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The Russification of Komi

It has been commonplace in western linguistics to speak about languages in isolation. Although there were proponents of language contacts as a factor in language change, i.e. historical linguistics in Europe – the main representatives in Balkan studies – the interest in language contact is of a fairly recent origin. Nowadays, one can hardly avoid dealing with it, if one takes the research of language change seriously. This does not, of course, minimize the role of language-inherent change or typological tendencies. The effect of a contiguous linguistic system is an additive factor, but sometimes it crucially defines the types of change, sometimes even leads to a total change of language, a language shift.

Formerly, the effects of another language were termed superstratum, substratum and adstratum. When dealing with the European North, Russia, the two latter terms are relevant. In a substratum situation, one language takes another's place entirely, preserving some features of the former linguistic system. Typically, such features are phonetic or syntactic. Since the seminal monograph by Terrence Kaufman and Sarah G. Thomason (1988), this change is called language shift, thus highlighting the point of view of the speakers who shift from one language to another.

In an adstratum situation, two (or more) languages, i.e. populations speaking different languages, continue interacting for a long time, both retain their speech forms but features enter from one language to the other. Typically, in such a situation we find lexical, morphosyntactic and even purely morphological features in common with neighbouring languages. Phonetic features also develop in a parallel fashion. This interaction may concern entire populations, or there may exist a bilingual belt between the monolingual hinterlands.

Superstratum is usually exemplified by invaders who shift to the language of the conquered people, introducing mainly new lexical items. Although these terms are based on sociohistory, they are still common in linguistic studies.

Thus, adstratum may describe best the situation leading to the changes that have taken place in Komi, a Finno-Ugrian language spoken in the north-east corner of European Russia. In that area, there is a gradual development of isomorphism, equivalence of form, in phonetics, morphosyntax, and syntax. Another term devoid of sociohistorical reference is code-copying.

In the European North, the Slavs entered the wide, sparsely-populated areas where the Permic peoples lived along the rivers, after exploring the areas of the Finnic peoples. The areas between Karelia and present-day Komi were Slavicized long ago, presumably through language shift. The substratum effects in Northern Russian dialects are discussed in Thomason & Kaufman (1988: 244–251), who seem to overlook the evidence of toponymy. In the case of Komi, in order to characterize the linguistic situation in historical times, the source for the following description is mainly the recent publication, *Istorija Komi* (IK 2004).

The Nestor Chronicle mentions that in the year 1096, Gjurat Rogovič from Novgorod sent people to Pečora for a tribute, for the year 1133, Pečora tribute went to Novgorod and Kiev; and Perm' was paying tribute to the Rus'. At first collecting tribute mainly in furs, the Novgorodians travelled far to the Northern Dvina. The local population, at that time probably Finnic speakers in contact with the ancestors of the present-day Komi-Zyryans, may have represented the legendary Biarmians of the Scandinavian sagas. According to the Russian chronicles, the explorations extended to Pečora and Jugra. While the ethnic nomenclature of the former is uncertain, as it merely refers to the Pečora river, the latter were presumably the ancestors of the Hanti and Mansi. The contacts between Komi-Zyryans and a Finnic population have left behind both archeological and linguistic evidence: loanwords are found especially in the western Komi dialects.

Contacts between populations

In the 12th century, Russian administrative towns were founded close to the Komi area. Russian peasant colonization took place from the 13th – 14th century on to the Lower Luza and Lower Vyčegda. The battles over the rights of collecting tribute between Novgorod, Vladimir-Suzdal' and Rostov-Suzdal', and finally Moscow, led to the victory of the latter. Moscow took over, also in a cultural sense, by promoting the conversion of the Komi into Christianity by Stephan of Perm' at the end of the fourteenth century. This process began in Pyras (nowadays Kotlas), a central place for the Komi. In Ust'-Vym' (mouth of the river Vym'), a diocese was founded with Stephan as the first bishop. Moreover,

Stephan devised a specific alphabet where distinction was made between the rounded and unrounded vowels of the middle series (*o*, *e*); i.e. the script was phonematic. As such, the sound system was close enough to the surrounding Russian dialects: no diphthongs, no distinction between long and short vowels, palatalization of dental consonants, in Komi also affricates. Only fragments of ca 900 words remain to our day, but they are enough to show the structure of the language (V.I. Lytkin 1952). The texts have both Russian Church Slavonic elements and innovations by Stephan which are based on Slavic and Komi elements (Rédei 1996). One can only guess as to why devising a new script for the holy texts was seen as necessary. A logical motivation would be the existence of such a writing system prior to Stephan; this has, however, not been found, except the *pas* signs used by the Komi to mark their belongings.

The area where the Perm' lived was defined in the Life of St Stephan by a contemporary of Stephan, Epifanij Premudryj (*Žitie Stefana Permskago*): "One river, Vym', flows through the entire Perm' land and joins the river Vyčegda. The second river Vyčegda, flows from Perm' land and enters the northern land, and joins the Dvina below the town of Ustjug. (...) A third river, Vjatka, flows from another Perm' land and joins Kama. A fourth river Kama flows round and through the entire Perm' land, along it many peoples live". In the Vyčegda-Vym' chronicle from 1333, the Komi are said to live on the rivers Pinega, Udora, Vyšera, Upper Vym', and Sysola. In 1455, Christianity was taken to Čerdin', to Perm' Velikaja (the Great Perm'), as it was called, to the Komi that later became called the Komi Permyak. When the Perm' diocese was moved to the diocese of Vologda in 1492, further conversion of the population in the surroundings was probably no longer relevant; the sights were set further towards Siberia (IPE 1996: 12).

In addition to administration – the clergy and the *voevodas*, settled in Velikij Ustjug since 1364 – Russian peasants began moving east and north, mostly from the neighbouring areas. As a result, Ust'-Vym' and Lower Vyčegda became bilingual and finally Russian-speaking, as did some areas on the rivers Luza, Pinega, and lower Vaška. In Pustozersk in the North, the Russians were the majority as well. This evidenced the importance of the river routes leading to Siberia. The Komi, while having adopted cattle-breeding and agriculture already before, kept to their semi-nomadic way of life, where hunting and fishing played a decisive role. Thus, they could move great distances, settling along the rivers in the north and east, looking for further and further hunting-grounds even across the Ural mountains. Finally, in the seventeenth century, they led the Russians to Siberia where they already had paved the way, trading with the local peoples.

In the north, the Komi settled on the Ižma river in 1560–1570, mixing with the local population, Nenets, and Russian Old Believers who arrived from the Russian settlement Ust'-Cil'ma – Russian Old Believers found their refuge in several places in the far north, here in 1575. Russians found their way to Mezen' from Pinega, and Ust'-Sysol'sk, later to become the capital, obtained its mixed population in the seventeenth century. Other dialectal groups formed along the rivers, with admixtures of Russian, Mansi and Mari in the south. All along, men from various Komi localities were taken to join the military or trade explorations of the Russians.

In the seventeenth century, travellers made notes on the linguistic and ethnic situation of the area. Thus, a Swede, E. Palmqvist wrote in 1673 that the Zyryans' area bordered with Sol'vyčegodsk, and that the Permyaks lived closer to Solikamsk. An unknown German officer noted in 1666 that the Permyaks lived between Sol'vyčegodsk and Kama; their language differed from Russian and Tatar. It was observed that the people also spoke Russian, but used their own language in their everyday life. Bishop Markel in 1653 complained that in neither Ust'-Vym', nor on the Sysola, could the peasants speak Russian; their language was Permic. Presumably, the ethnic border was the same then, as now: the village Spasporub on the Luza in the south, Mežog on the Vyčegda in the west. In the north and northwest, the border stabilized in the villages Koptjuga on the Vaška and Latjuga on the Mezen'. These language borders happened to be observed by early foreigners. For instance, Cavalry Captain Peter Schönström, a Swedish prisoner-of-war from the army of Carl XII, wrote in his diary in 1711:

“On day 5, arrived at town Jarinski (= Jarensk), at 95 versts from Soliwisiogda (= Sol'vyčegodsk), where the river Jaris (= Jarenga) turns to the left. On day 7, to village Soskort at 20 versts from Jarensk. Day 8, arrived at village Kam (= Gam), at 25 versts from Jarensk, where the language changes and the people speak Zyryan and few speak Russian.” (Davidsson 1960: 15; transl. ML)

The Finnish linguist and ethnographer A.J. Sjögren undertook long trips to the Russian North, searching for languages known or rumoured to be related to Finnish. On his voyage through Komi lands, he noted in 1827:

“In Meshog (= Mežog), which is a fairly big village with several parts, the Zyryan language begins. However, people did not, as my coachman from the town (Jarensk) pointed out, want to own to their Zyryan origin, but limited their skills to understanding the language only, which made them clever at acting as interpreters between the Russians and the Zyryans proper, who lived further on along the road, and added, as a kind of self-excuse, that a great part of the town-dwellers, especially merchants also understood the language. – When after a further journey of 9 versts ... arrived at the Shevjart pogost, Zyryan was the

common language between the inhabitants and my coachman. Everyone speaks Russian as well, though.” (Branch 1973: 146; transl. ML)

The scarcity of arable land and extinction of valuable fur animals forced the men to seek income in an ever-widening extension: they found seasonal work in mines, towns, and in forestry in European Russia and Siberia; they also served in the Russian army. No doubt this brought with it a wide-spread acquaintance with the Russian lexicon, useful phraseology, maybe even elementary grammar. In the eighteenth century, Academician Lepexin was sent to travel in the Russian countryside. On his trip to the Permyak and Zyryan areas, he reported on his findings and even compiled a small Komi-Russian phrase-book (published in V.I. Lytkin 1952). This shows rather extensive borrowings from Russian, and even phraseology calqued from Russian.

It is estimated that in 1725, the Komi kraj (= present-day Komi) had 37,000–38,000 Komi and 2,500 Russians. In 1860, there were ca 110,000 inhabitants in the Komi kraj. It is estimated that of these, 97,000–100,000 were Komi, and 10,000–13,000 were Russians. In 1917–1918, the number had doubled: 214,000, out of which 193,000 were Komi.

The revolution in 1917 brought with it the endeavour to make the population literate. The same objective was behind the indigenization (*korenizacija*) policy of the 1920s. Towards this end, a new alphabet was created for a standardized language, and text-books for schools, newspapers, and literature were published. In the new Komi Autonomous Area, founded in 1921, the language seems actually to have functioned as an administrative official language. Stalin’s purges changed this situation completely, however, and the changes in the alphabet during the 1930s did not help, either. In short, the literates learned respect towards the dominating role of the Russian language the hard way. Added to this, the demographic picture turned upside down. During WW II, the indigenous population decreased, and the GULAG system brought hundreds of thousands to the area. Granted amnesty, many of them stayed in the 1950s, and an additional work force for the industries was brought in. New forest settlements and towns arose in the countryside (Vorkuta, Inta, Uhta, Sosnogorsk, Pečora, Usinsk) where the inhabitants spoke Russian. Mixed marriages, self-liquidation of the national language in the schools, liquidation of non-perspective villages in the 1960s, all led to the result that even in schools in the countryside, Komi became merely a subject that could be taught to the children. By 1975, not a single school taught the whole programme in Komi (Popov 1996: 213). Furthermore, parents often preferred to speak to their children in Russian in order to help them climb the social ladder into the bigger and richer world of education. The language used in the kindergartens was Russian as well.

In 1987–1988, a survey among those of Komi nationality showed that 87.9% of the rural and 97.4% of the urban population spoke Russian fluently (Šabaev 1998: 84). At the same time, over 20% of the urban Komi did not speak their mother tongue and for the rural Komi, the corresponding figure was 5%. Moreover, nearly 40% of the urban Komi could not write in the Komi language, for the rural Komi, the figure was 26.4% (Kotov et al. 1996: 78). In the 1989 census, the population of the Republic was 1,251,000, of which people of Komi nationality totalled 291,500, that is 23.3%, the Russians representing 57.7%. Although there are Komi outside the Republic, 87% of the Komi live in the republic. Komi as the native tongue was reported by 70.4%. (Ènciklopedija I). A survey made in the early 1990s showed that as the language of everyday communication, Komi was retained only by the oldest generation in the villages (Denisenko & Kal'janova 1994). In the census of 2000, questions about mother tongue were not asked; the number of Komi in the entire Federation has fallen (Lallukka 2005: 37).

During the 1990s, the language situation had a new start. Komi and Russian were named as official languages. As a consequence, several measures were taken to increase the use of Komi. The heightened ethnic consciousness produced results. For example, new dictionaries, text-books, and grammars were published, as was extensive material on the ethnography and history of Komi, mainly in Russian. In the 2000s, this situation was on the wane, with less public expense and space in the media, furthermore, changes in the constitution and administration reduced the newly-won role of Komi. In 2003, a sociological survey among those of Komi nationality (1894 interviews) showed that the number of people with Komi as their mother tongue had fallen to 65.4%, while 30.8% reported Russian as their mother tongue. The tendency for the younger generation to linguistic assimilation was evident: only 13.9% within the age group of 18–34 had Komi as their mother tongue. The degree of education is a strong factor as well: 30.8% of those with the least education spoke Komi as their mother tongue, while the corresponding figure for those with a high education was 9.1%. Yet a surprising change was recorded in the ability of Russians being able to speak Komi: now, 13.8% claimed they could, whereas in 1994, only 1.4% did so. The lowest percentage of Komi speakers was recorded in the industrial settlements in the countryside: 10%. When asked about the perspectives of the language in the republic, 21.7% of countryside dwellers thought that Komi will reach a status equal to Russian, whereas only 15.8% of people living in urban areas thought so. Among the Komi, 11.5% think that the language will disappear, among the Russians, the corresponding figure is 13.8%.

Still, quite a large number considered that Komi should be an obligatory teaching subject at school – 44% (Konjuxov 2004). What is now new is that the language is taught in urban schools, and as a subject, it is offered to 34% of the pupils (Cypanov 2005). Still, the ethnic self-image among Komi urban youth is negative. This has been the greatest obstacle to the development of their ethnos (Šabaev 1998: 93).

Language contact

In as early as 1827, Sjögren had noted the contact phenomena in the Russian speech of his coachman:

“From Časovo I got an old coachman who expressed himself in very bad Russian, so that I had difficulty understanding him. Besides, there are many Zyryanisms in his speech. For instance, he did not distinguish Genera.” (Branch 1973: 146; transl. ML)

During the 1850s, S. Maksimov, a well-known Russian writer and traveller, visited Ižma in the north. There, he was astonished to find in such a harsh climate, rich, hospitable, Russian-speaking Zyryans who spoke the language fluently, though with faulty pronunciation and word stress (Maksimov 1859: 139–212).

The linguistic situation at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries has been commented on by several authors. For instance, Pitirim Sorokin, later to be a well-known sociologist in the USA, wrote the following on his field trip to the Komi in 1911 concerning their bilingualism:

“[---] one can say that all Zyryans understand Russian, and a great number speak Russian, of course mixing gender and number (for instance *moj šapka*, *ètot reka* etc.). Concerning the young people (and by the river Udora almost the entire population), nearly everyone speaks proper Russian.” (Sorokin 1999 [1911]: 106; transl. ML)

A few years later, A.A. Cember, a teacher and one of the leading Komi philologists, as well as a collector of Komi folklore, wrote in the foreword to his Komi-Zyryan folk tales, published in 1913:

“The Komi language has begun to disappear. The educated Komi speak Russian everywhere. In Ust'-Sysol'sk they speak to each other, and even their children, mostly in Russian. In the villages, the priests, the *feldshers*, the teachers, the carters, the shopkeepers also speak Russian with each other and tell their children to speak it so as to make going to school easier. All these people, naturally, can also speak Komi, but their language is not pure any more: two words in Komi, the third word already in Russian. And in this way, all the simple people are also beginning to talk and then they will forget the Komi language completely. Thus in the village Kojgort they have already forgotten many Komi words. Instead of the Komi word *pyv'san* ('sauna') they say *banja*, instead of *kaga* ('child') *dit'a*. In five hundred years, or even sooner, one will not be able to find in the vicinity of our towns a single Komi. Maybe somewhere like Lopydin or Obyd there will be speakers who mix Komi and Russian.” (Cember 1913: 3; transl. ML)

Komi had been used in writing, mostly in translations from Russian and on the basis of slightly differing dialects. Komi was taught at the seminars in Tot'ma and Vologda where Komi students were schooled as priests and teachers. Their language was apparently strongly influenced by Russian, carrying the banner of education. Grammars and phrase-books were written for them. Thus, P. Savvaitov published a grammar and a Zyryan-Russian and Russian-Zyryan dictionary in 1850. Earlier, in 1843 a Russian-Zyryan dictionary was compiled but not published; it served as a basis for linguistic research by Finno-Ugrists, such as F. Wiedemann. Grammars had also been written abroad by H.C. von Gabelenz in 1841, as well as by M.A. Castrén 1844. A Komi linguist and philologist, G.S. Lytkin, residing in St Petersburg, was active debating in the language question, being probably the first purist. He published a grammar and a dictionary of Komi-Zyryan, leaving out what he considered as the worst Russianisms. He noted, for instance, that calquing and conjunctions had spread from Russian into Komi to the extent that the seminarist jargon that he himself had been exposed to at school in Ust'-Sysol'sk was nearly incomprehensible (G.S. Lytkin 1889 [1996]: I). Lytkin's aim was, as was the aim of his paragon, N.I. Il'minskij in Kazan', to introduce literacy in the mother tongue, after which learning Russian would be less troublesome.

When the standardization began, discussions arose as to whether the language should be nativized. There were complaints that the common people could not understand the new concepts expressed by Russian lexemes brought by the revolution. New words were created, but subsequently Russian lexicon and grammar provided the model. This has led to a noticeable development of the language system towards Russian, a tendency that is striking when compared to other Finno-Ugrian languages. This process was no doubt accelerated by the idea of amalgamation of languages propagated by Marrism. Later on, the national-Russian bilingualism programme led to intensive teaching of Russian.

The lexicon is naturally the quickest to receive new elements. Russian loans comprise about 25% of the Komi-Russian dictionary published in 1961 (Ajbabina 1990). In the new dictionary Komi-roč kyvčukör (KRK 2000), Russian words which have synonyms in Komi have been left out, but the amount of Russian words still remains high due to new concepts without Komi equivalents (KRK 2000: 14). There are loans from older times as well, which is apparent by their phonetic and phonotactic adaptations into the Komi system: *döva* from *vdova*, *patera* from *fatera* (dial.) = *kvertira*. A high number of Russian adverbs, particles and conjunctions, which are typical in face-to-face communication, show a high degree of acculturation. We can compare the situation with other Uralic

languages spoken in European Russia: in excerpts from literary journals in 1992–1993 (3,000–5,000 words), Sirkka Saarinen found that Erzya Mordvin showed the highest number of Russian loans, namely 23.6%. Komi came second with 23.4%, and next was Moksha Mordvin with 18.6%, Udmurt with 11.7% and Mari with 14.2% (Saarinen 1994).

The linguistic system of Komi is extremely agglutinative with minimal morphophonological rules, which makes the introduction of new elements very easy, e.g. the Russian imperative (+ *-t*) + infinitive *-ny*; *dumajtny* < *dumat'*, *dumaj!* *dumajte!*; *zagotovl'ajtny* < *zagotovljat'*, *zagotovljaj!*; *instruktirujtny* < *instruktirovat'*, *instruktiruj!*; *dušitny* < *dušit'*, etc.; Russian adjective *-yj*, *-oj* > adj. *-öj*; *mirsköj*, *samoderžavnöj*; Russian noun + *-a*; *pal'toa* < *pal'to* 'dressed in a coat' etc.

With the loanwords, new phonemes have appeared: /h/, /f/, /c/, /š'/:. Morphological elements, such as the adjectival derivative suffixes *-at*, *-öj* and a verbal suffix, *-ni* (< *-nu*), are in active use, as well as the negative element *n'e-* and the diminutive nominal suffixes. One Russian postposition, *radi*, has been borrowed (for an overview, see Leinonen 2002).

In syntax, the influence of Russian is considerable. V.I. Lytkin noted the use of subordinate clauses, as well as the calquing of idioms and word phrases (Lytkin 1969). In morphology, Russian models are copied by extending the functions of Komi elements. For instance, instead of a case-marked noun (*kinoö* 'to the movies'), a postpositional construction *kino vylö* (cf. Russian *na kino*) appears. The reflexive marker in Komi has extended its functions to mark a correspondence to the Russian morphological passive *-sja*, even with an agent in the instrumental case. On the other hand, reduction in frequency of the Komi grammatical categories is noticeable in cases where Russian does not have the corresponding category. Such cases are the Komi analytic past forms, the gerundials, and the infinitival forms. Moreover, Russian sentence types are copied (Leinonen 2002). Further examples on, e.g., the Russian negative particle and word order, can be found in Sidorov (1992 [1951]), and in the 1990s discussions on Russian influence, e.g. Ludykova (1996).

Conclusion

The language contact situation has thus changed dramatically. At first, Russian and Komi found themselves in an adstratum situation on the borders of the Komi population retreating east and north, assimilating with the Russians in the south and south-west. The influence of the Russian language on spoken Komi

began, according to K. Rédei, from the eighteenth century (Rédei 1996: 5). Increasing familiarity with the Russian way of life led to heavy Russification of the material culture as well. Socially, the situation developed an asymmetrical dominant-subordinate intergroup relationship. By the nineteenth century, widespread bilingualism emerged as a requisite of daily life in certain areas and especially among the male population. By the twentieth century, the educated, though few, felt pressure towards language shift, and some of them even resisted the introduction of their mother tongue into the schools. The indigenous socially subordinate group, however, was able to become literate in their own language, that is, until dramatic demographic changes brought the superordinate language even to the countryside. This was followed by mass bilingualism and language shift in urban conditions, which was seen as a desirable process. Besides, it was generally believed that the young generation would learn their mother tongue from their elders, since Komi remained the language of family life in the countryside in Komi villages. Nevertheless, that was before the urbanization, mixed marriages and the mass media. In some villages, though, Komi still predominates.

In linguistic terms, there is continuing code-copying in that bilinguals code-switch, favouring structures that are common to both languages. In addition, social factors favour borrowing. In a scale of borrowing devised by Thomason & Kaufman (1988: 74–75), slightly modified in Thomason (2001), the language contact is not yet intense to the extent that anything goes, including structural borrowing that results in major typological changes. Instead, this contact remains on a scale where basic as well as non-basic vocabulary has been borrowed, with moderate structural borrowing. More exactly, the following features apply to the literary language and the dialects to a varying extent:

- function words are borrowed, such as pronouns and low numerals (in dialects; in Komi-Permyak), derivational affixes;
- structural features are borrowed, new phonemes appear, syllable structure constraints are changed;
- syntax shows the decreasing use of non-finite constructions; there are changes in the word order (Thomason 2001: 70–71).

The morphology is still intact, only Komi-Permyak shows borrowed inflectional affixes added to native words (Cypanov 1999: 58).

To speak in terms of give-and-take, it is a truism that Komi is becoming semantically closer to Russian, reaching a higher level of acculturation.

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