One of the perks offered to faculty at Nazarbayev University is a free campus apartment. When I was hired last year, I was pleased to be offered this accommodation. Not only did it mean not having to pay rent, but it meant not having to house-hunt in the unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environment of Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan. Now that I’m here, I find myself living on a construction site. It is frequently loud and muddy, and the path from my apartment block to work shifts on a somewhat regular basis. New paths are built in one direction, and new barriers erected in another. My confusion, however, is counterbalanced by the pleasure of seeing the miniature city of a new university campus rising up from the mud and the chaos. In the mere ten months since my arrival, buildings that were only steel frameworks now have proper façades, furnished insides, and faculty occupants. The university is now in its fourth year of operations, and our first class of undergraduate students will celebrate their commencement at the end of the current term.

The students who come to this new university feel enormous pressure from their families to study something practical and lucrative, much more so than the American students I taught in graduate school. Most intend study science or engineering, or perhaps economics or political science. My anthropology classes are largely populated by students fulfilling general education requirements, and few are excited about anthropology to begin with. Yet, once my students and I are in the classroom together, I find that teaching linguistic anthropology here is easier than I expected, insofar as I can readily connect concepts to students’ concrete realities. Nazarbayev University’s classes are, with a few exceptions, delivered entirely in English. Most of my students grew up speaking Russian at home, but all of them must pass a proficiency test in Kazakh to graduate; for some, this requires extensive Kazakh language instruction, which the university provides.

My students struggle actively with issues of language, ideology, and nation-building, not just as a matter of philosophy, but as a matter of getting their homework done. My students struggle actively with issues of language, ideology, and nation-building, not just as a matter of philosophy, but as a matter of getting their homework done. Their choice to study here is often motivated, at least in part, by the political economies of language that make knowledge of English a valuable commodity. Likewise, it would be a challenge for them to make it to graduation without contemplating the developing relationships between the Kazakh language, Kazakh ethnicity, and Kazakhstani nationality. What does it mean for ethnic Ukrainians or Uzbeks to study Kazakh? What does it mean for ethnic Kazakhs to learn “their” language as adults? Which varieties of Kazakh are enshrined in the textbooks we use? Do my Kazakh-speaking students speak the language forms we will later test them on? I hope that my classes have a meta-educational aspect to them, one that helps them to explore why they are learning what they are learning.

As a teacher, I too am probably more sensitive to language issues here (as if, as a linguist, I wasn’t sensitive enough already). I did my dissertation fieldwork in Japan, in a language I first started studying when I was a teenager. Astana is a wholly new linguistic environment for me. Russian is the dominant language of signage and commerce, but I hear Kazakh around me too—mostly, I can tell the difference from the lack of cognates. The practical necessities of buying food and getting around town have pushed me back into language study at a stage in my career when I might otherwise feel
confident in my skills. Recently, at the campus pharmacy, I was muddling my way through buying cold medicine. The frustrated pharmacist, after several failed attempts to explain what was in the package, thrust the medicine at a student behind me and asked him to help. I was more than a little mortified at what would elsewhere be a violation of privacy; the only thing that tempered the embarrassment was that it was not my student. As a counterpoint to the clueless foreigner treatment I receive as an Anglophone Caucasian, my Chinese-Canadian friend is often assumed to be Kazakh and is publicly scolded for not behaving more appropriately or speaking the language. The ideas about language, ethnicity, and nationality that I explore with my students have consequences for even mundane interactions.

Navigating the city with my developing Russian skills, however haplessly, provides me with a wealth of new examples to bring back to class about how language choice, grammatical rules, and norms of usage affect everyday interaction. Even the problem of how students should address a professor in class and via email is more complicated when Russian and Kazakh norms for polite address are taken into account. Kazakh honorification would affix a kin term to my given name, while in Russian, professors are typically addressed by first name and patronymic. In neither language is a title like "professor" usual, and I feel strange insisting on one here. I may have professorial authority in the classroom, but outside it, I sometimes feel tremendously vulnerable.

Anthropologists tend to highlight the contrast between "home" and "the field." I don't know yet what it means for my research and teaching to be in a third place that is neither. I find myself struggling with cultural adjustment in ways similar to fieldwork, but more intense. I prepared for fieldwork with extensive reading and language study in a way I never prepared for Astana, so there have been more surprises. But like fieldwork, and like the physical and institutional mud and chaos around me, I think the discomfort I feel is the sort that I think anthropologists tend to find productive. I tell my statistically-minded students that anthropology is more about discovering possible ways for people to do things, rather than finding generalizations that apply to everyone. My hope is that having a third point of comparison will help to bring my view of those possibilities into three dimensions.

Erika Alpert is at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA Contributing Editors Aaron Ansell (aansell@vt.edu) or Anna Babel (babel.6@osu.edu).