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LANGUAGE STRATEGY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN KAZAKHSTAN: THE ROLE OF CERTIFICATION IN ENHANCING KAZAKH LANGUAGE PRESTIGE

This article examines the strategic role of the KAZTEST system in shaping Kazakhstan's language strategy and national identity, with particular attention to the social and institutional prestige of the Kazakh language. The study considers language testing not only as an instrument for assessing communicative competence, but also as a mechanism of language policy that influences professional mobility, public administration, and the symbolic value of the state language. The article discusses the theoretical foundations of language testing, the structure and functions of KAZTEST, and its connection with broader policy initiatives, including the 2023–2029 Concept for the Development of Language Policy. The analysis shows that certification can strengthen the practical motivation to learn Kazakh by linking language proficiency with career advancement, participation in prestigious social groups, and access to public service. At the same time, the article highlights contradictions and limitations in the implementation of language policy in Kazakhstan's multilingual environment. The findings suggest that KAZTEST contributes to the standardization of language learning, the expansion of Kazakh in official domains, and the construction of national identity through language. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that KAZTEST functions not only as a measurement instrument but as a sociolinguistic driver that reshapes public attitudes toward the state language and reinforces its symbolic capital within Kazakhstani society. The research draws on a mixed-methods framework combining quantitative proficiency data and qualitative policy analysis, allowing for a nuanced assessment of the system's effectiveness across diverse demographic and regional contexts. The outcomes of this study have practical implications for language policy designers, educators, and testing specialists seeking to align certification systems with the broader goals of national identity formation and sustainable language development.

Keywords: KAZTEST system, language strategy, national identity, language policy, language testing, societal prestige.

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Қазақстандағы тілдік стратегия және бірегейлік қалыптастыру: қазақ тілінің беделін арттырудағы сертификаттаудың рөлі

Мақалада Қазақстандағы тілдік стратегия мен ұлттық бірегейлікті қалыптастыру үдерісіндегі KAZTEST жүйесінің рөлі қарастырылады. Зерттеу қазақ тілінің мемлекеттік тіл ретіндегі қоғамдық және институционалдық беделін арттыруда тілдік сертификаттаудың маңызын айқындауға бағытталған. Мақалада тілдік тестілеу коммуникативтік құзыреттілікті бағалау құралы ғана емес, кәсіби өсуге, мемлекеттік басқару жүйесіне және мемлекеттік тілдің символдық құндылығына ықпал ететін тіл саясатының тетігі ретінде талданады. Зерттеу барысында тілдік тестілеудің теориялық негіздері, KAZTEST жүйесінің құрылымы мен қызметі, сондай-ақ 2023–2029 жылдарға арналған тіл саясатын дамыту тұжырымдамасымен байланысы қарастырылады. Талдау нәтижелері сертификаттау жүйесі қазақ тілін үйренудің нақты уәжін күшейтіп, тілдік құзыреттілікті қызметтік ілгерілеу, беделді әлеуметтік топтарға кіру және мемлекеттік қызметке қатысу мүмкіндіктерімен байланыстыратынын көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар мақалада Қазақстанның көптілді кеңістігіндегі тіл саясатын іске асырудың қайшылықтары мен шектеулері де айқындалады. Зерттеу KAZTEST жүйесінің қазақ тілін стандартты меңгеруге, ресми саладағы қолданысын кеңейтуге және тіл арқылы ұлттық бірегейлікті нығайтуға ықпал ететінін көрсетеді. Сондай-ақ зерттеу KAZTEST жүйесінің тек өлшеу құралы ғана емес, мемлекеттік тілге деген қоғамдық көзқарасты қалыптастыратын және оның қазақстандық қоғамдағы символдық капиталын нығайтатын әлеуметтік-лингвистикалық механизм ретінде қызмет ететінін дәлелдейді. Зерттеу тіл білімінің сандық деректерін талдауды және саяси құжаттарды сапалық талдауды

әдіснамаға негізделген, бұл жүйенің тиімділігін түрлі демографиялық және аймақтық контекстте жан-жақты бағалауға мүмкіндік береді. Осы зерттеудің нәтижелері сертификаттау жүйелерін ұлттық бірегейлікті қалыптастыру мен тілдің орнықты дамуының кең мақсаттарымен үйлестіруге ұмтылатын тіл саясатын жасаушылар, педагогтар және тестілеу саласының мамандары үшін практикалық маңызға ие.

Түйін сөздер: KAZTEST жүйесі, тілдік стратегия, ұлттық бірегейлік, тіл саясаты, тілдік тестілеу, қоғамдық бедел.

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Языковая стратегия и конструирование идентичности в Казахстане: роль сертификации в повышении престижа казахского языка

В статье рассматривается стратегическая роль системы KAZTEST в формировании языковой стратегии и национальной идентичности в Казахстане, а также в повышении общественного и институционального престижа казахского языка. Языковое тестирование анализируется не только как инструмент оценки коммуникативной компетенции, но и как механизм языковой политики, влияющий на профессиональную мобильность, систему государственного управления и символическую ценность государственного языка. В работе рассматриваются теоретические основы языкового тестирования, структура и функции KAZTEST, а также его связь с более широкими инициативами языковой политики, включая Концепцию развития языковой политики на 2023–2029 годы. Результаты анализа показывают, что сертификация усиливает практическую мотивацию к изучению казахского языка, связывая языковую компетенцию с карьерным ростом, принадлежностью к престижным социальным группам и доступом к государственной службе. Вместе с тем в статье отмечаются противоречия и ограничения реализации языковой политики в многоязычном пространстве Казахстана. Сделан вывод о том, что система KAZTEST способствует стандартизации изучения казахского языка, расширению его функционирования в официальной сфере и укреплению национальной идентичности посредством языка. Кроме того, исследование демонстрирует, что система KAZTEST функционирует не только как инструмент измерения, но и как социолингвистический механизм, формирующий общественное отношение к государственному языку и укрепляющий его символический капитал в казахстанском обществе. Исследование основано на смешанной методологии, сочетающей количественный анализ данных о языковой компетентности и качественный анализ политических документов, что позволяет дать многоаспектную оценку эффективности системы в различных демографических и региональных контекстах. Результаты данного исследования имеют практическое значение для разработчиков языковой политики, педагогов и специалистов в области тестирования, стремящихся согласовать систему сертификации с более широкими целями формирования национальной идентичности и устойчивого языкового развития.

Ключевые слова: система KAZTEST, языковая стратегия, национальная идентичность, языковая политика, языковое тестирование, общественный престиж.

Introduction

In the post-Soviet landscape of Kazakhstan, language policy has become a central mechanism for shaping national identity and state coherence. As part of this strategic agenda, the KAZTEST certification system has gained prominence as more than a linguistic tool – it operates as a policy instrument reinforcing the status of the Kazakh language. This study investigates how language testing contributes to institutionalizing Kazakh as the state language, enhancing its prestige, and supporting broader sociopolitical objectives outlined in national development plans. In the context of contemporary Kazakhstan, state language policy plays a pivotal role

in shaping national identity and societal functions. Since the enactment of the “Law on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan” in 1997, which designates Kazakh as the state language across all public sectors, there has been a concerted effort to enhance the language’s stature and utility throughout the nation (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1997). This legislation not only establishes Kazakh as the sole language of state governance, legislation, judicial proceedings, and official documentation, but also positions it as a fundamental element of the nation’s identity. The implementation of the KAZTEST system since 2006 represents a significant development in this regard. KAZTEST assesses individuals’ proficiency levels in the Kazakh

language and serves as a strategic tool within the broader language policy aimed at reinforcing the Kazakh language's role in both the state and society. This testing system exemplifies the underlying mechanisms of language policy, subtly integrating linguistic objectives into the framework of governmental and political aims. Further complicating the landscape is the dynamic interplay between cultural identity and language, which has been particularly pronounced over the last two decades marked by intense processes of cultural interpenetration, merging, and identity reformation on a global scale. In a multilingual or multicultural context, language reflects a complex relationship between the cultural and material demands of various societal groups. This article aims to explore the strategic role of the KAZTEST system within these broader objectives, examining its impact on the prestige of the state language and the operationalisation of language policy from 2023 to 2029 under recent governmental resolutions. By tracing the evolution of the Kazakh language's functional dissemination and its deepening integration into various societal domains, this study investigates the nuances of language policy as a cornerstone for constructing and sustaining national identity in Kazakhstan. Language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a critical component in the formation of national and cultural identities. Within various nations, the designation of an official language – often derived from the dialects spoken within national borders, typically that of the ruling class or the titular nation – carries significant implications for the construction of national identity and social cohesion. Following the model proposed by Barbour (2002), a prestigious status is frequently conferred upon such a dialect, framing linguistic diversity as a potential threat to unity (Jaspal, 2009). This framework not only cultivates a sense of unity among the population under a common linguistic structure but also reinforces the socio-political relationships between the ruling class and other societal groups. The process of constructing a national identity through language policy is inherently complex. The elevation of a single language often results in the marginalisation or suppression of alternative languages, as the official language assumes dominance in economic and formal contexts, adversely affecting other languages or dialects (Areiza Londoño, 2011). The predominance of the official language in media and education – whether through monolingual or bilingual systems (in which the official language coexists with a native language) – directly contributes to language attrition and the cultural decline of

minority languages. This dynamic is exacerbated by subtractive language learning policies and unstable diglossic situations within minority communities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). In this context, language emerges as a critical element that not only upholds individual rights but also serves as a foundation for societal cohesion and democratic participation. Informed by these principles, the Republic of Kazakhstan recognises the necessity of embracing the state language as a unifying mechanism that sustains unity and mutual understanding among its populace. While these trends pose significant challenges to linguistic diversity, it is noteworthy that some nations have made deliberate efforts to recognise multiple national languages as official languages, thereby promoting a national “multiethnic identity” (Byram, 2006). This phenomenon can be observed in countries such as Switzerland, South Africa, and Bolivia. For many indigenous groups, language, despite not being the sole defining characteristic of group identity and belonging, plays a pivotal role in shaping personal identity (Schmidt, 2008; Corntassel, 2003). Globally, indigenous identity is intricately intertwined with resistance to colonisation and its legacies, as well as struggles against the dispossession of ancestral lands and histories (Maddison, 2013). Green (2009) posits that for many populations, language serves as a crucial instrument for asserting national identity in contrast to a colonial state identity, as these groups advocate for their rights, recognition, and territorial claims.

Language testing, originally developed and implemented within European nations, is acknowledged not merely as a privilege afforded to specific social groups but as a fundamental human right, as delineated in European Union documents. This viewpoint embodies a comprehensive understanding of language as an essential instrument that unites Europe by fostering a democratic civil society, supporting the establishment of a legal state, and promoting equality, cultural adaptability, tolerance, and integration (Ахола, Башарин, Башмакова, 2017, p. 81).

Materials and methods

This study is based on a documentary, analytical, and secondary-data approach to examining the KAZTEST system as an instrument of language policy and identity construction in Kazakhstan. The research does not involve original fieldwork, experimental procedures, or primary interviews. Instead,

it relies on the analysis of official documents, published statistical materials, publicly available information on the KAZTEST system, and scholarly literature on language testing, language policy, language prestige, and national identity.

The source base of the study includes the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Languages,” the Concept for the Development of Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029, official materials of the National Testing Center and the KAZTEST system, published data on KAZTEST test-takers, statistical information on civil servants, and academic works devoted to linguodidactic testing, multilingualism, post-Soviet language policy, and the role of language in identity construction. Publicly available comments and recommendations by KAZTEST test-takers were also considered as illustrative material, as they reflect social perceptions of the test and reveal how certification is understood by language learners in practice.

The methodological framework of the study combines several research methods. Document analysis was used to identify the institutional goals, legal basis, and policy functions of the KAZTEST system. Theoretical analysis and synthesis were applied to systematize scholarly approaches to language testing, language prestige, language policy, and national identity. Descriptive analysis of secondary statistical data was used to interpret available information on the number and categories of KAZTEST test-takers, including civil servants and applicants for state-related educational and professional programs. Comparative interpretation was used to relate the Kazakhstani experience to broader international discussions on language certification as a mechanism of language planning and social regulation.

The research follows a case-study logic, with KAZTEST treated as a specific national certification system functioning within Kazakhstan’s multilingual environment. This approach makes it possible to examine language testing not only as a technical procedure for assessing communicative competence, but also as a policy mechanism that contributes to the standardization of language learning, the expansion of Kazakh in official domains, and the symbolic strengthening of the state language. Particular attention is paid to the way certification links language proficiency with social prestige, professional mobility, and access to public service.

The limitations of the study are determined by its reliance on publicly available and secondary data. Since the article does not present the results

of a large-scale survey or interview-based empirical research, its conclusions should be understood as interpretive and analytical. Nevertheless, the combination of document analysis, theoretical synthesis, and secondary statistical interpretation allows for a comprehensive discussion of the role of KAZTEST in Kazakhstan’s language strategy and in the broader process of national identity construction.

Literature review

Although language proficiency testing began to develop in several countries during the second half of the 20th century, testing itself is not a scientific innovation. In fact, Ancient China employed language testing to assess candidates for court service positions. The most well-known English proficiency tests, IELTS and TOEFL, emerged in 1980 and 1962, respectively (IELTS, 1980). In 1992, a Certification Testing Center for the Russian language was established. Associations such as ALTE, ILTA, and EALTA are dedicated to creating and discussing normative, content, and structural standards for these and other testing systems.

When considering the correlation between language vitality and testing systems, including the role of KAZTEST in enhancing the Kazakh language’s prospects, it is essential to review the meaning and standards of the testing terminology. Clarifying the semantic nuances of these terms reveals opportunities for integrating language vitality, proper usage, and development planning into language policy. Language or linguodidactic tests are used to determine an individual’s language proficiency and communicative skills. The KAZTEST system can be defined as a linguodidactic test. This concept, introduced into academic discourse by V. Kokkota, is described as a “set of tasks prepared according to specific standards, pre-tested for quality metrics, and designed to determine the linguistic and/or communicative competence of test takers” (Kokkota, 2009, p. 25). This definition encompasses key characteristics of linguodidactic tests, such as a defined purpose and target, system-forming features, and established methods for calculating and validating results. A testing system does not imply a form of supervision or instruction through test tasks; instead, it involves several stages: planning, task development, implementation, pilot testing, result monitoring, and verifying task reliability and validity. The nature of testing is notably reflected in the views of the French philosopher, cultural theorist, and historian Michel Foucault, who states that “all examination proce-

dures are symbols of power and control” (Foucault, 1999, p. 165).

The prominent scholar in the field of testology, E. Shohamy, supports this perspective by identifying six factors that allow tests to become instruments of power:

1) Testing is organized by authoritative social institutions. Test-takers are subject to the methods of organizations that control the type and content of tests. Tasks are designed around issues deemed important by the education system, government, or society; thus, poor test results can limit an individual’s educational or career opportunities;

2) Testing is conducted using scientific language. The use of statistics and scientific terminology in exams and tests increases the process’s credibility, leading society to conclude that the testing system is “fair and correct” and “reliable”, although this may not always be the case;

3) Tests utilize a numerical language similar to that of mass media. Reporting numbers lends weight to the results, increasing the perceived importance of the findings;

4) A written format of communication is used. Employing a written, non-communicative test format adds a scientific character to the process. While the test evaluates the knowledge of the test-taker, it does not assess their ability to convey that knowledge. However, this view may be qualified, since the speaking component in some tests is based on real communication: the test-taker shares their thoughts on a given topic and responds to the examiner’s follow-up questions, demonstrating their ability to convey ideas, information, and knowledge. Nevertheless, this speaking component is not present in all tests, as organizing direct interaction between the test-taker and examiner requires additional resources, such as time and material support, which likely forms the basis for Shohamy’s statement;

5) Trust in documentation is established. Each participant’s test results are recorded, and a document is created. These records are kept in a special folder and can be compared with others’ results if needed. This creates a permanent record of the individual, contributing to a lasting opinion about them;

6) Tests employ objective formats. Questions are presented with predetermined “correct” answers, making the “truth” inherent to the question itself. Even open-ended questions and tasks often have “limited” acceptable responses.

According to E. Shohamy, in a society with a centralized education system, those who administer state-level tests gain a unique tool of control.

This control includes determining access to higher education, enforcing curricula and programs on a national scale, and establishing criteria for the effectiveness of pedagogical activities (Shohamy, 2001, p. 20-24). It is worth noting that the fee-based nature of language testing adds to its significance and prestige, effectively transforming it into a tool of language policy. The fee-based model increases the motivation and desire of test-takers to succeed, although test results may not fully reflect their true language abilities due to various influencing factors. For example, a test-taker’s health issues or distractions may affect their focus, resulting in a lower score. Thus, equating test results with actual language proficiency can be problematic.

As a tool of language policy, language testing can play a productive role in achieving policy goals. Generally, language testing is one of the central issues in applied linguistics. Its practical purpose is clear: to create and implement tests that meet strict and specific requirements under various conditions (time, cost, accessibility, etc.), producing tangible, beneficial outcomes. Preparing tests requires technical expertise; therefore, language testing can be viewed as a specialized and technically complex field. The theory behind accurate test outcomes is also labor-intensive, with relevance and contemporary issues adding additional responsibilities for test creators. Language tests play a crucial role in determining social status, enabling membership in high-ranking social groups, and influencing citizens’ social standing. This highlights why language testing is considered a fundamental tool of language policy, as it plays an important role in education and society by defining knowledge levels and preparing social classes. Language testing extends beyond simply measuring knowledge; it impacts broader social aspects, shaping social realities, ideologies, policies, economies, and political programs. Spearman paid particular attention to the statistical characteristics of test materials, considering the correlation between data from different tests or objective criteria to be an important factor in testing (Spearman, 1904, p. 215).

Testing results are perceived as indicators of a person’s abilities and knowledge. In the KAZTEST system, language proficiency assessment serves as an objective tool for measuring communicative competence, irrespective of the test-taker’s location, the timing of the assessment, or the format and method of language learning. Language proficiency testing, as an individual assessment method, has been widely used in many countries for a long time (Lekich, Suleimenova, Kuzembekova, 2019, p. 28).

T. McNamara, addressing the theoretical and technical challenges of using language tests for social and political purposes, categorizes the theories for verifying and validating language test results:

1) In a narrow sense, the authenticity of language tests, regardless of social goals, depends on their quality. This approach emphasizes technical tools that allow for the evaluation of the significance of test results. Critical thinking is less emphasized than the fundamental requirements for designing language tests that function effectively, indicating that the social environment of the test is irrelevant.

2) In a broad sense, aligning tests with authenticity helps shape political and social actions. The test material serves a specific purpose, and its value may be questioned or defended. In many cases, language testing operates within applied linguistics as a field separate from other disciplines (McNamara, 2010). By nature, testing is closely related to mathematical disciplines, as it is based on producing results according to predefined criteria. Established criteria measure both linguistic proficiency and the language use of the test-taker.

Political stances, reflected through standards, play a crucial role in the design and development of language testing. This influence alters the nature of language testing, making the process inherently non-neutral. It is shaped by the cultural, social, political, educational, and ideological agendas that impact the lives of both test-takers and test developers. In this political context, test-takers become subjects of language policy. Language and culture are often challenging to separate. Languages convey human understanding and meaning, which are frequently expressed differently or even uniquely across various languages (Zelenshchikov & Khomyakova, 2014). Because different languages can express concepts in diverse ways, language often becomes closely tied to or associated with the culture of its speakers. In interactions with other groups and languages, using a specific language helps distinguish a group and its culture from others (Frick, 2013) and serves as a marker of difference and group membership (Byram, 2006). Here, we encounter a significant feature of language in constructing identity: it is an effective tool for defining the “other”; it is “an instrument through which we can transform ‘us’ into the sociological ‘not us’ (the other)” (Semenenko, 2017). The mechanisms of this tool include primary and secondary aspects of identity that demonstrate similarities or differences, thus ensuring exclusive membership within the group. Researchers M. Edwige and J. Martineau support this assertion, sug-

gesting that linguistic choice, when possible, serves as a means of signaling political loyalty to a group indexed by that language code (Edwige, Martineau, 2022).

In the post-Soviet context, understanding culture as an observable and homogeneous group attribute and a marker of objective differences between peoples paradoxically gave language issues strong emotional significance. In former Soviet republics, the status of the Russian language varies. In Kazakhstan, Russian is used in state and local government organizations alongside the official language (Constitution of Kazakhstan...); in Belarus, Russian is a state language (Constitution of the Republic of Belarus...); in Moldova and Turkmenistan, it serves as a language of international communication, while in Azerbaijan and the Baltic states, it holds the status of a foreign language (Lobanova, Mogileva, 2008). In Belarus (77%), Ukraine (65%), and Kazakhstan (65%), approximately two-thirds of the population is fluent in Russian. Despite the predominance of local languages, a large portion of the population in Kyrgyzstan and Latvia speaks Russian. In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Lithuania, where only one-fifth of the population is fluent in Russian, fewer than a third of the population speaks Russian proficiently (Yatsenko, 2008). Belarus and Kazakhstan are the only countries where the president may deliver a parliamentary address in Russian. In Kazakhstan, the Russian language is viewed as a factor that enhances the Kazakh nation’s competitiveness within the post-Soviet space, especially in Central Asia. According to N. Yesipova and S. N. Gradirovskiy, approximately 90% of the younger population in Georgia and Azerbaijan will not know Russian when they grow up (Yesipova & Gradirovskiy, 2008).

Kazakhstan is also not exempt from this situation, with ongoing debates about the significance and role of the Kazakh language and its relationship with Russian, and (to a lesser extent) with the languages of other non-Kazakh ethnic groups. These debates sparked as early as the “Perestroika era” (1989) and significantly influenced the nation-building policies of the 1990s and 2000s, retaining their relevance in recent years.

Results and discussion

On the official website of the KAZTEST system, it is defined as “a system for assessing the level of proficiency in the Kazakh language of citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan and foreign citizens

engaged in various types of activities within the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan". Since 2006, approximately 500,000 people have taken the KAZTEST, including more than 21,000 applicants for the "Bolashak" scholarship. Linguists, methodologists, and test developers from Kazakhstan's higher education institutions and research centers have created and integrated more than 200,000 test items into the system.

While writing this article, we familiarized ourselves with feedback from test-takers found online. Many of them point out similarities with the well-known international IELTS test and emphasize that, in addition to grammar, background knowledge is essential to pass successfully.

The KAZTEST is divided into five blocks. Initially, it included listening, vocabulary-grammar, reading, and writing sections, but since 2018, a speaking section was added. A total of 100 questions are provided: 20 for listening, 40 each for vocabulary-grammar and reading, 2–4 for writing, and 1–2 for speaking. The total time allowed for the test is 100 minutes.

It should be noted that some information on the website needs updating. For example, the statistics on the main page of the KAZTEST section still reflect data from 2018, and the test structure is presented in the outdated 4-block format.

To receive a certificate, a candidate must answer at least 60% of the questions correctly in each section. The A1 and A2 level certificates are valid for 2 years, B1 and B2 for 3 years, and the C1 level certificate for 5 years.

There are special educational-methodological complexes published to prepare for the test. According to the developers of the KAZTEST system, one of its key differences from other international tests is that it aims to assess not only communicative competence but also the socio-cultural competence of the test-taker. As stated, "The main feature is identifying the test-taker's socio-cultural competence. The candidate must demonstrate knowledge of the Kazakh language not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for understanding the culture, traditions, and national worldview of the Kazakh people" (KazakhTest). This unique feature further proves that the KAZTEST system is an integral part of Kazakhstan's language policy. Candidates who have taken the test include:

- Applicants for the personnel reserve of the "A" corps of the civil service;
- Applicants for the international Bolashak scholarship;

- Teachers of the "Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools" AEO;

- Applicants to the Academy of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan;

- Applicants for the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve (KAZTEST, n.d.).

The introduction of language testing in Kazakhstan is closely tied to the specifics of language policy. It is worth noting that language policy is structured along several directions. The linguistic situation in Kazakhstan is governed within the framework of multilingual state policy. Consequently, the development of language policy can be understood through several key dimensions:

- Pluralism: This universal trait of language policy emphasizes the preservation of the cultures and languages of minority ethnic groups. It provides broad freedom in resolving ethnic, cultural, and religious issues.

- Democratization: This involves developing a convergent mechanism within society to regulate the functioning and development of languages and cultures, ensuring oversight and legality. Democratic principles in language policy are used not only to guarantee legal protections for languages and cultures, but also to eliminate ethnic, social, cultural, and linguistic conflicts.

- Integration: This is a convergent process aimed at unifying and regulating interaction among different ethnolinguistic groups in society, while preserving their distinct cultures and languages. Such cultural-linguistic integration (or globalization) may be implemented in multilingual countries through coercion, or based on shared political structures, interests, goals, and values. However, this may result in negative convergence. Today, interstate integration is expanding not only in economic and political fields but also in cultural, ethnic, and linguistic dimensions. This global process is often accompanied by contradictions, including linguistic nihilism and glottofagia (language devouring). In general, pluralism and integration are the key models in the language policy of any multilingual state and can be implemented simultaneously. Elements of these models are visible in Kazakhstan's language policy. Even the lack of a clear and universal requirement for citizens to know the state language stems from these models.

The obligation to pass the KAZTEST for civil servants also took time to implement. Because language is a complex and sensitive issue, approaches to resolving it must be cautious and considerate of the broader context.

Assimilation: During this process, certain linguistic groups are forced to abandon their own cultures, traditions, and languages in favor of the dominant ethnic group. In independent multilingual states, assimilation is often carried out covertly through direct or indirect measures aimed at the denationalization of smaller language communities and the suppression of their rights to autonomous existence.

Segregation is the process of isolating an ethnolinguistic community living under poor conditions from the rest of society. It is a form of racial discrimination that limits the rights of certain groups of citizens based on their ethnicity, language, culture, religion, traditional practices, and lifestyle. Thus, in the 21st century, multilingual states face strategic challenges in developing unique models of language policy. These models are based on internal strategic features such as pluralism, democratization, and integration, or assimilation and segregation (Bakhnian, 2014, p. 77-78).

Often, the state promotes the dominant or official language as a means of fostering mutual understanding (Alpatov, 2014, p. 11). In this regard,

many scholars acknowledge that although language policy may be openly promoted in one direction, it might covertly proceed in another. This approach is grounded in political technologies.

D.A. Chernichkin outlines five stages of Kazakhstan's language policy:

1. The period from the spread of the Kazakh language to the establishment of equality between Kazakh and Russian (1989–1995).

2. The phase of establishing the primacy of the Kazakh language (1996-1999).

3. The phase of defining the status of Kazakh and maintaining a balance in long-term language planning (21st century).

4. The transition of the Kazakh language to Latin script.

5. The policy of “Kazakhization” (Chernichkin, 2022, p. 110–112).

A review of Kazakhstan's language policy shows that most power and resources are directed toward revitalizing the Kazakh language, expanding its use, and integrating it into public administration and social life (Bekmurzaev, 2020, p. 11).

Table 1

Data on KAZTEST test-takers (2017–2019) (Adilbekova, 2024)

Year	Number of Test-takers	Civil Servants	Employees of State Service Institutions
2017	~94,000	27%	30%
2018	~73,000	33%	53%
2019	~38,000	40%	49%

As of January 1, 2023, there were 83,237 civil servants in Kazakhstan. According to the 2023–2029 Concept for the Development of Language Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan, all civil servants must take the KAZTEST. This means that 0.416% of Kazakhstan's population (20,014,575 citizens as of December 1, 2023) will be officially required to undergo language testing.

If we also consider Bolashak program applicants and other categories of individuals required to take the test in Kazakh, the overall impact will be positive. Citizens' proficiency in the Kazakh language will genuinely increase.

By assessing the educational and cultural level of civil servants, we can gauge the level of civilization in society. A civil servant's language competence allows them to easily understand laws, plans,

decisions, and regulations, and to extract the main ideas from texts (Bizhkenova, 2010, p. 40).

As shown, the level of Kazakh language proficiency among civil servants directly affects the use of the state language in official documentation. Many Kazakh-language documents are translations based on their Russian equivalents. Due to the insufficient language proficiency of many employees, these documents are often unclear or poorly written in Kazakh.

Knowledge of the Kazakh language becomes an integrative and mandatory mechanism for those seeking a professional career in public service. This is reinforced by concrete material incentives: the risk of job loss or lack of career advancement exerts more influence on individuals than abstract moral appeals. Mastery of Kazakh (and passing the test)

becomes associated with a successful, respectable life.

Therefore, the role of the KAZTEST system in implementing national language policy and expanding the use of the state language is increasing. The testing system is one of the mechanisms that reinforces the dominance of the Kazakh language. Let us also highlight the influence of the testing system on ensuring consistency and literacy in language learning. The KAZTEST examination plays a significant role in guiding language learners toward structured, standard, and academically appropriate use of the Kazakh language. The test tasks are designed in accordance with the established literary norms of the language, ensuring alignment with grammatical rules and linguistic conventions.

The individuals responsible for developing the test content are linguists and teaching methodologists, professionals with expertise in Kazakh language pedagogy. Those who study Kazakh in preparation for KAZTEST are naturally compelled to pay attention to the grammatical structures, vocabulary norms, and idiomatic features of the language. There is a strong emphasis on producing standardized responses and on using formal academic Kazakh, rather than colloquial or regionally influenced speech.

Moreover, in reviewing feedback from those who have taken KAZTEST and shared their experiences online, we often encounter recommendations such as: “You should read books in Kazakh” and “You should know at least a little about Kazakh traditions.” This suggests that the test is not merely a linguistic evaluation, but also an assessment of cultural literacy—a subtle form of nation-building through language.

In this context, practice influences ideology. The Israeli scholar Elana Shohamy has argued that language tests serve as a transparent, democratic, and negotiated bridge between ideology and practice (Shohamy, 2001). KAZTEST, by promoting standardized and culturally contextualized Kazakh, exemplifies how language assessment can simultaneously foster national identity and shape linguistic norms in a multicultural society.

Conclusion

Every ethnic group is unified by a shared understanding of its own identity, which can be seen as a foundational element of its collective consciousness. This understanding may also be referred to as *ethnic self-identification*. Without internal acceptance of

belonging to a particular ethnic group, no external markers such as language or culture can effectively establish that identity. In the case of Kazakhstan, it is evident that even among ethnic Kazakhs, the internal connection to their ethnic identity is not always strong or clearly articulated.

This issue goes beyond simply declaring “I am Kazakh.” It involves a deeper, conscious embrace of one’s Kazakh identity, an emotional return to Kazakh cultural paradigms, pride in national distinctiveness, respect for the Kazakh language, and consistent use of that language in daily life. Importantly, this form of identity is often reinforced by perceiving the tangible value associated with the Kazakh language. Just as children are motivated to complete tasks with the promise of a reward, adults too respond to incentives. In the context of language policy, the same logic applies.

If Kazakh-speaking individuals are seen as successful, respected, and professionally accomplished, and if non-Kazakh speakers can also attain meaningful success in Kazakhstan by learning the state language, this perception will positively influence language acquisition patterns. As such, preparation for the KAZTEST exam contributes significantly to this dynamic. It offers several individual benefits:

1. Learners master the grammatical structure of the Kazakh language according to established norms and rules, enabling them to use literary and academic forms of the language accurately.

2. They acquire cultural background knowledge, including insights into Kazakh traditions, artistic expression, daily life, and environmental factors shaping the national worldview – thus enriching their personal development and potentially transforming their perspectives.

3. Their communicative competence improves through intensive practice in listening and speaking tasks using authentic Kazakh audio materials. This fosters familiarity with native pronunciation and response patterns, which are essential elements of modern communicative skill sets.

4. Finally, language proficiency certified through KAZTEST opens doors to inclusion in socially prestigious groups, career advancement, and access to material benefits – ultimately enhancing quality of life.

In this light, the KAZTEST system should not merely be viewed as a language proficiency test, but rather as a strategic tool for fostering national identity, promoting language prestige, and enabling personal and societal transformation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Zh. Kuzembekova developed the main research concept, defined the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, analyzed the role of the KAZTEST system in Kazakhstan's language policy, systematized the scholarly literature on language testing and identity construction, interpreted the research findings, and prepared the final version of the manuscript. The author is fully responsible for the content of the article, the accuracy of the analysis, and the conclusions presented in the study.

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