

# **THE PRESENT-DAY SITUATION OF THE UDMURT LANGUAGE**

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Theses of PhD Dissertation

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## **The aim and subject of the thesis**

The main objective of the thesis is to highlight the present-day situation of the Udmurt language with a view to place of residence, age and qualification, and on the basis of the research on the language usage of different Udmurt speakers. Furthermore, I considered it essential that the research on language usage was founded on data which had been collected from the above identified groups of speakers and were suitable for statistical processing.

The subject of the research is the introduction of 192 Udmurt speakers' language usage on the basis of a questionnaire survey. The language usage is presented through investigating the examined speakers' language acquisition, knowledge, and choice, their relations with language and opinions about grammatical variables. The introduction of the language usage is complemented by certain aspects that are not linguistic but still influence language usage, by general information about the Udmurt language and by the description of the research methodology.

The topicality of this thesis comes from the fact that there has not been any research on the usage of the Udmurt language that examines it in respect of individual language usage domains<sup>1</sup> and concerning speakers' groups that differ in sociological variables, and that can be statistically processed.

There is also a lack of research on the usage of the grammatical variables' variants with regard to sociological variables and in relation to different groups of speakers.

In the literature specialised in researches on bilingualism there are hardly any works on the present-day language usage of Finno-Ugric language peoples living in Russia. This kind of research would be topical also because the linguistic situation of the Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia who have become bilingual in the last half of the century, today can be characterised by their mother-tongues' limited sphere of applicability and an advanced degree of language assimilation.

The data collection was carried out by means of questionnaire, as my main objectives were that the research was quantitative in its method and so that the findings could be comparable to the general hypotheses about the Udmurt language usage and also that the research can be repeated later. There was no prepared questionnaire available on the Udmurt language usage. While I could use some questions from other questionnaires examining bilingual usage, albeit after some alterations, I could not resort to this solution in the case of the grammatical variables' usage. Accordingly, it was necessary to set the additional aim of creating a language usage questionnaire – especially concerned with the

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<sup>1</sup> Vö. Kiss 1995: 66-70.

usage of grammatical variables – for the research on the speakers' language usage.

### **Basic concepts**

In the dissertation the definition of the main applied basic concepts are given: speaking community, bilingualism, mother-tongue, linguistic variable, language usage domain.

### **The Udmurt Language**

The Udmurt language belongs to the group of the Finno-Ugric languages. Although the Udmurts have been living in close interrelationship with Turkish-language (Volga-Bulgarian, Tartar, Baskir) and Slavonic-language (Russian) speaking people for centuries, they preserved their linguistic (and cultural) independence until recent times. However, due to the social and political changes in the last century practically the entire Udmurt-language speaking community has become (at least) bilingual (trilingual with Tartar in the Southern areas). In the generation of the present grandparents there still can be found, albeit very rarely, monolingual (Udmurt) speaking people. Consequently, present-day speakers are indigenous, bi- or trilingual people living in minority position.

On the basis of empirical observations it seems that in the second part of the last century the nature of primary linguistic socialisation: the acquisition of both the Russian and Udmurt languages happens in early childhood, often simultaneously.

The formation of the Udmurt literary language, the setting of linguistic norms started in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The standard usage of the language, however, is still not regulated in detail, since in consequence of the established social-political circumstances the Udmurt language is not used at all or used only in a limited way on several domains of language usage in spite of the language revival endeavours which took off in the last decade. Among others the education in the mother-tongue is also insufficient. Therefore present-day speakers use their mother-tongue either only at the level of dialect or at the level of both dialect and standard language.

### **Literature specialised in this theme**

In the specialist literature concentrating on bilingualism there are hardly any works discussing Udmurt-Russian bilingualism. In Pusztay's monograph investigating the situation of the Finno-Ugric peoples and languages according to aspects that are not linguistic he also discusses information on the Udmurt linguistic situation. (Pusztay 2006). There are several studies on the circumstances of language usage that are not linguistic, I. Fenomen 2002, Fenomen 2001, Krilova – Behtyerev – Behtyereva 2000. Ethnopsychological or ethnosociological researches can also be mentioned: I. Bajmetov – Ismuratov – Razin – Ragyevic 1999, Sirobokova 1999.

The first and only linguistic work on the Udmurt language with a sociolinguistic approach is Pozgyejeva's candidate's dissertation, in which the

author discusses the phonetics and phonology of the Udmurt language (Pozgyejeva 1985).

Researches on the Udmurt language inasmuch as they deal with the Udmurt-other connections, traditionally study the connections between contact languages, with special regard to the borrowing of words, l. 1972, 1990b, Tarakanov 1993, Karakulov and Karakulova compare the Udmurt language with Russian from the viewpoint of typology (2001). Suihkonen 1990, Kelmakov 2000 also have typological subjects.

Linguistics in the Udmurt Republic is first of all focused on dialectological and historical research, and performs linguistic tasks (preparing dictionaries, school books, and orthographic rules). Researches on spoken language and bilingualism/bidialectalism are randomly conducted, but there is no Udmurt sociolinguistic literature. The present literature specialised in interference-phenomena has a practical approach: its primary aim is to solve the problems that children speaking Udmurt as their mother-tongue face when learning Russian.

The variables showing the contact effects of Russian are treated by the Udmurt linguistic literature as the question of correct usage, in a prescriptive way.

### **Material and method**

I collected the material necessary to carry out the research on language usage<sup>2</sup> by means of a questionnaire in the interest of comparability of the answers given by certain examined groups. In addition, I also used the method of participatory observation and made great use of literature specialised in aspects that are not linguistic but still influence language usage.

The questionnaire was compiled on the basis of specialist literature specialised in bilingual research and – concerning the grammatical variables – literature concentrating on Udmurt dialectological and contact researches, and also relying on my own observations. It contained both open-ended and closed questions.

As there was no questionnaire survey with a sociolinguistic point of view at my disposal, I endeavoured to include in the questionnaire as many grammatical variables as possible and later on the grounds of the experiences to concentrate the research around certain topics. The grammatical variables were tested with different kinds of tasks.

The material was collected via field-work. The questionnaire survey was conducted by Udmurt native speakers, and I used the additional method of participatory observation.

The collected material was coded, transferred to the computer and the research findings were obtained by using this database.

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<sup>2</sup> Vö. Kiss 1995: 32.

The sample of the research is analysed according to age, sex and qualification<sup>3</sup>. So based on the final results the possible differences in respects of the speakers' age, qualification and place of residence can be measured and shown, but the sample of my research cannot be considered representative. Instead of aiming for a sample representative of the present-day demographic conditions – which have significantly changed in the last quarter of the century – I tried to achieve around equal proportions of the interviewed people in the research sample according to their age, qualification and place of residence.

The respondents were divided into three age-groups (17-30 years old, 30-60 years old and over 60), into three qualification levels (people completed primary, secondary or higher education) and according to the five types of settlements they were from (three villages with Udmurt in the majority: one in the Northern, one in the Central and one in the Southern dialect areas; and the places with a Russian majority: one small town and the capital). In the Udmurt Republic slightly more than half of the Udmurts live in villages. The language usage is significantly determined by geographical belonging. Therefore the linguistic questionnaire survey was conducted in two districts and in two towns.

The ratio of women and men is around the same in the first two age groups, but the majority of the over 60 is female. The social-historical conditions are behind the disproportion of the qualification categories in the different age groups: people over 60 rarely have higher qualifications, while in the other two age groups the respondents had already completed – or were just about to complete – their minimum secondary level education.

### **The structure of the thesis**

Following the table of contents the lists of maps, tables and figures can be found.

After them the thesis is divided into five numbered parts.

The first chapter is the introduction.

The second chapter contains the introduction of language ecological factors<sup>4</sup>. The here described factors that are not linguistic but still explain and influence language usage are geographical location and demographic situation, history, economy, politics, and culture.

The third chapter carries the title of the sociolinguistic introduction of the Udmurt language. It is divided into three larger sections.

The first section gives a brief introduction of the Udmurt language, and summarises certain measures that are not linguistic but are directly concerned with language usage. The specialised literature connected to this topic and focused on the Udmurt language, the geographical structure of the Udmurt language, the main periods of the language history and the formation of the literary language are all introduced here. It is followed by descriptions of the Udmurt-Russian bilingualism applied to Russian and to Udmurt speakers.

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<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Vö. Bartha 1999: 134.

Finally this section contains those measures and activities that are reckoned in the scope of linguistic planning.

The second section describes the process of compiling the questionnaire and the methods of material collection. The themes of the research that appeared in the questionnaire – language acquisition, language knowledge, and language choice, relation to a language and linguistic variables – are listed here with the justification for these choices. Pieces of practical information on the compilation of the questionnaire, the circumstances of the collection, the recording of the data and on the presentation of the findings are summarised in this section. Then the lessons to be learnt from the compilation of the questionnaire are formulated here and I also include some suggestions for alteration in a future version of the questionnaire. Finally, this section contains the description of the respondents and of the research locations.

The third section describes the usage of the Udmurt and the Russian languages among the questioned speakers. By the individual topics concerning language usage I evaluate the research findings which are given in tables showing percentage proportion. The language choice is organised into four groups – speaking partners, locations, subjects of conversation and other possibilities of language choice.

At the end of this chapter there is a general index of language usage, which presents the summary of every examined group's language usage. The index was defined on the basis of the weighted evaluation of selected issues concerning language usage and relation to a language.

The fourth chapter introduces the speakers' choice in relation to language variables. The discussed language variables are put into three larger groups: variables with variants of dialectical origin, variables with variants showing possible Russian interference, and variables with variants of Udmurt words from language reform and Russian loan words.

The fifth chapter of the thesis is its summary, which sums up the work's main results. It is followed by the appendices, which contains the questionnaire used in the survey and its Hungarian version, moreover some graphs and the cross table of all the presented research questions.

## **Findings**

### Language knowledge

The knowledge of Russian and Udmurt languages shows recognisable differences among the generations.

People over 60 considered their knowledge of Udmurt very good but of Russian not that satisfactory. Only a couple of them declared a mastery of the Russian spoken language. The middle-aged speak nearly as good Russian as Udmurt, and they read and write better in Russian. The youngest generation understand, speak, write and read significantly better in Russian than in Udmurt.

The speakers generally find the difference between the dialect spoken by them and the standard language significant. The oldest generation know the Udmurt standard language only very little, they can speak only the dialect. The differences between the dialect and the standard language listening comprehension and speaking fluency decrease among the younger generation but still prevail, so the knowledge of Udmurt in dialect is at a higher level for all the generations than the knowledge of the literary Udmurt.

#### Language acquisition

The two main places of language acquisition for all speakers are their home and school, but there are recognisable divergences of language acquisition among the generations. At home the elderly speakers learnt only Udmurt, and so got to know Russian at school or later in their adult lives. Presently the simultaneous or successive (i.e. in succession) but always childhood language acquisition is typical of the method of language acquisition. The present-day youth and young middle-aged have been or are taught Russian as well or only Russian already by their parents in order to avoid being at a disadvantage at school. Language competence differs according to age: as in general the elderly are dominantly Udmurt speakers; the younger generations are balanced bilingual or dominantly Russian bilingual.

The type of language acquisition is dependent upon the status of the languages involved: Udmurt has a lower acceptance in the society, familiarity with it does not help individual mobility, it does not offer useful knowledge in the areas of economy and trade. The speakers do not believe that their skills increase with the knowledge of more than one language or with studying in their mother-tongue. All of these logically create a favourable situation for subtractive bilingualism.

The role of the school in the Udmurt language acquisition is significant for each generation, it comes directly after the home: as the school is the place of learning literary Udmurt.

A great part of the present-day youth cannot hand the Udmurt language down to their children because of their own insufficient language competences. Therefore in the future the teaching of Udmurt and the education in the Udmurt language should be a much greater role given. Moreover, grandparents still speaking a very fluent Udmurt could take on a significant part in language acquisition. However, under present-day circumstances both possibilities are mere illusions which cannot be realised without effective external support, institutional help and a definite raise in the prestige of the language.

#### Language choice

On the basis of the differences in number between the speakers of the two contact languages and because of other circumstances that are not linguistic it cannot be expected that the use of the minority language dominates outside

family circles. However, by now Russian also became a family language beside (or instead of) Udmurt with the generation of the middle-aged and the urban population of the Udmurts playing a key role in it. On the whole, it is still the use of Udmurt that dominates in the family, but on the scenes of community life it is pushed into the background in the cases of all the generations.

The place of residence and the demographic situation clearly determine whether a speaker has any chance to practice his mother-tongue. Accordingly, Udmurt is used generally in the largest proportion among the respondents of the Southern and Central regions, and in the smallest proportion among the urban Udmurts. The use of Russian is the most typical of respondents in Izsevszk and speakers in the Northern region, but it is not exclusive as approximately 50% of them use both languages alike.

It is, however, difficult to make generalisations about certain locations, as each of them can be considered unique. Sometimes the speakers of the Southern region, other times the speakers of the Northern region have more opportunities to speak Udmurt, as the choice of language in the different locations of language usage is unique in every area of residence, in every village.

Having higher education qualification is not favourable to the Udmurt language usage: only people with primary qualification use Udmurt alone or mainly in the communication with different discussion partners and in the various locations. Accordingly, the written usage of the language, which is frequent among the younger and more educated respondents, is characterised by the dominance of the Russian language.

On the whole, it can be stated that nearly half of the respondents use both Russian and Udmurt alike. The exclusive or predominant use of the Udmurt language is mostly typical of the language usage of the elderly. By comparison, the usage of the Udmurt language among the middle-aged and the youth shows a sharp decline. The exclusively Udmurt communication among the middle-aged has reached a minimum level. The proportion of people using both languages is slightly higher in the group of the middle-aged than among the elderly, but around the same – almost half of the groups – as in the age group of the under 30.

The use of the Russian language shows different proportions in the age groups: parallel to the decrease of age the use of Russian increases following the decline in the use of the Udmurt language. So Udmurt is not succeeded by the usage of both languages but the predominant or exclusive use of Russian. In the age group of the under 30 there are people who speak only Russian.

Accordingly, the easier language is Udmurt for the older generations and Russian for the younger ones.

From the viewpoint of the future survival of the language that would be promising if the number of people using both languages did not fall, if the bilingualism of this considerable size group showed a relative stability. However, the data indicates that the decrease of age is followed by a decline in

the proportion of people speaking both languages and by an increase in the proportion of those who use exclusively or predominantly Russian.

The proportion of those who speak only the standard form of Udmurt is insignificant, the overwhelming majority speak only in dialect or in dialect as well. However, the age differences are characteristic: the use of dialect is less and less present among the younger speakers.

The relation with the language

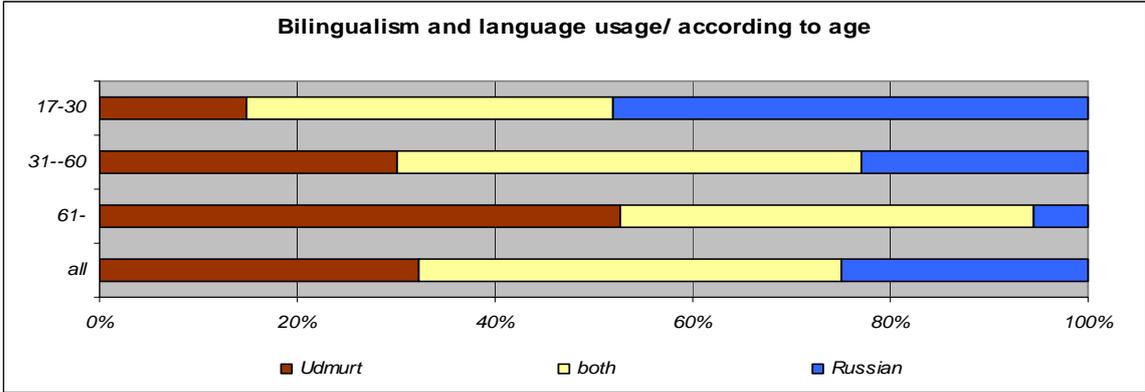
The recipients favour Udmurt when discussing family matters, personal feelings and life, while they consider it proper to use Russian when speaking about social issues. It deserves, however, attention that among the youth the proportion of those who prefer speaking in Udmurt has already halved. They are the ones who do not experience language change, probably in connection with their less frequent language use. In their opinion there is no subject that can be discussed better in Udmurt. The young people are also those – in addition to the speakers in the Southern region – who see the future of the Udmurt language in the most pessimistic way.

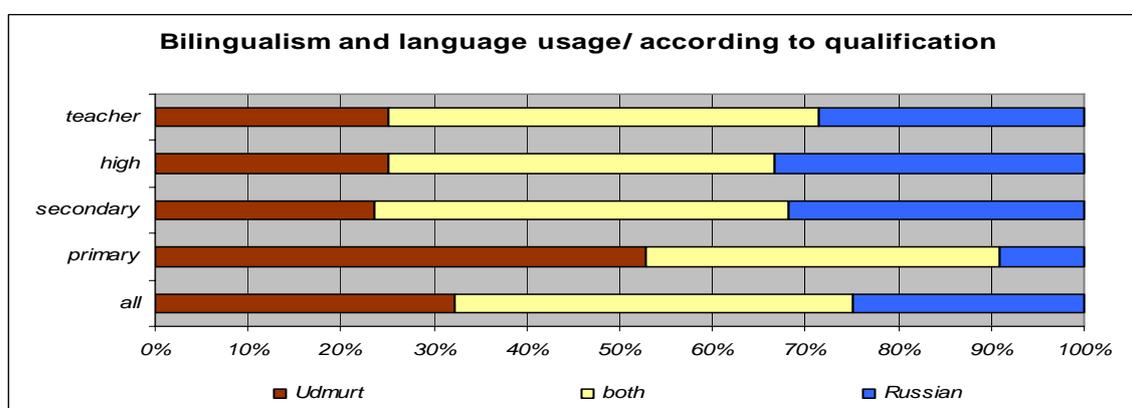
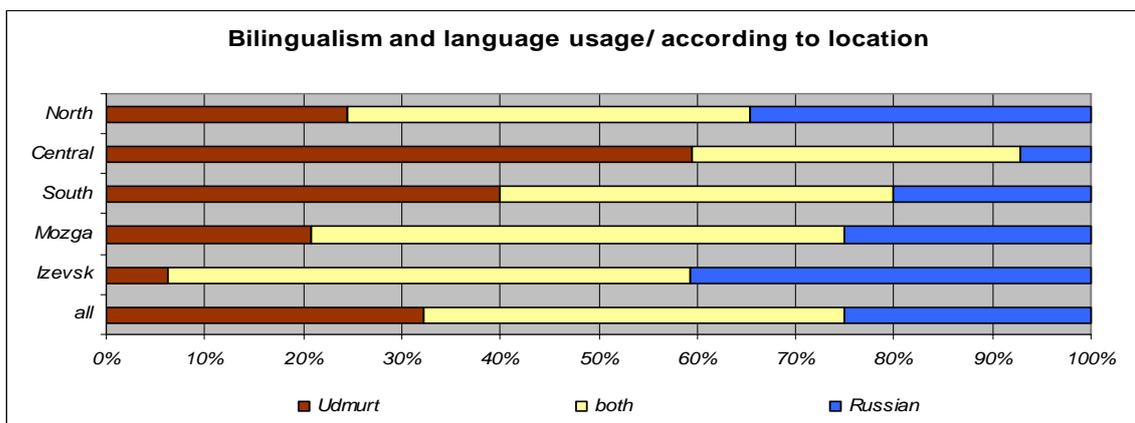
The education of Udmurt is considered important independently from the age of the respondents, around fifty percentage of them share the opinion that everybody should learn Udmurt in the Udmurt Republic.

The spoken language characterised by frequent changes of code due to the everyday use of both languages is looked on as inappropriate. It is possible, that this attitude also contributes to the fact that on certain domains of language usage Udmurt is forced into the background.

It is not typical any more that somebody is rebuked for speaking Udmurt in a public area. One possible explanation is a positive change in the social public thinking, the other is the less frequent use of the Udmurt language.

In the basis of the above characterised language usage and relation with the language I compiled a general index of language usage, which illustrates the summary of the individual examined groups' language usage. The index was defined on the basis of the weighted evaluation of selected issues concerning language usage and relation with a language. The following graph illustrates this.





Concerning the speakers' choice of grammatical variables the following can be stated.

The judgement on certain dialectal phenomena is influenced by the dialectal background, but not to a decisive degree. In the judgments on several grammatical variables with dialectal background there are no irreconcilable differences among those respondents who live in various dialectal areas. The use of the dialectal variants shows a decreasing tendency mainly among the young.

The opinion about those linguistic phenomena that can be explained by the Russian contact effect – morphological, syntactic and lexicological variables - is not uniform. The speakers generally consider the characteristically Russian structures also good, the young to a larger extent than the elderly people.

Between an Udmurt word of the language revival and its equivalent Russian loan word the speakers tend to choose the common Russian loan word, while they usually regard the Udmurt word also appropriate.

In the case of certain variants of some variables- loan verbs, morphological variables with dialectal background – the spontaneous linguistic form strongly deviates from the literary norm taught at school and used in the media. It might not be too bold to assume that the use of the Udmurt language in as many domains of language usage and with as many discussion partners as possible could be helped, if the use of non-standard linguistic variables – either with

dialectal background or Russian borrowings – were not connected with institutionally negative value judgement.

As a final conclusion it can be stated that since the rival of the Udmurt language in respect of usage is the Russian language that has high reputation and long literary history and consequently a set standard, only an Udmurt language used in a wide circle of functions and with a set standard can be a match for it. The acquisition and use of this language, however, cannot be imagined without its widespread usage at schools. It is extremely important that the speakers do not change to monolingual Russian communication, but use and be able to use both languages in as many domains as possible. Accordingly, paying attention to the language usage of those speakers who use both languages is worth and necessary.

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