz man who identified as Russian because of a personal connection with the beauty of the Russian language or engage in dialogue several Russian teenagers I interviewed whose families still remained in Osh after the massive deflux of the Russian population and who told me that they fluently speak both Uzbek and Kyrgyz with their friends, having learned these languages not in schools but as children playing outside together in the dvor. We also have the patriotic Kyrgyz youth who insist that all must speak Kyrgyz and who, even when they speak to Uzbeks, always address them in either Russian or Kyrgyz, resulting in whole conversations carried out with each individual speaking his own tongue, despite the fact that they may have basic fluency in the other’s language. There are also Uzbeks who say that maintaining the Kyrgyz language is important since, after all, they are citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic, and there are Kyrgyz who likewise believe in the importance of knowing enough Uzbek to communicate with a large sector of the population of Osh and its surroundings. Uzbek singers and Uzbek language television serials
are popular among Uzbeks and Kyrgyz alike, and a young man visiting family in Osh from Tashkent told me that these Uzbek stars are in fact more popular in Osh than they are in Tashkent, where most prefer Western pop culture.

In full recognition that Central Asia does not exist in isolation and that linguistic attitudes and identities also change in respect to new external influences, the demand for and popular status of the English language must be acknowledged. Most schools incorporate English as a subject from the fourth grade until graduation from secondary education, and many of the young people interviewed stressed the importance of English as the current language to learn and speak. Not only are schools doubled-tracked in Russian and Kyrgyz, as described earlier, but new Turkish lyceums are opening up all around the city, where classes are attractively conducted with English as the language of instruction, and Turkish—Central Asia’s perceived connection to the rest of Europe nowadays—being a language subject.

CONCLUSION: CODE-SWITCHING & THE FUTURE OF KYRGYZ IDENTITY

Expressed attitudes aside, perhaps most interesting and telling are the actual behaviors and habits of language choice and usage. The phenomenon of particular note here is the manner of habitual code-switching between Kyrgyz and Russian, Uzbek and Russian, or all three that has become the norm for communication at home and, more often, with friends, especially among the youth of Osh. Code-switching is a common linguistic phenomenon in situations of extended language contact. Formal analyses of code-switching often define it through systematic classification of its structures; for example, differentiating it from other phenomena of linguistic contact as intrasentential embedding of phrases and words of one language into the syntactic structure of another “matrix” language. Here, I am less concerned with the strict forms of code-switching, and more interested in the social performance and usage of “switching” as a broader category. Contemporary studies of the so-
cial importance of code-switching have been largely preoccupied
with power and prestige, analyzing specific motions of switching
to convey authority or deference. Certainly these instances of code-
switching between Russian, Kyrgyz, and/or Uzbek can also be
examined in this fashion and certainly individuals do consciously
switch in certain situations to strategically communicate some-
thing about social relationships. But what is particularly telling
about the multiplicities of identity in the situation I encountered in
Osh, and which is applicable across most parts of Central Asia, is
the way “code-switching” has become the norm in communicating,
particularly among the younger generations. Many young Uzbek
and Kyrgyz describe it as being the most “natural” and “comfortable”
way of communicating for them—easier and more familiar than
speaking in pure Russian, Kyrgyz, or Uzbek. Carol Meyer-Scot-
ton writes that “codeswitching can index a speaker’s self-perception,
as a multidimensional person, whether as a member of a specific
group, or as a member simultaneously of several groups. As a tool,
codeswitching can be used in an ongoing conversation to step in—
or out—of a presumed or expected identity” (Myers-Scotton 2006,
73). Habitual code-switching is code-switching that has become so
normalized that jumps from one identity to another are no longer
taken purposefully or even consciously. It reflects the simultaneous
layering of multiple identities, and often suggests that these identi-
ties exist on the same level and with the same degree of comfort
and sense of belonging. It socializes the youth of Osh into a diverse
community that does not define itself statically as purely Kyrgyz,
Uzbek, or Russian in everyday life, but where identity is constantly
being negotiated.

Thus, linguistic identity and language in everyday usage re-
fects a rich mix of all the historical legacies, religious influences,
cultural contacts, and ethnic interplays that have touched the re-
gion, from pre-Tsarist times through the Tsarist and Soviet peri-
ods. It shows that despite contemporary official policies to assert
the dominance of one consolidated nationality over the others,
identity in Central Asia will most likely remain fluid, multifaceted,
and versatile.
Works Cited


