

# BILINGUAL ANXIETIES AND BARRIERS TO ACQUISITION: LANGUAGE CHOICES AMONG URBAN SAKHA AND THEIR CHILDREN

ПРОБЛЕМЫ БИЛИНГВИЗМА И ИХ РЕШЕНИЕ: ВЫБОР ЯЗЫКА  
СРЕДИ ГОРОДСКИХ САХА И ИХ ДЕТЕЙ

ÇİFT-DİLLİLİK İLE İLGİLİ ENDİŞELER VE DİL EDİNİMİNDEKİ ENGELLER:  
KENTLİ SAHALAR VE ÇOCUKLARI ARASINDAKİ DİL TERCİHLERİ

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## ABSTRACT

This paper, based on ethnographic fieldwork among young adults and their families in Yakutsk, deals with urban ethnic Sakha bilinguals and their language ideologies and choices, especially concerning the language socialization of their children—both at home and within the educational system. The usage of the Sakha language within urban spaces has been on the rise in the post-Soviet years, but it is still generally acquired in the home environment as a first language, whereas Russian is acquired later in the ‘outside’ world and reinforced through the educational system. Barriers toward Sakha acquisition and maintenance that speakers face are explored; these obstacles are both ideological and structural. Narratives concerning unapprehension toward bilingualism and the possibility of mastering two languages within the educational system are discussed, along with the need for language instruction—especially in schools—to be made to accommodate those with little to no Sakha knowledge in order to continue to increase the usage of Sakha by urban speakers.

**Keywords:** bilingualism; language acquisition; language ideologies; family language planning; Sakha (Yakut) language

## АННОТАЦИЯ

Эта статья, основанная на этнографических полевых исследованиях среди молодых совершеннолетних людей и их семей в Якутске, связана с городскими якутами билингвами и их языковыми идеологиями и выбором, особенно относительно языковой социализации их детей — как дома, так и в системе образования. Использование якутского языка в пределах городских пространств повышалось в постсоветских годах, но сейчас используется в домашней окружающей среде как первый язык, тогда как русский язык используется во 'внешнем' мире и

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укреплен через образовательную систему. Исследуются барьеры к усвоению и сохранению якутского языка; эти препятствия и идеологические, и структурные. Высказывания относительно идей билингвизма и возможности освоения двух языков в пределах образовательной системы обсуждены, наряду с потребностью в обучению языку — особенно в школах — чтобы продолжить увеличивать использование якутского языка жителями города.

**Ключевые слова:** билингвизм; усвоение языка; языковая идеология; языковое планирование; якутский язык

## ÖZET

Yakutistanda genç yetişkinler ile aileleri arasında yapılan etnografik bir alan araştırmasına dayanan bu makale kentli çift-dilli Saha/Yakutların dil ideolojileri ve seçimleri ile hem ev hem de okul ortamlarında dil sosyalleşmelerini incelemektedir. Kentlerde, Saha / Yakut dilinin kullanımı Sovyet dönemi sonrasında artmaya başlamıştır, ancak hala ana dil olarak ev ortamında edinilirken, Rusça daha sonraki yaşlarda “dışarıda” öğrenilmekte ve eğitim sistemi yoluyla pekiştirilmektedir. Saha dili edinimi ve sürdürülmesi konusunda bu dili konuşanların karşılaştıkları engeller incelenmiş ve bu engellerin hem ideolojik hem de yapısal kökenli olduğu belirlenmiştir. Makalede, çift dilliliğe yönelik endişeler tartışılmış ve eğitim sisteminde her iki dilin öğrenilme olasılığı değerlendirilmiş, ayrıca kentli Sahaların dillerini konuşmalarını artırmak amacıyla çok az derecede Saha dilini bilen ya da hiç bilmeyen kullanıcılar için çözümler aranmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çift-dillilik, Dil Edinimi, Dil İdeolojisi, Aile Dil Planlaması, Saha /Yakut Dili

## Introduction

Sakha, also known as Yakut, is a North Siberian Turkic language predominantly spoken in the Sakha Republic, in the far northeast of the Russian Federation. While the language has historically been spoken not only by ethnic Sakha but also by other indigenous northern peoples (e.g. Evenki, Even, Yukaghir, etc.) and by Russians who settled long ago in the region (Sleptsov, 2012; see also Grenoble, 2003; Robbek, 1998; Wurm, 1996), use of the language declined in the Soviet era in urban areas due to the overwhelming dominance of Russian. However, during this period usage of the language remained vital among Sakha in the villages. Upon the creation of the Sakha Republic in 1992, the Sakha language was made official in the Republic alongside Russian; now, recent shifts in both of population and politics in the past two post-Soviet decades has led to the Sakha language being increasingly spoken once more in urban space of Yakutsk. Due to the influx of rural Sakha moving into the city—bringing with them their Sakha language practices—and the revalorization of the Sakha language within popular linguistic and politic ideologies, more urban ethnic Sakha are speaking Sakha in both the home and again within public spheres.

According to the most recent statistics from the 2010 All-Russian census, there are 450,140 speakers of Sakha in total; 441,536 of those speakers are in the Sakha Republic. Of the 466,492 people in the Republic identifying themselves as ethnically Sakha, 401,240, or

86% of them, speak the language (All-Russian population census 2010).<sup>1</sup> As noted previously, 89% of Sakha speak Russian. Overall, there has been a slight increase in the number of Sakha speakers since the last census in 2002, when 446 704 people overall claimed to speak Sakha, and 92% of people ethnically identifying as Sakha (a total of 443,852) speak the language (All-Russian population census 2002).

Despite this rate of language maintenance and usage which is comparatively high for a minority language in Russia, some researchers have been expressing concern for the future of Sakha language usage. According to Robbek (1998:114), at the end of the 1990s, 26.2% of ethnic Sakha do not study their language in school, and 30% of preschool-aged children do not receive exposure to the language. Argunova (1994:87) reported that the Sakha language is ‘characterized by specialists as being in a precrisis state’ and Salminen (1998), too, regards Sakha as ‘potentially endangered.’ It is important to recognize that language ‘endangerment’ is not related only to the total number of speakers, but the percentage of children learning it as either a first or second language; this better explains the concern of both researchers and speakers that the language is not thriving.

This article first outlines some of the recent trends in Sakha acquisition among urban Sakha, and introduces the idea of ‘family language policies’ (King, 2008), in light of increased promotion of the Sakha language within the public sphere, especially in education. As a minority language, Sakha is generally acquired in the home environment as a first language, whereas Russian is acquired later in the ‘outside’ world and reinforced through the educational system. As well, there are other circumstances that can lead to the acquisition, or promote the maintenance of Sakha ways of speaking at many other points along the speaker’s life trajectory in language. However, despite the rise in Sakha linguistic capital and positive attitudes toward the language, there are still some barriers toward Sakha acquisition and maintenance that speakers face; these obstacles are both ideological—concerning apprehension toward bilingualism and the mastery of two languages—and structural—within the educational system and its approach to language instruction that does not always accommodate beginners.

This paper is based on sociolinguistic and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2010–2011 in the city of Yakutsk in the Sakha Republic; it covers aspects part of a larger study conducted for a PhD degree in Social Anthropology, dealing broadly with urban and rural movement and language practices among Sakha-Russian bilingual speakers. Through language usage surveys, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, and observations I gathered narratives that dealt with ideas about bilingualism, related language ideologies, and how peoples’ lives and networks in the urban environments of Yakutsk structured both language acquisition and choices about language education.

#### Family language planning and practices

Bilingual Sakha-Russian parents, like parents everywhere, are all faced with the choice of which language to use to socialize their children, and also which language their children should use in their formal education through kindergartens and grade school. Worries about their children achieving fluency in both languages affected Sakha people I spoke with in both rural and urban areas, but it was those parents in cities who felt greater anxiety over the decisions regarding language practices both in the home and the wider environment. This was due, of course, to the prevalence of Russian used in Yakutsk and the comparative lack of Sakha than in rural settlements.

## Barriers to Sakha acquisition

Despite the desire many people have to learn Sakha and for their children to learn Sakha as well, there are both institutional obstacles and persistent ideological issues against bilingualism that continue to circulate; often the institutional or infrastructural and ideological combine, leading to frustrating situations. Once while walking down a street in central Yakutsk, I saw a large group of people congregating outside of a school. It seemed like there must be some special event or festival happening, but I couldn't be sure. Later on I mentioned it to a friend, Andrej, who had young children, who told me that it was not a special event, unless you counted registration day for the following year. 'They all want spaces for their children at that school, it's in high demand right now. They need to claim places years ahead in order to get in'. Andrej noted that he had met many parents from villages who would send their school-age children into Yakutsk to live with relatives, especially for high school, as they believed the educational opportunities were better in urban schools. And so, as Yakutsk grows in population, the demand for places in classrooms also rises, leading to a stressful state of affairs for parents aiming to secure a spot for their child in their preferred school.

For urban parents who want their children to have a Sakha-medium education, they have only two choices in the city for 'national schools': School Number 14, which offers all subjects in Sakha up until the seventh grade, and then the most prestigious Sakha Gymnasium, which offers all subjects in all eleven grades in Sakha—and is also known for having a strong English-language program. To my knowledge, in 2010-11 all other Yakutsk schools save the Russian Classical Gymnasium offered a 'Sakha stream' of classes, so that Sakha-speaking students could take a Sakha language and a literature course. Each school also offered a 'Sakha national culture' course as well; in some it was mandatory for all students, but others only in the primary grades. Parents I spoke with claimed that in order to get your first choice of schools, you practically had to register at birth to get in where you wanted. For families wishing for their children to learn or maintain their Sakha skills, school reinforcement was considered essential to this process. Many parents I spoke to considered Russian-medium schools in urban areas one of the reasons their children—who often understood Sakha well—often did not always engage in Sakha ways of speaking. When I asked Dajaana why she thought her two sons were hesitant to speak Sakha, even though they showed understanding, she replied, 'They went to a Russian kindergarten and had an instructor who was Russian, maybe that's why'.

While more kindergartens are currently being built to accommodate demand, it is still difficult to find places, especially in Sakha-medium programs. There were only three Sakha-language kindergartens during my fieldwork period, though others were in the process of construction. In my interviews, I spoke with some parents who were hoping to enrol their two- and three-year-old children in Sakha-language programs because of the fact they did not speak much Sakha in the home, and so they hoped these kindergartens would offer a second chance for their children to become fluent in the language and later attend a Sakha-medium primary school. In theory, these situations would likely be an excellent chance for Sakha-language immersion, but as it turned out in a few cases I heard about, this is deceptive; entry seems to depend on being able to already speak the language

Educational situations are not, of course, the only way to promote a language, and should not be relied upon as the sole way of gaining or maintaining fluency in a minority language. As Teresa McCarthy reminds us, 'Schools alone cannot do the job [of

maintaining a language], but they [can be] potential sites of resistance and opportunity'. However, despite the increasing top-down promotion of Sakha language in the Republic's educational system, which does seem to be helping to maintain Sakha for those who already speak the language, this paradoxical barrier of needing knowledge of the language first to enter the programs means the system is not promoting the acquisition of the language by non-speakers or those with only basic productive or receptive skills. While other opportunities (such as the evening classes run by the city and the university) have been made available in Yakutsk for learning Sakha, these have not been long-term endeavours. While some children do enter Sakha-medium programs after Russian-language kindergarten, they are few and far between. With the increasing demand for Sakha-language places due to in-migration of fluent Sakha-speaking families into Yakutsk, this system would need both expansion and, I suggest, programs that could teach Sakha at a basic level for newcomers in order to be those spaces of opportunity for those wishing to improve their children's Sakha skills.

### The Legacy of Bilingual Anxiety

Another language ideology from the Soviet era was the tendency to be suspicious of certain types of bilingualism, and it still circulates in Yakutsk, bringing with it a wariness of Sakha-medium education and Sakha-only child-rearing. The attitudes concerning bilingualism highlight some of the key tensions and contradictions regarding non-Russian languages that pervaded the Soviet era. There was the belief that one should indeed speak one's *rodnoi iazyk*; as mentioned, this was tied to ideas of purity and essentialism, and to 'natural', nameable boundaries between ethnic groups. But at the same time, speaking one's own native language, while (often ambiguously) 'promoted' during Soviet times, should never interfere with one's ability to speak Russian fluently, like any 'cultured person'.

Bilingualism was also used as a scapegoat, and pathologised by Soviet-era educators, doctors, and others in similar positions of institutional power. Issues related to learning disabilities, speech impediments, social anxiety and character traits such as excessive shyness or introversion which might lead to a child or young adult not speaking Russian 'well enough' (and potentially being labelled as less intelligent) were blamed on 'being bilingual', which was really code for 'speaking Sakha'. This bilingualism-blaming stems partially from Soviet policies, and also from views about the nature of bilingualism and its effects on the brain of the speaker—anxieties which are not new, and certainly not unique to the Soviet or Russian state. Many systems of 'folk linguistics' (Niedzielski and Preston, 2000), or popular beliefs and speculation about how language is used, include the belief that learning two languages at once confuses children (Jackendoff, 2003). In terms of Soviet policy, ambivalence about bilingualism perhaps stems from how 'on one hand, an open policy of bilingualism was promoted but on the other the very need for... Any language other than Russian was questioned' (Grenoble, 2003). Though Lenin's mandate on the equality of all nations, and their languages, remained in theory under subsequent governments, this certainly did not match up with practice. This can be seen in the government actions taken regarding the creation of a hierarchy of languages, in which some languages were assessed as non-viable and their acquisition was not supported or promoted in education. Perhaps this was because ultimately, the Soviets saw bilingualism in the *rodnoi iazyk* as a necessary 'step' along the way to Russian-only fluency, due to their evolutionary Leninist-Marxist thinking (Hirsch, 2005). Thus, bilingualism was not seen as a productive, sustainable end in itself.

The issue of bilingualism was raised on other occasions by parents as well as educators. In one conversation I documented, Kesha, an English teacher in his late 20s at one of the city schools, solicited my opinions on the matter. ‘Do you think it’s bad we are speaking two languages?’ he asked hesitantly. Taken aback by this, considering he was a language teacher himself—albeit of a foreign language—I went on to reassure him that no, I did not think it was detrimental, and passed on some thoughts regarding bilingualism research. Kesha told me that he thought it was problematic because so many children coming to his school (a Russian-medium institute with about 250 students, all of whom were of at least partial Sakha or Evenki/Even descent) had grown up in the city and ‘didn’t speak Sakha very well’. When I pressed him to describe their abilities, he told me that these children were all born and raised in the city, usually with city-raised bilingual parents who often spoke Sakha but had not studied it in school. These children would study Sakha language and literature in their classes but it was difficult for them; they lagged behind because they did not have ‘enough of a base’ in the language. However, their Russian was also peppered with Sakha ‘words, phrases, idioms’, and Kesha’s tone implied that he had ambivalent feelings about mixing multiple languages in conversation. He expressed to me that he thought Sakha language skills were important for the students, but also recognized what drove many parents to emphasize developing Russian competence in their children: ‘I think even if the parents speak Sakha, some of them emphasize Russian above all because they think it’s most important, it’s going to help their children get ahead faster, you know? But I think we do need both languages, even if there are difficulties’.

#### Adapting to Russian, Adapting to Sakha

The parents most concerned about Sakha impeding their children’s Russian tended to be urbanites. The tendency among those I surveyed who were village-born and raised, and came to the city later in life often did not learn Russian at home; rather, it was learned only once the child started school (or sometimes kindergarten) and they worried less about these issues. They assumed that Russian ‘would come naturally’ later, due to inevitable exposure in school and through media, presumably due to time that would be spent in the city in the future for purposes of higher education and possibly careers. Thus, the worries of urban bilingual parents seemed to be primarily connected to infant bilingualism, where they feared they would end up with confused toddlers with delayed speech, and ‘*poliazychniks*’ (those who cannot speak either language well). Künnej suggested that this could lead to them not being accepted into Russian-medium kindergartens or schools. Rural parents appeared to be less concerned, and worried less because they knew that even in Russian-medium schools in the village, most of the students and teachers would be Sakha speakers and their child could get by easily, echoing what Nadia and Noya told me: even though they attended village ‘Russian-medium schools’ in their Soviet-era educational years, much of the instruction occurred in Sakha.

Furthermore, many rural Sakha speakers themselves supported these beliefs with accounts of their own language adjustments to speaking Russian when they moved to the city later in life. While multiple Sakha-dominant respondents reported that they had a psychological ‘barrier’ (*bar’er*) toward speaking Russian that manifested sometimes as hesitance or shyness, and worried that they would be judged by their Sakha accents or grammatical errors, many of the rural bilinguals tended to focus on adaptation in their narratives of moving to Yakutsk and increasingly speaking more Russian. Maria and Noya, two women in their forties, both reported that they adjusted to speaking Russian in

universities outside of the Sakha Republic in about a year. Tujaara, a woman in her early 30s, told me that upon arriving in Yakutsk from Niurba to begin pedagogical college in the late 1990s, she was at first very hesitant to speak Russian, and told me she would sometimes end up on the wrong bus somewhere unfamiliar in the city because she was afraid to speak to the non-Sakha bus drivers. However, she said by the New Year she was speaking Russian in public with ease. Michil, in his mid-20s, told me similar stories about the new rural students he worked with in his job as a university administrator. The first year students from the *uluses* would often have great difficulty speaking in Russian when they first arrived, but would soon improve rapidly. He told me of one boy in particular whom Michil would always be sure to speak to only in Sakha, to make him feel comfortable during the first year. A year later he ran into the boy, who came up to him while Michil was chatting to some acquaintances in Russian. When the boy approached, Michil switched to Sakha immediately so this boy would not feel alienated from the conversation, but to Michil's surprise, the boy began to speak confidently in Russian. Similarly, Stepan, who transitioned into a Russian-medium school at age twelve, told me that there was a sense of confidence among many rural bilinguals and those who knew them well that they would easily adapt to speaking Russian in situations that necessitated it. Though I recall one older woman, Agafia, stating that even though she was now middle-aged and had spent most of her adult life in Yakutsk she still had a 'bar'er' toward Russian, there was generally a fluidity to these practices despite an initial feeling of being overwhelmed. Their barriers diminished as speakers adapted to moving between their Sakha and Russian linguistic repertoires with ease gained through increased practice.

Circumstances embedded in social and institutional structures also help facilitate and maintain close and lasting friendships among Sakha youths, thus influencing their communicative practices as well. In Sakha Republic schools, as in the rest of Russia, student cohorts remain the same each year, in that the same group of students attends classes together and is presided over by a 'class teacher' who also follows this group as they progress through the grades. Thus, in some schools, one could spend each day with the same classmates for at least the six primary years (until sixth year) or even all eleven years, as is common in some of the smaller rural schools. School lessons occur six days a week for nine months of the year, and activities with teachers and classmates also often occur outside of official school hours thus making these cohorts very much the focus of student's lives. Of course friendships extend beyond these groupings to other students in the same year or other years, but according to my respondents, the extensive amount of time spent with the same peers meant that close friendships tended to develop within these groups.

## **Conclusion**

Through the exploration of the language histories and repertoires in this chapter it is possible to identify factors that have had a key influence on the acquisition of Sakha and Russian and the shaping of communicative practices at different points in an individual speaker's life. While early language socialization first occurs in the home with parents and siblings, the peer groups and settings a young child encounters throughout their lives—especially within the educational system—can be influential as well.

The overarching language attitudes and ideologies circulating at the time which affect a language's value on the linguistic market also continue to shape decisions individuals make about language choice for themselves as well as their children. As mentioned, ideological shifts that have led to the promotion of Sakha in language policy and planning especially

within the educational sphere, and these plans have been deemed more successful and important by speakers. Nevertheless, among the circulation of language ideologies and ‘folk linguistics’, it has become apparent that anxieties are still present regarding bilingual language acquisition, with many urban parents concerned that speaking only Sakha with their children and placing them in Sakha-medium education will lead to imperfect mastery of Russian. According to the many of the parents interviewed, future language promotion planning in the Sakha Republic needs to ensure that parents are thoroughly educated about the most recent findings about bilingualism and its benefits, so that those wishing for their children to learn or improve their Sakha skills will feel empowered and secure in their choices.

Issues with accessing Sakha-language education, especially in Yakutsk, have also emerged. Because programs are set up to maintain or enrich Sakha language competence among those who already speak Sakha, rather than teach the language to those who may only have receptive skills or no language skills at all, it can be difficult for those children who wish to learn the language to gain admittance to Sakha-language programs. Between this issue that many research participants brought up and the widespread popularity of beginner’s Sakha language classes sponsored by the City of Yakutsk in 2010, I would suggest that further language planning for Sakha-language education must address the needs of these speakers in order to ensure continued maintenance of Sakha language practices, especially in urban spaces.

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