

## **LANGUAGE AS AN ETHNIC VALUE (BASED ON RESEARCH IN THE REPUBLIC OF MARI EL)**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the article is to generalize the results of sociological research from the beginning of the 2010s which were devoted to the study of the ethnic consciousness of Mari El Republic's population.

The article defines the place of language in the system of ethnic values of respondents. The authors propose the concept of the native language as a factor of the ethnic identity of the Mari and reveal the semantics of the concept of «native language» in the perception of the respondents of the Mari nationality.

In the beginning of 2010, among all the peoples who lived in the Republic of Mari El, the language topped the list among the motives for rapprochement with people of their nationality. The importance of this factor among the Mari is obvious at any level of the ethno-linguistic competence of a person and in any reality of the native language (the language of the ethnic, maternal or by preference - any other, which is considered as native).

Research methods are statistical, classification, analysis and generalization.

The relevance of the study is determined by the authors' appeal to the problems of the multicultural region, which are inevitably focused on language, ethnic interests and ethno-cultural integration.

The research showed that the population of the Republic of Mari El recognizes language as an unconditional factor and a stable determinant of ethnic identity, regardless of nationality, language competence and speech behavior of a person.

We found out the following as part of the study:

-Language as an ethnic value is the most important for the Mari and Tatars, who together make up about half of the population of the Republic;

- The material well-being of respondents «dulls» their ethnic awareness and identity;

- Perception the language as an ethnic value belongs to the Mari, who consider the Mari language as their mother tongue;

- The largest number of Mari who recognize their native language as an ethnic value and the main motive for rapprochement with people of their nationality is represented among those who fully master the Mari

language (reads, speaks and writes);

- The native language as an ethnic value is recognized by the older generation of respondents, as well as by the rural population of the republic;

- About half of the Mari understand their mother tongue as the language of their parents; the exception is the Mari with a weakened ethnic identity, namely, they call Russian as their native language (only a quarter of them call the language of parents as the mother tongue, for 42% of them it is associated with the language, which is spoken by the majority of the population).

The authors' conclusions and generalizations may have practical importance for adjusting the national policy, the language «construction» and the principles of interethnic interaction in the polyethnic region.

**Keywords:** The Republic of Mari El, public consciousness, ethnic self-identification, ethnic value, language, the native language of the Mari.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The results of opinion surveys, which were pursued in the Republic of Mari El in the beginning of the 21st century in order to identify ethnic values and value priorities of the public's consciousness of the population, show that language, folk customs, historical past, religion, character traits and psychology are always among the key values of the people. The hierarchy of ethnic values in terms of the degree of their importance and the nature of their relationship is heterogeneous, it depends to an extent on the nationality and the social standing of the person. However, the language remains the fundamental ethnic value for all respondents. The problem of language as an ethnic value recently has been markedly actualized in ethno-sociological and sociolinguistic researches in the Republic of Mari El (Shabykov, 2014; Shabykov, 2016; Shabykov, Kudryavtseva, Kazantsev, 2014, pp. 207-210; Shabykov, Kudryavtseva, 2014, pp. 204-207).

## 2. OPINIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this article is to generalize the results of sociological research of the beginning of the 2010s, dedicated to the study of the ethnic consciousness of the population of the Republic of Mari El. It has the following tasks: to determine the place of language in the system of respondents' ethnic values of different nationalities, who are living in the republic; to reveal the attitude to the native language as the factor of ethnic identity of the Mari - representatives of the titular ethnic group; to reveal the semantics of the very concept of «native language» in the perception of respondents of Mari nationality. Research methods are statistical, classification, analysis and generalization.

In the beginning of 2010, among all the peoples who lived in the Republic of Mari El, the language topped the list among the motives for rapprochement with people of their nationality; approximately 60-80% of respondents noted ethno value-based, ethno-unifying and ethno-differentiating roles of language (Table 1). In 2011, this factor was strongly pronounced among the Mari (75%) and the Tatars (76.1%), for whom it was more important than folk customs and religion.

The importance of this factor among the Mari is obvious at any level of the ethno-linguistic competence of a person and in any reality of the native language (the language of the ethnic, maternal or by preference - any other, which is considered as native). Besides, native language «is one of the most valued aspects of ethnic identity, regardless of competence in it» (Borisov, 2007, p. 155).

Table 1

Motives for rapprochement with people of their nationality depending on the nationality of the respondents (in % from all number of persons interviewed)

Motives	Nationality of respondents					
	Russian		Mari		Tatars	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
Language	72,0	65,7	79,3	75,0	80,0	76,1
Folk customs	36,6	34,3	55,0	40,1	67,7	56,5
Historical past	25,3	32,3	27,9	25,2	7,7	18,5

Religion	25,6	22,7	17,5	14,8	63,1	43,5
Features of the external appearance	11,6	9,3	7,2	6,3	4,6	4,3
Personality traits, psychology	25,9	20,3	15,4	14,0	12,3	14,1
Equal treatment of other nations	14,0	9,1	9,9	9,2	9,2	14,1
The common fate, the same social and status standing	16,1	16,0	12,3	9,8	4,6	8,7
Other	0,9	0,0	0,2	0,4	1,5	0,0
Nothing approximates	1,8	2,8	2,3	2,7	0,0	1,1
Neither agree nor disagree	3,3	9,1	3,0	5,4	1,5	2,2

It should be said about the fundamental importance of language in the ethnic self-identity of the an individual in the context of a group of Mari who completely speaks the ethnic language. Among the Mari, who in 2011 considered, that the language as a motive for rapprochement with people of their nationality, about 85% were those who could write, read and speak the Mari language. If we bear in mind the fact that the Mari people, who is a proficient in an ethnic language («I write, I read, I speak»), in 2011 was in the large majority (79.7%), then it is possible to argue, that ethnic self-identification through the language is indeed extremely important and meaningful for the Mari.

The Mari language for the Mari is the ethnic language, that fulfills «the role of a symbol of unity with the people» (Borisov, 2007, p. 154) (ethnic value), and is the natural (motherese) language, it is the mother's tongue, the first learned language. It is possible active and passive language practice in both cases. However, it remains the characteristic of ethnic identity, even if the ethnic language is weakened by the function of communication or if it loses this function generally. In such a case, not the «real use of the ethnic language, but the desired linguistic behavior» (Dontsov, Stefanenko, Utalieva, 1997, p. 81), language preference become important for the respondents. «Native language, which is used often as the second, is not the main communicative means, but the orientation to the native language is kept» (Gavrilova, 2013, p. 53).

In 2012, among the Mari the Mari language was recognized as vernacular by 79.2% of respondents, Russian language - 7.8%, Russian and Mari - 12.9%. The Mari, who considered, that the Mari language is their mother tongue, had a more pronounced ethnicity. This is evidenced by their choice such criteria as the «mother tongue of parents» (44%) and «father's nationality» (30.7%) as the attributes to determine the national identity of a person. These figures are lower for the Mari, who considered that the Mari and Russian languages are their mother tongue (3.4% and 8.2% respectively) and for the Mari who considered the Russian language as vernacular (25.6% and 2.8% respectively). There is a significant transformation of the ethnic identity of the Mari, who considers that the Russian language is their mother tongue. It is confirmed by the fact, that 41.9% of the respondents among them consider «the taking a decision only by teenager himself» is the criterion for determining a person's nationality.

Male Mari more than Female Mari call the Mari language as the mother tongue (the difference is 6.1%). 14.8% of women consider the Russian and Mari languages as their mother tongue, which is 3.5% more than among men. The Mari at the age of 60 years and older (86.8%) are the most oriented to the ethnic language, as the vernacular, least of all the youngest at the age of 15-22 (69.4%).

To a greater extent, language as an ethnic value is recognized by the villagers. Among them, 90.6% recognize the Mari language as their mother tongue; Russian language was named by less than 1% of respondents. As a comparison: among residents of towns and cities, those who call the Mari language as their native, 69.4% and 63.7% respectively; among the townspeople, every fifth Mari indicates Russian as his native language.

Interest in the Mari language as a vernacular decreases in the wake of rising of educational level of the Mary respondents (90.3% with incomplete secondary and 73.5% with higher and incomplete higher education).

With the growth of material well-being, interest in the mother tongue as an ethnic value decreases. The richer respondents of the Mari nationality least of all consider the Mari language as their native. So, if among respondents with an average monthly income per family member up to 4000 rubles inclusive, more than 82% of respondents call the nation's language as their native language, whereas with an income of over 7000 rubles only 65.8%. Among the well-off Mari, there are significantly more those who consider two languages - Mari and Russian, as their mother tongue.

The researches prove the relationship between reflection in relation to the native language and recognition of the ethnic value of the language, its ethno-differentiating role. In 2011 the degree of importance of ethnoidentifying factors among the Mari people, who call Mari as native language, was the following: the language (80.2%) was in the first place (with significant dominance), then - folk customs (44.7%), historical past (24.4%), religion (16.8%).

The ethnic identity of the Mari is presented through their native language and in the respondents' answers to the question «What does the mother tongue mean for you?». Approximately half of the Mari respondents correlate the «mother tongue» with the language of the parents (Table 2). The Mari ethnic identity in the position « the mother tongue is the language of the parents» is expressed to the greatest extent among the Mari, who recognizes the Mari language as the vernacular (51.9%), as well as among men (51.7%, which is 5% more than among women). The difference between female perceptions is also manifested in the position «mother tongue is a language, which is learned in childhood» (20.3%, which is 5.6% more than for men). This semantics of the native language is characteristic, in general, for approximately 18% of the Mari respondents and for 19% of the Mari with their native Mari language.

Table 2

Semantics of the concept of «native language» in the perception of the Mari in 2012 (in % of the number of respondents)

The meaning of the term «native language»	In general, in the Republic of Mari El, the Mari	Mother tongue of Mari		
		Mari	Russian	Russian and Mari
This is mother's language	4,7	4,7	4,7	8,5
This is the father's language	1,4	1,8	0	0
The language spoken by the majority of the population where you were born	17,2	14,9	41,9	15,5
The language of the social environment where you were brought up	8,7	6,9	18,6	14,1
This is the language, which is learned in childhood	17,9	19,0	7,0	18,3
This is the language of parents	48,9	51,9	27,9	43,7
Nothing means	0,2	0,2	0	0
Other	0,2	0,2	0	0

Strong ethnoidentity is shown by a large proportion of the Mari respondents, for whom the mother tongue is the language of the parents (48.9% among the Mari respondents, 51.9% among the Mari who consider the Mari language as native, 43.7% among the Mari who consider the Mari and Russian languages as vernacular simultaneously). And the following factors are evidence of a weak manifestation of ethnoidentity: the presence of respondents among Mari people who consider the Russian as their native language; a large proportion of respondents who understand their native language as the language? which is spoken by the majority of the population of the region where they were born (41.9%); as well as a small percentage of respondents who belongs to the mother tongue as the language of the social environment where they were brought up (18.6%), and as to the parents' language (27.9%) (Table 2).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The research showed that the population of the Republic of Mari El recognizes language as an unconditional factor and a stable determinant of ethnic identity, regardless of nationality, language competence and speech behavior of a person.

We found out the following as part of the study:

- Language as an ethnic value is the most important for the Mari and Tatars, who together make up about half of the population of the Republic;
- The material well-being of respondents «dulls» their ethnic awareness and identity;
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mother tongue;

- The largest number of Mari who recognize their native language as an ethnic value and the main motive for rapprochement with people of their nationality is represented among those who fully master the Mari language (reads, speaks and writes);

- The native language as an ethnic value is recognized by the older generation of respondents, as well as by the rural population of the republic;

- About half of the Mari understand their mother tongue as the language of their parents; the exception is the Mari with a weakened ethnic identity, namely, they call Russian as their native language (only a quarter of them call the language of parents as the mother tongue, for 42% of them it is associated with the language, which is spoken by the majority of the population).

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