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HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

*Mariia Lapina, Daria Oleinik*

**LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY  
DURING LANGUAGE SHIFT:  
THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF  
KARELIA AFTER 2018**

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## **LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY DURING LANGUAGE SHIFT: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF KARELIA AFTER 2018<sup>3</sup>**

This study focuses on the relationship between language and identity in the Republic of Karelia in recent years. There are several indigenous peoples living in Karelia whose languages are in the process of a language shift. According to the 2010 Russian census, Karelians and Veps are minority populations of Karelia, while the Karelian and Vepsian languages are native to even smaller populations. This language situation has developed because of the Soviet policy of assimilation and Russification, and because of the linguistic diversity of the region. Residents of Karelia express different opinions about the languages of Karelia, note the invisibility of the Karelian and Vepsian languages, and worry about their status. In the context of language shift, the main concern for people is the preservation of a culture that is unconditionally associated with languages and ethnicities.

Keywords: identity, ethnicity, language shift, language policy, ethnic languages, Karelian, Vepsian, Finnish, language practices, language revival

JEL Classification: Z

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<sup>1</sup> Laboratory for Arctic Social Sciences and Humanities, HSE University, Research Assistant. E-mail: mariia.svetl.lapina@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Laboratory for Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Projects, HSE University, Research Assistant. E-mail: darin\_olly@mail.ru

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## **Introduction<sup>4</sup>**

There are more than one hundred ethnicities in Russia and, consequently, more than one hundred languages. Due to a decades-old policy of Russification, a great number of the languages are endangered or moribund. The Republic of Karelia is one of the regions of Russia where the languages of the indigenous population (Karelians and Veps) are in the process of language shift. Language shift is when an ethnic group loses their ethnic language. However, there is another process occurring in Karelia which is the revitalization of ethnic languages. Revitalization is the opposite of language shift. There are many actors involved in revitalization — the state, language activists, and locals who are interested in preserving their language and widening its usage outside the household sphere, although not everyone who considers themselves a language activist speaks an indigenous language or even defines themselves as an indigenous person. This study focuses on the link between language and identity during language shift and language revitalization. Describing this connection can help policymakers improve regional language policies. This study is useful for documenting the language situation in Karelia and for developing suitable strategies to revitalize other languages in different regions.

Most of the literature on the identity of habitants of the Republic of Karelia either describes the situation in the last century or does not consider language revitalization. For instance, [Litvin 2017] focuses on ethnocultural identity of contemporary female Karelians, while [Myaki 2008] investigates whether learning Vepsian influences ethnic consciousness. Many studies have been published on the ethnolinguistic history of Karelia. The main shortcoming of these works (Klementiev 1991; Klementiev 2013; Birin 2000) is that they either analyze historical sources or use quantitative data (questionnaires and census figures) instead of interviews.

## **Theoretical Background**

Since this work focuses on the interaction of languages and identities in the context of language shift, we draw on concepts from sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Language shift is the process of loss of an ethnic language by an ethnic group and the result of this process (Vakhtin & Golovko 2004: 111). The Karelian and Vepsian languages in the Republic of Karelia are in the process of a language shift. With the collapse of the USSR and the revival of ethnic movements in Russia, there is some language shift reversal in Karelia. Language shift reversal is a return to the use of an ethnic language, which is the result of language revitalization and is extremely rare (Fishman 1997).

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<sup>4</sup> This section is based on an unpublished term paper submitted in 2021 as part of the BA curriculum at HSE University: (Lapina 2021). Some field data used in (Lapina & Smirnova 2021) was also used when preparing this section. Proper citation and reference management will be completed upon final submission of the text to a refereed journal.

Language shift and language shift reversal are characteristics of a language situation which is defined as "a set of forms of existence of one language or a set of several languages in their social and functional interaction within certain territories: regions or administrative-political entities" (Vakhtin & Golovko 2004: 47).

In this work, we consider the language situation in Karelia through the prism of the identity of the residents of the region. We define identity as "the psychological correlation of an individual with a social group or ethno-social community with which he or she shares certain norms, values, group attitudes, as well as how others perceive a person" (Dictionary 2006: 72). Identity can be ethnic, age, regional, class, etc. A factor of ethnic identity is often the knowledge of an ethnic language (Dictionary 2006: 73). Ethnicity does not depend on a specific set of traits but is determined situationally and is generated in the process of social exchange. Thus, the ethnic identity of one person may be different in different situations and may change over time. Equally often, ethnicity is self-attributed by a group or a person or is attributed to someone from the outside (Vakhtin & Golovko 2004: 34–35; Barth 1996).

When talking about languages and identities, the concept of language loyalty is important. Language loyalty is "a set of internal assessments by the members of the language community of the communicative suitability and prestige of their ethnic group's language, which determines the degree of their commitment to this language" (Dictionary 2006: 261). However, Baranova's definition seems more appropriate to us: linguistic loyalty is "the support provided by the group to the idiom, or the willingness of the speakers of the idiom to abandon it. So, the linguistic loyalty of the group can be negative" (Baranova 2010: 32).

Identity in relation to language is often associated with language skills. In this regard, we consider it necessary to single out the categories of new speakers, semi-speakers, and full speakers. Semi-speakers are passive speakers who understand speech but do not produce it. New speakers are people who have learned a language not through intergenerational transmission, but in settings, such as at school (Baranova 2021: 12).

## **Methods and Data**

This study is based on qualitative methods such as qualitative interviews and observation. We chose qualitative rather than quantitative methods in order to focus on the opinions of the residents of the region and present the diversity of points of view about identity and language.

Field work was carried out in five expeditions to the Republic of Karelia, which took place in 2019–2022. Employees and students of HSE University took part in all the expeditions. In 2019, we collected field data in the city of Petrozavodsk, and the districts of Pryazhinsky, Kondopozhsky and Prionezhsky; in 2020 in the Kostomuksha urban district; in two field trips in 2021, in

Olonetsky, Pryazhinsky and Kalevalsky districts; in 2022 in the Kostomuksha urban district, and Kalevalsky and Loukhsky districts. The interviews were conducted in Russian. During the interviews, we used a semi-structured guide compiled by our study team. The guide included questions about the language situation in Karelia in general and in specific communities in particular. It also included the identity of people in association with ethnicity and territory, as well as languages skills. More details on the guide and the sample questions are given in Appendix 1. During the interview analysis, we considered the location of the interview and interactions with other people as it is widely known that these can affect an informant's opinion. We also admit that some informants may have been biased, both consciously and unconsciously. Still, we do not make assumptions about the truthfulness of the opinions, and we quote the extracts verbatim. The authors of this paper translated quotes from the interview from Russian into English.

Another limitation of our study is that the sampling is imbalanced. We interviewed people between the ages of eight and eighty-five, but most of our informants were women in their forties and sixties who work in public service (specifically, education and culture).

Unfortunately, it is not possible to visit all the communities of the region, and this is limitation we are fully aware of. However, during the five expeditions we managed to work in 58 communities where the majority of the Karelian, Veps, and Finnish populations dwell.

The total sample size was 591 interviews. All interviews were tape-recorded with the verbal consent of the informants and then transcribed. We have carefully selected the most relevant interviews that broached the subject of identity and language proficiency. Data on informants is presented in the Appendix 2. The personal data of the informants is stored in an anonymized format without any specifying details that could deanonymize the informants.

## **Language Situation in Karelia**

The Republic of Karelia is a Russian region located in the north-west. It borders Finland and other regions of Russia. Despite the fact that Karelia is a republic within Russia, there is no official language in Karelia other than Russian (Constitution 2001). But according to the laws of the Republic of Karelia, the Karelian, Vepsian, and Finnish languages enjoy state support. The power of the state and the republic contributes to the preservation, development, and documentation of these languages in Karelia.

According to the 2010 Census (Russian Census 2010), among the residents of Karelia, 7.4% of the population were Karelians, 1.4% were Finns, 0.5% were Veps, and 78.7% were Russians. According to the results of our interviews, the percentage of Karelians and Vepsians among those who indicated their ethnicity is much higher. This is explained by our sample, since we tried to interview those residents of Karelia who had some connection with the languages of the indigenous

peoples of Karelia. According to the Census, 92.84% of the region's residents indicated Russian as their native language, 1.95% indicated Karelian, 0.36% indicated Ukrainian, 0.32% indicated Belarusian, 0.15% indicated Finnish and 0.08% indicated Vepsian (Russian Census 2010). Among our informants, the percentage of native speakers was higher due to our sampling.

The census did not record Karelian idioms. However, the Karelian language is subdivided into Proper Karelian, Livvik Karelian, and Ludic Karelian. Proper Karelian is used in the north of Karelia. Livvik and Ludic Karelian are used in the south of Karelia (Oleinik 2021). These Karelian idioms have different numbers of speakers. All idioms are taught in schools in Karelia, but only for Livvik and Proper Karelian there are educational standards. Since Ludic Karelian is spoken in only a few communities, there are no textbooks for learning Ludic Karelian (Lapina 2021).

The language situation in Karelia is complex. This is due to the linguistic diversity of the region, the state language, and the small indigenous populations in Karelia. In addition, throughout the twentieth century, people from all over the Soviet Union migrated to Karelia, which determines the current ethnic diversity. In the 1990s, on the contrary, there was an outflow of the population of Karelia to other regions of Russia and to Finland.

## **Language and Identity**

As indicated earlier, the number of those who indicated ethnicity in the census and the number of those who indicated knowledge of the languages of Karelia are very different. Does this mean that identity and language are not always connected? In this section, we will look at the diversity of perspectives on identity in Karelia.

Guboglo writes that “in the sphere of culture, the ethnic identity of the Russian population is less relevant than the ethnic identity of the titular nationalities” (Guboglo 2003: 203). This is also true for Karelia.

Myaki (2008: 157) writes that after the collapse of the USSR, the residents of Russia became interested in ethnic self-determination. Perhaps it happened in order to replace the departed identity of the Soviet people with a new identity. Not only the emerging need for a new identity was important, but also the opportunity to declare that ethnic identities exist and that people who lived in the USSR can differ from each other: not only in appearance, but also, for example, in language. Ethno-linguistic mobilization in Karelia was associated not only with the need to declare oneself, but also with a change in state policy. While the policy of Russification was systematically pursued in the USSR, in the Russian Federation the course became more liberal. Thus, ethnic and linguistic diversity became more public. Despite the increased publicity, the Karelian and Vepsian languages are in the process of language shift, which is primarily due to the lack of intergenerational transmission of the language.

Many of our informants who lived in the USSR attribute their lack of knowledge of the language to state policy, which includes repressive measures.

(1) *Parents did not speak Karelian to my generation of children, they communicated with each other and with their parents, but they did not pass it on to us, because they were communists. (Informant 1)*

(2) *It was clear: when you at home you speak Karelian, when you are outside of home you speak Russian. In school, the use of Karelian was inappropriate when I studied. People who are fifteen years older than me told me that Karelian was forbidden, and use of Karelian in school could be the reason for exclusion from the Komsomol. Yes, as a traitor in the war. Betrayal. (Informant 2)*

In addition to political reasons, our informants mentioned the general lack of prestige of the Karelian and Vepsian languages. These languages were associated with a rural way of life, underdevelopment, and even mental retardation.

(3) *It was enough to say: "Moron, speaks Karelian". The children discussed it with each other. It was like prescriptions: if you speak Karelian, then you are a swine. Well, here we are, all silent, yes. (Informant 2)*

Nowadays, attitudes towards knowledge of the Karelian and Vepsian languages have changed, but they are still very rarely heard on the streets of Karelia and even in the homes of Karelians and Veps. This is due to language shift, a decrease in the number of active speakers, and an increase in the number of passive speakers of the languages. This is especially noticeable in cities, since in villages, especially in national regions, there are still speakers of Karelian and, less often, Vepsian who use them in daily communication. This is confirmed by our informants:

(4) *I have been living in Petrozavodsk for eight years, I have heard Karelian twice. Once I went to a cafe. A mother with a little child was sitting at the next table, and she told him when she left the cafe: "You forgot the bucket." [...] The second time I heard Karelian in a trolley bus. The elderly conductor spoke to the elderly passenger in pure Karelian, that's all. (Informant 3)*

Young people who did not live in the USSR or lived in it only in childhood have an interest in their native language and ethnicity not from childhood, but from a more conscious age.

(5) *And the older I get, the more my interest awakens in my roots and culture. I wonder who I really am. Because there are not many Karelian-speaking people left. (Informant 4)*

Many of our informants considered themselves Karelians or Veps since childhood, but without knowledge of the languages they felt that they were illegitimate representatives of these ethnic groups. Some of them are semi-speakers and others are new speakers.

(6) *I did not speak Karelian as a child, but my parents know both Karelian and Finnish, and I just heard speech from them and also from other people who live and lived in the village. I decided to study Karelian, because I have Karelian roots both on my father's and my mother's sides. I decided that I will call myself a Karelian when I fully learn the language. A Karel is, first of all, someone who knows the language. You need to know Karelian. People who do not know the language can call themselves Karelians, but in my understanding, you must know both the language and the culture. (Informant 5)*

On the other hand, there are a large number of people for whom ethnic language proficiency and ethnicity are not strongly related. One of the informants defines herself as Veps. Her father is Veps and her mother is Russian. The informant learned the Vepsian language at school and by communicating with her grandparents, however, she believes that a person is Veps or Karelian, even if they do not know the language.

(7) *Of course, everyone can be considered Karelian or Veps without knowing the language, for example, [my] father. But it is difficult to preserve culture without language. (Informant 6)*

Despite this opinion, this informant also supports the idea of the preservation of culture and its importance for ethnic identity. Informants 5 and 6 are new speakers and have acquired languages through education.

Karelians divide each other into ethnic subgroups based on the division of idioms. Belonging to a ethnic subgroup is also an important part of identity. Dividing each other into sub-ethnic groups, Karelians divide people into Insiders and Outsiders. If informants say that they are Karelians, we ask “Which one?” And usually we get the answer: Livvik Karelian, Proper Karelian, or Ludic Karelian. If people are asked how Karelians differ from other Karelians, the informants begin to list the differences between Karelian idioms.

(8) *Northern [Proper] Karelian seems more beautiful to me. The rest are not wrong, but there is some kind of roughness in the southern idioms, there are a lot of voiced consonants, and the northern one is soft, here voiceless consonants predominate. (Informant 2)*

Russian residents of Karelia do not have a single opinion about the need to speak an ethnic language in order to classify themselves as a particular ethnic group. Some believe that Karelians need to learn their language from childhood:

(9) *It is necessary to study languages, especially when living in the Republic of Karelia. And there are natives who have Karelian children, and it is very sad that they do not speak Karelian. If the Russians want to, let them learn Karelian too. (Informant 7)*

Others believe that learning Karelian and Vepsian is only necessary for history. It is enough for them to know a few phrases to preserve the peculiarity of the Republic and its culture. It is possible



that this point of view is justified not by other ideas about the formation of ethnic identity, but by the fear that the role of the Karelian and Vepsian languages in the Republic will increase. If this happens, the languages will receive the status of state languages, and then, according to some informants, they will have to be studied by everyone living in Karelia.

To achieve a comprehensive view, one should not lose sight of regional identity. Many residents of Karelia use the word Karel as a designation for those who live in Karelia, and not to refer to the indigenous people.

Summing up, we can say that ethnic identity and language skills are dependent on one another. On the one hand, many people start learning Karelian or Vepsian in order to feel like full-fledged Karelians and Veps. On the other hand, language proficiency is not always important for self-identification but it is a desirable factor in preserving the culture of one's ethnic group. Those for whom an ethnic language is native are more likely to be in favor of passing it on to the next generations, but in fact, they themselves do not always pass it on to children and realize the need for this only when they become older.

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### **Affiliations**

Mariia Lapina

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia), Laboratory for Arctic Social Sciences and Humanities, Research Assistant

E-mail: mariia.svetl.lapina@gmail.com

Daria Oleinik

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia), Laboratory for  
Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Projects, Research Assistant  
E-mail: darin\_olly@mail.ru

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## **Appendix 1. Example of the Interview Guide**

1. How old are you? Where were you born? What is your profession? Where do you currently live? Did you live somewhere else?
2. What is your level of education? What specialty did you get? Did you go to a rural school or a city school? Was your education related to the languages of Karelia? Have you studied the languages of Karelia in educational institutions or courses?
3. What languages do you speak? Do you know Karelian, Veps ,or Finnish? How well do you speak these languages? Can you understand what is being said to you in these languages? Do you understand printed texts in these languages? What languages do your parents and grandparents speak? What are your parents' professions? Where were they born?
4. What ethnic (national) groups do people live in Karelia? What ethnic group do you belong to? What ethnic group do your parents belong to? Do you come across people of other ethnicities in everyday communication? How do you feel about them? What is the difference between people of different ethnicities in Karelia?
5. What languages do you use in everyday life? Do you hear any languages other than Russian in public places in Karelia? How do you feel about the Russian language? How do you feel about other languages? Should languages of Karelia be taught in kindergartens and schools? What languages are obligatory for learning? Should the languages of Karelia be known only to indigenous peoples or to all residents of Karelia?

## Appendix 2. List of Mentioned Informants

No	Gender	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Place of Living	Occupation	Ethnicity	Year of the Interview
1	f	1957		Kondopoga	museum employee	Ludic Karelian	2019
2	f	1950	Voknavolok	Kostomuksha	teacher	Proper Karelian	2020
3	f	1961	Olonec	Petrozavodsk	teacher	Livvik Karelian	2019
4	m	1987	Olonec	Petrozavodsk	actor, musician	Livvik Karelian	2019
5	f	1995	Vojnica	Kostomuksha	teacher	Proper Karelian	2020
6	f	1989		Petrozavodsk	TV employee	Vepsian	2019
7	f	1976	Nignij Novgorod	Kostomuksha	factory worker	Russian	2020