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On the Problem of the Current State and Preservation of the Language of Chinese Evenks (Socio-Linguistic Aspect)

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Abstract. In the context of rapid technological development and globalization, issues related to the preservation of languages of small nationalities are becoming increasingly relevant. Among these languages is the language of Chinese Evenks (Solons), which, according to research data, is in a state close to decline. This article analyzes the current state of the Evenki language as well as factors influencing its development and survival. The study is based on the transdisciplinary approach of “language ecology,” which studies the interaction of languages with their social, cultural, psychological, geographical, and ecological characteristics. The language system is considered similar to a biological ecosystem that requires balance for preserving linguistic diversity. Therefore, special attention is paid to the language ecological environment, which determines its viability.

Keywords: language of Chinese Evenks, ethnic minority language, language ecology, language environment, language diversity, language policy, transdisciplinary approach.

Research area: Social Structure, Social Institutions and Processes; Interdisciplinary Language Studies.

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К вопросу современного состояния и сохранения языка китайских эвенков (социолингвистический аспект)

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Аннотация. В современных условиях быстрого развития технологий и глобализации вопросы сохранения языка малых народностей становятся все более актуальными. К числу таких языков относится язык китайских эвенков (солонгов), который, согласно исследовательским данным, находится в состоянии, близком к исчезновению. В данной статье анализируется текущее состояние эвенкийского языка, а также факторы, влияющие на его развитие и выживание. Исследование базируется на трансдисциплинарном направлении «экология языка», изучающем взаимодействие языков с их социальными, культурными, психологическими, географическими и экологическими характеристиками. Языковая система рассматривается подобно биологической экосистеме, которая требует равновесия для сохранения языкового многообразия. В силу этого особое внимание уделяется экологической среде языка, которая определяет его жизнеспособность.

Ключевые слова: язык китайских эвенков, язык этнического меньшинства, экология языка, языковая среда, языковое многообразие, языковая политика, трансдисциплинарность.

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Introduction

The widespread use of Putonghua (standard Chinese), processes of globalization, and the development of internet technologies bring numerous competitive and technological advantages to China on the one hand. On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that all these factors cause fatal damage to the languages of national minorities, whose number of speakers is decreasing from year to year, and the possibility of survival of these languages, along with the ecological environment necessary for their development and existence, is critically deteriorating. This seems relevant to the majority of languages of national minorities in general,

and to the language of Chinese Evenks in particular.

The Evenks in China belong to the ethnic minorities, and according to the latest census of 2020, their population totals 39,534 people. The main areas where this ethnic group is found are Inner Mongolia (about 2/3) and Heilongjiang Province. In Inner Mongolia, the Evenks mainly live in the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun, which is a part of Hulunbuir City District. This area is the center of ethnic identity and cultural activities for the Evenks. A small number of Evenks reside in the border city of Manzhouli, some Evenks also live in Hailar City.

Evenks in China can be divided into several subgroups based on their historical way of life and localization. According to our analysis of research literature, we believe that two relatively numerous subgroups of Chinese Evenks can be identified: Solon Evenks (索伦鄂温克) and Olunchen Evenks (敖鲁古雅鄂温克).

Since Solon Evenks is the most numerous subgroup of Evenks in China, our study will focus on the state and prospects for preserving the language of this ethnic subgroup.

In the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun, there are 11,787 people, and more than 8,000 use the Evenk language. Solon Evenks living in Inner Mongolia speak the Solon dialect of the Evenk language. This dialect has some phonetic, lexical, and grammatical peculiarities due to a long contact with the Chinese and Mongolian languages.

We believe that issues related to the preservation of languages of ethnic minorities refer to sociolinguistic studies and have a transdisciplinary nature, this concept is developed at the Research Center for Transdisciplinary Regionology of Asia Pacific, Irkutsk State University (Kremnyov, 2022). Systematic study of a language as a system interacting with social, cultural, and geographical environments stems from the term “language ecology” introduced by Norwegian linguist Einar Haugen in his presentation at the International Congress of Linguists in 1972 and then described in his book “The Ecology of Language” (Haugen, 1972). The term itself is defined as “the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 1972).

Since the introduction of the term “language ecology,” researchers have continued to develop this concept, adapting it to new theories and methods. For example, French sociolinguist Jean Baptiste Marcellesi uses the term “ecolinguistics” in his article (Marcellesi, 1975); M. Halliday writes about the importance of interaction between the language and ecology (Halliday, 1990). Some scientists expanded the theoretical foundations in language planning and policy, as well as development of methodology, for example K. Salzinger (Salzinger, 1979), H. Haarmann

(Haarmann, 1986), A. Fill and H. Penz (Fill A., 1998; Fill A., 2021; Penz and Fill, 2022); A. Liddicoat and P. Bryant (Liddicoat and Bryant, 2000); P. Mühlhäusler (Mühlhäusler, 2003); A. Stibbe (Stibbe, 2015), J. Smith (Smith, 2024). G. A. Kopnina and A. P. Skovorodnikov discussed synonymic aspects of the term in their article, (Kopnina and Skovorodnikov, 2014), A. V. Kravchenko explored two perspectives on language ecology and ecological linguistics in his paper (Kravchenko, 2014), A. A. Polukhin wrote about contemporary linguistics and ecological thinking (Polukhin, 2009). On the current stage, “language ecology” has become an important tool for analyzing the reasons for disappearance of languages of ethnic minorities. Researchers such as P. Mühlhäusler (Mühlhäusler, 1996), A. Bastardas-Boada (Bastardas-Boada, 2018) and many others used this approach to develop strategies for language preservation. In multilingual cities, language ecology helps understand how different languages coexist and interact with each other. With the development of internet technologies and globalization, language ecology has begun to take into account and consider new factors such as online communication and digital content. For example, N. Fairclough analyzes how these technologies affect the use and spreading of languages (Fairclough, 2013).

For a deeper understanding of the problem of preserving the Evenk language and its current state, a review of scientific studies by foreign and Russian scholars who studied the current state and preservation of the Chinese Evenk language (Solon language) was conducted. Thus, issues related to language, culture, literature, problems of preserving and developing the languages of national minorities, analysis of the use of the Evenk language in various social contexts, and measures for its protection in the modern era were discussed in publications by authors: Li Guozheng (Li, 1991), Sun Hongkai (Sun, 2006), Voitishchek E. E., Bochkareva D. S. (Voitishchek and Bochkareva, 2014), Bitkeeva A. N., Golik M. Ya. (Bitkeeva and Golik, 2015), Van S. (Van, 2017), Su Yu, Wang Shujing (Su and Wang, 2022), Ma L. (Ma, 2023) and many others.

Theoretical Framework

Einar Haugen's work laid the foundation for understanding a language not only as a set of structural elements but also as a phenomenon dependent on external and internal factors. External factors include social economy, natural environment, history, geography, culture, education, customs and habits. Internal factors examine specific linguistic units and their relationships. Both environments are interdependent; external factors influence the internal ones, and facts from the external environment are reflected within it. The ecological nature of the linguistic environment largely reflects the state of the language; an environment closed to external influences protects and preserves the language. The term "language ecology" has evolved from the original to modern comprehensive studies. Today, it is a multifaceted concept covering a wide range of issues related to the interaction between a language and its environment. The concept is actively developing and continues to play a crucial role in understanding and solving problems related to preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. It is applied in various fields to develop effective strategies for protecting and developing languages, facilitating language planning and policy-making by governments. Methods of language ecology are integrated into educational programs to support multilingualism and preserve cultural diversity. Studies in language ecology help document and preserve unique cultural practices and traditions associated with specific languages. This concept is crucial in our research and is used to evaluate the significance of preserving the language of the Chinese Evenks.

Problem Statement

The analysis of the research literature enables us to assert that the Solon dialect of the Evenk language in China is currently under the threat of disappearing. This dialect plays a crucial role in the ethnic identity of the Solon Evenks. To evaluate the ecological balance of the situation with the Solon language and predict its development, it is necessary to address the following tasks: 1. evaluate the role of the natural, educational, and cultural environment

of the language studied; 2. research the social situation of people speaking this language; 3. analyze the correlation of contacts among different languages in a multilingual situation in the region.

Methods

To analyze the state and prospects for preserving the Evenk language, the following research methods were used:

1. Ecological Approach to a Language: the concept of language ecology proposed by Einar Haugen (Haugen, 1972) was used to analyze psychological and social situations influencing the use and preservation of the language.

2. Sociolinguistic Analysis: sociolinguistic methods were employed to assess the level of language proficiency among various age and social groups.

3. Analysis of Language Vitality Levels: classification system for the vitality levels of ethnic minority languages was applied. This system evaluates the degree of preservation of the communicative function of the language and its ability to survive.

4. Correlation Analysis: correlations between education levels and proficiency in the native language were examined to identify dependencies and trends in the use of the Evenk language among different population groups.

5. Historical Geographical Analysis: identification and analyses of historical and geographical factors that influenced the formation and development of the Evenk language.

Discussion

Any language exists in the mind of its speakers and functions in interactions with other speakers, their social and natural environment. At the same time, language ecology has a physiological nature (interaction with other languages in the speaker's mind) and partially a social nature (interaction with a society where a language is used as a means of communication). The vitality of a language is determined by its dependence on the surrounding environment. Language policy, continuity of language use from generation to generation, and situations where communication occurs in this language – all these factors ultimately

affect the ability of a language to serve as a means of communication.

The Evenks primarily live in the north-western part of the Greater Khingan (a mountain range in northeastern China), an area characterized by elevated terrains and mountain ranges intersected by water bodies. Due to geographical isolation before the establishment of the PRC, this place was relatively inaccessible and closed to external influence. Thus unique nature has created ecologically balanced and stable environment. The Chinese Evenk language was primarily a common language for communication between different tribes and communities. There is much evidence of the Evenk language from that time, including rich hunting and herding vocabulary, special domestic terms that characterize the life of the Evenk people. With the onset of reform and opening policies, the situation changed, expanding the scale of communication and activities among the Evenks and increasing linguistic contacts between different ethnic groups.

Let us now consider the characteristics of the ecological linguistic environment of the Solon Evenks today. The Chinese scholar Sun Hongkai classified the languages of ethnic minorities in China based on the preservation of their communicative function into six levels:

1. languages with high communicative function and widespread use (Mongolian, Tibetan languages);
2. languages with moderate communicative function and limited use (Miao, Hani languages);
3. languages with declining communicative function and reduced use (Qiang, Naxi languages);
4. languages with very low communicative function and minimal use, close to extinction (Galao, Orochen languages);
5. languages with no communicative function but still recognized culturally (Nanai, She languages);
6. languages completely extinct or nearly extinct (Manchurian language) (Sun, 2006).

According to Hongkai's assessment, the Evenk language is at level 4, described as "insufficiently viable, close to extinction." As already noted, the object of our study is the So-

lon dialect, the most numerous ethnic group of Chinese Evenks, residing in the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun within Hulunbuir City District of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. We studied the ecological situation of two settlements, Bayantohai town and Somon Huey village.

The living environment is an important factor that allows the preservation of the Evenk language. Moreover, the fact that people are born and live on the historical territory within the khoshun towns and villages, which means that most residents of this area are locals, is extremely important. For example, Evenks from Bayantohai, despite living in an urban environment, originate from the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun and therefore adhere to their traditional values and use their ethnic language in daily life. In the Evenki Autonomous Livestock Breeding Area of Somon Huey, due to the lack of modern transportation links, there are limited external contacts, making the Evenk language the major means of communication among different ethnic groups. The environment is characterized by a high degree of isolation; primarily, Evenki families reside there, with few representatives of other nationalities present. Tribe and ethnic roots are strong here, thus the Evenks respect traditions and cherish their native language. All of this allows the Evenk language to be preserved in this region. According to the data from 2020, the number of Solon Evenks in Somon Huey is 2,902. The native language for Chinese Evenks in the village is a tradition and habit, a desire to create a unique cultural atmosphere so that all family members feel united within the ethnic community. In this tightly knit family environment, the Evenk language maintains its purity along with all traditional cultural rituals.

Bayantohai is the residence of the government of the Evenki khoshun and the largest city in the region. In Bayantohai, due to mixed living with other nationalities, two languages are used for communication in everyday life. Still Putonghua, as the dominant language, gradually displaces the native language of the Chinese Evenks. The rapid process of urbanization has led to a higher cultural level, higher education level, and a more open environment for work

and life among the Evenks in Bayantohai compared to the rural Evenk population.

Let us refer to sociological data provided by Chinese scholars Su Yu (苏宇) and Wang Shujing (王姝静). They conducted a survey in Bayantohai regarding the frequency of use of the native ethnic language by its speakers. The survey involved participants from different social groups and age categories, totaling approximately 8,000 people. In the primary school, 33 % use the Evenk language, in junior high schools – 29,4 %, in high schools – 18,7 %, those with incomplete specialized education – 12.5 %, and those with a bachelor's degree or higher – 9,8 %. Based on age criteria, the results are as follows: up to 18 years old – 7,1 %, 19–29 years old – 11,6 %, 29–39 years old – 18,7 %, 39–49 years old – 21 %, above 49 years old – 41,1 % (Su and Wang, 2022). Most Chinese Evenks learned their native language through oral communication with older generations before attending school, thus acquiring language skills within the family. A small number of Evenks studied the Evenk language in primary and secondary schools. Among the surveyed individuals, only a minority fluently speaks and understands the language. On average, the level of language proficiency does not exceed B 2 on the international scale. Moreover, there are not so many young people under the age of 29 among them, mostly there are those who belong to the older generation. This indicates a significant intergenerational gap in inheriting and preserving the language.

The degree of language proficiency in Bayantohai can be characterized as follows: the status of language preservation remains at the level of relationships within families, where the native language is used when communicating with older family members. However, there is an increase in bilingualism. The proportion of using the Evenk language in society as a whole is small, and with increased openness and social platforms, the frequency of using Chinese-Evenk is gradually decreasing. Studies have shown that knowledge of the native language in Bayantohai has declined, and young people often switch to Chinese in communication. With the rise of urbanization, the social function of the language has

changed. Since it is relatively easy to obtain education and learn Putonghua, and given the broader opportunities offered by the Chinese language, Evenks prefer it over their native tongue. Additionally, literacy rates among Evenks using Putonghua are higher than those using the Chinese Evenk language.

The bilingual situation in Bayantohai shows that the Evenk language has lost its position due to the mixed residential area where the majority of residents are Han Chinese. The study on the bilingual situation reveals a mixing of linguistic codes among the Chinese Evenks. In the urban environment of Bayantohai, 80 % of Evenks proficiently speak and write Chinese, and Putonghua is recognized as the main language in most cases of communication in this mixed residential area. Besides Putonghua and the Evenk language, Mongolian, Daur, and other ethnic languages are also used. With increasing economic and cultural contacts and close interactions in an open linguistic environment, there is frequent switching to the language of mainland China, making the Evenk language less dynamic and putting it at risk of disappearing.

Still, inner Mongolia implements several measures to protect the ecology of the Evenk language. For example, in the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun, courses in the Evenk language were successively opened in the kindergarten, Evenki Primary School, and Evenki Secondary School. Courses for teaching the Evenki national language and traditional education were opened in schools of Jalan Town, and school courses in the Evenk language were opened in the Evenki Primary School of Olgu Village in Genhe District. In 2003, the “Regulation on National Education in the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun” was adopted, and in May 2011, an amended version of the “Regulation on National Education in the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun” was officially published. This version contains clear requirements for education in national languages and obligates the Evenki Autonomous Khoshun government to allocate funds annually for special Evenki education, with a priority on developing schools that teach in national languages within the autonomous khoshun.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the development of regions varies, and in cities with industrial development, the need for linguistic contacts between different ethnic groups living there is increasing. In Bayantohai, these needs are higher, leading to a high degree of sinicization in communication. Multicultural cohabitation facilitates communication in Chinese, Mongolian, and Daur, respectively. Local Chinese Evenks master these second languages and use them widely. Solon Evenks choose second languages such as Chinese and Mongolian to reduce language barriers and engage in bilingual or multilingual communication among different ethnic groups, which leads to a decrease in the number of speakers of the Solon dialect.

Based on the analysis of the social, cultural, and natural ecological environment, it can be stated that with increased accessibility and openness of the surrounding environment, the level of proficiency in the native ethnic language among the Chinese Evenk community decreases. Meanwhile, primary contacts and communication occur within families, where most Evenks use their language only during family gatherings and celebrations. In open social spaces and everyday communication at work, during studies, shopping, and market visits, the use of the native language by Chinese Evenks is significantly lower compared to family gatherings. It can be confirmed that the more frequently Chinese Evenks interact with the societal environment outside their families, the less they use their native language for communication. However, it should be noted that this depends on lifestyle as well. Evenks living in Somon Huey use their native language more often than those living in Bayantohai. This is possible because Somon Huey is a relatively closed place without mixed habitation, unlike Bayantohai. In areas with mixed habitation, the proportion of the Chinese language (Putonghua) is significantly higher, and there is a trend towards its increasing usage. Thus, in the Evenki language environment, the family remains the primary source and motivator for using the national language and passing it on to subsequent generations. In cities, Putonghua is becoming prioritized, gradually narrowing

the sphere of usage of the Evenki language and weakening its function as a means of communication.

In social communication among Chinese Evenks, persistent bilingualism exists. Establishing a specific trend in choosing one language over another is difficult. Generally, Evenks are guided by their communication partner and the location of the interaction. If the partner belongs to their ethnic group, communication usually occurs in the native language of both parties. If communication takes place in an Evenki village, it is likely to be in the Evenki language. It is evident that the most vulnerable and least proficient group in terms of the ethnic language is young people. The main reasons are in assimilation and significant pressure from Putonghua. Thus, the older generation of Evenks is the most resilient carriers of the Evenki language.

There is also a trend toward greater tolerance and readiness of the Evenki community to accept languages outside their ethnic group for communication. On the one hand, there is still a strong desire among the older generation to preserve and pass on the native language to children, but this is often passive hope without concrete actions. This is primarily due to the concern of the older generation about the future of their children and potential difficulties in obtaining education and employment, as Putonghua remains the priority language for adaptation in China. In this case, Putonghua undoubtedly has a greater practical value, thereby gradually destroying the ecological balance of the Chinese Evenk language. Therefore, mixed habitation, social prospects, employment, and access to education significantly influence the choice of language by Evenks, not in favor of their native language. The level of the Chinese language usage is increasing, and it can be confirmed that in Bayantohai, Chinese has become the dominant inter-ethnic language.

Language is a tool of communication, and its existence depends primarily on those who use it. The small population using the languages of minority ethnic groups in Inner Mongolia inevitably leads to these national languages losing in linguistic competition, further exacerbating the threat of their disappearance. Different lev-

els of economic and cultural development, along with varying levels of language education, have resulted in imbalanced development of bilingual education in different regions. In regions with higher degrees of sinicization, significant emphasis is placed on studying Chinese, while the importance of studying and using national languages diminishes or they are completely displaced. All this is detrimental to the development of bilingual educational activities among the Evenks. We should state that bilingual education should be based on the native language, and implementing effective and scientifically grounded bilingual education is an important measure for developing national education and improving the cultural quality of the nation.

Despite recent efforts to preserve the Solon dialect, including cultural events and training programs, the government must develop effective language policy and a language program for the Evenki language. It should focus on increasing the level of economic development and material well-being of the language community, upon which the Evenki language depends, promote Evenki traditional culture, encourage the Evenki people to use their language, and intensively explore the economic value of Evenki language resources.

From the above analysis, it is evident that the linguistic ecological environment of the Evenks is constantly changing, and the issues of creating a harmonious linguistic ecological environment and protecting linguistic diversi-

ty are becoming increasingly apparent. Inner Mongolia is a multilingual and multicultural region of mixed habitation by different ethnic groups; it is necessary to create a harmonious linguistic society there, support the linguistic and cultural identity of national minorities, and, on this base, actively promote the joint development of multilingualism to achieve a balance between languages corresponding to contemporary reality. Expanding the functioning of languages in different areas will inevitably strengthen the sense of identity among speakers with their native language, which is crucial for effectively protecting linguistic diversity. Bilingual courses can be introduced in most national primary schools, and conditions can be created, as much as possible, for teaching in national languages. Protecting national languages should also be combined with protecting culture and developing national language economies. Language serves as a carrier of culture and is an integral part of it. Language can also be considered a class of renewable economic resources, and Inner Mongolia possesses rich linguistic resources with broad development prospects. By combining language and cultural protection with regional economic development, adopting scientifically sound and effective measures for protection, and timely improving the ecological environment of the Evenki language, balanced language development can be achieved within a harmonious linguistic ecosystem.

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