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Between Names and Namelessness

A Critical Autoethnography of Language Ideology and Categorical Identity

Mizuki Sakurama-Nakamura

1. Introduction

What is your mother tongue? How many languages do you know?

These questions arrive with an air of casual curiosity, as though they were asking about the weather or one's place of origin. Yet for those who cannot answer them cleanly — who reach for a reply and find the categories buckling under the weight of lived experience — the questions carry a different charge entirely. They do not simply seek information. They presuppose a particular order of things: that each person possesses a *mother tongue*, singular and identifiable; that languages are discrete, enumerable objects; that the self stands in a clear and stable relation to each of them. To be unable to answer is not merely to lack certain information. It is, in some sense, to fail to exist in the way the question assumes.

I have been asked these questions in Japanese, in English, in Russian, in Tatar, in other languages, in academic seminar rooms and at immigration counters, by students and by officials, by colleagues and by fieldwork interlocutors. Each time, I have found myself performing a kind of triage, selecting whichever answer produces the least confusion, the fewest follow-up questions, the most manageable version of a self. The answer I give is never quite true. It is also never quite false. It is, rather, a concession to the architecture of the question.

This paper is an attempt to understand how that architecture came to be, and what it has made of me in the making.

What follows is neither straightforwardly an autobiography nor a conventional ethnographic account, though it draws on both. It proceeds from the conviction that the formation of language categories — the process by which the fluid, embodied, emotionally saturated experience of living in language comes to be organised into named, ranked, and evaluated units — cannot be adequately analysed from a purely external vantage point. The ideological work of language categorisation reaches into the most intimate layers of selfhood, shaping how one speaks, how one hears one's own speech, and how one accounts for oneself in language. To study this process only in others is to miss the laboratory one inhabits.

At the same time, the autoethnographic turn risks a different kind of partiality: the risk of treating the singular as merely particular, of mistaking one's own biography for a general theory. It is to guard against this that the present paper places my own language formation in sustained dialogue with more than a decade of ethnographic fieldwork among Tatar diaspora communities in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. What I have observed in those communities — the ways in which the Tatar language is remembered, mourned, claimed, and partially inhabited by people who cannot always speak it — illuminates, with a kind of lateral light, the dynamics I have lived from within. The movement between the two is not a validation of one by the other. It is, rather, a recognition of structural kinship: of the shared conditions under which language categories are formed, imposed, and — never fully, never cleanly — refused.

The methodological choice to allow academic analysis and personal testimony to cross-inhabit the same textual space is itself a theoretical commitment. If language boundaries are socially constructed rather than naturally given, if the apparent clarity of categorical distinctions conceals the ideological labour required to produce and maintain them, then the form of scholarly writing ought not to reproduce that clarity by fiat.

The friction between registers — between the intimate and the analytical, between the embodied and the conceptual — is not a stylistic indulgence but an enactment of the paper's central argument.

My language formation has been shaped by a multiplicity of environments that resist easy summary. My grandmother moved between Tatar, Japanese, and Russian in ways that did not announce themselves as code-switching, because the codes themselves were not always clearly distinct. My father, who would later settle in southern Germany, brought into our shared space an English-inflected relationship to language, a mobility that treated linguistic rootedness with a certain pragmatic indifference. Around me, and eventually within me, several languages accumulated, each carrying histories, affects, and normative expectations that did not converge. The question of which among them was my *mother tongue* was not one I felt equipped to answer, because the question presupposed a kind of singularity and origin that my experience simply did not contain.

This paper traces how that experience came to be organised, or rather, how it came to be subjected to successive attempts at organisation, through the ideological force of language categories. It is, in the terms developed below, a genealogy of namelessness.

2. The Ideological Force of the Question

2.1 Language Ideology as Naturalisation

The concept of language ideology has been central to sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology since at least the late 1970s, when Silverstein (1979) began to articulate the ways in which speakers' metalinguistic representations of language — their beliefs, attitudes, and evaluative orientations towards linguistic forms — are never merely descriptive but are actively constitutive of linguistic practice. What Silverstein called the *metapragmatic* dimension of language encompasses not just what speakers say, but the frameworks through which they understand and evaluate saying. These frameworks are ideological not in the vulgar sense of being merely distorted or false, but in the Althusserian sense of organising lived relations to a symbolic order in ways that feel self-evident, natural, beyond question.

Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) defined language ideologies as representations that *naturalise* the social arrangements in which language is embedded. Language ideologies work, in part, by presenting their constructions as discoveries: as though the division of the human linguistic world into bounded, nameable languages were a feature of reality itself, waiting to be mapped, rather than a historically specific, politically motivated, and institutionally enforced project. Makoni and Pennycook (2005) pressed this point further with their argument that languages — in the modern sense of discrete, codified, nationally associated systems — are not ancient facts but relatively recent inventions, products of colonial and missionary linguistic engineering that imposed grid-lines on what were in practice continuous and variable semiotic landscapes. To name a language, on this account, is already to perform an ideological act.

Kroskrity (2000) argued that language ideologies are not monolithic but operate at multiple levels simultaneously: the level of institutional policy, the level of community discourse, and the level of individual awareness and reflexivity. What this multi-layered model reveals is that the ideological work of language categorisation is not accomplished once and for all by some macro-level authority, but is reproduced continuously in the texture of everyday interaction — in the questions people ask each other, in the evaluations teachers make of children's speech, in the way a bureaucratic form presents the option *mother tongue* as though it referred to a stable, knowable datum. It is precisely this *distributed* character of language ideology that makes it so difficult to resist: it surrounds one not as a single force but as an atmosphere, an ecology of assumptions that one breathes before one can think.

2.2 The Question as Interpellation

Althusser's concept of interpellation — the process by which ideology hails subjects into existence, calling them into a subject-position through which they recognise themselves — offers a useful framework for understanding the particular force of questions about language. When a policeman calls out *Hey, you there!*, Althusser (1971) famously observed, the person who turns around in response has, in that turning, recognised themselves as the one being addressed, and in so doing has constituted themselves as a subject of the law. The recognition is not the effect of a pre-existing subject; it is constitutive of the subject. Ideology, on this account, does not distort what is already there: it produces what it addresses.

The question *What is your mother tongue?* operates similarly, though the machinery is gentler and the social occasion more benign. The question hails its addressee into a subject-position: that of a person who possesses a mother tongue, who can identify it, and who will now confirm or specify it. To answer the question — even to answer *I don't really have one* — is to enter the space the question has opened. It is to submit to its terms, to confirm that the concept of a *mother tongue* is an appropriate framework within which to situate oneself. The very grammar of the question forecloses certain answers: one cannot respond by questioning whether the category applies, because the form of the question has already installed the category as operative.

Butler's reworking of Althusser in the theory of performativity sharpens this insight considerably. For Butler (1997), the subject is not simply hailed once but is constituted through the repeated citation of normative frameworks, through a series of interpellations that, by their reiteration, produce the effect of a stable, pre-existing self. The student who is asked about her mother tongue every year, at school entry, at university registration, on forms of every kind, does not merely report a fact she already knew about herself. She comes, through these repeated encounters, to understand herself as a person with a mother tongue, as someone for whom this question is answerable, even if the answer remains uncomfortable or imprecise. The category works on her; it shapes her self-understanding not through a single dramatic moment but through the accumulation of ordinary institutional encounters.

What Butler's account also reveals, however, is that the process of citation is never perfectly smooth. Citations always carry the risk of *misfiring*, of producing, in the gaps between intended and actual utterances, something other than what was called for. The person who cannot answer the mother tongue question cleanly, who hesitates, who gives an answer that immediately requires qualification, who says *it depends* — this person is not simply failing to comply with an interpellation. They are, in however minor a key, refusing the premises of the hailing, disclosing the contingency of what the question presents as necessary. This refusal is never total, never clean; one remains addressed, remains implicated in the space the question opens. But in the incompleteness of the response, something of the constructed character of the category becomes visible.

It is at this threshold — the threshold between the name and its inadequacy, between the interpellation and the partial misfire — that the concept of *namelessness* takes its first shape. Namelessness, as I am developing it here, is not the absence of a name but the condition of those who cannot be fully named by the categories available to them, and for whom this failure of nomination is not merely inconvenient but constitutive of their relation to language itself.

3. Genealogies of a Language Self

3.1 Before the Name: A Pre-Categorical World

There is a word my grandmother used when she called me to her: *bäläkäy*. It is a Tatar word, a diminutive, an endearment, a word that exists at the crossing of intimacy and summons. But I did not know

it as a Tatar word, not for a long time. I knew it as a sound that meant safety. It came from the same register as the smell of her kitchen and the weight of her hand on my head; it was not a unit of a language but a node in a network of bodily and emotional orientations that organised, before any conceptual work, what it felt like to be small and cared for.

Busch (2017) has proposed the concept of *Spracherleben* — the lived experience of language — to capture precisely this dimension of linguistic experience that standard sociolinguistic analysis tends to pass over: the dimension in which language is not a system or a code but an embodied, affective, sensory phenomenon, woven into the textures of memory and attachment before it is ever subjected to classification. Busch's concept draws attention to what is lost when we approach language primarily through its categorial structure, through the question of which language a given utterance belongs to, rather than what it feels like from the inside, what it carries, what it opens or forecloses in the speaking of it. My grandmother's *bäläkäy* belongs to Busch's *Spracherleben* more than it belongs to any grammar of Tatar. And yet it is precisely this pre-categorial stratum of experience that is most systematically overwritten by the work of language ideology.

The household in which I grew up was not what applied linguistics would typically call a *multilingual household*. It was something more unruly than that. My grandmother, who had worked as a Russian language teacher, moved among Tatar, Japanese, and Russian in ways that did not always announce themselves as transitions. She would begin a sentence in one and end it in another, not from confusion but from the pressure of finding the right sound for the right moment, the right weight of address. Japanese had a particular formality that suited certain topics; Russian carried the authority of her professional life; Tatar carried, above all, the register of intimacy, the language of *before*, the sound of a world that preceded migration and diaspora and the long process of becoming someone who had to explain herself in other people's terms. My father's presence introduced a different texture: English as a working language, a *lingua franca* of movement, inflected by years of living between continents, unattached to any particular soil or community. The concept of *mother tongue* — with its investment in singularity, origin, and maternal transmission — sat uneasily in this household. Not because no languages were spoken, but because the relations among them did not conform to the hierarchical, singular model the concept presupposes.

What I am describing is not exotic. It is, as Blommaert (2010) has argued in a different context, something closer to the ordinary condition of life in a world shaped by migration, colonialism, and the ongoing circulation of populations and languages, a condition that dominant language ideologies systematically misrecognise as exceptional, as a deviation from the norm of bounded, rooted, nation adjacent linguistic identity. The norm is, of course, a construction. But constructions have force; they become norms by being treated as norms, and the person who does not fit them does not simply occupy an alternative position — she is measured against the norm and found wanting.

3.2 The First Disciplining: Encounters with Correctness

The process of being found wanting began, in my experience, in school. This is perhaps unsurprising: educational institutions are among the primary sites through which language ideologies are reproduced at the level of the individual body and psyche. Foucault's analysis of *discipline* in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) is illuminating here. Discipline, for Foucault, is not primarily the exercise of spectacular punishment but the organisation of space, time, and activity in such a way that individuals come to regulate themselves according to normative standards — standards that are enforced not only by external sanction but by the internalisation of the examiner's gaze. The *examination*, in Foucault's account, is a particularly powerful

disciplinary instrument because it combines the hierarchical observation of normalising judgement with a documentary procedure that fixes the subject in a grid of comparative evaluation.

The school encounter with language operates precisely in this way. The child who is told that her pronunciation is *incorrect*, that her sentence structure is *unusual*, that she has made a mistake, is being subjected to an examination in Foucault's sense: her speech is measured against an invisible norm, found to deviate from it, and corrected. The content of the correction is less important than its *form*: the repeated experience of being assessed against a standard one did not choose and cannot quite reach produces, over time, an orientation towards one's own speech as deficient, as requiring monitoring, as always potentially wrong. The Japanese I spoke was not quite right. The English I spoke was not quite right. The Tatar — what I retained of it, which diminished as the years passed — was certainly not right, or rather, the question of its rightness or wrongness could not even arise, because it had no institutional existence against which it could be evaluated. It simply fell away, or rather was pushed away, in the relentless prioritisation of what could be assessed.

Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of the *linguistic market* captures part of what is happening here. Bourdieu argued that linguistic exchanges are never merely communicative transactions but are always also economic ones, in which speakers' utterances are evaluated and credited according to the degree to which they conform to the legitimate language — the language whose authority is guaranteed by educational and state institutions. Those whose speech deviates from the legitimate standard do not simply communicate differently; they accumulate less symbolic capital, and this deficit is experienced not as a social verdict but as a personal inadequacy. The child who is told her pronunciation is incorrect does not typically conclude that the norm is arbitrary. She concludes that her pronunciation needs to be fixed. This is the ordinary phenomenology of linguistic correction, and it is enormously effective as a mechanism of language ideological reproduction.

What was being fixed, in my case, was not simply pronunciation but the very structure of my relation to language. The demand for correctness is also a demand for singularity: for choosing one language and inhabiting it fully, rather than moving among them in the ways that come naturally in a multilingual household. Language pedagogy, as Pennycook (2007) has noted, is deeply invested in the *monolingual norm*, the assumption that the ideal speaker is a native speaker of one language, and that multilingualism is at best a talent to be cultivated and at worst a source of interference. The child who comes from a mixed linguistic environment is implicitly asked, by the logic of the school, to resolve her multiplicity into a hierarchy: to nominate a mother tongue and position the others as additions to it. This nomination — this choosing of a first — is itself an act of ideological submission, a concession to the categorical order that the question *What is your mother tongue?* assumes.

3.3 The Multiplication of Names: Fieldwork and the Researcher's Language

The multiplication of naming pressures did not end with schooling. It intensified, in unexpected ways, when I entered the fieldwork context that would come to define my scholarly life. Conducting research among Tatar diaspora communities in Central Asia — in Uzbekistan from 2013, later in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan — placed me in a peculiar position with respect to language that I have taken some years to fully appreciate.

On one hand, Tatar identity was a form of insider knowledge. I had a family history, a fragment of the language, a bodily and affective orientation towards what Tatariness felt and sounded like, however partial and mediated my access to it. On the other hand, I was repeatedly positioned as an outsider: as someone whose Tatar was insufficient, whose Russian was accented, whose Japanese origin complicated the familiar

rubrics of ethnicity and diaspora through which my interlocutors organised their world. In one memorable encounter during fieldwork in Uzbekistan — which I have written about elsewhere in a somewhat different register (Sakurama-Nakamura 2025) — a community member named Elmira asked me, with genuine curiosity and not a trace of hostility, whether I was *really* Tatar. The question was not meant cruelly. It was a reasonable inquiry, given the available information. But it positioned me, in an instant, as someone whose claim to a category required verification, as someone who might or might not qualify for the name.

This is, I would argue, a particularly revealing form of the interpellation analysed in Section 2. The question *Are you really Tatar?* is structurally more transparent than *What is your mother tongue?*, because it makes explicit the process of evaluation that the latter question conceals. Both questions invoke a standard of authenticity; both assess the individual against a normative model. But the first question presents this assessment as a mere request for information, while the second exposes the evaluative dimension — the possibility of failing — that the first question typically suppresses. In the field, that suppression was no longer available to me. I was being examined in the most literal sense.

What the fieldwork context also revealed, with particular acuity, was the researcher's own entanglement in the language ideologies she was attempting to analyse. Norton (2013) has written about the investment that language learners and speakers bring to the languages they inhabit: the stake they have in being recognised, in having their speech count, in being heard as legitimate participants in a community. This investment is not merely psychological but social: it is shaped by the distribution of symbolic resources that Bourdieu's analysis of the linguistic market describes. In the field, I brought all of this: the desire to be recognised as sufficiently Tatar, as sufficiently fluent, as sufficiently *there*, combined with the recurrent experience of falling short, of being positioned as an interested observer rather than a natural participant. The categories that my fieldwork was designed to analyse were, simultaneously, categories that were being applied to me. This double positioning, as analyst and as analysed, is not an inconvenience to be overcome. It is, rather, the specific epistemological condition of autoethnographic research, and it is what gives that research its particular capacity to illuminate the interior workings of ideological processes that more externally positioned accounts cannot reach.

4. Categorical Violence in the Field

4.1 Polycentric Authenticity and Competing Demands

The Tatar diaspora communities of Central Asia do not inhabit a single ideological field. They are positioned at the intersection of multiple, sometimes contradictory, regimes of language authority, what I have elsewhere called *polycentric authenticity* (Sakurama-Nakamura 2025): the condition in which speakers must negotiate legitimacy with respect to several competing centres of cultural and linguistic normativity simultaneously. This condition, I want to argue, is not merely a practical complication but a fundamental feature of diaspora life, and it generates a distinctive form of linguistic subjectivity.

The concept of polycentric authenticity extends Blommaert's (2010) analysis of *polycentricity* in the sociolinguistics of globalisation: his observation that in contemporary mobile worlds, speakers' linguistic resources are evaluated differently depending on the market context, and that the norms of different markets are often in tension. In the Tatar diaspora context, the relevant markets include the Kazan-centred discourse of Tatar linguistic authenticity (which tends to treat the literary Tatar of Tatarstan as the legitimate standard), the Soviet-era discourse in which Russian functioned as the neutral medium of interethnic communication and cultural prestige (a discourse that many older community members internalised deeply), the post-Soviet nation-state language policies of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan (which have each variously elevated national languages at the expense of Russian and minority languages), and the increasingly

influential framework of a pan-Turkic identity to which some community members orient through Turkish language and media. None of these centres supersedes the others. Each exerts its own pull; each generates its own form of inauthenticity for speakers who cannot fully satisfy its demands.

During fieldwork in Uzbekistan, I interviewed members of the Tatar community who had grown up speaking a mixture of Russian, Uzbek, and fragments of Tatar, and who navigated these languages according to the demands of different contexts — Russian for older relatives and formal occasions, Uzbek for interactions with Uzbek neighbours and state institutions, Tatar for the specific occasions (festivals, prayers, greetings) in which ethnic distinctiveness was being claimed. When I asked how they understood their relation to Tatar, several interlocutors expressed a compound of pride, guilt, and longing that resists easy paraphrase. Tatar was their language — the language of their ethnicity, the language their parents and grandparents had spoken — and simultaneously a language from which they felt, in some irreversible way, excluded. The exclusion was not voluntary; it was the cumulative effect of decades of Soviet language policy, post-Soviet demographic change, and the everyday friction of multilingual life in a context where Tatar had no institutional support. They had not abandoned Tatar. They had been separated from it by the force of circumstances. And yet the discourse of Tatar authenticity, as mediated through cultural organisations, diaspora publications, and the authority of community elders, tended to frame linguistic competence as a measure of ethnic seriousness, as evidence of how much one *really* cared about being Tatar.

What this produces is a particular form of what might be called *categorical guilt*: the sense that one's failure to satisfy the requirements of a category to which one is assigned — or which one claims — is a moral failing rather than a consequence of structural conditions. The person who cannot speak Tatar fluently is positioned, in the discourse of authentic Tatariness, not as a victim of language shift and policy but as someone who has not done enough to preserve their heritage. This framing individualises what is in fact a collective, structural process, and in doing so reproduces the ideological naturalization that Silverstein (1979) and Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) identified as central to the operation of language ideology.

4.2 Memory, Loss, and the Haunting of Names

Among the most analytically compelling aspects of the Tatar diaspora material is the role played by linguistic memory — by the recollection of a language that can no longer be fully spoken — in the maintenance of ethnic identity. In Tajikistan, where the civil war of 1992–1997 caused the dispersal of many Tatar families and accelerated language shift to Tajik and Russian, I encountered a pattern of linguistic attachment that cannot be adequately described in the standard terms of either language maintenance or language loss.

Zulfiya, a housewife in her early sixties whom I interviewed in Dushanbe in the summer of 2019, had lost most of her active Tatar through the upheaval of the war years, during which the relatives who had been her primary interlocutors in that language fled the country. She could no longer hold a conversation in Tatar. And yet she recited, without hesitation, a small cluster of phrases that had remained with her across the decades: *Isänmesez* — hello; *xälläregez niçek* — how are you; *barısı da yaxşı bulır* — everything will be fine. These phrases, she explained, were what remained. They were not enough to communicate with. They were enough to locate herself.

What Zulfiya's fragments enact is something that Derrida's concept of the *trace* helps to articulate. For Derrida (1967), a trace is not a remnant of a presence that has passed away. It is, rather, constitutively marked by the absence it indexes: it does not point back to a full, undivided origin but to a differential structure in which presence and absence are always already implicated in each other. The trace of Tatar in Zulfiya's speech is not a diminished version of a language she once had; it is a specific mode of relation to

a language, one shaped precisely by the violence of its loss, and carrying in its fragmentary form the weight of what the fragments stand for: family, dispersal, a world before the war, an ethnicity that must now be maintained through means other than its most obvious medium. The fragments do not fail to be Tatar. They are, in their particular form of partial presence, a specific and irreducible mode of being Tatar.

Derrida's trace concept has been criticised for its abstraction, for the way it can seem to aestheticise loss rather than grapple with its political and historical causes. The point is well taken. What Zulfiya experienced was not an interesting structural condition but the violent dissolution of a community, the death and displacement of people she loved, and the slow erosion of a language that had been the medium of her most important relationships. The theoretical framework does not replace the political analysis; it opens a different angle of vision onto the same material. What the trace concept offers, specifically, is a way of understanding how languages can continue to function as identity resources even in the absence of full competence, how the remnant can do the work of the whole, not as a substitute but as a form of haunting.

The resonance between Zulfiya's linguistic situation and my own experience of *bäläkäy* is not accidental. In both cases, a fragment of a language — insufficient for conversation, insufficient by the standards of any measure of competence — persists as a node of identity, an anchor to a history and a community that the fragment itself cannot fully articulate but can, as it were, point towards. The word I carry from my grandmother is not a piece of Tatar that has survived. It is a trace of a world in which Tatar and Japanese and Russian were woven together in ways that did not require naming, and its survival in my memory marks both the richness of that world and the irreversibility of its transformation. Namelessness, here, takes on yet another dimension: the experience of carrying something that one cannot claim as a language, that has no institutional recognition, that exists only as a sound embedded in an affect — and yet that continues, in its persistence, to constitute something essential about who one is.

4.3 The Institutional Demand: Between Document and Life

The gap between lived language practice and institutional language categorisation is a persistent theme in both my fieldwork data and my own biography, and it is worth examining in some detail, because it is through this gap that the concept of *categorical violence* acquires its most concrete content.

In virtually every formal context — school enrolments, census forms, visa applications, academic registrations — there is a field for *mother tongue* or *native language* or *first language*, presented as though these designations were clear, stable, and unproblematic. The form does not ask how you relate to a language, or what histories are embedded in your use of it, or which language carries your grief and which your professional persona. It asks for a name, and it expects a single one. The administrative logic behind this is comprehensible: categories are necessary for the management of populations, and the clean entry is more useful than the qualified, uncertain, historically burdened one. But the requirement for a clean entry is not politically neutral. It privileges those whose linguistic lives conform to the monolingual norm and burdens those whose lives do not with the necessity of simplification: of choosing an answer that is not quite true, and in some cases of choosing an answer that is not their choice but an assignment made for them.

Makoni and Pennycook (2005) argued that the very existence of named, bounded languages as administrative and educational categories is a product of a particular moment in the history of European colonialism and nationalism, when the project of inventing national languages served the political purpose of constructing unified national communities. The Tatar language, as it exists as an administrative category in contemporary Russia, is both the product of this invention and the site of ongoing ideological contestation about what counts as authentic Tatar, who speaks it correctly, and what its relation is to the other Turkic languages with which it shares genetic and structural features. For diaspora communities in Central Asia,

who may have grown up speaking a variety of Tatar that has absorbed substantial Russian and local language influence, the administrative category *Tatar-speaker* does not map cleanly onto their lived linguistic practice. It is a label that both acknowledges and misrecognises them.

Before specifying what I mean by categorical violence, it is necessary to situate the concept within, and distinguish it from, the several cognate frameworks in critical theory with which it is in dialogue. The concept with the most obvious affinity is Bourdieu's *violence symbolique*, the gentle, invisible violence exercised through the misrecognition, by dominated subjects, of the arbitrariness of the symbolic order to which they are subjected (Bourdieu 1991). Bourdieu's account captures the mechanism by which individuals come to internalise, and reproduce as self-evident, the hierarchies that disadvantage them: the child who concludes that her pronunciation needs to be fixed, rather than that the norm is arbitrary, is enacting precisely this structure of misrecognition. Categorical violence is continuous with symbolic violence in this respect. But Bourdieu's concept operates at the level of the entire field of social reproduction, and is primarily oriented towards class-based distinctions and the accumulation of cultural capital across the educational field. Categorical violence, as I am developing it, is narrower and more specific: it concerns the harm that occurs at the interface between institutional categorisation and biographical experience, not the broad reproduction of legitimate culture but the particular violence of the imposed mismatch between a categorical system and the life it claims to name.

A second cognate concept is Butler's analysis of *injurious speech* in *Excitable Speech* (1997). Butler's concern there is with the wounding force of speech acts — slurs, epithets, hate speech — that hail subjects into degrading subject-positions and, through their reiteration, produce real psychological and social harm. The analysis of Section 2 draws explicitly on Butler's account of interpellation, and her framework illuminates the hailing dimension of the mother tongue question. But what Butler analyses in *Excitable Speech* is primarily the violence of the content of particular utterances directed at identifiable persons: the violence of being called a name. Categorical violence, by contrast, concerns a more impersonal and structural form of harm, not the violence of being called a name but the violence of the naming system itself, which produces injury not through what it asserts but through what it cannot accommodate. The person who cannot answer *What is your mother tongue?* cleanly is not being slurred or interpellated in a degrading subject-position; she is being subjected to the violence of a categorisation that is structurally indifferent to her existence as an outlier. This violence is the more insidious for its air of administrative neutrality: it presents itself as a mere request for information, and requires no hostile intent to inflict its harm.

A third framework is Spivak's (1988) analysis of *epistemic violence* in colonial discourse: the violence through which colonial knowledge production forecloses the speech of subaltern subjects, rendering certain forms of knowledge and experience unspeakable within the dominant episteme. Categorical violence shares with epistemic violence an attention to the silencing effects of hegemonic knowledge structures: the bureaucratic requirement of a mother tongue is not a neutral information request but a demand shaped by historically specific, ideologically loaded assumptions about what a properly constituted linguistic subject looks like, assumptions whose genealogy Makoni and Pennycook have traced through the history of colonial linguistics. Where categorical violence differs from Spivak's epistemic violence is principally in its register. Spivak analyses the macro-level violence of colonial discourse as a system, the structural impossibility of subaltern speech within the colonial episteme. Categorical violence, while equally concerned with structural conditions, is concerned primarily with the granular, biographical encounters through which those conditions are reproduced in the texture of individual lives: the moment of the form, the school correction, the fieldwork question. It is, in this sense, the lived phenomenology of what Spivak maps at the systemic

level, the point at which the macro-structure of categorical exclusion is experienced as a personal inadequacy.

What I mean by categorical violence, then, is something specific: the harm done to persons when the categories through which they are officially named fail to accommodate the complexity of their experience, and when the failure of accommodation is experienced not as a failure of the category but as a failure of the person. The Tatar in Tajikistan who cannot speak literary Tatar fluently but who has grown up in a Tatar family, who carries Tatar memories and Tatar affiliations, is not failed by the category *Tatar-speaker* — she is positioned as failing it. The researcher who cannot answer *What is your mother tongue?* without qualification is not failed by the question — she appears, in the social logic of the encounter, to be confused, or evasive, or unusually complicated. The violence is in this displacement: in the way the inadequacy of the category is experienced as an inadequacy of the self.

Pavlenko (2005), writing about emotions and multilingualism, has documented the affective dimensions of this displacement: the shame, the sense of linguistic inadequacy, the grief of feeling that one does not fully belong to any of the languages one uses. Her analysis focuses largely on second-language learners, but the dynamics she describes apply with equal force to those who cannot identify a *first* language in the required sense. The emotional residue of repeated encounters with categorical demands one cannot satisfy — the minor humiliation of every form that asks for a mother tongue, the larger one of being told by a community member that one's claim to belonging requires verification — accumulates. It does not only shape one's public linguistic behaviour; it shapes one's private relation to language itself, the way one hears one's own speech, the degree to which one feels authorised to speak.

5. Between Names and Namelessness

5.1 The Trace and the Proper Name

The relation between naming and violence is not new to critical theory. Derrida's sustained engagement with the question of the proper name — developed across several texts but perhaps most concentrated in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and the later *The Gift of Death* (1992) — offers a framework for understanding the specific violence of linguistic categorisation that complements and extends the more overtly sociological analyses developed above.

For Derrida, the proper name is a limit-case of the general logic of the sign. It appears to be the purest form of reference, the name that names only this, this individual, this entity, with no general meaning of its own. But this appearance of pure singularity is, for Derrida, precisely what makes the proper name a site of philosophical and political complexity. The proper name does not designate a fixed, self-identical entity; it inscribes that entity in a differential structure, in the play of *différance*: the always-deferred, never fully-present meaning that, for Derrida, characterises all signification. To name something is to fix it in a grid of distinctions, to locate it by its differences from what it is not, and in this fixing — in this apparent gift of identity — there is always also a form of reduction, of what we might call ontological triage: this, and not that; here, and not there; belonging, and not foreign.

The *mother tongue*, understood as a proper name of linguistic selfhood, operates within this logic. It purports to name the most intimate relation between self and language, the language that came first, that one absorbed without effort, that carries the sounds of origin and care. But this apparent intimacy is produced, as I have been arguing, through an ideological process: through the repeated encounter with institutions and discourses that demand the nomination, that require the self to confirm its linguistic address. The mother tongue is not found; it is, in a significant sense, made — made through the process of its nomination, and in being made, it makes the self that claims it. The person who cannot nominate a mother

tongue is not, then, a person who lacks something everyone else naturally has. She is a person in whom the production process has misfired, in whom the ideological machinery of linguistic identity has produced not a subject smoothly installed in a category but a subject caught in the interval between categories, aware of the mechanism because she cannot take its product for granted.

This interval — the space between names — is what I am calling *namelessness*. It is not a vacancy. It is a structural position, one generated by the same processes that generate named linguistic identity, but at their edges, where the categories do not quite cohere. Derrida's concept of the trace illuminates what populates this interval: not nothing, but remnants, half-attached fragments, affects that belong to no single language, memories of sounds that resist transcription. *Bäläkäy*. The fragments of greeting that Zulfıya recited in a language she can no longer speak. These are not failed words. They are traces, carrying, in their partial, haunting presence, the weight of what the names cannot contain.

5.2 Performativity and the Possibility of the Misfire

Butler's theory of performativity, as developed in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and elaborated in *Excitable Speech* (1997), offers a complementary perspective on the dynamics of naming and resistance. Butler's central claim that identity categories are not descriptions of pre-existing essences but are produced through the repeated, regulated citation of norms has direct implications for how we understand linguistic identity. The person who identifies herself as a speaker of Japanese, or Tatar, or English, is not reporting a fact about herself that exists independently of the identification. She is performing an identification that, through its repetition across many contexts and encounters, produces the effect of the stable, natural-seeming category it appears merely to confirm.

The ideological power of language categories rests on their capacity to pass themselves off as descriptions rather than performances, presenting the naming of a mother tongue as the recognition of something already there, rather than as a citational act that constitutes what it names. This is what Butler means by the *naturalization* of performative constructions: through their repeated citation, contingent constructions come to appear necessary, chosen performances come to appear as facts of nature. The discipline of linguistic correctness analysed in Section 3 can be understood, in Butlerian terms, as the training of the subject to cite the appropriate norms, to perform the right relationship to the right language, to produce, through repeated regulatory encounter, the properly singular, properly hierarchical linguistic identity that the ideological order requires.

But Butler is equally insistent that the performative process is inherently unstable, subject to what she calls *performative failure*: the possibility that the citation will not reproduce the norm but will displace it, distort it, produce something other than what was called for. This possibility is structural rather than merely accidental: it arises from the fact that citation is always a repetition with difference, always a performance in a new context that cannot be identical to the contexts in which the norm was previously instantiated. The self who cannot answer the mother tongue question cleanly is enacting, in the minor register of hesitation and qualification, this structural possibility of misfire. She is not transcending the norm — she remains addressed by it, caught in its demand — but she is, in the gap of her inadequate response, making visible the constructed character of what the norm presents as natural.

Butler's later work in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) extends this analysis in a direction that is particularly germane to the autoethnographic dimensions of this paper. Butler argues there that the self who attempts to give a coherent narrative account of herself is always already constituted by conditions — of language, of social recognition, of historical formation — that she did not choose and cannot render fully transparent to herself. The opacity of the self to itself is not a deficiency to be corrected by more searching

introspection; it is a structural condition of subjectivity, arising from the fact that one comes to be as a subject through the social norms and linguistic categories that precede one's capacity for self-reflection. What this implies for the question of namelessness is significant: the person who cannot answer *What is your mother tongue?* clearly is not simply failing to provide information she possesses. She is encountering the limits of the available narrative — the limits of what the categories permit her to say about herself. Her difficulty in answering is not a symptom of confusion but a trace of the structural opacity Butler is describing: the way that the social conditions of one's linguistic formation always exceed one's capacity to render them transparent in the terms the question provides.

This opacity, Butler argues, far from being a moral or epistemic failing, is the very condition that makes genuine ethical encounter possible. Because no subject can give a fully transparent account of herself, the demand for such an account — the demand to produce a clear, unambiguous answer to the question of identity — is itself a form of violence: a demand for a coherence that the structure of subjectivity cannot deliver and that the ideological machinery of categorisation imposes from without. To acknowledge the limits of self-narration is not to fail at ethics; it is to engage honestly with the conditions of one's formation. Applied to the language politics of this paper, this means that the refusal — or inability — to answer the mother tongue question clearly is not merely a symptom of ideological disruption. It is, at its best, an enactment of the opacity that any honest account of linguistic selfhood would have to acknowledge. The interval between names that I have been calling namelessness is the space in which the structural opacity of the subject becomes visible, the space in which the demand for categorical clarity confronts the irreducible complexity of a life in language.

The Tatar diaspora communities of Central Asia have developed, in response to the conditions of categorical violence described in Section 4, a range of practices that can be understood as creative citations of Tatar identity that do not depend on linguistic competence in the ways that dominant language ideology would require. The celebration of the spring festival *Sabantuy*, the preparation of specific foods, the maintenance of kinship networks that are understood as Tatar networks even when their members communicate in Russian or Uzbek — these are performances of Tatariness that work through means other than language, that sustain identity through the citation of cultural content that has been partially detached from its linguistic medium. As I argued in Sakurama-Nakamura (2025), this polycentric negotiation of authenticity is not a compromise or a diminishment but a specific and sophisticated response to the conditions of diaspora life, a way of inhabiting the category *Tatar* that preserves its meaningfulness while transforming its substance.

What Butler's account adds to this analysis is a way of understanding these cultural performances not as workarounds for the loss of language but as performative productions of identity in their own right, as citational practices that, by repeating Tatar cultural forms in new contexts and through new means, produce the Tatar subject rather than merely expressing a Tatar essence that was already there. And what her account of opacity adds further is a way of understanding why the demand that Tatar community members give a transparent, linguistically grounded account of their Tatar identity — the demand implicit in the discourse of authentic Tatariness examined in Section 4 — is not merely difficult to satisfy but structurally misconceived. The demand presupposes a kind of self-transparency that no subject can achieve; it mistakes the ideological product of categorisation for a natural given. What the community members in question know, in the bodily register of their practices and their affects, exceeds what the category Tatar-speaker can contain. Their opacity to the category is not a measure of their insufficiency. It is a measure of the category's.

6. Conclusion

I return, at the end, to the questions with which this paper began. *What is your mother tongue? How many languages do you know?*

I have not answered them. I want to be clear that this is not evasion, or not only evasion. It is the outcome of an analysis that takes seriously what these questions do, and what they presuppose, and what they exclude. The paper has argued that these questions are not neutral information requests but ideological interventions that hail subjects into a pre-constituted categorical order. That this order is experienced as natural — as simply describing a reality that exists independently of the question — is the primary effect of the language ideological processes analysed throughout these pages.

The genealogy of my own linguistic self has proceeded through several phases: a pre-categorical stratum of language experience, embedded in the voice and household of my grandmother, in which Tatar and Japanese and Russian were folded into each other without announcement; an encounter with the disciplinary apparatus of schooling, which installed in me the normative framework of the correct language and the mother tongue; a fieldwork context in which the researcher became the researched, in which my own partial and inadequate claim to Tatar membership was subjected to the same evaluative scrutiny I was bringing to others; and a sustained theoretical engagement with the resources required to understand what this history means, and what it might ask of us.

The Tatar diaspora communities of Central Asia have lived these questions more dramatically, with greater material stakes, and across longer historical timescales than I have. The dispersal wrought by the Tajik Civil War, the erosion of language competence across generations, the complicated negotiations of belonging in post-Soviet national contexts — these are not merely illustrative material for an autoethnographic argument. They are the conditions of life of real communities, and the categorical violence they have experienced has real consequences for how people understand themselves, maintain their cultural ties, and transmit their identities to their children. The concept of categorical violence, as I have developed it here — distinguished from but continuous with Bourdieu's symbolic violence, Butler's injurious speech, and Spivak's epistemic violence — is offered as a contribution to the analysis of this specific harm: the harm that occurs when the inadequacy of the category is displaced onto the person the category fails to name.

If there is something to be learned from placing my experience alongside theirs, it is not that the experiences are equivalent — they are not — but that they share a structural logic, and that understanding this structural logic may contribute something to the larger project of thinking about what language ideology does to persons, and what persons can do in return.

What persons can do in return, this paper has suggested, is something considerably more limited than a full refusal of categorisation. Categories are socially real; they cannot be transcended by individual will or theoretical critique. Zulfiya cannot stop being assessed by the norms of Tatar linguistic authenticity by knowing that those norms are ideologically constructed. I cannot stop being hailed by the question *What is your mother tongue?* by having written a paper about its ideological force. The categories continue to operate; the interpellations continue to arrive; the examination continues, in every form that asks for a first language.

What is possible, I want to suggest, is something different from refusal: a mode of inhabiting the interval, of occupying the namelessness, that transforms it from a site of shame or confusion into a site of critical awareness. This is not a solution to the problem of categorical violence. It is, rather, the specific epistemic position that the experience of namelessness makes available, a position from which the constructed character of language categories becomes visible precisely because one cannot take their product for granted.

Those who can answer the mother tongue question easily do not typically notice the ideological work the question performs. Those who cannot are, in a sense, its involuntary analysts.

The opacity of the self to the categories through which it is named — an opacity that Butler's account of self-narration helps us understand not as a failing but as a structural condition — becomes, in the interval of namelessness, something one can learn to inhabit rather than to mourn. The Tatar community members of Dushanbe who maintain their ethnicity through food, festival, and kinship rather than through linguistic fluency are not inhabiting a diminished form of Tatariness. They are demonstrating, in practice, what a theoretically informed account of performativity and opacity can illuminate: that identity is constituted through the full range of one's citational practices, and that the authority of language to serve as the primary measure of ethnic belonging is itself an ideological imposition, not a natural fact.

Bäläkäy. The word remains. It does not belong to any language in which I can claim full competence. It belongs, perhaps, to the stratum of experience that precedes and exceeds the categories — to what Busch calls the *Spracherleben*, the lived experience of language, that no taxonomy can fully contain. I carry it not as a relic of a lost authenticity but as evidence of something the categorical order cannot account for: the way that language, in its most intimate register, exceeds the names we give it.

Between names and namelessness, there is no resolution. There is only the ongoing work of attending to what the names fail to say.

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