

Uralic Studies PhD Programme  
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The vitality and revitalisation attempts  
of the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk

PhD Dissertation

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## 1. Research questions

The Mansi language is an endangered indigenous minority language spoken in Western Siberia. Linguistically it belongs to the family of Uralic languages, socially it belongs to the group of the so-called numerically small indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation. The beginnings of bilingualism (and probable multilingualism) of the Mansi society are no doubt located in the distant past, and it would be problematic to determine the starting point of language shift, but it is certain that researchers (e.g. Munkácsi 1889a: 208, 222-224) have been complaining about the difficulty of finding native speakers due to assimilation and rapid language shift for more than a hundred years. Thus, it appears to be likely that at least a part of Mansi society became a subject of language endangerment already during the 19th century, and the process has continued ever since.

The Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug and Khanty-Mansiysk as its administrative and cultural centre often use the name Yugra, which refers to the indigenous Ob-Ugric peoples, as well as to ornaments and festivals originating from Ob-Ugric traditions, thus creating the district's and the city's own identity within Russia (Nagy 2016: 10-11). In order to “authentically” represent the Ob-Ugric cultural elements, the majority society needs Ob-Ugrians, including Mansis, who are considered “authentic”, but defining the authentic Ob-Ugric identity is not unproblematic in urbanised conditions. While for both the legislative authorities and the scholarly community authentic

representatives of the Ob-Ugric peoples often equal the followers of the traditional lifestyle, that is, those living off fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding, this subgroup makes up barely 8% of the population of the Ob-Ugric peoples (Nagy 2020: 23), and is unrepresented among the Mansi living in Khanty-Mansiysk. Since in the urban environment the Mansi of Khanty-Mansiysk are deprived of their most tangible identity-marking element, the traditional way of life, the next most common identity marker becomes knowledge of Mansi culture, including Mansi language proficiency.

In my dissertation I am seeking answers to the following questions:

- (1) How is the vitality of the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk prior to the emergence of revitalisation efforts and initiatives best described?
- (2) What kind of revitalisation attempts has been appearing in Khanty-Mansiysk, aiming at the revitalisation of the Mansi language? Who are the initiators of these efforts? What are the goals of these initiatives, which groups constitute their target audience? To what extent have these initiatives been effective in relation to their goals?
- (3) How has the situation of the vitality of the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk changed as a result of the revitalisation efforts?

In the dissertation after briefly introducing theoretical background (Chapter 2), research history (Chapter 3) and research methods (Chapter 4), I present a detailed description of the field (Chapter 5), the role of the Mansi language in the linguistic landscape of Khanty-Mansiysk (Chapter 6) and in the formation of ethnic identity by the Mansi living in Khanty-Mansiysk (Chapter 9). I analyse Mansi language acquisition (Chapter 7) and Mansi language use (Chapter 8), and because of its prominent role in both language acquisition and language revitalisation, I write in detail about the Lylyng Soyum Centre (Chapter 10), and its impact on the tendencies of Mansi language acquisition and language use in Khanty-Mansiysk (Chapter 11).

## 2. Research history

Since literature on language endangerment or language vitality is almost entirely devoid of works recording the sociolinguistic situation of indigenous peoples in Russia, it is not surprising that no comprehensive studies have been conducted on the situation of the Mansi language and Mansi speakers either. The few short reports published by Russian authors (e.g. Skribnik and Koshkaryova 1996, Сподина 2011) often mention data on the two Ob-Ugric languages, Khanty and Mansi, together, making it difficult or impossible to apply the conclusions to the Mansi speakers only. On the other hand,

authors do not generally distinguish between the language use experienced among Mansis living in the traditional territories and the multiethnic cities. It is not only linguistic analysis of the language used in the cities or the detailed descriptions of different aspects of language use that are missing, but researchers lack the most elementary statistical data concerning speakers as well. Unfortunately, no similar report to Csepregi's (2018) exemplary study is available about the distribution of Mansi inhabitants and Mansi speakers, supposedly no similar description is likely to appear until Norbert Szilágyi publishes the data he collected during his momentous field trip among the Mansi of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug in 2017-2018.

While no comprehensive studies or case studies are available on Mansi language teaching, there are a handful of shorter articles describing the situation and problems of indigenous language teaching of the Khanty language (e.g. Jääsalmi-Krüger 1998 and Ventsel and Dudeck 1998), and more broadly on the educational situation of the peoples of the Arctic in Russia (e.g. Bartels and Bartels 1995). Among the various topics, language teaching, and the crossroads of language use, language acquisition and language planning have the richest literature. Touluze's (1999) invaluable report on the founding of literacy and institutionalised education in Western Siberia is especially important for citing all the Russian resources and authors, largely unavailable in the Eastern and Northern European libraries.

Due to Zamyatin's achievements (2012, 2017, 2018), a considerable amount of information and extensive analysis are

available on the language policy concerning the minority languages of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, as well as the effects this policy had on minority language education. Although he focuses mainly on the republics located in the European part of present-day Russia, his comprehensive descriptions provide a deep insight into the tendencies determining contemporary language vitality and language use in Western Siberia.

### 3. Research methods

#### 3.1. Ethical considerations

In this chapter the key ethical issues considered during fieldwork (following Eckert 2014) and their analysis are overviewed, followed by the preferred personal guidelines.

Research on underdocumented, endangered language necessarily involves cooperation with speakers, participants, and consultants. During my fieldwork I tried to turn to the largest possible number of consultants and not to refuse anyone who volunteered to discuss my research topic with me. This often led me into the middle of the smaller and larger conflicts suffusing the everyday life of a small community, and since participating in the conflicts would desperately limit the success of my research, I tried to tell my general, theoretical opinion when asked to, but not to commend individual behaviours or take sides in arguments.

I described my research questions to the consultants every time, asked for their permission to record their answers with a small digital recorder and to quote it later during my scientific work. As far as I am informed, every consultant took part in research not only out of consent but also voluntarily. I informed consultants every time about their right to interrupt the interviews and observations at any time and to revoke their consent to record them or to quote them during recording as well as at any time afterwards. Because of the intimate nature of the issues researched and the unfriendly political situation, I decided not to ask consultants to sign consent forms. I did not ask for prior permission when taking photos, because spontaneous photographs served my research better, and the consultants could check and delete the undesirable images after the session. This behaviour raised no conflict during the fieldwork, on the contrary, knowing that I always carried a camera with me, the consultants often requested that I take photos or short videos even on occasions when I had not intended to use the camera. On the rare occasion when our understanding of privacy turned out to differ, consultants warned me not to take photos before the activity started.

While language documentation usually demands very straightforward collaboration between researcher and speaker, sociolinguists often prefer to de-emphasise their actual research questions in order to receive as unselfconscious answers as possible. The institutional background of research and researcher may affect the perception of the researcher's behaviour as well. During my fieldwork I tried to give brief and simple explanations about my research questions, if necessary,



enumerating various possible answers and international examples, carefully hiding my expectations. Officially being a foreign exchange student at the local university from a post-socialist country was a very fortunate setting easily understood and accepted by every consultant, creating no conflicts and evoking only positive stereotypes.

Although consultants are usually aware of the fact that informants may receive a fixed sum or salary for participating in research, paying consultants is not yet an accepted practice in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. The consultants' position as the owners of knowledge apparently does not allow them to accept financial compensation, thus, transaction was limited to objects not forming the direct subject of the research (e.g. purchasing artefacts), while mutual souvenirs had been changed to strengthen agreeable relationships, and since the consultants were not interested in receiving the records of the interviews or the scientific paper resulting from them, the scientific part of the relationship was maintained by providing the consultants with various digital materials on Ob-Ugric languages and cultures available outside Russia. Just as in the case of the previous research projects carried out in the same topic at the same domains, subject to necessary conditions I plan to translate the final work to Russian and to provide it to the Lylyng Soyum Centre and on demand to the library of the Ob-Ugric Research Institute.

### 3.2. Sampling and methods

While random sampling is often viewed as the surest way of providing equal probability of selection and regarded as ensuring representative results, thus permitting extrapolation from the sample to the entire community, a more populous speakers' community than the size of the Mansi community of Khanty-Mansiysk is necessary for applying. Thus, instead of random sampling, the snowball sampling method was applied during the fieldwork. According to Buchstaller and Khattab, the general rule of thumb for the social sciences would require reaching 3% to be regarded as representative (Buchstaller and Khattab 2014: 82), thus the approximately 100 members of the Mansi community of Khanty-Mansiysk contacted during the fieldwork may be regarded representative.

I carried out interviews with approximately 40 people about their history of language acquisition and language use as well as their opinion about the role of the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk and the possible future of the language. The interviewees were employees of the institutions with Ob-Ugric profile, or their immediate family members. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, were conducted in Russian, and recorded with a small digital recorder. The interviews were ethnomethodological interviews in their content, semi-structured interviews according to the form-content constraints, individual and in some cases double interviews according to the framework of the interaction.

I have spent approximately 18 months in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug during fieldwork carried out between

2006 and 2019. During this period, I had the opportunity to carry out participant observation in nearly all of the important domains of language use in Khanty-Mansiysk. The Lylyng Soyum Centre, the (unfortunately closed) department of Mansi philology at Yugra State University, and the editorial offices of the Mansi newspaper Luima Seripos proved to be most important and central during the fieldwork. I observed classes at the department of Mansi philology at Yugra State University and the Lylyng Soyum Center as a student, I visited the department of Mansi philology at Yugra State University and the editorial offices of Luima Seripos as a visiting researcher, while I was able to visit the Office of Educational Development as a researcher. In addition to providing an insight into their work, the employees of these places also aided me by providing their family relationships and social network, thus making possible for me to get a more accurate picture of Mansi language use in Khanty-Mansiysk.

Following contemporary practices regarding transcriptions, I provide the transcription of spoken Mansi texts in IPA, while out of respect for Mansi as a language, with literacy and standardised forms, I also give the same texts according to Mansi orthography as well.

The integrated results of the 2002 and 2010 Russian censuses were collected by me from the official website of the censuses, while the data from the same censuses limited to the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District, and well as the statistics on public education and the social situation of minorities in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug were obtained from the

Regional Statistical Office and the Education Development Office in Khanty-Mansiysk.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1. The situation of Mansi language vitality prior to the revitalisation attempts

The vitality of the Mansi language in the domains of language use in Khanty-Mansiysk was rather limited prior to the advent of revitalisation initiatives. The Mansi language occupied its strongest position in family language use and language teaching. However, since interethnic marriages and thus the use of Russian as a family language became widespread in Khanty-Mansiysk, and since the Mansi language was only present in higher education in Khanty-Mansiysk, this strong position could only be interpreted relatively. These two domains of language use were incapable to extend or to maintain the language use, and thus the language vitality of the Mansi language.

The Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk showed up in typically urbanised domains of language use, where it could not have otherwise been found in a non-urban environment. Such domains are the Mansi press, media, as well as entertainment (in the case of Mansi, this means theatre performances), public events (events, celebrations, and conferences). The fact that the Mansi language appeared in the above-mentioned domains of language use before revitalisation efforts could take place,

resulted only in the numerical expansion of domains, while at the same time it did not have a lasting positive effect on language vitality. There either had been too few permanent language users (as in the case of the Mansi press and media) present at the domains, or the domains had been accessible only sporadically (as in the case of theatre performances and community events), thus although these urban domains proved to be suitable for raising the prestige of the Mansi language, they could not be fixed as permanent domains of language use.

#### 4.2. Mansi language revitalisation attempts in Khanty-Mansiysk

Due to its unique importance and central role among the initiatives aiming to revitalise the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk, it is necessary to highlight the activity of the Lylyng Soyum Centre. The demand to establish the Lylyng Soyum Centre arose when the Ob-Ugric intellectuals living in the city in the late 1990s were confronted with the fact that there were no educational centre or other institutions helping Ob-Ugric children to discover or preserve their ethnic identity, to acquaint them with Ob-Ugric languages and cultures. To change the situation, the Centre's founding director began to plan the foundation of a children's studio in 1999. The founding staff of the Centre realised that the continuity of intergenerational transmission of the indigenous ethnic culture is disappearing, since the conditions necessary for the maintenance are absent in the urban settings. The Centre was founded in order to restore

this continuity, to provide a shelter aiming to revitalise Ob-Ugric cultures and languages. The Centre opened its gates to 25 children in 2003, then operated with 60, while by 2015, some 580 students were attending the Centre's courses across the city, thanks to educational activities outside the Centre.

In the course of a few years the Lylyng Soyum Centre became an important actor among indigenous agencies. By not only formulating but also carrying out its initiatives, the Centre started to appear almost as determining as the government itself, thus replacing the governmental monopoly with a dynamic theoretical competition in shaping the discourse, representation and life of the Ob-Ugric peoples in Khanty-Mansiysk. After her inauguration, the new governor of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug payed her first official visit to the Lylyng Soyum Centre and a spent significant fraction of her speeches emphasising the importance of Ob-Ugric peoples for the Okrug and its government.

#### 4.3. The effects of the Mansi language revitalisation movements on the language vitality of the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk

As a result of the activities of the Lylyng Soyum Centre, Mansi language use, and thus the situation Mansi language vitality of Khanty-Mansiysk has been changed. The most significant change in the domain of family language use is the

ambition of Mansi-speaking parents sending their children to attend the programs of the Centre, to increase the use of the Mansi language in family conversations, while parents without proficiency in Mansi often wish to acquire the Mansi language. Also, in 2015, for the first time since fieldwork has been carried out in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, a group of parents expressed their wish to teach and educate their children to become fluent speakers of the Mansi language.

The educational system of the Mansi language in Khanty-Mansiysk was radically transformed in several respects. As a result of the activity of the teachers working for the Lylyng Soyum Centre, Mansi language courses are held not only at the Lylyng Soyum Centre, but the teachers also teach classes in other preschools and primary schools of Khanty-Mansiysk which are part of the state education network. As a result of non-governmental and independent initiatives, some urban schools have started to offer Mansi language courses since 2014. As a result of the increased interest in Khanty-Mansiysk, the Khanty-Mansiysk Office for Educational Development has designed and published a family of experimental textbooks that teach the Mansi language not as a mother tongue but as a second/foreign language.

In addition to the transformation of the state supported and alternative education systems, self-organised language acquisition initiatives have also appeared in the city. Besides teach yourself groups founded by students and other motivated youngsters, haphazardly run handicraft groups with Mansi as the language of conversation appeared in town. (The emphasis is on

the appearance of such initiatives and the underlying attitudes, since none of these initiatives operated for a longer time.) The teachers and students of the Lylyng Soyum Centre regularly appear on air in the episodes of Yugorika, a language teaching video series broadcast at the local TV channel Yugra. The Office for Education Development, the Mansi newspaper Luima Seripos, and the Lylyng Soyum Centre coordinate the organisation of annual competitions for the teachers of indigenous languages, as well as competitions for students, focusing on Mansi grammar and Mansi literature

In summary, as a result of educational activities of the Lylyng Soyum Centre, the Mansi language revitalisation initiatives appearing in Khanty-Mansiysk in the 2000s are already able to deliver results, despite of the relatively short time that has elapsed. The revitalisation initiatives stabilised the presence of the Mansi language at the already existing domains of language use and increased the activity of language use at the urban domains, by raising the number of participating speakers on the one hand, and the number of institutions and events providing opportunities for language use on the other hand. As a result of revitalisation initiatives, a group of active Mansi adults appeared in Khanty-Mansiysk who advocate and support Mansi language use in the family. As a result of the revitalisation initiatives, state supported education also recognised one of the main problems of Mansi language teaching and, accordingly, began to transform the system of state education by offering more opportunities to study indigenous minority languages in cities and publishing textbooks applying the principles of heritage language teaching.





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