

# Nivkh and Sakha Language Ideologies

Their Causes and What They Mean for Language Revitalization

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## Abstract

This thesis explores existing research into Nivkh and Sakha language ideologies in order to elucidate the need for investigations into the causes of language ideologies in future research as well as the importance of incorporating youth and rural perspectives into such research. It is argued that the causes of ideologies must be understood in order to design and implement effective language maintenance and revitalization programs. I then present the findings of my own language ideology interviews conducted with young Sakha and Nivkh consultants and lay out five major factors that help shape their ideologies. I conclude that Nivkh and Sakha revitalization programs should be determined by the communities themselves and will likely be most successful if they aim for bilingualism and highlight personal and spiritual factors for studying the indigenous language.

## Acknowledgments

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# 1 Introduction

The language ideologies of indigenous peoples of the Russian Far East have not been widely explored in either English- or Russian-language scholarship. Even less attention has been paid to the ideologies of indigenous youths. In this thesis I will explore the language ideologies of both speakers and non-speakers of both endangered and more vibrant language communities of the Russian Far East. Indigenous groups in Russia include the officially delineated “small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East”,<sup>1</sup> of which there are about 40; over two dozen ethnic groups in Dagestan; nearly three dozen larger ethnic groups, from the Caucasus to the Sakha Republic, most of which have some degree of autonomy;<sup>2</sup> and several other smaller indigenous groups throughout the country. All in all, more than 100 ethnic groups are native to Russia (Teague 1994:53). I will be focusing on the ideologies and experiences of speakers of two of the languages of the North, Siberia, and the Far East (hereafter simply “the North”): the small-numbered language Nivkh, and the larger language Sakha.

Nivkh is a language isolate spoken by fewer than 200 people on the island of Sakhalin and across the Strait of Tartary in Khabarovsk Krai. It has no official status and is rarely taught in schools. Children do not speak it and for the most part do not understand it very well. Sakha, a Turkic language, is spoken by over 450,000 people, mostly in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), where it has co-official status with Russian and is used as a lingua franca by ethnic minorities in the republic. It is a vibrant language with speakers of all ages, both urban and rural, and is not only taught, but used as the sole language of instruction in many schools in Sakha. In spite of

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<sup>1</sup> These are groups with fewer than 50,000 representatives.

<sup>2</sup> Nominal autonomy, at least.

this, Sakha is still classified as vulnerable, as it remains under pressure from Russian, and most Sakha speakers are bilingual.

Revitalization efforts are already underway for some of the endangered languages of the North, but these are typically marred by insufficient financing, expertise (including of fluent speakers, teachers, linguists, and activists), and hospitality on the part of federal and regional governments. But beyond official attitudes toward these languages, it is crucial to understand the attitudes of future speakers in order to revitalize the languages. Since most fluent speakers of Nivkh are already past child-bearing age, intergenerational transmission has been disrupted for several generations. Therefore, in order to revitalize the language, young Nivkhs must actively *want* to learn it, and eventually recommence intergenerational transmission with their own children. However, in contrast to larger ethnicities like the Sakha, much less work has been done to evaluate language attitudes among the smaller groups (vid. Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2015, 2018; King 2011; Siragusa 2017; Ulturgasheva 2012). Without an understanding about how the next generation feels about their language, and why – that is, where these ideologies come from – progress toward maintaining these languages will be scarce. It should thus be fruitful to compare the language ideologies of young Nivkhs and Sakha through interviews and an extensive review of prior research.

## **2 Languages of Russia**

As of the 2010 census, about 80.9% of Russia's population of 142,856,536 is ethnically Russian. After Russians, the largest ethnic groups are Tatars (3.8%), Ukrainians (1.4%), Bashkirs (1.2%), Chuvash (1.1%), and Chechens (1.0%) (Rosstat 2010:9–21). 99.1% of Russia's population reports knowing Russian (Rosstat 25). Aside from the predominantly foreign languages English

and German (5.5% and 1.5%, respectively), the next most widely spoken languages of Russia are Tatar (3.1%), Chechen (1.0%), Bashkir, Ukrainian, and Chuvash (each 0.8%), and Avar (0.5%).

Within Russia there are both generally larger indigenous languages with varying degrees of official recognition and support, and also generally smaller ones with no official recognition and little if any outside support. Sakha is a member of the former group, while Nivkh belongs to the latter. Although no strict line can be drawn between these two groups, there is a clear, and very sizable, gulf between Sakha and Nivkh in terms of their speaker populations, their total ethnic populations, and their degree of political autonomy. Overall there are around 32 of these larger indigenous languages (approximately 13 Northern and 19 non-Northern) and around 59 of the smaller ones (approximately 36 Northern and 23 non-Northern).<sup>3</sup>

Although, as is apparent from the data above, there is tremendous linguistic diversity in the Caucasus, including many vulnerable and endangered languages, I will be focusing solely on languages of the North.<sup>4</sup> The historical context of Russian intervention in the Caucasus is quite distinct from that of Russia's expansion to the east, and the languages of the Caucasus are also largely linguistically distinct from those of the North (with the exception of a few Turkic languages). Within Russia and Russian scholarship, as well, the Caucasus is generally considered separately from the North.

In the Russian context, "Northern" and "the North" often do not refer to the truly geographically northern part of Russia (vid. Slavin 1962). As Vakhtin (2019) notes, the traditional understanding of "the North" includes all of Siberia and the Far East, even, for

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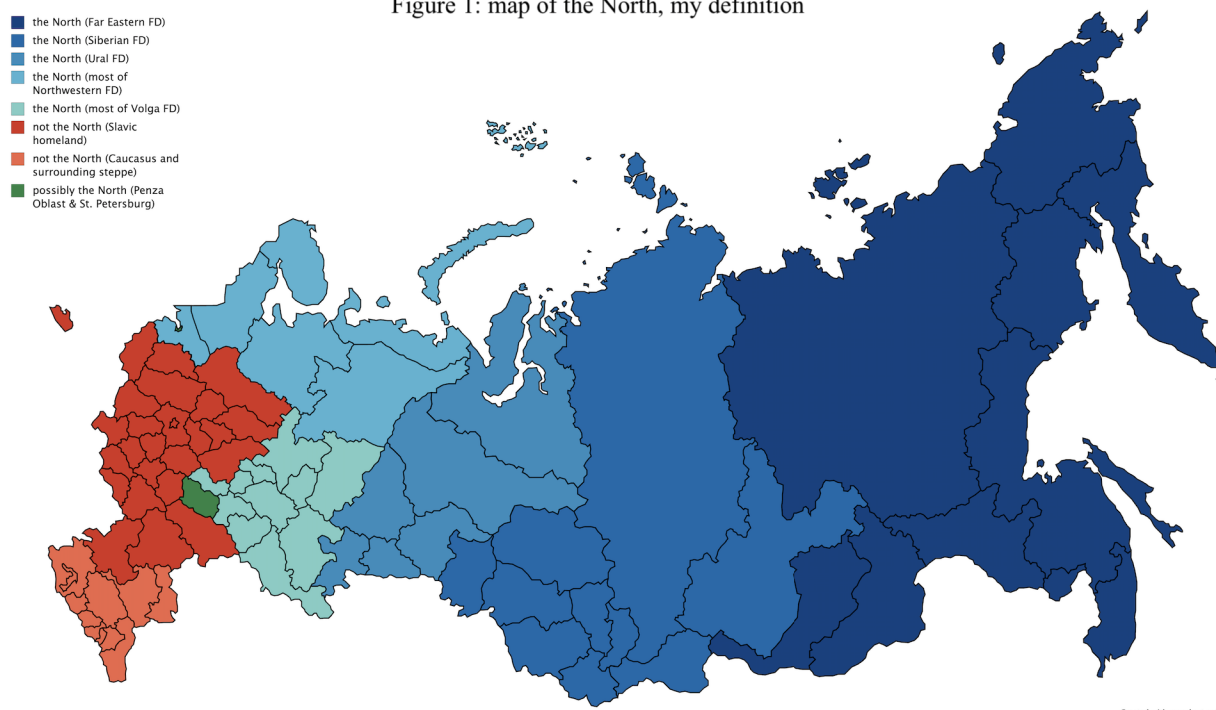
<sup>3</sup> There are fewer small-numbered languages of the North (around 36) than there are small-numbered peoples of the North (39–42) because some of these peoples' languages are already extinct, and some officially speak the same languages (e.g. the language of the Teleut and the Telengit is Altai, which is an official language and too large to be considered "small-numbered").

<sup>4</sup> For the languages of the Caucasus, see Catford 1977 & Schulze 2007.

example, Primorsky Krai, the homeland of the Udege and Nanai, even though it extends as far south as 44° N. Meanwhile, Novgorod Oblast, extending north past 59° N, is not a part of “the North”.<sup>5</sup> I will define “the North” as all of Russia except for the historical Slavic homeland, the Caucasus, and the southwestern steppes of Kalmykia and Astrakhan. This corresponds to all of the Far Eastern, Siberian, and Ural Federal Districts; most of the Northwestern Federal District, with the exceptions of Kaliningrad, Pskov, and Novgorod Oblasts (and perhaps also Saint Petersburg); and most of the Volga Federal District, excluding Nizhny Novgorod and Saratov Oblasts, and perhaps also Penza Oblast.

This definition is attractive for a few reasons: first, it is thorough and mostly unambiguous. Second, it includes all of the regions of Russia outside of the Caucasus and surrounding steppe that are populated by indigenous minorities, while excluding the historical (precolonial) Slavic homeland, which remains to this day overwhelmingly Russian. And third, with the exception of the regions of the ethnically diverse Volga Federal District that I have

Figure 1: map of the North, my definition



included, it largely accords to traditional definitions of “the North”. For these reasons, for the remainder of this thesis, when I use the terms “the North” and “Northern”, I will be referring to this area.

## 2.1 Languages of the North

Коренные народы Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока Российской Федерации  
Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East of the Russian Federation



Figure 2: map of many of the languages of the North (Dallman 2005)

There are 49 indigenous languages of the North, ranging in size from Sirenik and Oroch, with 5 and 8 speakers per the 2010 Census, to Tatar, with 4,280,718 (Rosstat 2010:142–43). These languages belong to nine families (see figure 2 below, which conflates several of these<sup>6</sup>): *Turkic* (including Tatar, Bashkir, Chuvash, and Sakha—the four largest Northern languages), *Uralic* (including Mari, Udmurt, Erzya, and Komi), *Mongolic* (Buryat), *Tungusic* (including Even,

<sup>6</sup> Namely, this map conflates Uralic and Yukaghir into one family (vid. Aikio 2014), as well as Turkic, Tungusic, and Mongolic into one family (vid. Clauson 1956 & Pereltsvaig 2011). It also includes Ainu, which is no longer spoken in Russia.

Evenki, Nanai, and Ulch), *Chukotko-Kamchatkan* (Chukchi, Koryak, Itelmen, and Alyutor), *Eskimo-Aleut* (Siberian Yupik, Aleut, and perhaps Sirenik<sup>7</sup>), *Yukaghir* (Tundra & Kolyma Yukaghir), *Yeniseian* (Ket), and *Nivkh* (an isolate).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the “small-numbered languages of the North”, other indigenous languages of the Russian Federation are better documented, preserved, and officially supported, including in education. For instance, Tatar, Bashkir, and Sakha are all used to some extent in regional government and primary and secondary education; each of these languages was the sole language of instruction for over 40,000 students in 2012 (Arefiev 2014:112). On the other hand, Dolgan was the only small-numbered language of the North in which students (52 of them) were studying in 2011, and by the next year that number was zero (Arefiev 113). Especially since smaller languages like Nivkh lack the kind of official support that major regional languages like Tatar, Bashkir, and Sakha have, linguists cannot expect to help them thrive without properly understanding the sociolinguistic environments they are in.

Moreover, these environments are always in flux. The political situation in Russia has varied greatly since the onset of Russian expansion into the East, with Russians practicing open subjugation up to the mid-nineteenth century, accompanied by attempted Russification until the end of the Russian Empire. However, Sakha remained a regional lingua franca throughout this era and was even relatively prestigious until Russian immigration rapidly increased in the early twentieth century. Ferguson (2019) notes that “throughout the tsarist period the linguistic exchange between Russian and Sakha speakers was at its most egalitarian” (55). The first dozen or so years of the Soviet Union were characterized by active and explicitly codified government

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<sup>7</sup> Sirenik may be extinct.

<sup>8</sup> Nivkh is in fact a dialect continuum or small family with 4 or 5 main dialects, 1 or 2 of which are recently extinct. The Amur and Sakhalin “dialects” are not mutually intelligible. See §2.1.1 below.



support for all indigenous peoples and languages. In fact, “the peak of instruction of students in their native language ended up being 1932, when instruction was carried out in nearly 100 languages in Soviet elementary and middle schools” (Arefiev 2014:37).

However, beginning in the late 1920s, Joseph Stalin changed the Soviet policy again, denouncing the earlier Soviet ideals of multiculturalism and instating a strict policy of Russification, particularly through the privileging of the Russian language and “nation” (Vakhtin 1994:53), but also through forced collectivization. This very quickly led to a “spiritual and economic crisis among indigenous peoples” of the North (Arefiev 2014:48) as they were expelled from their traditional lands and forced into multiethnic towns where there was little opportunity to speak their languages and live traditionally (Vakhtin 1994:59). This suppression lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, whereupon many regional governments (including that of the Sakha Republic) fought for more indigenous and regionalist rights (Teague 1994, Ferguson 2019:88). Starting in the early 2000s, the Russian federal government has settled for mere nominal support of indigenous peoples and languages, resulting in a gradually worsening situation for the languages of the North, especially those spoken outside semi-autonomous regions like the Sakha Republic (Brown 2013; Grant 1995; Grenoble 2003, 2018; Lekhanova 2008). However, a decree in 2017 led to weakened guarantees of minority language rights in many republics, such as Bashkortostan and the Komi Republic (Jankiewicz & Kniaginina 2019). Federal courts often overturn decisions by republics to guarantee minority language rights; in 2015 the Russian Supreme Court banned the previously implemented mandatory study of Sakha within the republic (ibid. 17).

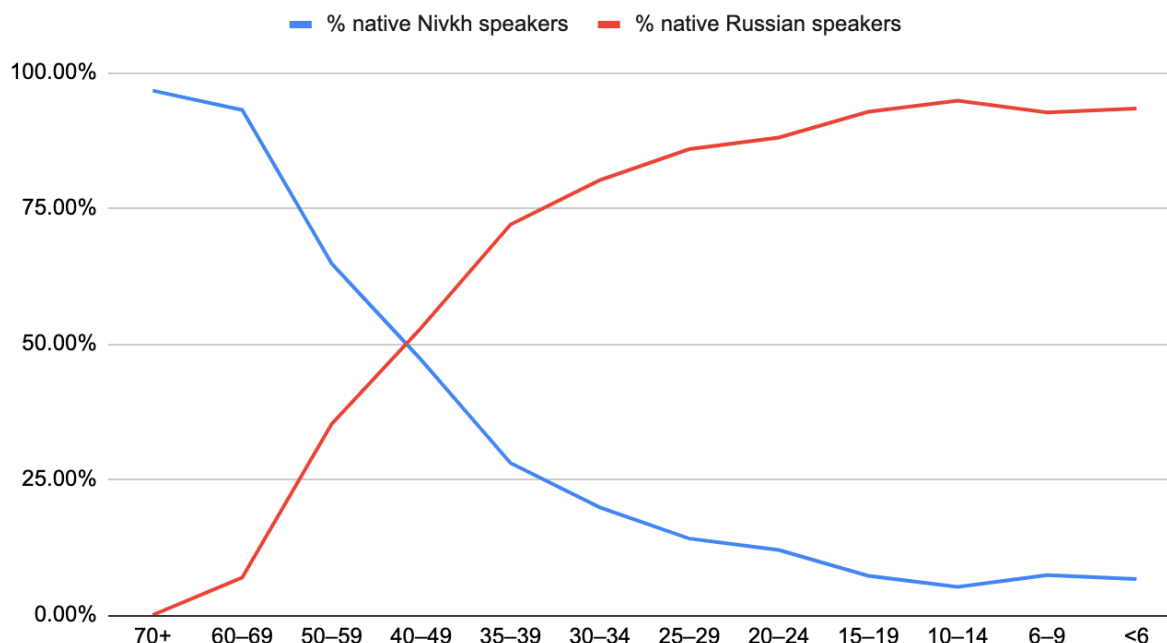
### 2.1.1 Nivkh

Nivkh is traditionally considered a language isolate, but in reality it is a dialect continuum or small family with three or four varieties that are still to some extent spoken (or at least known): an Amur variety on the mainland, and two or three Sakhalin varieties (East, West, and possibly still North). A South Sakhalin dialect was formerly spoken in the vicinity of Poronaysk. The Amur “dialect” is not mutually intelligible with the Sakhalin dialects; as a result, it would be more appropriate to consider Amur Nivkh and Sakhalin Nivkh as separate languages. All of these forms together have fewer than 200 speakers, all older than the parent generation. UNESCO considers the Sakhalin dialects of Nivkh (collectively, as UNESCO does not distinguish them) to be severely endangered and the Amur “dialect” to be critically endangered (Moseley 2010). For the most part, neither parents nor children use the language at home or in public; it is used almost exclusively by people of the grandparent generation and older, and seldom even by them.

The transmission of the Nivkh language from parents to children was interrupted [...] several decades ago as a result of demographic, economic and political changes, including, perhaps most importantly, the relocation of the Nivkh population to a small number of large settlements with a Russian-dominated mixed population, accompanied by the introduction of a system of boarding schools functioning only in the Russian language. (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2018)

Nivkh is taught in some schools as an elective, but only for one hour a week (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2018). There are also extracurricular language circles in some towns, where nonspeakers gather with one or more fluent speakers to converse in Nivkh (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2015, 2018; Jakunova 2016).

### Nivkh- and Russian-speakers among Nivkhs by age group, 1989



(data from Vakhtin 2001:76)<sup>9</sup>

Nivkh revitalization is exceptionally difficult for several reasons. Among the foremost is a perceived lack of social and economic mobility offered by the language in modern Russia, which is a condition that Nivkh shares with all other small-numbered languages of Russia, as well as, for the most part, the larger ones. Another complicating factor is, of course, the very small population of fluent speakers, especially because these speakers are spread thinly across the Nivkhs' former territory, rather than being concentrated in cohesive communities. Moreover, the fact that there are three or four extant dialects of Nivkh, which are not all mutually intelligible, further complicates education and revitalization. Even though Amur Nivkh and Sakhalin Nivkh are not mutually intelligible, official data nevertheless make no distinction

<sup>9</sup> There is an apparent typo in the table in Vakhtin (2001). The figure for Nivkhs between 40–49 is 106, but the sum of Nivkh-speakers (97) and Russian-speakers (109) in the same age category is 206. I assume here that the 106 figure is meant to be 206.

between them, nor between the dialects spoken on Sakhalin (Vakhtin 2001:60). Also, speakers of different dialects were forced to settle together during the period of collectivization in the Soviet Union, so that boundaries between dialects are much harder to delineate now. In developing Nivkh pedagogical materials, many difficult decisions must be made about which variety or varieties to standardize, and about which features even belong to which variety (L. B. Gashilova, personal communication, 2019). Such a situation is not atypical in the context of the small-numbered languages of the North.

### **2.1.2 Sakha**

Sakha (also known by the exonym Yakut) was, as of 2010, the fourth most widely spoken indigenous language of the North, and the thirteenth most widely spoken non-foreign language in Russia, with just over 450,000 speakers. It is co-official with Russian in the Sakha Republic (also called Yakutia). Even so, UNESCO considers Sakha to be vulnerable, because it remains subordinate to Russian, and most speakers are bilingual (Moseley 2010). Nonetheless, “signs of language loyalty are strong in the Yakut language community” (Ivanova 2014:66) and Chevalier (2017) claims that “the Sakha language is currently used in every sphere of public life” even in the capital, Yakutsk (621). Ferguson (2019) also notes that “ideologies that revalorize Sakha are becoming prominent in the public sphere once more” (24). Thus, unlike Nivkh, Sakha does not seem to be at imminent risk of extinction. Sakha is a language of the Turkic family, closely related to Dolgan, a small-numbered language of the North; less closely to Tuvan, Altai, and Khakas, three other larger Northern languages; and more distantly to such well-known and widely-spoken national languages as Turkish, Azeri, Uzbek, and Kazakh.

### 3 Sociolinguistics

#### 3.1 Language attitudes and ideologies

To reverse the disheartening trend of language endangerment occurring across the North, we must understand all of the contributing factors. And, as Bradley (2002) concisely asserts, “overall attitudes are extremely important”. Sociolinguists today often highlight the need to focus on language ideologies, especially in cases of minority language maintenance and education (Garrett 2010; Grenoble & Whaley 1998; Liang 2015; Woolard & Schieffelin 1994). Language vitality is of course greatly influenced by larger political, legal, and financial factors, such as whether a language is taught in school or not. However, it is also true that “decisions about when to speak heritage and/or other languages” and a community’s “choices about whether to actively participate in language renewal efforts... are prompted by beliefs and feelings about language” (Kroskrity & Field 2009). This underlines the importance of investigating individual and community “ideologies and beliefs regarding language endangerment and revitalization” (Austin 2014:5), along with the factors that contribute to these beliefs.

Wilson (2014) further points out that “studies on issues of language revitalization remain remarkably silent” on the attitudes of children, even though anthropology, ethnography, and linguistics are all “premised on a process that children do better than almost all others”: the acquisition of cultural or linguistic knowledge (Hirschfeld 2002). More saliently, as Michael Krauss (1992) famously remarked, “languages no longer being learned as mother-tongue by children are beyond mere endangerment, for, unless the course is somehow dramatically reversed, they are already doomed to extinction” (4). This highlights the crucial need for young people, and not just children, to take an active interest in learning their language in order for

revitalization to be successful. Unfortunately, and paradoxically, as Meek (2019) notes, “children have largely been excluded from [endangered-language] research because they are no longer recognized as being users” of the language (96). In fact, since young speakers are the ones who have to be most involved with and committed to language revitalization efforts, they must also be centered in research of endangered-language ideologies.

### **3.2 Language revitalization**

Most linguists agree that language revitalization is good and important work—as long as the speech community supports it—although the reasons for doing it can vary (vid. Grenoble & Whaley 2006; Holton 2009; Tsunoda 2005; Zamjatin et al. 2012). Existing literature on revitalization highlights several factors. Tsunoda (2005) notes that a people’s language can represent any of several things to various members of the community, including a means of connecting to ancestors; a means of retaining ethnolinguistic skills; and a source of self-esteem, solidarity, sovereignty, or beauty (136–43). Grenoble & Whaley (2006) emphasize the need for a robust survey of resources, vitality, attitudes, and goals before embarking upon revitalization efforts.

Others have remarked that “policies based on [capitalist or neoliberal] ideologies... are often detrimental to ethnolinguistic survival” because “minorities are often simply not prepared for the struggle in the framework of ‘survival of the fittest’” (Saarikivi & Marten 2012; cf. Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). As a result of this, it has been argued that “minority protection schemes are of fundamental importance” (Saarikivi & Marten 2012:11). Nonetheless, even with sufficient economic resources and political structures – which are far from the reality in Russia –

maintenance and revitalization demand the enthusiastic and committed participation of minority language communities themselves.

Indeed, as Annika Pasanen notes, “for a small, endangered language community, revitalization cannot just be a project; it must become a way of life” (Hinton 2018:344). Unfortunately, with so little support and so few high-quality resources for revitalization, many community members cannot afford to devote the requisite time and energy into learning and spreading the language. Gruzdeva & Janhunen (2018) claimed further that “the difficult socioeconomic and ecological situation on Sakhalin turns the thoughts of the indigenous population first of all on physical survival, not on language maintenance” (§2.3).

### **3.3 Siberian sociolinguistics**

Nikolai Vakhtin has argued that despite the presence of both sociolinguists and scholars of the indigenous languages of the North in the Soviet Union throughout the twentieth century, “there never were attempts to study sociolinguistically the languages of indigenous ‘Northern’ minorities”. He posits that the “many failures and inconsistencies” of Soviet language planning (the creation of alphabets, the implementation of pedagogical strategies, etc.) for Northern indigenous languages was due to the fact that scholars “did not sufficiently take into account the sociolinguistic aspect of the problem” (Vakhtin 2015:171). For most of the twentieth century scholars were unable to research or write about the causes of language endangerment in the North; as a result, it has only been in the last few decades that genuine sociolinguistic and anthropological research has been conducted among indigenous peoples of the North, which has led to a hole in the scholarship.

Nevertheless, the deteriorating situation of the small-numbered languages of the North is quite apparently borne out by the data. Let us consider Koryak (Chukotko-Kamchatkan, 1,665 speakers) and Nivkh as examples. The number of children of each group in school decreased from 1987 to 2010 by 35% and 31.3%, respectively (Arefiev 2014:453), while the number studying their language in school decreased in the same period by 70% and 59.6% (*ibid.* 454–55). In Kamchatka Krai—where Koryak is primarily spoken, along with Aleut, Alyutor, Even, and Itelmen—the percentage of indigenous students studying their native language decreased from 55.4% in 1987 to 30.6% in 2010. As for Nivkh (and the various Tungusic languages spoken in the same regions as Nivkh), the percentage of indigenous students studying their native language in Khabarovsk Krai decreased from 45% in 1987 to 30.7% in 2010, and in Sakhalin Oblast from 26% to 19.9%.

However, schools are not the only place where children can learn their language. Some indigenous scholars have written about the need for more people- and community-based work in revitalizing and crafting better educational resources for the smaller indigenous languages of the North. For instance, Borgojakov & Borgojakova (2014) stress that “only a precise understanding of how things actually stand in each and every village can facilitate the adoption of adequate measures for the support and preservation of the linguistic diversity of a given village, and, consequently, of a whole region” (43). In fact, sociolinguistic works and language-attitude surveys and studies have already been published on several of the larger languages of the North (e.g. for Tatar see Lotkin 2006 & Mustafina 2012; for Sakha see Ivanova 2014, 2018 & Ferguson 2019; for Tuvan see Serejedar 2018).



The smaller languages, on the other hand, for the most part lack such research. And unfortunately, the somewhat decennial (Feshbach 2009) Russian Census – the closest thing there is to a survey of language use and identity among these languages – “in light of its finite capabilities, cannot ascertain the degree of linguistic competency of the population” (Borgojakov & Borgojakova 2014:46). Moreover, as Vakhtin (2001) points out, it is a common mistake to assume that the number of people who claim fluency in a language in the census is equivalent to the number of people actually fluent in that language (77), especially in cases where language and ethnic identity are closely interwoven.

As an example, Vakhtin asserts that although 48.5% of Nanai claimed fluency in their language in the 1989 census, in reality no more than 25% spoke it (Krasnaja Kniga 1994:32). In short, a person might consider their “native language” to be the language their parents spoke at home, or simply “the language whose name accords with their ethnicity” (Vakhtin 2001:78). The very term used by the Russian census, and also used widely throughout Russia, *rodnoj jazyk* (родной язык), leads to some of this confusion; it is commonly used both in the sense of “native language” and in the sense of “heritage language”, and so reflects the ethnic group, not just the speaker group. Additionally, 70 years of Soviet rule led to a much stronger association of language and ethnic identity than had existed before, not least due to the decreasing multilingualism. Ferguson (2019) found that under Stalin, “language became an objectified symbol of a nation rather than [just] a dynamic practice that was engaged in by those who identified with it” (24). This all helps to explain why figures of native speakers are typically inflated. The census also disregards differences in dialects, which in the case of Nivkh and such

other languages as Mari, Khanty, and Yukaghir,<sup>10</sup> are drastic. It is thus important to determine actual language competency, and when this does not coincide with ideologies surrounding competency (as in the example with the Nanai in 1989), why that is so.

As far as Nivkh is concerned, according to Gruzdeva & Janhunen (2018), local “communities are very concerned about the future of their ethnic language”. They also “understand very well how important a role language has for the preservation of their ethnic and cultural heritage” and are “willing to collaborate with professional linguists in order to ensure language survival” (§3.1). Gruzdeva & Janhunen also found that:

the general attitude to the teaching of Nivkh remains positive, and many community members see the school as a primary source of learning, or, more precisely, of getting acquainted with, the Nivkh language. The teaching of Nivkh also performs a symbolic function, keeping up the ethnic identity and proving that something is being done for maintaining the language. (§2.2)

The current revitalization program for Nivkh was designed in 2014 by Finnish linguists from Helsinki Area & Language Studies (HALS) at the University of Helsinki (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2015, 2018).<sup>11</sup> It involves a master-apprentice program, language nests, language classes, and a Nivkh-only summer camp in Nekrasovka, all planned to be implemented in consultation with Saint Petersburg’s Institute for Linguistic Studies and with specialists at Helsinki University (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2015:134–36).

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<sup>10</sup> The 2010 Census includes 365,127 respondents with *марийский* (Mari) as their native language; 23,062 with *горномарийский* (Hill Mari); and 189 with *лугово-восточный марийский* (Meadow–Eastern Mari). Mari is traditionally divided into four dialects: Hill, Northwestern, Meadow, and Eastern. For both Khanty and Yukaghir, only one variety is listed; these languages are traditionally divided into three and two varieties, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Very little has been published regarding these programs. Gruzdeva & Janhunen have published only brief summaries of their expedition and planned programs, in both Russian (2015) and English (2018).

## 4 A necessary step for revitalization

The previous section explains the importance of understanding language attitudes and ideologies for language revitalization. An endangered language, spoken only by older people, cannot be revitalized if younger community members are not willing, and indeed motivated, to study, learn, and begin using the language. Something as imprecise, infrequent, remote, and methodologically flawed as a decennial census cannot ascertain the sociolinguistic situation of a language community nor of any individual town or village, so linguists must engage directly with young members of language communities to understand their attitudes. Such an investigation is “particularly crucial in minority and endangered language situations”, where language ideologies “are never solely abstract ideas, but may come to play critical roles in the future maintenance of a language” (Ferguson 2019:82).

One typical problem among minority groups in Russia, according to Zamjatin et al. (2012) is “a lack of realism in the evaluation of their use of their language, as well as of feelings of responsibility for transmitting the language to the younger generation” (30). If community members do not recognize that their language is at risk, or do not feel responsible for its preservation, then any preservation efforts by linguists will be fruitless, and perhaps even counterproductive. To ascertain such attitudes and beliefs, linguists must engage in direct conversations with the communities themselves.

Beyond attitudes toward their own language, it is also important to understand community members’ attitudes toward the language(s) of the majority(ies) – be they regional, national, or global. Zamjatin et al. (2012) have claimed that “not infrequently, only those members of minority groups who have the will to adopt the values and language of the majority’s

culture can advance in a modern and officially monolingual society” (32). Ulturgasheva (2012) found this dynamic among some Evens, citing one young woman who felt that it is difficult “to be a young person in the village... because you want to do something to make a start. ... [I]t is better to try the city, where there are more jobs” (69). If ethnic minorities sense that their traditional lifestyles are no longer economically viable, there may be less urgency to maintain the language that is strongly associated with these traditions, as indigenous languages typically are (perceived to be). Not only state and societal pressure but also broader processes such as climate change are impacting the decisions of many peoples of the North regarding the practice of traditional lifestyles (Doloisio & Vanderlinden 2020).

This pressure among linguistic minorities to conform culturally and linguistically is not limited to officially monolingual societies. In a multilingual society such as the Sakha Republic, certain minority languages can be excluded at the expense of others. In the Sakha Republic many Chukchi, Dolgan, Even, Evenki, and Yukaghir speakers are shifting to the larger and official language, Sakha. Sakha also has a long history in the region as a *lingua franca* (Ferguson 2019:18–19). In 2010 Sakha people represented 49.9% of the population of the republic<sup>12</sup> (Rosstat 2010:130). While the Sakha population in the Sakha Republic increased by 27.7% from 1989 to 2010, the number of students studying Sakha as a *subject* in school increased by 353.1% between 1991 and 2012 (from 6,862 to 31,090), but the number of students studying *in* Sakha (the vast majority of whom are ethnically Sakha<sup>13</sup>) increased by only 17.4% (Arefiev 2014:112–18). While the increase of kids studying *in* Sakha has not kept up with the increase of the ethnic Sakha population, the much larger increase of students *of* Sakha is at least in part due to the fact

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<sup>12</sup> By 2021, based on post-Soviet population trends, the Sakha likely make up a majority.

<sup>13</sup> *vid.* Ferguson (2019)

that many of the enumerated small-numbered indigenous peoples of the Republic have been shifting (due to outside pressure) from their own languages to Sakha. In fact, 72% of Evens in the Sakha Republic report speaking Sakha, while only 21% speak Even; similarly among Evenki in the republic, 81% speak Sakha, and just 6% speak Evenki (Rosstat 2010). Evidently, some of the smaller indigenous languages of the North are threatened not only by Russian, but also by larger (and themselves threatened) indigenous languages.

The issue of urban versus rural language use is also salient. Arefiev (2014) notes that 98% of students of indigenous languages of the North study in rural areas, where traditional ways of life are more likely to survive (123). Borgojakov & Borgojakova (2014) have claimed that, at least in a Russian context, “the more a people has preserved its traditional way of life, and the less familiar it is with the benefits of modern technogenic civilization..., the higher their rate of fluency in their native language” (48). Nearly all sociolinguistic research on Sakha has focused on residents of Yakutsk, usually treating rural Sakha only enough so as to contrast them with urban Sakha (Chevalier 2017; Ferguson 2016, 2019; Ivanova 2018; Ventsel 2015). It will thus be valuable to engage with more rural Sakha, such as my Sakha consultant from Vilyuysk.

This highlights the need to determine to what extent a sense of inclusion in contemporary Russian society affects indigenous peoples’ attitudes toward their own languages and cultures. If people feel that they cannot partake in a modern society (attend university, get a job, etc.) by speaking their ethnic language, they will be inclined to disfavor this language in their own usage as well as when raising their children, and shift instead to Russian – or to a more prestigious indigenous language, like Sakha. Borgojakov & Borgojakova (2014) also lament that “for all the positive attitudes among indigenous populations toward their ethnic languages, in actual practice

they prefer Russian” (45). If this is the case, then it is crucial to understand *why* they “prefer” Russian; it is not enough to conclude that indigenous populations simply yet inexplicably favor Russian over their own languages, in spite of their positive attitudes. Are these preferences influenced by official state language or education policies? By the economic structure of the state? By oppressive social forces? These are questions that must be interrogated rather than swept aside.

## **5 Research**

Now that the urgent need not just to research indigenous youths’ language attitudes, but to understand their origins, has been made clear, I will shift to presenting my own such research and analysis, consisting of interviews with a Nivkh student and a Sakha student. After describing my methodology and introducing my consultants, I will present my findings and my analysis, and will finally proceed to my conclusions.

### **5.1 Background**

Many of the indigenous languages of the North are in great danger of extinction in the next couple of generations; in many cases, intergenerational transmission had already ceased or severely slowed several decades ago. Some revitalization programs are underway, and these efforts will be most effective if they are successfully geared toward young speakers and non-speakers, who can be expected to have differing and at times conflicting beliefs and ideologies about their own languages, about other indigenous languages, and about more widespread languages such as Russian and English. Further study of these youths’ attitudes, with a focus on contrasting those of Nivkhs and Sakha – owing to their vastly different sociolinguistic

situations – will contribute to further preservation and revitalization by helping programs to focus on the most salient aspects of revitalization for each community by taking into account speakers' and individual communities' attitudes and ideologies.

## 5.2 Methodology

I have conducted rigorous language attitude interviews with young members of two indigenous groups of the North: one Sakha (19 years old<sup>14</sup>) and one Nivkh (26 years old). I postulated that it would be revealing to compare language and ethnic ideologies of Nivkhs and Sakha because the peoples and languages are positioned in such drastically different circumstances. My Nivkh consultant does not speak the language but has been exposed to it since childhood, whereas my Sakha consultant speaks Sakha natively (along with Russian) and uses it regularly with friends and family. Furthermore, Sakha is an official language with many widely spoken nationally represented relatives (such as Turkish, Kazakh, and Uzbek), while Nivkh has no official status and is a linguistic isolate. I am focusing on young adults rather than children simply because they are more accessible. Since this is a convenience sample and a small sample, my results are likely to be biased by these individuals' personalities and their personal beliefs and experiences; however, I am not aiming to generalize Nivkh or Sakha ideologies, but rather to represent these particular individuals' unique yet constitutive viewpoints.

The goal of these interviews was to better understand how a select few young indigenous people of the North feel about their languages, as well as Russian, and to posit possible influencing factors. The questions I am asking have been guided by earlier language attitude surveys and interviews and methodological literature (Bradley 2002; Grenoble & Whaley 2006;

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<sup>14</sup> By the time of this writing, he has turned 20.

Grenoble & Whitecloud 2014; Spolsky 2014; Wilson 2014). Another purpose of the interviews is simply to generate more scholarly work and data in English regarding vulnerable and endangered languages of the North, since this topic has not seen enough coverage in English-language academia. It appears that only one work on Nivkh language attitudes has ever been published in English (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2018), along with one additional work dealing with Nivkh sociolinguistic issues (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2016).<sup>15</sup> As a result, any further work in this field will yield at the very least the profit of exposure and attention.

### 5.2.1 Consultants

Both of my consultants are university students whom I met while studying in Saint Petersburg in 2019. Both of them attend university in the European part of Russia, far from the Far East. They do not know each other. My Sakha consultant, Vladimir (19), is originally from Vilyuysk, a small town (population around 11,000) about 280 mi (450 km) northwest of Yakutsk, but he moved to Yakutsk for highschool before heading west in 2019 for university. He considers himself “mixed” (*смешанный*) – apparently more in terms of race or ancestry than culture or ethnicity – and grew up speaking both Sakha and Russian, but was schooled monolingually in Russian. In recent years he has also acquired some English. He studies history and pedagogy and has self-taught some Sakha language, literature, and culture out of personal interest.

My Nivkh consultant, Sergey (26), is from the largest majority-Nivkh village in existence: Nekrasovka (population around 900, just over 50% Nivkh), which is in the Okha

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<sup>15</sup> This paper discusses the authors’ creation of a very unappealing orthography for Nivkh to be typed on smartphones and laptops. There is unfortunately not enough space in this thesis to discuss the problems with this attempted orthography, which, admittedly, was devised with the best of intentions.



District of northern Sakhalin.<sup>16</sup> Like Vladimir, Sergey also moved to a larger settlement to complete his secondary education, in this case to Okha, the district center, with a population of just over 20,000, about 1% of whom are Nivkh (Rosstat 2018). Sergey is also of mixed ancestry, with grandparents of four different ethnicities: Nivkh and Russian on his mother's side, and Nanai and Mordvin on his father's side. However, since he “grew up in a culture where everyone was Nivkh” (*я рос в культуре, где все нивхи*), he, too, identifies as Nivkh. Sergey does not speak Nivkh fluently, but can understand and read it fairly well. Russian is his native language, but he, too, has acquired some English in recent years. He studies filmmaking and Nivkh culturology,<sup>17</sup> positioning him uniquely among Nivkh youths, of which he has been the only one at the Institute of the Peoples of the North – where Nivkh and other Northern indigenous languages and culturologies are taught – for at least the past three years (2019–2021). This also distinguishes him from Vladimir, who is not formally studying Sakha language or culture in university.

### 5.2.2 Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each consultant (separately, in Russian). In these interviews, which I presented to the participants as *разговоры* ‘conversations’, I asked a series of questions arranged roughly thematically: personal identity & behavior, heritage, media, worldview, views on language(s), and their perception of others’ views. My consultants were welcome to diverge from the overarching format to talk about anything they deemed relevant and

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<sup>16</sup> The only other sizable (population  $\geq 100$ ) predominantly Nivkh community on Sakhalin is Chir-Unvd (population around 240), while the only settlement anywhere with more Nivkhs than Nekrasovka is the city of Nogliki, with around 640 Nivkhs out of a population of 10,090 (Rosstat 2018).

<sup>17</sup> *Культурология* is a common term and concept in Russian pedagogy, developed in the Soviet period. It is similar to the Western fields of cultural studies, cultural sociology, or cultural anthropology. (Bunge 1998).

important, and we followed the flow of discussion, not always strictly the order of the questions as I had planned them. Semi-structured interviews like this tend to yield answers “in a free and extensive form”, allowing greater nuance and inspiring more clarifying questions from the interviewer (Terekhina 2021:4). The relaxed and conversational tone of the interviews was also aided by the fact that my consultants are friends of mine who have spoken to me both in person and over video chat in the past. This resulted in a lower formality and less of a sense that the interviews were part of a scientific study, an environment where participants often feel the urge to find particular “correct” answers. The interview with Sergey lasted close to one and a half hours, and the interview with Vladimir lasted just under two hours. They were conducted over Zoom and recorded. Russian captions were automatically generated, which I neatened and corrected.<sup>18</sup> Both of my consultants were offered compensation for their time and assistance, at a rate of roughly \$20 per hour.

### 5.3 Results

Throughout my preliminary research and interviews with Vladimir and Sergey, several factors stood out in the development of indigenous peoples’ language ideologies. The most salient ones were self-determination and autonomy, language prestige, economic viability, fluency, and ethnic interest or pride. Both Vladimir and Sergey support further maintenance or revitalization of their language, as well as of other indigenous languages of the North. Their attitudes toward their languages and about maintenance, official support, education, and revitalization are strongly

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<sup>18</sup> Many commonly uttered words, such as якутский ‘Yakut (adj.)’, нивх ‘Nivkh’, нивхский ‘Nivkh (adj.)’, and Вилюйск ‘Vilyuysk’, were unknown to the automatic captioning software, which tended to replace them with иркутский ‘Irkutsk (adj.)’, них ‘them’, низкий ‘low’, and various nonsensical concoctions, respectively.

influenced by these factors. For instance, each of my consultants has a strong personal interest in self-studying his language, which sets them apart from many less actively involved speakers and potential speakers. Sergey has the sense that among those he knows on Sakhalin, “many look at [the revitalization of Nivkh] sort of indifferently” (*многие как-то равнодушно это воспринимают*). Yet at the same time, Sergey has “nonetheless seen that people are interested in” revitalization (*я всё равно видел, что людям это интересно*). For his part, Vladimir believed that most people in his milieu “would agree that we need to preserve and know and, like, value Sakha culture. And the language, too” (*они были бы согласны, то что нужно сохранять, знать, и, вот, ценить культуру якутскую. И язык также*). My consultants’ beliefs and their senses of others’ attitudes present promising prospects for future language maintenance of both Nivkh and Sakha.

It is also important to note that for both Vladimir and Sergey, language is not the only – nor even a requisite – part of ethnic identity. Although Vladimir, as a native speaker of a rather widely spoken language, is “disappointed” (*это меня разочаровывает*) when Sakha-presenting strangers cannot understand or respond to him in Sakha – since he believes that “Yakuts<sup>19</sup> at least should know their own language” (*хотя бы якуты должны знать свой язык*) – when asked if a person can be Sakha without knowing the language, Vladimir responded after much thought that they can, reminding me that he “had said that Yakut isn’t just a language; it’s also a culture” (*я же говорил, что якутский язык — это не только язык, это и культура тоже*). He continued that it is not enough “simply to be born Sakha” (*нельзя... просто родиться саха*),

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<sup>19</sup> I translate *якут* as “Yakut” and *саха* as “Sakha”. Where Russian grammar allows Vladimir to say *саха*, but he instead says *якутский*, I use “Yakut”. Elsewhere I translate *якутский* as “Sakha”. (For example, he could have said *саха — это не только язык* instead of *якутский язык — это не только язык*, but he could not have said *\*саха дух* instead of *якутский дух*. The former I translate as “Yakut”, the latter as “Sakha”).

but that one must also be knowledgeable about Sakha culture, since ethnic groups “are preserved thanks to the fact that they have culture” (*народы... сохраняются благодаря тому, что у них есть культура*). These attitudes are reminiscent of those expressed by bilingual Sakha in Yakutsk in Ferguson (2019). Ferguson found that many Sakha believe that one cannot “just passively ‘know’ the language” but must actually “speak it, in public, to ensure that both the language, and Sakha people, [do] not disappear” (106). These ideologies highlight that for many Sakha people, language is a dynamic process,<sup>20</sup> and it is closely bound to other cultural practices, which should continue to be emphasized in Sakha language education. Based on his responses, Vladimir seems to understand “culture” as the sum of a particular people’s knowledge and practices, including language, history, spiritual beliefs, and livelihood as coequal among many parts.

Sergey, as a semi-speaker of a moribund language, has a very similar view. When asked if one can be Nivkh without knowing the language, he also agreed, and also focused on culture and traditions: “a knowledge of some kind of traditions... is more important, probably” (*знание традиций каких-то... важнее наверное*). Although most young Nivkhs don’t speak the language, Nivkh as an identity isn’t dying out because, as Sergey sees it, “young people know the traditions, but the language they might not know” (*молодые люди знают традиции, но языка могут и не знать*). Sergey also emphasizes the importance of growing up within a particular culture for developing an identity: “My father is mixed, half Nanai, but that doesn’t make me entirely Nanai, because I didn’t grow up... among people of that ethnic group” (*у меня отец — метис, наполовину нанайец, но это же не делает меня полностью нанайцем,*

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<sup>20</sup> While many linguists see language as the sum of linguistic knowledge possessed by an individual

*потому что я не рос... среди людей этого этноса*). This attitude also speaks to conceptions of personal self-determination, which I will get into the next subsection.

### 5.3.1 Self-determination

While Vladimir several times brought up the idea of an independent Sakha Republic to explain certain things, Sergey never alluded to hypothetical Nivkh political autonomy. As far as self-determination goes, Sergey spoke on a more individual and communal level, whereas Vladimir also brought in a more national understanding of self-determination, one for all Sakha people. When asked if Russian culture is a part of every Russian citizen's heritage – including that of ethnic Sakha and other indigenous peoples of the North – Vladimir answered in historical and political terms. He pointed out that the Sakha Republic “wasn't a distinct country overall in history” and said that it was “thanks to Russia, let's say, [that] it's alive and has remained intact so far” (*она же не была самобытной страной вообще в истории. Она благодаря России, скажем так, живёт и до сих пор сохранилась*). Vladimir seems to consider Russia as a strong and perhaps unifying force, but he is also aware of the coercive power of the Russian state. When I asked whether Russian culture *should* be a part of every Russian citizen's heritage, Vladimir made this belief clear, saying that “if Yakutia were a separate country, I think... I wouldn't expect success. [...] In any case I think Russia would somehow interact with it or occupy it” (*если бы Якутия была отдельной страной, мне кажется... я бы не ждал успех. [...] В любом случае, мне кажется, Россия бы как-то взаимодействовала или захватила бы*). It is clear that Vladimir recognizes the impact of Russian hegemony on Sakha autonomy, and he seems to strive for, or at least to have considered, a greater degree of Sakha autonomy.

Later, after telling me that the only prospect for a monolingual Sakha speaker is to engage in animal husbandry in the countryside, Vladimir again, in considering what would need to happen for that to change, pondered an independent Sakha Republic:

If Yakutia were a separate government, then most likely things would be different, and you'd be able to get both an education and a job in Yakut. But since we live in Russia, and Yakutia is... a territory also, a [federal] subject of Russia..... That's why you need to know Russian.

*Если бы Якутия была бы отдельным государством, то скорее всего это было бы не так, и можно было бы получить и образование и работу на якутском языке. Но так как мы живём в России, и Якутия является... территорией тоже, субъектом России..... Поэтому русский нужно знать.*

Vladimir's musings about an independent Sakha Republic reflect a long history of Russian influence over language policy and ideologies in the region. Considering the pervasive power of Russian as the sole official language of the increasingly centralized and nationalistic Russian Federation (vid. Teague 1994, Jankiewicz & Kniaginina 2019), and how this has been ingrained into indigenous language ideologies, maintenance and revitalization programs should, at least for the immediate future, focus on grassroots efforts that emphasize functional bilingualism, such that both Sakha people and Russians can gain or retain proficiency in Sakha without missing out on the social (and financial) capital that comes from knowing Russian. Furthermore, Vladimir did not agree that the federal government has a duty to protect the rights of minorities or their languages, but rather that the regional government should.

Scholars in other scarcely supportive environments such as Guatemala and the United States have also emphasized the importance and effectiveness of “community-based” and “grassroots” programs (Barrett 2016; Dementi-Leonard & Gilmore 1999). Chevalier (2017) likewise highlights grassroots efforts within the Sakha Republic to increase Sakha-language

instruction in schools, while Ferguson (2019) discusses online Sakha-language fora, especially on the social media site VK, which allow Sakha speakers to create their own communities and facilitate connections with each other. Similar online Nivkh communities and local advocacy groups for Nivkh-language education do not exist. This presents a serious obstacle to progress towards the revitalization of Nivkh, as grassroots efforts are the only ones likely to have any efficacy for a small people inhabiting two non-autonomous regions of Russia (Sakhalin Oblast and Khabarovsk Krai). Unlike republics, oblasts and kraia have no titular nationality nor any prerogative (even be it nominal) to support minority groups and languages.

Despite the lack of large-scale grassroots movements within the Nivkh-language community, Sergey spoke of self-determination nearly as much as Vladimir did. Sergey, however, focused on individual self-determination, perhaps in part because of this historical lack of political power or autonomy for the Nivkhs. At one point he told me that, given a degree of Nivkh heritage or ancestry, “you have your own personal right... to identify as a Nivkh, even if you don’t know the language” (*у тебя есть своё личное право... определять себя, как нивх, пусть и языка не знаешь*), showing his belief in the separation of Nivkh identity from fluency in the language, which highlights the importance of letting Nivkhs themselves determine their participation in Nivkh culture and language revitalization. Sergey went on to emphasize the importance of growing up in a particular culture and of personal self-determination in developing an identity:

I lived mostly among Nivkhs. And I can consider myself a Nivkh, too, because, like, I grew up among that. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t learn the language, and... don’t speak it fluently. [...] I think that— well, I’m Nivkh. They say that I’m a member of various, you know, ethnicities. That’s just not true, I think. I mean, you decide that you’re Nivkh, right? For example. [...] So you consider yourself Nivkh. For the rest of your life.

*Я в основном жил среди нивхов. И я могу считать себя тоже нивхом, потому что,*

*как бы, я рос среди этого. Пускай я и не изучал язык, и ... свободно на нём не разговариваю. [...] Я считаю, что— ну, я нивх. Рассказывают, что я представитель разных, там, народов. Это же неправильно, я считаю. То есть, ты определился, что ты нивх, да? Например. [...] То ты считаешь себя нивхом. До конца своей жизни.*

Gruzdeva & Janhunen (2015) also found that the master-apprentice programs they introduced in Nekrasovka and Okha as part of a Nivkh revitalization program were adapted by the participating Nivkhs to fit their needs and familial traditions. Importantly, they did not attempt to ‘correct’ the participants, because, as we have found reflected in the language ideologies of Vladimir and Sergey, it is vital to incorporate self-determination and indigenous autonomy into language maintenance and revitalization programs, especially considering how important a role it has already played in the vitality of Sakha and Nivkh.

### 5.3.2 Prestige

Prestige can be divided into two related categories: internal and external prestige. Internal prestige here refers to attitudes of Nivkh and Sakha speakers and ethnic communities themselves: to what extent and in which contexts do they view their languages as holding some prestige, and, importantly, what factors affect speakers’ (and non-speakers’ and semi-speakers’) perceptions about how prestigious their language is in different contexts, from reindeer pastures and holiday celebrations to universities and regional parliaments?

External prestige refers to broader societal and official views toward the languages. These are often imposed top-down by official state and educational policies. They include widely held and very visible stereotypes as well as more pernicious systemic ideologies. These latter can also be widespread in the communities themselves. For instance, both of my consultants, along with many other people, both indigenous and non-indigenous (vid. Ferguson 2019; Bird 2020), are



under the impression that indigenous languages cannot be used in more recent domains like technology, generally because, as Vladimir told me about Sakha, indigenous languages are “always connected with the old, specifically in the sense of activities that existed in the past” (*не то, что связано с технологиями, потому что это всегда связано со старым, именно в плане, действия которые были раньше*).

The existence of literature in a language also affects both its internal and external prestige, as speakers may value their language more if it is (or, as they see it, *can*) be written down, while others, including the state, often treat purely oral languages as less legitimate than others (Sherris & Peyton 2019). While Nivkh has a very small and relatively young literary scene, with Vladimir Sangi being the only widely known Nivkh-language writer, Sakha has been written since “about a century before the [1917 Russian] revolution”, allowing “a class of Sakha intellectuals” to form by the turn of the twentieth century (Ferguson 2019:57). This disparity certainly plays a role in differentiating Nivkh and Sakha language ideologies and outcomes.

### 5.3.2.1 External

Interest in and perceptions of particular indigenous languages among outsiders is a significant factor influencing the languages’ prestige and community members’ ideologies regarding the language. Both Sergey and Vladimir reported encountering Russians who are ignorant of Nivkhs and Sakha, respectively, overwhelmingly outside of the North, in the European part of Russia where they study. Other European Russians have many stereotypes about Sakha, while this is less common regarding Nivkhs due to their greater obscurity outside of Sakhalin and Khabarovsk Krai. Vladimir mentioned that many Russians in the West “have this stereotypical way of thinking, where they think that we’re all reindeer herders [... and] that we’re, like, sitting

on diamonds, and riding reindeer around... and that we live in, like, yurts” (*у них стереотипное такое мышление, вот они думают, что мы все оленеводы [... и] то что мы, вот, сидим на алмазах, и катаемся на олене... и живём, вот, в юртах*). These stereotypes display a degree of awareness about Sakha people and about certain enregistered characteristics of the Sakha Republic and Sakha culture among far-removed Russians. Such stereotypes are likely to influence the broader Russian public’s perception of the Sakha as an autonomous participant in modern Russian society, as well as their acceptance of or interest in laws and other policies that impact or target the Sakha and other indigenous groups.

Vladimir felt that within the Sakha Republic, “everything is fine with the language” (*с языком всё хорошо*) and that “Russians don’t really have, like, conflicts with Yakuts” (*у русских с якутами, вот, конфликтов особо не возникает*). He also noted that some Russians even take Sakha-language classes, and that:

In the villages... and in small cities, people – those who are Russian – they also speak Yakut, but... in Yakutsk it can totally vary. Maybe one Russian speaks Yakut, while another might not speak it.

*На деревнях... и в маленьких городах люди, те кто русский, они говорят тоже на якутском, но... в Якутске это совсем по-разному. Может быть, что русский говорит на якутском, а другие могут и не говорить.*

In Vladimir’s opinion, widespread community-level Sakha–Russian bilingualism is possible, and it is already the norm for most Sakha as well as some Russians. Ferguson (2019) also notes that in Yakutsk, “Russian is not losing any prestige even as Sakha gains it” (139). Nonetheless, “Russian could not quite replace Sakha for many speakers” (140). Vladimir considers Russian more useful and also more beautiful (both because of how it sounds, and because of the prevalence of ‘beautiful’ Russian literature) than Sakha. However, he still rated Sakha as the

most important language to him personally (among Sakha, Russian, and English), because “Yakut is very interesting to [him]” (*якутский мне очень интересен*), and, as he said further, “since I myself am also a Yakut, I need to know [the language], I understand that that’s important for me” (*так как я сам тоже якут, мне нужно знать, я понимаю, что это для меня важно*). All of these ideologies suggest that Sakha language maintenance should be geared toward maintaining bilingual fluency for Sakha people, while increasing opportunities as well as social and financial incentives (such as marketability in a job search) for more Russians to learn Sakha.

Vladimir’s responses also make sense when taking an historical perspective of Sakha into account. Through the nineteenth century, Sakha was a lingua franca in the region and even enjoyed a “cosmopolitan” status (Ferguson 2019:5). Travelers to the area “compared trendy Sakha speakers in Yakutsk with the French speakers in the Russian aristocratic salons” (Ferguson & Sidorova 2016:28), and as late as 1920 the British Foreign Office was writing that the Sakha “are in many places absorbing the Russians, who adopt their language and customs” (Prothero 1920:7). The relatively large Sakha population, coupled with its history as a rather prestigious language, have had a great effect on present-day ideologies about the language, allowing the development of a widespread attitude of Sakha as the language of one’s “roots” (Ferguson 2019:91), which also speaks to attitudes of ethnic pride and interest.

External attitudes of Nivkh are quite different. Based on 2010 Census data, no more than seven non-Nivkhs in Russia, including no more than four in Sakhalin Oblast, speak Nivkh (Rosstat 2010:2140–46). On the other hand, Sergey did tell me that “many Russian fishermen, for example, know how to say in Nivkh... uh, well, they know lots of words that actually come

from Nivkh” (*много русских рыбаков, например, знают, как на нивхском... аа, ну, много слов, которые как раз-таки из нивхского языка*). This indicates that Nivkh, too, retains at least a small and very localized and specialized (to a traditional Nivkh domain) degree of prestige. Since the Nivkh language and people are less well known throughout Russia, Sergey encounters more ignorance and curiosity among the wider population than Vladimir does. As Sergey told me:

Constantly answering that you’re, like, a member of such and such people can be, uh, hard, especially when you’re answering people who don’t [...] Well, like, not that they’re not interested, they just... They have no knowledge about ethnic groups. Small ethnic groups. When you talk to them about all this, uh, they start asking more and more questions. And... well sometimes it’s interesting to continue the conversation further, and... But sometimes it’s not.

*Постоянно отвечать, что ты, вот, представитель такого народа, бывает, аа, трудно, особенно когда ты отвечаешь тем людям, которые в этом [...] ну, как бы, не то, чтобы не заинтересованы, они... У них нет знаний по поводу этносов. Малых этносов. Когда ты им это всё рассказываешь, аа, они начинают задавать всё больше и больше вопросов. И... ну, иногда это интересно дальше продолжать этот разговор, и... Но иногда нет.*

Sergey then told me that occasionally, “to save time and [...] not have to explain to people” who he is (*чтобы время экономить и [...] не объяснять человеку*), he simply allows them to believe that he belongs to “some more widespread” ethnic group (*более каким-нибудь крупным*); he recalled an instance when a Russian told him, “you look like a Korean” (*ты похож на корейца*), in response to which Sergey thought, “so be it. Let me look [like that ...] I guess I’m a Korean, then. Go ahead, consider me [Korean]” (*пусть будет так. Пусть я похож [...] Значит я кореец. Считай меня таким*). Such experiences can be degrading and tiring, and they certainly have an effect on one’s own evaluation of one’s language and ethnic identity,

and even of oneself. Externally driven ideologies of language prestige thus deeply impact personal ideologies of prestige, self-worth, and pride in one's heritage.

Another factor influencing the prestige of Nivkh is the monthly Nivkh-Russian bilingual newspaper *Nivkh Dif*, which has been published since 1990 with funding from the regional government, the petroleum company Sakhalin Energy, and a local publishing house.<sup>21</sup> *Nivkh dif* is written mostly in the West Sakhalin dialect. Gruzdeva & Janhunen (2018) found that the newspaper “is highly valued by the community” as it “performs not only an informative, but also a symbolic role, demonstrating that the Nivkh language is not yet dormant and may function in various domains, including, in particular, media” (§2.1). Sergey likewise told me that the newspaper is well known and appreciated in his communities (Nekrasovka and Okha), and that he “really hopes that it still exists” (*я очень надеюсь, что она до сих пор существует*) (it does). Additional sources of Nivkh-language media, such as hip-hop or magazines (cf. Barrett 2016), would represent a significant step in revitalizing and revalorizing the language.

### 5.3.2.2 Internal

As mentioned above, the sense that an indigenous language like Sakha or Nivkh cannot be used in modern domains like technology, gaming, and science is widespread. Ferguson (2019) cites a young Sakha teacher who exclaimed, “can you imagine, talking about physics in Sakha!” (114). Sergey and Vladimir echoed this view; discussing possible domains of use for Nivkh, Sergey admitted that “in the technological [sphere] I... I doubt it [could be used]” (*в технологической [сфере] я... я сомневаюсь*). He continued with a laugh, saying that technology “is more for English than for some... rare languages” (*больше к английскому языку, чем к каким-то...*

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<sup>21</sup> Details about the 30th anniversary and a link to an electronic copy of a 2020 edition can be found here: <http://www.musictownrecords.ru/en/news/5510/>

*редким языкам*). This ideology reveals a need for updated lexica and increased use of both Nivkh and Sakha, as in many other endangered and vulnerable indigenous languages. The process of updating lexica can take many forms,<sup>22</sup> but in any case it must be organized and carried out at the behest of the language community itself, not of outside scholars or other actors (vid. Kimura & Counciller 2009). Such grassroots lexical efforts are especially likely to be profitable for Nivkh, given how small the current and potential language communities are.

At the same time, the idea that vulnerable indigenous languages do not have the capacity to express modern ideas, or to be used in modern contexts, is compromised by the actual state of affairs. Even as Vladimir asserted that Sakha is not a language “for work” (*якутский язык, он, ну такой более, язык, скажем, не рабочий*), and that it’s only used to discuss older, traditional things, he also told me about popular music<sup>23</sup> and memes<sup>24</sup> in Sakha. The language is also used in other modern domains such as news broadcasts, parliamentary debates, and some primary- and secondary-school math and science classes (Ferguson 2019).

This association of Sakha with the past is apparently common among bilingual Sakha in Yakutsk as well, as Ferguson (2019) cites many interviewees emphasizing that Sakha is “ancient” (91). This is another ideology that can also be found in the global societal consciousness (cf. Meek 2007). As just one example, an article about a recently developed language-learning app for Ditidaht, a Wakashan language with perhaps 7 speakers (Eberhard et

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, words could be borrowed or calqued from Russian, English, or other foreign languages, or from other languages of the North; words could be derived from existing morphemes; existing or obsolete words could be shifted or expanded in scope; words could be coined more or less *ex nihilo* à la Johannes Aavik (vid. Saagpakk 1970); and, in Sakha’s case, words could be formed on the basis of other Turkic languages. These decisions might be made by committees, by communities, or by individual speakers or writers.

<sup>23</sup> He mentioned the singer Ajyy Uola (*Айыы Уола*).

<sup>24</sup> A large (sometimes NSFW) group, *Якутская мемная республика* (‘Sakha Meme Republic’), can be found here: [https://vk.com/saqalarga\\_urui](https://vk.com/saqalarga_urui)

al. 2021), notes that the nation's app "teaches its centuries-old language to users through a game" (Malik 2021). That this ideology of especial oldness is so entrenched in both indigenous and nonindigenous people's mindsets about indigenous languages is indicative of the harm caused by centuries of oppression and relegation of these languages to certain, usually traditional, domains. Indigenous people must understand that their languages are no less capable of expressing modern concepts than any other language is, and linguists must support communities in developing lexica and expanding domains of use as this need arises, which will help speakers overcome this pernicious misconception.

### 5.3.3 Economic viability

The economic or financial viability of (knowing) a language is closely related to its prestige. Sergey and Vladimir each insisted that their language is not economically viable, excepting traditional enterprises (fishing (*рыболовство*) for Nivkhs; animal or land husbandry (*скотоводство, земледелие*) for Sakha), which both consultants agreed can be, and in fact sometimes are, carried out successfully by monolingual individuals. Recall the young Even girl cited by Ulturgasheva (2012) who claimed that it is difficult "to be a young person in the village" (69) because all the jobs are in the city. Ferguson (2019) found the same belief among Sakha speakers, who indicated that "there are no opportunities" in the villages (134).

However, where Nivkh and Sakha are vastly different is in their domains of use. Despite the persistent belief that Sakha cannot be used for certain contemporary purposes, and that "some Russian words [...] can't be translated" (*русские слова тоже некоторые [...] нельзя перевести*) nor expressed in Sakha (Ferguson 2019:166), the language is still used throughout the regional government, in news broadcasts, and in some upper-level schools. Nivkh, on the

other hand, is only taught in the early grades of a few schools on Sakhalin and rarely used elsewhere. Sakha is also subject to the phenomenon of ethnographic branding, whereby “Sakha language presence [is] associated both with nation-building and the symbolic reclaiming of cultural space, but also... within the business sphere”, both to claim authenticity and to reify various cultural aspects (Ferguson 2016:25–26). This idea is unheard of for Nivkh, but for Sakha it creates an environment where knowledge of the language can bring direct economic, political, and social benefits that Nivkh speakers cannot access.

In 2014, representatives from the Sakha Republic went to Sakhalin to explore a possible joint Sakha-Nivkh fishing and seafood enterprise. The Sakha team concluded that the most troublesome factor in the Nivkhs’ present situation is that

there are no localities with compact Nivkh populations on Sakhalin, [because] during the consolidation of ethnic settlements, they were relocated to urban-type settlements, so they’re disunited. There are no Nivkh schools, although in certain schools the study of the native language is carried out in the form of electives. (“Jakuty predlagajut...” 2014)

Furthermore, in terms of agricultural production, “local [Nivkh] communities do not have officially designated fishing zones” (ibid.), which contributes to the high level of unemployment among Nivkhs. Clearly these issues lie beyond the purview of linguists and language activists; they demand serious social and political intervention, such as would be dangerous in the current political climate of the Russian Federation. Sakhalin Oblast and Khabarovsk Krai, as mentioned earlier, have no regional autonomy and no inherent stake in the wellbeing of the indigenous minorities living there. Thus, barring a significant political upheaval, other factors should be highlighted in revitalizing Nivkh, such as the language’s potential spiritual significance, its ability to express ideas differently than Russian, or more generally a sense of pride in – and an urgency to protect – the language before it is lost.



In general, both Sakha and Nivkh, like other indigenous languages across Russia and the rest of the world, index ruralness and, to varying extents, backwardness. Sakha is unlike many indigenous languages – and certainly unlike Nivkh – in that it carries competing ideologies in this regard. Ferguson & Sidorova (2016) find that “speaking Sakha authentically... tends to be more highly valued by both urban and rural Sakha, despite Soviet-era associations of non-Russian languages with backwardness” (41), indicating that there are environments in which fluency in Sakha is valuable. Yet at the same time, “for many speakers Sakha is still primarily associated with rural places” (43). Vladimir likewise told me, “I think if a person is in some village, they won’t need Russian” (*мне кажется, если человек в какой-нибудь деревне, то ему не нужен будет русский*), and that, on the other hand, “for a job, for an education, you need Russian” (*для какой-то работы, для получения образования, нужен русский*). It is interesting that Vladimir, like many other Sakha people, continues to perceive Sakha as a largely rural and traditional language, and Russian as necessary for education and career success, despite the prevalence of Sakha in Yakutsk businesses, in government, and in some schools. More work should be done to change local attitudes about Sakha so that it is perceived on equal footing with Russian in terms of usefulness and economic viability within the Sakha Republic.

Sergey expressed a comparable attitude toward Nivkh, telling me that someone could get through life knowing just Nivkh “only if he’s in a traditional environment” (*если только он в среде традиционной*). Grant (1995) found a similar view nearly three decades ago, when Nivkhs would point to certain men who had reclaimed the traditional lifestyles of (by then illegal) fishing and living semi-nomadically as role models for Nivkh children – though unrealistic role models at that (161). Sergey continued in the same vein: “All the same, living in

Russia, you need to know Russian well, to make things simpler” (*всё равно, проживая в России, нужно знать хорошо русский язык, чтобы было проще*). Since Nivkh is not used at all in the regional government and is very rarely spoken or heard outside the home, it is not realistic to motivate Nivkhs to learn the language on the basis of practicality. The newspaper *Nivkh dif* is the only regular publication in the language, but it is distributed for free and does not represent a reliable venue to obtain financial stability using Nivkh.

### 5.3.4 Fluency

The fact that Vladimir speaks Sakha natively while Sergey is only a semi-speaker of Nivkh also factors strongly into their respective language ideologies. Sergey highlighted his non-fluency several times, typically describing it as unfortunate. At one point he told me, “unfortunately I’m not fluent in Nivkh, but there is a little understanding” (*к сожалению я не владею нивхским языком, но есть понимание небольшое*). He later told me, “unfortunately... there was very little time. And my grandma also regrets this now, that we should have worked on it [learning Nivkh] when I was a kid” (*к сожалению... было очень мало времени. И бабушка сейчас тоже сожалеет об этом, что надо было заниматься в детстве этим*). Sergey’s regret about not acquiring the language as a child was very apparent throughout the interview. In telling me about the last Nivkh literature he read, Vladimir Sangi’s “First Shot” (*Первый Выстрел*), Sergey said, “but it’s a pity I didn’t read it in the original, I read it in Russian, in translation” (*но жаль, я читал не в оригинале, я его прочитал на русском языке, в переводе*).

Though Sergey is clearly disappointed by his lack of fluency, he still remains proud in his Nivkh identity and is committed to learning more Nivkh. He is enrolled in Nivkh culturology classes at the Institute of the Peoples of the North in Saint Petersburg, where, among other

things, he reads Nivkh literature and studies the language. Despite the disappointment, Sergey never seemed ashamed about his abilities or experiences with the language. This is reassuring, since Gruzdeva & Janhunen (2018) found that most Nivkh teachers in schools on Sakhalin, who are seldom fully competent, “experience difficulties in keeping conversation with the fully competent [visiting elder] speakers and in many cases feel ashamed of their insufficient command of Nivkh” (§2.2). Shame, or fear of reproach, can be among the most insidious sustainers of language endangerment (Meek 2007), so it is important for all involved in revitalization to remain encouraging and enthusiastic.

The very low rates of fluency and literacy among younger Nivkhs may also present a solution to the potential problems caused by the diversity of Nivkh ‘dialects’. Non-speakers are less likely to feel excluded, or be confused, if taught a dialect that is not spoken where they are from, because the varied linguistic features only index particular dialects for those who know about these variations. Sergey, who primarily studies the East Sakhalin dialect at the Institute of the Peoples of the North, told me that his grandmother uses forms from the Amur dialect, even though she has always lived in East Sakhalin. In spite of this he did not express any vexation or confusion about the mixing of dialects; he has likely been acquiring a mixture of various dialects, and unless he is scolded for speaking ‘improperly’ or ‘impurely’ that should not pose a significant problem, though it may complicate literacy. Sakha on the other hand has significantly less variation than Nivkh does, and the language has been standardized and written for over a century, so this issue is less germane to Sakha.

There remains the question of how – or even whether – to standardize Nivkh for future teaching of and publication in the language(s), but this is something that can be worked out by

community members, educators, and scholars. In the case of Lenape, another severely endangered language with several highly divergent dialects and a diffuse population, a single enterprising Lenape scholar, Shelley DePaul, “created written and oral materials for children and adults in her community, despite... the dispersed population and difficult choices about dialect variation and orthography” (De Korne & Weinberg 2013:2). The Nivkh scholar Vladimir Sangi has played a comparable role in the development of Nivkh literature and teaching materials so far, and more similar work should be done to build on this small existing canon.

### 5.3.5 Ethnic interest

As with many of these factors, ethnic interest or pride is closely interconnected with several others, particularly fluency and prestige. Sergey posited that the fact that he did not learn Nivkh as a child “may be one of the reasons – one of the most important ones – why [he] went to keep studying specifically, like, culturology and [his] mother tongue” (*возможно это одна из причин — из самых важных — что я поехал учиться дальше именно, вот, культурологию, и изучать родной язык*). Meanwhile, Vladimir also emphasized his active personal interest in the language as an important component of his fluency: “It’s probably from my conversations that I know Yakut, and the fact that I also tried to learn it myself” (*я наверное из общения своего знаю якутский и то, что сам тоже пытался изучать*).

Beyond the association of Sakha and Nivkh with traditions and the past broadly, Vladimir and Sergey also both ascribe a certain spiritual significance to their language. Recall Vladimir’s assertion that “Yakut isn’t just a language; it’s also a culture” and Sergey’s similar observation that Nivkh identity remains strong because “young people know the traditions, even if they don’t know the language”. For both consultants, being Nivkh or Sakha means more than being born

into the ethnicity, and more than just knowing the language. Likewise, Ferguson (2019) found that “speaking Sakha is now a way to get to one’s ‘source’ or roots” (91) and also highlighted “the relationship between speaking Sakha and spiritual beliefs” (97). Meanwhile, Sergey could hardly express the significance of knowing Nivkh, even after acknowledging the greater usefulness for him of English and Russian:

While Nivkh, Nivkh I think is for the soul [*he laughs*]. I mean, well, it’s... I have to know it, because I’m, like, well like, I, well... I don’t know. It’s hard for me to talk about this, but— that I don’t speak [Nivkh], but if I spoke it... then... well I don’t know. I would probably be proud of that. Very much so. And... well, it, like, has such a symbolic importance for me, because, well, my heritage is specifically of that ethnicity. And if I knew the language fluently, right? Then... then like... well either way it would be important for me.

*А вот нивхский, нивхский, мне кажется, для души [смеётся]. То есть, ну, он... его нужно знать, потому что я, как бы, ну как бы, мне, ну... не знаю. Мне сложно об этом сказать, но— что я не разговариваю, но если б я разговаривал... то... ну не знаю. Я б наверное этим гордился. Очень сильно. И... ну, он как бы имеет такую очень символическую важность для меня, потому что, ну, происхождение именно этого этноса. И если бы я знал язык в свободном общении, да?, то... то как бы... ну всё равно было бы важен для меня.*

Clearly the interest and passion exist already, but what interested and passionate Nivkhs need is opportunities to study and use the language. As of now the only place to learn Nivkh after the early years of elementary school is the Institute of the Peoples of the North in Saint Petersburg, which is far removed from Sakhalin and the Amur, is only accessible to successful students who can afford to leave their homes and families for several years, and is persistently understaffed and underresourced (there is, for instance, only one Nivkh professor).<sup>25</sup>

Vladimir also connected the Sakha language with the soul and a spiritual significance. He mentioned that although he generally thinks in Russian, “there are sometimes moments when I

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<sup>25</sup> And shortly before my arrival to Saint Petersburg, the only Chukchi professor at the Institute of the Peoples of the North had been killed in a hit-and-run in downtown Saint Petersburg, leaving the school with no Chukchi department for the foreseeable future.

think in Yakut. That is, some sort of like... as if a spirit is awakening in me, even though right now I'm, you know, completely surrounded by Russians [at school near Saint Petersburg]" (*хотя иногда бывают такие моменты, что я думаю на якутском. То есть какие-то такие вот... будто во мне просыпается дух, хотя я сейчас, скажем так, среди русских полностью*). Here Vladimir also starkly separates the idea of a Sakha spirit from the surrounding "Russians" that it occasionally awakens in spite of. Vladimir again expressed pride in his Sakha identity when discussing the importance of knowing about Sakha culture and traditions: "it somehow supports the spirit, too. The fact that there's, like, a Sakha spirit, let's say" (*это как-то поддерживает тоже дух. То что, вот, якутский дух, скажем так*). At this point Vladimir smiled and continued, "the fact that I'm a Yakut. I'm proud of that. *Min sakhabyн, kieng tuttabyn onon* (*То что я — якут. Я горжусь этим. Мин сахабын, киэн туттабын оон*)).

## 6 Conclusion

It is clear that my consultants care and think about their ethnic identity and their languages. They have both taken steps to improve their language skills due to their own sense of pride and interest in their heritage. My research and analysis have largely supported Gruzdeva & Janhunen's (2015, 2018) work with Nivkh as well as Ferguson's (2016, 2019), among others', research into Sakha. We have reinforced the need to tailor revitalization work to the needs and circumstances of individual communities, which is only possible given a thorough understanding of the community's prevailing language ideologies. Further, given that the ideologies themselves shape individuals' and communities' acceptance and conception of, and enthusiasm for, various forms

of language maintenance and revitalization, it is also crucial to understand how – that is, under what conditions and influences – these attitudes develop.

Vladimir and Sergey indicated that autonomy, for both the people and the individual, can significantly improve the prospects of an endangered language. Prestige is vital because it can influence community members' self-worth, can lead to more or less funding for instructional and other programs, and can increase the urgency of more powerful bodies (like the regional and federal governments) to support maintenance efforts. Neither Sakha, a major language with its own republic, nor Nivkh, a moribund language with fewer than 200 elderly speakers, is seen as economically viable in modern Russia. This is largely due to oppressive policies enacted over the years by the Tsarist, Soviet, and contemporary Russian governments to favor Russian and Russians. The degree of fluency in a language also affects how it is viewed by a community; it will remain important to keep these potential influences in mind as revitalization progresses. Finally, as the government of the Sakha Republic understood in the 1990s, interest and pride in one's ethnicity and language can be overwhelming in shaping individuals' language ideologies; even in the face of scores of other hurdles toward acquisition or maintenance of an endangered language, a sense of pride and spiritual duty can be enough to motivate many potential speakers.

This thesis does not claim to speak on behalf of the broader Nivkh and Sakha language communities, but, in representing my consultants' own viewpoints as authentically as possible, I hope to have revealed some of the similarities and differences in the factors influencing Nivkh and Sakha language ideologies. Future research into Nivkh and Sakha should continue to take into account rural and youth perspectives and should always interrogate the origins of the ideologies that are revealed, not just the ideologies themselves. Attitudes do not develop in a

vacuum, but in the presence of dozens of competing influences, all of which must be understood in order to continue effectively working with, and understanding the perspectives of, indigenous peoples as they fight to maintain their languages and ways of life, often in the face of seemingly insurmountable repression.



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