

LANGUAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF ETHNIC SELF-DEFINITION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION OF MODERN STUDENT YOUTH OF THE MARI EL REPUBLIC

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Abstract

The article deals with the sociolinguistic situation in the Republic of Mari El in the context of ethnic self-definition and intercultural communication of modern student youth. The choice of student youth as the target of research is not accidental: the opinion of young people is very significant in studying the public consciousness of the population, in general.

One of the most topical sociolinguistic problems is the perception of the language and its position in society by youth. The research subject of this article is the language as a means of ethnic self-definition of modern student youth of the Mari El Republic and as a means of social, including intercultural, communication. Such a sociological problematique was considered previously only concerning the opinion of young people at the turn of the XXth – XXIst centuries. The state of public consciousness of student youth is analyzed for the first time.

The empirical basis of the study was the results of opinion polls of 2016s and 2018s, conducted by the Mari Scientific Research Institute of Language, Literature and History named after V.M. Vasilyev.

The comparison of the results made it possible to see dynamics in consciousness of student youth, which is to a certain extent related to the fact, that in the last two years positions of the state as to language policy in the education sector has changed.

The new positions contained serious recurrences: 1) narrowing of the role of languages of indigenous peoples of Russia in the field of education (including the Mari language), 2) limitation the possibilities for their preservation and development in society.

It is proved in this article that the modern student youth of the Mari El Republic approaches to the language from three positions, treating it:

- 1) As the ethnic value and means of ethnic self-definition;
- 2) As mean of intercultural communication in the modern information environment,

3) Pragmatically – as means of «advance» in further life.

The tendency of fading of the first position in favor of the other two is outlined, in connection with which the following trends are revealed in the youth consciousness and, in general, in the regional society:

– Strengthening the position of Russian and English languages,

– A slight decrease in interest in the Mari language – both as a mother tongue and as a state language (the comparison of the results of 2016s and 2018s researches well demonstrates the strengthening of these trends).

Answers of respondents to the question «Should knowledge of mother tongue be compulsive for each person?» prove, that the highest ethno-identification index of the mother tongue is marked among Mari students, but at the same time today almost one fifth of Mari students do not call the Mari language as their mother tongue, only half of Mari students support for compulsory study of the Mari language as a native language.

Keywords: The Republic of Mari El, collective consciousness, student youth, language, ethnic self-definition, social communication, mother tongue, intercultural communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article deals with the sociolinguistic situation in the Republic of Mari El in the context of ethnic self-definition and intercultural communication of modern student youth. The choice of student youth as the target of research is not accidental: in the youth environment, as a rule, the same meanings and problems, which concern all other sectors of society are relayed; i.e. the opinion of young people is very significant in studying the public consciousness of the population, in general.

2. OPINIONS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most topical sociolinguistic problems is the perception of the language and its position in society by youth. The research subject of this article is the language as a means of ethnic self-definition of modern student youth of the Mari El Republic and as a means of social, including intercultural, communication. Such a sociological problematique was considered previously only concerning the opinion of young people at the turn of the XXth – XX1st centuries (Shabykov, 2014; Shabykov, 2016). The state of public consciousness of student youth is analyzed for the first time.

The empirical basis of the study was the results of opinion polls of 2016th («The social portrait of student youth») (Questionnaire, 2016) and 2018th («Civil and ethnic identity of youth in the context of the international relations in multicultural space») (Questionnaire, 2018), conducted by the Mari Scientific Research Institute of Language, Literature and History named after V.M. Vasilyev.

The coverage of students youth in both researches was quite volumetric – 494 in 2016 and 165 (from 750 respondents of all) in 2018. Both times university students of the city of Yoshkar-Ola were interviewed: 7 faculties and institutes of the Mari State University and 7 faculties and institutes of the Povolzhskiy State Technological University.

Comparison of the results allowed us to see dynamics in consciousness of student youth for this short period (2 years). During this period the positions of the state as to language policy in the education sector have changed abruptly. Evidence of this, first, is the statement of the Russian President, made in Yoshkar-Ola in July 2017, about undoubted priority of the Russian language in the educational system (that's fair, and nobody argues with it) and about «voluntary right» (free will) of studying of languages of the peoples of Russia (it has been the subject of many questions in national territorial subject of Russia), secondly, after these statements the amendments to the federal law on education, establishing the principle of voluntariness of studying of languages (native and state), were made.

Diverse information appeared on the Internet, reflecting a different perception of this situation, including the following: «A new stage of russification of the population begins in Russia: now schools in the Russian regions are smoothed out from languages of indigenous people, education programs change everywhere, non-governmental organizations are being demanded to conduct work only in Russian language. Imperial

politics receives new lease of life» (Panfilov, 2017).

In the Republic of Mari El before the beginning of the school year (2018) parents of all primary students (1 and 5 classes) wrote application requests for choosing language of study, as well as for studying of subjects: the native language and the state language of the Mari El Republic (from three languages: Russian, Mari and Hill Mari).

The aforementioned positions contained serious recurrences: 1) narrowing of the role of languages of indigenous peoples of Russia, including the Mari language in the field of education, 2) limitation the possibilities for their preservation and development in society. Such a situation could not be reflected in the responses of students young generation in the survey of 2018s. In the public consciousness of young people there have been some changes, that will be shown in this article in examining the results of sociological polls.

In 2016 about half of the student respondents identify themselves the Russians, about 40% – the Maris, about 5% – the Tatars, about 3% associated themselves with other ethnic groups.

More than half of students (54,3%) considered the Russian language as their native language + 20,9% – at the same time the Russian and Mari languages, so, it turns out Russian only are more than 75% of students.

Mari was named native by 17,8% + Russian and Mari at the same time – 20,9%, in all it turns out about 40%.

Tatar was called native by 3,4% of the surveyed students.

Such quality of identification by the native language, in general, approximately coincides with ethnic self-identification of students, what allows to speak about the importance of the language factor in each of the main ethnic groups of the Mari El Republic.

Hereafter we will consider the situation with the choice of the native language in the context of nationality of respondents. In 2016 there was presented such situation:

– most of all the Russians recognize their ethnic language as a native – nearly 90% (88,4% called Russian language + 8,3% – at the same time the Russian and Mari languages); the Maris, who consider Mari as their mother tongue, are less – about 85% (43,2% named the Mari language + 41,6% – at the same time both the Russian and Mari languages).

As we see, the number of Mari youth, who has passed to bilingual consciousness fast draw near to the number of respondents with ethno-lingual unity (Tab. 1). This trend obviously strengthen in 2018 (correspondingly 39,7% and 41,3%), the figures almost become equal, the difference makes already only 1,6%).

Naturally, in 2018 there is the tendency of choice by Mari students youth the Russian language as the mother tongue, instead of their ethnic language, for what, in our opinion, recently mentioned political processes of the last two years are influenced (let's compare facts of the tables: the number of those, who chooses Mari as their mother tongue decreased almost by 3,5% and the number of those, who chooses Russian as their mother tongue increased by 2%).

The number of Russian student youth, recognizing at the same time Russian and Mari as their native languages, decreased approximately by a factor of 2.

Table 1
The native language of student youth of the Mari El Republic depending on ethnic self-identification
(in % from the number of respondents)

Native language	Nationality of respondents					
	Russian		Mari		Others	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Russian	88,4	91,3	15,3	17,5	26,3	37,5
Mari	0,8	0,0	43,2	39,7	0,0	8,3
Tatar	0,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	36,8	16,7
Russian and Mari	8,3	4,3	41,6	41,3	5,3	8,3
Russian and Tatar	1,7	1,4	0,0	0,0	21,1	12,5
Others	0,0	2,8	0,0	1,5	10,5	16,7

In 2018 into the sociological fact-finding questionnaire was included the question, allowing to judge **degree of ethnic** self-definition of students youth on the basis of the native language («Should knowledge of mother

tongue be compulsive for each person?»), and such answers were received (we give them depending on national affiliation of respondents): the highest ethno-identification index of the mother tongue is marked among Mari student youth (it is about 70% in the table). This percent of in relation to the Mari native language, obligatory mastery of it, will be significantly less, if to take into account, that almost fifth part of Mari students **do not call** the Mari language as their mother tongue today, and to subtract these 20%, then only half of Mari students support for compulsory study of the Mari language as a native language.

According to the latest information, at schools of the Republic of Mari El parents of 7,948 pupils chose the mother tongue to study as a subject, which is **0,4% of the total number of students**. If to try to correlate at least conditionally these percentages with the national structure of the population of the Republic of Mari El according to the last census of 2010 (the Russians – 45,08%, **the Maris – 41,76%**, the Tatars – 5,51%, the others – 7.65%), then it turns out that, it is very small figure.

Table 2
Distribution of answers on the question «Should knowledge of mother tongue be compulsive for each person?» depending on national affiliation (2018)
(in % from the number of respondents)

Possible answers	the Russian	the Mari	Others
Yes	56,5	69,8	75
No	24,6	17,5	16,7
Did not think about it	18,9	12,7	8,3

In 2016 about 90% of students answered, that they study or learned the Russian language, about 94% – English, **more than 60% – Mari**, about 13% – German, about 5% – French. Significant percent of those, who studied or study the Mari language – it, OBVIOUSLY, was a consequence of recognizing it as the state language of the MER and then, in 2016, to a certain extent it was necessary to study it within the Basic curriculum of the Republic of Mari El.

With these (in general, they are quite good as for the Mari language) indicators were not correlated the students' answers about the need to know these languages in their future life. So, if about the need of knowledge of the Russian language tell about 90% of students and more than 70% of students speak about necessity of English, then only about one fifth of the respondents speak about the need of Mari, and a little more than 2% about the need of French. This picture is shown in table 3.

Table 3
Opinion of the students of the Mari El Republic about need of knowledge of the studied or learning languages in their further life
(in % from the number of respondents)

Languages	It is necessary	It is not so necessary	I am not particular about it	Rather no	It is not necessary	I do not study	Didn't answer
English	72,1	14,2	4,7	2,8	1,8	2,4	2,0
German	5,9	15,8	13,0	7,1	2,8	26,1	29,3
French	2,2	12,1	13,2	6,7	3,6	28,3	33,9
Russian	87,9	2,4	1,6	0,2	0,4	1,2	6,3
Mari	18,2	17,8	11,3	11,7	12,1	12,1	16,8
Other	5,3	2,6	1,8	1,0	0,6	3,6	85,1

Hereafter we will consider opinion of students of 2016 on need for their further life of the Mari language depending on their nationality determined by themselves.

About 40% of Mari students, in general, and about 50% of the students, who called the Mari language is their native language, said unambiguously and accurately, that the Mari language is necessary.

But almost 30% thought, that it is not so necessary, 11,5% it is not necessary (these are the summarized answers «rather no» and «It is not necessary»), the rest showed indifference to it (Table 4), that is, about more than 40% of Mari respondents said unnecessary. This is a serious sign of the departure of students from the Mari language (both native and state), a sign of the vulnerability of the Mari language in society.

The largest number of people, claiming the uselessness of the language of the indigenous population of the

MER (44%) and indifferent to it, needless to say, were among Russian students (this can be seen in table 4)

Table 4
Opinion of student youth of the Republic of Mari El about necessity of knowledge of the Mari language for further life depending on ethnic self-definition
(in % from the number of respondents)

Variants of answers	Nationality of students		
	the Russian	the Mari	others
It is necessary	5,4	38,4	7,9
It isn't so necessary	12,0	27,4	15,8
It doesn't matter	12,0	9,5	13,2
Rather not need	13,7	8,9	10,5
It is not necessary	18,3	2,6	13,2
I do not study	17,4	3,7	15,8
Did not answer	21,2	9,5	23,6

Certainly, the situation with the Russian and English languages was in a different way.

The Russian language is necessary in the further life, was called by about 90% of respondents.

The English language, which is the main language of the international communication and the modern information environment, is considered as such by those more than 70% of students of all nationalities; uselessness of English was noted only by 4,6% of the Russians, 3,7% of the Mari and 7.9% of students of other nationalities.

About 40% of students consider, it is necessary to study and other languages, besides those, which they have already studied or are studying. The French language (20,1%) is in the first place among them, followed by Chinese (19,1%), German (17,7%), English (11,3%), Spanish (7,4%), Japanese (4,9%), Hebrew and Finnish (3,9 % each), Italian and Latin (for 3,4% each), Mari and Indian (for 1,5% each). Students of humanitarian faculties and institutes (45,9%) nearly 12% more, than technical ones, want to study other languages, besides those, which they have studied or are learning.

The similar difference is found in the respondents' answers on the question about the need of teaching the Mari language in the Mari El Republic's schools: more than 60% of the students of humanitarian program track answers «in all schools» and «in some schools», while among technical students – only about half of the respondents.

The greatest number of those, who considered, that it is necessary to study the Mari language in all schools of the Republic of Mari El in 2016, was noted among Mari students – about 65% (Table 5).

Table 5
Opinion of students youth of the Republic of Mari El on the need of teaching the Mari language in all schools of the republic, depending on ethnic self-definition
(in % from the number of respondents)

Variants of answers	Nationality of students					
	the Russians		the Maris		others	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
It is necessary at all schools	20,7	11,6	65,8	61,9	10,5	25,0
It is necessary at some schools	18,3	27,5	20,0	19,0	15,8	16,7
There is no such need	46,5	53,6	8,4	11,1	65,8	37,5
I find it difficult to answer	14,5	7,3	5,8	8,0	7,9	20,8

Dynamics of opinion of students youth in this matter, depending on nationality from 2016 to 2018, is shown in table 5. Trends in dynamics are the following:

- Among the Russian students the number of supporters (about 9%) of unambiguous opinion, that it is necessary to study Mari at all schools, decreased abruptly. And there are same tendency in the position «is necessary at some schools»; «there is no such need». It is already more than a half of answers (53,6%);

– The same tendency was designated in the responses of Mari students, although, to a far lesser degree of manifestation.

3. CONCLUSION

So, the modern student youth of the Republic of Mari El approaches the language from three positions, treating it:

- 1) As to the ethnic value and means of ethnic self-definition;
- 2) As a means of intercultural communication in the modern information environment,
- 3) Pragmatically – as a means of «advance» in further life.

The tendency of fading of the first position in favor of the other two is outlined, in connection with which the following trends are revealed in the youth consciousness and, in general, in the regional society:

- Strengthening the position of Russian and English languages,
- A slight decrease in interest in the Mari language – both as a mother tongue and as a state language (the comparison of the results of 2016s and 2018s researches well demonstrates the strengthening of these trends).

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