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Kazakh

Christopher Straughn

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Christopher Straughn
on one of Kazakhstan's
two official languages

Kazakh

Where is it spoken?

Kazakh is spoken in Kazakhstan, a former republic of the Soviet Union and the ninth largest country (by area) in the world. It is also widely-spoken in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. There are smaller numbers of speakers in other countries that border Kazakhstan, such as Russia, Mongolia and Uzbekistan. Kazakh is an official language of Kazakhstan, alongside Russian.

What kind of language is it?

Kazakh is a member of the Kipchak branch of Turkic languages, which also includes Tatar, Karakalpak and Kyrgyz. Other Turkic languages include Uzbek, Uyghur, Turkmen and, of course, Turkish. Kazakh is partially mutually intelligible with Kyrgyz, and, with time and practice, speakers of Kazakh can usually learn to communicate in other Turkic languages.

Where and when did it emerge?

The Kazakh language emerged in the 15th century. Before then, the Kazakhs were one of the many Turkic tribes who lived in the eastern part of Central Asia and who spoke a common Turkic language. As Genghis

Khan's Mongol Empire spread west through Asia in the 13th and 14th centuries, speakers of Common Turkic moved along with them. The Kazakhs ended up in Kazakhstan, and over time their language became distinct from that of their neighbours.

Who speaks it?

According to Ethnologue, Kazakh has around 13 million speakers, most of whom live in Kazakhstan. Most Kazakh speakers are ethnic Kazakhs. Before Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, Kazakh was mostly limited in use to the home and rural areas. Since then, Kazakh has been granted the status of state language, and coexists in all domains with Russian. The Kazakh government has passed a number of laws promoting the use of Kazakh. As a result, signs must now all be in Kazakh, and its use has increased on television, on the radio, and in newspapers. Thanks to these efforts, Kazakh is not in any danger of extinction.

What is it like?

Kazakh shares many features with other Turkic languages, including subject-object-verb (or SOV) word order, and the use of many suffixes to conjugate

verbs, inflect nouns, or form new words.

Another feature Kazakh shares with its relatives is a complex system of vowel harmony, whereby the vowels in a word tend to either be front vowels or back vowels. This affects the form of suffixes, such as the plural marker. For example, *alma-lar* ('apples') has an /a/ sound in the suffix because the preceding vowel is a back vowel, while *tülki-ler* ('foxes') has an /e/ sound because the preceding vowel is a front one.

Vowel harmony often combines with consonant assimilation, whereby the consonants in a suffix change based on the preceding sounds. This means that a single suffix can have many different forms, as we see in *adam-dar* ('people') and *şeşek-ter* ('flowers'). Linguists often represent this plural suffix as *-LAR*, because the first consonant changes based on the preceding sounds and the vowel is affected by the other vowels in the word to which it is attached. The use of capital letters indicates that these sounds are always affected by the sounds that precede them.

How is it written?

The ancestor of Kazakh, Old Turkic, used an angular alphabet

Kazakh in 5 minutes

The following Kazakh phrases are given in the current Cyrillic alphabet, the Latin alphabet as of April 2021, and IPA transliteration.

<i>Сәлем! / Sälem! [sæljɛm]</i>	How are you?
<i>Қазақстан өте әдемі / Qazaqstan öte ädemi [qazakstan ɔtɛ ädɛmɪ]</i>	Kazakhstan is very beautiful
<i>Сенің атың кім? / Seniñ atıñ kim? [sɛjɛnɪŋ atɔŋ kim]</i>	What is your name? (lit. 'Who is your name?')
<i>Менің атым Айлин / Менің атым Ailin [mɛjɛnɪŋ atɔm ajlɪjɪn]</i>	My name is Ailin
<i>Кешіріңіз / Keşirıñız [kɛʃɪrɪŋɪz]</i>	Excuse me
<i>Рақмет! / Raqmet! [raqmɛt]</i>	Thank you



Street signs in Almaty, Kazakhstan showing the use of Kazakh written in the Cyrillic alphabet

sometimes called Orkhon script or Old Turkic runes. This alphabet was used by Turkic-speaking groups throughout Inner Asia to write inscriptions on monuments and to write books. The angular shape of the alphabet made it easier to carve into stone or wood, much as the angular forms of the Etruscan alphabet or Germanic runes did.

Kazakh itself has used a number of alphabets, and continues to do so today. In China and Afghanistan, a version of the Arabic script is used. This continues the custom of the medieval era, when Muslim peoples used versions of the Arabic script to write their languages. After the establishment of the Soviet

Union, there was an effort to introduce the Latin alphabet to the many languages spoken there, especially those that used the Arabic script. This was intended to increase literacy, to distance Muslims from the Arabic language, and to standardise how languages were written by introducing a common alphabet that they could all share. Kazakh and its neighboring languages were all written, for a time, in a version of the Latin alphabet.

This programme was abandoned when Joseph Stalin came into power, and Kazakh and the other languages that had been given Latin alphabets switched to versions of the Cyrillic alphabet. A feature

of these new alphabets was the use of different letters to represent the same sounds across different languages. For example, Kazakh represented the sound /q/ with the letter <к>, while its neighbour Bashkir used <к>. Kyrgyz and Tatar, two other related neighbours, simply used the letter <к> to represent both /k/ and /q/. This had the effect of making it harder for speakers of related languages to communicate, but served to strengthen ethnic and linguistic identity within groups.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many of the Turkic languages of the newly independent republics switched to Latin alphabets to strengthen their relationship with Turkey, where the Latin alphabet is used, and to make computer communication easier. Azerbaijani made this switch in 1991, Uzbek in 1992, and Turkmen in 1993. Kazakh has taken a bit longer, possibly because of closer ties with Russia and because of the large Russian population in Kazakhstan. In the past few years, however, the leaders of Kazakhstan have proposed a number of Latin alphabets and they now plan to fully convert Kazakh to a new Latin alphabet by 2031. ¶

Christopher Straughn is a librarian and linguist at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, Illinois. His linguistic research focuses on the Turkic languages and their history.

Find out more

Books

John Krueger (1980) *Introduction to Kazakh*, Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies.

Raihan Muhamedowa (2016) *Kazakh: A Comprehensive Grammar*, Routledge.