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Anastasia A. Smirnova, Matvei A. Mordasov

THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN IZHMA KOMI COMMUNITIES: THE IZHEMSKY DISTRICT

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Anastasia A. Smirnova¹, Matvei A. Mordasov²

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This study focuses on the language situation in the Izhemsky District of the Komi Republic. The majority of the population of the district speaks a variety of Komi, which has been formed over several centuries of Komi presence in this remote area. The local communities display a diglossia of the standard variety of Komi and a local one. The third idiom that is present in the area is Russian. The article analyses of the coexistence of these three idioms in local communities.

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¹ Laboratory for Arctic Social Sciences and Humanities, HSE University, Research Assistant; a.a.smirnovaaa@gmail.com

² Laboratory for Arctic Social Sciences and Humanities, HSE University, Research Assistant; matveimordasov@gmail.com

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Introduction

Language policies affect many different actors, from individuals to institutions. Since language is an important marker of identity, language-related actions and language ideologies express this identity. Without considering language policy, it is impossible to describe and analyze the linguistic situation of a particular territory or community. By analyzing language policy, researchers can reveal the attitudes of different actors towards languages, language conflicts, language shifts, and other linguistic processes in society, which reveal social phenomena.

This study focuses on the language situation in the Izhemsky District of the Komi Republic. The majority of the population of the district speak a variety of Komi, which has been formed over several centuries of Komi presence in this remote area. The local communities display a diglossia of the standard variety of Komi and a local one. The third idiom that is present in the area is Russian. The article analyses of the coexistence of these three idioms in local communities.

Much of this study is based on the fieldwork of two expeditions to the Izhemsky District of the Komi Republic, which took place in 2021 and 2022 as part of the program “Rediscovering Russia”.⁴

⁴ <https://foi.hse.ru/openrussia/north-ethnolingvo>

Research Design

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Language policies and language situations constantly influence each other. The vitality of a language depends on both of them to a large extent. The study of the linguistic situation allows us to put theoretical linguistic research into a more detailed context, providing opportunities for a deeper understanding and a comprehensive description of the processes and phenomena studied in language. The conscious and unconscious actions related to language depend on the actors' language attitudes. Accordingly, the analysis of language policy makes it possible to identify language attitudes and the processes associated with it.

Using the term “language situation” we follow Charles Ferguson who used it “to refer to an aggregate of language varieties (dialect and register) and their patterns of acquisition, use, and modalities by and among various linguistic communities within a particular geographical region” (Ferguson 1996: 17).

Another concept introduced by Ferguson (1959) is diglossia. He described diglossia as a situation in which two related idioms, strictly separated by sphere of use, function in a certain community (later interpretations by Joshua Fishman have extended the term to situations of unrelated idioms as well). One is the “low” vernacular, the other is the language of “high culture”. In our situation, the “high” idiom—standard Komi—is used only by a small group and only in the written form but has an important symbolic status.

A comprehensive description of the linguistic situation includes the consideration of language policy. Here we follow Bernard Spolsky, who identifies three components in language policy. The first one is language practices, i.e., which language varieties a community uses in different situations. It is important not only how a person uses these or those idioms, but also their beliefs about how, how much, and when they use them. The second is language beliefs—what speakers think about these language varieties. Primarily, these are language attitudes and language ideologies (Silverstein 1979), in other words, what values the actors associate with language variants. The third is language management, which means the actions and activities of speakers and institutions aimed at the transformation of language practices (Spolsky 2012: 5). Actors of language policy are individuals, social groups, organizations, institutions, and state structures. Many ethnic groups who have traditionally inhabited the Russian North are often exposed to language shift, which is a transition of the speech community away from one language (in this case, local) to another (Russian) (Vakhtin 2001).

Language is an important marker of identity. Although it is neither necessary nor sufficient, it aids the construction of identity (Vakhtin 2001: 283). In this study, we adhere to an

understanding of identity as a dynamic process, a social positioning of self and others (Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

There are several studies about the Izhma Komi community. Most of them are devoted to the history of Izhma Komi settlements and the economic development of diasporas (Kvashnin 2009). There are studies devoted to the economy of the Izhma Komi (Vlasova and Denisenko 2020). There are also linguistic works devoted to the dialects of the Komi language (Kuznetsova 2014). The identity of the Izhma Komi has been studied by Shabaev and Istomin (2017), who investigated the formation of the Northern Komi identity, but language as an attribute of identity is not given enough attention there. Vlakhov (2012) is dedicated to the language situation of the Izhma Komi of the Kola Peninsula and the language policy in this community.

Methodological Framework of the Study

The primary method of data collection during the fieldwork were in-depth and semi-structured interviews. We conducted the interviews in the form of loose conversations with the informants, where we gently guided the conversation in the direction of the study, using a specially developed questionnaire. The questions were divided into thematic blocks, which in practice often overlapped.

In addition to interviews, we used the observation method. In particular, we collected data using online ethnography (Baranova 2021: 14), which is increasingly used in contemporary research. We also used linguistic landscaping, which made it possible to draw conclusions about the presence of language in the public sphere.

This study is based on a diverse range of field data. These mainly include the materials collected in two expeditions to the Izhemsky District of the Komi Republic in the summer of 2021 and the spring of 2022.



Fig. 1. Map of the Izhemsky District settlements of the Komi Republic where the fieldwork was conducted

During these two expeditions, we visited almost all the settlements of the Izhemsky District. We conducted about 350 interviews and talked to more than 450 informants. All personal data was anonymized. In addition to the interviews, an audio and photo archive was collected.

The Izhemsky District and the Izhma Komi

The Komi Language and its Official Status

There are 901,189 people living in the Komi Republic. Many “nationalities” (the official term of census, an analogue of ethnicity) are represented in the republic. The largest are Russians, numbering 555,963 people (61.7%), and Komi 202,348 people (22.45%) (Russian Census 2010). In addition to the term “Komi”, the census also includes Izhma Komi (“Komi-izhemtsy” in Russian) who constitute less than one percent of the total population of the republic (5,725 people). In total 6,420 people in Russia identified with this nationality. Izhma Komi are traditionally considered as an ethnic group inhabiting the territory of the Izhemsky District of the Komi Republic and diasporas in the other Northern regions. According to the census data (Russian Census 2010), the Izhemsky District has 18,771 inhabitants, 89% of whom defined themselves as Komi (including Izhma Komi). Proportionally, it is the most Komi populated district in Russia.

In the 16th century, a part of the Komi community living in the basin of the Vychegda River migrated northward, settling along the Izhma and Pechora rivers. The settlers adapted to the new conditions and mastered reindeer herding. In the first third of the 20th century, the Northern and the Southern Komi recognized that they were dissimilar, serving as each other's “cultural mirror” through active contact (Sokolovsky 2001). The Southern Komi regarded the Northern Komi as “backward” and their language as “improper” compared to their own dialect, which was considered the language of education and culture. The Northern Komi who lived on the territory of the present-day Izhemsky District, in turn, began to contrast themselves, the “Komi”, with the “Southerners” or “Zyryans” who speak the “Zyryan language”. Despite this opposition, the Northern Komi never separated themselves from the Komi community. The sense of cultural unity with Southern Komi became especially acute in the second half of the 20th century when an influx of Russian-speaking migrants made Komi an ethnic minority in the republic and Russian became dominant in almost all spheres of social life (Shabaev and Istomin 2017: 100-104).

The Komi language belongs to the Permian group of the Finno-Ugric family. Three varieties are distinguished: Komi-Zyryan, Komi-Permian, and Komi-Yazvin. Each variant has a codified norm (Kuznetsova 2014). In this paper, the Komi language refers to the Komi-Zyryan dialect, unless otherwise stated. In addition to the literary norm, Komi also has many dialects (Popova and Sazhina 2014). Standard Komi is based on the dialects common in the southern part of the Komi Republic. The Komi language is not classified as a threatened language.⁵

⁵ Glottolog data on Komi. <https://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/komi1268>

The Russian and Komi languages have the status of state languages (Constitution of the Komi Republic: Art. 67). The Komi language in the Komi Republic is formally equal to the Russian language in many respects—there are laws stipulating the spheres of Komi language use and guaranteeing the right to use the language in these spheres. However, in practice most of the laws are followed minimally.

Our Komi, Their Komi: Komi Idioms in the Izhemsky District

Along the dialect continuum of the Komi language, the Izhma dialect stands out. The Izhma dialect differs from standard Komi mostly lexically and phonetically. Thus, a significant stratum of vocabulary of the Izhma dialect of the Komi language consists of borrowings from the Russian and Nenets languages, which is less typical for the other Komi varieties (Sakharova and Sel'kov 1976: 116–123).

In the community of speakers of this dialect, stereotypes circulate about the excessive proportion of borrowings from Russian. The difference between the Izhma dialect and other varieties of the Komi language is perceived by its speakers as significant and as hindering mutual understanding. The distinctive features identified by informants include different features related to phonetics, intonation, and vocabulary.

It can be assumed that this point of view exaggerates the difference in dialects. Based on field observations, we can conclude that most of the Russianisms in the speech of speakers of Izhma Komi are discourse units, which help to build the logic of the narrative, and conversational formulas like greetings, as well as obviously cultural vocabulary. Similar observations are described by Leinonen (2009). We rely on the opinion of speakers in attributing content as written in “literary” or “local” idioms. Nevertheless, speakers of the Izhma dialect often find it difficult to attribute a particular text or other content as “literary” or “local”—many linguistic and social circumstances contribute to this. Because of these circumstances, it seems appropriate to use the more neutral term “local Komi” or “the local idiom” instead of the term “Izhma dialect” in this paper.

In cases where the informant defines themselves as not being Izhma Komi (that is, in most cases), they refer to themselves as Komi. Different strategies of identity through language emerge from the opposition of the local communities to Southern Komi communities. Thus, we can observe two strategies of contrasting idioms—two language ideologies. The first one is connected to the notion that the Komi language has many local varieties—its speakers compare their local Komi with other local varieties and a supra-local standard Komi. This view of idioms means the recognition of dialect features and differences.

The second ideology deals with the dichotomy of “their pure Komi” and “our Komi, mixed with Russian”. “Other” Komi are perceived as the bearers of the literary norm, or varieties very close to it. The Komi of the Izhemsky District describe their idiom as “impure” and “mixed”, but such characteristics have no negative connotations. For a more detailed discussion of identity strategies and linguistic ideologies in communities of the Izhemsky District, see Mordasov et al. (2022).

The domestic and public spheres: rules of linguistic behavior

The local idiom is the default code of communication in the settlements of the Izhemsky District. While we were in the field, more than once we were first addressed in Komi, assuming that we understood it. The local idiom is used for everyday conversations at home and at work.

In some situations, there are informal rules of linguistic behavior, for example, in hobby groups and at cultural events. If there is at least one monolingual Russian-speaker in the group, the event is held in Russian. This rule is also probably observed in conversations in informal groups of children or young adults.

In the administrative center of the district, Izhma, there is bilingualism with the domination of Russian. In Shchel'yayur, which was the economic center of the district during the Soviet period, and in some other work settlements founded during the Soviet period, Russian dominates all spheres. According to the residents of the Izhemsky District, Izhma and Shchel'yayur are "Russified" because there are many newcomers from outside of the district.

In the streets of the local settlements the use of Komi is limited. Komi is present in the form of a few signs and sometimes Komi can be found on commercial establishments such as canteens and small stores. In January 2021, a *Magnit* chain store opened in Shchel'yayur. Inside the labels and signs are in Komi. This practice can also be found in Syktyvkar, the capital of the republic. There are several chain stores where the signs are duplicated in the Komi language. The residents of the Izhemsky District have a neutral attitude towards this practice, but when asked directly about their attitude to such an initiative, they express a positive opinion.

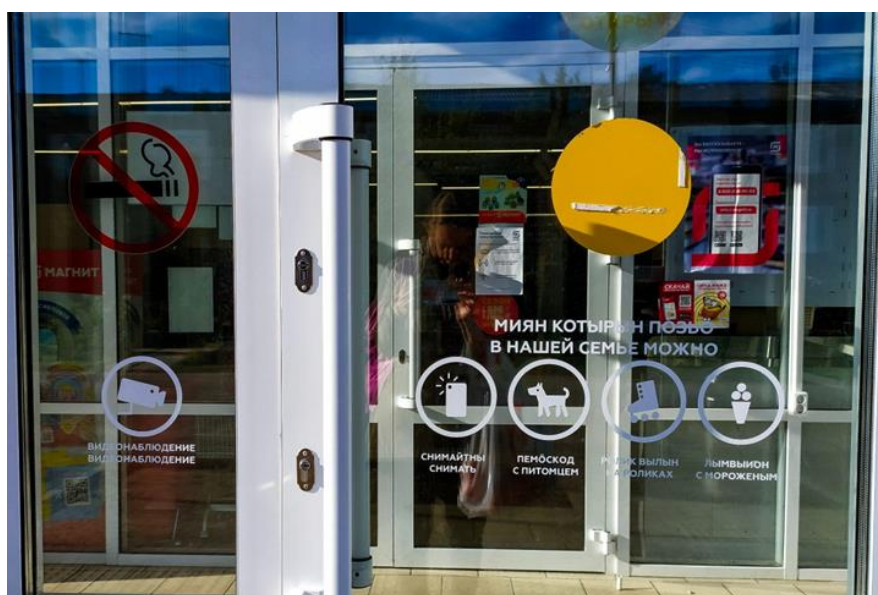


Fig. 2. Signs in Komi at the entrance to the Magnit store in Shchel'yayur M. S. Lapina.

Education in the Izhemsky District: local Komi, standard Komi, and Russian

The Komi Language at School

As mentioned, Komi has the status of the state language in the Komi Republic. This status guarantees, among other things, education in Komi and Russian, in all schools of the republic (Law on the State Languages of the Komi Republic 1992: Ch. 5, Article 19). Since 2018, following the adopted amendments to the Federal Law on Education, all schoolchildren of the Russian Federation have a compulsory subject called *The Native Language* (“Rodnoj jazyk”). The amendments to the law provide the opportunity to study Russian as *The Native Language*. This leads to a situation where every year more and more students—or rather their parents—choose Russian as *The Native Language*. The compulsory study of Komi is conducted according to a simplified program of the subject *The State Language*, (“gosudarstvennyj jazyk”) where Komi is taught as a foreign language. All school subjects other than *The Native Language* are required to be taught in Russian.

Most schoolchildren of the Izhemsky District face a difficult situation. Before school, children speak the local idiom and a little bit of Russian. Once in school, they have to learn Russian, the standard Komi language, and a foreign language (English, French, etc.). Thus, as informants complain, the children of the Izhemsky District essentially have to deal, as they say, “with three foreign languages”.

Since standard Komi seems very difficult, parents decide to ease their child's school program, preferring an extra hour of Russian as *The Native Language* and the simplified Komi language program as *The State Language*. The main difficulty, according to informants, is the vocabulary. Neologisms introduced by the Komi Academy of Sciences in the line with purism are unfamiliar either to the children or to adult speakers.

Homework assignments in the Komi language cause difficulties. To handle them, schoolchildren turn for help to adults—relatives who are native speakers of southern dialects, cultural workers, and teachers. To a certain extent, this serves as an occasion for additional communication among community members, which strengthens horizontal ties. This “community homework” is the main input of modern standard Komi for most of the locals.

Teachers of Komi language are the bearers of both the local idiom and the literary norm which they learnt at the same “Finno-Ugric Department” at Syktyvkar State University (the official name is *The Department of Komi Philology, Finno-Ugric Studies, and Regional Studies*). In class, local Komi can function as an intermediary language. It is used to explain difficult material (on the different school subjects, not only in *The Native Language*). The most determined

teachers of Komi demonstrate the difference between the literary norm and the local idiom and give a comparative analysis at classes. In some schools, the administration forbids the use of the local idiom during class. Nevertheless, it is still common practice. In Soviet times, according to the accounts of informants, teaching at school took place according to the so-called transitional model—each year more and more Russian was used. To some extent, this model remains today, but informally.

Language Shift and Bilingualism

From a comparison of informants' narratives, we can observe the dynamics of the language situation. Generations born before the 1980s did not speak Russian before school. Today the situation is different. Children go to school already knowing at least some Russian. This change is due to the increase of Russian-speaking input, which preschoolers receive through cartoons and other content for children. It has been made possible in recent years by the spread of television, smartphones, and tablets and access to the internet, even in the most remote settlements of the district. The early acquisition of Russian by children makes some members of the community—mostly older people—express their concerns about the preservation of the local idiom and the Komi language in general. However, we cannot speak of a late stage of a language shift, as most children are growing up in a bilingual environment. From the interviews with preschool teachers and parents, we can assume that children of preschool and primary school age are often in a diffuse language situation (Bichurina 2021: 49-50; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985: 204), in which speakers do not separate idioms in their heads and speak in a kind of mixture of these idioms. Sometimes, to change this situation, preschool teachers and parents agree to use the same language with the child. Thus, a common situation in the Izhemsky District is that preschool teachers speak to children mostly in the local idiom. Negative attitudes towards the Russian language, despite concerns about the possible loss of their idiom, are rarely observed among the informants. Often parents address their children in the local Komi, and the children respond to them in Russian. No principal imposition of the Komi language in the family was encountered. Language transmission occurs naturally. Even in Russian-speaking Komi families, parents are not concerned about the absence of Komi speech at home: children, they say, will learn it “in the streets”.

Standard Komi and the Local Idiom in Culture and Media

Despite these difficulties related to teaching Komi at school, standard Komi has a special status in the communities of the Izhemsky District. Standard Komi is a marker of the involvement of local communities in the common Komi culture. There is practically no demand for teaching the

local idiom at school. This is largely because the speakers have not thought about such an option—local Komi exists almost exclusively in oral form. Informants told us about rare cases of Komi writers and poets who write in the local idiom. However, as described above, it is difficult for bearers of both the local idiom and standard Komi to attribute a particular text as written in one or the other idiom due to fuzzy boundaries between the varieties. An example of such texts is a local newspaper called *Novy Sever* (“The New North” in Russian). It publishes a whole page in the Komi language once or twice a month. These texts are written by native speakers of the local idiom who also are proficient in standard Komi. According to the informants, these texts contain local words, but many people still find them difficult to read.

Standard Komi has prestige in the eyes of community members, including being the literary variant. In addition to being a marker of ethnic identity and of common Komi culture, knowledge of standard Komi is also a sign of a good education. Almost all literature is written in standard Komi, which is neither native nor even familiar for most readers of the Izhemsky District. Even though all libraries in the district have an extensive collection of literature in Komi and the latest Komi press, it is not in demand among readers. The books are mostly fiction, prose, and poetry, as well as local history and scientific literature. Periodicals are published for adults and children, especially teenagers. The only readers are teachers and cultural workers fluent in standard Komi—and school students who have to prepare for Komi literature class.

There is a very limited amount of television and radio broadcast in the Komi language. There is a republican TV channel *Yurgan* (“Sonorous” in Komi), which broadcasts several programs in Komi. There are also programs in Komi on the *Komi Gor* (“The Sound of Komi” in Komi) radio station. Informants say that they sometimes watch and listen to these programs. The broadcasts are in “common Komi”, as the informants call it, and they have no difficulties in understanding them. This “common” variety is a kind of standard Komi, but it differs from what is taught in schools with the near absence of neologisms.

The social network VK plays an important role in the life of the Izhemsky District communities. Almost every house of culture, school, and shop in the district has a page. Many locals read and discuss the news in online communities, for example, in *Miyan Izhma medsyta dona* (“Our Izhma, the most beautiful” in Komi). It has more than 18,000 subscribers (note, as mentioned above, there are 18,771 people living in the Izhemsky District (Russian census 2010)). The Komi language can be found in public correspondence—for example, in comments to publications, personal VK blogs, and other public discussions. However, this does not occur very often, and Russian currently prevails online. The role of Komi on the internet is limited by the functions of discourse units and conversational formulas.

According to informants, they often use the local idiom in private chats in messengers. However, many face the problem of the lack of the special letters of Komi cyrillic alphabet (*i* and *ö*) in the standard keyboard layout. They deal with the situation in different ways (the most common way is to replace them with convenient *u* and *o*).

Despite the difficulty of learning standard Komi, there is a widespread opinion in local communities that it is necessary to learn it “to be able to read and write correctly in Komi”.

Standard Komi is a marker of Komi identity, but it is mostly symbolic because in practice the content created in standard Komi is not in demand among the residents of the Izhemsky District. The speakers of the local idiom write in their everyday life either in Russian or in the local Komi “as we hear it”.

Conclusion

The Izhemsky District of the Komi Republic is a rural area where the local language is vital and quite stable. With some exceptions, the transmission of the local idiom to children occurs naturally. Negative attitudes towards the Russian language are not encountered in the district, and its spread is perceived with no concern. There is no alarmist sentiment about the impending language shift among residents of the district, nor are there any activists seeking to reverse it at a very early stage.

We can conclude that the language situation in the Izhemsky District can be determined as a diglossia, where the local Komi idiom acts as a “low” idiom and the standard Komi as a “high” idiom. The roles between them seem to be clearly distributed, but there are certain difficulties. It is often a problem for speakers of the local Komi idiom to attribute a text to literary Komi or to the local idiom. It can be assumed that these codes represent a continuum. Each time when creating content serving as an identity marker, a particular content maker marks a point along this continuum.

The local idiom of the Izhemsky District is the default code of communication. For example, a stranger will be addressed first in local Komi. The local idiom is also a “code for locals”. In the perceptions of speakers, there are rules of politeness—to speak in Russian in public places in the presence of a Komi non-speaker—but they are often violated, sometimes intentionally. The persons publicly known as newcomers or city dwellers are not expected to understand the local idiom, which is why it is often used as a secret language in their presence.

In the identity of the communities of the Izhemsky District there is still both an antagonism with the Southern Komi and a cultural unity with them. The standard Komi language for the locals is a marker of common Komi identity, but proficiency in standard Komi is not necessary. The literary Komi language causes dissatisfaction among parents of schoolchildren and a considerable part of the community who deal with school education—neologisms and other novelties seem alien and often artificial. Nevertheless, community members are not ready to abandon the study of literary Komi for good. There is almost no demand for teaching the familiar local idiom, largely due to the lack of consideration of this possibility. Members of the speech community do not make claims for inclusion of the local Komi in new “higher” domains.

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