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The Evenki Language from the Yenisei to Sakhalin

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The paper reviews the current ethnic and linguistic situation among the Evenki, one of the most numerous and widespread Northern minorities in Siberia. In spite of their relatively large overall number, the Evenki have tended to undergo linguistic assimilation more rapidly than many smaller ethnic groups. There are, however, regional differences, and these are of considerable importance if anything is to be done in order to stimulate a linguistic revival among the Evenki.

1. THE HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The original Tungusic homeland of the Evenkis, one of the most numerous of the indigenous Northern peoples of Siberia—the most numerous if the Evenki on the Chinese side are also considered—is believed to have been located somewhere in Transbaikalia during the Neolithic period. From this homeland, an ethnic migration towards the east took place at the beginning of the Christian era. This period is marked by the domestication of the reindeer, which, alongside with hunting, forms the traditional basis for the economic activities of the Evenkis.

The Evenkis, earlier known as the *Tungus* (Russian *tungusy*) were first encountered by the Russians in northwestern Siberia at the end of the 16th century. Thanks to their nomadic style of life they survived several later periods of turmoil, and even today there are groups of Evenkis living all over Siberia and the former Soviet Far East. The modern ethnonym *Evenki* (Russian singular *evenk* : plural *evenki*) is based on the self-appellation of several Evenki groups (Evenki *ewenkii*), notably those inhabiting the region to the east of the Yenisei and to the north of Lake Baikal. It is also used by some of the Evenkis living along the upper reaches of the Amur, the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk, the lower reaches of Olyokma, the basin of Aldan, and its tributaries Amga and Bol'shoi Patom. The same appellation is used, or has historically been in use, among several other nomadic Tungusic tribes, also known under the names *Solon* and *Ongkor*, who originally inhabited the upper reaches of the Amur.

A more basic and ancient form of the ethnonym Evenki is *Even* (native *ewen*). This is today used by a population in northeastern Siberia, historically known as the *Lamuts*, who are officially counted as a nationality separate from the Evenkis. The

same form of the ethnonym was, however, also preserved by a group of actual Evenkis in the Angara region up to the beginning of the 20th century. Another name used for certain regional groups of the Evenkis is *Orochen* 'reindeer herders', which mainly refers to the Evenki population inhabiting the mountainous areas to the east of Lake Baikal—including the Khingan region in China. Similarly, the Evenkis who used to live in Buryatia have been called *Murchen* 'horsemen'. A part of the latter also call themselves *mata* 'visitors, travelers, aliens', while the Evenkis between the upper reaches of the Podkamennaya Tunguska and Nizhnyaya Tunguska have been known as *ile* 'human beings, men' or *beye* 'men'. Finally, the Evenki groups inhabiting the river Bol'shaya Bira, a tributary of the Middle Amur, call themselves *Birar* or *Birarchen* 'river men'. In some localities, still other ethnonyms, such as *Manyagir* (Russian *manegr*), *Ganalchi* and *Urangkai*, have been registered.

As for the geographical borders of the Evenki territory, they lie in the west between the basins of the two great rivers the Ob' and the Yenisei, while in the east they extend to the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk, including the island of Sakhalin. In the northwest the borderline traverses the basins of numerous rivers flowing either into the Lower (*Nizhnyaya*) Tunguska or directly into the Arctic Ocean, while in the northwest it includes the basins of the rivers Vilyui and Amga, as well as the Aldan with its tributary the Maya. Finally, in the south, the Evenki territory extends to the watershed between the Angara and the Stony (*Podkamennaya*) Tunguska, comprising also much of the Baikal Region, notably the upper reaches of the Barguzin, as well as the rivers Vitim, Olyokma, and the northern sources of the Amur.

Numerically the Tungusic populations in Russia form a considerable portion of the so-called Minorities of the Far North. In 1979, for instance, the Evenkis comprised 35.7 per cent of the whole aboriginal population in the Russian North. The 1989 census revealed a total Evenki population of 29,975 individuals, which may be compared with the approximate figures of 27,000 for 1979 and 24,000 for 1959. This suggests that a slow but steady increase took place in the officially-registered Evenki population during the last thirty years of the Soviet era. However, several decades earlier the number of the Evenkis was even larger, as may be seen from the figure of ca. 38.000 Evenkis registered in 1926–1927 [VASILEVICH 1958: 641].

The modern Evenki population in Russia is administratively divided between the following entities, as listed mainly from west to east: the Evenki Autonomous District (*okrug*) and the Taimyr Autonomous District in the Region (*krai*) of Krasnoyarsk, the Republics of Buryatia and Yakutia, the provinces (*oblast'*) of Tomsk, Irkutsk and Chita, as well as the Regions of Khabarovsk and Sakhalin. Outside of Russia, there is a considerable number of Evenkis (mainly Orochen and Solon) in northeastern China, while a small Evenki population has also been reported from Mongolia. All over their places of habitat, the Evenkis are

surrounded by other ethnic groups, both Tungusic and non-Tungusic. They include the Nenets, Enets, Nganasans, Khantys and Kets in the west, the Buryats and Yakuts in the middle, and the Evens, Yukagirs, Nanais, Oroks and Nivkhs in the east. To these aboriginal populations, the immigrant impact of the Russians has been added in the course of the last few centuries.

2. THE EVENKI LANGUAGE AND ITS DOCUMENTATION

The Evenki language belongs to the *Tungusic* (also known as *Manchu-Tungus* or *Tungus-Manchu*) group of languages, which, in its turn, is often regarded as a branch of the so-called *Altaic* language family. The mutual relationship of the Tungusic languages was established as early as the second half of the 18th century. From the point of view of comparative linguistics, Tungusic may be divided into three main branches:

(1) the Manchu branch, which includes the now almost extinct Manchu language, with its ancestral form Jurchen and its sole living remnant, today officially known as the Sibe language;
(2) the Amur Tungusic branch, which includes the Nanai, Ulcha, Orok, Oroch and Udehe languages; and
(3) the Northern Tungusic branch, which includes Evenki proper together with Orochen and Solon, as well as the closely related Negidal and Even languages.

The features distinguishing the three branches are partly grammatical, partly lexical. To some extent the internal differences within Tungusic can be explained by external influences, notably the influence of Mongolian and Chinese on Manchu.

Unlike Manchu, the best known and most extensively recorded Tungusic language, Evenki has been scientifically documented only since the middle of the 19th century, when the posthumous field materials of the Finnish ethnolinguist M.A. Castrén from the 1840s were published in St. Petersburg by the Academician Anton Schiefner. The Evenki volume of Castrén's materials [CASTRÉN 1856] is generally considered to form the foundation of modern Tungusology. It is, in fact, not only a descriptive grammar of Evenki, but also one of the pioneer treatises in the field of comparative Altaic linguistics, a field initiated by Castrén himself in a number of other publications a few years earlier.

However, even before Castrén, short lists of Evenki words and phrases had been written down by travelling European scholars, including N.W. Witsen, D.G. Messerschmidt and Ph.J. von Strahlenberg. Also, beginning with the first half of the 18th century, the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg set about to explore the history, ethnology and languages of the peoples of Siberia [GORCEVSKAYA 1959]. Among the results of this extensive programme, a special position is occupied by the *Comparative Dictionary* (*Linguarum totis orbis vocabularia comparativa* 1786–1789) of P.S. Pallas, which contains 285 Russian

words translated into a large number of Asiatic tongues, including seven Tungus (Evenki and Even) dialects: those of Nerchinsk, Yenisei, Mangazeya, Barguzin, Upper Angara, Yakutsk and Chapogir. In his preface to the work, Pallas noted the closeness of Tungus with Manchu. Another early work of interest is the list of 130 Evenki words compiled in 1810 by Grigorii Spasskii. This list was later included by Schiefner as an appendix to his publication of Castrén's materials.

Apart from Castrén, there were several other scholars in the 19th century who contributed to the development of Tungusic studies. We may mention, in particular, the names of L.I. Schrenk and S.K. Patkanov, who, although not linguists, carried out careful studies of the ethnological and demographical situation among various Tungusic populations, including the Evenkis. Castrén's field work itself was part of a multidisciplinary programme organized in 1843 by the Russian Academy of Sciences under the leadership of the Academician A.F. Middendorff (then professor of the Kiev University). Middendorff and his assistants travelled widely in Siberia and succeeded in writing down some 600 words, a few phrases and three texts from the Nizhnyaya Tunguska, Noril'sk, Uda and Aldan Evenki dialects, as well as from the Negidals living in the basin of the river Amgun'. These materials were also published by Schiefner as an appendix to Castren's Evenki volume.

Speaking of Castren's own materials on Evenki, he mainly collected them towards the end of his four-year second expedition to Siberia (1845–1849). Originally, Castrén did not plan to work on Tungusic at all, but he then decided to collect material from Evenki, thinking that it might make it easier for him to study Written Manchu as well as the Altaic problem as a whole. It was in 1848, on his way to Nerchinsk, that Castrén made his first systematic notes on Evenki words, and during the subsequent months he concentrated his work on two local forms of speech today known as the historical Man'kovo (or Man'kovsk) and Urul'ga dialects of Evenki. The grammatical and lexical materials from these dialects came to form the basic part of his Evenki volume. To the lexical section, which comprises some 1,500 Evenki items translated into German, Written Manchu, Written Mongolian, Buryat, Tatar and Yakut parallels were added, partly by Castrén himself and partly by Schiefner.

Just a few years after Castrén's expedition, in 1855, R.K. Maak also collected some 1,500 Evenki words, mainly from the Orochen and Manyagir dialects spoken on both sides of the Upper and Middle Amur. The publication of his materials includes 86 phrases collected earlier from the Vilyui Evenkis. Another major corpus of Evenki language material was written down by the geologist A. Czekanowski in the 1870s. His collection comprises about 1,800 words and 217 phrases, deriving from the Kondogir Evenkis in the Baikal Region. Similar contributions of varying size and quality were made by many other scholars during the last decades of the Czarist period, including V.V. Pticyn, V.V. Vasil'ev, I.P. Tolmachov, E.K. Piekarski, K.M. Rychkov, and M.M. Suslov.

During the Soviet period, there were three main fields of Tungusic language studies to which scholars paid special attention: grammar, lexicon, and dialectology. In addition to these, the study of folklore was always regarded as very important. Also, since the Evenki language (as well as a number of other Tungusic languages) had been introduced into the official curriculum of native schools in Siberia, problems relevant to didactic and contrastive studies were elaborated in a number of works.

From 1919 to 1926, E.I. Titov made several expeditions to the Evenkis of the Upper Lena, Northern Baikal and Vitim-Nerchinsk regions. His lexical collections were published in 1926 as a dictionary (with appr. 3,000 entries), with the Russian translation of Castren's grammar added as an appendix. Another scholar of that period was Ya.P. Koshkin (also known under the pseudonym Ya.P. Al'kor), who, among other things, wrote a favourable evaluation of Castrén's Tungusological contribution. He also contributed himself to many theoretical and practical aspects of Evenki studies, as well as to the promotion of native literacy among the Northern Minorities of Siberia, in general.

Towards the end of the 1920s, an extremely productive period in Russian Tungusology was initiated by two very prominent scholars: G.M. Vasilevich and V.I. Cincius. Their personal impact continued for about 50 years, but their influence is still very strong today among their living disciples. They started their work with the publication of school textbooks in 1929 and 1930. Vasilevich was also the author of the first Evenki language primer for school use, the first dialectological dictionary of Evenki [VASILEVICH 1934], and the first teacher's manual of Evenki grammar, in which she tried to create a basis for a standard (literary) Evenki language. Among her later achievements were the large Russian-Evenki [VASILEVICH 1948] and Evenki-Russian [VASILEVICH 1958] dictionaries, as well as several publications of dialectological materials. At the same time, Cincius concentrated her efforts on documenting the Even language, as well as on creating a basis for comparative Tungusic and Altaic studies. In the latter field, the theoretical influence of N.N. Poppe was of crucial significance. Poppe also directly contributed to the study of the Evenki language, collecting and publishing materials on the Barguzin dialect [POPPE 1927] as well as Solon [POPPE 1931].

Following the example of Vasilevich and Cincius, several other young scholars soon started working on the Evenki language in the 1930s and 1940s. Ye.P. Lebedeva, A.A. Gorcevskii, V.A. Gorcevskaya, and A.F. Boicova, for instance, all wrote their doctoral (candidate) dissertations on various problems of Evenki grammar. Beginning with the early 1950s there was a second wave of scholars who devoted their lives to Evenki and Even language and folklore studies: O.A. Konstantinova, V.D. Kolesnikova, K.A. Novikova, A.P. Kozlovskii, A.P. Konakov, M.G. Voskoboinikov, and T.Z. Pukshanskaya. After the death of Vasilevich and Cincius, and with major political changes taking place in the country, the number of new scholars entering the field of Evenki studies in Russia has been on the decline. As a compensation, interest in Evenki and Tungusic is,

however, increasing in other countries, including China and Japan.

3. CLASSIFICATION PROBLEMS OF EVENKI DIALECTS

One of the principal tasks that Russian scholars had to deal with in the 1920s and 1930s concerned the classification of the numerous Tungusic languages and dialects scattered over the vast territory of Siberia and the Russian Far East, not to mention Manchuria and Mongolia. The problem was that almost all early studies dealing with Tungusic language material spoke of "Tungus" as a diffuse concept which, depending on the circumstances, could refer to a great variety of languages and dialects.

Generally speaking, the task of classifying languages and dialects always involves delicate problems, especially when political factors interfere with the linguistic realities. This is exactly the case with Evenki. Having first been classified as a single "Tungus" language together with Even, the Evenki language itself is today officially divided into three entities, each of which is often considered to form a language in its own right: Evenki proper, Orochen, and Solon. If we think, in particular, of the Evenki dialects spoken in the Middle Amur basin, on the Russian side they are today counted among the local forms of Evenki proper, while on the Chinese side they are supposed to form the separate Orochen language. Irrespective of the presence of small actual differences, most of which are due to the recent impact of the neighbouring languages, the two groups of Evenki dialects are still very close to each other and should, in a strictly linguistic framework, be classified as belonging to a single language.

Another idiom often connected with Evenki is Negidal. For instance, in his *Map of the Northern languages* (1934), Z.Ye. Chernyakov makes a distinction between four main dialects of Evenki, among which he lists: (1) Northern Evenki, (2) Southern Evenki, (3) Eastern Evenki, and (4) Amgun' Evenki or Negidal. Later Russian scholarship has tended to view Negidal as a separate language, though closely related to Evenki proper. If we follow the latter interpretation, and if we also accept the official division of the Evenki dialects on the Chinese side, we end up with recognizing as many as five separate Northern Tungusic languages: Evenki proper, Orochen, Solon, Negidal, and Even.

In the following, we will focus our attention on the dialects of Evenki proper, as spoken in various parts of Siberia and the Russian Far East. In view of the vast geographical distances even within this area, it is natural that there exist several local dialects. According to Vasilevich [VASILEVICH 1948: 10], who referred to the differences observed in the representation of the original sibilant fricative consonant **s* , the regional variation within Evenki proper may be explained in terms of three protohistorical tribal dialects: (1) a spirant dialect (*h*), (2) a hissing sibilant dialect (*s*), and (3) a hushing sibilant dialect (*sh*). Vasilevich assumed that under the conditions of constant migration and expansion in the context of Evenki

nomadism, there appeared new tribes and new secondary dialects, but these still preserved the basic features of the three initial dialects.

Approaching the goal of a more elaborate classification, Vasilevich later divided the dialects of Evenki proper as follows:

1. The Northern group of dialects

1.1. The Ilimpeya dialect, spoken in the Ilimpeya region of the Evenki Autonomous District, with three main subdialects: western, central, and eastern.

1.2. The Yerbogachon dialect, spoken in the northern part of the Irkutsk region and the adjacent parts of Yakutia, with two main subdialects.

2. The Southern group of dialects

2.1. The hushing type, distributed in the region between eastern tributaries of the Ob' and the upper reaches of the Lena, with three dialects: those of (a) the Sym', (b) Northern Baikal, as well as (c) the Tokma and the Upper Lena.

2.2. The hissing type, distributed in a belt extending from the Stony Tunguska in the west to Baikal and the Vitim in the east, with three dialects: those of (a) the Stony Tunguska and the Angara, (b) the Nepa, as well as (c) the Vitim and the Talocha.

3. The Eastern group of dialects

3.1. The Vitim-Olyokma dialect, comprising the Tungir, Olyokma, Kalar, Tokko and Tommot subdialects.

3.2. The Chul'man-Gilyui dialect, spoken on the upper reaches of the Aldan as well as along the watershed of the Gilyui, and comprising the Upper Aldan, Upper Amur, Sutam, Gilyui-Tynda, Khingan and Zeya subdialects.

3.3. The Uchur-Zeya dialect, spoken on the upper reaches of the rivers Uchur and Zeya, and comprising the Uchur, Bomnak and Selemdzha subdialects.

3.4. The Bureya-Amgun' dialect, spoken on the upper reaches of the rivers Bureya, Urmi, and Amgun'.

3.5. The Sakhalin dialect, spoken by the descendants of Ayan, Chumikan and Bureya Evenks that moved to Sakhalin in the 19th century.

3.6. The Barguzin dialect, representing a transition between the sibilant and the spirant types.

As to the Eastern dialects, the modern forms of speech belonging to this group present a rather mosaic picture, demonstrating their connections with either the Northern or the Southern dialects. It may be noted that Vasilevich recognized the intimate connection of Negidal and Solon with the dialects of Evenki proper. According to her, the Negidals are to be regarded as the descendants of Evenkis who assimilated the aboriginal population of the Amgun' basin, while the Solons are Evenkis influenced by the Mongols of the Barga Region in Northwestern Manchuria.

Later, V.A. Gorcevskaya [GORCEVSKAYA 1954] and O.A. Konstantinova [KONSTANTINOVA 1964] reviewed the question of dialectal taxonomy in the light of new data obtained during several field expeditions to various parts of the Evenki native territory. Their schemes show, however, few essential deviations from that of Vasilevich. The most recent attempt to establish an adequate classification in

Russia was made by N.Ya. Bulatova [BULATOVA 1987: 9–10] who, following the ideas of V.I. Cincius, enumerates altogether fourteen dialects with more than fifty subdialectal forms, all arranged in a framework comprising three principal dialectal groups:

A. The Northern or spirant group of dialects

(1) The Ilimpeya dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Ilimpeya, Agata and Bol'shoi Porog, Tura, Tutonchany, as well as Dudinka or Khantai.

(2) The Yerbogachon dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Yerbogachon and Nakanno.

B. The Southern or sibilant group of dialects

Ba. The hushing type:

(3) The Sym dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Tokma or Upper Nepa, Upper Lena or Kachug, as well as Angara.

(4) The Northern Baikal dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Northern Baikal and Upper Lena.

Bb. The hissing type:

(5) The Stony Tunguska dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Vanavara, Kuyumba, Poligus, Surinda, Taimura or Chirinda, Uchami, as well as Chemdal'sk.

(6) The Nepa dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Nepa and Kirensk.

(7) The Vitim-Nercha or Baunt-Talocha dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Baunt, Talocha, Tungukochan and Nercha.

C. The Eastern or sibilant-spirant group of dialects

(8) The Vitim-Olyokma dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Barguzin, Vitim or Kalar, Olyokma, Tungir, as well as Tokko.

(9) The Upper Aldan dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Aldan, Upper Amur, Amga, Dzheltulak, Timpton, Tommot, Khingan, Chul'man, as well as Chul'man-Gilyui.

(10) The Uchur-Zeya dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Uchur and Zeya.

(11) The Selemdzha-Bureya-Urmi dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Selemdzha, Bureya, and Urmi.

(12) The Ayan-Mai dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Ayan, Aim, Mai, Nel'kan, as well as Totti.

(13) The Tugur-Chumikan dialect, comprising the subdialects of: Tugur and Chumikan.

(14) The Sakhalin dialect, with no subdialects distinguished.

Below is a chart illustrating the sibilant vs. spirant representation, as used for the classification of Evenki dialects (Table 1). A number of grammatical and lexical differences between the main dialects is also listed (Table 2).

Table 1. The representation of the original (Proto-Evenki) prevocalic sibilant consonant *s in the modern dialects.

Southern hissing	Southern hushing	Northern spirant	Eastern sibilant-spirant	(gloss)
s	*sh*	*h*	*s : h*	
saa-	*shaa-*	*haa-*	*saa-*	'to know'
si	*shi*	*hi*	*si*	'thou'
séén	*shéén*	*héén*	*séén*	'ear'
asii	*ashii*	*ahii*	*ahii*	'woman'
éésa	*éésha*	*ééha*	*ééha*	'eye'
tuuksu	*tuukshu*	*tuuksu*	*tuuhu*	'cloud'

Table 2. Selected grammatical and lexical differences between the main dialects of Evenki proper.

Southern hissing	Southern hushing	Northern spirant	Eastern sibilant-spirant	(gloss)
jaan-juur 'ten-two'	*juur-jaa-leke* 'two-ten-spare'	*jaan-duk-juur* 'from-ten-two'	*jaan-juur* 'ten-two'	'twelve'
mine	*minewe*	*mine*	*mine/minewe*	'me'
gugdalduu urelduu	*gugdalduu urel*	*gugdal urelduu*	*gugda urelduu*	'on high hills'

Note: The examples illustrate the morphological structure of the numerals for the teens and the accusative of personal pronouns, as well as the occurrence of congruence for case and number in attributive constructions.

4. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION AMONG THE EVENKIS

Upon the diversity of the actual dialects, a unified *literary language* was created for Evenki proper in the early 1930s. The literary standard was first based on the Nepa dialect of the Southern group, which at that time was better known than most other dialects. In the 1950s, however, the standard was changed, with the dialect of the Stony Tunguska emerging as the new norm. The new literary language initially operated in the unified Roman transcription, adopted for all the newly-created literary languages of the Northern Minorities. In 1936–1937, a transition to the use of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet took place.

Unfortunately, having been spoken in a number of local varieties for hundreds years with no standard available, the Evenki language could not be unified around a single superdialectal norm. The period during which the literary language was introduced was too short for it to become immediately accepted by those speakers whose dialectal basis was substantially different from the norm. The geographical dispersion of the Evenki population also played a negative role. Thus, although

more or less intelligible to most Evenkis, the literary language never became popular outside of its own dialectal base. Within this base, however, the literary language has survived and continues to be used even today.

The dialects close to the standard language are currently spoken by a population of less than 5,000 people, most of whom are concentrated in the Evenki Autonomous District. The local newspaper published in Tura, the administrative center of the District, includes an Evenki appendix once a week, and even radio broadcasting takes place regularly via a local channel (called *Turu gunjeren*). Several works of belletristics and folklore have appeared in the standard language, in addition to the numerous school textbooks, primers and readers published over the decades. In view of all this, we might say that the external presuppositions are there for the Evenki standard language to exist and survive. There are, however, many practical problems that make the prospects less bright.

After a rather complicated history of teaching the language in primary schools during the period extending from the 1930s to the 1970s, Evenki is currently taught as a separate subject for Evenki children in the first four grades of compulsory education. In the higher grades, the language can be studied as an optional subject, with manuals and textbooks being available up to the eighth grade. Evenki is also taught in a number of colleges and universities for future native-language teachers. The most famous of these institutions of higher learning is the Russian State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg, with its Faculty of the Northern Peoples. College-level Evenki language programmes are available in Yakutsk, Khabarovsk, Ulan-Ude, Igarka, and Nikolayevsk-na-Amure.

The most serious development affecting the functioning of the Evenki literary language is the rapid decline of the Evenki *spoken language* during the Soviet period. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, only 29.5 per cent of the whole ethnic Evenki population acknowledged the Evenki language as their mother tongue. The figure has been steadily falling since the census of 1959. At the same time, the proportion of Evenkis who consider Russian to be their first language has constantly increased, though assimilation to the speakers of other languages, notably Yakut and Buryat, has also taken place. The same trends are visible when we consider the data indicating the use of Evenki and Russian as second languages among ethnic Evenkis. The figures for Evenki either as a first language or as a second language sum up to yield the overall proportion of Evenki-speakers, a crucial indicator that is also falling (Table 3).

Table 3. The percentual proportions of Evenki and Russian as the first and second languages of ethnic Evenkis in Russia.

census:	1959	1970	1979	1989
Evenki native	55.9	51.3	42.8	29.5
Russian native	8.7	16.5	20.7	29.1
other native	35.4	32.2	36.5	41.4
Evenki second		4.6	2.3	
Russian second		54.9	54.4	
Evenki fluent		55.9	45.1	
Russian fluent		71.4	75.2	

Sources: *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya SSSR 1959 goda* (1960 Moscow: Svodnyi tom), id. *1970 goda* (1973 Moscow: Statistika); *Chislennost' i sostav naseleniya SSSR po dannym perepisi naseleniya 1979 goda* (1985 Moscow: Finansy i statistika).

There are, however, considerable regional differences in the native language retaining rates among the Evenkis. In the Amur and Chita Provinces, for instance, almost 98 per cent of all Evenkis maintain a fluency in their native language. The figure is somewhat lower in Khabarovsk Region, some 47 per cent in the Evenki Autonomous District, and only 12 to 15 per cent in Yakutia and Buryatia.

With the Russian language serving as the main means of interethnic communication all over the Evenki native territory, most Evenki-speakers are today fully bilingual in Russian. In Yakutia and Buryatia, the regionally important Yakut and Buryat languages are also widely used, and they tend to replace Evenki as the first language among ethnic Evenkis. In Yakutia, 85 per cent of the local Evenkis are fluent in Yakut, against only 12 per cent speaking Evenki. Cases of trilingualism in Evenki, Russian and either Yakut or Buryat are also not uncommon. Under such conditions, the functional sphere of Evenki tends to be confined to everyday communication between individuals belonging to the old and middle generations, especially when topics pertaining to traditional activities, such as hunting and reindeer breeding, are discussed.

For the future of the Evenki language, the single most important parameter is the proportion of young speakers. In spite of mother tongue teaching at schools, a large majority of all Evenki children in Russia are almost ignorant of their ethnic language. Recent investigations have shown that at least one third of rural Evenki children under seven, and one fifth of those aged from seven to ten, are not familiar with even the elements of the Evenki language. These figures more than double in the case of urban children. Typically, the Evenki language is surviving among children only in areas where the native population still lives in solid groups engaged in traditional activities. Another presupposition is the availability of elderly people in the community.

What has been said above about the Evenki language does not coincide with the rather optimistic statement of Petr Skorik [SKORIK 1990: 78]:

> The changes (in economy and culture) have been and continue to be in some measure reflected in the Northern languages which, like the other languages of the Soviet Union, are among the most effective instruments for developing national cultures. The mother tongues have played and still play a substantial role in the transformation of the lives of the indigenous Northeners. Because of this, their social functions have gained considerable in scope and the languages themselves have developed and grown proportionally richer.

Obviously, if the Evenki language is to survive, the Russian authorities should take prompt actions to preserve, promote and revitalize not only the language itself, but also the traditional "Tungus" cultural and economic activities. The use of the Evenki language should be encouraged in all spheres of life, and it should also be taught to those Evenki children who are already completely ignorant of their native tongue. Both school books and fiction should continue to be published in Evenki, though the norms of the standard language should perhaps be reconsidered and possibly redefined. Not much external help for all of this can be expected. However, the *Association of the Small Minorities of the North, Siberia and the Far East*, formed in 1993, offers one forum of cooperation and publicity that may also contribute to the revigoration of the Evenki language.

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