The commodifying effect of global capitalism on language highlights tensions between linguistic practices and ideology (Duchêne & Heller, 2011). Heller (2010) singles out the key sites of globalization – tourism, marketing, language teaching, translation, communications, and performance art – that show how language as symbolic capital not only frames meaning, social relations or identities, but becomes a resource with inherent exchange value. Although the ideology of language ”as a whole, bounded system, consistent with the territorial boundaries of the nation state” (Heller 2010: 102) is not at stake per se, the role of language in late capitalism tests the limits of this ideology and its capacity to explain language as social activity.

The focus of this paper is on Lithuania, where government policies continue to limit the use of Russian in education, linguistic landscapes and the media, while the local economy has recognized proficiency in Russian as a commodity with inherent exchange value. Business associations campaign for a more pragmatic approach in dealing with Russian, call for simplified visa regulations and for an end to the ban to display Russian in the public sphere. This is particularly salient with regard to the health care industry, a sector of the economy that grew significantly in the past years because of patients from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine seeking treatment at local private clinics. Marketed for their ’European’ standards and competitive prices, the medical industry refers to their staff’s proficiency in Russian and their knowledge of Russian culture in general. The accommodation of Russian-speakers challenges commonly held perceptions on the value of language in the formation of political and cultural identities, pointing towards a paradigmatic shift and renegotiation of language attitudes in post-colonial settings.

Keywords: Russian, language ideologies, language commodification.