

The Udmurt Language: Notes on its Status and Survival

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Abstract

With the opening up of the former Soviet Union new areas have become visitable by scholars from the outside world. The Udmurt Republic and its native language, Udmurt, are exemplary in that they highlight some of the difficulties faced; in particular, the frequent inaccuracy of existing reference materials compiled under the old regime. This article exemplifies this with reference to the Udmurt language.

1 Introduction

Udmurt, formerly known as Votyak, is spoken by about 600 000 people living mainly in Russia's Udmurt Republic.

(Katzner 1995:145)

These notes will attempt to demonstrate that Katzner's claim, and also those made by other leading Western scholars, cannot be corroborated with hard evidence.

With the advent of *perestroika* and *glasnost'* areas of the former Soviet Union once closed to the outside world are now accessible, if still with difficulty. Research once conducted at a distance and often reliant on what has now been proven to be highly dubious Soviet-produced propaganda can now be reassessed. The Udmurt Republic was closed to Westerners, its capital Izhevsk has only recently begun to appear in atlases. This is the location of one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, the workplace of Kalashnikov, however few Westerners have been here and much of what has been published in the West is proving apocryphal.

Western sources claim, on the basis of Soviet-provided information, that Udmurt is spoken by over half a million people and that it is a thriving linguistic and cultural force (e.g. Campbell 1991:1405-1409; Comrie 1981:104-105 & 279). This is uncontentious in Western sources. However, Professor Reshetnikov, Vice-Rector of Udmurt State University, disputes this, suggesting that as few as 15 000 people may have Udmurt as their native language. The State University has a small Department of Finno-Ugric Linguistics which appears to teach Udmurt as a foreign language. Excluding this department, there appear to be no courses within the Udmurt State University which use the Udmurt language as their medium of tuition for all or even part of their teaching.

2 Background

The Udmurt language is a language with an old written literature, with a modest pre-Revolutionary literature and today is the literary language of the Udmurt socialist nation. Udmurt literature has been considerably enriched by translation into it of the scholarly works of Marxism-Leninism and the classics of Soviet, Russian and world literature. The beginning of the 19th century saw the beginnings of the first written poetry.

The Udmurts and their language developed between the Volga-Kama and Vyatka Rivers during the second half of the first millennium (Tarakanov 1994:5). In terms of genealogical classification, the Udmurt language belongs to the Permian branch of the Finno-Ugric languages of the Uralic family, and is most closely related to the Komi languages: Komi-Zuryanskiy and especially Komi-Permyalskiy. According to Vladykin (1994:4), the relationship between Udmurt and Komi is similar to that which holds between Russian and Polish. The phonetic system and grammatical structures of these languages are almost identical, and have much common lexis.

In total the Udmurts, according to the census question of 1979, number 714 000, of whom 686 000 people live within the territory of the Russian Federation, of whom the number in the Udmurt Republic is 479 000 people. By the time of the 1989 census, the total Udmurt population had risen to 750 000. Outside the boundaries of the autonomous republic, the number composed within the Russian Federation is 206 300 and in neighbouring Federated Republics is 28 000. The most compact groups are settled in the Bashkir AR, the Tatar AR, and in the Perm, Kirov and Yekaterinburg Oblast's of the Russian Federation.

There is uncertainty as to how many people still speak Udmurt. On the 1979 census of the USSR 714 000 people reported Udmurt to be their native language, while in 1989 it was 550 000. The question of a 'native' language may tend to inflate the response for Udmurt - a 'native' language need not be a mother tongue, a first language, a 'best' language or a language in everyday use. Indeed, there is considerable anecdotal evidence of people who recorded their 'native' language as Udmurt, but who very rarely speak the language, who speak Russian to a much greater degree of proficiency, or even who have no practical command of the Udmurt language. In a country where a nationality is stated on internal passports, there is a tendency for people who hold a passport stating their nationality as Udmurt and having some Udmurt ethnicity to record their native language as Udmurt. The census figure of 714 000 must therefore be viewed with caution.

Lallukka (1990:110) states that in 1959 23.8% of Udmurts lived outside the Udmurt Republic; however, by 1989 this figure had risen to 33.5%. If this trend has continued since 1989, and there is no reason to believe it has not, what percentage of Udmurts now live outside their home republic? This must have a detrimental effect on the strength of the Udmurt language. People living outside of the Udmurt Republic, and with little or no access to Udmurt-medium materials are surely going to tend to 'lose' their language.

3 The Status of the Udmurt Language

Udmurt had never been an official state language and by the beginning of the 20th century it has all but died out. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that there was any concerted effort to preserve the language and the culmination of this may be seen in the 1994 constitution. In this document, Udmurt is presented as one of the two official languages of the Udmurt Republic, along with Russian. This status is enshrined in article 1, paragraph 2 the republic's constitution (and reaffirmed in article 9). However, according to Vaba and Viikberg (2002), there has been considerable opposition to the state sponsorship of the language and now "the sphere of usage of the Udmurt language is narrow and its status is low". It is difficult to envisage that Udmurt can be a strong language in the future.

3.1 The Status of the Udmurt Language within the Udmurt State University (UdSU)

Udmurt does not have the same validity within UdSU that, for example, Welsh does within the University of Wales. While the latter appears on official documents and is the possible medium of

Instruction and examination for many courses, Udmurt is accorded no such status. Only within the Department of General and Finno-Ugric Linguistics is Udmurt used for instruction or examination. Indeed, it was only within this department that I heard any Udmurt spoken at UdSU. Many departments have ethnic Udmurt staff, but they do not appear to use their language at work. Many told me that Udmurt was their weaker language after Russian. Furthermore, one ethnic Udmurt teacher of English maintained that her English was stronger than her Udmurt.

Of the four other state HE institutions in the republic, only the Pedagogic Institute in Glazov teaches Udmurt. It is interesting to note that the rector at Glazov is a first-language Udmurt-speaker, however none of his children speak Udmurt. The same is true for Professor Kel'makov, head of the Department of General and Finno-Ugric Linguistics at UdSU, and his children.

It is interesting to note that Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) suggests that

"as a result of the russification of Udmurt (sic, the Udmurt Republic) the possibility to study the Udmurt language almost disappeared (sic) along with the Udmurt culture".

3.2 The Status of Udmurt within Secondary Schools in Izhevsk

There are 100 secondary schools in Izhevsk; only two offer any provision for Udmurt. There are no Udmurt-medium schools or streams within in schools in the capital. Vaba and Viikberg (2002) state that less than 30% of Udmurt school children are learning Udmurt, and that most of these are in rural districts of the republic. There is a shortage of appropriately trained and qualified teachers and Udmurt-medium schools are only to be encountered in these rural areas.

3.3 The Availability of Books in Udmurt

Walking round the bookshops of Izhevsk I only found one title written in Udmurt. There was also a limited number of bilingual Russian-Udmurt dictionaries, and an even more limited selection of magazines and newspapers - I counted two! Until perestroika there had been as many as fifty new titles published each year in Udmurt, but in the past three or four years there has been no new production. Professor Kel'makov told me that there were plenty of manuscripts at press, but no money to publish them.

3.4 The Extent of Udmurt on Local TV and Radio

There is little provision of TV or radio in Udmurt. The level of coverage appears to vary by region. In Izhevsk the number of broadcast hours per week in Udmurt is minimal and in the republic as a whole there is less than 10 hours of Udmurt medium TV broadcasting per week and only marginally more radio.

4 Conclusion

At best, the position of the Udmurt language today could be described as precarious. The government of the republic appears not to have the political will, and certainly it does not have the cash, to provide the Udmurt language with the support it requires. Symptomatic is the fact that although a Basic Law guaranteeing the status of Udmurt has been drafted for some time, it has still to be ratified. I am assured that ratification will occur sometime!

In light of the foregoing discussion, I do not believe it is possible to give a definitive figure for the present number of Udmurt speakers; however, it would be safe to state that this number is doubtless below that which has traditionally been quoted in reference works.

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