



DOI: 10.22363/2618-897X-2025-22-2-240-250

EDN: OSNXYK

Research article / Научная статья

Ethnolinguistic Identity of the Sakha-Speaking Evenks: Results of a Study in the Zhigansk District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

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Abstract. The article explores the ethnolinguistic identity of Sakha-speaking Evenks living in the Zhigansk National Evenk District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in the context of language shift. The study is based on data collected during fieldwork conducted in 2024 in villages with compact Evenk populations. The analysis draws on an ethnosociolinguistic survey ($N = 200$) and is supplemented by insights from in-depth interviews. The findings reveal a growing symbolic significance of the Evenk language, particularly among young people, despite their low proficiency. The designation of the district as a national Evenk territory has had a positive impact on language revitalization efforts by promoting education, cultural events, and linguistic landscape initiatives. Modern technologies also play a crucial role by creating new opportunities for learning and using the language. The study concludes that language loss does not necessarily lead to the erosion of ethnic identity; on the contrary, a language may acquire special symbolic power in the process of its decline. However, for the language to function fully, a comprehensive language policy is essential. The experience of Sakha-speaking Evenks demonstrates the potential for revitalizing minority languages even under prolonged linguistic dominance of other languages.

Key words: Evenki language, ethnolinguistic identity, symbolic power of language, revitalizing minority languages, Zhigansk Evenks

Article history: received 03.03.2025; accepted 14.04.2025.

Conflict of interests: the author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

Funding: This article was prepared as part of the project “Organization and Conduct of Monitoring the Functioning of Indigenous Languages in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)”, implemented under the state program of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) “Preservation and Development of State and Official Languages in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) for 2020–2024.”

For citation: Danilov, I.A. 2025. “Ethnolinguistic Identity of the Sakha-Speaking Evenks: Results of a Study in the Zhigansk District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).” *Polylinguality and Transcultural Practices*, 22 (2), 240–250. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2618-897X-2025-22-2-240-250>

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Этноязыковая идентичность якутоязычных эвенков: итоги исследования в Жиганском районе Республики Саха (Якутия)

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Аннотация. Исследована этноязыковая идентичность якутоязычных эвенков, проживающих в Жиганском национальном эвенкийском районе Республики Саха (Якутия), в условиях языкового сдвига. В качестве материала исследования используются результаты полевых работ, проведенных в 2024 г. в селах компактного проживания эвенков. Проанализированы данные этносоциолингвистического опроса ($N = 200$), для интерпретации привлечены материалы глубинных интервью. Результаты показывают рост символической мощи эвенкийского языка, особенно среди молодежи, несмотря на низкий уровень владения. Присвоение району статуса национального эвенкийского положительно влияет на процессы ревитализации эвенкийского языка через активизацию преподавания, культурных мероприятий и оформление лингвистического ландшафта. Важную роль также играют современные технологии, предоставляющие новые возможности для изучения и использования языка. Делается вывод, что утрата языка не всегда ведет к размыванию этнической идентичности, а язык может приобретать особую символическую мощь в условиях его утраты. Однако для полноценного функционирования языка необходима системная языковая политика. Опыт якутоязычных эвенков демонстрирует потенциал ревитализации миноритарных языков даже в условиях длительного доминирования другого языка.

Ключевые слова: эвенкийский язык, этноязыковая идентичность, символическая мощь языка, ревитализация миноритарных языков, жиганские эвенки

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 14.10.2024; принята к печати 19.12.2024.

Конфликт интересов: автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Финансирование. Статья подготовлена в рамках проекта «Организация и проведение мониторинга функционирования языков коренных народов в Республике Саха (Якутия)», реализуемого в рамках государственной программы Республики Саха (Якутия) «Сохранение и развитие государственного и официального языков в Республике Саха (Якутия) на 2020–2024 годы».

Для цитирования: Danilov I.A. Ethnolinguistic Identity of the Sakha-Speaking Evenks: Results of a Study in the Zhigansk District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) // Полилингвильность и транскультурные практики. 2025. Т. 22. № 2. С. 240–250. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2618-897X-2025-22-2-240-250>

Introduction

In the context of active language shift, characteristic of many Indigenous peoples of Russia, the study of their ethnolinguistic identity becomes particularly relevant as it serves as a key indicator of linguistic processes. The All-Russian Population Census of 2020–2021 revealed intriguing results in this regard. Research conducted by A.F. Khanova, T.A. Bolgina, and O.V. Dragoy demonstrated an “in-

crease in the symbolic power of native (national) languages of the Russian Federation” [1. P. 60] compared to the previous census, as reflected in the growing number of people who consider an ethnic language their native language, regardless of proficiency level. This trend is also evident among the Evenks of Russia, where the percentage of individuals identifying Evenki as their native language (21.5%) exceeds the percentage of those who can actually speak it (13.7%), setting them apart from other Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North.

Overall, the situation of the Evenki language in Russia is complex and heterogeneous. The widespread dispersion of the Evenks across the North and Siberia results in varying linguistic conditions across regions, leading N.B. Vakhtin to classify the Evenki language as a “special case” [2. P. 180]. Measurements of language vitality in Evenki settlements confirm a significant differentiation in the degree of language preservation — ranging from the early stages of language shift to complete language loss [3. P. 37].

At the same time, the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in its “List of Languages of Russia and Their Vitality Status,” has assigned Evenki a vitality status of 2B-, indicating a nearly universal disruption of inter-generational language transmission, with possible exceptions in Iengra and Ust-Nyukzha [4. P. 51]. However, studies indicate that even in these settlements, the vitality of the Evenki language remains limited. In Iengra (Republic of Sakha [Yakutia]), the language is predominantly used by the older and middle generations in family communication and nomadic clan communities, while in school, it is taught as a subject with a minimal academic load [5. P. 96]. In Ust-Nyukzha (Amur Region), the language is undergoing simplification, particularly among those who spend little time in the taiga, and there is widespread use of Russian loanwords. The younger generation, except for children from reindeer herding and hunting families, demonstrates a low level of proficiency in Evenki. Additionally, mixed marriages contribute to the dominance of Russian in family communication [6. P. 18]. These data highlight the fragility of the remaining pockets of active Evenki language use in Russia and the need for targeted measures to support its preservation.

According to census data, more than half of Russia’s Evenks reside in Yakutia. The Evenks of Yakutia can be roughly divided into two groups: the Evenks of southern Yakutia (Aldan, Neryungri, Olekminsk, Ust-Maya) and those of north-western Yakutia (Anabar, Bulun, Zhigansk, Mirny, Olenek). The latter group, including those from Ust-Maya, transitioned to the Sakha language long ago, leading to the loss of their native Evenki language. As A.A. Sirina notes, “by the mid-19th century, most of the population of northwestern Yakutia was already Sakha-speaking” [7. P. 98].

Given this context, the present study focuses on the ethnolinguistic identity of Sakha-speaking Evenks. This group is of particular interest because, having been

in long-term contact with the Yakuts, the Evenks of northwestern Yakutia have largely lost their native language and shifted to Yakut. This situation creates a unique context for studying the transformation of ethnolinguistic identity and its adaptation to new sociocultural conditions. The scientific novelty of this research is defined by the insufficient study of the ethnolinguistic situation of Sakha-speaking Evenks. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex processes involved in the formation and transformation of ethnolinguistic identity in the context of language shift.

Materials and Methods

The study focuses on the Sakha-speaking Evenks residing in the Zhigansky National Evenk District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Established in 1822 as part of the Verkhoyansk Okrug, the Zhigansky District became part of the newly formed Bulun Okrug of the Yakut ASSR in 1924. On December 10, 1930, the Zhigansky National (Evenk) District was officially created. Although its national district status was later revoked, it was reinstated in 2008 [8]. Currently, the district comprises four municipal entities, three of which — Zhigansk, Bakhanay, and Kystatyam — are areas of compact Evenk settlement.

Field research for this study was conducted in these villages in September 2024 by the author in collaboration with Yu.G. Stepanova. A combination of complementary research methods was employed, including surveys, interviews, participant observation, and photographic documentation of the linguistic landscape. To gain deeper insights into linguistic processes, 36 in-depth interviews were conducted with long-term residents, educators, cultural workers, government officials, and representatives of public organizations. The total duration of recorded interviews exceeded 30 hours. Additionally, an ethnosociolinguistic survey of residents from the three Evenk-populated settlements of the Zhigansky District ($N = 320$) was carried out in Russian. The study utilized a disproportionate stratified sampling method in surveying the settlements.

The research instrument consisted of a questionnaire developed by researchers from the Institute for Humanities Research and Indigenous Studies of the North, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. It included 28 questions divided into three thematic sections:

1. Ethnolinguistic identity (native language selection, language proficiency, domains of language use, challenges in language transmission, etc.);
2. Traditional culture (rituals, ceremonies, holidays, national cuisine, and clothing);
3. Socio-demographic characteristics.

This article analyzes the responses of Evenk participants ($N = 200$) specifically related to the first section — ethnolinguistic identity. The study approaches ethnolinguistic identity within the theoretical framework proposed by N.I. Ivanova

[9. P. 52], which includes the following categories: linguistic self-identification, language competence, language attitudes, and speech behavior.

For data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied, including statistical analysis, correlation analysis, content analysis, and socio-linguistic interpretation methods.

Results and Discussion

In the Zhigansky District, the proportion of Evenks in the ethnic structure increased by 7.6% between the 2010 and 2020 census periods. The number of Evenks reporting proficiency in the Evenk language grew significantly from 5 people (0.2%) in 2010 to 570 people (21.7%) in the latest census. A similar increase was observed among Zhigansky residents identifying Evenk as their native language, rising from 3 people (0.1%) to 68 people (2.6%).

Despite the value of population censuses as sources of information on the linguistic situation, it is important to acknowledge that they do not always fully reflect reality. The 2020 All-Russian Census was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected the quality and completeness of the collected data. Moreover, a study by G.F. Gabdrakhmanova and E. Alos-i-Font identified “several inaccuracies and contradictions in the final statistics of the 2020 census regarding the national and linguistic composition of Russia” [10. P. 36], leading the authors to conclude that the reliability of the 2020 census had declined compared to previous ones. In this context, the perspectives of E.V. Khilkhanova and G.A. Dyrkheeva are particularly relevant, as they advocate for supplementing large-scale statistical data with regional and local studies [11. P. 123].

Our research revealed that 7.5% of surveyed Evenks in the Zhigansky District have proficiency in the Evenk language. However, a breakdown of language proficiency levels presents a more nuanced picture: 53% of respondents reported some degree of proficiency: with 0.5% fluent, 6% conversational, and 46.5% familiar with individual words and phrases. We believe that maintaining even minimal language competence is facilitated by the continuous presence of the Evenk language in the linguistic landscape and ethnocultural space of the district. Only 9.5% of respondents reported no knowledge of the language at all, while 37.5% were uncertain about their proficiency, suggesting unclear perceptions of linguistic competence.

Regarding the reasons for limited Evenk language proficiency, respondents predominantly cited external factors rather than a lack of personal motivation. The most common reasons were the absence of language instruction in schools (42%) and the lack of a linguistic environment in the family (31%). These factors, both linked to limited opportunities for language learning and use, account for a combined 73%, significantly surpassing the proportion of respondents who indicated a lack of necessity for the language (10.5%) or were unsure of their response (15%).

The extremely low percentage (1.5%) of respondents attributing their lack of language proficiency to an unwillingness to learn confirms that the main barrier to language acquisition is restricted access to educational resources and linguistic practice rather than disinterest. Similar to the Bulun Evenks, who also belong to the Sakha-speaking group, the Zhigansky Evenks view the education system as the primary institution capable of ensuring the revitalization and transmission of the Evenk language to future generations [12. P. 355].

At the same time, a significant portion of Zhigansky Evenks (46.5%) consider the Evenk language important for future generations. Among them, 26% of respondents would like their children and grandchildren to learn Evenk as a first language. An additional fifth of respondents ranked it as their second (10.5%) or third (10%) most important language, indicating an existing—though not always dominant—demand for the revival of linguistic traditions. This potential can be realized through the creation of favorable conditions for Evenk language learning and use, including the development of an educational system, support for family language policies, and the establishment of a supportive linguistic environment. It is crucial to note that choosing Evenk as a priority language reflects not only linguistic preferences but also the preservation of ethnic identity, which remains a key factor in the sustainable development of Evenk society.

The latest population census records only 2.6% of Zhigansky Evenks as considering Evenk their native language. However, our research reveals a significantly higher figure—26.5% of surveyed Evenks in the Zhigansky District recognize it as their native tongue. This discrepancy is likely due not so much to an actual increase in the number of speakers as to the growing symbolic importance of the language for ethnic identity. Notably, younger respondents under 40 (32.6%) were more likely to identify Evenk as their native language than those from middle and older generations (20.9%), indicating a shift in how the language is perceived amid active efforts to revitalize and promote it.

The words of a 38-year-old female respondent illustrate this trend: “I used to consider Yakut my native language—it was the first one I spoke and the one I use in daily life. Moreover, because I didn’t know Evenk, I was ashamed to call myself Evenk. But now, everything is different. Today, I proudly say that I am Evenk, and my native language is Evenk.”

This observation aligns with N.Ya. Bulatova’s assertion that “many northern peoples, especially those of mixed heritage, fear identifying with their indigenous communities due to a lack of language proficiency” [13. P. 15]. In this case, Evenk is recognized as a native language despite limited use, breaking down barriers and reinforcing ethnic self-identification. This process of re-ethnization, where language, even without active proficiency, becomes a crucial symbol of ethnic belonging, is exemplified in the above case.

The increasing symbolic power of the language is further supported by data on the hierarchy of ethnic markers. Evenk ranks third (13%) as a key identity marker, following culture and traditions (64%) and history and territory (14%). However, it is noteworthy that nearly as many respondents identified language as a primary marker as those who prioritized history and territory, highlighting its significance as an ethnic resource despite its functional absence. Over time, the role of language as an ethnic marker may continue to grow. For example, in the Olenek National Evenk District — similar in status to Zhigansky — research on the identity of Indigenous youth [14. P. 159] found that language surpassed native land, nature, and historical heritage in importance, ranking second only to culture and customs.

The designation of Zhigansky District as a national Evenk district appears to contribute to positive linguistic trends, increasing interest in the Evenk language and enhancing its symbolic power in the consciousness of Zhigansky Evenks. Similar positive shifts in Evenk language revitalization, associated with national status recognition, have also been observed in other Sakha-speaking settlements with concentrated Evenk populations [15. P. 187].

Respondents also confirm the positive influence of the Zhigansky District's designation as a national Evenk district on the revitalization of the Evenk language. According to them, this is reflected in the increased organization of the Evenk ritual celebration Bakaldyn, both at the local and district levels. Moreover, educational institutions (schools and kindergartens) have become more active in incorporating Evenk elements: elective courses in the Evenk language have been introduced, thematic celebrations are held, and folk ensembles are formed. Cultural centers have also joined this effort.

Interestingly, for a significant portion of respondents (77%), national holidays are the main context in which they hear Evenk speech, highlighting the important role such events play in maintaining even episodic language use. Additionally, 15.5% of respondents listen to Evenk songs, pointing to the potential of musical culture as an additional resource for language preservation and popularization.

Furthermore, in the Zhigansky District, the requirement of Article 35 of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) law “On Languages in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)” (16.10.1992) is observed, which mandates the use of official regional languages, including Evenk, on signage in areas with compact populations of Indigenous northern peoples. The presence of the Evenk language in the linguistic landscape positively influences the self-awareness and ethnolinguistic identity of the Zhigansky Evenks.

In schools in Zhigansky District, there is also an active formation of an internal linguistic landscape incorporating the Evenk language. Educators are working to create a visual environment in the Evenk language, aiming to enrich students' vocabulary. Often, teachers themselves translate signs and prepare materials, demonstrating their high motivation and involvement in the language revitalization process. They note that an important role in this work is played by republic-wide

WhatsApp groups, where enthusiasts and specialists share experiences, provide consultations, and offer Evenk language lessons. Interestingly, the activation of online platforms for learning and using Indigenous languages of the Northern peoples, including the creation of WhatsApp groups specifically for communicating in or studying the native language, became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic [16. P. 217].

Additionally, a key factor contributing to the involvement of Sakha-speaking Evenks in the linguistic environment has been the widespread use of the “Ayana” application, especially popular among younger respondents. As S.I. Sharina writes, the launch of this media platform in February 2021 was a significant event for the Indigenous peoples of the North, as it provided the world’s first voice translator from Russian to Evenk [17. P. 44]. The accessibility and convenience of using “Ayana” allow Sakha-speaking Evenks to regularly interact with their native language, even without advanced conversational skills. This creates additional opportunities for language learning and contributes to the process of linguistic revival.

Conclusion

Thus, despite the long-standing linguistic shift towards the Sakha language and the low level of proficiency in Evenk, there is an observable growth in the symbolic power of the language. This trend is especially pronounced among the younger generation, indicating a reevaluation of the role of the native language in the self-awareness of the Evenk people. As the study has shown, the designation of Zhigansky District as a national Evenk district has positively influenced the language revitalization processes through the activation of language teaching, cultural events, and the formation of a linguistic landscape. Modern information technologies also play a crucial role in supporting the Evenk language. Mobile applications and online platforms provide new opportunities for learning and using the language, particularly among the youth.

In a broader context, the situation with the ethnolinguistic identity of Sakha-speaking Evenks reflects the complex processes of transformation in the self-awareness of Indigenous Northern peoples in the context of language shift. The loss of a language does not always lead to the dilution of ethnic identity — on the contrary, the language can acquire special symbolic power, and positive ethnicity can become a resource for its revitalization. However, symbolic power alone is not enough for the full functioning of the language. A systematic language policy is necessary, aimed at expanding the spheres of its use and enhancing its prestige.

The experience of Sakha-speaking Evenks in Zhigansky District shows that the language revitalization process can be initiated even in conditions of long-term dominance of another language. Despite the existing linguistic situation, the measures being taken contribute to the growing interest in the language, creating the conditions for further steps in its revitalization.

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