

## LANGUAGE VITALITY OF THE PEOPLES OF RUSSIA

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### Abstract

The article considers the problem of vitality of the languages of the peoples living on the territory of the Russian Federation. This subject of research is timely as substantial changes have been introduced in the school educational program in the last few years. The study of the title language became compulsory for all schoolchildren, regardless of their nationality or the wishes of their parents in a number of republics of the Russian Federation. At the same time, the hours for studying the Russian language were reduced, which caused conflict situations, especially in the Republic of Tatarstan. This situation has led to an enormous controversy in the discussions on national languages, their functional development and the level of their vitality.

The level of vitality of a language is determined by a number of factors. The most important ones are: 1) the number of native speakers; 2) the level of the functional development of the language; 3) the existence of a written tradition; 4) the status of the language and the language policy aimed at its development and support; and a number of other factors.

The subject of research in this article deals with the languages of the Finno-Ugrian peoples which have the status of state languages in their republics: Komi, Mari, Mordovian and Udmurt languages. In these republics, the vitality of languages is strongly influenced by the demographic factor, namely the numerical prevalence of the Russian and Russian-speaking population.

The purpose of the study were the factors mentioned above, which in turn determine the level of vitality and the definition of this level. Special attention is paid to the situation in school education, since the language competence of the whole society depends on the sphere of education. In all points of the study the findings comprise the latest facts and indicators of both official federal statistics and data from regional ministries and the media.

Comparison of the results showed negative dynamics in the development of national title languages, strengthening positions of the Russian language and an increased interest in the English language. The tendency to recognize Russian as a native language is clearly indicated, which makes it possible to speak of a continuing linguistic shift.

In conclusion, there are given some suggestions, which may change the situation with the national languages.

**Keywords:** language vitality, demographic power of language, language policy, language legislation, language shift.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

A language is a “living system”, “a living organism,” as was stated by the Russian philosophers P.A. Florensky, S.N. Bulgakov, A.A. Losev, G.G. Shpet, the German linguist A. Schleicher, the famous Soviet writer and literary critic K.I. Chukovsky and many others. Language is capable, like any living organism, to independently preserve and maintain their own vitality, however, that is restricted to certain limits. When the influence of external extralinguistic factors turns out to be too strong, the stability of the language experiences ‘overloads’, the language begins to ‘feel ill’, the vitality decreases, and the threat of the disappearance of the language, the mortality arises. About 10 languages of small population groups disappear every year.

Language vitality or viability of language is the ability of the language to develop further, to modify or preserve structural and, mainly, functional qualities. The problems of vitality of the languages is a burning issue for many languages in Russia. This is especially challenging for the languages of small peoples (group of population of up to 50 thousand people). However, the same problems are experienced by the languages that are the state languages of the republics, which is a worrying sign since the state language performs the integration function within the given republic in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres, acting as a symbol of this republic. Moreover, it is the language of state-administrative texts, laws, orders, training, mass media, etc. Solving the problems of these languages, preventing them from disappearance from the linguistic map of the Russian Federation, creating conditions for their preservation and scientific studies, means saving the culture of these peoples, preventing or at least slowing down the assimilation processes, and helping them not to lose their ethnic identities. This problem is global for Russia, since, according to I.I. Khaleeva, almost half of the languages of the peoples of Russia (63) are in a depressed state, with a tendency to extinction.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

All languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation are at different levels of functional development. Expansion in the functions of the language or its functional development is a process when the use of a language occurs in more areas of social life than in the previous stage of language functioning. The public functions of the language comprise the functioning of the language in various spheres of communication, corresponding to the spheres of human activity, for example, in the sphere of science, mass communication of production, transport, legal proceedings, etc.

Language functions can be distributed into three groups. This classification is strongly interlinked with the level of language vitality.

1. Basic and secondary functions that a language performs as a specific phenomenon of human civilization, among which there is its main function – to be a means of communication.
2. Ethno-social (ethnic, social) functions – the role played by an ethnic language (or only its literary form) in ethnic communities of different types.
3. Social functions – the use of a language as a means of communication in different communicative spheres, conditioned by the specificity of various spheres of human activity.

As a rule, minority languages perform significantly fewer social functions than the majoritarian language, and do not function in the most prestigious spheres of communication (public administration, international activity, science, higher education, etc.). Consequently, a differentiated approach is required towards the revitalization, maintenance and preservation of each minority language. It is this approach that will be able to protect languages from extinction, peoples from the loss of native languages, which in itself will help maintain balance, prevent linguistic confrontations and, thus, contribute to Russia’s internal security.

The functional power of the language is one of the main factors of its vitality. There is a direct relationship between the number of social functions of the language and its vitality, which can be measured by the volume of its main functions, its application in the most important areas of society: education, science, mass communication, court, industry, administrative activity, industry, socio-political sphere, religion. Note that national culture is also a very important area (traditional crafts, national art, theatres, books, etc.). Another important indicator of the development of a written language is the availability of various types of literature, primarily artistic, as well as religious (usually the first to emerge), business, academic, etc. The development of various types of literature is a sign of the usefulness or the relevance of a language.

The national language of a nation does not necessarily have to fulfil all social functions. All social functions are performed by a limited number of world languages; thus, it is obvious that the vitality of national

languages is measured by the breadth and intensity of their use in that repertoire of communication spheres, which is socially relevant.

Socio-communicative spheres are the different spheres of human activity, each of which is characterized by relatively the same conditions of communication, which determine certain rules for the use of language. Such spheres are divided into regulated and amorphous spheres of communication. Spheres of communication in which regulation is applied by administrative and state bodies aimed at the orderly use of language(s) are called regulated spheres. Areas of informal communication are non-regulated in which the use of language is not subject to regulation by society and the state: the sphere of family communication, the sphere of everyday communication, the sphere of interpersonal communication.

### **3 SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF THE RESEARCH**

The subject of this research is the languages of the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia: Komi, Mari, Mordovian and Urdu. We present data on the last census of 2010 for these republics, comparing the titular population and Russian-speaking population. The titular population in the Komi Republic is 22.5%, Russian and Russian-speaking – 61.7%; in Mari El – 41.8% and 45.1% respectively; in Mordovia – 39, 9% and 53.2% respectively; in the Udmurt Republic - 27% and 60% respectively. The title nation is a nationality, whose ethnonym constitutes the base for the name of an administrative-territorial entity. The object of this research is the linguistic situation in the above-mentioned republics, which is studied compared to the influence of the Russian language.

Among the numerous factors affecting the levels of vitality of the studied languages, one of the most important is the demographic factor, i.e. the ratio of the titular population with the Russian population. The predominance of the Russian population in the republics entails the dominance of the Russian language, since it functions in the main areas of communication, and often in the sphere of home and everyday communication.

As a rule, representatives of the older generation speak national languages, and young people prefer the Russian language because of its being in demand for higher education (all universities in the republics work mainly in Russian, except for philological departments, which have branches of the native language and literature). Besides, Russian language is considered to be a key to a successful career after school, the possibility of research the Russian and world culture.

### **4 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

When comparing censuses, they reveal one general tendency: many languages demonstrate a drop in the significance of the native language as a marker of ethnic identity and a decrease in the number of speakers; i.e. it is a process of linguistic and ethnic assimilation.

This can be clearly seen from the example of the Komi population censuses: in 1959, 93.7% of the Komi people considered their ethnic language to be their mother tongue, in 1970 – 86.7%, in 1979 – 80%, in 1989 – 74.3 %, in 2010 – 62.8%, i.e. within 51 years the number of those who considered the Komi language to be their native language has decreased by almost 31%.

Based on the 2010 census, it is possible to calculate the demographic power of the languages as one of the indicators of the language vitality. The demographic power of languages in the republics is the number of speakers of a language or a variety, is determined by the ratio of those who speak the language and the total number of the population of a given nationality in the republic.

The data on the Finno-Ugric languages of the Russian Federation is presented according to the census:

- 202,348 people live in Komi, of which 130,797 people speak the Komi language; therefore, the power of the Komi language is 64.6%;
- 290,863 people live in Mari El, of which 198,072 speak Mari languages, i.e. the power of Mari languages is 68.1%;
- 333,112 people live in Mordovia, of which 191,164 people speak Mordovian, the power of Mordovian languages is 57.4%;
- 410,584 people live in Udmurtia, of which 229,203 people speak the language, the power of the Udmurt language is 55.8%.

The fact that the demographic power of languages in all republics ranges from 56% to 68% indicates that their vitality is quite high (more than half of the population). For a comparison, we present data on the

demographic power of the Russian language in the same regions: in Komi – 98.8%, in Mari El – 98.2%, in Mordovia – 99.5%, in the Udmurt Republic – 99%. Practically all Finno-Ugric population of Russia speaks Russian, i.e. the demographic power of the Russian language is much higher.

Laws on languages were adopted in all Finno-Ugric republics: Komi in 1992, Mari El in 1995, Mordovia in 1998, Udmurt Republic in 2001. Laws established the high status of title languages as state languages in the respective republics. Typically, state title languages serve in the official areas of communication, its regulated spheres, the main one being the field of education, since the language competence of the whole society depends on it. In the republics of the Russian Federation, languages are usually taught at primary schools in rural areas, in other educational institutions the language is studied as a subject for 2-4 hours per week, which is clearly not enough due to the lack of a language environment. Outside school, students communicate in Russian, which is dominant not only in class, but also during the school breaks. Therefore, such languages tend to be used in the amorphous spheres of communication.

According to 2015/2016 data from the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, the title language was used as a means of learning only in rural areas of Mari El and Mordovia: there were 2 schools in Mari El teaching in Mari language (65 students), and in Mordovia there were 42 primary schools teaching in Moksha language (483 students) and in Erzya language there were 29 schools (658 students). In the city the language of Erzya was studied in one school (50 students). In all others non-Russian schools of the Finno-Ugric republics, the title language was studied as a subject. This is the position of languages in school education which concerns the public in the republics. There were language conflicts which erupted in a number of republics due to the fact that the national state languages became compulsory subjects for all schoolchildren regardless of their parents' desires and national affiliation. As a result, the Russian language lessons were reduced in a number of schools to 2–3 hours a week. Therefore, the President of Russia V.V. Putin, responded to this situation. Speaking at a meeting of the Council on Interethnic Relations in Yoshkar-Ola in the summer of 2017, he instructed to give the right to the parents themselves or the legal representatives of a child to choose whether to study the national language of the republic or not.

The Russian language dominates in such areas as administrative management, legal proceedings, office work, legislation, science, industrial production, etc., and the title languages can be used if necessary, for example, in court, if one of the participants knows Russian badly. Moreover, languages can be used in the field of local administration in the places of compact residence of their speakers.

The Russian language dominates the media field, but a number of newspapers and magazines are published and distributed in title languages. So, according to the Russian Book Chamber for 2017, there were a number of newspapers published in title languages:

- 6 newspapers in Komi language, with a total annual circulation of 755.0 thousand copies;
- 13 newspapers in Mari language, with a circulation of 1206.5 thousand copies;
- 4 newspapers in Mordovian Moksha language, with a circulation of 259.1 thousand copies;
- 4 newspapers in Mordovian Erzya language, with a circulation of 512.8 thousand copies;
- 13 newspapers in Udmurt language, with a circulation of 851 thousand copies.

In the same year, a number of magazines were released: 6 in Komi language, 6 in Mari language, 2 in the Mordovian Moksha, 2 in Mordovian Erzya, 3 in Udmurt language.

Data for books and brochures: in Komi language - 9, in Mari - 29, in Mordovian Moksha - 4, in Mordovian Erzya - 7, in Udmurt - 11.

Russian also predominates on television and radio; national languages are mostly used for short news or concerts of folk performers. Recently, in absolutely all republics and regions of the Russian Federation there has been a sharp decline in the subscription of the population to newspapers and magazines. This is due to both subscription prices and the increasingly decisive onset of the Internet.

The psychological factor is of great importance for the vitality of the language, i.e. the attitude of an individual, his loyalty to his native language. Unfortunately, a number of extra-linguistic factors, such as political repressions of the 1930s and Russification of the 1960s-80s of the 20th century in Soviet times, turned people away from their native language. Communication in title languages over the years turned into a psychological prohibition for a person, since it was considered to be a manifestation of nationalism, the meaning of which gained a sharply negative connotation. Language loyalty, consequently, lowered, i.e. an aggregate of internal assessments of the members of the language community of communicative suitability

and prestige of the language of the ethnos dropped, and it determined the degree of people's adherence to the language. As a result, an increasing number of people began to consider Russian as their native language. Thus, according to the census of 2010, Russian was named as the native language among 37.1% of Komi people, 20.2% Mari, 18.2% Mordovians and 34.9% Udmurts. And these numbers tend to increase.

As an Udmurt scholar K. Zamyatin rightly notes, "the danger of language extinction is associated not as much with the number of speakers as with the lack of language transmission to the next generations" and draws as an example the Mordovian languages, which, despite hundreds of thousands of speakers, are under threat, precisely when language is not passed on to the youth.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

Summing up the results of the research, we state that the vitality of the languages of the Finno-Ugric peoples of the Russian Federation, although it not yet lethal, still requires necessary measures. A targeted language policy can facilitate in that. Since the family has almost ceased to be a transmitter of the language to the younger generation, one could turn to the experience of, for example, Karelia or other republics which launched the so-called "language nests". In fact, this can be a kindergarten or group in kindergarten, where teachers from the very first minute speak with children only in their native language. The second important point is the introduction of the native language into school education not only in language and literature classes, but also in other subjects, e.g. in drawing, physical education, singing, geography, mathematics, etc. Finally, the main thing is to increase the prestige of the language, to develop programs for the formation of public opinion that would perceive the native language as a specific cultural value, as one of the constituent parts of a person's belonging to a particular nationality.

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