# MULTILINGUALISM AND INTERFERENCE: A CASE STUDY OF KAZAKH, RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES PERFORMANCE IN KAZAKHSTANI YOUTH

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**Abstract.** The interference of languages in minds of multilingual speakers, mastering several foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue, is inevitable. Much is still unknown about differences in the innate ability to learn a foreign language and its relationship to native language proficiency. Being a multiethnic and multilingual country, Kazakhstan supports the policy of trinity of languages – Kazakh, Russian and English. The purpose of this research is to study the language performance of the Kazakhstani trilingual youth exposing language deviations in speech practices in three languages – Kazakh, Russian and English. The research method used in the study comprised interviews, conducted among the representatives of the Kazakhstani youth. Sixty-six students of K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University (Aktobe, the Republic of Kazakhstan) aged 18-29 years participated in the study. The collected interview data were used to compare the respondents' performance in the Kazakh, Russian and English languages, to describe the specifics of their language processes in the above-mentioned languages, and to identify language inconsistencies, if there were any, in their communication. Code-switching, code-mixing, pauses, fillers, and context mismatch were among the deviations examined. The study results demonstrated that language deviations in speech and communication are a usual practice for the representatives of the Kazakhstani youth. Language deviations such as code-switching, code-mixing, pauses, fillers and context mismatch were observed in the speech of Kazakhstani multilingual youth. The most common among language deviations in the speech performance of Kazakhstani youth were code-switching (24.4%) and code-mixing (41.5%) in Kazakh, fillers (65.5%) and code-mixing (13.8%) in Russian, pauses (29.2%) and fillers (29.2%) in English. The scientific significance of the study implies the defining of language deviations occurring in speech practices of Kazakhstani multilingual youth in Kazakh, Russian and English languages. The practical significance of research lies in the fact that the study findings will contribute to a better understanding of the performance of different languages in a multilingual's mind, especially in the context of adopting the trilingual policy in Kazakhstan, as well as to an effective communication.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, trilingual youth, the Republic of Kazakhstan, language deviations, code-switching, code-mixing, fillers, pauses, context mismatch, language acquisition

**Basic provisions**

Language is a reflection of a country's culture and the attitude of its people. Studying a foreign language contributes to a better understanding of its bearers, discovering how social relationships are formed in another nation, and learning to deal with others who think and perceive the world differently. In this regard, the quote by Frank Smith "One language sets you in a corridor for life, two languages open every door along the way" remains extremely relevant.

Within a linguistic community the ability to perfectly speak two languages is declared as "bilingualism", which is defined as "the native-like control of two languages" [1]. In contrast to this opinion Macnamara [2] suggests, that a bilingual is anybody who has negligible abilities in one of the four language aptitudes – listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing in a language other than his mother tongue.

Multilingualism is defined as "the existence of multiple languages in a country, municipality, or city", "the use of three or more languages", "the ability to speak multiple languages", and in the sense of this sense, multilingualism is widely seen as "the natural state of mankind" [3]. The experience of multilinguals in juggling three or more languages has implications for language processing, as both the native and second languages change as bilingual proficiency is acquired, as well as domain general cognitive processes, resulting in monolinguals having better executive function than monolinguals [4]. Multilingualism is sometimes used interchangeably with bilingualism, which refers to the capacity to speak two languages fluently [5]. For instance, Cook [6], who used a holistic approach, coined the word multicompetence to describe a complex sort of competence that differs qualitatively from that of monolingual speakers of a language. He believed that multilingual individuals' understanding of their native language differs from monolingual speakers' because learning a second language might have an impact on the first. As a matter of fact, the majority of previous studies as well as the most linguists all around the world are interested in exploring the issues of multilingualism.

The Republic of Kazakhstan has become one of the CIS leaders in the modernization of socio-economics, market and politics, and bilingualism has played an important role in this. In Kazakhstan, the State policy of the unity of three languages suggests speaking three languages: Kazakh as a state language, Russian as a language of international communication, and English as a language of successful integration into global economics.

With more than one hundred and thirty nationalities living in Kazakhstan, most of the population is bilingual (Kazakh and Russian). Research states that 39.2% of Kazakhstani people aged 18-29 years and only 25.9% of the older generation (aged 61 years and up) speak Kazakh at home [7]. Russian is spoken by 27% of young people and 43% of the elderly. The amount of citizens aged 41 to 50 years who communicate in both languages in family is relatively high (31.4%). Among the representatives of other ethnic groups, both Kazakh and Russian are spoken by 8.5% of the Kazakhstan's population. The East Kazakhstan (39.1%) has the highest proportion of speakers of both languages, followed by the Central Kazakhstan (35.3%), North (24%), West (19.2%) and South (17.9%). 3.8% of the population can

read and write fluently. Language policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan dates back to 2007 when the cultural project "New Kazakhstan in the New World" was proposed by the head of the state, serving as a big step forward in the development of language practices [8].

At present, people's studying of English is motivated by the government programmes on the development at all stages of education [9]. This is in line with the worldwide practices with many students who are a part of an educational curriculum that includes a second language (L2).

In bilingual research the core characteristics of the multilingual language acquisition appear to be developing. While monolinguals are exposed to only one type of language information, bilinguals are exposed to two. The language situation with the first language (L1) being built up in early childhood as a result of linguistic input in L1-speaking homes, and the second language (L2) later coming into play via L2 communicators and study, can be described as emergent bilingualism. On many assessments, students receiving L2 input are expected to perform similarly to native speakers, but there may be some residual asymmetries that reflect their L2 knowledge's reliance on their initial L1 knowledge [10].

The simultaneous activation of several languages promotes conflict between them, making the multilingual a mental juggler. Language interference including various deviations can be noted in multilinguals' language performance: code-switching, code-mixing, fillers, pauses, context mismatch. Code switching is the practice of simultaneously switching between two languages or between two dialects or registers of the same language. Therefore, in some cases, it can be considered as an automatic or unconscious action. It inevitably performs some basic functions that may be beneficial in a language learning environment. These functions are listed as topic switch, affective functions, and repetitive functions [11]. Code-mixing is quite a similar practice, in which a multilingual speaker mixes words and grammatical rules from different languages into a single sentence. Language deviations are of great practical importance since they're used occasionally on the everyday basis.

**Introduction**

In today's globalized society, being able to converse in more than one language has become a valuable asset. Multilingualism is widely spread in the multi-ethnic geographical space, for instance, twenty percent of the United States' population speak a language at home other than English, fifty-six percent of Europeans and over half of the entire world's population is bilingual [12]. As for Kazakhstan with more than one hundred and thirty nationalities living there, the majority of Kazakhs speak two languages – Kazakh and Russian. Slavic people mainly speak only one language, whereas Uighur, Uzbek, Dungan, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Tajik, Tatar, and other ethnic groups are multilingual [13].

The speech behavior of different multilinguals varies greatly. Some multilingual speakers master several foreign languages, as well as their mother tongue, and the interference of languages in their mind is inevitable. Some multilinguals are much less proficient in a second language than their native language, and there is a constant strong interference in their speech. Multilingual

speakers easily switch from one language to another depending on the situation, though some of them do it with great difficulty. The same person may behave completely differently in terms of language production in different situations, his behavior may change over time, or he may be predisposed from birth to a certain form of linguistic behavior. These variables and conditions were studied by language psychologists [14].

Much is still unknown about differences in the innate ability to learn a foreign language and its relationship to native language proficiency. Foreign language teachers admit that some students are much more successful in learning foreign languages than others, but attempt to predict such success on the basis of tests, excluding observation of the learning process itself. It is an advanced claim that early multilingualism increases the ability to learn foreign languages, and that is still awaiting scientific validation. However, research in recent years by neuroscientists, psychologists and linguists using the latest brain scans has uncovered many of the cognitive and intellectual benefits of bilingualism. The main explanation for pros of bilingualism is the fact that the incredibly flexible brains are perfectly capable of multitasking [15].

The study is aimed at investigating the multilinguals' speech practices among the Kazakhstani youth, speaking the Kazakh, Russian and English languages. The study tasks included observation of the respondents' language performance: whether they tend to utilize only one language at one time or engage several languages in the course of their communication. Thus, the study seeks answer for the following research question:

RQ1: What are the specifics of Kazakhstani youth's language performance in Kazakh, Russian and English?

RQ2: What language deviations are noticed in the speech practices of the Kazakhstani trilinguals?

**Materials and methods**

The purpose of this research is to study the language performance of the Kazakhstani trilingual youth from the perspectives of language deviations in speech practices in three languages – Russian, Kazakh, and English. The study design comprised interviews conducted with the students of the K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University speaking three languages (Kazakh, Russian, and English). The research methods included observation, critical analysis and descriptive statistics of the research data.

A standardized structured interview was administered where specific questions are asked in a set order and in a set manner to ensure no variation between interviews. A questionnaire consisted of nine questions – 3 in Kazakh, 3 in Russian and 3 in English. Participant demographic information such as name, gender, age, nationality, level of each language apprehension and the time spent on their acquisition was obtained. The respondents participated on the voluntary basis and the prior consent was obtained in line with the research ethics. The respondents' answers were recorded with the help of the mobile phone voice recorder and further transcribed for critical and statistical analysis.

Critical analysis of the data collected included listening to respondents answers individually, scrutinizing the use of Kazakh, Russian and English languages as well as their level of proficiency in them, capturing mistakes in speech, corrections and pauses, the replacement of words from one language to another.

Descriptive statistics were applied in order to define the ratio of language deviations in the speech processes of the study participants. The respondents' answers were coded and statistically analyzed in the MS Excel program through the Analysis Toolpak function. The interview data were specified and certain parameters were selected. The calculation was performed using the statistical macro function, and the results were placed in tables.

**Results and discussion**

The demographic information about the interview respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Study Participants' Demographics

| Nationality | Total | | Male | | Female | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Kazakh | 54 | 81.8 | 1 | 1.5 | 53 | 80.3 |
| Russian | 8 | 12.1 | - | - | 8 | 12.1 |
| German | 2 | 3 | - | - | 2 | 3 |
| Chechen | 1 | 1.5 | - | - | 1 | 1.5 |
| Kyrgyz | 1 | 1.5 | - | - | 1 | 1.5 |
| Total | 66 | 100 | 1 | 1.5 | 65 | 98.5 |

The level of language proficiency of the study participants in Kazakh, Russian and English were defined. A five-point scale from 1 (poor acquisition) to 5 (excellent knowledge) was used by the participants for self-evaluation reports on their language skills. The ratio of the respondents' language proficiency levels is stated in Figure 1.
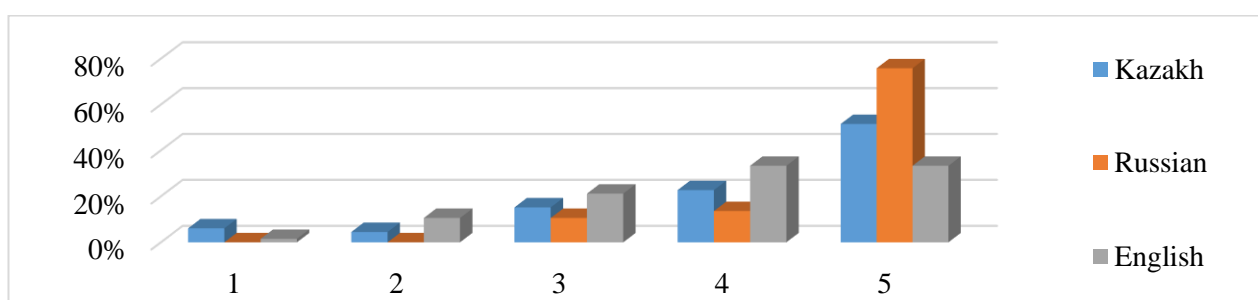


Figure 1 – The Study Participants' Proficiency in Three Languages

Figure 1 demonstrates that 6.1% of respondents evaluate their Kazakh language proficiency at the lowest level (point 1), 4.5% at the 2nd level, 15.2% at the 3rd level, 22.7% at the 4th level, and 51.5% of respondents indicate the highest level of the Kazakh language proficiency.

The Russian language proficiency was not rated lower than point 3, indicated by 10.6% of respondents, point 4 Russian language proficiency was stated by 13.6%

of respondents, 75.8% confidently assigned themselves with the highest score (point 5).

The time spent on mastering English by each of the respondents varies. The shortest period of learning English by the respondents is 6 months, and the longest period is 27 years. Mean duration of English language mastering by the interviewed youth is 10.2 years.

The study participants' speech processes analysis included five types of language deviations such as code-switching, code-mixing, pauses, fillers and context mismatch.

Code-switching:

*Екінші сұрақ... нерушимый квадрат и сплоченность.*
Interviewer: *Опишите себя 5 словами.*
Interviewee: *Мен шыншыл, мейірімдімін, I'm honest, well.*
*Менің отбасым үлкен. Мен, менің .... I forgot, my husband.*
Code-mixing:
In Kazakh: *Ол тогда төртінші класс оқушысы.*
*Но, енді негізгі мәсәле өзім шығар.*
*Ну то есть, мен өзім-өзіме ұнамай жүрмін.*
*Позитивный настройі.*
*Хоббиміз бар.*
*Бизнесімді ашып.*
*Отбасым өте дружный.*
In Russian: *Я оптимист, энергичная и ақкөніл.*
*Связь, которую вы ищите, проще говоря feedback.*
Fillers:
In Kazakh: *және, келесі, солай.*
In Russian: *Так, ну, типо, как бы.*
In English: *okay, like, so, for example, and.*

The ratio of language deviations in the respondents' speech is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Ratio of Language Deviations in the Respondents' Speech

| Language deviations | Kazakh | | Russian | | English | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Code-switching | 10 | 24.4 | 2 | 6.9 | 4 | 16.7 |
| Code-mixing | 17 | 41.5 | 4 | 13.8 | 2 | 8.3 |
| Pauses | 7 | 17.1 | 3 | 10.4 | 7 | 29.2 |
| Fillers | 4 | 9.8 | 19 | 65.5 | 7 | 29.2 |
| Context mismatch | 3 | 7.3 | 1 | 3.5 | 4 | 16.7 |
| Total | 41 | 100 | 29 | 100 | 24 | 100 |

Code-switching (24.4%) and code-mixing (41.5%) in Kazakh, fillers (65.5%) and code-mixing (13.8%) in Russian, pauses (29.2%) and fillers (29.2%) in English.

Most of the interviewees, when answering the questions in Kazakh, used Russian words, and sometimes replaced the Kazakh language with full sentences in Russian.

While answering the questions in English some phrases were replaced by the phrases in Russian, least of all they were replaced by Kazakh words.

There were the few pauses, mostly due to people's thinking "what" to answer, rather than remembering a certain word or meaning in one of the languages, although such moments occurred.

Many fillers were observed in the interviewee's speech processes. The fillers included phrases heard on a daily basis, since they are used by many people.

Context mismatch was rare in the speech of the respondents. Some people tried to provide additional information to expand their answer in a particular language or to show an excellent vocabulary use by adding "complex words" to their speech that were not appropriate to the context, and this contributed to some misunderstanding in communication. A number of follow-up questions particularly in Russian and English, and rarely in Kazakh were asked. The majority of interviewees made some grammar mistakes and demonstrated cases of wrong pronunciation of words, specifically in English.

**Conclusion**

The study findings confirm that language deviations in speech and communication are a usual practice for the representatives of the Kazakhstani youth. One might even say they have become an integral part of the present-day speech of the study respondents.

By analyzing language deviations such as code-switching, code-mixing, pauses, fillers and context mismatch in the speech of Kazakhstani multilingual youth, we found out that they are more likely to use code-switching and code-mixing in their speech practices. This is rather justified by the fact that in most families in Kazakhstan the use of two languages predominates, due to which some people cannot fully focus on one language, but rather replace words in Kazakh or Russian or mix them. Regarding the English language, since the interviews were conducted at the Faculty of Philology and most of the respondents noted that they had been studying it for a long time, we observed that students had difficulties in responding to a question asked in a certain language, showing their skills and mastery when answering, clearly and expressively stating their opinion. Context mismatch was rare, and pauses were made more likely due to people's choosing the proper words, and not trying to remember a particular word, meaning or translation.

The study results demonstrate a strong influence of multilingualism in a modern Kazakhstani society, in which proficiency in the Kazakh, Russian and English languages is gaining importance. Language learning is extremely important due to current global processes leading to the rise of multilingualism as a socio-cultural phenomenon of an everyday reality. Studying into multilingualism, one should not ignore the system of modern secondary education contributing to the implementation of foreign languages into the school program.

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**КӨПТІЛДІК ЖӘНЕ ИНТЕРФЕРЕНЦИЯ: ҚАЗАҚСТАНДЫҚ ЖАСТАРДЫҢ ҚАЗАҚ, ОРЫС ЖӘНЕ АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛДЕРІНДЕ СӨЙЛЕУ ӨНІМДІЛІГІН ЗЕРТТЕУ**

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**Аңдатпа.** Ана тілінен басқа бірнеше шетел тілдерінде сөйлейтін көптілді адамдардың санасында тілдердің интерференциясы сөзсіз жүзеге асады. Шетел тілін меңгерудің туа біткен қабілетінің айырмашылықтары мен оның ана тілін білумен байланысы туралы әлі де көп нәрсе белгісіз. Қазақстан көпұлтты және көптілді ел бола отырып, халықтың қазақ, орыс және ағылшын тілдерін білуін көздейтін үштілділік саясатын ұстанады. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты үш тілді меңгерген қазақ жастарының қазақ, орыс және ағылшын тілдерінде сөйлеу тәжірибесіндегі тілдік ауытқуларды анықтай отырып, тілдік әрекетінің ерекшеліктерін зерттеу. Зерттеу әдісі ретінде қазақстандық жастардың өкілдері арасында сұхбат жүргізілді. Зерттеуге Қ. Жұбанов атындағы Ақтөбе өңірлік университетінің (Ақтөбе қ., Қазақстан Республикасы) 18 бен 29 жас аралығындағы 66 студенті қатысты. Жиналған сұхбат материалдары респонденттердің орыс, қазақ және ағылшын тілдерін меңгеру деңгейлерін салыстыру, жоғарыда аталған тілдердегі тілдік үдерістердің ерекшеліктерін анықтау, сондай-ақ қазақстандық жастардың қарым-қатынасындағы тілдік сәйкессіздіктерді анықтау үшін пайдаланылды. Кодты ауыстыру, кодты араластыру, кідірістер, толтырғыштар және мәтінмәннің сәйкессіздігі сияқты тілдік ауытқулар зерттелді. Зерттеу нәтижелері сөйлеу мен қарым-қатынаста тілдік ауытқулар қазақстандық жастар өкілдері үшін әдеттегі тәжірибе екенін көрсетті. Көптілді қазақ жастарының сөйлеуінде кодты ауыстыру, кодты араластыру, кідірістер, толтырғыштар, мәтінмәннің сәйкессіздігі сияқты тілдік ауытқулар байқалды. Қазақстандық жастардың сөйлеу әрекетіндегі тілдік ауытқулардың ішінде қазақ тілінде код ауыстыру (24,4%) және код араластыру (41,5%), орыс тілінде толтырғыштар (65,5%) және кодтарды араластыру (13,8%), ағылшын тілінде кідірістер (29,2%) және толтырғыштар (29,2%) көп байқалды. Зерттеудің ғылыми маңыздылығы қазақстандық көптілді жастардың қазақ, орыс және ағылшын тілдеріндегі сөйлеу тәжірибесінде кездесетін тілдік ауытқуларды анықтаумен айқындалады. Зерттеудің тәжірибелік маңыздылығы зерттеу нәтижелерінің Қазақстандағы үштілділік саясатын өзектілендіру контекстінде ерекше маңызды болып табылатын көптілділердің санасында тілдік өнімділікті жақсырақ түсінуге ықпал ететіндігімен және тиімді қарым-қатынас жасау үшін қолданылуымен айқындалады.

**Тірек сөздер:** көптілділік, үштілді жастар, Қазақстан Республикасы, тілдегі ауытқулар, кодты ауыстыру, код араластыру, толтырғыштар, кідірістер, мәтінмәннің сәйкессіздігі, тілді меңгеру

# ПОЛИЯЗЫЧИЕ И ИНТЕРФЕРЕНЦИЯ: ИЗУЧЕНИЕ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ ПРОИЗВОДИТЕЛЬНОСТИ КАЗАХСТАНСКОЙ МОЛОДЕЖИ В КАЗАХСКОМ, РУССКОМ И АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКАХ

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**Аннотация.** Интерференция языков в сознании многоязычных людей, владеющих несколькими иностранными языками в дополнение к родному языку, неотвратима. Многое еще неизвестно о различиях врожденной способности к изучению иностранного языка и ее связи со знанием родного языка. Будучи многонациональной и полиязычной страной, Казахстан поддерживает политику трёхъязычия, обусловливающей владение казахским, русским и английским языками. Целью данного исследования является изучение специфики языковой производительности казахстанской трехъязычной молодежи с выявлением языковых отклонений в речевых практиках на трех языках – казахском, русском и английском. Основным методом исследования является интервью, проведенное среди представителей казахстанской молодежи. В исследовании приняли участие 66 студентов Актюбинского регионального университета имени К. Жубанова (г. Актобе, Республика Казахстан) в возрасте от 18-ти до 29-ти лет. Собранные материалы интервью использовались для сравнения уровней владения респондентов русским, казахским и английским языками, определения специфики языковых процессов на вышеуказанных языках, а также для выявления языковых несоответствий, если они были, в коммуникации казахстанской молодежи. Переключение кода, смешение кода, паузы, заполнители и несоответствие контекста были среди исследованных отклонений. Результаты исследования показали, что языковые отклонения в речи и общении являются обычной практикой для представителей казахстанской молодежи. В речи казахстанской полиязычной молодежи наблюдались такие языковые отклонения, как переключение кодов, смешение кодов, паузы, наполнители и несоответствие контекста. Среди языковых отклонений в речевой деятельности казахстанской молодежи наиболее часто встречались переключение кодов (24,4%) и смешение кодов (41,5%) в казахском языке, наполнители (65,5%) и смешение кодов (13,8%) в русском языке, паузы (29,2%) и наполнители (29,2%) в английском языке. Научная значимость исследования заключается в определении языковых отклонений, встречающихся в речевых практиках казахстанской полиязычной молодежи в казахском, русском и английском языках. Практическая значимость исследования состоит в том, что результаты исследования будут способствовать лучшему пониманию языковой производительности в сознании полилингвов, что особенно значимо в контексте актуализации политики трехъязычия в Казахстане, и будут использованы для эффективной коммуникации.

**Ключевые слова:** полиязычие, трехъязычная молодежь, Республика Казахстан, языковые отклонения, переключение кодов, смешение кодов, наполнители, паузы, несовпадение контекста, овладение языком