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Veps language:

An Overview of a Language in Context

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During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Ulriikka Puura, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about the Veps language.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

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1 Introduction: Speakers of Veps Language in The Russian Federation

The Veps have lived as a linguistic and ethnic minority in the northwestern part of the Russian Federation throughout documented history. It is generally considered that the earliest written evidence of the Veps is found in the Russian *Primary Chronicle* (*Повесть временных лет*, dating back to the 11th century), where a people called *Ves'* are mentioned as the first inhabitants of the Belozero area. The predecessors of the present-day Russians, Slavic tribes, came to the area at the end of the 8th century. Even today the main Veps area is situated between the Ladoga, Onega and Belozero lakes. Most Veps live in the administrative areas of the Republic of Karelia, the Leningrad and Vologda *oblasts*.

According to the Russian census of 2002, there were 8,240 people living in the Russian Federation identifying themselves as Veps. Most of them (88.8%) lived in the three above-mentioned administrative areas: the Republic of Karelia (4,870 people), the Leningrad *Oblast* (2,019 people) and the Vologda *Oblast* (426 persons). The number of Veps speakers is even lower: a generally accepted estimation of the number in 2002 is less than 4,000 (see Grünthal, 2011). The 2002 census was criticised for not asking people to report their native language. Voluntarily the respondents could state their knowledge of languages other than Russian, and 5,753 people reported a knowledge of Veps¹. At the administrative level the Veps form a tiny minority, since they constitute 0.7% of the inhabitants of the Republic of Karelia and even less in the two other areas. There are, however, certain villages and village clusters in which the Veps do constitute a majority. The latest census was carried out in 2010 and 5,936 people were reported as Veps speakers.

At present, all Veps know and use the common ethnonym and the name of the language *Veps* in official connections, but in the everyday language they frequently use other ethnonyms, such as *tähine* or *tägalaine* 'local, from here'. Most Veps claim to speak in 'our own language' (*ičemoi kelel*), 'our way' (*miide kartte*), 'local way' (*tähiižeks*) or 'in the home language' (*kodikelel*), instead of 'in Veps' (*vepsäks*, *vepsän kelel*). Traditionally, the Veps have also been called *Čud*; this ethnonym was

1 <http://www.perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=17>, table 4 "Распространенность владения языками (кроме русского)", read 28.5.2010

used in the first Russian population census of 1897 which gave the first official data on the number of the Veps, and the name *Čud* is still used in certain areas. In addition, *lūdilane* ('Lude') and *pagišta lūdikiš* ('speak in Lude language') are used in North and Central Veps areas to denote 'Veps' and 'Veps language' (cf. 4.1). Given the great variance in determining linguistic and local identity, many Veps have difficulties in outlining the size and areal distribution of the ethnic entity "Veps people".

2 Socio-political Context

2.1 Legal and Political Position

The Veps were granted official minority status in the Russian Federation as late as at the beginning of the 21st century, receiving the official status of "Indigenous Small-numbered People of the Russian Federation" in 2000 (this included only Veps in the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad *oblasts*—the Veps of the Vologda *oblast* were enrolled in 2009) as well as "Indigenous Small-numbered People of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" in 2006. According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation § 68, § 69, § 72 (1: I) these statuses are meant to guarantee that the rights of the minorities are preserved "according to international standards". However, the language laws of the Russian Federation are not normative and compulsory, but instead declarative and symbolic in nature. As most minority experts, especially in Western countries, see the situation, the established goals of native-language development have not been achieved in reality.

The Veps have never had such large titular ethnic administrative areas as some other ethnic groups in Russia. However, 24 ethnic municipalities and 2 national districts were created in the 1920s. The Šoutjärv national district which existed until 1957, was restored in 1994 and abolished again in 2004. Of the three administrative areas where most of the Veps live, there is specific legislation concerning the Veps (as well as Finns and Karelians) only in the Republic of Karelia. The Law on State Support of the Karelian, Veps and Finnish languages in the Republic of Karelia² (2004) declares the right to a free choice of the language of instruction, the right to learn the Karelian, Veps and Finnish languages and receive education in these languages (article 5). These languages can be used for the publication of laws and other legal acts in the Republic of Karelia (article 6), and for arranging and holding elections and referenda in the territory of Karelia (article 7). They can be used by state and municipal authorities, public institutions (article 8) and the mass media (article 9), in the fields of culture, the arts and education (article 10) and for geographical names, and road and other signs (article 11). It

² <http://www.gov.karelia.ru/Karelia/1162/15.html>

should be noted that according to Karelian law the languages "can be used", whereas the language laws of the other republics of the Russian Federation define that the state languages of the republics "are used" and "shall be used" on specific occasions. The vague formulations of the law make it merely a declarative document. There is only a little evidence that the special status of the Veps language in the Republic of Karelia has had any real influence on the language situation. Nevertheless, the Veps in the Republic of Karelia are better researched and their situation is monitored more closely than in other areas.³

2.2 Attitudes

The attitudes of the Russian majority towards the Veps minority and vice versa have yet not been studied extensively. A case-study on attitudes in the Republic of Karelia in 2003–2004 included 160 informants of different nationalities, social status and age, and demonstrated that almost half of the respondents were interested in language issues in the republic. Only 15% of the informants considered measures aimed at the preservation of the indigenous Karelian and Veps languages in the republic unnecessary. A significant majority (75%) felt it necessary to preserve and develop these languages. The Russians of the Republic of Karelia seem to have a positive attitude towards the preservation of the Veps language. The Veps do not differ notably from the other Russian-speaking populations in terms of religion, appearances or cultural conventions. The elder Veps population may have an accent when they speak Russian, but otherwise the Veps can be quite invisible in everyday life, if they do not go out of their way to make an effort to display their ethnicity. The Veps are hardly seen as a danger in present day Russian society, and they do not seem to pose a threat to the Russian majority's income, religion, cultural values or political power.

The Veps of the Republic of Karelia are more positive towards the survival of their native language than in other areas: almost 60% presume that the language situation will remain the same. In the Leningrad *Oblast* over 60% consider that the language will gradually disappear.

Russian language policy has mainly favoured monolingualism in Russian with the exception of brief periods when multilingualism was to some extent supported. Ethnicity was given more significance at the beginning of the Soviet era in the early 20th century. After the October Revolution in 1917 the political ideologies gave rise to language politics, regional politics and nationality politics that favoured equal rights for different peoples and their languages in the USSR: the goals of enlightenment and establishing Soviet power demanded that literary languages be created for those minority peoples lacking a command of the Russian language. Literary standards for minority

languages were created, and the overall goal of language policy was to advance the process of ‘indigenisation’ or ‘nativisation’ (коренизация) in the 1920s. Use of the minority languages was promoted in local administration, the courts, education and the mass media, and between 1932 and 1937 the first Veps literary standard was created. In the second half of the 1930s the Russification policies were intensified. By the end of the 1930s the Veps had lost their right to native language education, and gradually all over the Soviet Union education given in languages other than Russian diminished rapidly. After the eradication of linguistic rights, other centralist oppression policies continued. The traditional contacts between the Veps villages were cut off as new roads began to be built from the population centres to the villages, and the old roads connecting the villages were abandoned. These measures were not specifically discrimination of the Veps or their language, as they were aimed at all the minorities in the USSR alike.

The attitudes of both the minority and majority should be more carefully investigated in traditional Veps areas: also in the Leningrad and Vologda oblasts, and the main urban locations (mainly Petrozavodsk and Lodeynoe Pole) of the Veps. Conducting research on the Veps in all of the administrative areas would probably produce interesting findings relating to the importance of knowledge of the minority status, as well on the importance of Veps instruction in schools, and so forth.

3 Cultural Context

The most central (and probably most thoroughly researched) cultural institutions the Veps have of their own are museums whereas there are no Veps theatres, publishing houses etc. The most significant of the museums is the Museum of Veps Culture in the village of Šoutjärv (Шёлтозеро) in the Republic of Karelia. Local cultural clubs exist in the villages and typically practice choir singing and folk dancing. Many groups perform in different kinds of annual festivals, of which the *Elon pu* ‘The Tree of Life’ festival in Vidl (Винницы) in the Leningrad *Oblast* attracts several hundred visitors every summer. The significance of these gatherings has not been researched, but as a collective activity connecting the Veps of different areas they do play a part in ethnic identity construction. An important organiser and supporter of events of this kind is the Veps Culture Society (Общество вепской культуры) in Petrozavodsk.

The importance of the minority language as the most important cultural marker of Veps identity is probably not perceived by local groups of Russians and Veps themselves in the same way. The Veps do not differ notably in their physical cultural traits from the surrounding Russian society and they share the Orthodox religion with the Russians. Supposedly they have not differed from Russians in

the same areas for centuries, and the Soviet era at the latest wiped out most ethnic or local cultural differences. Specific areas of culture (provincial festivals, folklore, arts and crafts, lamentation tradition) may have Veps features although they belong to a larger areal cultural heritage. Poetry has played an important role in the establishment of the Veps literary language, and there are some poets that are well known and appreciated. The first anthology of poetry by Nikolay Abramov, *Koumekümne koum* ('Thirty three', 1994) is probably still the best known original example of Veps literature. Nina Zayceva, the present Primus Motor of the Veps literary language and linguistics has also published original poetry and several translations of important texts such as the Gospels.

The religious conceptions of the Veps can be said to have been formed on the basis of Orthodox Christianity, a local peasant view of Christianity and the pre-Christian worldview of the Veps. On the face of it the Veps share quite a similar religious history with their neighbouring Russians. Religious life and practice was forbidden in Soviet times for all ethnic groups in the USSR. There was no research on different patterns of religious practices during the decades under the Soviet rule. Today Orthodox worship has a publicly acknowledged position in Russia. Religious traditions are increasingly popular and their importance has grown in parallel with a more generally increased interest in religion. As regards Veps, it must be noted that the Orthodox church applies Russian (and Church Slavic) as the language of ceremonies which increases the Russian influence on Veps language and culture. Yet there is no research available whatsoever on the role of religion (folk religion or Christianity) in building the ethnic identity of either the Veps or the Russians in the area.

4 Language

4.1 General description of the language

The Veps language belongs to the Finnic branch of the Finno-Ugric language family⁴. Veps is closely related to the Estonian and Finnish languages and the geographically neighbouring minority languages Karelian and Lude. In contrast to the demarcation of the Karelian dialects or languages (Karelian proper, Olonets Karelian) and Lude that has been a subject of debate, Veps has been considered as an independent language since the earliest studies at the beginning of 19th century⁵. Russian, belonging to the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family, and Veps do not share

⁴ The term *Finno-Ugric* languages is used as a synonym for the *Uralic* languages. The term *Finnic* languages is used here instead of the synonymic *Fennic*, *Balto-Finnic* or *Baltic-Finnic* languages.

⁵ The Lude language can be considered a transitional dialect between the Karelian varieties and Veps. It has been noted that the speakers of southern Lude and neighbouring Veps dialects manifest ethnicity in the same way and use the same endonym *lüdilane*.

even a distant common ancestor. There is no mutual basic vocabulary and the grammar and syntax were originally very different from each other. The different genealogical background is the main reason for the major differences between the two languages and it is impossible for Veps and Russian speakers to understand each other without heavy borrowing and code-switching and some level of command of both languages. Russian and Veps are typically used in different domains, and especially in fields such as modern society, religion and education, in which the use of Russian clearly dominates, while the vocabulary of Veps displays a great number of Russian loanwords.

Pessimistic attitudes of individual Veps towards bilingualism result from the history of Russian and Soviet society. Bilingualism has not been valued in schools or at work. Even today officials may claim that, for example, mastering the minority language may affect mastery of Russian. This claim was addressed to Veps activists in 2010 when a language nest project was being discussed at a conference in Moscow.

The Veps language has had two literary periods: a short five-year period in Soviet times in the 1930s and the present period beginning at the end of the 1980s. The first Veps literary language was developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s along with several other minority languages. The second period started at the second dawn of the minority languages in Russia, as many minorities began to discuss publicly the state of the art and the future of their language and the corresponding ethnic group. During both literary periods Veps was, and has been written in the Roman alphabet instead of Cyrillic. The choice of the Roman alphabet is somewhat problematic, since it makes the Veps literary language alien to, especially, those fluent elderly speakers who are only literate in Cyrillic script. The most important means for spreading the literary language is the monthly Veps newspaper *Kodima* ('Homeland'), which is delivered freely to the villages. However, no estimates have been made of the size of the literary language readership. More importantly, there is a lack of different forums for using the newly cultivated literature languages.

There is no research available on the differences between written and spoken Veps. However, there are notable differences of varying importance. The present standard literary Veps is formed on the basis of Central Veps dialects but features from other dialects have been taken into account in planning the literary standard. The three Veps dialect groups do differ to some extent from each other on many language levels but they are easily mutually understandable. The current Veps language planners aim at avoidance of Russian influence in vocabulary and other levels of language. Naturally, the average speaker of Veps most probably does not pay much attention to Russian influence, and more importantly, the newly developed or dialectal vocabulary may make the standard language seem alien to them.

4.2 Language contact and multilingualism

Currently, all Veps speakers are more or less bilingual. There is a big group that consists of those identifying themselves as Veps but not speaking the language at all or only a little. The younger Veps generations tend to be monolingually Russian. There is no research on how many people are able to speak Veps without considering themselves to be Veps, but supposedly these numbers are low. According to present information based on socio-historical evidence, there is no reason to doubt that the co-existence between and the mutual bilingualism of the Finnic and Slavic populations in the area was mainly peaceful until the turn of the 20th century. Gradual language shift to Russian has been going on for a long period of time; part of the Veps male population was characterised as fairly bilingual already in the late 19th century due to seasonal trading activities and the labour opportunities offered by nearby St. Petersburg. The changes in the status and prestige of the Veps language intertwine with the organisation and development of Russian and especially Soviet society. The language of power and official authorities has always been Russian, but the decline in the use of Veps in other spheres of life started rapidly when changes in Soviet society took place and the Veps rural language communities began to disintegrate. The pace has accelerated during the past 80 years, most notably in the post-war Soviet society.

Bilingualism is manifested at every level of the Veps language and yet its effects are still poorly studied. The most visible contact-induced effects are to be found in the lexicon, where one seems to be able to replace practically anything with a Russian equivalent in vernacular Veps speech. Nonetheless, there has been no research on Russian loanwords in Veps. The grammatical influence of Russian has been examined in only a few studies (Grünthal 2003: 162–177, Mullanen 1967, Zajceva 1994, 2003). Influence on verbal derivation has been looked into in Lehtinen (1985; 1990) and Puura (2010). It can be assumed that intensive language contacts through the centuries have affected the Russian varieties in the area also, but neither has any research on this subject yet been carried out. There have been no extensive studies concerning code-switching so far.

4.3 Language use and maintenance

Veps is used merely as a vernacular language in Veps language communities and only marginally in other domains. Veps is a language of the home and family and it has little use in the public sphere outside the minority media and literature. The Veps have a monthly newspaper *Kodima* that is delivered to all Veps areas. In the Republic of Karelia, the national broadcasting company allocates a little time for Veps-language radio programmes. Veps is not used as the language of instruction in pre-schools or schools. The University of Petrozavodsk offers some courses in Veps and students

specialising in Veps are obliged to use Veps in their course reports and write and defend their theses required for diplomas in Veps.

There is no precise data on the use of the language in different age groups, but as has been shown by numerous researchers and is clearly observable in the present Veps communities, the vast majority of fluent speakers of Veps are elderly. Despite the somewhat different definitions of different researchers for the age cohorts of the more fluent generation, we can still define three generations of Veps speakers in terms of fluency, on the one hand, and grade and type of bilingualism, on the other. There is a significant group of elderly people for whom Veps is clearly their strongest language, a middle generation who may still be fluent in Veps but for whom Russian is their first language and a third generation, who has only a passive or limited knowledge of Veps. Today we lack knowledge of the language choices of the families of the third generation: what is the situation of their children? It has not changed remarkably in the last few decades. There has been no solid research on the age differences in language proficiencies, but the observations of all researchers imply that stereotypically the younger the speaker, the weaker the skills in Veps .

The era of Veps language revitalisation in the late '80s and early '90s introduced the new literary language. The development of the standard language has been the most important means of Veps revitalisation since the first period of literary Veps in the Soviet period in the 1920s and 1930s. Additional linguistic or cultural revitalisation attempts have been few and far between. The Veps had hoped to get a language nest, a Veps language kindergarten, supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation in 2010, but for the time being this effort has been postponed due to certain difficulties and the pessimistic attitudes of official authorities and the Veps themselves. Veps language education at the University of Petrozavodsk has been faced difficulties in 2010, but so far the situation has been kept under control.

There are several relevant gaps in the research of the Veps people and their language. The effects of the language contact situation—bilingualism, code-switching and language change—are far from extensively studied. The linguistic identity of the Veps has not been studied. We lack information on everyday interaction between the minority and the majority and the linguistic choices of the Veps, as well as on the linguistic networks of the (usually younger) urban populations.

The sense of a common Veps ethnos has not been studied. We do not know how well known the new literary standard and the recently received official minority status are, or whether the Veps feel they belong to the Russian majority and possess only some special ethnic features, or whether they have a specific minority identity.

Linguistically, an incomplete description of the basic grammar is the widest gap in research. The most researched areas of the Veps language are historical phonology and morphology. Veps language history has not been subject to academic study, and etymological questions that used to gain a lot of attention in Finno-Ugric studies have still not been satisfactorily answered.

There is also an areal bias in the research. The focus of study in recent decades has been on the territory of the Republic of Karelia and many generalisations have been made without investigation of the situation among the Veps in the Leningrad and Vologda *oblasts*. Further, the gender issues of the Veps language and people have been left outside of the scope of research.

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