

Tehlikedeki Diller Dergisi Journal of Endangered Languages

e-ISSN 2148-130X

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This article appears in: *Journal of Endangered Languages*, Volume 11, Issue 19, Summer 2021
Tatar Language Preservation Strategies and Innovative Practices. Guest Editor: Sabira Stahlberg

Cite this article:

Karakoç, Birsnel & Karakoç, Enver (2021). Visual images as mnemonic devices in the context of language revitalisation: some notes with sample illustrations. Sabira Stahlberg (ed.), *Journal of Endangered Languages* 19, Vol. 11: Tatar language preservation strategies and innovative practices. Ankara: 407–417.

Link to this article: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/tdd>

This electronic version was first published in July 2021.



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Visual images as mnemonic devices in the context of language revitalisation: some notes with sample illustrations

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INNOVATIVE

Abstract: *This article gives an example of how visual data can be used as an educational aid in the context of language revitalisation. Here the language for presenting the use of visual data in interactive learning is Noghay, a small Kipchak Turkic language spoken in the Northern Caucasus. Noghay is relatively close to Mishar Tatar, a variant of Tatar spoken in the Volga region and in the Tatar diaspora of the northern Baltic Sea region.*

Today the use of Noghay is rapidly decreasing, as a growing number of children and young people prefer to speak Russian, which is the socially dominant language. The transmission of the language from one generation to another is also endangered by migration to cities and resulting bilingual situations, where children are not forced to actively speak Noghay. Elderly persons however still prefer Noghay to Russian, and children could be motivated by contact with the older generation to activate their knowledge of the family language.

The purpose of using visual data in reawakening a language is to trigger linguistic memories of the community's heritage language in young bilingual children, which they do not use actively or in their everyday life. We assume that visual data, especially photos depicting realistic situations from their community life, are well suited to stimulate emotional attention and elicit memories of situations in which the heritage language is preferably used. Our approach combines materials gathered during field research and from language and cultural documentation with methods mainly drawn from pedagogy and linguistics.

Keywords: *Noghay, language teaching, visual images, mnemonic devices, language revitalisation*

Görsel malzemenin dilin yeniden canlandırılması bağlamında anımsatıcı olarak kullanılması: notlar ve örnekler

Özet: *Bu makale, yok olma tehlikesiyle karşı karşıya olan dillerin yeniden canlandırılması çabaları çerçevesinde görsel malzemenin eğitim amaçlı ne şekilde kullanılabileceği üzerine bir örnek sunmaktadır. Etkileşimli öğrenmede görsellerin rolünü ortaya koyarken Rusya'nın Kuzey Kafkasya bölgesinde konuşulan ve konuşur sayısı yönünden bakıldığında küçük ölçekli Türk dillerinden biri sayılan Nogayca örneğinden hareket edilmiştir. Nogayca, Volga ve Kuzey Baltık Denizi bölgelerinde konuşulan Mişer Tatarcasına yakın bir dildir.*

Günümüzde, çocukların ve gençlerin, çoğunlukla, toplumsal kullanım açısından baskın dil konumunda olan Rusçayı tercih etmeleri sonucu Nogaycanın kullanım oranı hızlı bir şekilde azalmaktadır. Ayrıca yine ekonomik kaygılarla büyük şehirlere doğru yaşanan göçlerle birlikte çocukların Nogayca'yı aktif bir şekilde kullanacakları toplumsal alanların gittikçe daralması dilin nesilden nesile aktarımını zorlaştırmaktadır. Diğer yandan ise yetişkinlerin önemli bir kısmının ve yaşlı neslin neredeyse tamamının Nogayca'yı tercih ediyor olması çocukların bizzat kullanmasalar da bir ölçüde aile içi iletişimi sağlayan bu dili en azından anlamalarında hala önemli bir motivasyon unsuru olarak karşımıza çıkarmaktadır.

Makalemizde, görsel malzemenin, Nogayca'yı etkin olarak kullanmayan ikidilli çocukların, var olduğunu düşündüğümüz edilgen dilsel belleklerini harekete geçirme amacıyla kullanılabileceği düşüncesinden hareket ediyoruz. Bu bağlamda, bu tür malzemenin, özellikle, toplumsal hayatı, kültürel unsurları ve yaşlı nesli gerçekçi olarak yansıtan fotoğrafların, duygusal ilgiyi tetiklemek suretiyle çocuklarda, miras dili olan Nogaycanın tercihen ya da alternatifsiz kullanıldığı durumlarda ilgili belleği ortaya çıkaracağını var sayıyoruz. Yaklaşımımız, dilin belgelenmesi amacıyla gerçekleştirdiğimiz saha araştırmalarında derlediğimiz fotoğraflar ile eğitim ve dilbilim alanlarında uygulanan yöntemleri bir araya getirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Nogayca, dil öğretimi, görsel malzeme, anımsatıcılar, dilin yeniden canlandırılması*

Introduction

This article aims to give an example of how visual data can be integrated into language revitalisation endeavours as an educational aid. The purpose of using visual data in this context is to trigger linguistic memories in young bilingual children of the community's heritage language, which they do not use actively. The visual data used in this article to demonstrate the example was collected during field research trips carried out among the Noghay communities in the Northern Caucasus. Before presenting the samples, however, we will briefly address some preliminaries.

Language documentation and language revitalisation

Language documentation and language revitalisation are closely interrelated sub-disciplines of linguistics, but at the same time they are quite distinct with regard to their basic motivations. While research in the field of language documentation is often motivated by genuine scholarly interest in learning about less-studied or endangered languages, language revitalisation mainly has the practical goal of preservation of linguistic diversity.

Language documentation deals with the collection and transcription of language data to serve as a basis for subsequent linguistic descriptions. It primarily strives to archive and systematically prepare data and can eventually lead to the preparation of complete records of linguistic structures and dictionaries. Thus, the work within a documentation project is carried out by trained linguists for an academic audience. Revitalisation work, which would ideally benefit from linguistic research and documentation activities, is however primarily a task of the communities (for discussions about the comprehensive relations between documentation and revitalisation work, see Himmelmann 2006; Penfield & Tucker 2011; Austin & Sallabank 2018).

The complex and ever-changing process of language reawakening involves multiple steps and a variety of activities. These activities, pursuing the specific goal of increasing the number of speakers of an endangered language, require thinking and re-thinking the methods and designs, and the creation of materials. In this context, one of the concerns relates to the need for "reintroducing the language into domains where it has been lost and claiming new domains for the language" (Sapién & Hirata-Edds 2019: 561–562).

The outputs of scientific documentary work can be used for educational and societal purposes related to language revitalisation, thereby making them available to the members of the speech community. One requirement for using the results in this way is that the entire documentation process must be deliberately carried out with the goal of revitalisation in mind. Sapién and Hirata-Edds (2019) discuss a wide range of possibilities for including available documentary data in the development of teaching and learning resources and activities. They mention in particular the role of field notes, academic descriptions, reference grammars and texts in fostering interaction in the endangered language. Nathan and Fang (2009) highlight the relevance of metadata for language pedagogy, mentioning, among other things, songs performed at social and cultural events, and potential learning domains such as greetings and kinship.

The present article does not aim to deepen the discussion on theoretical and general methodological issues relevant to documentation and revitalisation. It rather intends to present a concrete example and illustrate how visual materials, collected in various daily life contexts, can be used to promote the linguistic skills of young speakers.

Visual materials in language education

Using visual materials in language education is an essential method applied at all teaching levels in both native and foreign-language learning situations.¹ A basic assumption is that humans generally have a strong visual orientation and are much better at remembering events or materials that are presented visually. We can therefore assume that visual data is well suited to stimulating emotional attention and eliciting memories of situations where a heritage language is or has been the preferred language. Furthermore, these data could be considered a rich source for promoting the involvement of a functional language and as effective mnemonic devices to bring children's language performance to a higher level (see for example Brown 2004).

Visual data can include drawings in storybooks, cartoons that tell stories, photos and videos. The initial idea is that photos depicting realistic situations from community life can be especially useful to evoke children's memories. To use photos for revitalisation, however, certain requirements must be met. In this article, we illustrate a possible way of using photos to elicit and activate linguistic memory among children who are not active speakers of the heritage language, but know how the language is used in specific situations by adults.

1 See Stahlberg (2020) for a discussion of different creative activities supporting language learning and development.

Noghay in the Northern Caucasus

The language we use in presenting our project is Noghay, a Kipchak Turkic language spoken by around 103,000 individuals in the Northern Caucasus. This multiethnic and multilingual territory is situated in the southwestern part of the Russian Federation. Noghay is relatively close to Mishar Tatar, which is chiefly spoken in the Volga region and in the Tatar diaspora of the northern Baltic Sea region.

In the Northern Caucasus, the Noghay communities are dispersed between different autonomous republics. In their various administrative regions, they live as neighbours of different Turkic and Caucasian peoples. All languages spoken in the territory are strongly dominated by Russian, which serves the role of a *lingua franca*. Due to economic pressure, there is an increasing tendency among the Noghays to migrate from their traditional settlements to large cities and regions where there are more work opportunities. All these factors, administrative and geographic divisions, multilingual environments, Russian dominance and migration, negatively affect the prospects for the language maintenance (Karakoç, in print). When the transmission of the language breaks down and the younger generation no longer uses the language actively, the process leading from language endangerment to extinction is difficult to stop. Therefore language maintenance measures become necessary.

Due to political, economic and linguistic subordination, the younger generation tends to mainly use Russian, though on various occasions, sometimes even daily, they are still exposed to the community language in their surroundings. According to our observations during a field trip in 2019, the active use of Noghay among children is decreasing rapidly as compared to our earlier observations in 1997. Findings from research in many parts of the world show that children prefer to speak the socially dominant language in which they have the best competence for several reasons. Moreover, in a community where the majority of speakers are bilingual, children are not necessarily forced to actively use the vernacular. Answering in the socially dominant language Russian is often an easier strategy for them. Since the older generation prefers to use Noghay as their first language, children are still motivated to learn to understand it, especially in family situations. Many Noghay children can thus be considered to carry a passive knowledge of their culture and language.

Using photos to elicit memories

The method we suggest here puts children who are not active speakers of Noghay into situations where they are expected to imitate how adults interact, for example. With the help of photos, the interlocutor encourages the children to imagine specific situations in which the adults tell stories or communicate with each other. Such a situation makes it natural for the children to use Noghay, the preferred language of their elders. This motivates the children to remember words, phrases and specific expressions they have heard adult relatives use in the situation depicted in a picture. In other words, photos depicting adults or specific social occasions where the use of Noghay is a normal part of the communication can stimulate meaningful emotional connections. Consequently, this method can contribute to eliciting children's language memories and promote their basic communication skills in Noghay.

Taking such a communicative step could motivate the children to use their family language also in other situations. It is very important to point out here that the aim of this method is not to ask the children to comment on the pictures – a well-established method, widely used for pedagogical or scientific purposes – but rather to place the children in the role of elderly speakers and ask them to reproduce what these full-fledged speakers would say in the given situations.

The photographs we use to demonstrate this method were collected during our field research among the Noghays. Although our research was then mainly focused on collecting language data for linguistic purposes, supplementary visual materials portraying various cultural aspects of daily life in which the language plays an important role were also collected. These photos naturally depict typical situations in which Noghay is preferably used, at least by the older generation. Thus, they are also suitable for triggering the use of specific vocabulary items or phrases remembered by children.

Sample photos

The selected sample photos² are meant for working with primary and middle school children who are not active speakers of the Noghay language, but have passive knowledge and can understand or remember a great deal. The goal of the present method is not to get the children to talk about various aspects of the pictures, but rather to let them take on the role of the adult speakers. This encourages them to take a very first step in speaking the heritage language and boosts their

2 All photographs in this article: © Enver Karakoç 2021

confidence in their own language skills and their motivation for using them. If the child is an advanced speaker, able to use a more complex vocabulary than what is foreseen in the brief descriptions below, the interlocutor can develop a conversation by asking comprehensive questions and giving the child the possibility to respond in more detail.

Picture 1. This photo shows some elderly community members. The old lady in the middle could narrate wonderful folk stories, fairy tales, lullabies, nursery rhymes, etc. Such a photo can be used to evoke the children’s memories of their grandparents or other elderly family members. The interlocutor asks the children, for instance, to name the people in the photo (‘a grandmother’, ‘a grandfather’, etc.) and say what their own grandmothers would call the children (basic kinship relations) and whether she would use special forms of address to show affection (‘my dear’, ‘my beloved one’, etc.).



Picture 2. The photo, which depicts Noghay hosts welcoming their guests, can be used to elicit basic vocabulary items on the topic of “guests”. The interlocutor asks the children, for example, what their grandparents would say to welcome guests, how they would address their guests, and how they might express themselves when saying goodbye. If the children are able to use more than these simple expressions, the interlocutor can continue with the vocabulary for hospitality and for how the grandparents usually would receive their guests.





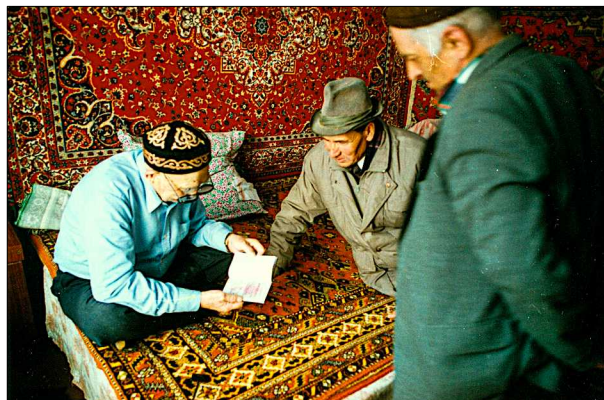
Picture 3. This photo depicts common animals found in a village. Pointing at an animal, the interlocutor can ask the children: “What does your grandmother call this animal?” and “What does your grandmother call a chicken?” If the children are willing to say more than this, the interlocutor can continue by asking whether their grandparents keep animals in their yard and what they would call them.

Picture 4. The photo shows an old Noghay bard who is performing a traditional song. The interlocutor asks the children among others what their grandparents would call the bard’s instrument, the decoration on the wall and the special place in the room where the bard is sitting.



Picture 5. This photo depicts a large gathering of Noghays celebrating a religious feast. The children are asked what the feast is called, what their grandmothers would call the special food she would prepare for this feast, and which expressions she might use to “celebrate” the guests’ feast.

Picture 6. The photo shows an elderly man, who together with his neighbours is looking at a page of a document. This can be used to ignite the imagination of the children and get them to use nouns and verbs to create a story, building simple sentences of the type “He is looking...”, “The man is reading...”, etc. The interlocutor could here ask the children what their grandfathers would call their friends or neighbours and what they usually read.



Picture 7. This photo shows a Noghay woman selling fruit in a bazaar. Possible questions to get the children to remember the words usually heard in markets could be: “What does she say when selling fruit?” or “What is the woman buying the fruit saying?”

Picture 8. The photo depicts a group of Noghay students planting trees and cleaning the schoolyard. The teacher organising the outing gives instructions to the students about what they should do. The interlocutor asks the child for example to guess what the teacher is saying in Noghay.



Picture 9. This photo depicts children playing the traditional game *aşık* ('knucklebones'). The interlocutor asks the child among others what this game is called and what the older children would call each other during the game.



Conclusions

The method of eliciting memories and experiences aims to activate the children's passive linguistic knowledge as a first step toward inducing them to speak the language. Because the children are put in the role of adults and elderly family members through pictures and situations they know and have experienced, they can remember words and expressions that they have heard but do not necessarily use themselves. After the children find that they can comfortably utilise these expressions and words in a safe environment with people they trust, their interest and motivation to express themselves in the language of their elders can grow.

This concise presentation of our idea is not an exhaustive description of how photographs depicting authentic and natural scenes of community life can be integrated into the context of language revitalisation activities. However, we hope that the ideas and examples we have presented here can be further developed and used more effectively in such endeavours.

Thanks

We would like to thank Éva Á. Csató and Sabira Stahlberg for encouraging us to write this article and giving us valuable suggestions. Our idea about visual images as mnemonic devices traces its origins to discussions with Éva Á. Csató, to whom we are very grateful. Further, we wish to thank the reviewers for their insights and comments, as well as Everett Thiele for proofreading.

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**Här çäçäkneñ üz ise,
här halıknıñ üz töse.
Each flower has its own scent,
all people have their own colours.**
Tatar mäkale / proverb