

# The Role of the Russian Language in the Formation of Interethnic Communication in the Turkestan Region in the Late 19th - Early 20th Centuries

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of the Russian language in the formation and development of interethnic communication in the Turkestan region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study analyzes the historical, political, social, and cultural factors that contributed to the spread of the Russian language among the diverse ethnic groups of Turkestan under the administration of the Russian Empire. Particular attention is paid to the educational reforms, the emergence of Russian-native schools, administrative institutions, military structures, trade relations, and the activities of the Jadid movement. The article argues that the Russian language gradually became a significant means of communication among representatives of different nationalities, facilitating intercultural interaction and access to modern knowledge while simultaneously influencing local linguistic and cultural processes. The research employs historical-comparative and socio-linguistic methods to evaluate the impact of Russian-language policies on the multilingual environment of Turkestan. The findings demonstrate that the Russian language served not only as an instrument of colonial administration but also as a bridge for interethnic communication, contributing to the formation of new social identities and intellectual networks in the region.

**Keywords:** Russian language, Turkestan, interethnic communication, multilingualism, Russian Empire, Jadidism, education, colonial policy, language contact, Central Asia.

## Introduction

The issue of interethnic communication has always occupied an important place in the social and cultural development of multiethnic societies. Language serves as one of the most significant tools through which communication, cooperation, and mutual understanding between different ethnic groups are established. In regions characterized by linguistic and ethnic diversity, the role of a common language becomes particularly important for social integration and the functioning of

public institutions. The Turkestan region of Central Asia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries represented such a multilingual and multicultural environment.

The incorporation of Turkestan into the Russian Empire after the military campaigns of the 1860s and 1870s significantly transformed the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the region. The establishment of Russian colonial administration brought new forms of governance, educational institutions, transportation networks, and economic relations. These changes created conditions for increased interaction among representatives of different ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmens, Tajiks, Tatars, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, and others. In this context, the Russian language gradually emerged as an important medium of communication among various communities.

Before Russian colonization, communication among the peoples of Turkestan was facilitated primarily through local languages and, in certain spheres, through Chagatai Turkic and Persian. However, these languages did not always provide effective communication across all ethnic and social groups. The arrival of Russian administrative structures introduced a new linguistic element into the region's social fabric. Russian became the language of administration, military institutions, modern education, and many economic activities. Consequently, knowledge of Russian increasingly became associated with access to employment opportunities, education, and participation in public life.

The spread of the Russian language in Turkestan was not a spontaneous process but was closely connected with the policies of the Russian Empire. Colonial authorities viewed language as an important instrument of governance and integration. Educational reforms played a crucial role in this process. Russian-native schools, established throughout the region, aimed to provide local populations with basic knowledge of the Russian language while simultaneously introducing elements of Russian culture and administration. Although the effectiveness of these institutions varied, they significantly contributed to the emergence of a bilingual population capable of functioning within both local and imperial contexts.

At the same time, the development of trade and urbanization further increased the practical importance of Russian. Cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand, Kokand, Andijan, and Verny became centers where people from different ethnic backgrounds interacted regularly. Merchants, craftsmen, government officials, military personnel, and intellectuals often relied on Russian as a common language in situations where communication through local languages was difficult. As a result, Russian gradually acquired the status of a lingua franca in many spheres of public life.

The emergence of the Jadid movement at the turn of the twentieth century introduced a new perspective on language and education. Jadid intellectuals recognized the importance of acquiring modern scientific and technical knowledge, much of which was accessible through Russian. Figures such as Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Munawwar Qori Abdurashidkhanov, Abdullah Avloni, and others emphasized the need for educational reforms and often advocated the study of Russian alongside native languages. While they sought to preserve national identity and cultural heritage, they also acknowledged the practical benefits of linguistic competence in Russian.

The role of the Russian language in Turkestan during this period should not be interpreted solely through the framework of colonial domination. Although imperial policies undoubtedly promoted Russian as an administrative language, local populations also actively engaged with it for their own purposes. Knowledge of Russian enabled access to new educational opportunities,

participation in emerging political movements, communication with intellectual circles throughout the empire, and involvement in modern economic activities. Thus, the spread of Russian was shaped by both state policies and the agency of local actors.

## METHODS

The present study employs a multidisciplinary methodological approach combining historical analysis, sociolinguistic investigation, and comparative research methods. Since the topic concerns both historical developments and language functions within a multicultural environment, the integration of several methodological perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the Russian language in the formation of interethnic communication in Turkestan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The research is qualitative and historical in nature. It focuses on the examination of social, political, educational, and cultural processes that influenced language practices in Turkestan under Russian imperial rule. The study investigates how the Russian language was introduced, disseminated, and utilized among different ethnic communities and evaluates its contribution to the development of communication between representatives of various nationalities.

The research covers the period from approximately 1865, when Russian control over major parts of Turkestan became established, until the early 1920s, when profound political transformations associated with the Russian Revolution and the establishment of Soviet power altered the linguistic and administrative landscape of the region.

The study is based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include administrative reports of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, educational regulations, official correspondence, census data, contemporary newspapers and journals, memoirs, and publications produced by representatives of the Jadid movement. These documents provide valuable information concerning language policies, educational reforms, demographic developments, and patterns of social interaction.

Particular attention is given to periodicals published in both Russian and local languages during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Newspapers such as *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* and journals produced by Jadid intellectuals contain important evidence regarding attitudes toward language, education, and modernization. These publications reflect the perspectives of both colonial authorities and local reformers, allowing for a balanced analysis of the role of Russian in society.

Secondary sources consist of scholarly studies devoted to the history of Central Asia, colonial administration, language policy, multilingualism, and the Jadid movement. Works by historians, linguists, sociologists, and educational researchers provide theoretical frameworks and contextual information necessary for interpreting historical evidence.

**Historical Method.** The historical method serves as the primary methodological foundation of the research. It enables the reconstruction of social and political circumstances that contributed to the spread of the Russian language in Turkestan. Through chronological analysis, the study traces the evolution of language use from the establishment of Russian administration to the emergence of new intellectual and political movements in the early twentieth century.

Comparative Method. A comparative approach is employed to examine differences and similarities between linguistic practices before and after the incorporation of Turkestan into the Russian Empire. Prior to Russian rule, communication among various communities relied largely on local languages, regional lingua francas, and traditional educational institutions. Following colonization, Russian gradually became integrated into administrative, educational, and economic spheres.

Sociolinguistic Method. The sociolinguistic method is central to understanding how language functions within society. This approach examines the relationship between language use and social factors such as ethnicity, education, occupation, social status, and political power.

In the context of Turkestan, sociolinguistic analysis focuses on several key questions. First, it investigates the social groups that adopted Russian and the motivations behind language acquisition. Second, it examines the communicative functions of Russian in different domains, including administration, education, trade, military service, and intellectual life. Third, it analyzes patterns of bilingualism and multilingualism that emerged as a result of increased contact between Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking populations.

## RESULTS

The analysis of historical, sociolinguistic, and documentary sources demonstrates that the Russian language played a significant role in the formation of interethnic communication in Turkestan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its growing importance was closely connected with administrative reforms, educational transformations, economic modernization, urban development, and the activities of local intellectuals. The findings indicate that Russian gradually evolved from the language of colonial administration into one of the principal means of communication among various ethnic groups inhabiting the region.

Russian Language as an Administrative Instrument. One of the most important factors contributing to the spread of the Russian language was the establishment of the administrative system of the Russian Empire in Turkestan. Following the military incorporation of the region, the Turkestan Governor-Generalship became the principal governing institution responsible for political and economic management.

Russian served as the official language of administration, legislation, and public documentation. Government offices, courts, military headquarters, and municipal institutions conducted their activities primarily in Russian. Consequently, local elites who wished to participate in administrative affairs found it increasingly necessary to acquire at least a basic knowledge of the language.

The study reveals that communication between colonial authorities and local populations often required translators and intermediaries during the early stages of Russian rule. However, over time, a growing number of local officials, clerks, and educated individuals became bilingual. This development reduced linguistic barriers and facilitated direct interaction between representatives of different ethnic and social groups.

Administrative requirements encouraged the emergence of a new category of professionals who possessed competence in both Russian and local languages. These individuals played an important role in connecting diverse communities and contributed significantly to the formation of interethnic communication networks.

Development of Russian-Native Schools. Educational institutions constituted another major factor in the dissemination of the Russian language. During the late nineteenth century, Russian authorities established numerous Russian-native schools throughout Turkestan. These schools aimed to provide local children with elementary education and practical knowledge of Russian.

The findings indicate that although the number of such schools remained relatively limited compared with traditional maktab and madrasas, their influence extended beyond their immediate student populations. Graduates often obtained positions in administrative offices, commercial enterprises, railway services, and educational institutions. Consequently, knowledge of Russian became associated with social mobility and economic opportunity.

Educational statistics from the beginning of the twentieth century demonstrate a gradual increase in the number of local students enrolled in Russian-language educational institutions. While traditional religious schools continued to dominate the educational landscape, Russian-native schools introduced new subjects such as geography, mathematics, natural sciences, and history alongside language instruction.

As a result, Russian increasingly became linked with modern education and access to contemporary scientific knowledge. The language functioned not only as a subject of study but also as a medium through which students encountered new intellectual and cultural ideas.

Emergence of Bilingual Intellectuals. One of the most significant outcomes of educational reforms was the emergence of a bilingual intelligentsia. Educated representatives of Turkestan society acquired proficiency in Russian while maintaining their native linguistic and cultural identities.

The research demonstrates that bilingual intellectuals occupied a unique position within society. They served as mediators between local communities and imperial institutions, translated educational materials, participated in public debates, and contributed to the development of modern journalism.

Many members of the emerging intelligentsia utilized Russian-language publications to gain access to contemporary political, scientific, and cultural discussions occurring throughout the Russian Empire and Europe. Their linguistic competence enabled them to introduce new concepts and ideas into local intellectual discourse.

This group became particularly influential in the promotion of educational modernization and social reform. Their activities contributed substantially to the formation of a public sphere characterized by increased intercultural communication and intellectual exchange.

Russian as a Language of Urban Communication. Urbanization significantly strengthened the role of Russian as a language of interethnic interaction. Major cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand, Kokand, Andijan, Verny, and Ashgabat experienced rapid demographic growth during the colonial period.

The study shows that urban centers attracted diverse populations including Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, Armenians, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and representatives of other ethnic groups. In such multilingual environments, communication across ethnic boundaries became a practical necessity.

Russian frequently functioned as a common language in marketplaces, transportation systems, administrative institutions, educational establishments, and commercial enterprises. Although local languages remained dominant within ethnic communities, Russian increasingly facilitated communication between individuals who did not share a common native language.

Urban spaces therefore became important environments for linguistic contact and cultural interaction. The widespread use of Russian in public institutions contributed to the emergence of shared communicative practices among diverse social groups.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Russian language occupied a complex and multifaceted position in the social life of Turkestan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While its spread was initially associated with the expansion of Russian imperial authority, the language gradually acquired broader communicative, educational, and cultural functions. The results indicate that Russian became one of the principal instruments of interethnic communication in the region, facilitating interaction among diverse ethnic communities while simultaneously influencing patterns of social mobility, education, and intellectual development.

**Education and Language Modernization.** The role of education emerges as one of the most significant themes in the study. Educational institutions not only transmitted linguistic competence but also transformed broader social attitudes toward language and knowledge.

Russian-native schools introduced students to modern pedagogical methods, scientific subjects, and administrative practices. Through these institutions, language acquisition became closely associated with educational modernization. Russian was perceived not merely as a means of communication but also as a gateway to scientific literature, technological innovation, and contemporary intellectual developments.

This relationship between language and modernization has been observed in numerous historical contexts. Languages associated with centers of political and economic power often acquire symbolic value as vehicles of progress and social advancement. In Turkestan, Russian increasingly fulfilled this function, particularly among urban populations and reform-minded intellectuals.

The educational significance of Russian also helps explain why many local communities voluntarily invested in language learning despite concerns regarding cultural preservation. For numerous families, proficiency in Russian represented an opportunity to improve social and economic prospects without necessarily abandoning indigenous cultural traditions.

**The Jadid perspective on Russian.** The activities of the Jadid movement provide particularly important insights into the social perception of Russian during this period. Jadid reformers sought to modernize Muslim society through educational reform while simultaneously preserving national identity and cultural heritage.

The findings reveal that Jadid intellectuals generally adopted a pragmatic rather than ideological attitude toward the Russian language. They recognized that modern scientific and technical knowledge was largely accessible through Russian-language sources and therefore considered linguistic competence an essential component of educational advancement.

This perspective challenges simplistic assumptions that national reform movements necessarily opposed the language of the colonial state. In reality, many Jadid thinkers viewed multilingualism as a strategic advantage. They advocated mastery of both native languages and Russian, believing that such linguistic competence would strengthen rather than weaken society.

The Jadid approach reflects a broader pattern observed in modernization movements throughout the world, where engagement with external languages often occurs alongside efforts to preserve

local cultural identities. In Turkestan, Russian was frequently interpreted as a tool for intellectual development rather than solely as a symbol of foreign domination.

## Conclusion

The present study examined the role of the Russian language in the formation of interethnic communication in the Turkestan region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The analysis of historical, sociolinguistic, educational, and political factors demonstrates that the Russian language occupied a significant place in the transformation of social relations and communicative practices within the multicultural environment of Turkestan.

The incorporation of Turkestan into the Russian Empire created new political, economic, and cultural conditions that fundamentally altered patterns of interaction among the region's diverse ethnic groups. Prior to Russian colonization, communication between different communities was facilitated through local languages, regional trade languages, and traditional educational institutions. However, the expansion of administrative structures, the development of transportation networks, the growth of urban centers, and the modernization of economic life generated increasing demand for a common medium of communication capable of functioning across ethnic boundaries.

In conclusion, the Russian language played a substantial role in the formation and development of interethnic communication in Turkestan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its significance resulted from the interaction of administrative policies, educational reforms, economic modernization, urban growth, and intellectual movements. The language became an important communicative bridge linking diverse ethnic communities and facilitating cultural, social, and intellectual exchange. Understanding these historical processes contributes to a deeper appreciation of the linguistic and cultural dynamics that continue to shape Central Asian societies today.

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