

Yukaghir Language Competence in a Multilingual Environment: a Longitudinal Research¹

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In this talk, we will present preliminary results of a longitudinal study of language situation in Andryushkino, a multilingual village in Northeastern Sakha (Yakutia). In this village, five languages are used, and it is one of two villages where severely endangered Tundra Yukaghir language is still spoken. This language and the dynamics of its use is the main object of our study. Data on Tundra Yukaghir language levels were collected by one of the authors in 1987, and then, after 35 years, by the other in 2022. We used 7-point scale elaborated by Nikolai Vakhtin in the 1980s. To evaluate speaker's competence, expert interviews were used: several experts fluent in Tundra Yukaghir language evaluated their fellow villagers' level of Yukaghir. Data from 1987 and 2022 demonstrate considerable reduction of language skills in the younger and middle-aged group of individuals. In our samples, we have found 13 individuals whose level of language competence was evaluated in both studies. All of them could speak, apart from Yukaghir, also Russian, Yakut and sometimes Even. Interestingly, the experts' evaluation of Yukaghir competence of 6 people, nearly a half of this small sample, increased. This can have several explanations: (1) respondents' competence did increase (this may sound strange, but it could happen because linguists and ethnographers widely demonstrated the value of this critically endangered language to its speakers in 1990s-2000s); (2) in 1987, experts used highly competent speakers as a point of reference, and now that these competent people have passed away, previously less competent speakers have occupied a vacant niche of skillful speakers; (3) the standards of expert evaluation have changed; simplified language is now considered a norm. In our talk, we will discuss the cases of all 13 people with increased competence, taking into account their linguistic biographies, as well as multilingual environment of Andryushkino and general dynamics of Yukaghir competence decline. All this will help us to picture the dynamics of language situation of Andryushkino, whose inhabitants have created a remarkable but ephemeral multicultural and multilingual environment.

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