LANGUAGE ACTIVISM IN RUSSIA: PREREQUISITES AND FORMS OF EXISTENCE

One of the topical areas of study of modern Russian sociolinguistics is the theory of language activism, which, as a rule, correlates with the activities oriented towards languages that are not supported de jure or are not efficiently supported de facto to maintain their functioning in various areas of communication. The article discusses approaches to the definition of the concept of language activism, analyzes the prerequisites for the emergence of the language activism in the Russian Federation and the forms of its existence. In this analysis, the author relies on the field sociolinguistic research conducted within the period of 2021–2022 on the territory of the Republic of Tyva and Sakha (Yakutia).

Keywords: languages of Russia, language policy, language situation, language activism, language enthusiasts.

Introduction

Activism as a separate notion is mainly defined as a series of vigorous actions aimed at achieving a certain goal by a group of individuals. It is often treated controversially due to its oppositional spirit, because in fact “it manifests as confrontational activity that directly challenges the order of things” [Combs, Penfield, 2012]. With reference to language policy language activ-
ism implies a set of actions, as a rule, oriented towards the languages that are not supported de jure or are not efficiently supported de facto to maintain their functioning in various areas of communication. Thus, these grassroots movements are able to influence the existing language policy implemented from the top, and that is exactly what makes this topic very sensitive.

When we think of a typical portrait of a language activist is possible to single out “internal” language activists who are a part of an ethnic community that is worried about the fate of their mother tongue (irrespective of their personal language competence), and “external” ones who for some reason decided to deal with the language of the people with whom they originally have not been connected. The case of internal language activism may be presented by people of different age and sex, including elderly people who after becoming grandparents start to realize the importance of the transmission of their mother tongue to their grandchildren, after having ignored this fact for a long time being young parents in relation to their own children, which resulted in a language shift of the latter towards the majority language. External activists usually include those who, for certain reason, have begun to take an interest in the minority language, such as spouses in mixed marriages.

Another important issue in the analysis of this concept is the distinction between language activists and linguists. Florey et al. [Florey et al., 2009] distinguish these notions in accordance with the following parameters: activity, indigeneity and training. According to the first one, language advocacy, revitalization and maintenance belong to the realm of language activists, while language documentation and description refer to the realm of linguists. According to the second one Florey and Penfield stress, that the term language activist is applied “almost exclusively to indigenous peoples” and in this point their share the idea of internal vs. external language activist. Finally, the third criterion refers to the linguistic skill level, which proves to be lower among activists, most of whom are not professional linguists [Florey et al., 2009].

We see that this classification refers to typical cases of linguistic activism, while at present, with the development of interdisciplinary research, it is possible to expand the possibilities of this area beyond the scope of linguistics.

Problem statement

“Language activism manifests differently at different times in different contexts” [Combs & Penfield, 2012]. In the context of the Russian Federation, in which language activism began to manifest itself relatively re-
cently, the Internet played an important role in its formation. At the same time, due to the traditional power distance inherent in the Russian culture according to Hofstede's scale, the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within the country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally, an ambiguous attitude has formed in society towards language activists, as well as towards activism in general. This was the reason for the long-term replacement of this concept by the concept of language enthusiasts as having a positive connotation. Currently, the term “language activism” is actively used in journalistic articles and video materials of language communities (for example, “Country of Languages”), and increasingly appears in Russian-language scientific publications, to a greater extent, international scientific platforms like WoS and Scopus, to a lesser extent in Russian Science Citation Index (RSCI). In particular, when searching by keywords, one can find 12 articles in RSCI, all of them belong to the period 2020–2022.

Research methods

The source base for this sociolinguistic study is the research of the Russian scholars in recent years in this area, as well as the results of the field studies conducted by the author in 2021–2022 in the Republics of the Russian Federation, including Tuva and Sakha (Yakutia). In the course of this study, we conducted a series of interviews with linguists, historians, language activists, cultural figures, and youth. The choice of respondents was determined, first of all, by their ability to identify signs of a language shift at the initial stage and analyze the language situation in the region. Key interview questions focused on the analysis of the dynamics of the functioning of languages in the respective region in recent years and the attitude of informants to the current situation and the measures taken by local residents to preserve their language.

Results and discussion

Prerequisites for language activism in Russia

Globalization and technological development are the main prerequisites for the development of activist movements in support of the language. “The fact is that the process of globalization, leading to the unification of cultures, gives rise to a desire for cultural self-affirmation among some ethnic groups and causes a desire to preserve their own cultural values, …” The range of forms of resistance to the process of globalization
is quite wide, from passive rejection of the achievements of other cultures to active resistance to their spread and establishment. As a result, we are witnessing numerous ethnic conflicts, extremist actions, strengthening of nationalist sentiments, activation of regional fundamentalist movements” [Sadokhin, 2013]. Naturally, the process of globalization did not bypass Russia with its cultural and linguistic diversity, which also faced challenges in the form of information and communication tools with the predominant functioning of the majority languages and a decrease in the prestige of minority languages within the community.

The second prerequisite for the formation of language activism is the state language policy, focused on the functional development of the majority language. “Today, one can often hear discussions about the state of minority and underused languages, the functional ability of which is gradually fading away, unable to compete with the dominant languages in terms of status and functional development. In turn, world linguistic experience shows that the fate of such languages largely depends on the individual efforts of language enthusiasts” [Bitkeeva & Mandzhieva, 2022]. So, language activism, as a rule, correlates with activities in relation to languages that are not supported at the official level or are not sufficiently supported to provide its functioning in real life. Social tension from quasi-legal recognition of legal rights of a language as a result of a certain language policy becomes one of the prerequisites for the language activism. One of such triggers in the Russian Federation was an amendment to the language legislation of the country, which caused heated debates among the Russian society, i.e. the adoption of amendments to the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” and the introduction of a provision for the voluntary study of minority languages in 2018 [Bitkeeva et al, 2022]. According to the latest edition of the law, the opportunity to receive education in the native language (from among the peoples of the Russian Federation, including the Russian language), the study of the Russian language as the languages of the Republics of the Russian Federation is provided on a voluntary basis “according to the statements of the parents (legal representatives) of minor students upon admission (transfer) for training in educational programs of preschool education, having state accreditation of educational programs of primary general and basic general education”. The amendments led to a tendency among representatives of various ethnic groups to choose in favor of teaching children in Russian in order to successfully pass the exam and further enter universities. At the same time, it also gave rise to activist movements in support of the language among those segments of the population who noticed a danger to the continued functioning of their language.
Further, we will consider the types of language activism on the example of their manifestations in such Republics of the Russian Federation as Tuva and Sakha (Yakutia).

**Digital activism**

Describing the current language situation in the republics of the Russian Federation, informants, as a rule, pay attention to the influence of television and the Internet on the formation of Russian-speaking competence and the language shift towards the Russian language among ethnic groups, primarily among the younger generation. At the same time, it is the Internet that gives rise to a variety of methods for the preservation and revitalization of the language used by the language activists. The so-called Internet activism (or digital activism), which implies the use of electronic communication technologies, such as email, social networks and podcasts for various forms of activity, the presentation of individual information to a wide audience in the world, is effectively correlating with the language activism.

The desire to keep in touch with other representatives of the Tuva ethnic group is expressed in the tendency to join various kinds of community chats based on the family or territorial proximity of the participants. The language of communication in such communities is often the Tuva language, which in some cases is specifically stipulated in the rules of the community (Kaplunova, 2022b).

School teachers are beginning to introduce digital educational resources into their lessons. Nadezhda Maksimovna Ochirova, a teacher of the Even language at the Experimental boarding school “Arktika” with in-depth study of humanitarian and cultural subjects in Neryungri (Yakutia), shoots school videos that she uploads to the Internet, contributing to the formation of students’ linguistic and communicative competence, practical mastery of the language.

Documentation as another way of language revitalization, “because documentation of lesser-used languages using digital technologies also results in the production of new cultural objects to be stored, displayed, and circulated, attention is also focused on the forms of sociality sustained by the creation and exchange of such electronic artifacts” [Eisenchlohr, 2004]. One way to document and maintain a language is to run it on such a platform like Wikipedia. In an interview with a language activist, the creator of the Sakha Wikipedia, PhD in medical sciences, Nikolai Nikolaevich Pavlov-Khalan, we found out that he realized the importance
of preserving the Yakut language at the moment when his children went to kindergarten and after two weeks began to mix language codes in family communication (Kaplunova, 2022a). In addition to Wikipedia, which is an encyclopedia, there are other projects, such as Wiktionary, Wiki-source, Wikiguide, Wikinews. These are separate sites, which also have different language versions. So far, there are two such sites in the Yakut language, i.e. Wikiquote and Wikisource. Wikisource is a collection of works in a language including either fiction, or scientific articles, or journalist works. Wikiquote includes quotations from fiction and folklore, films, interviews, including phraseological units, proverbs and sayings. In addition to spreading the Yankut language on wiki sites, N. Pavlov-Khalan also contributed to the spread of the Even language. As N. Pavlov-Khalan said in the interview, “In the section of Russian Wikinews, we once made a subsection in the Even language. About four years ago. I helped a student, who spoke her native Even language very well. Then we published several articles in Russian Wikinews on Even topics.” (Kaplunova, 2022a).

In addition to Wikipedia projects, there is a number of other effective projects coordinated by N. Pavlov-Khalan, including a public movement “CyberSakha4”, whose members created such project as SakhaTyla.ru5, which accumulates various already published books related to the Yakut language. There are phrasebooks, dictionaries, audio content.

Yandex, a transnational company in the information technology industry, can also be considered as a language activist due to the presence on its platform of the Russian-Yakut and Yakut-Russian online translator on open access for all Internet users.

**Language events**

The practice of conducting the so-called Total Dictation (originally held in Russian) in ethnic languages in the format of a voluntary mass test of knowledge is also assessed by researchers as a manifestation of language activism that contributes to the spread of the practice of holding such events in the field of national languages, “improving the culture of speech and, in general, developing the languages of peoples Russia” [Ne-flyasheva, 2020]. In 2011, for the first time in the Republic of Tuva, the Headquarters of Youth Organizations hosted the first total dictation in the Tuvan language, dedicated to the International Mother Language Day. Six years later, within the framework of the Festival of the Mother Language from February 14 to February 16, 2017, the Total Dictation in the Yakut language was organized for the first time in 24 educational institutions of the city of Yakutsk for everyone, including students, teachers, parents.
**Language nest**

One of the traditional ways of language revitalization language nest aimed at preschool children is also worth considering as the type of language activism. This method implies the presence in the kindergarten of a teacher who is a native speaker of the revived language, who uses it when communicating with children. This method has been used since 2022 in the kindergarten of Khatystyr (Aldan region) of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) to preserve the Evenki language. In the context of a shortage of pedagogical personnel among the local population who speak the Evenki language, the kindergarten invited Mikhailova Svetlana Stepanovna from the village of Iengra (Neryungri region), who is not indifferent to the fate of her native language,

**Culture as the means of language promotion**

The high level of ethnic identity and cultural heritage of Tuvans are recognized by the residents of Tuva as key factors contributing to the preservation of the Tuvan language in the region (Kaplunova, 2022b). As an example of cultural activities that contribute to maintaining the prestige of the Tuvan language is the Oduchu musical project, created in the summer of 2018 by Tuvan performers Chingis Sorzhu and Mengi Mongush, which was awarded the Russian World Music Awards in 2019 in the Best New Project nomination. Young people perform music in ethnic style, in their texts they instill love for their homeland and Tuvan traditions.

A special role in maintaining the ethno-cultural self-consciousness of the Tuvans is played by throat singing khoomei, which is often considered the “cultural brand of Tuva” [Lamazhaa, Suzukey, 2019]. As Tuvan culturalists note, “Performances in the Tuvan language, storytelling competitions and other events help to motivate young people to learn their native language. We especially noticed this after the performances of the Tuva National Orchestra” [Kaplunova, 2022b].

The cultural heritage of the Yakuts is presented by the modern Yakut cinema, which has become one of the main centers of film production in Russia in recent years. Yakut films are diverse, include various genres, but all of them are distinguished by the features of the Yakut ethnic group and Yakut way of life (for example, “The sun does not set above me”, “The King Bird”, “Scarecrow”, etc.). “The symbols and collective cultural images present in the films replace the viewer with an adventure: a journey to this unique region.”

In turn, theatrical performances in the Yakut language are organized by the Sakha Academic Theater named after P.A. Oyunsky (Yakutsk) and
the Republican Puppet Theater (Neryungri). In the languages of the peoples of the North, performances are organized by the State Theater of Indigenous Peoples of the North (Yakutsk).

**Conclusion**

With the widespread effect of globalization and the tendency of the language shift towards the majority language among the representatives of national minorities, the sociolinguistic community has begun to pay more attention to the problem of the disappearance of languages with low vitality. The development of Internet technologies plays a dual role in the life of the languages of national minorities. On the one hand, this is the reason for the acceleration of the language shift even among those peoples who had fewer prerequisites for this (for example, the Tuvans). At the same time, the development of technology has opened up new opportunities for the preservation and even revitalization of such languages. With the UN General Assembly proclamation of the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 and the forthcoming International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), language activism around the world has taken on a new lease of life. And this is also felt in the multinational Russian Federation, where Russian language activism, like its foreign counterparts, exists largely on the Internet, which leads to the emergence of an increasing number of studies on this topic [Khilkhanova & Dugarova, 2022]. Manifestations of language activism as within the framework of Internet activism and in more traditional forms are various and diverse, which is proved by examples from such Republics of the Russian Federation as Tuva and Sakha (Yakutia).

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