

Language Situation in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

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1.

Language is the spiritual basis for the existence of any people, small or large. When it comes to the preservation, revival and development of Arctic indigenous peoples, we face the issue of the destiny of their language cultures. These are not only an important part of world civilization; they relate to all its socio-economic, political, and interethnic aspects.

The language situation in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is notable for its distinctive complexity, which is unique in some respects. Let us look, first, at the general present-day situation of all the languages functioning in this territory, and at their various interactions and interrelations.

According to 1989 census data, the republic's population is 1,095,000. The native peoples are: the Sakha (or Yakut, hence the name of the republic)—382,000—the most numerous people in northern-western Asia; the Evenki—14,428; the Even—8,668; the Yukagir—697; the Chukchi—about 473; and the Dolgan—408.

The interaction of languages in the republic, that is, the interrelations between the Sakha language, the Russian language and the languages of the Northern nationalities, constitutes a unique situation. Because the languages coexisted side-by-side for centuries, there exist the most varied kinds of bilingualism and the polylingualism, and the process of assimilation has been intense.

At present the most characteristic types of bilingualism and polylingualism in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) are: Russian-Sakha-Even, Russian-Sakha-Yukagir; Russian-Sakha-Chukchi and their diverse variations. The Nizhnaya Kolyma Region is especially interesting in its polylingualism. Here some residents speak five languages: Russian, Sakha, Even, Yukagir and Chukchi. According to the 1989 census, of the Northern peoples, 11,905 Evenki (i.e. 82.5% of all Evenki), 4,708 Even (54.3%), 196 Yukagir (28.1%), 35 Chukchi (7.4%) consider Sakha to be their native language. At the same time 1,291 Evenki (8.9%), 926 Even (10.7%), 233 Yukagir (33.4%), 135 Chuk-

chi (28.5%) consider Russian their native language. Every year the number of people who consider a language of their own nationality to be their native language becomes fewer. For example, among the Even in 1970—41.7%, in 1979—44.1%, and in 1989—34.7%; among the Evenki in 1970—15.1%, but in 1979—11.2%, and in 1989—8.5%; for the Yukagir the figures were 1970—51.8%, 1979—39.7%, 1989—35.2%. As a result, with the loss of the language base, even native folklore is beginning to disappear. People who know and follow the language, material and spiritual culture of the Northern peoples are becoming fewer and fewer every year.

Up until the beginning of the 20th century, the Sakha language was a regional language of interethnic communication in northern-eastern Siberia. Having such a language was an objective necessity in this multi-national region. Practically everybody, including the 25,000-strong Russian population of Yakutia, spoke the Sakha language. It is believed that the numbers of the Sakha people increased considerably as a result of the transition of the polyglot ethnoses (primarily the Mongol-, Even- and Evenki-speaking ones) to the Sakha language. In post-war period, processes of assimilation intensified and gained in scope. Even among the Sakha, where conditions for preservation of their own language were rather favorable, about 5% of the Sakha (i.e. almost 18,000 individuals) now consider Russian language their native language (95%). Thus almost every twentieth Sakha in the republic (but almost every fourth Sakha child living in cities) no longer speaks the native language. People in the republic are especially concerned about the fact that 26.2% of Sakha children do not learn their native language in school, and 30% of preschool-age children are alienated from their native language.

Assimilation processes are very strong among all four Northern nationalities in the republic. As the same time that some, including Sakha speakers, are switching to Russian, others are assimilating to the Sakha language. Russian has now become a language of competence for 70% of the Sakha, 73% of the Evenki, 68% of the Even, 77% of the Yukagir, and 92% of Chukchi (this includes those who call it their native language). Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of the Evenki and more than half of the Even consider Sakha their native language. Thus, the languages of the minority peoples are in a catastrophic situation and, in fact, are on the verge of disappearing. This is especially clear if one looks behind the census figures to the facts of language reality. Under today's conditions, with increasing national self-consciousness, even if respondents hardly understand and speak their traditional language,

they still often designate it to census takers as their native language. For example, only 20 of the 245 persons who consider the Yukagir language as native language speak it fluently.

2.

What is behind these assimilation processes? The objective causes are:

(1) The Northern peoples live dispersed throughout the entire territory of Yakutia. The Even and the Chukchi are spread among 33 regions and three cities. The Evenki are more concentrated, living in eight regions: the Aldan Region—1,890 persons, the Anabar Region—372, the Bulun Region—2,086, the Zhigansk Region—1,836, the Mirny Region—155, in the territory of the city of Yakutsk—770, of Neryungri—904, and in the city of Mirny—35. The Even live in thirteen regions: the Abyi Region—142 persons, the Allayiakha Region—544, the Bulun Region—384, the Verkhnyaya Kolyma Region—197, the Verkhoyansk Region—189, the Oimyakon Region—322, the Srednyaya Kolyma Region—364, the Tompo Region—735, the Ust-Yana Region—939 and the Even-Bitantai Region—903, in the territory of the city of Yakutsk—651, of Neryungri—51, and in the city of Mirny—30. The Yukagir live in six regions: the Nizhnyaya Kolyma Region—263 persons, the Verkhnyaya Kolyma Region—186, the Allayikha Region—95, the Srednyaya Kolyma Region—36, the Taatta Region—21, the Ust-Yana Region—10 and in the territory of the city of Yakutsk—45 persons. The Chukchi live in the Nizhnyaya Kolyma Region—367 persons, the Allayikha Region—28 and in the territory of the city of Yakutsk—34 persons. Living as dispersed ethnic groups in the midst of a Sakha-speaking population, the Northern peoples have tended to acquire the language of the Sakha, who had decisive advantages. These include a settled way of life, a compact population, overwhelming numerical superiority, a written language and the national culture.

(2) There are many distinct dialects in the languages of the Northern peoples. The dialects of the Verkhnyaya Kolyma Yukagir and the Nizhnyaya Kolyma Yukagir are like independent languages. The Even and Evenki literary languages, which were created in the 30s from certain dialects, are not quite intelligible to the speakers of other dialects. Therefore these literary languages have not developed properly. And so, the Sakha and Russian languages themselves served as means of integration and as languages of interethnic com-

munication. It was impossible to overcome the dialect differences in the short time available to consolidate the various local ethnic groups into a single nationality.

(3) Some Northern peoples shifted towards the Russian language because Russian had an ancient tradition, was monolithic, was the only language with strong literary norms, and was able to serve a comparatively wide range of functions in society.

3.

There were also the subjective causes:

(1) On the whole, the traditional life-style was destroyed by good intentions. During the years of Soviet rule, the Northern peoples joined in the culture of the peoples of the former Soviet Union and of Europe. They shared in scientific and technical progress; they created their own written language; they built settlements; they mastered a whole range of new professions; part of the population chose to pursue a settled way of life; they gave rise to their very own intelligentsia, and so on.

At the same time, however, the political experiment, which aimed to guide the Northern “small peoples” through the difficult direct transition from a patrimonial and clan system to socialism and communism, while bypassing the stages of feudalism and capitalism entirely, had some very negative consequences for the destinies of the minority peoples of the North. Among the drastic steps were the mass reorganization of the life-style of Northern peoples: the creation of “artels”, associations for collective reindeer-breeding (1930–1940), followed by the post-war unification of collective farms and the reorganization of them into State farms (*sovkhoz*). The campaign to liquidate “the kulaks as a class” took place among the Northern peoples too. The Northern peoples were among the many repressed and repatriated Soviet nationalities as a result of the liquidation of 15 national Evenki and Even districts and the campaign to liquidate “settlements with no prospects” (1940–1966).

(2) Great harm was also done by a Eurocentric Soviet approach to all Northern peoples. Commands came from the centre. There was an obsession with large-scale “buildings of the century.” And forced labor was used in the “opening up” of the Russian North. All of these established stereotypical expectations of socio-economic behavior. These stereotypes, in turn, were the source of many troublesome and negative phenomena: Among these were:

- (a) a slighting attitude towards the languages of Northern peoples, and with it a denial of the contribution made by Northern peoples to the common culture of mankind;
- (b) a demeaning stereotype according to which the nomadic clan community of reindeer-breeders and hunters was seen as a primitive stage in the development of mankind. Since nomadic life was considered a form of “wildness” or “semi-wildness”, the liquidation of these clan communities had a high priority for State policy;
- (c) a dismissive attitude towards the natural environment of indigenous peoples.

These and other factors and circumstances have brought the aboriginal peoples of the North to the verge of ethnic catastrophe.

(3) Measures undertaken by the bodies of public education in the post-war period:

- (a) Parents were artificially excluded from the upbringing of their children: day-care centres in built-up areas were run exclusively in the Russian and Sakha languages.
- (b) The Evenki and Even languages were abolished as languages of instruction at the level of first and second forms when primary schools were opened in the 30-s and the 40-s; the reduction in native language lessons as school subjects, etc.

Public opinion surveys carried out by us in 1986–88 and 1991–92 among the Even, the Evenki and the Yukagir showed that the linguistic shift to other languages was forced on those peoples and was by no means voluntary.

The overwhelming majority of respondents consider this rapid shift to other languages by a large part of native youth to be abnormal:

- they regard the loss of native language as abnormal as well;
- they want their children to learn their native language from the first through tenth grades;
- they propose that children in preschool institutions should be raised in the native language;
- they strongly approved the establishment of: the Sub-faculty of Northern Philology in the Yakutsk State University (1991), the Nizhnaya Kolyma College of Northern Peoples (1992), and the departments in the Yakutsk teachers' training college N1 and the Yakutsk teachers' training college N2 (1988).

- they expressed a wish to strengthen these educational institutions and to extend the training of personnel, not least in philology, in order to begin the process of national revival and to make it irreversible;
- they confirmed their commitment to having children study, in secondary school, the language, folklore, literature and national culture of their own nation, and to establishing the required logistical base.

4.

We detailed these research results and the problems of language policy in the Russian Federation and the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the studies “Konceptsiya sokhraneniya, razvitiya i vrozhdeniya yazykov narodov Severa Rossii” (Conception of preservation, development and revival of languages of the Northern peoples of Russia) (1989) and “Yazykovaya politika v SSSR” (Language policy in the USSR) (1990).

The well-known Yukagir scientist and poet Gavril Kurilov (Uluro Ado) said at the First Yukagir Congress: “Language is the only wealth which has been left to us as a sacred object, as memory from our ancestors. Without it we cease to be a distinct people, a distinct ethnos and become a small crowd of individuals. Therefore the protection of native language, native culture should be our sacred duty.”

With the adoption of the Declaration on Sovereignty (27.09.90) and the Constitution of the Republic (4.04.92)—the socio-political situation has changed radically in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). As is well known, in the final analysis, the language situation is intimately linked with the socio-political situation.

The Republic, led by the President, and the native peoples themselves, have resolutely set out to elaborate a new language policy and new stage of language building in the Republic. After long discussions (at the beginning of 1988) of the law “On the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation” and after the adoption of “The Declaration on languages of the peoples of Russia” in October, 1991—the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) adopted “The Law on languages in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)” (October, 1992). This establishes a legal basis for language policy aimed at elaborating a system of state measures to revive, preserve, develop and encourage the use of native languages by the republic’s native peoples.

The government had earlier adopted the very important document “Con-

ception and state programme of renewal and development of national schools in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)” (23.05.91), where it states: “The need for the revival of languages, the broadening of their functions ... require that the entire system of education and training in national schools be reorganized. The Conception’s major principle is to realize the democratic and constitutional right to education and training of students in their native language. Native language should function as a language of pre-school and school-age education, and should be the decisive factor in the revival of national schools, the development of national cultures and the self-preservation of the native peoples of our republic”.

In “The Law on languages in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)”, the Sakha language and the Russian language were proclaimed the official state languages in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). The languages of the minority peoples of the North were proclaimed official languages in all places where they live in compact groupings. This very important document is now being gradually put into effect. In 1996 the President of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) issued a decree proclaiming an official Day of Native Language and Literature. In addition, such fundamental measures as the revival of the traditional life-style (notably “*sayilik*”, the move to summer residence sites by people and their cattle) and of the clan-based nomadic communities of the Northern peoples have been undertaken. There are 238 of the latter in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia); 14 deserted national settlements have been restored.

The practical details involved in having national Evenki, Even and Yukagir schools, as provided for in “The Conception of revival and development of national schools of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)” are currently being worked out. According to the prominent Russian linguist Victor Petrovich Grigoriev, all these measures will be needed to carry out a policy of “unforced language therapy”. In spite of current difficulties, an appreciable amount of work has been carried out along these lines. Specialists in Northern peoples are being trained in 3 teachers’ colleges, in the subfaculty of northern philology at Yakutsk State University, in the Hertenzen University and at other educational institutions.

At present in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), the children of Northern peoples can study their native languages in 44 schools including the Evenki language in 13 schools, the Even language in 28, the Yukagir language in 2 schools (Andryushkino and Nelemnoye), and the Chukchi in one (the Kolyma school). In addition, children study their native language in 10 pre-

school institutions. The Gevan radio station broadcasts regularly in the Even, Yukagir and Evenki languages. Television programmes are also regularly transmitted in these languages.

As for Sakha, 20 regional newspapers, 7 republic-wide newspapers and 5 magazines are published in the Sakha language. Radio broadcasts between two and five hours every day, while television broadcasts for two hours a day. Sakha children study their native language in 426 schools. The Sakha language is used as the main language of instruction through the seventh grade, and is partially used in the eighth and ninth grades. The languages of the Northern peoples have not become languages of instruction except on an experimental basis. 36 new types of educational institutions have been established, including 8 grammar schools, 5 lycees, 3 associated schools, 4 agricultural schools and 4 nomadic schools.

5.

There are many problems and unsettled issues concerning the revival, preservation and development of languages of the Northern peoples. We do not discuss the financial and material problems that arise before the state programme of revival is realized. The very elaboration of the programme has required considerable resources from the government of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). However serious the material and financial demands may be, we are even more concerned about the moral and theoretical issues.

If one is to be absolutely unbiased, it is important to acknowledge that the peoples' own relationship to language revival is an ambiguous one. The intelligentsia and the educated part of the population feel nostalgia towards their native language, along with bitterness and a sense of being offended. From this has always sprung the question, who is guilty? The nearest language is Sakha. Sakhaphobia, therefore, often comes to the fore.

Such a feeling is understandable. On the one hand, our command and administrative system which was in the overwhelming majority a Sakha-speaking one, was never very understanding of the language problems of the minority peoples. On the other hand, part of the rural population, which switched over to using Sakha, feels that the Even should not bother trying to speak the Even language any more. There are 916 Even living in the Even-Bitantai Region. Only 16 of them still speak their native language. The Even language is no longer regenerating itself, so almost no language environment remains.

In such a situation, the upholders of language revival may well become despondent about the opinion, which is widespread in academic circles, that “the process of language assimilation by the minority peoples (the Tofalar, the Yukagir) is unavoidable and natural; that it is senseless to impede, but it is criminal to accelerate, this process” (Academician A. N. Derevyanko, E. I. Ubryatova, M. I. Cheremisina), and that “languages that are doomed to disappear should not be artificially preserved and restored” (V. N. Yartseva).

But there are at least some encouraging new beginnings here. First, the new national policy of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), which received legislative confirmation in the Constitution of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) adopted on April 4, 1992; the special law “On languages in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)”; and the conception of revival, preservation and development of languages of the native peoples of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). Second, the Northern peoples themselves are eager to revive their native languages and national cultures at all costs, as has been clearly stated at the Evenki, Even, and Yukagir congresses. Third, neither the Northern peoples themselves, nor many specialists, share the belief in the inevitable fate of the so-called disappearing languages, not even in the case of the Yukagir. If a people and their language have been preserved, irrespective of the number of speakers in this language, then given the right conditions, the language can be revived.

This was substantiated by the founder of theoretical linguistics, Wilhelm Humboldt, who introduced the concept of “language consciousness of people”. Every person, the bearer of ethnos, has an “inherent predisposition” to one’s language. He wrote that “children of any nationality, having found themselves in the environment of another alien people while they are not yet able to speak, develop an ability to speak the language of the latter”. One may say that this indisputable fact proves “that a language is simply the reproduction of things heard ... and depends only on the communication with one’s associates”. He wrote, that “it is unlikely that in such a situation somebody managed to observe carefully enough how hard, probably, the inherent predispositions were being overcome and how these inherent predispositions in their most delicate nuance remained undefeated for all that”.

From this we conclude that the revival and development of languages is both possible and necessary. The outcome will depend decisively on the determination of the peoples themselves, supported by governments and all people of good will.

TABLE

Languages of the minority peoples of the North of the Russian Federation (according to the 1989 census, rural population).

People	Total	Consider that their native language is:							
		Language of their own nationality		Russian language		Language of the nationalities forming the union, the republics		Other languages	
		number	%	number	%	number	%	nu.	%
Aleut	435	95	21.8	324	74.5	5	1.1	11	2.5
Dolgan	5,373	4,842	90.1	493	9.3	7	0.1	26	0.5
Itelmen	1,525	276	18.1	1,234	80.9	1	0.1	14	0.9
Kety	894	461	51.6	424	47.4	1	0.1	8	0.9
Koryak	6,464	3,734	57.8	2,652	41.0	15	0.2	63	1.0
Mansi	4,540	2,111	46.5	2,393	52.7	6	0.1	30	0.7
Nanai	7,240	3,566	49.3	3,633	50.2	2	-	39	0.5
Nganasan	918	796	86.7	114	12.4	1	0.1	7	0.8
Negidal	372	104	28.0	254	63.3	1	0.3	13	3.5
Nenets	28,472	23,303	81.8	3,691	13.0	24	0.1	1,145	5.1
Nivkhi	2,290	528	23.1	1,747	76.3	6	0.3	9	0.4
Oroki	31	8	25.8	23	74.2	-	-	-	-
Orochi	471	79	16.8	387	82.2	-	-	5	1.1
Sámi	1,136	549	48.3	568	50.0	5	0.4	14	1.2
Selkup	2,678	1,424	53.2	1,210	45.2	1	-	43	1.6
Tofalar	627	275	43.9	351	56.0	-	-	1	0.2
Udegei	1,236	252	20.4	955	77.3	9	0.7	20	1.6
Ulchi	2,310	728	31.5	1,562	67.6	3	0.1	17	0.7
Khanty	15,693	10,709	68.2	4,879	31.1	7	-	98	0.6
Chuvan	677	137	20.2	423	62.5	-	-	117	17.3
Chukchi	13,008	9,648	74.2	3,193	24.5	2	-	165	1.3
Chortsi	4,359	3,123	71.6	1,172	26.9	10	0.2	54	1.2
Evenki	23,891	7,357	30.8	5,673	23.7	8	-	10,953	45.4
Even	12,830	6,165	48.1	2,747	21.4	5	-	3,913	30.5
Entsy	113	59	49.5	33	27.7	-	-	27	22.7
Eskimo	1,320	748	56.7	538	40.8	1	0.1	33	2.5
Yukagir	705	257	36.5	264	37.4	-	-	184	26.1