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Studying Evenki-Yakut multilingualism in various conditions

Evenki, a Tungusic language spoken in Siberia, is one of the endangered minor languages of Russia. The absolute majority of those respondents, who consider Evenki as their native language, use Russian as a primary language of everyday communication. Along with Selkup and Ket, it is the object of research within the project “Minority languages of Siberia as our cultural heritage”¹.

The Evenki people coexist with different minor indigenous peoples, such as Ket, Selkup, Nenets, Enets, Dolgan, Nganasan, Buryat, and Yakut. Among these languages there are both moribund (e. g. Ket) and vital to some extent (e. g. Yakut). The contacts with the speakers of other indigenous languages affect Evenki in varying degrees.

Thus, in the Evenkiysky District of Krasnoyarsk Krai, where the status of the Evenki language is high enough, a Yakut enclave Yessey is located. According to the recollections of local residents, the Yakuts of Yessey used to speak Evenki in earlier times. In two villages, Chirinda and Ekonda, located in the Evenkiysky District, the two languages coexist. According to the data collected in 2007, many residents of Ekonda could speak both Yakut and Evenki; while in the Evenki idiom of Ekonda there have been attested many Yakut borrowings.

In Khamakar and Nakanno, two villages of the Katangsky District of Irkutsk oblast, Evenki was not ousted with Yakut. On the contrary, in Nakanno, according to the recollections of local residents, the Yakut idiom was less prestigious and at last turned out to be ousted by Evenki.

The opposite situation was attested in 2018 in the course of the expedition to the residents of the Perevoz locality of the Bodaybinsky District of Irkutsk oblast.

Those who consider themselves Yakuts recognize Yakut or Russian as their mother language. The native speakers who regard themselves as Evenki opt for Russian or Yakut as their first language, or they find it difficult to answer this question. In the vocabulary of the Yakut idiom of Perevoz, the Evenki contamination is attested, mainly in the semantic fields of fauna and material culture.

The process of assimilation of the Evenki Yakut in the Bodaybinsky District was already testified in the statistical essay of A. T. Samohin dated 1927 [Kazakevich 2018]. In Perevoz, the prestige of Yakut has always been much higher than that of Evenki. The biographical data, that we obtain using questionnaires, interviewing local people and recording autobiographical stories, reveal the leading role of the Yakut idiom in Perevoz throughout the 20th century (except for the last decades, when the leading role passed to Russian).

References

1. Kazakevich, Olga. (2018, April) *What and how we can learn about the functioning of the languages of Siberian minorities in the 1st part of the 20th century*. Talk presented at the workshop “Before the shift: sociolinguistic description of indigenous languages of Russia”, Moscow, Institute of linguistics

¹ <http://siberian-lang.srcc.msu.ru/en/>