

Practices of language shift reversal in Russia: A comparative case study of three regions¹

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Despite the increased academic interest in bottom-up language policy and language shift reversal in particular, most of the studies pertaining to the subject tend to describe instances of language activism as standalone cases. As of now, there have not been many attempts to study language activism through comparison and analysis of its different instances with a view to ascertaining their common properties and tendencies.

The premises of our work suggest that a better understanding of the phenomenon of language activism may be achieved by comparing its different manifestations using a set of defined parameters. It is logical to assume that, on the one hand, a number of similar socioeconomic, political, cultural, and sociolinguistic conditions shared by different linguistic communities will influence the language policies implemented in those communities, thereby leading them in more or less similar directions. On the other hand, the differences found in such policies are likely to be explained by the extra-linguistic factors that differ.

This work is an attempt to illustrate how juxtaposition of similar practices in different communities may shed light on some of the properties that are characteristic of language shift reversal in general, as well as some of the extra-linguistic variables that play an important role in shaping language shift reversal practices in terms of the means and measures preferred by activists locally.

¹ The results of the project “Language, literature and culture in historical and social perspective”, carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at HSE University in 2025, are presented in this work.

The specific focus of this research is on the language shift reversal practices among several languages historically spoken in the Republic of Karelia, Khabarovsk Kray, and Primorsky Kray in the Russian Federation.

Keywords: language activism, language shift, language shift reversal, Russia, Karelian, Veps, Nanai, Nivkh, Oroch, Udege

For citation: Shaymukhametov R. Practices of language shift reversal in Russia: A comparative case study of three regions. *Rodnoy yazyk*, 2025, 1: 41–71.

DOI: 10.37892/2313-5816-2025-1-41-71

Практики противодействия языковому сдвигу в России: сравнительное исследование на материале трех регионов²

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Несмотря на возросший академический интерес к языковой политике «снизу вверх» и, в частности, к практикам противодействия языковому сдвигу, большинство исследований, посвященных этой теме, характеризуются описанием отдельных случаев языкового активизма. На данный момент было предпринято не так много попыток изучать языковой активизм через сравнение и анализ различных его проявлений с целью выявления общих для них свойств и тенденций.

² В данной научной работе использованы результаты проекта «Язык, литература и культура в историческом и социальном измерении», выполненного в рамках Программы фундаментальных исследований НИУ ВШЭ в 2025 году.

Предпосылка нашей работы состоит в том, что лучшее понимание феномена языкового активизма может быть достигнуто путем сравнения различных его проявлений на основе определенного набора параметров. Логично предположить, что, с одной стороны, похожие социоэкономические, политические, культурные и социолингвистические условия, характерные для разных языковых сообществ, будут влиять на языковую политику этих сообществ, тем самым двигая ее в более-менее одном направлении. С другой стороны, различия в языковой политике, вероятно, могут быть объяснены разницей этих экстралингвистических условий.

Таким образом, данная работа является попыткой продемонстрировать, как через сопоставление практик противодействия языковому сдвигу можно обнаружить некоторые характерные свойства языкового активизма как такого, а также выявить факторы, играющие важную роль при выборе активистами способов и мер для замедления языковых сдвигов в конкретных сообществах.

Предметом данного исследования являются практики противодействия языковому сдвигу в нескольких сообществах, в которых используются некоторые языки, традиционно распространенные в Республике Карелия, Хабаровском и Приморском краях.

Ключевые слова: языковой активизм, языковой сдвиг, противодействие языковому сдвигу, Россия, карельский, вепсский, нанайский, нивхский, ороцкий, удэгейский

Для цитирования: Шаймухаметов Р. О. Практики противодействия языковому сдвигу в России: сравнительное исследование на материале трех регионов. *Родной язык*, 2025, 1: 41–71.

DOI: 10.37892/2313-5816-2025-1-41-71

Introduction

In recent years there has been a surge of language activism in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, as has been rightly pointed out by Baranova [2023: 9], while there are many interesting works written within the paradigm of the traditional understanding of language policy as state regulation, not many works have so far focused on local, private initiatives, especially in Russia. There are a number of studies dedicated

to non-institutionalised practices in some locations, e.g. Galicia [O'Rourke, Dayán-Fernández 2024], Catalonia [Pujolar, Puigdevall 2015], Dagestan [Bitkeyeva 2021], Yakutia [Bitkeyeva et al. 2022], Sweden [Årman 2021], Kalmykia [Volgin 2022], but many regions remain largely understudied. Moreover, what all of the previous studies have in common is that, while providing detailed descriptions of such initiatives, they rarely try to juxtapose different cases. As a result, we are not any closer to being able to propose a comprehensive, overarching theoretical framework for studying language activism, nor can we provide broader descriptions, e.g. macro-regional reviews.

It is apparent that without comparing and contrasting practices in different communities it is impossible to establish the extralinguistic variables that have a consistent impact on language activism versus the ones that are arbitrary. The premises of this work suggest that scaling up the research on language activism by involving direct comparisons of its different forms will broaden our understanding of both the phenomenon of language shift and the various ways societies react to it.

The ultimate objective of this study is thus to pilot one possible way of such analysis and thereby see what kind of results can be obtained from such an approach, and what kind of conclusions can be drawn.

To achieve the objective we formulated the following tasks:

- a) interview agents of bottom-up language policy from different linguistic communities;
- b) process and analyse the data obtained from various initiatives;
- c) identify commonalities, differences, and patterns;
- d) formulate the conclusions of the study based on the analysis.

Methodology and data

Our methodological framework falls into the scope of contemporary sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and the study of language policy and planning (LPP). We believe that

the methods and research tools of these disciplines will yield the best results as they can provide us with all the information we need to achieve the objective of the study.

The work is divided into two parts:

- 1) conducting semi-structured interviews with practitioners of language shift reversal, using a specially devised interview guide (Appendix 1);
- 2) processing and analysing the data within the framework of the ethnography of language policy as the main epistemological lens.

The Ethnography of Language Policy (ELP) is a method adopted from social anthropology that presents an epistemologically and methodologically updated view of the analysis of LPP [Johnson 2009: 140]. The main principle of ELP is to study “agents, contexts and processes at several levels of creation, interpretation and appropriation of language policy” [Johnson 2013: 44]. This approach implies the interpretation of LPP as a socio-cultural process, which means that the analysis includes practices, ideologies, attitudes, and mechanisms that influence people’s language use. Accordingly, the interviews conducted within this framework are organised in such a way that they could be parsed for information on practitioners’ socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds, their perception of language shift, attitudes towards revitalisation practices and other aspects of language use.

The data presented in this study are based on the semi-structured anthropological/sociolinguistic interviews conducted in March-May 2024 with 16 language activists from Karelia, Finland, St. Petersburg, Khabarovsk Kray, and Primorsky Kray. The main criterion for the choice of informants was their engagement in minority language activities and language-related activism pertaining to the indigenous languages of three areas located at the Northwest and Far East of the Russian Federation, namely Karelian, Veps, Nivkh, Oroch, Udege, and Nanai.

We would like to thank all of the informants for their help. We consider their valuable and sincere opinions a sensitive matter, so the statements cited in this text are anonymised and the

original Russian-language citations are presented in a neutral-manner English translation.

Perceptions of language shift

One of our first observations was the fact that language activists are not merely aware of minority languages being in the situation of language shift; they also tend to accurately assess how deep the shifts are, as their assessments agree with different statistical data (such as the All-Russian population census) and linguists' reports [Koryakov et al. 2023]. An illustrative example of how the shifts are perceived is the following reaction by two Karelian activists when they travelled to Mari El (it should be kept in mind that the Mari languages are also experiencing a shift):

(1) – *We travelled to Mari El the summer before last. We were shocked at how well they know the language. It is used in everyday life. They speak it to each other.*

– *Yes. The children speak it. They are nationalists, in the good sense of the word. They have a reverent attitude towards their language. It's a whole new level.*

– *Yes, it's a different world. I know there are regions in Russia where two languages are used in everyday life. Unfortunately, Karelia is not one of them [12, 11].*

The informants correctly perceive the difference in the two languages' vitality status. They confirm that some of the studied communities are experiencing deeper shifts than others: (2) *Karelian settlements are further away from Russian settlements, especially in the North. They are far from Petrozavodsk, for instance. It's no surprise that the language has better chances to be preserved there (as compared to Veps) [4].*

According to the informants, the language shifts in the three regions started at about the same time, i. e. in the 1960s-70s. Representatives of the older generations report that the languages were widely used as they were growing up and some of them were even monolingual until a certain age: (3) *My generation was raised in a Nivkh-speaking environment. Even some Rus-*

sian-speaking residents of Makarovka occasionally used certain Nivkh phrases [16].

Most of the alleged reasons for the current vitality status of the languages are shared by the informants, regardless of the community in question. Thus, the activists name urbanisation and depopulation of smaller ethnic settlements as one of the primary causes. What is peculiar is that many activists from Karelia take assimilation and depopulation of ethnic settlements to be a natural result of globalisation. The informants perceive people's relocation as a voluntary act done with the aim of improving one's financial status and career opportunities, and many agree that a close proximity of small minority settlements to Russian-speaking cities is an additional risk for languages: (4) *I have an example. I had a teacher at the university. She hadn't even known Russian until she left her village. She'd been raised in a totally Veps-speaking family. It was possible until civilization came there. I don't think it's possible anymore. It's only 60 kilometres from Shoksha to the city. From Sheltozero it's about a hundred. The Veps were assimilated quite quickly* [4]. In contrast, the activists from the Far East regions often report mass disbandment of small ethnic villages, which made people move to predominantly Russian-speaking settlements and halted minority-language communication. This "forced relocation" narrative is specific for the regions of the Far East and was mentioned by every informant from there: (5) *Sanchikheza was disbanded in 1977. Many villages were. People moved out, scattered. And we moved to Roschino in '87. It's a big settlement. The population is 5000 people, if not more* [15]. Nothing like this was mentioned by the interviewees from the western part of Russia.

According to some of the informants, such migration processes lead to ethnic assimilation as well. Ethnic endogamy and group homogeneity are seen helpful to language preservation, which is why some languages, they claim, are in a less severe shift dynamic: (6) *There are very few pure-blooded Oroch, fewer than 10 people, maybe. The rest are mixed, whereas the Nanai support their purity. They marry within the group* [14].

A shared opinion is that the density of minority groups' settlement patterns and the presence of homogeneous ethnic

villages can be a major advantage when it comes to language and culture maintenance: (7) *Nanaisky, Amursky, and Komso-molsky districts are a kind of "Nanai Republic". There are Nanai settlements with Nanai predominance. The Udege and Oroch have nothing like that [13]; (8) The Nanai are a bigger group than the Oroch. They have compact settlements along the Amur. And the local authorities give them more money, because that's the policy. The more people, the more money [14].*

The second most frequently named reason for the shifts was the state's policies on ethnicity and education. Most of the activists from Karelia speak of linguistic discrimination and prohibition of indigenous language use in the Soviet Union in the 1960s-70s: (9) *We were brainwashed into thinking that it was bad to be Karelian. We were told we would do poorly in school if we keep on speaking it [3].*

The informants claim that people would try not to talk about their ethnicity or speak their language in public; if they did, they would be looked down on, discriminated against, or shamed. This narrative is commonplace. The activists feel that the promotion of Russian was almost omnipresent in the regions in question. At some point, Russian became the language of higher prestige and offered economic opportunities, career perspectives and social advantages, which contributed to the cessation of intergenerational transmission of minority languages in the context of intra-family communication: (10) *My grandmother was a party worker. She was in the village council and head of the village. Several times she was elected as our representative, deputy in one of the superior government bodies. That village council system, the Soviet way of thinking, deprived them of any ethnic consciousness [14].*

Although the majority of the interviewed activists shared such an understanding of the reasons for language shift, the Republic of Karelia and the two regions of the Far East do differ in some aspects. Thus, for the Far East regions a common narrative was one connected to Soviet educational policy, which was based, starting in the 1920s, on the system of boarding schools. Most of the informants attended such schools themselves, and many of them think that that system was the turning point that

led to the cessation of the intergenerational transmission of their language and traditions: (11) *I spent my childhood at a boarding school. We were taken away from our parents, grandparents and would only come home for the holidays. Our language wasn't taught. They had completely taken away all ethnic consciousness from the people* [14]. The interviewees report that the boarding schools were mixed, meaning children of different linguistic backgrounds attended them, making communication in any language but Russian virtually impossible. Nevertheless, it must be said that unlike the distinctively negative perception of Soviet ethno-linguistic policy in the 1960s-70s in Karelia, opinions on Soviet educational policy in the Far East regions at about the same time are not exclusively negative. On the contrary, some activists see the educational efforts in a rather positive light: (12) *I could already read in kindergarten, because there were enthusiasts. In school we had a homeroom teacher who was a gifted enthusiast. She would read us Russian folktales, poetry, and we studied the alphabet. Along the way she taught us English. I could easily read in English by the 5th grade. There were young aspiring teachers who were eager to teach us* [15]. These views on educational policies and ethnic-village disbandment are not unique to Russia as we find similar perspectives among some of the indigenous populations in North America [Woolford 2015].

An interesting observation is that for the most rural groups, the traditional tribal-clan relationships may still play an important social role. Thus, the same informant said: (13) *My nephews are from the <...> clan. They want to socialise among each other. And we, <...>, regularly meet too. We have a family commune* [15]. Although the data are yet insufficient to hypothesise, it may be that such a social system actually contributes to the acceleration of language shift, as it can potentially create certain boundaries between speakers of minority languages, depriving them of the opportunity to maintain habitual use of their ethnic language.

Several informants from Karelia also spoke on a matter specific for their region. For them, an additional factor that may account for some of the decline in the indigenous population size in Karelia is the emigrational programmes via which the

Finno-Ugric ethnic groups of the Russian Northwest moved to Finland from the 1990s to the mid-2010s: (14) *A lot of northern Karelians moved to Finland in the 90s. People left from the South as well, but those were Ingrians, not Karelians* [9].

Notwithstanding the demographic difference between the seven ethnic groups studied, the intergenerational transmission of all their languages has practically ceased. However, for Karelian it may still be partly occurring among some families in areas where there is a significant ethnic presence. Apparently, it is still possible to find a few native Karelian speakers born in the 1990s and early 2000s: (15) *My assistant (born in the 2000s), <...>, is from the North of the Republic. She spoke Karelian at home as a child. Her family is Karelian. She knows the language well* [10]. However, there are now hardly any monolingual speakers left. The vast majority of speakers are fluent in Russian, with the exception of a few very elderly people: (16) *There are still some elderly women who don't speak Russian well. This relates to Karelian, Veps, and Ingrian speakers. Some of them struggle to understand Russian, and it's much easier for them to communicate in their native languages. But it's so rare* [1].

Owing to the cessation of intergenerational transmission, there has also appeared an expected demographic shift. As the age of the average speaker increases, we can anticipate that there is going to be a gender disproportion, due to the difference in life expectancy of men and women: (17) *It was such a big problem to find a male native speaker of Karelian Proper. Not only did I not find one, but even finding women was tough. I understood then that to find Livvi speakers was considerably easier* [5].

Another side to this generation gap is the fact that the shifts have resulted in people outside the linguistic communities ascribing a certain unappealing connotation to these languages: (18) *Many young people, I mean younger than 35, think that Karelian is an ancient language, the language of the elderly* [1].

In spite of their attempts, the language activists report little positive change. However, by virtue of the language nest in Vedlozero (Pryazhinsky district, Karelia) and activism in Dada (Nanai district, Khabarovsk Kray) there has appeared a number

of younger children that are able to understand Karelian and Nanai and have some limited speaking abilities: (19) *The children who attended the language nest, of whom there are 14 people, they understand the language. They don't speak much, but they understand everything. They can also reply and answer questions in a simple way and with short sentences* [9]; (20) *There are no children who speak Nanai. Owing to our work, unfortunately, only to our work, there are children who understand it and can communicate in Nanai in a limited number of contexts* [13].

Contrary to our expectation, the issue of the formal status of the languages, though discussed, is not deemed as important as one may assume. While all of the interviewees speak in favour of assigning minority languages some institutionalised status, the vast majority say that such a step will not be sufficient on its own and that there is a need for other institutional measures, such as the introduction of the languages to the sphere of public education, or the creation of a certain official structure that would be in charge of the status, corpus, and acquisition planning. Among the named advantages of such a status, the most common were as follows:

1) the presence of the languages in official spheres can enhance their prestige, and therefore have a positive impact on the public's perception of them;

2) local authorities would be able to impose the use of the languages in certain contexts: (21) *If the director of a school wants to support ethnocultural education they do it. If they don't – they don't. The state can't impose it, because the language doesn't have that status* [9].

Nonetheless, the diversity of language variants is sometimes seen as a hindrance to such a measure: (22) *The situation with the dialects is complicated. Which of them should we choose as the second official language? Whom are we going to offend?* [12]. There could also be a negative reaction on the part of the authorities. Several activists say that the issue of ethnic nationalism and separatism is connected to ethnic-driven activities, and that it might be the reason why certain types of activism are discoura-

ged: (23) *There's another delicate matter. They may also be afraid of nationalism. There is such a fine line* [11].

A relatively common opinion among the activists is that the functional limitations of minority languages stem from the languages' reduced applications, namely the underdevelopment of the written forms of the languages and the lack of vocabulary needed in the 21st century: (24) *Karelian has fallen behind on life. The language is connected to the Karelian lifestyle, which has not entered the modern era. There are no words for "cellphone" or "computer"* [5]. Some informants say that the attitude the general public has towards minority languages can be partially explained by these limitations. Because of the fact that the languages cannot be used to talk about the realities of contemporary life that young people experience in the 21st century, they perceive minority languages as "the languages of the village" and "the languages of the elderly".

On the other hand, many native speakers are illiterate in their language, i.e. they have only acquired the oral form. As a result, they cannot communicate with second-language speakers, who have mostly acquired the literary, written form of the language. Over time this difference between the standardised language and the spoken dialects grows and creates a gap between generations, as young speakers are often second-language speakers. One informant said: (25) *When the literary language was being created, the objective was to translate literature, use it on TV and radio, and publish newspapers. But there was no modern vocabulary. And many new words were coined by specialists. But if one goes to a village and speaks to the elderly native speakers, naturally, they won't understand a lot of that* [4]. Something very similar has been happening in Breton and Yiddish communities [Hornsby 2015].

This seems to be a common problem for all of the studied communities, as informants from the Far East regions have had a similar experience. For example, a Nanai informant stated that speakers of the local language varieties have a very negative attitude to any form that differs from theirs, including the literary norm: (26) *As soon as we start teaching the literary norm*

we rule out people who don't use it. Moreover, we expect a negative response on their part as we teach a language that is not native for them. We're teaching a foreign language, basically [13].

Another aspect that the languages of Karelia and the Far East regions differ in is their acquisition availability. For instance, a Veps informant says that (27) *There are all these opportunities to learn the language. Online, offline, there is no problem. There are textbooks, methodological guides, and the language is taught at the university. Absolutely no problem, should one wish to learn* [4], whereas informants from the Far East regions often speak of the lack of resources. A common complaint was that most of the available literature is not for education purposes, but is “written by linguists for linguists”. Oftentimes the only materials that language learners have to rely on are linguistic descriptions of grammar, phonology, and dictionaries, rather than textbooks: (28) *It's written in a sort of scholarly language, from the point of view of linguistics. I'm not a specialist yet, I'm just starting. I have to figure it all out by myself, with the help of the internet* [14]. All the respondents are unanimous in the opinion that as long as a declining language cannot be formally taught, any revitalisation measures are severely hindered, since not everyone willing to study the language can find the rare native speakers to learn the language from.

A portrait of language activists

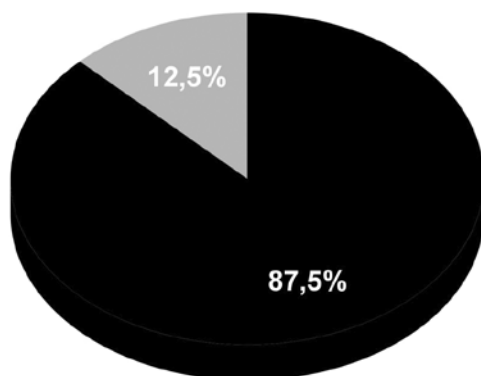
Despite the similar sentiments that language activists express towards their minority languages, they turned out to be quite different in terms of their perception of the practices and the reasons they are engaged in them.

Most of the activists identify as representatives of the respective ethnic groups or report some relation to them (i.e. they are “internal advocates”). The vast majority of the informants share narratives related to their families' history and connection to their ancestors, which for most of them is realised through their ethnic identity and language. From this we can conclude that most of the time language activists are motivated

by their personal relation to the group and family bonds. Several activists spoke of the issues of identity and how language is intrinsically connected to it, saying that language is the primary marker of identity.

Another group is represented by the so-called external activists, or “outsider advocates”, i. e. people who do not report any ethno-cultural or linguistic connection to the communities. Out of the 16 informants, 4 of them come from a different ethnic background and had had no relation to the languages prior to their activities. Unlike the internal activists in whose stories we found many commonalities and similar narratives, the stories of the external activists are versatile and there are not too many commonalities between them. The reasons people are attracted to the minority languages vary from a general interest in different languages and concern for the world’s linguistic diversity to the passion people have for northern ethnic music. Consequently, the perceptions of the activities people are engaged in differ according to their motivation, goals, and life stories. Thus, for some of the informants the survival of their target language is crucial and they take their activism seriously: (29) *One of my main objectives, life goals, is the survival and popularisation of the language and culture* [1]. Other activists, on the contrary, while being attracted to the languages and engaged in some forms of language-related activism, pursue other goals and do not aim at revitalisation: (30) *I just like it. I don’t do it because I want to revitalise it. I just like the language. And my main goal is to show other people what languages are out there, and that one can create music in any of them* [12]. These results resonate with what has been known from other communities, especially in diasporas, such as Mountain Jews [Agranat 2024] and Chuvash [Kutsaeva 2017] in Moscow, Czechs in Australia [Castle 2021], or German, French, and Spanish speakers in the United States [Fishman 1966].

One of the commonalities between the activists is the fact that the vast majority of them come from an urban background. Out of the 16 people interviewed, 14 were born or live in cities or urbanised areas.

Image 1. Residential status of language activists

• City dwellers • Rural residents

In addition, all the activists have received a higher education in one form or another, and many of them speak foreign and international languages.

Table 1. Educational background of language activists

Educational background	% of the respondents ³
Pedagogical	37.5
Performing arts	37.5
Humanities	31.25
Vocational, technical	12.5

This leads to the conclusion that language activism as a whole has an inclination towards a certain demographic. Language shift reversal practices are more likely to emerge in an

³ The numbers do not add up to 100 % as several respondents have got more than one degree, and a linguistic degree in Russia often, but not always, implies pedagogical qualifications.

urban, educated social environment where people can expect their activities to get more coverage, have multiple social connections, and a sufficient level of financial and informational resources.

The fact that language activists usually come from the urban educated middle class and above may be explained by the following reasons:

1. The interest people take in native cultures and languages is often induced by their personal membership in a minority group; it seems that the threat of losing personal bonds to the family, ethnic language, and culture is more acutely perceived by people living in multicultural, multiethnic urban centres, whereas such issues less often concern inhabitants of smaller mono-ethnic settlements, possibly due to the absence of the feeling of “otherness” or uniqueness, of which city dwellers often speak: (31) *The feeling of one's roots, the understanding of one's past, language, and relatives are the most valuable and most important things a human being has. Without the past there is no present. Without the present there is no future* [2].

2. The economic conditions of rural dwellers might present an obstacle to putting cultural values before more pressing and urgent problems of a domestic or economic character: (32) *Cultural heritage, including language, can't be saved in a village, because there is no money there. That's why heritage is preserved in cities. Petrozavodsk is the place of force for the Karelian language. All the financial flows are here. And all the initiatives are supported from here, even if they come from the districts* [1].

This conclusion finds justification in many of the interviews. Several activists report that they started their activities once they had stopped being engaged in manual labour. Others express the opinion that the current popularity of language activism is connected to the amount of resources people now have; a common narrative was that the issue of culture and language was not relevant for the previous generations as they sometimes “had to survive themselves” rather than “save their languages”.

Aside from the demographics, there might be a certain point on the spectrum of language shift at which we can expect some emergence of language activism in a community. More than a third of the informants share a common biographical trait of belonging to the first generation in their families to which the ethnic language was not passed on, or was not passed on to the extent of fluent command.

Table 2. Activists' linguistic background as regards to the target language

Linguistic background	% of the respondents
Parents native speakers	37.5
No family relation to the languages ("outsider advocates")	31.3
Native speaker of the target language	18.7
Grandparents native speakers	12.5

Internal activists usually report one of two patterns:

1) either their parents were capable of understanding the respective language but did not speak it, resulting in the activists not acquiring the language in the family context, or 2) they themselves spoke the language up to a certain age but then forgot how to do this, which motivated them to start regaining their fluency: (33) *The Nivkh language was spoken in our family, by my mother, mostly. I learnt it from her. As she says, I spoke it before the age of three or four. Then I was taken to our relative's family on Sakhalin, where only Russian was spoken, and I myself started speaking Russian* [16].

Particular features of language activism in the three regions

The practices of language activism in the three regions are versatile and can be grouped into categories:

- 1) content-creation, i.e. the production of new materials in a minority language for entertainment or educational purposes;
- 2) informational support, i.e. initiatives aimed at educating the population on the culture and languages of minority groups;
- 3) teaching initiatives, i.e. endeavours to increase the number of people who speak the language and their fluency;
- 4) corpus and acquisition planning, i.e. work dedicated to the expansion of the functionality of the languages, such as coining new words and terms, developing the literary written norms, strategies of language acquisition, etc.

A prominent characteristic of language activism is that it overlaps with ethnic activism and is sometimes indistinguishable from it. It appears that for most activists, the language is only part of their ethnocultural identity, and other cultural symbols and traditions play an important role as well. Several informants reported that apart from their linguistic endeavours they engage in traditional decorative and applied arts, cooking, etc.: (34) *We organise different events. We go to schools and show children our traditional paraphernalia and attributes. My brother makes ulys, hunter's shoes. Another one makes traditional skis, fishing nets, bone crafts* [15].

The same applies to educational initiatives. The activists are worried that not only are their languages disappearing, but also the memory about these ethnic groups is being erased from the general public awareness. Because of that, some of the activists have organised educational platforms in which they familiarise the general public with their culture. Most of the time the activists are open to wider audiences and want to gain coverage, instead of focusing exclusively on the ethnic group itself. One of the respondents explained the use of Russian in one of their popularisation activities the following way: (35) *If we want to be interesting only to ourselves we will write for ourselves. If we want to be interesting to everyone, we should be understood. This material works for the popularisation of the language anyway* [1].

One of the most noticeable features of language activism in Karelia is its vast presence in the sphere of culture. Many initiatives are aimed at expanding language use in the arts, such as music, theatre, literature, etc. As one of the informants says: (36) *A lot of folk groups have appeared. Karelia has historically had a strong tradition of singing. And now this is reviving. There are lots of bands and festivals. Many books are being published. There are many authors, including young ones, who write poetry, children's literature, and adults' literature in the Karelian languages* (Karelian Proper, Livvi-Karelian, and Ludic are deemed three separate languages by the respondent) [1]. Apart from the state-funded traditional musical ensembles engaged in recreating the traditions of performance of the native groups' oral folklore, there exist several dozen independent musical bands that produce new musical content using the languages of Karelia. Even though the majority of them resort to traditional lyrics, some of them insist on the necessity of creating something new: (37) *We cannot stick to what there was 100–200 years ago and stop going any further. Otherwise, the language disappears. It disappears when it doesn't transform, when nothing new is created in the language. It gets stuck in the past* [12].

Karelian activism differs from the activism in the Far East regions in terms of the amount of public approval it receives. It appears that activism in Karelia is on the rise, as more and more initiatives are appearing and more people are engaging in them. The vast majority of the informants from the Northwest of Russia say that the overall climate is favourable and the interest is noticeable on both the state's and the general public's part. Some even say that minority cultures and native languages are now in fashion among young people. Among the named reasons for this surge of attention were the following:

- 1) by virtue of the activists' work, young people see that ethnic minorities can co-exist with the majority culture and language and develop in their own way;
- 2) the development of Karelia as a popular tourist destination, which has now expanded, making Karelia interesting

not only for its unique natural environment, but from the point of view of ethnic tourism as well.

However, some of the informants do not perceive this surge as something specific for Karelia, but think that it is a global trend observed in many other countries nowadays.

On the other hand, no such trend is reported by the informants from Khabarovsk Kray or Primorsky Kray. On the contrary, a common opinion is that very few people (even among the representatives of the minority groups) care about the ethnic languages and cultures: (38) *Our people don't care about their roots. Neither the language nor the culture interests them. They only use the (economic) benefits provided for the peoples of the North* [14].

Another remarkable feature of Karelian activism is the pervasive influence of Finland it has experienced over the years. Thus, some practices of reversing language shift are directly borrowed from Finnish experience. For example, the language nest in Vedlozero employs the methodology first tested in Lapland. Many informants from the Russian Northwest speak of their frequent visits to Finland. Language activism in Finland plays an important role in the development of language shift reversal in Karelia, as many informants had Finnish initiatives as their reference point. Many Karelian activists see Finland as a role model and think that, due to the affinity of their languages and cultures, what worked for the Finnish language must work for Karelian. What is peculiar is that this interest seems bilateral. Many activists say that Finns and Finnish Karelians also express sympathy for Karelia, which is why the Finnish-Karelian partnership has existed for a long time now. In part, this interest can be explained by the fact that a considerable number of ethnic Karelians from Finland see Karelia as their historical fatherland: (39) *They have a great interest for their historical homeland. When the borders were open we had lots of Finnish Karelian tourists. They supported the teaching of the language by helping us in the publication of language resources. The universities cooperated. There were family relationships. Their help was palpable* (9).

All of that is in a strong contrast to the communities of the Far East regions. Just like in the Northwest, linguistically and culturally related groups reside on both sides of the Russian-Chinese border, but no such connections were reported by the activists of the Far East regions. It seems that there is no cooperation or even communication between the minority groups of Russia and China.

As to the support provided by the local authorities, the representatives of both the Northwest and Far East regions spoke of a heightened amount of attention paid by the state in recent years. The Republic of Karelia, Khabarovsk Kray and Primorsky Kray, as well as Sakhalin Oblast are all taking steps towards the support of the development of the cultures and languages of the native minority groups. Nonetheless, the opinion shared by most informants is that the languages receive far less attention than the abstract “culture”. For the past ten years there have appeared many projects and platforms, such as ethnocultural centres, that organise traditional celebrations or master classes on folk crafts. While the general attitude to such initiatives is positive, some informants are sceptical as regards the actual help for the languages’ condition that such initiatives can bring: (40) *A lot is done for the culture. We have museums, folk theatres and libraries, different events and so on. But in my opinion the language is the basis of everything. Without the language there is no ethnicity. It’s not enough to put on a dress and sing a Karelian song. If you don’t know what you are singing about – that’s not it* [9].

One of the possible explanations for this could be the fact that there are not so many institutional facilities that would make the direct funding of language development possible. For instance, an informant from Khabarovsk Kray mentioned a special programme for the protection of the minority peoples of the North living in Khabarovsk Kray. As they say, this programme openly states the support of the minority languages as one of its priorities. However, when it comes down to actual measures, it turns out that apart from education there are no institutions the authorities can finance the languages through.

Conclusion

The present study confirms our initial hypothesis that non-institutionalised language policies existing in the form of language and language-related activism have a number of shared features that are characteristic of such initiatives in general, regardless of the specific communities and languages. This conclusion finds justification in a variety of cases all across the world, and the ones we have studied have proved to be similar in many aspects. The narratives voiced by the activists from Karelia, Finland, St. Petersburg, Khabarovsk Kray, and Primorsky Kray have shown many parallels with each other as well as with many similar instances from other places. Those instances where their opinions do not concur can be accounted for by specific differences in the linguistic situations and extra-linguistic conditions, such as the demographics of minority groups, availability of language resources, institutional support, state regulation, etc.

Having analysed the discourse of language shift used by bottom-up language activists in the communities of the three regions of focus, we have seen unanimity in most of their assessments of the sociolinguistic situations that the minority languages are currently in. Despite certain differences in particulars, the vast majority agree that the main reasons for the shifts are:

- a) urbanisation and depopulation of ethnic settlements;
- b) Soviet policies on ethnicity pursued in the 1960s-70s.

Firstly, due to economic reasons and the lack of jobs, ethnic settlements are shrinking in population as young people move to cities, where their ethnic language no longer serves a communicative function in most contexts, leading to ethnic and linguistic assimilation. Throughout the interviews the informants referred to remote villages («глухая деревня») as the places where the languages were preserved best. This can be explained by two facts: 1) on the one hand, ethnic settlements can expect more substantial financial support from both the local authorities and NGOs; and 2) on the other, the linguistic envi-

ronment of more dispersed groups does not allow them to use their language in a sufficient range of social contexts. This is illustrated by the fact that some of the activists often report their deliberate efforts to meet with other speakers just to practise the language, which sometimes requires travelling considerable distances.

Secondly, depopulation of traditional, monoethnic settlements sometimes bears an involuntary character, when authorities force locals to abandon smaller ethnically homogenous villages and move to Russian-speaking towns and cities.

The ethno-linguistically discriminating Soviet policies of the 1960s-70s also contributed to language shift in all of the regions under consideration. And in the case of Khabarovsk Kray and Primorsky Kray, the situation was even further aggravated by the introduction of the boarding school system.

Language activism in Russia is versatile and is represented by a variety of initiatives of different kinds. It is characterised by its merger with ethno-activism, as most enthusiasts perceive language as only part of their ethno-cultural identity, i. e. they value other parts of their cultures, such as folk craft or traditional music equally high.

The vast majority of language activists are so-called internal activists, i. e. they identify with the ethnic group they deal with and report some personal connection to the language. Most of them share the view that the language is important for the existence of their ethnic group, and that the bonds and connections they have with their family and ancestors are realised through their engagement in linguistic and cultural practices. However, engagement in a language-related practice does not always mean active attempts at language revitalisation, as activists' incentives may differ from the desire to maintain or change their habitual language use.

Our work has provided additional proof that for language activism to emerge in a language community, there has to be an urban upper-middle class. Judging from our findings, ethnic and language activism is practised almost exclusively by edu-

cated intellectuals, whereas rural manual labourers are practically absent among such people.

Our findings can be summarised the following way:

1. language activism is characterised by a number of demographic characteristics, i. e. the portrait of the average practitioner working to reverse language shift features the following traits:

- a) urban upbringing;
- b) higher education;
- c) belonging to the ethnic community;
- d) belonging to the first generation to which the ethnic language was not passed on;

2. the activities a language activist is engaged in are determined by:

- a) the specific value the activist ascribes to the languages;
- b) the value the activist ascribes to other cultural markers;
- c) the functional development of the language, e. g. many activists are engaged in corpus planning because some of the languages are underdeveloped in this regard;
- d) the sociolinguistic status of the languages, which places restrictions on the possible options, e. g. the fact that most native speakers feel repelled by the written standardised language makes teacher-activists resort to using local spoken varieties, for which there are few resources and which are more difficult to teach.

Appendix 1. Thematic blocks of interview questions

1. Personal information and socioeconomic background: age, place of birth, place of residence, education, occupation or profession, personal relation to the target language, such as ethnic identity, ancestry, etc.;

2. Linguistic background: languages spoken in the household as the informants were growing up, language use in the place of birth as the informants were growing up and now, language use in the place of residence, informants' current language use (the languages used, the contexts the

languages are used in, their subjective level of fluency in each of them, the circumstances of language acquisition);

3. The perception of the current linguistic situation and the vitality status of the languages: informants' opinions on the speakers of the languages (the generation they belong to, the socioeconomic conditions of the speakers), the places where the languages are used, the social contexts the languages are now used in, the availability of content and resources for language study, the future of the languages, the institutional support provided by authorities, the necessary and desirable measures of language support;

4. The practices of language shift reversal the informants are engaged in: motivation, reasons, influences, references, difficulties, achievements, and feedback.

Appendix 2. Information about the informants

Table 3. List of informants

Number	Sex	Year of birth	Place of birth	Place of residence	Main occupation	Education
1	m	1987	Olonets, Olonetsky district, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Actor, artist	Performing arts (higher)
2	f	1988	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Actor, actress	Performing arts (higher)
3	f	1961	Rypushkalitsy, Olonetsky district, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Language teacher, methodologist	Higher philological/linguistic, pedagogical
4	m	1979-1980	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Internet marketing	Higher philological/linguistic, pedagogical, and marketing

5	m	1983	St. Petersburg	St. Petersburg	Business acquisitions in IT	Sound design, music production
6	m	1993	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Professional musician	Higher musical
7	m	1980	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Professional musician	-
8	f	1990s	Kalevala, Kalevsky district, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Professional musician	Higher musical
9	f	1961	Vedlozero, Pryazhinsky district, Karelia	Vedlozero, Pryazhinsky district, Karelia	Teacher, methodologist, activist	Higher pedagogical/linguistic, pedagogical
10	m	2004-2005	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	University student	Higher pedagogical (ongoing)
11	m	1980s	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Tampere, Pirkanmaa, Finland	Journalist	Higher technical
12	f	1988	Petrozavodsk, Karelia	Tampere, Pirkanmaa, Finland	Music producer	Higher musical and sound design
13	m	1980s	Moscow	Dada, Nanaisky district, Khabarovsk Kray	Activist, teacher, methodologist, researcher	Higher linguistic
14	f	1973	Sovetskaya Gavan, Khabarovsk Kray	Sovetskaya Gavan, Khabarovsk Kray	Museum work	Higher pedagogical (ongoing), professional (accountant)

15	f	1959	Sanchikheza, Kransno-armeysky district, Primorsky Kray	Roschino, Kransno-armeysky district, Primorsky Kray	Retired (previously geologist)	Higher (industrial engineering/geology), pedagogical
16	f	1970s	Makarovka, Nikolayevsky district, Khabarovsk Kray	Nikolayevsk-on-Amur, Khabarovsk Kray	Language teacher, methodologist, activist	Higher pedagogical, PhD in history

Table 4. Informants' language background

Number	Target language	Reported identity/ethnic background	Linguistic background/Target language acquisition type	Target-language use	Other languages and level of command (besides Russian)
1	Livvi	Karelian-Livvi	Livvi-Russian bilingual from birth, family first-language acquisition	Professionally; Arts, resources production; Intra-family communication	Professional Karelian Proper, Finnish, Veps
2	Veps	Veps	Informal second language acquisition; Mother is a passive speaker	Professionally	-
3	Livvi	Karelian	Karelian monolingual from birth up to the age of 7, family first-language acquisition	Professionally	-
4	Veps	Veps	Formal second-language acquisition; Mother is a passive speaker	Arts	Good English, some Finnish

5	Karelian Proper	Possible Karelian and Izhorian ancestry	Second-language acquisition;	Arts	Professional English, some German
6	Karelian Proper	No Finno-Ugric roots	Occasional attempts to learn some Karelian for creative purposes	Arts	English
7	Karelian Proper	Karelian ancestry	Occasional attempts to learn some Karelian for creative purposes	Arts	-
8	Karelian Proper	Karelian ancestry	Spoke Karelian until the age of 3, then lost fluency; the language is spoken by immediate family members (Father is an active speaker)	Arts	-
9	Livvi	Karelian	Livvi-Russian bilingual from birth, acquired in family;	Professionally; Casual and intra-family communication;	Professional Finnish
10	Karelian Proper, Livvi	-	Active attempts to learn	Activism	Professional English
11	Livvi	Possible Ludic ancestry	Occasional attempts to learn some Karelian for creative purposes	Arts	English, Finnish

12	Livvi	Possible Ludic ancestry	Occasional attempts to learn some Karelian for creative purposes	Arts	English, Finnish
13	Nanai Proper	-	Second-language acquisition;	Professionally; Casual communication	-
14	Oroch	Oroch	Active attempts to learn Oroch	-	-
15	Udege	Udege	First-language acquisition passive speaker, regaining fluency	Activism; Active attempts to meet with other speakers and practice; Intra-family communication, occasional	-
16	Amur Nivkh	-	Spoke Nivkh up until the age of three; regained fluency	Professionally; Active attempts to meet with other speakers and practise	Professional English and German

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