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Sociolinguistic Situation of the Minority Languages of the Indigenous Peoples of the Far North

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2010-03-23 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Bulatova, Nadezhda Ya. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002608

Chapter 10**Sociolinguistic Situation of the Minority Languages of the Indigenous Peoples of the Far North****Nadezhda Ya. Bulatova***Institute of Linguistic Research, Russian Academy of Sciences*

The indigenous peoples who have long inhabited the Far North and Far East as well as western, eastern and southern Siberia, which constitutes about 64 per cent of the territory of the Russian Federation, speak languages that belong to different language families: Altaic, which includes the Tungus-Manchurian, Mongolian and Turkic languages; Uralic, which includes Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic; Chukchee-Kamchadal; Eskimo-Aleut; and the isolated languages of Ket, Nivkh, and Yukagir. The latter two groups together with the three isolated languages are traditionally referred to as the Paleosiberian or Paleoasiatic languages. Twenty-six peoples of this region are traditionally referred to as the peoples of the Far North («народности Севера»), and their languages generally described as Northern languages. In recent years, however, terms such as “the language minorities of the Far North” («языки малочисленных народов Севера») and the corresponding “northern minority languages” («северные малочисленные языки») have also gained currency.

These “northern minority languages” may be listed as follows. All the groups named are hunters, fisherfolk, gatherers, or reindeer herders.

Tungus-Manchurian: Evenki, Even, Negidal, Ulchi, Nanai, Oroch, Orok, Udehe

Samoyedic: Nenets, Enets, Nganasan, Selkup

Finno-Ugric: Saami, Khanty, Mansi

Chukchee-Kamchadal: Chukchee, Koryak, Alutor, Kerek, Itelmen

Eskimo-Aleut: Eskimo, Aleut

Turkic: Dolgan

Isolated “Paleosiberian”: Ket, Yukagir, Nivkh

To this list can be added another three Turkic languages (Tofalar, Shor and Teleut), and possibly Chulym Turkic also.

According to the census of the population of the USSR in 1989, at that time there were about 170,000 speakers of these northern languages, 50.5 per cent of which (86,000) consider them their mother tongue or native language. However, these languages differ from each other in their functional relation. Quite apart from general issues, many of these languages are therefore faced with individual problems.

In general, the language situation in the regions of the Far North is affected by two major factors. The first is the pressure of socially dominant languages like Russian, or Yakut and Buriat in some particular regions, and the second is the unfavorable social and economic conditions that face minorities in the Far North. Settlement of the nomadic peoples and consolidation and enlargement of their settlements has strengthened the

pressure from Russian and other major languages. Language retention correlates with the age of speakers. Generally the older speakers are more conservative and preserve linguistic and cultural traditions, whereas younger speakers are more innovative and easily subject to the influence of the dominating culture (Russian, Yakut, or Buriat).

One characteristic of the language situation of northern peoples is the short stage of active bilingualism. As a result of Soviet language policy, people of the generation born in the years from 1930 to 1940 are genuinely bilingual. In general, however, older people cannot speak Russian well, whereas younger people tend to lose their own language.

Between them is a layer of people aged between 30 and 50 who are not sufficiently competent in either language (the “semi-lingual” layer). The same thing can be said about the cultural situation of this generation. They are losing their traditional culture, but have not completely acquired Russian culture. This means that the cultural tradition cannot be transmitted by this generation.

According to the observations of A. A. Burykin, the contemporary linguistic situation in the regions of the Far North is not only the result of purely social and political events that destroyed the traditional way of life and society, but also that of the changes of the surrounding culture, which were falsely understood and appropriated by the first generation of so-called “national intelligentsia.” They undoubtedly believed that working in non-traditional professions, arranging their home lives in Russian style, having Russian-speaking spouses from the newcomer population, and speaking Russian to each other were prestigious and that they should encourage the peoples of the North to change themselves. This linguistic fashion began among those who were bilingual, but was then assimilated by the rest. Although the following one or two generations did in fact know their mother tongues, either they did not use them at all, or used them only during professional activity and not for personal communication. If the parents did not speak the native language even though they knew and understood it, their children could not learn it even if they did become capable of understanding everyday conversation.

There is nothing negative for a minority people to switch their spoken language to adapt themselves to the surrounding linguistic situation. This is a common strategy among the hundreds of peoples in the world. If the social process had not gone too fast and if it had taken place in conjunction with a skilled social and linguistic policy, it would have caused less pain. For bilingual communities, perhaps one of the most common variants of normal language life is that situation of functional bilingualism, in which the indigenous people regard their mother tongue as being for use in home and family communication, traditional occupations, and school education, while Russian (and also Yakut and Buriat) is regarded as being for use in various forms of communication with the external world.

The statistic data shown in Table 1 show a comparison of the results of two censuses of the population of the Russian Federation as a part of the former USSR, and represent a dynamic change in the linguistic situation of the indigenous peoples of the North from 1959 to 1989.

This table was compiled on the basis of the tables in the following sources: *Итоги всесоюзной переписи населения СССР 1959 г.* (Сводный том), 1962. стр. 186 and *Население СССР по данным всесоюзной переписи населения СССР 1989 г.* 1990. стр. 39.

Table 1 Reduction in the number of representatives of the minority peoples of the North who name their mother tongue as their native language.

People	Number in 1959 census	Percentage of those who name their mother tongue as their native language	Number in 1989 census	Percentage of those who name their mother tongue as their native language	Percentage of 1959 figure
Aleut	421	22	700	27	123
Dolgan	—	—	6900	82	—
Itelmen	1109	36	2500	20	55
Ket	1019	77	1100	48	62
Koryak	—	—	9200	53	—
Mansi	6287	91	8500	37	41
Nanai	8026	86	12000	44	51
Nganasan	748	93	1300	83	89
Negidal	—	—	600	28	—
Nenets	23007	85	35000	77	91
Nivkh	3717	76	4700	23	30
Orok	—	—	200	45	—
Oroch	782	68	900	19	28
Saami	1792	70	1900	42	60
Selkup	3768	51	3600	48	94
Tofalar	—	—	700	43	—
Udehe	1444	74	2000	26	35
Ulchi	2055	85	3200	31	36
Khanty	19410	77	23000	61	79
Chuvan	—	—	1500	21	—
Chukchee	11727	94	15000	70	74
Shor	15274	—	16652	—	57
Evenki	24710	56	30000	30	54
Even	9121	81	17000	44	54
Enets	—	—	200	45	—
Eskimo	1118	84	1700	52	62
Yukagir	442	54	1100	33	61

The role of native language teaching in schools has always been regarded as a very important factor in language development. The statistic materials given in Table 2 show the change in the number of students learning or being taught in native language at schools during a five-year period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s.

It is inappropriate to think that teaching in schools can by itself save the languages of the indigenous peoples so long as parents do not use them with their children at home. Regardless of all the attempts by schools to preserve these languages and the consensus on the undoubted importance of these attempts, the maximum expectations of such language

Table 2 Number of students learning or being taught in native (non-Russian) languages from 1988/1989 to 1993/94 academic years in the Russian Federation.

Native languages learnt in schools in the north of the Russian Federation	Number of students learning or being taught in each language in the schools of the Russian Federation				
	Academic Year				
	1988/89	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94
Altai	3731	12455	12919	13671	16593
Dolgan	—	543	447	494	677
Itelmen	—	115	38	16	42
Ket	—	15	134	142	123
Koryak	—	874	956	865	937
Nanai	680	885	1061	891	1094
Nganasan	—	—	—	91	100
Negidal	—	—	—	27	30
Nenets	—	976	3729	2905	3713
Nivkh (2 dialects)	—	355	288	240	157
Tofalar	—	—	—	239	136
Udehe	—	—	—	8	25
Chukchee	—	1978	2000	2188	2127
Shor	—	—	—	9	97
Even	—	1276	749	1252	1598
Eskimo	—	1346	—	205	241
Evenki	—	—	—	2089	2023
Jukagir	—	45	92	106	103
Yakut	54355	54365	62075	70532	71661
Number of indigenous schools	5498	13280	14046	14783	15150

education programs are to give children a certain impression about the language of their ancestors, to help them to conserve its memory, and to provide them with a temporary traditional-language community. However, the efforts of schools cannot replace the role of the family in language education in transmitting the practical use of traditional languages down the generations. If we compare the numbers of students studying their native languages in 1993 with those in other years in Table 2, some trends may be observed. The numbers of students studying some indigenous languages, such as Altai, Chukchee, Nanai, Yukagir, and Yakut, were sharply or steadily increasing, whereas they were decreasing for other languages, such as Nivkh and Itelmen. It is interesting to note that in areas with high concentrations of indigenous people, children of other nationalities also study the indigenous language. For example, in the village of Iengra in the Sakha Republic, children of families of Russian, Ukrainian and other origin study the Evenki language. Their parents show a desire for students to study this language.

On October 25, 1991, the State Law “On the languages of the peoples of RSFSR,” which contains the fundamentals of language policy in Russia, was adopted. This law is aimed at creating conditions for the preservation and equal development of all the languages of Russia. It guarantees the language sovereignty of each nation and supports the creation of conditions for the preservation and development of the languages of minority peoples and minor ethnic groups that do not possess national states or territorial units and which live outside their national territories (Part 6 of the law).

Part 10 of this law declares that every nation that does not have a proper script system possesses the right to create a script system for its mother tongue, and the state provides all the necessary conditions for this action. However, in spite of the existence of the juridical foundation, we have to say that the guaranteed declarations and promises have yet to be fulfilled; nor has the financial support required to achieve them been forthcoming.

A. F. Startsev, who carried out research on the social, economical, and cultural transformations of the lives of indigenous peoples in Primorskii Krai (basically the Udehe people), came to the conclusion that the indigenous people were losing their national characteristics; not only were their ethnic languages disappearing, but the Udehe and Nanai people had also begun to forget their rites and customs and to lose their traditional occupations. As a result, he said, “the people of the world can lose the unique culture of the aboriginals of the Far East.” (Startsev 1994: 33). It is a pity, but a very similar situation is characteristic of almost all the peoples of the North.

Script systems for the native languages of the North were first created in the 1920s by using the Latin system, and they were translated into the Cyrillic script in the 1930s. Today 24 languages have their own script systems, of which 14 have been in existence since 1932. The first written forms of other languages have been devised between then and the present day.

Table 3 shows that twelve languages are taught in school up to the eighth grade (sometimes up to eleventh grade, i.e. the full secondary school program), that eleven languages are taught only in primary school, and that five languages still have no proper script.

It must be mentioned, however, that the function of the written language differs greatly among these peoples depending on the general linguistic situation and the strictness of the tradition of school teaching. If school teaching is once interrupted, it becomes very hard to restore the use of the written form (this happened, for example, with the Udehe, Itelmen, Ket, and Nivkh languages). There are also serious problems even with the teaching of rather well developed languages in secondary school, because of the lack of experience in teaching methods and especially in the preparation of effective school textbooks. This is one of the main problems seen in the contemporary linguistic situation among the peoples of the North in Russia.

Nowadays, some new movements can be seen in the restoration and use in education of minor languages of the North. One example I would like to cite in particular is that the writing system for the Uilta (Orok) language devised in the 1990s by Jiro Ikegami, professor emeritus of Hokkaido University in Japan, is now being used in a school textbook for Uilta children in Sakhalin. Until this system was devised no one had succeeded in

Table 3 Written languages and school education of northern minority languages.

Written languages taught in secondary school	Written languages taught only in primary school	Non-written languages
Evenki	Saami	Negidal
Even	Nivkh	Oroch
Nanai	Itelmen	Enets
Nenets	Ulchi	Alutor
Selkup	Udehe	Kerek
Khanty	Nganasan	
Mansi	Aleut	
Chukchee	Jukagir	
Koryak	Ket	
Eskimo	Tofalar	
Dolgan	Teleut	
Shor		

creating a written system for the Uilta language, a situation that had posed a serious obstacle to school education in this language. I hope that the sparse peoples of the North, despite the severe economic challenges confronting them today, will overcome these difficulties and survive this testing time, thus enriching the culture of the world.

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