

УДК 81'27

<https://doi.org/10.25587/3034-7378-2025-4-26-37>



Original article

Language shift in the Srednekolymsky District: a sociolinguistic analysis of Even and Sakha languages

*Marina I. Imeeva-Kysylbaikova*¹  , *Jenanne Ferguson*² 

¹M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University,
Yakutsk, Russian Federation

²MacEwan University, Alberta, Canada
 kysylbaikova@mail.ru

Abstract

Within the context of the global crisis of language shift, investigating the mechanisms of language shift in vulnerable language ecologies, such as the Russian Arctic, is of paramount importance. This article presents a sociolinguistic analysis of the dynamics of language shift among the Even and Sakha-speaking population of the Srednekolymsk District, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The primary aim of this research was to identify the specific features of language shift and the extent of this process based on original field materials. The empirical foundation comprises data collected during expeditions to eight settlements in the district in 2025. A mixed-methods approach was employed, which included linguistic biographies, a picture description task to analyze spontaneous Sakha speech, and the narrative “Bridge Story” task to assess the language proficiency of the younger generation. The theoretical framework is grounded in the principles of critical sociolinguistics and Lenore Grenoble’s multi-level model of language shift, which considers the interplay of macro-, meso-, and micro-factors. The results reveal a profound, multi-level shift in these settlements: the Even language has almost completely lost its everyday communicative function, surviving only in marginal symbolic and ritual niches, while the Sakha language is undergoing intense Russian influence, manifesting in syntactic calquing, lexical interference, and simplification of the morphological system, particularly in the speech of children and adolescents. A significant finding is the identified potential for establishing stable everyday bilingualism among a portion of high school students. Practically, the study provides evidence for developing Arctic language policies and revitalization programs that promote functional bilingualism through coordinated institutional, educational, and community measures.

Keywords: language shift, language revitalization, bilingualism, Even language, Sakha language, language ideology, language contact, Arctic sociolinguistics, critical sociolinguistics, language ecology

© Imeeva-Kysylbaikova M. I., Ferguson J., 2025

Funding. This study was funded by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation “Languages and Cultures of the Peoples of the North and Arctic of the Russian Federation: Comprehensive Socio-Humanitarian Research (based on Big Data Analysis)” No. 25-78-30006 (22.05.2025)

For citation: Imeeva-Kysylbaikova M.I., Ferguson J. Language shift in the Srednekolymsky District: a sociolinguistic analysis of Even and Sakha languages. *Arctic XXI Century*. 2025;(4):26–37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25587/3034-7378-2025-4-26-37>

Оригинальная научная статья

Языковой сдвиг в Среднеколымском улусе: социолингвистический анализ эвенского и якутского языков

М. И. Имеева-Кысылбаикова¹ , Дж. Фергюсон² 

¹Северо-Восточный федеральный университет им. М. К. Аммосова,
Якутск, Российская Федерация

²Университет Макьюэна, Альберта, Канада
 kysylbaikova@mail.ru

Аннотация

В контексте глобального кризиса языкового разнообразия исследование механизмов языкового сдвига в уязвимых лингвистических экосистемах, таких как Арктическая зона России, приобретает особую актуальность. Данная статья посвящена социолингвистическому анализу динамики языкового сдвига среди эвенского и якутскоязычного населения Среднеколымского улуса Республики Саха (Якутия). Основной целью работы является выявление специфических черт и глубины данного процесса на основе оригинальных полевых материалов. Эмпирическую базу составили данные, собранные в ходе экспедиций 2025 года в восьми населенных пунктах улуса; использовались качественные и количественные методы, включая сбор языковых биографий (239 респондентов), эксперимент по описанию визуальных стимулов для анализа спонтанной якутской речи и нарративное задание «История про мост» для оценки языковой компетенции молодого поколения. Теоретической основой выступили принципы критической социолингвистики и многоуровневая модель языкового сдвига Леноры Гренобль, рассматривающая взаимодействие макро-, мезо- и микро-факторов. Результаты демонстрируют глубокий и многоуровневый сдвиг: эвенский язык практически полностью утратил повседневную коммуникативную функцию, сохранившись лишь в маргинальных символических и ритуальных нишах, в то время как якутский язык испытывает интенсивное влияние рус-

ского, что проявляется в синтаксических кальках (нарушение порядка SOV), лексической интерференции и упрощении морфологической системы, особенно в речи детей и подростков. Важным выводом является констатация потенциала для формирования стабильного бытового билингвизма у части старшеклассников, что указывает на возможные точки приложения усилий. Практическая значимость исследования заключается в предоставлении детализированной эмпирической основы для разработки адресной языковой политики и программ ревитализации, направленных на поддержку функционального билингвизма через согласованные меры на институциональном, образовательном и семейно-общинном уровнях в арктических регионах.

Ключевые слова: языковой сдвиг, ревитализация языка, билингвизм, эвенский язык, якутский язык, языковая идеология, языковой контакт, арктическая социолингвистика, критическая социолингвистика, языковая экология

Финансирование. Работа выполнена в рамках научного проекта РНФ «Языки и культуры народов Севера и Арктики РФ: комплексные социогуманитарные исследования (на основе анализа больших данных)» по соглашению № 25-78-30006 от 22.05.2025

Для цитирования: Имеева-Кысылбаикова М.И., Фергюсон Дж. Языковой сдвиг в Среднеколымском улусе: социолингвистический анализ эвенского и якутского языков. *Арктика XXI век*. 2025;(4):26–37 (на англ). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25587/3034-7378-2025-4-26-37>

Introduction

The relevance of the study is driven by the global crisis of language shift and the need to investigate language shift mechanisms in regions with a diverse linguistic ecology, such as the Arctic zone of Russia. Despite existing theoretical works, empirical data on actual language practices in communities undergoing intensive shift remains insufficient. Current scholarship is characterized by a shift in focus from structural description to a critical analysis of language as a social practice embedded in systems of power and inequality.

The aim of this research is to analyze the specifics of language shift among the Even and Sakha-speaking population of the Srednekolymsk District based on field data. There were three objectives that were part of this study:: to determine the status and functional domains of the Even language through the analysis of linguistic biographies; to identify features of grammar and lexicon in spontaneous Sakha speech using a picture description method; to assess the level of Sakha proficiency among the younger generation based on narrative analysis.

The practical significance of the findings of this study lie in their capacity to provide crucial data for the development and implementation of targeted

language planning and revitalization policies in the Srednekolymsk District and analogous Arctic communities. By identifying the precise functional domains where Even persists (ritual, traditional economy) and diagnosing the specific nature of interference in Sakha (syntactic calquing, lexical borrowing), the research offers concrete points of intervention. The evidence of potential for stable bilingualism among youth indicates that educational programs and community initiatives can be effective if they are integrated across macro (state policy), meso (school curricula, local media), and micro (family language practices) levels, as per Grenoble's framework. This work can directly inform educators, cultural organizations, and policymakers in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) on designing measures to support functional, rather than solely symbolic, use of indigenous and minority languages.

Theoretical Significance. This research contributes to several key areas within sociolinguistic theory. First, it provides robust empirical validation and contextual application of Lenore Grenoble's multi-level model of language shift, demonstrating its utility in analyzing complex Arctic language ecologies. Second, by employing a critical sociolinguistic lens, the study moves beyond simple descriptions of language loss to analyze shift as embedded in social practices and power dynamics, particularly in terms of the pressure from the dominant Russian language. The detailed documentation of grammatical and discursive interference in Sakha enriches theories of language contact and change, showing how language shift manifests not just in lexicon but in core syntactic and morphological structures. Finally, the study contributes to the growing field of Arctic sociolinguistics by providing a detailed case study of a bilingual community in transition, highlighting the interplay between ethnic identity, symbolic language value, and communicative practice.

Materials and Methods

Theoretical framework: critical sociolinguistics and language shift

Modern sociolinguistics has moved beyond a structural approach to language and increasingly employs a critical analysis of the role of language in constructing social differences and inequality [1]. This approach views language not as an autonomous system but as a social practice embedded in processes of resource production, distribution and consumption. In this context, bilingualism, language contact and linguistic ecology are examined not as neutral phenomena but as arenas where power relations are formed and contested [2; 3].

Critical sociolinguistics provides a powerful theoretical and methodological toolkit for studying bilingualism, language contacts and linguistic ecology. Through ethnography, discourse analysis, and reflexivity, it reveals how language becomes an instrument of power and resistance in the modern world [1].

Bilingualism and language contact

Bilingualism has traditionally been studied from the perspective of proficiency in two languages, but critical sociolinguistics shifts the focus to how bilingual practices are interwoven with social, economic, and political processes [1]. For example, in Catalonia [4] or Francophone Canada [5], bilingualism becomes a site of struggle for symbolic and material resources. The phenomenon of language contact here is not merely a matter of code-mixing but rather reflects a conflict of ideologies related to national identity, social class, and access to power.

Linguistic ecology and language dynamics

An approach grounded in linguistic ecology emphasizes the interconnectedness of language with the social, economic, and political environment [1]. In the context of late capitalism and globalization, linguistic resources are often commodified, for instance, in the tourism industry, as shown by Sari Pietikäinen's research in the Sámi region [6], we can see how authenticity becomes a marketable commodity. The dynamics of language are manifested in how languages lose or gain value depending on shifts in the economy, migration, and cultural trends.

Methodological approach

Critical sociolinguistics relies on ethnographic and discourse-analytic methods, allowing for the study of language in action within specific social contexts [1]. Ethnography, as the primary approach, enables the investigation of social practices in their natural unfolding, which is crucial for understanding how language participates in creating and reproducing inequality. In this study, ethnography provides a basis to a research ethic as it requires deep immersion in the field and reflection on the researcher's position (researcher is Sakha speaker from another part of the Sakha Republic) [7].

Key data collection methods included:

1. Observation: The researcher became part of the social practice to observe how people use language in everyday life.
2. Interviews and Elicitation (Linguistic Biographies): Interviews were used not to obtain "objective" data but to analyze how people construct their narratives about language and identity.
3. Analysis of Material Traces: This involved collecting textual artifacts from official documents to photographs and social media posts that reflect how language is used and valued in society [1].

Methods of Lenore Grenoble

The study also employs methods developed by Lenore Grenoble, a sociolinguist specializing in contact linguistics, sociolinguistics, language ecology, and language preservation. Grenoble views language shift not

merely as a transition from one language to another but as a multi-level process influenced by macro- (state policy, education, economy), meso- (local institutions, community attitudes), and micro-factors (family practices, individual choices) [8].

In her work “Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization” (co-authored with L. Whaley), she emphasizes that reversing language shift requires simultaneous action across all these levels. It is insufficient to simply open a school that teaches the language if parents do not transmit it to their children at home, and if the language lacks socio-economic value in society [9].

In challenging simplified notions of language revitalization, Grenoble consistently challenges simplified notions of language revitalization. She points out that the goal of revitalization need not necessarily be to recreate a monolingual speech community. For many communities, especially those that have undergone decades of language shift, a more realistic and achievable aim is the development of stable bilingualism, where the minority language occupies an important niche in a range of communicative domains (e.g., rituals, communication with elders, traditional livelihoods, art) [10; 11].

The role of language ideology

One of the central concepts in her work is language ideology. These are deeply rooted, often subconscious beliefs about a language, its value, correctness, and social role. For example, ideologies such as “the local dialect is a corrupted version of the standard language” or that “children will get confused if they learn two languages from birth” are powerful drivers of language shift. Grenoble demonstrates how identifying and deconstructing such ideologies is a crucial step for any revitalization efforts [10].

Specific field methods

The empirical base comprises data from field expeditions in 2025 to settlements in the Srednekolymsk District (Ebyakh, Aleko-Kyuyol', Svatay, Nalimsk, Sylgy-Ytyar, Khatyngnaakh, Beryozovka, and the town of Srednekolymsk). A mixed-methods approach involved 239 respondents of different ages.

1. Linguistic Biographies: Semi-structured interviews to assess language competence, domains of use, and attitudes.

2. Picture Description Task: An adapted methodology [12] to elicit spontaneous Sakha speech and identify grammatical and lexical interference.

3. Narrative Elicitation (“The Bridge Story”): A method developed by Lenore Grenoble [13] to analyze discourse structure and language proficiency among younger speakers.

All 239 respondents provided informed consent for the use of their personal material for research purposes.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of linguistic biographies: symbolic status vs. functional marginalization of Even

The results of interviews revealed a paradoxical situation typical for many communities undergoing language shift.

— Ethnic Self-Identification vs. Language Competence: The vast majority of respondents identified as Even, confirming their connection to culture and history. However, the direct correlation between ethnic self-awareness and command of the ancestral language was broken. The Even language is in a state of extreme functional reduction. Active oral proficiency was virtually absent among respondents; the competence of most was limited to passive knowledge of individual lexemes (e.g., numerals: *umun* ‘one’, *dyur* ‘two’, *ilan* ‘three’) and set phrases.

— Narrowing of Functional Domains: The analysis of domains of Even language use fully corresponds to the model described by Grenoble, where a language is preserved in strictly limited, often symbolically charged domains. These include:

1. Ritual and ceremonial sphere (weddings, funerals, national holidays). Here the language functions as a marker of cultural identity.

2. Sphere of traditional economic practices (reindeer herding, fishing). The preservation of terminology in these domains is due to its utilitarian necessity and connection to specific activities.

3. Everyday communication within the older generation. This indicates that a complete language shift has occurred within the lifespan of 2-3 generations. This picture confirms the thesis that a language can retain high symbolic value while almost completely losing its communicative function in daily life.

Picture description experiment: Language shift at the level of Sakha syntax and lexicon

The experiment, in which respondents constructed sentences in Sakha based on pictures, revealed signs of profound influence from Russian the dominant societal language on Sakha speech.

— Violation of Syntactic Norms: A persistent non-normative word order was observed, calquing the structure of the Russian sentence (SVO instead of the SOV characteristic of Sakha):

• “*Uol oĝo byraĝar eder uolga meečigi*” (уол оĝо быраĝар эдэр уолга мээчиги) instead of the grammatically correct “*Uol oĝo eder uolga meečigi*

byraḡar” (уол оҕо эдэр уолга мээчиги быраḡар) – ‘The boy throws the ball to the young man’ – a calque from Russian.

- “*Er kihi balygy tutar kuögu*” (эр киһи балыгы тутар күөгү ‘The man catches fish fishing rod’) instead of “*Er kihi kuögünän balygy tutar*” (эр киһи күөгүнэн балыгы тутар ‘The man catches fish with a fishing rod’).

– Lexical Interference: The active use of Russian words instead of Sakha equivalents directly indicates code-switching and a narrowing of the active Sakha vocabulary:

- “*Koroche onno muosta baar...*” (короче онно муоста баар ‘In short, there is a bridge there...’).

These data indicate that even in Sakha speech, which is more stable than Even, processes of grammatical structure erosion and lexical replacement are occurring, which is a classic manifestation of language shift.

Analysis of narratives (“The Bridge Story”): stable everyday bilingualism with features of interference

The analysis of children’s retellings allowed for an assessment of the level of spontaneous speech and features of bilingual consciousness formation.

– Lexical and Morphological Interference: Children’s speech exhibited lexical interference (“*muosta*” *муоста* from Russian мост ‘bridge’), as well as reduced grammatical forms:

- “*Kiren biher*” (кирэн биһэр ‘bites’) instead of “*kiren kebiher*” (күрэн кэбиһэр ‘bites’) (morphological interference),

- “*Turaalar*” (тураалар ‘standing up’) instead of “*turan khaalar*” (туран хаалар ‘standing up’ - phasal aspect),

- “*Ald’ataaspittere*” (алдьатааспиттерэ ‘they have broken’) instead of “*ald’atan kebispitte*” (алдьатан кэбиспиттерэ ‘they have broken’). This suggests that the complex system of the Sakha verb is being simplified under the influence of the more analytic Russian language.

– Discursive Features: The active use of connectives “*onuokha*” (онуоха ‘furthermore’) and “*onton*” (онтон ‘then’) indicates an attempt to build a linear, sequential narrative, which may be a consequence of the influence of the Russian discursive model.

– Positive Findings: It is important to note that high school students demonstrated a fairly rich descriptive Sakha language. This allows for a cautiously optimistic conclusion that with targeted support (e.g., in the education system), it may be possible to see the formation of stable everyday bilingualism – emphasized by L. Grenoble.

General conclusions of the practical part

1. The study that has been conducted clearly demonstrates a multi-level language shift in the Srednekolymsk District. The Even language is almost

completely displaced into symbolic and ritual niches, corresponding to the final stage of shift, except the oldest adult generation.

2. The Sakha language, under strong pressure from Russian, shows signs of change at syntactic, morphological and lexical levels, especially in the spontaneous speech of the younger generation.

3. Nevertheless, the preservation of a relatively high level of Sakha proficiency among some high school students indicates potential for language planning aimed at supporting functional bilingualism. For this, in accordance with Lenore Grenoble's conclusions [8; 9], efforts are needed at all levels: from family communication to the integration of the language into modern communicative spheres (education, digital environment).

Conclusion

As mentioned, this research has established that the language situation in the Srednekolymsk District is a model of multi-level language shift. The Even language has almost completely lost its communicative function, surviving in marginal and symbolic niches. Sakha speech exhibits systemic changes caused by Russian interference at syntactic and morphological levels. The significance of the results obtained here lies in the empirical confirmation of L. Grenoble's theoretical models and the demonstration of the depth of grammatical erosion [14]. The identified potential for forming stable bilingualism among part of the youth indicates the necessity of developing comprehensive language planning measures aimed at integrating minority languages into modern socio-communicative spheres.

As mentioned previously in this article, Grenoble's work stresses that language shift is a complex process operating simultaneously across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of social ecology.

At the macro-level, the dominant position of the Russian language, reinforced by state institutions, media, and education, creates an overarching pressure that shapes the linguistic ecology. The meso-level of local community practices and attitudes reveals a critical disconnect: while ethnic Even identity remains strong, the ancestral Even language has been functionally relegated to a limited set of symbolic and ritual domains, such as ceremonies and traditional economic activities like reindeer herding. This consigns it to the final stages of a language shift, having lost its role as a vehicle for everyday communication within a span of 2-3 generations.

The situation with the Sakha language, while more robust, is also indicative of an ongoing shift under pressure. The analysis of spontaneous speech through picture description and narrative tasks revealed systematic interference from Russian, manifesting in non-normative SVO word order (calqued from Russian), lexical borrowings, and simplification of the complex

Sakha verbal system. These findings are significant as they move beyond the common focus on lexical borrowing to document the erosion of core grammatical and syntactic structures, a deeper marker of language change.

However, the research also identifies a crucial point of potential intervention. The relatively high proficiency in descriptive Sakha among some high school students suggests that the younger generation retains a functional competency that could serve as a foundation for stable bilingualism. This cautiously optimistic finding underscores Grenoble's argument that the goal of revitalization in such contexts may not be a return to monolingualism but the fostering of balanced, functional bilingualism where the minority language holds value in modern communicative spheres.

Therefore, the theoretical significance of this work lies in its empirical contribution to models of language shift and contact, particularly in vulnerable Arctic linguistic ecologies. It validates a critical sociolinguistic approach by linking grammatical patterns directly to social power dynamics. Practically, it provides a diagnostic map for language planners, emphasizing that effective interventions must be holistic. To support Sakha and reclaim Even within spheres of everyday language use, coordinated efforts are essential: from state-level policies that legitimize minority languages, through educational curricula that integrate them meaningfully, down to initiatives that empower families and communities to use these languages in digital, creative, and daily contexts. The future of linguistic diversity in Srednekolymsk depends on recognizing and nurturing this potential for bilingualism across all levels of social life.

References

1. Heller M, Pietikäinen S, Pujolar J. *Critical Sociolinguistic Research Methods: Studying Language Issues That Matter*. London: Routledge. 2024.
2. Heller M, Duchêne A. *Discourses of Endangerment. Interest and Ideology in the Defense of Languages (Advances in Sociolinguistics)*. London: Continuum. 2007.
3. Labov W. *Principles of Linguistic Change. Social Factors. Vol. 2*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2001.
4. Wray A, Grace GW. The consequences of talking to strangers: evolutionary corollaries of socio-cultural influences on linguistic form. *Lingua*. 2007;117(3):543–578. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2005.05.005>
5. Fleming A. Linguistic Justice: Rights, Resources and Recognition. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 2022;(51):455–472. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-041420-104450>

6. Grenoble LA, Whaley LJ. *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2006.
7. Grenoble LA. Language management in the Russian Federation: The Arctic and Far North. *The Routledge Handbook of Language Policy and Planning*. London: Routledge. 2021:525–538.
8. Kantarovich J, Grenoble LA, Vinokurova AA, Nesterova EV. Complexity and simplification in language shift. *Frontiers in Communication*. 2021;(6). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.638118>
9. Grenoble LA, Osipov B. The dynamics of bilingualism in language shift ecologies. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*. 2023;13(1):1–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.22035.gre>
10. Pietikäinen S. Powered by assemblage: language for multiplicity. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 2021;267–268:235–240. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-0074>
11. Pujolar J. Bilingualism and the nation-state in the post-national era. *Bilingualism: A Social Approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007:71–95.
12. Ammosov DA, Efendiev Ya, Grenoble L. Modeling Language Shift Based on Identity. *Arctic XXI century*. 2025;(1):6–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25587/2310-5453-2025-39-1-6-18> сдвига через призму носителей)
13. Grenoble L. Sociolinguistics and language shift: toward understanding the processes of shift through the prism of speakers (Гренобль Л. Социолингвистика и языковой сдвиг: к пониманию процессов сдвига через призму носителей). *Sociolinguistics*. 2021;2(6):9–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37892/2713-2951-2-6-10-36>

About the authors

Marina I. IMEEVA-KYSYLBAIKOVA – Cand. Sci. (Philology), Associate Professor, Institute of Modern Languages and International Studies, M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University, Yakutsk, Russian Federation, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2082-3883>, WoS ResearcherID: K-3771-2017, Scopus Author ID: 56436579300, Elibrary AuthorID: 787961, SPIN: 5410-9192, e-mail: kysylbaikova@mail.ru

Jenanne FERGUSON – Ph.D. (Anthropology), Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Economics and Political Science, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada, ORCID: 0000-0003-0249-2638, e-mail: fergusonj73@macewan.ca

Об авторах

ИМЕЕВА-КЫСЫЛБАЙКОВА Марина Ильинична – кандидат филологических наук, доцент, Институт зарубежной филологии и регионоведения, Северо-Восточный федеральный университет им. М.К. Аммосова, Якутск, Российская Федерация, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2082-3883>, WoS ResearcherID: K-3771-2017, Scopus Author ID: 56436579300, Elibrary AuthorID: 787961, SPIN: 5410-9192, e-mail: kysylbaikova@mail.ru

ФЕРГЮСОН Джанен – Ph.D. (антропология), доцент, кафедра антропологии, экономики и политических наук, Университет Макьюэна, Эдмонтон, Канада, ORCID: 0000-0003-0249-2638, e-mail: fergusonj73@macewan.ca

Authors' contribution

Marina I. Imeeva-Kysylbaikova – conceptualization, methodology, investigation, resources, writing – review & editing, visualization

Jenanne Ferguson – validation, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Вклад авторов

Имеева-Кысылбаикова М.И. – разработка концепции, методология, проведение исследования, ресурсное обеспечение исследования, редактирование рукописи, визуализация

Фергюсон Дж. – верификация данных, администрирование данных, создание черновика рукописи, редактирование рукописи

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests

Конфликт интересов

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов

Submitted / Поступила в редакцию 15.09.2025

Revised / Поступила после рецензирования 24.10.2025

Accepted / Принята к публикации 17.11.2025