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The Dynamics of Language Endangerment

A Comparative Study

BRIGITTE PAKENDORF

Abstract: Most languages spoken by the “small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North” are currently highly endangered or extinct, yet there are big differences in vitality between languages and even dialects. I here discuss the factors that have shaped the current levels of endangerment of three Northern Tungusic lects: the Lamunkhin dialect of Even, the Bystraia dialect of Even, and Negidal. All three communities have lived through the sociopolitical changes associated with the Soviet era, and yet Negidal is nearly extinct, Bystraia Even is spoken only by adults, and Lamunkhin Even is still being passed on to children. The factors favoring language vitality that emerge from this study are the maintenance of cohesive and compact speech communities without forced resettlements and a relative minority of newcomers.

Keywords: demographics, language loss, language vitality, schooling, settlement history, Sovietization

It is well known that languages across the globe are increasingly endangered (Krauss 2007; Hammarström et al. 2018), and it is estimated that as many as fifteen hundred to three thousand of the six to seven thousand languages still spoken today will be lost by the end of the century (Krauss 2007: 12; Bromham et al. 2022). The languages of the so-called *malochislennye korennnye narody severa* (small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North)¹ are no exception (Janhunen 2010; Bromham et al. 2022; Grenoble 2024). This state of endangerment is the result of the Russian colonization of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and most importantly the impact of Sovietization (Sablin and Savelyeva 2011; Grenoble 2024). However, even though all the indigenous inhabitants of Siberia were subject to the effects of colonization

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and Sovietization, there are big differences in vitality between individual languages and even between dialects of one language (cf. Vakhtin 2001: 85). For instance, the Samoyedic language Tundra Nenets—even though “definitely an endangered language”—is still spoken by approximately twenty thousand individuals (Nikolaeva 2014: 5–6), whereas the Tungusic language Negidal is spoken in Khabarovskii Krai by only a handful of elderly women, and it is only the Upper dialect of Negidal (*verkhovskoi*) that is still in use, while the last speakers of the Lower dialect (*nizovskoi*) passed away between 2010 and 2020 (Pakendorf and Aralova 2018).

In this article I investigate the factors that affect language vitality and attempt to elucidate the reasons for the observable differences, focusing on three closely related Northern Tungusic lects² spoken in Siberia and the Russian Far East for which I have first-hand data: Negidal and two dialects of Even, Lamunkhin and Bystraia. To refine the results, I consider two more Northern Tungusic lects—Topolinoe Even and Iengra Evenki—in the discussion (see Figure 1 for the geographic location of these lects).

Methodology

This investigation was stimulated by the differences in language vitality I was able to observe while collecting data for linguistic studies on Lamunkhin and Bystraia Even and Negidal. I conducted linguistic fieldwork (at times accompanied by my colleague Natalia Aralova) in the context of three projects: one that focused on contact-induced changes in Even dialects undertaken in the framework of the now obsolete Max Planck Research Group on Comparative Population Linguistics, which was based at the MPI for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany; one that focused on the documentation of Even dialects, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation DoBeS programme (Pakendorf et al. 2010); and a project funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) that aimed at documenting Negidal (Pakendorf and Aralova 2017). I thus spent a total of 16 weeks in central Kamchatka, where Bystraia Even is spoken, in 2007, 2009, and 2016; a total of 22 weeks in the village of Sebian-Kiuel', where Lamunkhin Even is spoken, in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012; and a total of 15 weeks in Vladimirovka, Khabarovskii Krai, in 2017, 2018, and 2020, to work on Negidal.

While I mostly focused on recording,³ translating, and annotating narratives as the basis for the documentation projects and my linguistic



Figure 1. Map showing the approximate locations of the lects discussed in this article.

analyses, I also collected sociolinguistic data on the speakers who contributed their narratives, which provided some insight into their linguistic biographies; in addition, I was able to observe the languages used in various interactions in the different settlements. Some of the autobiographical narratives recorded from Lamunkhin and Bystraia Evens also touched upon relevant topics and were consulted for this study, as shown by some quotes included below. Furthermore, in 2009 I conducted an (as yet unpublished) sociolinguistic study in Sebian-Kiuel', the home of Lamunkhin Even, during which I collected approximately 140 questionnaires targeting language use in various societal contexts. Finally, in 2017, Natalia Aralova and I conducted a search for remaining speakers of Lower Negidal (Pakendorf and Aralova 2018), during which

we gathered information on language use. Our field notes can be found in the Negidal documentation deposit (Pakendorf and Aralova 2017) by using the search term “Lower_Negidal.” In order to fill in gaps in my firsthand data, I consulted various publications that provide demographic and sociolinguistic information about these Even and Negidal communities; my information about the situation of Iengra Evenki and Topolinoe Even comes nearly exclusively from such published sources.

Reasons for Language Endangerment and Predictors of Future Vitality

Different factors have been identified as playing a role in language endangerment, none of which can be considered solely responsible (cf. Grenoble 2024: 1217). Some factors can be considered causal, helping to explain the current state of endangerment, while others are assumed to permit a prediction of the future rate of language loss. Overall, the factors that have been identified to date can be grouped roughly into four categories, namely 1) state policies, 2) educational factors, 3) demographic factors, and 4) pragmatism and expectations. These categories are, however, not distinct, but rather intertwined: for instance, state policies had direct and detrimental effects on the language of education and the demography of the minority peoples of the North. Of the four categories listed above, the first three are largely external to the speech communities, while the last is community-internal.

Among the most devastating factors were the state policies affecting the education and settlement of the indigenous peoples of the North that were put into place from the 1950s (Kibrik 1991: 10; Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015: 22): on the one hand, these aimed at achieving a unified Soviet society and elevated Russian to the position of the unifying Soviet language; on the other hand, small settlements were liquidated and their inhabitants forcibly relocated to larger, often ethnically and linguistically mixed, settlements. The elevation of Russian to the status of unifying Soviet language led to the Russification of the education system, beginning with nursery schools and kindergartens (Vakhtin 2001: 104; Gruzdeva 2015: 244; Grenoble, 2024: 1218) as well as the establishment of boarding schools. The forced relocations engendered by the policy of enlargement of settlements (*politika ukрупneniia*) uprooted communities, destroyed their traditional social networks, and led to the increased use of Russian as a *lingua franca* in the new settlements, where the northern minority peoples were more often than not outnumbered

by immigrants from the European part of the Soviet Union (Kibrik 1991: 9; Krupnik and Chlenov 2007; Gruzdeva 2015: 239–240; *inter alia*).

The educational policies pursued by the Soviet state played a large role in the fragilization⁴ and ultimate loss of the indigenous languages (Kibrik 1991: 10; Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015: 10). Even though in the early years of its existence, during the 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet Union aimed to provide each indigenous language with a writing system in order to ensure mother-tongue education, arbitrary decisions were taken as to which varieties were separate languages and which were merely dialects of larger languages that did not merit separate orthographies (Comrie 1981: 22–26, Sablin and Savelyeva 2011: 91). Furthermore, the reification of a single dialect as the “standard, literary” language had detrimental effects on the vitality of other dialects: on the one hand, the discrepancy between the variety taught at school and that spoken in the home confused (and still confuses) schoolchildren (author’s observations 2007–2012; cf. Lavrillier 2004: 442; Janhunen 2010: 49; Gernet 2012: 226; Grigor’ev 2016: 129); on the other hand, the non-standard dialects were stigmatized and thus fragilized⁵ (Grenoble 2024: 1218–1219). However, from 1936–37 onwards, many writing systems were discontinued (Comrie 1981: 26), and the school reform of 1958 effectively put an end to the use of languages other than Russian as a medium of instruction in the Federal Soviet Republic of Russia (today’s Russian Federation; Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015: 22).

By far the most detrimental educational policy, however, was the establishment of the boarding school system (Kibrik 1991: 9; Vakhtin 2001: 231; Janhunen 2010: 49; Gruzdeva 2015: 244; Grenoble 2024: 1219), in which children of northern minorities were taken out of their families and placed in boarding schools, where the medium of instruction was Russian and where they were forbidden to speak their home languages. In addition, since these schools were often comprised of children from various linguistic backgrounds, Russian served as a *lingua franca* in the schoolyard and dormitories. Not only did this system lead to the loss of the indigenous languages by the children, who spent only the summer holidays in their families, and their shift to Russian, but it also led to a break in the transmission of indigenous cultural knowledges and practices (Gernet 2008: 77; Grenoble 2024: 1219).

While the absolute size of an indigenous speech community is not necessarily important for language maintenance (Vakhtin 2001: 223–224), their proportion among the total population is relevant, and the number of speakers and their distribution across age groups is a major predictor of language endangerment (Kibrik 1991: 9; Bromham

et al. 2022). Among the most important demographic factors that have led to the decrease in vitality of Siberian languages are those that led to the minority peoples being outnumbered by newcomers from the European part of Russia, first and foremost as a result of the increased industrialization of the region. From the end of World War II, and most especially from the 1970s until the end of the Soviet Union, large-scale exploitation of natural resources and industrialization was pursued throughout Siberia, leading to a massive influx of immigrants from the European part of the Soviet Union and a rapid decline of the proportion of the overall population represented by the indigenous peoples (Sablin and Savelyeva 2011: 94; Gruzdeva 2015: 241; Grenoble 2024: 1217–1218).

The forced relocation to large settlements during the 1950s and 1960s had a similar effect, with autochthonous peoples being reduced to small minorities in ethnically mixed villages and towns alongside a large majority of newcomers (*priezzhie*) from western parts of the Soviet Union: “In Provideniya the former residents of Plover [relocated in 1957] shared the fate of other Native families who had settled there during the preceding decades. Here they were a scarcely noticeable minority among the rapidly expanding town population made of Russians and other newcomers. ... Life in Provideniya was ... dominated by the newcomers. Most former residents of Plover could in no way fit into this world and they were simply put adrift” (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007: 73). In addition, the relocations, both during collectivization and during the campaign of *ukrupnenie*, often led to the deliberate breakup of the traditional clan-based settlement pattern, for instance among the Bystraia Evens of Kamchatka (Kirillova 2012: 117), the Nivkh on Sakhalin (Gruzdeva 2015: 239), and the Yupik, where “...the territorial basis of the village of Ungaziq [Chaplino, relocated in 1958–59], with its structure of old clan sites and neighborhoods was not restored at the new site” (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007: 70). Nowadays, ongoing urbanization is continuing to increase the demographic imbalance of indigenous northern peoples in predominantly Russian-dominated towns (Grenoble 2024: 1219).

The demographic shifts induced by the influx of newcomers and by the forced resettlements has led to an increase in linguistically mixed marriages, in part because autochthonous individuals can end up being in more contact with newcomers than with members of their dispersed communities. This has happened to the Nivkh on Sakhalin, where “the indigenous communities were so widely separated [by the relocations] that there was more contact between the Nivkhs and the surrounding Russian population than with other Nivkh communities”

(Gruzdeva 2015: 241); resettlements have had a similar effect on the Lower Negidal community (Pakendorf and Aralova 2018). This in turn has a detrimental effect on indigenous language maintenance, since the language of such mixed households is very often Russian (Kibrik 1991: 9; Vinokurova 2000: 167).

Among the factors that can be considered predictors of language endangerment and shift are the degree of compactness versus dispersion of settlement of minority language speakers (Kibrik 1991: 9), the connectedness of settlements as measured by road density, since “roads increase human movement and thus bring people into contact with speakers of other languages, and this may result in language shift” (Bromham et al. 2022), and the proportion of neighboring languages that are endangered, since this points to the existence of widespread factors that threaten the vitality of small languages (Bromham et al. 2022). In contrast, contact with groups speaking different languages is not necessarily a factor involved in language endangerment (*contra* Kibrik 1991: 10), since situations of stable multilingualism are common (cf. Vakhtin 2001: 224); rather, multilingualism seems to enhance maintenance of indigenous languages, as indicated both by small-scale studies of multilingual communities (Di Carlo and Good, 2017, Epps 2018, Pakendorf, Dobrushina, and Khanina 2021: 841–842 and references therein) and by a global study of a diverse set of sociolinguistic, language ecological, economic, and environmental variables as correlates of language vitality in over 6,500 languages (Bromham et al. 2022).

Finally, Vakhtin (2001: 230–249) proposes that the major reasons for language endangerment and shift are what might be termed community-internal, as opposed to the external factors described above: “... the single ‘common denominator’ under which all cases of language shift can be subsumed...: people stop speaking their heritage languages because they stop considering this useful for themselves—put simply, *because they do not want to* [speak these languages]” (Vakhtin 2001: 230, his italics, my translation). These community-internal factors can be broken down into pragmatic motivations, motivations based on the attitudes and expectations of others, and identity-based motivations. Among the pragmatic motivations are the choice of the dominant language in order to find work or to enhance one’s career, the choice to use the dominant language once the indigenous language is used less and less and it becomes easier to communicate in the dominant language, and the choice of parents to use the dominant language with their children in order to facilitate their schooling and their way in life. Among the expectations of others, what played a major role in the

loss of languages in Siberia was the extremely disparaging and even racist attitude of the newcomers towards the autochthonous peoples. Constant confrontation with these negative stereotypes, especially by children at school, led to their identifying their traditional culture and language as being inferior, old-fashioned (cf. Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015: 9), shameful, and something to be avoided: “Parents consciously stopped teaching their children the heritage languages not only because it is advantageous to know Russian, ... but mainly in order to save their children from the humiliating experiences they had undergone. ... These stereotypes create a persistent negative image of everything that is linked with their nationality, especially in the eyes of the children, including their heritage language, the native language of their parents” (Vakhtin 2001: 241, 246, translation mine). Finally, indigenous individuals who have internalized the negative stereotypes that are constantly projected at them might want to avoid any kind of identification with their traditional group and so might want to switch their identity; since language is a major part of identity, they give up their ancestral language: the adults stop speaking it and do not teach it to their children (Vakhtin 2001: 247).

The impact of ideology, especially identity, on language maintenance and loss has been observed among the Yupik of Chukotka by Morgounova (2007), where a revival of Yupik identity in the 1990s led to a reawakened interest in their heritage language, only to be replaced a few years later by an orientation toward Russian triggered by economic improvements and tensions with the Yupik of Alaska. However, as shown by Khilkhanova and Khilkhanov (2004) with reference to Buryats, language is only one component of identity and hence can be given up even when ethnic identity is still strong and anchored in cultural distinctiveness. The negligibility of language as a marker of identity has also been shown to be a feature of communities of the Lower Yenisei in northern Siberia (Khanina 2021): here identities are relational, and “diverse components of one’s social self” are indexed via use of different languages (Pakendorf, Dobrushina, and Khanina 2021: 840). Conversely, when communities maintain a sense of their ethnic identity, this can counterbalance the negative effects of many of the “external” factors outlined above (Kibrik 1991: 10), and language ideologies that favor multilingualism have been shown to enhance language maintenance (Pakendorf, Dobrushina, and Khanina 2021: 841–842).

Nevertheless, even though all the small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North underwent the same process of Sovietization, and even though all of their languages are endangered (Janhunen 2010: 5),

there are differences in the degree of endangerment, as outlined in the introduction of this article. In the following, I assess some of the factors discussed here for three speech communities, namely Lamunkhin Even, Bystraia Even, and Negidal, in order to elucidate which factors might best account for such differences in vitality.

Different Degrees of Vitality: Lamunkhin Even, Bystraia Even, and Negidal

Lamunkhin Even is spoken by approximately 300 to 350 people in the Lamynkhinskii *nasleg* (the term for the administrative unit that comprises the village Sebian-Kiuel' and its reindeer herding territories) of Kobiaisinskii District in the central region of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The main means of subsistence were and still are reindeer herding and hunting; prior to collectivization in the 1930s the Lamunkhin Evens were fully nomadic. The dialect is still being acquired by children, but it has undergone considerable morphosyntactic changes under the influence of Sakha (Iakut) (see Pakendorf 2009 for some examples). Bystraia Even is spoken by some 200–250 adults over the age of forty to fifty years living in two villages in Bystrinskii District in central Kamchatka: Esso (the district capital) and Anavgai. The main means of subsistence are fishing and reindeer herding, though tourism also plays a role, especially in Esso. Like the Lamunkhin Evens, the Bystraia Evens were fully nomadic until collectivization in the 1930s (Bergman 1927; Gernet 2008). As to Negidal, the Upper dialect is currently still spoken with varying degrees of fluency by five elderly women (born between 1942 and 1955) who live in the village Vladimirovka in Polina Osipenko District in Khabarovskii Krai and in the district center of the same name. The Lower dialect used to be spoken along the Lower Amur and the lower reaches of the Amgun' river, one of its tributaries, but the last speakers died in the 2010s (Pakendorf and Aralova 2018; Pakendorf and Aralova 2017: landing page of the Negidal deposit).⁶ Negidals used to subsist on hunting and fishing, with seasonal transhumance until collectivization.

In the following I investigate several of the factors identified as being causal in language endangerment by discussing the 1) settlement history, 2) population size (as a proxy for the historical size of the speech community), 3) proportion of the autochthonous community among the total population of the settlement(s), 4) effect of schooling, and 5) amount of linguistically mixed marriages. I also touch upon

the degree of isolation versus connectedness of the settlements, since this has been suggested to be a predictor of language endangerment (Bromham et al. 2022). Two other predictors of endangerment, namely the proportion of neighboring languages that are endangered and the number of years spent in school and further educational institutions (Bromham et al. 2022) are not discussed in detail, since they do not appear to differ between the three lects considered here: as mentioned in the introduction, all the languages of the small-numbered peoples of the North are highly endangered or already extinct. As to the degree of schooling, there do not seem to be noteworthy differences between different Even subgroups, since more than 80 percent of Evens have at least completed high school (*srednee obshchee obrazovanie*) (Sharina 2015: 94), and I suspect that the same holds for Negidals. The role of the “community-internal” factors proposed by Vakhtin (2001) are hard to assess without dedicated fieldwork, yet their potential impact is discussed in the light of the demographic factors.

Settlement History

The village Sebian-Kiuel’ as part of the Lamunxhinskii *tuzemnyi sovet* (native council) was founded in 1931 as a result of the founding of the Sakkyryyr Even National District; in 1962, this district was liquidated, and the Lamunxhinskii *naslezhnyi sovet* (village council) was joined to Kobiaiskii District. Lamunxhin Evens were settled not only in Sebian-Kiuel’, but also in two other villages, Segen-Kiuel’ and Endybal, as well as in several small camps (*stoibishcha*); of the villages, Segen-Kiuel’ was the largest in 1939, with over three times as many Even inhabitants as Sebian-Kiuel’. In 1964 the Lamunxhinskii *naslezhnyi sovet* underwent fragmentation (*razukrupnenie*) and Sebian-Kiuel’ and Segen-Kiuel’ were administratively separated. In the 1980s a large part of the Even reindeer herders of Segen-Kiuel’ were moved to Sebian-Kiuel’ together with their state farm (*sovkhos*), so that this became the major Even settlement in the district (Filippova 2017: 210). It is thus clear that Lamunxhin Evens have lived in considerable stability in Sebian-Kiuel’, which was founded in the center of their territory upon their request (Filippova 2017: 206–207), for the last ninety years.

The Bystraia Evens, in contrast, were not so lucky. After having migrated to Kamchatka as recently as the 1830s to the 1850s, where they engaged in a nomadic lifestyle along the western edge of the central mountain range (von Ditmar 2011a [1890: 128]; 2011b [1900: 162, 192];

Bergman 1927), their settlement was initiated with the founding of three *tuzemnye sovety* in the *stoibishcha* of Anavgai, Kekuk, and Lauchan in 1926. Esso was founded as the district center in 1932 (Gurvich 2004 [1957]: 172; Gernet 2008: 22–23, 25, 34), a role it still plays. At the end of the 1930s, seven Even settlements were known in the district: the aforementioned Anavgai, Kekuk, Lauchan, and Esso, as well as Tvaian and two logging settlements, Krapivnaia and Bystraia. Of these, only two survived after the wave of liquidations initiated through the policy of *ukrupnenie*, which took place between 1956 and 1975. The first village to be shut down in 1956 was Kekuk, the inhabitants of which were resettled in Anavgai. In 1961, Lauchan was closed, and its inhabitants were resettled in Tvaian, until in 1964–65 Tvaian was liquidated in its turn. The inhabitants of Tvaian were resettled in Krapivnaia and Bystraia, until these settlements were shut down in 1974–75; their inhabitants were resettled in Esso, a village dominated by newcomers (Gernet 2008: 64–72; Kirillova 2012).

The Negidals used to have two major regions of settlement:⁷ the Lower Negidals were settled at the confluence of the Amgun' and the Amur and approximately 150 km up the Amgun' river from its mouth, and the Upper Negidals were found along its middle reaches, along its tributaries Duki and Nimelen and in the vicinity of Lakes Chukchagir and Evoron (Myl'nikova and Tsintsius 1931: 107–108; biographies in Lebedeva 2011: 22–45; Startsev 2014: 6–7). In the early twentieth century, the Upper Negidals had a very dispersed settlement pattern, with 63 percent of this group living in hamlets comprising only one to three households, and only one settlement that counted twelve households, whereas the Lower Negidals lived in larger and more compact settlements, often including Russian inhabitants: sixty two households were grouped into five settlements, of which the two largest were comprised of thirty and sixteen households, respectively (Myl'nikova and Tsintsius 1931: 107–108). After gold was found on the middle Amgun', Russians flooded into the area and a settlement called Kerbi was founded in the 1870s; this was renamed in 1939 in honor of Polina Osipenko, member of an all-women's team of pilots who undertook a nonstop flight across the country in 1938. In 1945, the village Vladimirovka was founded by merging three collective farms (*kolkhozy*) comprising Evenks and Negidals, and the Upper Negidals have lived here since then. The Lower Negidals, in contrast, were resettled to different localities along the Lower Amur from the 1940s to the 1960s, on the one hand because their largest settlement, Ust'-Amgungsk, suffered from regular flooding, and on the other hand because of forced relocations during the *ukrupnenie*

of the 1950s and 1960s (Tsintsius 1982: 3; Lebedeva 2011: 12; Startsev 2014: 6–7). Hence, since the middle of the twentieth century, the Upper Negidals have lived in a single compact settlement, while the Lower Negidals were distributed across various villages inhabited by Ulch, Nivkh, and non-indigenous newcomers.

Population Size

It is well known that census data are often far from reliable (cf. Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015: 17), especially with respect to linguistic affiliation, since often individuals name their heritage language when asked about their *rodnoi iazyk* (mother tongue) rather than the language that they actually speak in everyday life (cf. Vakhtin 2001: 77–87). Furthermore, whereas in the early Soviet period it is likely that a large proportion of most indigenous peoples spoke their heritage language, more recent numbers do not automatically reflect numbers of speakers. Nevertheless, population size is here taken as a rough proxy of the size of the speech community. Table 1 provides an overview of the population size recorded in different censuses conducted in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

Table 1. Population sizes according to census statistics. The groups are abbreviated as LAM: Lamunkhin Evens, BYS: Bystraia Evens, NEG: Negidals.

	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002	2010
LAM	333	363	451	491	621	587	648	676
BYS	469	514	590	676	638	672	876	1234
NEG	371		354	454	459	502	505	480

For the Lamunkhin Evens, the counts are based on an article by Filippova (2017) that is dedicated to the demography of this Even subgroup. However, it should be noted that, in the article, the census count for 1939 (753) is provided for the entire population of the Lamynkhinskii *nasleg*, without being specific about the ethnolinguistic identity of the respondents; furthermore, until 1962 this administrative unit included the village of Segen-Kiuel', which in 1939 counted 390 inhabitants (Filippova 2017: 207). In the table, I thus excluded the count for Segen-Kiuel', and the resulting number of 363 represents a maximal

number for the Evens in Sebian-Kiuel' and surroundings. The counts for 1970 and 1979 are specific to the Lamynkhinskii *nasleg*, that is, the administrative unit that comprises Sebian-Kiuel' to the exclusion of Segen-Kiuel', but they also refer to the general count of the inhabitants irrespective of their ethnolinguistic affiliation; it is thus unknown how many of these would have been Evens versus Sakha or newcomers. Later counts are specifically for Evens in Sebian-Kiuel'.

For the Bystraia Evens, the numbers are taken from Table 2 in Gernet (2008: 88), which provides a very detailed breakdown of population numbers in Bystrinskii District between 1925 and 2006. It should be noted, however, that the 1926 census report (*Vsesoiuznaia perepis'* 1928: 128) counts 467 Evens in the Ust'-Kamchatskii *raion*, and not 469 as given by Gernet. For 2010, Kirillova (2012: 113) provides the number of 1234 Evens in Bystrinskii District, referring to a conversation as her source. This number seems surprisingly high, given that Gernet (2008: 88) provides a number of 883 Bystraia Evens for 2006, but it is in accordance with the census figures: these counted 1179 Evens residing in the Kamchatskaia *oblast'* (now part of Kamchatskii Krai) in 2002 (*Natsional'nyi sostav* 2004: 118), and 1872 Evens in Kamchatskii Krai in 2010 (*Itogi* 2012: 2119).

The data for Negidals are taken from various sources, including individual census reports (*Tsentral'noe statisticheskoe upravlenie* 1973: 10; *Gosudarstvennyi komitet SSSR po statistike* 1989: 137; *Goskomstat RSFSR* 1990: 670; *Natsional'nyi sostav* 2004: 115; *Itogi* 2012: 2114), and show specifically the number of Negidals counted in Khabarovskii Krai, not the entire Soviet Union or RSFSR/Russian Federation. The 1926 census (*Vsesoiuznaia perepis'* 1928: 131) counted 683 Negidals residing in four different districts of the Nikolaevskii *okrug*. However, I preferred to include in Table 1 the much lower figure reported by Myl'nikova and Tsintsius (1931: 108), since it is specifically for the Amgun' Negidals and based on one year of ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork in 1926–27 (Myl'nikova and Tsintsius 1931). The report of the 1939 census, which was published in 1992, comprises only a brief summary of the data; in the breakdown of the population by ethnic and linguistic affiliation (*Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk et al.* 1992: 80), merely the number of the *Narodnosti Severa* (Peoples of the North) as a whole is provided, without a breakdown by individual ethnolinguistic groups. The report of the 1959 census for the RSFSR lists only Nanai, Evenk, Ulch, and Nivkh among the *Narodnosti Severa* (*Itogi* 1963: 334); nevertheless, Kolesnikova and Konstantinova (1968: 109) provide a figure of 354 Negidals with reference to the 1959 census, which is included in Table 1.

At first glance, the size of the different communities looks quite comparable: between approximately 350 and 800 individuals in the time period from 1926 to 2002, with an average of 450 for the Negidals, 520 for the Lamunkhin Evens, and 630 for the Bystraia Evens (counted excluding the doubtful data for 2010). However, these overall data are misleading, since the numbers for the Even communities refer to relatively compact settlements: the village Sebian-Kiuel' for the Lamunkhin Evens and the villages of Esso and Anavgai, which are only 25 km apart, for the Bystraia Evens. In contrast, the Negidals have always been more fragmented: as mentioned above, for 1926–27, Myl'nikova and Tsintsius (1931: 108) report five settlements of the Lower Negidals and several hamlets of the Upper Negidals, and in the early 2000s, the Negidals were scattered across a number of settlements (Startsev 2014: 7); the biggest single group were the Upper Negidals settled in Vladimirovka, while the Lower Negidals were dispersed across at least eight different villages along the Lower Amgun' and Amur river. Thus, the individual Negidal speech communities were actually always very small, numbering no more than one hundred, and mostly even less than fifty per individual location.

Proportion of Autochthonous Population

The data concerning the proportion of the Evens and Negidals among the total inhabitants of their individual settlements varies considerably between the groups. For the Lamunkhin Evens, Filippova (2017) provides the proportion of Evens among the overall population of Sebian-Kiuel' without specifying the ethnic affiliation of those not identifying as Evens (Figure 2a); only for 1959 does she give a detailed breakdown (Figure 2b), which shows that newcomers made up only 1 percent of the inhabitants of the village. This picture had not greatly changed fifty years later, based on the household statistics (*pokhoziaistvennye knigi*) consulted during fieldwork in 2009: newcomers made up only 2 percent of the inhabitants of the village. What had changed, however, was the proportion of individuals identifying as Evens versus Sakha: from nearly 40 percent Sakha in 1959 to only 7 percent in 2009. This change is very likely due to the fact that children of Even-Sakha marriages are nowadays preferentially registered as Evens (cf. Vinokurova 2000: 167–168).

For the Bystraia Evens (Figure 3a), Gernet (2008: 88) provides a list of the proportion of Evens among the total population of Bystrinskii

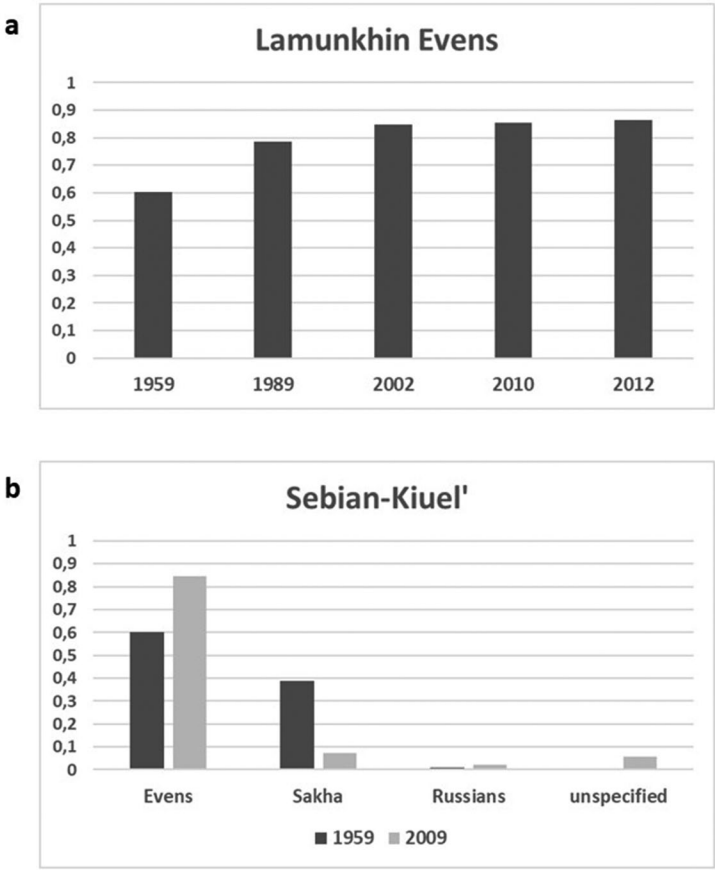


Figure 2. Proportion of Evens in Sebian-Kiuel': a) Proportion of Evens among the total population between 1959 and 2012 (Filippova 2017); b) Detailed population breakdown for Sebian-Kiuel' in 1959 (Filippova 2017) and 2009 (field data).

District between 1925 and 2006, without specifying how many of the non-Evens are other indigenous minorities. However, data for 2005 (Figure 3b) show that the proportion of indigenous peoples versus newcomers differs considerably between Esso (with 72 percent newcomers) and Anavgai (only 25 percent newcomers); furthermore, Evens are in the absolute majority in Anavgai (Gernet 2012: 293).

I do not have access to historical data on the proportion of the Negidals among the overall inhabitants of the settlements where they live;

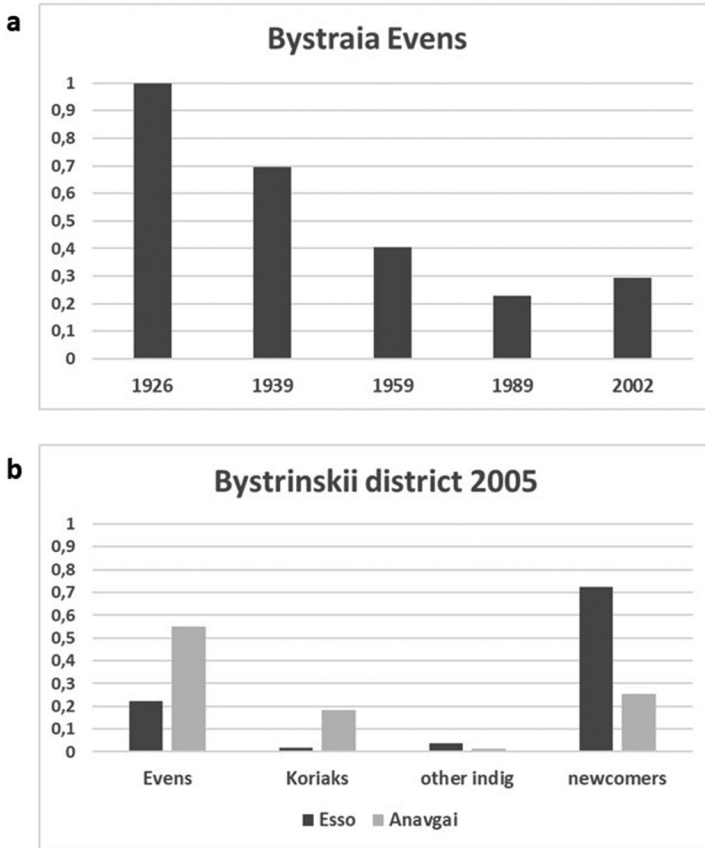


Figure 3. Proportion of Evens in Bystrinskii District: a) Proportion of Evens among the total population between 1926 and 2002 (Gernet 2008: 88); b) Detailed population breakdown for Bystrinskii District in 2005 (Gernet 2012: 293). The “other indig[enous]” groups include Itelmen, Chukchi, and Kamchadals, here meaning offspring of unions between Itelmens and newcomers.

however, Myl'nikova and Tsintsius (1931: 107) mention that, in contrast to the Upper Negidals, who were quite isolated, the Lower Negidals lived in close proximity to Russians, often even in shared settlements. The data shown in Figure 4a come from the website of Vladimirovka⁸ and from individual village statistics dating to 2015–2017 (Pakendorf and Aralova 2017: Lower_Negidal). It should be noted that not only do the Upper Negidals of Vladimirovka constitute a much higher proportion of the inhabitants of the village than do the Lower Negidals

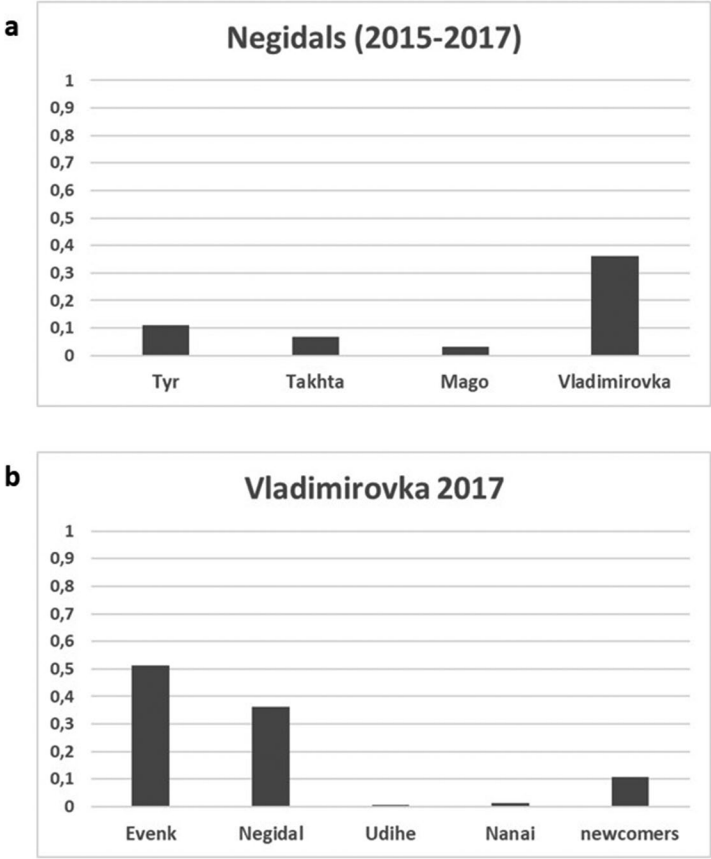


Figure 4. Proportion of Negidals in Khabarovskii Krai: a) Proportion of Negidals among the total inhabitants of the villages where they live. The entry for Tyr includes data for three villages, Tyr, Beloglinka, and Kal'ma; b) Detailed population breakdown for Vladimirovka in 2017 (<http://cmokhv.ru/municipalities/147/>).

in their respective settlements, but the proportion of newcomers in Vladimirovka is very low, constituting only 11 percent of the population, with the majority group in the village being Evenks (Figure 4b). This contrasts with the settlements along the Lower Amur (Tyr, Beloglinka, Kal'ma, Takhta, and Mago), where newcomers make up 56 to 94 percent of the population.

As can be seen, whereas the Lamunkhin Evens have been in the majority in Sebian-Kiucl' since at least the middle of the twentieth century, the Bystraia Evens have been in the minority since the end

of World War II (albeit with a distinction between Anavgai, where the indigenous peoples comprise three quarters of the population and the Evens are in the majority, and Esso, where they make up less than one quarter; Gernet 2008: 79, 88), and the Lower Negidals are in the minority in all of the settlements they inhabit, comprising at most 10 percent of the population. Furthermore, the proportion of newcomers is low or even very low in Sebian-Kiuel', Anavgai, and Vladimirovka, whereas these constitute the majority of the population in the other settlements.

Schooling

The school in Sebian-Kiuel' was founded in 1941 as a primary school with initially two grades and a third grade added from 1942; this was extended to seven grades in 1950 and eight grades in 1962, meaning that from the 1940s to the 1960s the older grades had to go to the district center Sangar to finish their school education. However, since 1970 the school has had ten grades, so that the children can now complete their entire schooling in their home village (MBOU Sebian-Kiuel'skaia NESOSh 2023). Many if not most of the teachers and school directors were local Evens, including well-known Even intellectuals such as Platon Lamutskii and Andrei Krivoshapkin (Pukhov and Dadaskinov 2006: 150; Krivoshapkin 2011: 8–9; MBOU Sebian-Kiuel'skaia NESOSh 2023). Some of the children boarded at the school, but they were free to use Even or Sakha amongst each other, as explained by AVZ (born 1963) in 2010:

ho:jan ebedit bihin. otto bi pakalenijaβ ebedit uktæemmekkererit, vsë ravno. otto ømen nu:t bihin, S. Vanja gerbe, tarjun jutçidit uktæemmekkererit, tara. jan omolgol otto, ahikkaljun nokadit uktæemmekkereriβ. a tak omolgol me:n me:njur pastajanno ebedit uktæemmekkere.

The majority was in Even. But my generation spoke Even, anyway. There was one Russian, Vania S., with him we spoke Russian. That is, the boys (spoke Even), with the girls I spoke Sakha. But the boys always spoke Even amongst themselves.

As to the Bystraia Evens, a school was built in Esso in 1926, with a Russian teacher using Russian schoolbooks. From 1933 it was turned into a boarding school with mainly newcomers (Russians) as teachers, which expanded in 1938–39; in 1944, schools opened in other settlements (Gernet 2008: 34, 36, 60), but those seem to have been only primary schools. Hence the children had to go to boarding school in

Esso to complete their schooling. Some children even had to spend their primary school years in boarding school, if their parents worked in reindeer herding brigades. Teaching was in Russian, even though the children in the beginning did not understand a word of what was being said:

*nonankana tairiŋiŋu tadu selodu Tβaja:ndu. ɲan natæalnejɛ ŋkoleβ oddijur
ɲan Esso:tki upkutnariŋun, tadu internattu bisiŋun. ... bi tairiŋariŋu ŋkoletki
umeniru ɲutɛidiŋ torem etɛiŋu a:r. ɲan uŋniŋun ŋkoladu, utɛitelnitsaŋun
Rimma Mixailovna munteki toreβe:tten ɲutɛiditɛ ɲan ulgimmo:tten orottitɛ
“ununni?” ... ɲan tar egjer ɲan mundu tar te:leŋŋo:tte iaβ gu:ŋjiru.*

At first, I studied (went to school) there, in the village Tvaian. And having finished primary school we went to Esso to study, there we lived in the boarding school. ... When I went to school to learn I didn't know a single word in Russian. And we (learned) in school, and our teacher Rimma Mikhailovna spoke to us in Russian and asked in Even “did you understand?” ... And so the older (children) told us what we should say. (RMS, born 1945, recorded in 2009)

Negidal was one of the languages that was not provided with a writing system in the early Soviet period, so that all schooling has always been in Russian (Kolesnikova and Konstantinova 1968: 109). The village Vladimirovka only has a kindergarten and a primary school, where instruction is in Russian, and all children have to continue their schooling in the district capital Polina Osipenko, where the school is dominated by children of newcomers. Since there still is no regular transport between Vladimirovka and Polina Osipenko, the children have to stay in the boarding school during the week, where they are and were encouraged to speak Russian (Pakendorf and Aralova 2018: 7). The experience of children of Lower Negidals growing up in villages along the Lower Amur was similar to that of other small-numbered peoples of the North: they had to attend a boarding school far from home with children of other minority groups, where they spoke Russian. Some children were forbidden to speak their heritage language even in kindergarten, for example in the village Takhta (Pakendorf and Aralova 2017: Lower Negidal).

Mixed Marriages

With respect to this factor, I have empirical data only from Sebian-Kiuel', where in households with one Even and one Sakha parent it is most often Sakha that is spoken in the family, especially if it is the father who is Sakha (2009 field data). For the Bystraia Evens and the Negidals, evidence is only anecdotal, but is in good accordance with what is observed in the literature: among the Bystraia Evens a woman married to a Koriak speaks Russian with him, and another woman, who is married to a Russian, speaks Russian with her husband and her children. Among the Negidals, the parents of one consultant, who were Nivkh and Negidal, spoke Russian with each other, while a woman who was married to a Nivkh spoke Russian with him (Pakendorf and Aralova 2017: Lower Negidal). In contrast, the most fluent of the last speakers of Upper Negidal were either not married at all or married to a Negidal (Pakendorf and Aralova 2018: 12).

Connectivity

With respect to connections to the wider world, the Lamunkhin Evens are definitely the most isolated of the three communities: the nearest settlement, Segen-Kiuel', is 210 km away, but there is no road, only a *zimnik* (winter road) over rivers that are extremely hazardous to navigate due to several large areas of *naled'* (overflow icings). The trip to Yakutsk can take several days, and there is no regular overland transport; however, in the 2000s and 2010s air travel was extremely irregular and expensive, so that most inhabitants chose the overland route, mostly by travelling with truckers who were bringing provisions to the mine at Endybal. In the early years after the establishment of Sebian-Kiuel', the trip was made by horse or reindeer.

Sebian-Kiuel' is thus not a settlement where outsiders come without any important business. Bystrinskii District, in contrast, is connected to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, the capital of Kamchatka, by a daily bus connection. Esso, in particular, is a popular destination for tourists from Petropavlovsk, since it lies in the heart of the Bystrinskii Nature Park and has several activities to offer visitors, amongst others a very popular thermal pool. However, as late as 1969, the road that links Esso

with Petropavlovsk did not yet exist, as shown by this excerpt from an autobiographical narrative recorded in 2010:

bakuriβu. nan akmu urrin minu gajirin patamufto bi: bakuddiβu goroddu. taduk gorodgitc meme emurin minu samoliotom Kljutεile—Kozyrevskele. taduk akmu gajirin minu. gadin, urriβun, paromite. nan algan girkasnin. minuda tukrin.

I was born. And my father went and fetched me because I was born in town (i.e., in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii). From there, from town, mama brought me by plane to Kliuchi—to Kozyrevsk. From there my father came to fetch me. He took (me), we went, by ferry. And he went on foot. And he carried me. (GIK, born 1969)

It was not possible to elucidate with certainty when the road between Petropavlovsk and Ezzo was constructed, but it might have been in the 1970s, when electricity was brought to the district (Gernet 2008: 73).

Similar to Bystrinskii District, Polina Osipenko District is linked to the regional capital, Khabarovsk, by a daily bus connection, although it was impossible to find information on the year when this road was established. A big difference, however, in the situation of the Negidals from that of the Lamunkhin and Bystraia Evens, is that river transport has always played a big role, both on a small scale (historically with dugout canoes, nowadays with *motoriki*, western-style boats with outboard motors) and on a larger scale, with passenger ferries and steamships. Given their location at the mouth of the Amgun' and on the Lower Amur, the Lower Negidals were probably more connected to the outside world than the Upper Negidals.

Factors Affecting Language Vitality: Discussion and Conclusions

Vitality of Lamunkhin Even, Bystraia Even, and Negidal

To summarize the “external” factors that affect language vitality, the two Even communities have had comparable population sizes throughout the twentieth century, 520 and 630 on average, and were settled in a fairly compact area. In contrast, even though the average population size of 450 for the Negidals is on the same order of magnitude as that of the Evens, they were always dispersed over several settlements, some of which are separated by considerable distances. The Lamunkhin Evens and the Upper Negidals have not had to move from their homes,

Sebian-Kiuel' and Vladimirovka, since these villages were founded in 1931 and 1945, respectively; in contrast, the Bystraia Evens and the Lower Negidals were resettled numerous times between the 1940s and the 1970s. These relocations had a particularly severe impact on the community structure of the Lower Negidals, who found themselves in villages with numerous other indigenous communities and with a preponderance of newcomers. In contrast, the Lamunkhin Evens are in the majority in Sebian-Kiuel', as are the Bystraia Evens in Anavgai, and newcomers constitute only a small fraction of the overall population of these villages, while the Bystraia Evens in Esso, like the Lower Negidals, are a minority group in a settlement dominated by newcomers. Although the Upper Negidals are not in the majority in Vladimirovka, the proportion of newcomers in this village is very small. Sebian-Kiuel' is a very isolated village, with no close neighbors and hardly any regular transport options; in contrast, Bystrinskii District, and especially Esso, is nowadays frequented by large numbers of Russian-speakers from Petropavlovsk, thanks to the daily bus connection. Although there is no regular transport linking Vladimirovka to the district capital Polina Osipenko, the two settlements are only 20 km apart, and it is relatively easy to find a private boat or car to make the journey from Vladimirovka to Polina Osipenko. The school in Sebian-Kiuel' stands out in having had a large number of local Evens among its teachers, and even in the boarding school Even was a frequent language of communication among the children; this contrasts with Bystrinskii District, where the teachers were predominantly Russian-speaking newcomers and the children had to learn Russian. The Negidals, too, have been confronted with Russian teachers and often the enforcement of Russian as the language of communication in kindergarten and boarding schools. In all communities, the heritage language is disfavored in linguistically mixed families, as far as can be deduced from the partial information.

Thus, based on these data, what characterizes the situation of the most vital lect, Lamunkhin Even, is continued settlement of a relatively numerous group in one very isolated village, where they constitute the majority group and where newcomers from western parts of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation were and are a small minority. In addition, the fact that the school was extended to encompass seven and even eight grades from a relatively early period and that the teachers were to a large degree local Evens distinguishes the Lamunkhin Even situation from that of the Bystraia Evens and the Negidals. The impact of continuous settlement, without forced relocations, and the small number of Russian-speaking newcomers are also factors that

distinguish the Upper Negidals—whose language is still spoken, albeit by only a few individuals—from the Lower Negidals—where the language is extinct, even though demographically the Lower Negidals have always outnumbered the Upper Negidals (Myl'nikova and Tsintsius 1931: 108; Kolesnikova and Konstantinova 1968: 110; Pevnov and Khasanova 2006: 452).

It is harder to evaluate the “internal” factors discussed by Vakhtin (2001) in the absence of targeted interviews to this effect. Nevertheless, some indirect considerations can be taken into account. With respect to the “expectations of others” and the confrontation with negative stereotypes, this is likely to play a more detrimental role in contexts where the newcomers are in the majority, since many of their pejorative attitudes are racially based. This will thus not play such a large role in those settlements where newcomers of European origin are in the minority, namely Sebian-Kiuel', Anavgai, and Vladimirovka. However, since Vladimirovka is in close proximity to Polina Osipenko, where Russians have been in the majority since the end of the nineteenth century, and Anavgai is in close proximity to Esso, dominated by newcomers since the 1950s, the mitigating effect of living in a village with predominantly indigenous inhabitants might not have been enough to counter-balance the effect of the negative stereotypes the Negidals and Anavgai Evens encountered during their frequent trips to the district capitals. In addition, their children would have been constantly confronted with these pejorative attitudes during their school years, whereas the Lamunkhin Even children, going to a school where many of the teachers were Lamunkhin Evens, would not have had to endure such a negative experience. The impact of negative “expectations of others” would have been particularly pronounced for the Evens in Esso and the Lower Negidals, faced with a majority of newcomers both in boarding schools and in daily life.

It is much harder, if not impossible, to evaluate the factor of “identity” put forward by Vakhtin (2001). However, until quite recently there was still a very strong connection among the Lamunkhin Evens with their traditional reindeer herding way of life: many of the narratives recorded in 2008 to 2012 tell of children spending their school holidays in a reindeer brigade with relatives. This implies that they were still quite happy to identify with their traditional culture and their community—additionally confirmed by the results of a survey undertaken in 2014, where nearly 73 percent of the respondents indicated they wanted to remain in Sebian-Kiuel' for their whole life (Grigor'ev 2016: 130)—and thus felt no need to avoid their heritage language as a marker of this

identity⁹ (cf. Vakhtin 2001: 247). This high level of maintenance of the traditional means of subsistence might also have lessened the pressure of the pragmatic motivations proposed by Vakhtin (2001: 233–236): rather than needing to use a dominant language to find work, a knowledge of Even is of importance for this traditional occupation, which revolves around specialized knowledge transmitted linguistically (cf. Saarikivi and Toivanen 2015: 10). In contrast to the Lamunkhin Evens, the Bystraia Evens have a rather ambivalent relation to their traditional culture (Gernet 2012: 219–228), which might have weakened their sense of identity. Hence, at least for the Lamunkhin Evens, it would seem as if the “internally induced” factors that facilitate language shift are not very prominent, while they are likely to have played a more dominant role among the Bystraia Evens and Negidals.

We might thus conclude that the most important factors determining language vitality are isolation and the maintenance of a compact settlement pattern, with a minority of newcomers from the European parts of the Soviet Union/Russian Federation, and a large number of local indigenous community members among the school staff, since these have a positive effect on the “internal” factors that allow a community to hold on to their language. However, there are two communities speaking Northern Tungusic languages that complicate this conclusion: the Evens of Topolinoe and the Evenks of Iengra.

Topolinoe Even and Iengra Evenki

Topolinoe, located in Tomponskii District, is, like Sebian-Kiuél', a village where Evens (744 in 2010) constitute the majority population group and where reindeer herding is still maintained. In addition, it is a very isolated settlement (Filippova 2019: 200): although there is a road that links it with Khandyga, the district capital, this is a bad gravel road that can take days to travel in summer. However, in contrast to Sebian-Kiuél', in Topolinoe the language is being lost: already in the early 1990s only about a third of the children actively used the language (Mal'chukov 1997: 102), and nowadays the main language of communication among younger people is Russian (Kuz'mina 2018: 48). Hence, isolation and a high proportion of Evens among the inhabitants are no proof against language loss.¹⁰

Although it is hard to establish with certainty, the loss of Even in Topolinoe may have been due to the school system: during a visit to the village in December 2003, my hostess, who was a fully fluent Even

speaker, explained to me that like many of her generation she and her husband had switched to Russian as their language of peer communication in the boarding school (where she and her sister had been taken by force), and had maintained this means of communication even after leaving school; they therefore spoke Russian with each other and with their children. This dominance of Russian in the school might be linked to a higher proportion of Russian-speaking newcomers in Topolinoe than in Sebian-Kiuel': Mal'chukov (1997: 102) reports 21 percent for 1993. This is far higher than the 1 to 2 percent of Russian-speaking newcomers reported for Sebian-Kiuel' in 1959 and 2009 (Figure 2b).¹¹ A further factor that at first glance might have played a role in the loss of Even in Topolinoe is the fact that Evens of different geographic and dialectal origins were settled here (Filippova 2019: 200)—as observed by Grenoble (2010: 74) for Evenki in Tura, perceived dialectal differences might have impeded the use of Even among Evens. However, according to Dejan Matić (p.c. 11 February 2023), such dialectal differences were merely a source of amusement to speakers, and not an obstacle to communication. Nevertheless, this geographically mixed origin does indicate that their social networks must have been disrupted by the resettlement.

As to Iengra, it is one of the few villages in which the Evenki language is still relatively viable¹² (Grenoble 2024: 1223; Struchkov 2008), with Kazakevich et al. (2022: 35–36) judging it “threatened” rather than endangered. However, it is not at all isolated: located in Neriungri Industrial District, it originated in the 1920s in the vicinity of a gold-mining settlement, and it includes the train station Zolotinka of the Baikal-Amur railroad. In the 1950s and 1960s there were “continuous reorganizations” of the collective farms comprised of Evenks (Struchkov 2008: 64), and in 1958 four dialectally and geographically disparate groups of Evenks were joined together in Iengra (Lavrillier 2004: 438). In 2006, 871 of the 1452 inhabitants of the village (i.e., 60 percent) were Evenks and 30 percent were Russians, and most of the 156 Evenki families lived a settled life in town, while only thirty still migrated in the taiga with their reindeer (Struchkov 2008: 65).

Even if the state of language loss in Iengra has progressed further than it has in Sebian-Kiuel' (see endnote 12), it is noteworthy that an Evenk community living in a settlement that is not isolated at all and where about half the families are linguistically mixed has managed to maintain its heritage language to a far higher degree than other Evenk communities in the Republic Sakha (Yakutia; Struchkov 2008: 64). Possibly the “high level of ethnic identity” (Struchkov 2011: 42)

maintained by Iengra Evenks played a decisive role in this situation; how they managed to maintain this sense of identity in spite of the adverse conditions is a question that merits a dedicated study, but it highlights the important role that linguistic ideologies play in language maintenance and loss, as mentioned above.

To conclude, in contrast to what one might assume based on the situation of Lamunkhin Even, isolation does not appear to be a major factor in the maintenance of language vitality, since languages can be lost even in isolated villages, such as Topolinoe, and can be maintained in the absence of isolation, as in Iengra. Taking all the data together, the main external factors determining language vitality in Siberia appear to be the maintenance of cohesive and compact speech communities without forced resettlements and a relative minority of newcomers. These provide a favorable context for the absence of negative stereotypes projected by newcomers from the European part of the country and the maintenance of a strong sense of identity linked to one's heritage culture and language, which are the major community-internal factors determining language vitality (Vakhtin 2001: 233–249).

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Notes

1. The criteria for inclusion in this group are small population size (less than fifty thousand individuals), a traditional lifestyle of nomadic or semi-nomadic reindeer herding, hunting, fishing, and gathering, and specificities of the traditional culture (Severnaia entsiklopediia 2004: 421).

2. Following Ross (2001: 146), I use the term *lect* to cover both dialects and languages.

3. The Negidal documentation project differed, since the basis for this was a large collection of recordings undertaken in 2005–2010 by a team of Russian linguists (Kalinina 2013).

4. I use the term “fragilization” rather than the more common “endangerment,” since the latter has connotations of focusing on the external pressures that lead to the loss of languages, while “fragilization” focuses more on the process of loss from a language-internal perspective, namely on the gradual breakdown of the language ecology.

5. Interestingly, although Lamunkhin Even, one of the focal lects of this article, is very different from the “literary” standard, partly due to noticeable Sakha influence, and hence highly stigmatized, it is this dialect that is one of the most vital Even dialects.

6. Landing page of the Negidal deposit, Endangered Languages Archive, <http://hdl.handle.net/2196/b644db81-725c-4031-935c-f33c763df152> (accessed on 28 October 2023).

7. The 1926 census also counted Negidals in the Nikolaevskii *raion* (Vsesoiuznaia perepis’ 1928: 131), and there is sporadic mention of Negidals in the vicinity of Lake Orel in the literature (Pevnov and Khasanova 2006: 451, Startsev 2014: 6, Bereznitskii and Janchev 2014: 25, 30). However, no details are known about this group—possibly because they may have died out in the early 1920s during the civil war (Bereznitskii and Janchev 2014: 36).

8. Assotsiatsiia Sovet Munitsipal'nykh Obrazovaniï Khabarovskogo kraia, "Sel'skoe poselenie 'Selo Vladimirovka'." <http://cmokhv.ru/municipalities/147/> (accessed 25 October 2023).

9. However, this appears to be changing, as indicated by the perception of reindeer herding as being not prestigious and a corresponding decline in young members of northern indigenous communities who want to take up reindeer herding as a profession (Kalitin 2021: 36, Ignatyeva et al. 2022: 83). Furthermore, Sharina (2015: 97) points out that even among compact Even communities where the language has been maintained up to now, such as Sebian-Kiuël', children are starting to lose interest in their heritage culture and language.

10. Similarly, in their discussion of language vitality among Evenki dialects, Kazakevich et al. (2022: 38) point out that, even when factors that have been shown to have a positive influence on language maintenance are present in a particular speech situation, this is no guarantee that the lect will indeed be maintained.

11. It should be noted that I lack detailed data for Sebian-Kiuël' for the period of the most pronounced influx of newcomers to Siberia, between the 1960s and the end of the Soviet Union, so that the numbers are not entirely comparable.

12. However, nowadays the degree of vitality of this Evenki dialect appears to be less than some statements lead one to assume. Thus, although Struchkov (2011: 41) writes about Iengra: "Practically all Evenks speak their heritage language to varying degrees" (my translation), he goes on to say that the language of daily communication in linguistically mixed families is Russian, and that even in mono-ethnic Evenk families parents speak with each other and with their children predominantly in Russian, using Evenki mostly when discussing topics that they do not want the children to understand. This indicates that children in Iengra actually do not really speak the language anymore, as confirmed by sociolinguistic survey results in which most children under the age of sixteen stated that they understand Evenki, but do not speak it or speak it only poorly (Struchkov 2011: 42).

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