

Title: Linguistic Ecologies of Empire: Russian and Ottoman Perspectives
Author: Andrew Dombrowski, University of Chicago

While the study of language contact is well-represented in the field of Slavic linguistics, there is still an ongoing need for the close analysis of how social and historical factors shape the outcome of language contact, as acknowledged by works like Friedman (2008) and exemplified by evolutionary and ecological approaches to language contact and change, like Mufwene (2008).

In this study I compare the role of Russian in the multilingual Russian Empire with the role of Turkish in the comparably multilingual Ottoman Empire. I show that the differing language policies in these empires led to sharply different linguistic ecologies: while, in much of the Russian Empire, Russian spread at the expense of other languages, Turkish, in much of the Ottoman Empire, generally functioned as an elite lingua franca spoken alongside multiple other languages. I also discuss the distinction between frequent (but not universal) multidirectional multilingualism in many parts of the Ottoman Empire and typically monodirectional multilingualism in the Russian Empire. I argue that this difference explains an asymmetry between Russian and Turkish, namely, that influence from non-Slavic languages on dialects of Russian has typically – but, crucially, not always – been minimal, whereas Turkish in the Balkans exhibits a contrasting pattern in which one dialect region (West Rumelian Turkish) displays intense influence from neighboring languages, while a neighboring dialect (East Rumelian Turkish) underwent significantly less influence. The comparative analysis developed in this paper sheds light both on the specific linguistic dynamics of the Balkans and Russia, and on the more general utility of a locally-focused, sociohistorically sensitive approach to language contact.