

The Votic Language: Research and Saving*

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Votic (Uralic, Balto-finnic family) now is one of minor languages of Russian Federation. Votian people are the oldest of known populations in Ingria. Ingria is situated on the very west of the European part of Russia, on south beach of Finnish Gulf of Baltic Sea, near Saint Petersburg. The ethnonym “Votes” appeared in Russian chronicles in the 11th century. Then Votes belonged to the principality of ancient Novgorod and as one of its five administrative districts was called *водская пятина* (in Russian), ‘the Votian Fifth’. Ingrians appeared there later, but the area received the name Ingria. In the 17th century some Finnish people moved from Finland to Ingria (in that time Finland was subordinate to Sweden). So the three minor ethnic groups, native people of this area, live there, there are Votes, Ingrians and ingrian Finns; they speak relative balto -finnic languages: Votic, Ingrian and Finnish.

In the beginning of the 19th century Votic speaking people were enough numerous: there were more than 5000 persons and they lived in a large territory near Saint Petersburg. In 1861 after the fall of serfdom Votic people had to go to nearest towns to earn money. So they began speak Russian. Now, unfortunately, only several elderly persons speaking Votic remain in some villages, they all speak also Russian. Young people do not speak Votic. So it is an endangered language. There are some extra linguistic political causes for it.

During the Second World War the most part of Votic people perished.

In 1943 all Votic, Ingrian and Finnish population of Ingria were moved to Finland, in 1944 they returned, but till 1953 they were forbidden to live in their villages. When

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they returned, the Votic language usage was prohibited. So, they tried to speak Russian with children and as the result only old generation now remember Votian.

Votic has never been written language and never been taught, in contrast to Ingrian which became written language in the beginning of 30th years of the 20th century. So in the 20th century Votic children went to school together with Ingrian ones. The first 1 or 1,5 years they all (Votic children as well as Ingrian ones) got there education in Ingrian and after that in Russian. Functionaries did not distinguish Votics and Ingrians. It is very strange, that none of my Votic informants were surprised that they had to learn Ingrian as the mother tongue(!). (More in details see Agranat 2002a.)

This situation continued till the middle of 30th years of 20th century. Now Russian is the only language of school education there. Then as well as now Russian teachers were came from some other places and did not speak Votic nor Ingrian. Russian population appeared in Ingria only in the end of 1930th years, so before this time children did not speak Russian until they went to school. In school Votic children spoke Votic to each other and Ingrian to Ingrian children.

In 1995, when I was there at my first expedition, almost all Votic people considered themselves as Ingrians, as the result of functionaries mistake in 1930th yaers. But Votian people, of course, distinguished their language from one of Ingrians. Now my informants remember their old ethnonym.

So the process of Votic language research furthers the Votic ethnic self-identification. On one hand Votic people can see some linguists to be interested in their language, so they begin themselves to interest more in it, and in addition the prestige of their mother tongue for them grows up. We all know that it is impossible to save a language, which has lost its prestige. I can see, that Votic speaking people, while working with linguists, become more and more optimistic with respect to

necessity and possibility of the Votic language saving. And what is more, they realise their mission and try to help linguists. As a rule, the more the informant works with linguists, the more he (of she) wants to make his (or her) contribution to the eternity.

And on another hand, as Votic speaking people are now only old persons, this language lost the function of family intercourse. So even old Votian generation began to forget their mother tongue. But working with linguists the informants have practice and remember Votic. As persons knowing Votic began to be interested on it, they try now to speak this language to each other. So the nature functioning of the language is reviving.

And the most important result of linguistic work in Votian villages is that children are interested in the Votic language and culture; they sing Votic folk songs that their parents do not know. (See Agranat 2002b).

Last year for the first time in the history a Votic speaking woman began to teach this language (as not written) at a village school. She speaks to children her own idiolect; as Votic never had any norm, an individual speech of each native speaking is quite different. Now it is not a time to speak about standardization of the Votic language, the only chance for the endangered language to be revived is to be taught as living language. Otherwise we will have standard manuals, but will not have pupils, because there is the risk that children lose the interest of learning Votic.

References

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