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SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN LADAKH  
(DEVELOPMENT OF THE WRITTEN LADAKHI LANGUAGE)

Dissertation Summary  
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### **Dissertation Overview**

The present dissertation is dedicated to the language of Ladakhi, one of the relatively "small" languages of modern Asia, and the problems it is facing while establishing itself as a written language.

In the past, the historic region of Ladakh was a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir of the Republic of India. In 2019, Ladakh officially became a union territory. Ladakh is situated at the junction between three actual states (India, Pakistan, and China) and also between three or even four cultural traditions: Indian per se (i.e. mostly Hindu), Indo-Muslim, Tibetan (Buddhist) and Chinese (indirectly). For many centuries, Ladakh, which gained independence in the 10th century AC, was a part of the Tibetan (Buddhist) cultural milieu and an important logistic gateway on the Silk Road. During the modern age, Ladakh found itself on the periphery of the Mughal Empire and became somehow influenced by its culture, although always remaining in cultural contact with Central Tibet.

In the first half of the 19th century, Ladakh was absorbed by the principality of Jammu, whose culture could then be described as a mix of Hindu and Muslim elements. By the second half of the century, Ladakh, together with the rest of the principality, became a part of the British Raj and stayed as such for about a century (being actually a sleepy region of the peripheral native state, therefore under insignificant influence of the European metropole). In 1947, Kashmir became the apple of discord between two new states, India and Pakistan. After the military conflict was over, a part of the historic Ladakh lands went over to Pakistan. In early 1960s, its second part, Aksai Chin, also became

the cause for disagreement between India and China, and is yet considered a disputed territory (controlled by the PRC). After the PRC went on to fully controlling Tibet in the late 1950s (this region is now officially called the Tibet Autonomous Region of China"), the centuries-old connections between Ladakh and Tibet were broken and almost eliminated. It is anyway worth mentioning that there was a fairly large Tibetan diaspora in India, headed by the Dalai Lama, who sometimes makes personal visits to Ladakh.

The Ladakhi idiom is mostly spoken in Ladakh, and also in those parts of China and Pakistan that are adjacent to today's Ladakh. Most Ladakhi people consider Tibetan and Ladakhi to be a single language and often refer to them using the linguonym "Bhoti".

Since the formation of the principality of Ladakh, classical Tibetan used to be the main written language here, but other idioms were also used for verbal communication. Also, local spoken language was often replenished with borrowings from the languages spoken by the merchants who passed through Ladakh on their way along the Silk Road. Colloquial forms of Ladakhi coexisted with written Tibetan, on terms of diglossia. Indian researcher Sanyukta Koshal in her "Ladakhi Grammar", published in 1979, mentioned that if the Ladakh needed to write something then they would use classical Tibetan, while Ladakhi per se was only used for speaking.

During the forty years that have passed since, there has been significant change in this field. There are several dozens of books in Ladakhi, both original and translated. An attempt has been made to issue a magazine in colloquial Ladakhi. The need for turning Ladakhi into a full-scale written (literary) language is an issue that provokes extensive discussions in Ladakh today, attracting increasing attention both within and outside the area.

This dissertation contemplates the following aspects: the history of Ladakhi studies, the current state (functionality) of Ladakhi in its sociopolitical

context, and discussions on the future of Ladakhi. We also make an attempt to see Ladakhi from a wider, historical and comparative perspective.

The **relevance** of this study is more than evident. It is exactly now (during the recent decades) that India's central government has been discussing the future state policy with regard to the Ladakhi language and some other idioms of the Tibeto-Burman group spoken by various ethnic groups in India next to the Himalayas that practice (Tibetan) Buddhism and use classical Tibetan for religious purposes (and for other ones, too, using it as the main and maybe even the only language). Indian political tradition suggests considering this issue in the context of including all those languages (under the "umbrella" term of classical Tibetan, called Bhoti for a sort of political correctness) into the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

The **academic novelty** of this dissertation consists in the fact that almost no one has performed any studies of Ladakhi in Russia before. There is also scarce scientific literature on the topic in European languages as well. As for our particular topic (the establishment of Ladakhi as a written language), it has not been studied at all so far.

This is the first dissertation containing a detailed description of the functionality of the Ladakhi idiom, its establishment as a written language, and the factors contributing to the process.

Also, the first chapter gives a fairly detailed description of Ladakh's geography and history, which is also essential to understand the linguistic situation in the region.

Thus, the **study subject** here is the Ladakhi idiom and its establishment as a written language.

The **purpose** of our study is to describe and analyze the sociolinguistic situation in Ladakh and the process of Ladakhi's establishment as a written language, as well as to define the factors contributing to the process.

Following the given purpose, we have formulated the following research **tasks**:

- analyze the theoretic literature on the problem;
- perform a field study in the region;
- analyze the language policy with regard to Ladakhi, at national and state levels;
- describe the current functionality and status of the Ladakhi idiom;
- collect and analyze written sources in Ladakhi.

This research is, to a great extent, interdisciplinary. Its **theoretic and methodological principles** are mostly based on studies in sociolinguistics, sociology and anthropology by Russian and foreign authors such as Ch. A. Ferguson, S. Kvale, G. R. Gibbs, M. Angrosino, U. Flick, N. Tournadre, I. F. Devyatko, B. A., Uspensky, E. M. Volf, and M. M. Gukhman.

For the purposes of studying Ladakhi sources, we have recourse to the works of A.G. Franke, G. A. Grierson, S. Conow, Biren Banerjee, Sanyukta Koshal, Konchok Tashi, Bakula Rangdol Nima, Bettina Zeisler and Rebecca Norman. In 2010-2011, we performed field studies in Ladakh, using such principal methods as overt and participant observation, historical accounts analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews.

It is commonly known that sociolinguistics is an interdisciplinary science. However, apart from sociolinguistic studies themselves, this dissertation has experienced great influence of Russian studies in the history of various languages, above all the so-called "literary languages history" research trend, a specifically Russian phenomenon, from V.F. Shishmaryov's studies on the history of Italian language to a series of multi-authored monographs edited by the Literary Languages Theory Task Group of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Linguistics.

Within the dissertation, Ladakh's linguistic situation is analyzed both synchronously and diachronically, as well as typologically, in comparison with

other regions and countries. Given all that, one can hope that our dissertation makes its contribution to addressing the problem that M. Gukhman has formulated in the following way in the first book within the above-mentioned series: developing a "common typology of linguistic situations".

The **materials** for the study are as follows:

- texts written in colloquial Ladakhi;
- various types of official materials from Ladakh's local authorities;
- scientific publications;
- grammar descriptions of the Ladakhi idiom;
- interviews with people of Ladakh and the researchers working there;
- a report of the special-purpose research group of the Central Institute for Indian Languages concerning the inclusion of the Bhoti language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

The **field materials** were collected during the author's visits of Ladakh in 2010-2011. In 2011, the author did an internship at the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies, found near Leh, the capital of Ladakh. Her informants included students of the Institutes, people from Leh and the nearby villages (random sampling), teachers of the Central Institute for Buddhist Studies and the Moravian mission school, authors, scientists, clergy representatives (including the imam of Leh's mosque, the pastor of the Moravian church, the person who translated the Bible into Ladakhi, local lamas), and the researchers working in Ladakh.

Initially, it was planned to perform the questionnaire survey based on the data taken from the sociolinguistic encyclopedia called The Written Languages of the World. In 1989, the volume dedicated to Indian languages was published in the series, describing Ladakhi among other ones. However, it took as little as a few questionnaires to understand that most data from that description was outdated. It is, first and foremost, due to the fact that Ladakhi had never been used as a literary language as we were gathering materials for this study. But,

only four years after the publication of the said volume, a Ladakhi-language magazine appeared, along with translations and even original works written in Ladakhi (including a translation of the Dhammapada and the Quranic sutra of Al-Baqara).

It should also be taken into consideration that Ladakhi people generally do not tell Ladakhi from classical Tibetan, considering the former to be a colloquial variant of the latter. This is, among other things, the reason why all the literature mentioned in the aforesaid volume of the sociolinguistic encyclopedia in the Ladakhi section is actually written in classical Tibetan.

Given the changed language situation in Ladakh and the support of the inclusion of Bhoti into the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, the existing sociolinguistic characteristics of the Ladakhi language have to be updated in a comprehensive manner. This requires a huge work to be done, only implementable by a research group, not by an individual researcher.

This dissertation, as already mentioned, contemplates principally the problems of Ladakhi's establishing as a written language and the general sociolinguistic situation in which this establishing is taking place.

**The following statements are brought for defense:**

1. In today's India (and Southern Asia in general), the establishing of languages (particularly, written ones) is a process that is far from completed. Ladakhi is one of Southern Asia's numerous spoken idioms that could well become an independent written language under favorable conditions.

2. Today, Ladakhi is not quite widely used in writing, although its use has grown considerably over the recent decades. Whether Ladakhi should or should not become a written language is at issue in the area. Most well-educated Buddhists and Muslims strongly object to Ladakhi becoming a written language.

3. For a long time, classical Tibetan was used as the written language in Ladakh, while Ladakhi developed alongside as a spoken idiom. The term diglossia, as modified by B.A. Uspensky, would perhaps work best in this

situation: a "high" form of a language opposed to the "low" one as sacral to secular. Traditional native speakers, at the same time, believe both forms to make a "single language".

4. The Ladakhi problem is a part of a wider problem about language formation and language policies in Northern India. In several Indian states found in the Himalaya region (Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh), there are ethnic groups that practice Tibetan forms of Buddhism and use classical Tibetan as written and sacral language (while using other spoken languages, which are still cognate to Tibetan, just as Ladakhi is). The local elite prefers referring to Tibetan (classical and any modern dialects) as Bhoti. A few decades ago, these states gave birth to a movement for the inclusion of the Bhoti language into the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Many educated Buddhists from Ladakh linked on thereto as well. This issue is currently being considered by India's central government.

5. The future of Ladakhi as an independent written (literary) language depends on certain circumstances, to-wit, Ladakh's socio-political progress and the relationships of various social (and religious) groups; the decisions to be taken by local authorities and by the central government; the development of the situations in the adjacent Himalayan states of India; and, finally, on the sociopolitical and cultural development of the Republic of India in general.

The **theoretical relevance of the research** is that this is the first time ever that the sociolinguistic situation in Ladakh is analyzed scientifically, and thereby a base is created for further studies in the theoretical sociolinguistics. Also, this research contributes to the studies of linguistic situations' typologies and standardization of written languages in general.

The **practical relevance** of the research is that its results can be used for developing language policies in multi-language countries and regions, and to reconstruct the full picture of the linguistic processes that are taking place in India.



The research information can be used by high school teachers for making lectures about India's sociolinguistic situation; the first chapter can also be included into a course on Indian and Tibetan history, since for Russian researchers Ladakh is currently contemplated outside the all-Indian context.

**The research results have been presented** at the following seminars and conferences:

1) The Movement for the Autonomy of Ladakh: The Linguistic and Religious Aspects // Under the South Asian Sky, conference at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow, May 23–24, 2012), panel: India: The Prospects for Development Today;

2) Ladakhi: Becoming a Literary Language? // ICOSAL-10, the Tenth International Conference on South Asian Languages and Literatures (Moscow, July 5–7, 2012);

3) A Historiographical Sketch of Ladakh // The History of Oriental Studies, the 3<sup>rd</sup> All-Russian conference (Moscow, November 11–12, 2015);

4) The Moravian Mission to Ladakh. “Tibetan” Christianity and the Moravian Brothers’ Contribution to the Development of the Ladakhi Language // 27<sup>th</sup> Zograf Readings (Saint Petersburg, May 11–13, 2016);

5) Development of the Written Ladakhi Language // The 24th Himalayan Languages Symposium (Lucknow, India, June 8–10, 2018).

**Structure of the Research:** The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a reference list, and several schedules.

### **Highlights of the Dissertation**

The **Introduction** gives a brief description of the subject matter, objectives, tasks and general methodology of the dissertation.

The first chapter, "**Ladakh History and Geography**", offers some historical and geographical information necessary to have an understanding of

Ladakh's sociolinguistic situation today. There is also an overview of Ladakh's historiography. As said before, this territory has been a part of Tibetan cultural environment for many centuries, however for certain geographical and historical reasons Ladakh (similar to Bhutan and Sikkim, among others) became somehow separated from that world, experiencing rather the influence of other cultures, Indo-Muslim above all, and then also modern European (Christian). Obviously, these circumstances became the reason why a local spoken idiom appeared, cognate to but different from classical Tibetan (similar to the way it also happened in Bhutan and Sikkim). In the second part of the 20th century, some speakers of that idiom (possibly influenced by the general linguistic trends in India) felt urged to give it the status of a full-scale written language.

The second chapter, "**Linguistic Aspects of Ladakhi**", gives an analytical review of today's research literature about Ladakhi and today's coverage of this idiom in research literature, as well as describes the principal problems and stages of the corresponding research as performed by modern linguists. Ladakhi studies began when A.G. Franke, a Moravian missionary, arrived in Ladakh in 1896. In 1901, Franke issued his first article on Ladakhi grammar, in 1905 he published the Ladakhi version of the Geseriade that he had put down, and in 1908, he published his own Ladakhi translation of St. Mark's Gospel. The next stage of Ladakhi studies has to do with the name of George A. Grierson, the author of the Linguistic Survey of India, hereinafter referred to as LSI. Ladakhi is covered in LSI's third volume (1927), in the section dedicated to "Tibetan dialects". This section was written by the Norwegian linguist Sten Conow together with A.G. Franke. George A. Grierson, well aware of the conventionality of the difference between "language" and "dialect", still preferred using the term "language" in relation to the classical (written) Tibetan only. As for the array of Himalayan idioms, including Ladakhi, he referred to them as "Tibetan dialects" (the term 'idiom' was not yet in use back then). These terms are accepted by many tibetologists up to these days, maybe because "classical"

tibetology traditionally pays more attention to written Tibetan, passing up the "dialects".

It was not until the 1970s that the government of the Republic of India opened the borders of Ladakh, which used to be a closed frontier area. That marked a new stage in Ladakhi studies. S. Koshal became the first new-generation researcher to study Ladakhi. She conducted her studies with the support of Mysore's Central Institute of Indian Languages. In 1979, Koshal published a detailed Ladakhi grammar. Linguists from her generation and the next one have no doubts anymore that Ladakhi can be considered an independent language.

It is worth noticing that the first Ladakhi reference book in Ladakhi grammar written by a Ladakhi person was only published in 2005. Its author, the monk Bakula Rangdol Nima, has also translated the Dhammapada from Tibetan into Ladakhi.

Today, there are several European and American researchers deeply involved in Ladakhi studies. Bettina Zeisler and Rebecca Norman are worth mentioning in the first place. Among other factors, Western researchers pay attention to the history of Ladakhi, its comparison to classical Tibetan and its own dialect breakdown. This dissertation gives a comparative analysis of various schemes of Ladakhi dialect breakdown and a conclusion that the dialectological studies of Ladakhi (and the neighboring languages, particularly the Balti, cognate to Ladakhi) are far from being complete. At the same time, the materials of the existing research show that the supradialectal norm is gradually becoming the idiom of Leh, the capital of Ladakh.

The third and main chapter of the dissertation is called **"Establishment of a Written Language: Ladakh Disputing over Ladakhi"**. This chapter is dedicated to the current state of Ladakhi (within the general sociolinguistic situation in Ladakh), with special emphasis made on the process of Ladakhi's establishment as a written language.

The linguistic situation that is currently characteristic for Ladakhi can be described as poliglossy and/or multilingualism. A Ladakhi person can use several languages for different, not overlapping (mutually complementary) purposes that exist in a certain hierarchy. They speak Ladakhi in their daily life. For religious purposes, Buddhists have classical Tibetan, while Muslims use Arabic. To communicate with any kind of authorities, one would use Urdu, Hindi, or English. They are likely to understand their Balti neighbors even if each one of them speaks their own language. Should they need to contact their neighbors, the Dogras or the Kashmiri, colloquial Hindustani will do.

It is important to notice that the main identity factor for the Ladakhi is not the language but the religion. In daily life, both Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh mostly use Ladakhi. However, the Muslims consider Arabic and Urdu to be "their" languages, since the Quran is written in Arabic and Urdu is the literary language of their Kashmiri brothers in faith, also associated with Islam. Meanwhile, Ladakhi Muslims often cannot understand Arabic. For Ladakhi people, language is inseparable from writing, and often the two even become one. A writing system, just like a language, is perceived as an integral part of some religion. Thus, many Ladakhi Muslims do not want to learn to read in their language because it uses the Tibetan ("Buddhist") writing.

The use of Ladakhi is considerably limited, especially when it comes to written forms. The overwhelming majority of officials and educators in Ladakh still believes that Ladakhi is not an individual language but merely a spoken form of classical Tibetan, and should remain as such. Now that Ladakhi is gradually becoming a written language, the advocates of its development have to handle many problems caused by the fact that Ladakhi has long been a "low" language in a situation of diglossia.

One problem in the development of written Ladakhi is that it is written using the same sacred script as the Buddhist canon, therefore the written texts in Ladakhi are often understood as ungrammatical classical Tibetan, while any

attempt to introduce changes into the spelling or grammar of the classical language is seen as blasphemy.

The correlation between classical Tibetan and Ladakhi can be compared to that between Latin and some Romanic language at the initial stage of its establishment. In other words, today's Ladakh is like Western Europe many centuries ago, in terms of languages. However, there are at least three significant differences. Firstly, Ladakhi is spoken by a comparatively thin ethnic group surrounded by many other, far more numerous ones. Secondly, Ladakh today is a part of the multilingual Republic of India. And thirdly, globalization is something that inevitably influences the linguistic situation almost anywhere on Earth.

Anyway, the comparison to Romanic (as well as Modern-Indian) languages gives us hope that Ladakhi will also leave its current subordinate position in the diglossic pair. It is evident that the "liberation" of Ladakhi depends not on its actual linguistic characteristics but on other factors of political and general cultural nature.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation is called **"The Report of the Central Institute of Indian Languages: Trying to Find the Middle Way"**.

In the Constitution of India, there is the Eighth Schedule listing out the languages that have special status, the so-called scheduled languages. A language on this list gains both financial support and higher status. For the central government this is evidently a means to settle or at least to mitigate local political problems. Before some of these languages were included into the Eighth Schedule, there was certain turbulence initiated by the speakers of these languages and the advocates of their "promotion".

During the recent decades, the so-called Bhoti movement has been in place in several northern Indian states, supporting the inclusion of the Bhoti language into the Eighth Schedule. This term is currently often used as an umbrella one to refer to an array of languages: classical Tibetan, on one side, and certain spoken languages (idioms) of northern (Himalayan) India, provided that their speakers

use (or would like to use) classical Tibetan as the language of religion (Buddhism). Those who use the linguonym "Bhoti" in that context, are either sincerely or somewhat histrionically proclaiming that Bhoti is "a single language". The Bhoti movement, whose history has not been studied well so far, seems to have appeared somewhere outside of Ladakh. However, many Ladakhi officials joined it eagerly. Since then, the movement must have gained such a momentum that it became impossible to ignore it on the official level.

In 2008, the Central Institute of Indian Languages formed a special task group to handle the Bhoti issue. In 2010, the Institute presented a progress report. The authors seem to have done their best to follow the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way, taking into account the opinions and requirements of various political, religious and secular agents, as well as simple people's needs, and trying to bring various, sometimes even contradicting judgments into accordance, convincing the officials that Bhoti is definitely worth being included into the Eighth Schedule. In short, the authors of the Report suggest keeping the region in question diglossic, i.e. allowing classical Tibetan (as the language of tradition and high culture) coexist with younger (living) languages, which should also be supported in their development.

Whether these suggestions are feasible and how the Bhoti-speaking people will react to them, remains yet to be seen. Anyway, it is evident that the problem of Ladakhi's establishment as an independent written language, despite its specificity, is merely a particular case from among other similar ones in Indian Himalaya region, and across the entire India, too. Moreover, the Institute's Report suggests that the future of Ladakhi as an independent written language could depend not only and not so much on the situation in Ladakh itself but rather on the development of the linguistic situation in all the Bhoti-speaking parts of India and also on the government's attitude toward the linguistic issues in these regions.

In March 2020, India's Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Arjun Ram Meghwal, responding to a requirement to include Rajasthani, Bhojpuri and Bhoti into the Eighth Schedule, mentioned that the answer could well be positive.

In the **Conclusion**, we summarize the research and give our view of the possible future development of the Ladakhi language.

The Schedules include a map of Ladakh, the list of our informants and a list of "Ladakhi"-language literature published by the Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, found in Leh.

The reference list includes over 190 titles of works published in Russian, Ladakhi, Tibetan, Urdu, Hindi, English, German, and French.

The author has published the following articles on the dissertation topic:

1. *Komissaruk E. L.* The Ladakhi Language and the History of Ladakhi Studies // The East. Afro-Asiatic Societies: History and Modernity. 2014. № 5. Pp. 178-184.
2. *Komissaruk E. L.* A Historiographical Sketch of Ladakh // Bulletin of the Russian State University for the Humanities. History. Philology. Cultural Studies. Oriental Studies. 2016. № 3 (12). Pp. 61–67.
3. *Komissaruk E. L.* The Written Language Debate in Ladakh: The Conservative and Reformist Opinions // Oriental Studies (Bulletin of the Kalmyk Institute for Humanities of the Russian Academy of Sciences). 2021. № 6. Pp. 158–171.
4. *Komissaruk E. L.* Moravian Church in Ladakh. The Moravian Brothers' Contribution to the Development of Ladakhi // Bulletin of the Russian State University for the Humanities. History. Philology. Cultural Studies. Oriental Studies. 2012. № 20. Pp. 169–189.
5. *Komissaruk E. L.* The Fight for Ladakh's Own Language: The Story of One Journal // Observatory of Culture. 2015. № 2. Pp. 137-142.

6. *Komissaruk E. L.* A Mission to Ladakh // The Oriental Collection, 2012. № 3. Pp. 112–125.