Confronting the Extinction Narrative: Diversity research, media, and folk views on language endangerment

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Johanna Laakso, Universität Wien

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The presentation is based on experiences from the EU-FP7 research project ELDIA, in which comparative research on the maintenance of linguistic diversity was conducted with a wide range of multilingual minority communities across Europe. The project included a media-sociological analysis of the representation of minorities and minority-majority relationships, and reactions to the project and its events in local media were also systematically collected.

Across the European meta-diversity (highly diverse types of multilingualism and roles of different languages in the life of the communities at issue), the ELDIA media analyses showed that media when reporting on minorities often neglect questions of endangerment and revitalisation and focus on politically harmless human-interest issues, especially the representations and conservation of traditional (visible) culture in its traditional habitat. This, in turn, may reinforce the image of endangered languages as reified entities, not human actions and choices.

Endangerment and extinction of animal and plant species are issues well known to Western media consumers. Tapping into this interest, media representations of research into minority languages and cultures often portray endangered languages as reified "organisms" inhabiting an endangered ecological niche, focusing not on the actions and choices of the speakers of the language but on the expert role of academic researchers, whose activities are portrayed as a "rescue mission". This folk view on language endangerment, downplaying the agency of speakers, may also endorse the vulgar-socio-Darwinist idea that some languages are less fit for survival and that language extinction is a natural process and therefore inevitable.

In this presentation, I will analyse the material of media reactions to the ELDIA project from the point of view of the "extinction narrative". Moreover, I will propose a preliminary list of measures which should be explicitly included into the media and communication strategies of research projects dealing with endangered languages.

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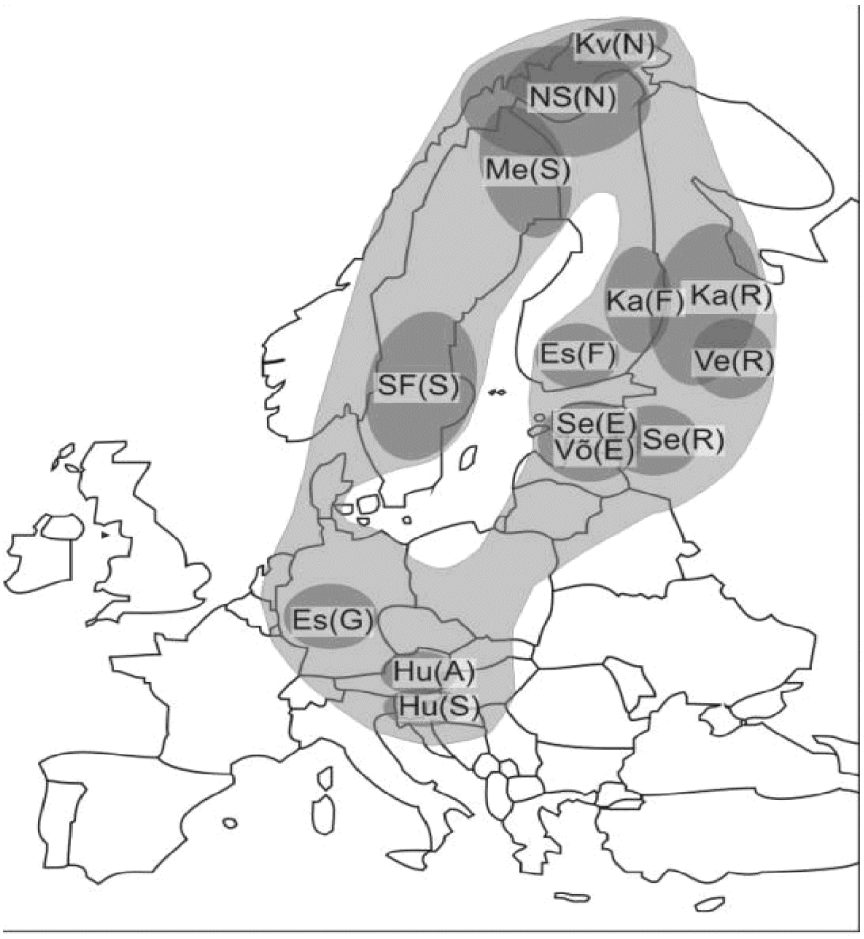
Introduction: Project ELDIA and the image of minority language research

This presentation is based on material from the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All; *www.eldia-project.org*). ELDIA was an international project funded by the 7th

Framework Programme of the European Union and run by a consortium of seven European universities and research institutions, with Prof. Anneli Sarhimaa (University of Mainz, Germany) as the coordinator-in-chief (and yours truly as the leader of the dissemination work package). Within ELDIA, case studies were conducted with thirteen speaker communities, which included both indigenous and autochthonous, so-called old minorities, and migrant groups, some of them quite recent. All these groups had a Finno-Ugric (Uralic) heritage language; one of the goals of ELDIA was to compensate for the under-representation of Eastern European, non-Indo-European and migrant minorities in minority language studies (which in Europe tend to concentrate heavily on certain Western, Indo-European and autochthonous groups such as the Celtic minorities, Frisian or Catalan).



The Framework Programme was not about pure knowledge and basic research; the EU expected “products” with practical relevance for its political goals, such as peace, democracy and inclusion of all citizens. The product which ELDIA created was a "European Language Vitality Barometer" (EuLaViBar), an attempt at a tool for measuring the vitality (or the state of

maintenance) of an endangered language on the basis of empirical data. These data were collected by way of an extensive questionnaire which was translated into all relevant languages; furthermore, qualitative data were gathered in individual and focus group interviews, and separate analyses of media and the legal and institutional framework in each country were also conducted.

The ELDIA project, as mentioned, included media analyses which – in the same way as the questionnaire surveys and the interviews – were conducted on the basis of the same design with all the groups at issue; this part of the project was planned and supervised by Dr. Reetta Toivanen of the University of Helsinki, a socio-anthropologist specializing on various issues of minorities and human rights. Moreover, as an EU funded project, ELDIA had to comply to certain central guidelines and fulfil certain expectations concerning dissemination: we had to work out a detailed media and dissemination strategy and report on it. A further contact interface with the media arose from the fact that some of our project researchers had close contacts with local minority media or even worked in the media themselves. (When speaker communities are small and there are relatively few educated activists able to use the language also in writing, this is probably inevitable.)

This means that different media assumed many roles in our activity: object of research, participant or supporter in research, and "show-window of research", or rather: the interface between the academic research community, the speaker community at issue and the general audience. Dealing with these multiple challenges was one of the main points in our media strategy. In addition to specifically reaching out to our stakeholders (this was the reason why our website was multilingual from the very beginning), we had to prepare policy briefs for EU dissemination, organize multiplier events (information events and public discussions) and also actively spread information about our project to mass media, in particular, using the PR agencies of our universities.

Where research meets the extinction narrative

Already at the planning stage of our project we became intensely aware of the presence of what I have tentatively called "the extinction narrative" in public discourse. By the extinction narrative I mean the idea that minority languages are heading towards inevitable extinction, which is portrayed as a natural consequence of modernization and globalization. The more the minority languages are shown in connection to traditional, preindustrial cultures, the less viable they seem in modern contexts such as urban life, technology or higher education, in particular, due to the rampant vulgar essentialism: the widespread ethnolinguistic assumption, that is, the idea of a simple one-to-one correspondence between language and ethnic identity (see e.g. Blommaert & al. 2013: 3–4, Laakso & al. 2014: 17), also works to the damage of minority

language speakers, if their language is associated with something that is believed to belong to yesterday's world. This impression is even strengthened by the folklorization of minority languages which seems to be at the heart of minority language policies and ethnopolitics in Russia, for instance: minority languages at school, for example, are taught in connection with or as part of local traditions, history, and folklore, for symbolic rather than communicative goals.

As I already mentioned, one of the main goals of the ELDIA project was to create a vitality barometer or a tool for measuring the state of maintenance of an endangered language. This, of course, sounds very scientific and exact, and already early on we realized that the whole idea of our tool might be completely misunderstood. The idea was to create a tool which measures the vitality of the language at issue across four focus areas which reflect the three criteria for language maintenance as formulated by François Grin, viz. *Capacity, Opportunity,* and *Desire* to use the language, and the accessibility of *Language products;* on each focus area, the idea was to measure the vitality on the dimensions of *language use and interaction, education, legislation,* and *media.* The results of the questionnaire survey were calculated into values along each dimension. The idea is that these results can be used by language policy makers and stakeholder groups to pinpoint those areas in which the language is in particular need of support. However, from the very beginning it was obvious that this tool could be misused: some minority representatives were explicitly concerned that the barometer might be used against them, to find excuses for cutting public support by showing that the language is not worth supporting any more. Of course, all our publications with the barometer include strong caveats: the barometer should NOT be used this way, it is not a magic crystal ball which can predict what will happen with a language in the future. However, the concern remains, and it is part of the extinction narrative: the image of scientific research conducted on a language may contribute to the idea that fighting language obsolescence is like healing cancer: it should be left to academic experts. This, furthermore, will tempt outsiders to confuse research and documentation with a "rescue mission".

Already in our project application, we kept stressing the agency of speakers and the linguistic rights of individuals and communities. Actually, although we ended up measuring the vitality of individual minority languages, our project initially focused on multilingualism and the parallel use of many languages. One of the main results of our legal and institutional framework analyses was precisely that multilingualism is actually neglected in minority language policies: what is supported or endorsed is, in the best case, the right of a certain group to use a certain language in a certain area. In other words, there is still a tacit assumption that supporting endangered languages means securing monolingual safe zones in which minority speakers can practice their strange habits behind closed doors. The fact that the survival of minority languages means coping with multilingualism and securing sustainable multilingual arrangements was hardly ever the topic of explicit language policies; I believe that this

monolingual bias, interpreting multilingualism merely as a sign of imminent extinction, is also an essential part of the extinction narrative. This also efficiently obscures the fact that language maintenance, ultimately, depends on the individual choices of each speaker.

The extinction narrative in media

Coming back to the extinction narrative: All these aspects – the alleged naturalness and inevitability of language death, folklorization and focusing on the past, as well as portraying language revitalization as a rescue mission by outsiders, and the monolingual bias in general – were clearly visible in the ELDIA media analyses, although in very different forms and proportions. For instance, in Swedish media the fact that minorities had suffered from assimilation pressure and official state-language monolingualism was often explicitly acknowledged and never questioned, while in many other countries the problems with the minorities' human rights and equal treatment hardly ever received attention in the majority press. Especially the majority media in the countries under study showed very diverse views on minority languages and their revitalization – and quite often the minorities at issue were almost completely ignored and absent in majority media. (The millennial presence of Hungarians in Austria, for instance, was practically never mentioned in the German-language press material analyzed for the ELDIA study.) However, certain aspects were typically mentioned in all media analyses, and many of them were also visible in the media reactions to the ELDIA project.

First of all, the tendency to identify minority languages with the past, with the tradition, with the historical and cultural roots of each ethnic group was clearly visible both in our media analyses and in the media reactions to our project. Obviously, matters pertaining to language are difficult to grasp and difficult to illustrate; for the media in general, focusing on visible culture such as folk dance festivals, ethnic cooking or traditional handwork and clothing is much easier and politically much less problematic, not to speak of the fact that it may well suit the general audience's expectations or even prejudices about the interesting, exciting characteristics of ethnic groups. However, even media contributions focusing specifically on language endangerment may suffer from this historical bias. Let me just show one example. In connection with the ELDIA field study among Karelian speakers in Finland, the local newspaper *Ylä-Karjala* in Eastern Finland published a very nice article featuring some young Karelian speakers who were interviewed for the project.

YLÄ-KARJALA (Tiistaina 8. maaliskuuta)

KIELENOPPIJAT Amanda Tolonen (vas.), Ira Pappi ja Maria Kähäri ostelevat karjalankielistä Oma maa -lehteä.

Kieli on osa perinnettä

Ira Pappi sai isänsä iloiseksi ryhdyttyään puhumaan karjalaa, Amanda Tolonen haluaisi oppia sukunsa kielen.

"Välillä puhutaan kokonaan karjalaa."

Hanke vähemmistökielten säilyttämiseksi

Although this is a group interview with younger-generation speakers and the journalist was obviously delighted to see that Karelian is not just the language of grandmothers and old folk songs, when it comes to the main motivation for maintaining the language, the focus is not on the future or the everyday use of the language but on the continuity of traditions, on family history and former generations. The title says “Language is part of the tradition”, and the sub-title deals with two of the young ladies shown here: one of them “made her father happy by starting to speak Karelian”, another “would like to learn the language of her family”. The Karelian language does not seem to have any relevance for the Finnish-speaking majority or for the society at large, beyond the private circles of Karelian families.

It was also evident that the representatives of majority media in particular normally have very little understanding for minority language issues in general. Typically, languages and language policies only surface in public discourse in connection to topics which are perceived as having political importance for the majority. In many European countries, such topics include immigration issues, in particular, the – real or imagined – problems with the immigrants’ language learning and linguistic integration. For quite a few minorities in our sample, this meant that their problems were overshadowed by those of more visible and more conspicuously different groups; for instance, the Hungarians in Austria, as a well-integrated and culturally close minority and immigrant group, hardly attract attention in contrast to the numerous Turkish immigrants. Moreover, minority language issues can be used as a pretext or an excuse for debates on other language policies, on cultural or ethnopolitics. I have often experienced this in Austria: trying to initiate a discussion on the importance of multilingualism or the linguistic rights of minorities ends up with a debate on whether immigrants are really too lazy or reluctant to teach German to their children... And in general, as the Hungarian sociolinguist Miklós Kontra once noted in a newspaper interview (in the context of the Hungarian government’s recently awoken concern for the purity and correctness of the state

language): when politicians are talking about language, they are really talking about something else.

I will show just one example on this. In connection with an ELDIA project workshop in Maribor, Slovenia, the local Hungarian-language newspaper *Népújság* published an article about the project. Instead of the situation of the Hungarian language in Slovenia or minority languages in general, the main attention is given to the official greeting words of the university rector, the dean and the Hungarian ambassador on language policies in general and especially in the education system. Minority language research is overshadowed by completely different concerns, in particular, the language policies favouring English (as in this region, German has traditionally had a very strong position, the dominance of English is perceived as problematic – which is an interesting problem but has very little to do with the language issues of the Hungarian minority in Slovenia).

Eldia – európai nyelvi projekt

A nyelvi sokszínűség felmérése a cél

Az Eldia európai projekt 6 ország 8 intézményének – többek között a Maribori Magyar Intézet – részvételével valósul meg, s a többnyelvűség kutatását szolgálja. Ennek bemutatójára került sor hétfőn a Maribori Egyetem Rektorátusán az összes közreműködő jelenlétében.

Bence Lajos
lajos.bence@nepujsag.net

Az EuLaViBar olyan új eszköz a nyelvi sok- nyelvek egymás mellett élése a többnyelvű mindennapokban. A hétfői bemutató műhelyen az összes ország részvevőinek a projekt fontosságáról. A Maribori Egyetem rektora, dr. Ivan Rozman pedig az európai integráció során keletkezett új helyzetben

Dr. Kolláth Anna tanszékvezető köszönti a vendégeket.

színűség felmérésére, amellyel lehetővé válik a jelenlétében dr. Kolláth Anna tanszékvezető szólt a kis nyelvek iránti felelősségről, azok kutatási szükségességéről szólt.

Dr. Marko Jesenšek, a Bölcsészettudományi Kar dékánja elégedettségének adott hangot, hogy az Eldia jelentős hangsúlyt kapott az EU-s nyelvi vizsgálódások között. – Jelenlegi monoton és kiszámítható világunkban a bolognai rendszer új mozgásteret, új szelet hozott. Egy kérdés azonban továbbra is tisztázásra szorul: az angol nyelv mindenhatóságának kérdése, s vajon ténylegesen is ez-e a megoldás? Szerencsére azonban az unió nem csak ebben gondolkodik – mondta a dékán.

A Magyar Intézetről elmondta: komoly pedagógiai és kutatómunka folyik itt, rendkívül nagy aktivitással. A kar 12 intézete közül talán itt a legjobb a helyzet. Kár, hogy az állami támogatás nem ehhez méltó.

Horváth Ferenc, az MMÖNK elnöke felszólalásában örömét fejezte ki, hogy a muravidéki magyarok nyelve is a kutatható nyelvek között szerepel. – Ez rendkívül fontos, hiszen az elmúlt 50 évben ritkán történt ilyen, s rajtunk is egyfajta kishitűség uralkodott el a magyar nyelvvel kapcsolatban – mondta az elnök. A nyelvünket illetően a politikai célok megfogalmazása megtörtént, a szakmának kell a továbblépést megtennie a nyelvi fejlesztés terén, ezért összefogásra szólította fel a feleket.

Máthé László, a ljubljanai Magyar Nagykövetség első titkára köszöntőjében további sikereket kívánt a csoport tagjainak.

Végezetül dr. Kolláth Anna tanszékvezető köszönte meg a részvételt a hat ország nyolc intézményének, valamint mindazoknak, akik elfogadták a meghívást a workshopra. A műsorban Šimonka Tjaša szólóénekes lépett fel magyar és szlovén népdalfeldolgozásokkal.

Magyar szó

This example had more to do with the general invisibility of minority issues than with language endangerment in particular. A related aspect is the monolingual bias which, to repeat, is part and parcel of the extinction narrative: monolingualism is seen and portrayed as the normal state, while multilingual arrangements are a kind of an anomaly. How deep entrenched this

view is in Western European media can be seen from this newspaper article, which also illustrates the previously mentioned tendency to focus on the integration of migrants as the politically most acute issue. The article deals with multilingualism in Austrian schools, in connection with an integration project for school children coming from immigrant families, and also very briefly interviews Angelika Parfuss, project researcher of the Viennese ELDIA team, about the Hungarians in Austria.

Migranten lernen am besten Deutsch über den Umweg der Muttersprache

Mehrsprachigkeit erwünscht

Vom Richard Solder

■ Warum gerade Englisch „cool“ ist.
■ Andere Sprachen werden vernachlässigt.

Wien. „Komm', gemma kicken, Lan!“ Die zwei Jugendlichen in der Wiener U-Bahn switchen in ihren Dialogen zwischen Türkisch und Deutsch: „Lan“ (eigentlich „Ulan“) heißt soviel wie „Mann“ oder „Mensch“. Die beiden sind, wie viele Österreicher mit Migrationshintergrund, in zwei Sprachen zu Hause.

Um bilinguales Potenzial geht es bei „Sag's Multi!“: Im Rahmen dieses Redewettbewerbs treten Wiener Schüler mit einer anderen Muttersprache als Deutsch an und wechseln während ihrer Vorträge zwischen dieser und Deutsch. Letztes Jahr, beim ersten Turnier dieser Art, kämpften 114 Schüler in 35 verschiedenen Spra-

Je früher die Mehrsprachigkeit trainiert wird, desto besser sind die Resultate. Foto: bilderbox

„Ghettoisierung“ von Schulen mit selbst, die eingeteilt werden, son- nicht genug“, so der in Wien an-

The subtitle of the article emphasizes the importance of the mother tongue for immigrant kids: they will learn German best by way of their mother tongue. (The importance of the mother tongue for the learning of other languages, of course, is a fact confirmed by a plethora of studies in many countries of the world, but also notoriously ignored by majority policy-makers.) But in fact, the German wording uses the word *Umweg,* literally ‘detour’, implicitly highlighting the idea that the mother tongue is simply a tool that can be used to bringing these young people, in a sense, “back” to the German language – which should have come naturally to them. And, of course, this article as well presupposes a simple black-and-white world where everybody only has one mother tongue, either German or something else (the latter case being

a problem that has to be solved), and the broad spectrum of heritage language skills, from deficient and passive language knowledge to full fluency, simply doesn't exist.

Lessons learned

I have tried to describe the general "inertia" and resistance which we face when disseminating information about endangered languages; these problems arise partly from the general ignorance of the general audience, partly from difficult ethnopolitical issues, partly from the monolingual bias or the tendency to "naturalize" monolingualism (especially monolingualism in the nation-state language), all of these contributing to the prevailing extinction narrative.

In the last few minutes, I would like to sum up the lessons learned from the dissemination of ELDIA. First of all, a clear dissemination strategy is crucial. Knowing how easily research on minority languages can be "hi-jacked" for political purposes – be it education politics, academic language strategies, national ethnopolitics or the internal strifes of minority groups (even quite small minority communities can be internally fragmented and riddled by ideological or personal conflicts) – it is always good to define one's position as a researcher. In our case, the strategy was to refrain from giving concrete political recommendations and to emphasize the role of the speaker community: whatever is done with the language should be for its speakers to decide, and researchers can only supply information, facts and points of comparison, to help the stakeholders pass as well-informed decisions as possible. This is particularly important, as – due to the "rescue mission" misconception – lay people cannot necessarily distinguish between research and partisanship.

Secondly, instead of general principles and abstract, essentialized problems (such as "intercultural relations") it is always good to focus on concrete issues. A very good example of well-informed and adequate journalism comes from the case of Meänkieli or Tornedal Finnish in Northern Sweden, a variety of Finnish officially recognized as a minority language in Sweden since 2000 but still acutely endangered. On the news site of the Finnish state broadcasting company YLE, the results of the ELDIA study are reported: fluent Meänkieli speakers usually belong to the grandparent or great-grandparent generation, and only very few children grow up with the language any more. The news article by Karoliina Haapakoski[1] clearly identifies the problem and lets Laura Arola, the project researcher in charge of the ELDIA case study, outline a concrete solution: children's language acquisition must be supported, if not at home, then in daycare, and the real problem seems to be that the speaker community has not yet completely realized the danger and begun to demand daycare in Meänkieli. Instead of nostalgia or romantic illustrations of the culture of Meänkieli speakers, instead of attempting to cover the

[1] From January 2, 2013, http://yle.fi/uutiset/meankielen_taito_on_rapistunut/6434415 .

whole past and present of the speaker community, the article focuses on today's problems and current revitalization projects.

Furthermore, in order to shift the attention from the extinction narrative to the future and to real issues, it might be a good idea to emphasize the reality of multilingualism and coexistence of languages. This example, representing the Veps language in Russia, shows what can be achieved when an expert, herself an activist in the speaker community and one of the central figures in Veps-language media activities, writes about the research project in which she participated.

Vastused keskvepsän mal

Kodima-lehtesen pätoimitajan mam Maria Jevsejeva; baboi Aleksandra Sokolova

Necil vilul tal'vel ani vilukul om uddainus ajada keskvepsän male, Ojatin randoile. Amu en olend vepsän mal tal'ven aigan, eskai kodimal en olend. Unohtin jo, mitte puhtaz, pehmed i vauged om lumi küläs, mičced süväd übused, mičced čomad pud hüdegen sädos... Necil vilukul mö ühtes Ol'a Žukovanke olim ELDIA-projektan azjoid

i konz mö pagižem ičemoi kelel, venän kelel, anglian kelel i m.e. Erašti ristitud küzeliba: a mikš nügüd' meile vepsän kel', kuna panda sen tedoid? I üks' meletuz ihastoiti mindai. Kurbalaine Zina-töt sanui: kel' ei väzuta i sel'gän taga havados jügedan kandman ei ripu, ka mikš sidä ei tarbiž opeta kaikile!

Küzundlistas oli äi toižid-ki küzundoid ičemoi keles: tarbiž-ik sidä otta paginaha sudas vai parlamentas, radios vai TV:s vai bol'nicas? Ken pagižeb kelel, ka vastsiba: mikš ei, oliži muga hüvä, ku mitte-ni vanhaine baboi voiži sanuda lekarile ičeze kibuiš kodiman kelel. Voib olda, poled kibuišpäi pageniživa hibjaspäi. A ku kenni voiži pidäda mittušt-ni paginad parlamentas: ka mitte vägi sünduiži kel'he!

Akoiden kel'

Anketas oli mugoižid küzundoid, kus tarbiž oli panda znamoid kelele. Ka i znamad ičemoi keles ei olnugoi madalad, a vastkarin – enamaban kaiked korktad! Konz küzutihe, mitte ičemoi kel' om: edahaine vai läheline, čoma vai paha, vanh vai nor', intelligentine vai intelligentitoi i m.e., ka ken mahtab pagišta kelel, arvostelli sidä lujas korktas. Vepsän kel' om väl

glian kelil tulijas kümnes vodes, ka kaik sanuiba – nenid kelid otaškatas paginaha enamban. A ičemoi kodikelen, vepsän kelen tulii aig holduti kaikid. Nägui, miše äjile oli kibed vastata sihe, ei olend tahtod sanuda, miše kodikel' sambub. Äjad saneliba: "om jüged sanuda", miše koval vastusel ei abidida kodikel't. I ližadeliba: tarbiž kaikile pagišta ičemoi kelel: norile prihoile i neiččile i aigvoččile mužikoile i akoile.

Ka miš om azj? Meile kaikile tarbiž ladida nece rebitadud sidonit' vanhembiden i noriden keskes, eläbzoitta kodikel't, hengahtada sihe ut elod. Sen tulii aig om meiden käziš, mugoižed projektad, kut ELDIA, abutaba meile el'geta: mir nügüd' om kaks'keline i enamban – eskai äikeline, siš om tulii aig. Ka tarbiž-ik meile kadotada sidä tulijad aigad? Ved' mö, vepsläižed, olim-ki kaks'keližed!

Sured spasibod

ELDIA-projektan abul mö tedištim äi ut. Keratud tedoid völ kacuškatas, tegeškatas prognozoid tahttes abutada vähäluguižile rahvahile kaitas i kaita ičezoi kelid. Sen abul tahtoidas tehta mugoine Elobarometr,

In the bilingual, Russian- and Veps-language gazette *Kodima* ('Homeland'), Nina Zaiceva, the leading researcher of her native language and also the primus motor behind most Veps language activities today, writes about the ELDIA project. The article, illustrated with a picture of two typical Veps speakers, that is, elderly rural women, writes openly about the concerns of Veps speakers about the future of their language, and takes up a very important point: the world is increasingly becoming bilingual or multilingual, and this is actually something the Veps already know. Today's Veps speakers are bilingual in Russian (in our study, only one informant of the oldest generation claimed to speak Russian poorly), and acknowledging bilingualism in Russian circumstances is not just politically realistic but in reality the only possibility to maintain the Veps language. This may sound self-evident to many of us, but it must be noted that the speakers and potential speakers of Veps live in the Russian linguistic culture (for the concept of "linguistic culture", see e.g. Schiffman 2006) which is very prescriptivistic and characterized by a

general glorification of the Russian language as the language of the most advanced culture, technology and interethnic communication (not to speak of the "efficiency assumption" which in practice restricts the use of minority languages alongside Russian, cf. Blommaert 1996: 210-212, Zamyatin 2014: 125). For them, the idea that another language could be used alongside Russian is actually revolutionary.

Of course, we all know that it is not easy to influence public discourse and the powerful narratives which tend to strengthen existing prejudices. Still, I believe that with a clear media strategy and a clear emphasis on those aspects which are really relevant for the maintenance of the language (that is: focusing on real problems), researchers of endangered languages can give essential support to those who work to keep the endangered languages of our world alive.

Thank you for your attention.

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