

Language shift and change in ethnic identity among urban Maris

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Reasons for study

1) Results of previous research:

- passing the language doesn't depend on the strongness of ethnic identity of parents
- language choice depends on the strongness of ethnic identity of speakers

2) Discourse of Mari activists:

- direct link between ethnic identity and language maintenance

Maris and Mari language

Population in Russia (2010): 547 605

Native speakers: 67%

The capital the Republic of Mari: Joshkar-Ola

Maris in the Republic of Mari: 42%



Data

Interviews with 60 Mari speakers in Joshkar-Ola (2012)
All informants are 1st generation urban Maris.

Some questions about ethnic identity:

- Is it important for every Mari to know Mari language?
- What is your attitude to the fact that you are Mari?
- What is the mentality of Mari and Russian people?
- What do you think, what is the attitude of Russians to Maris and vice versa?
- Did anybody tell you not to speak Mari?
- What is your attitude to Mari accent?
- What do you think about mixed marriages?
- Are there more Maris or Russians among your friends?

The role of Mari language for Mari identity

Survey 2001, ≈ 400 Maris: 79% marked the language as ethnic marker

Ethnic categories revealed in interviews:

- 1) Mari
- 2) Russian son or daughter of a Mari woman

Joke variant: "Nor Russian, nor Mari,
pig leg, cake (said in Russian)"

- 3) Russian

EXPECTATION: if you are Mari, you speak Mari

The role of Mari language for Mari identity

Change:

passive knowledge of Mari is enough –
communicative function is replaced by
symbolic

Assumed reason of coexistence of two
viewpoints:

twofold position, between rural and urban
value systems.

Norms of rural Mari communities

The use of Mari is obligatory for the members of community.

Choice of Russian is perceived as denying Mari identity and evokes symbolic punishment.

Even local Russians speak Mari.

Norms in the urban area

Elder generation: complying with the norms of majority

Negative attitudes of Russians + very low prestige of Mari →
hiding ethnic origin →
refusing to speak Mari in public,
speaking Russian to children

Norms in the urban area

Change:

the status of Mari language increased →
„struggling” for reformulation of existing
norms →

use of Mari in public, with strangers, in the
workplace

Still:

language shift

Conclusion

Positive attitude to Mari identity really influences the language behavior, it helps the broadening of the use of Mari as the solidarity marker in the city, but doesn't affect the language shift.

The idea that it's enough for Mari to have a passive knowledge of Mari language seems to be a compromise between the awaitings and norms of the rural Mari community and the reality of the city.