

UDMURT LANGUAGE IN VIRTUAL SPACE

This paper focuses on the presence of the Udmurt language in the virtual space, especially on the popular Russian social network site called Vkontakte. Unlike other endangered languages, the Udmurt language has a lot of materials online, and is one of the most active minority languages on SNS (Social Network Sites) in Russia [1]. There are factors that might add to the popularity of the Udmurt language, for example there is a famous music group, called «The Grannies of Burenovo», who participated in the finals of the Eurovision Song Contest 2012, and their success improved the Udmurt language's prestige [2].

Bilingual studies show there is correlation between the choice of language and the topic of the message [3]. The Udmurt language is usually considered to be mostly a family language, like many of the minority languages of Russia. The tendency of strong russification leaves no or very few other domains for minority language use: the language of instruction in schools, the language of bureaucracy, the language of legislation, even the language of everyday life is usually Russian [4].

The study shows no correlation between the topic and the choice of language, even the source of the information is irrelevant from this perspective. The research also shows that judging by the number of posts on Vkontakte and the activeness of the community, the Udmurt language is not endangered, at least not digitally. However, it is unclear how Udmurt users are using the language outside their online communities.

Key words: Udmurt language, virtual space, sociolinguistics, bilingualism, language choice, Vkontakte.

Introduction

The Udmurt language is a member of the Permic branch of the Uralic language family. Its closest relative is the Komi language. Udmurt is the fifth largest Uralic language with 552 299 ethnic Udmurts altogether (according to the 2010 census of Russia). Most of them are living in the Udmurt Republic, which is part of the Russian Federation, here they make up to 28,0% (410 584) of the population. There are also small diasporas of Udmurt speakers in other parts of Russia: Kirov Oblast, Perm Krai, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Mari El. The official languages of the Udmurt Republic are Russian and Udmurt, but in practice this is just a symbolic gesture, because government officials do not speak Udmurt, and there are just a few schools where they even teach the Udmurt language [5]. However, the Udmurt language is one of the most digitally active minority languages in Russia. There are a lot of web pages and blogs in the Udmurt language, a lot of Udmurt videos on Youtube, and a large number of users not only on the Russian SNS Vkontakte, but also a relatively decent number of users on Facebook and Twitter. And the most important part of the online presence of a language is the presence on Web 2.0, because it provides the opportunity for everyday users to create content without any special computer related knowledge instantly [1].

Nowadays the importance of digital language use rose, as the methods and means of communication and literacy were changed dramatically in the last few decades [6]. The probability of survival for a language now depends on not just the number, location, density, etc. of speakers, but also on whether the language is active online and used in everyday life. Kornai states there are two kinds of language death, the death of a language and the digital death of a language. Today both are equally important, and mostly independent of each other. While a dead language can be digitally active, for example Latin, Yiddish and Ancient Greek can be used in online communication. Also a digitally dead language can be far from real-life extinction and be completely missing from online communication for example the languages that have no literacy,

but have relatively large and vital communities. However, it is obvious that the digitally absent languages are destined to become extinct sooner or later in the future [7].

The original factors of language choice yet still remain the same, because the category of properties of communication did not change, just the amount of possible values for these properties grew in number. The four main factors of language choice, according to Grosjean, are the following: the situation, the topic, the participants and the function of the message [3]. From these factors, I mainly focused on the topic of the message.

So the main aim of my research was to look for any kind of correlation between the choice of language and the content of message. I also took into account the type of the message (news/polls/requests), the target of the message and the sender of the message.

1. Methodology

This paper follows the traditions of content analysis studies from the point of theoretical independency. The mainly descriptive approach allows the research to focus on the language choice as a natural phenomenon of everyday online communication and content creation [8].

The process of collecting materials was mostly manual. After finding the most active Udmurt communities of Vkontakte, the posts were saved from the date of creation of the community. The format is virtually printed pdf, because this type not only preserves the original formatting of the material, but also saves the extra visual content of the pages, for example pictures, links for videos, audio titles, polls, etc. It is also easy to copy and paste the text for further analysis.

The actual content analysis was performed manually with the help of a Microsoft Excel database.¹ The reason for this is very simple: there is no good bilingual content analysis tool for Russian and Udmurt language. The following parameters were recorded for every post:

ID: a special identifier of the post, contains the name of the site, the name of the community, the time period of the post and a number (e.g. vk_udmurt_2016_04_001)

Sender: the name of the user, who created the post

Language of the post: either Russian, Udmurt or mixed

Area of relevance: there were three variables Udmurtia, Russia or International

Main topic: culture, politics, economics, religion, public interest

Subtopic: education, language, arts, theatre, etc.

Type of post: news or request

Type of content: text, audio, video, picture

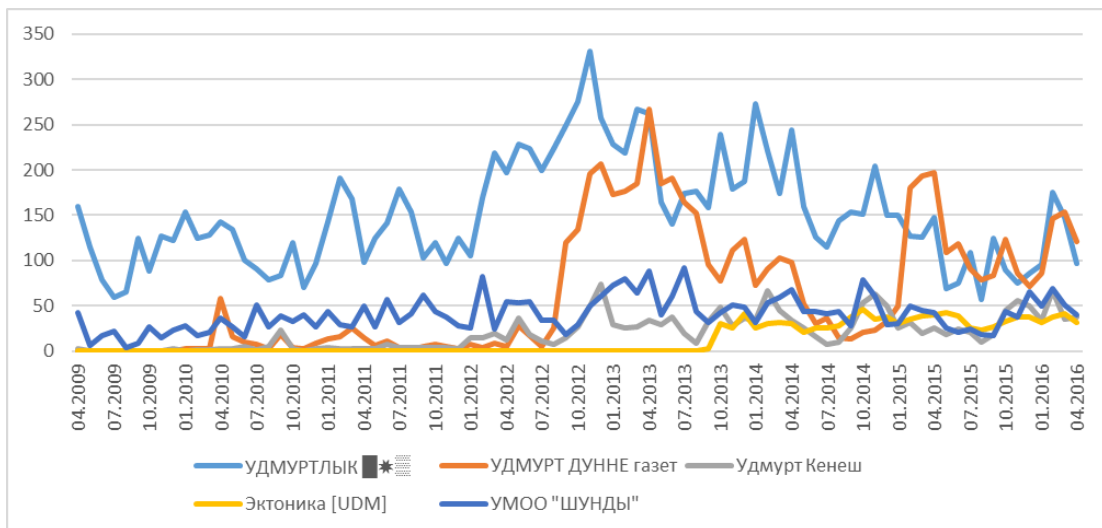
Source: either original or a repost

Commentary: if something was unclear, or really case-specific, it was mentioned here.

2. Materials

The five most active Udmurt-related communities were selected, for the study, by weighing different aspects of the communities, for example, they had to be easily searchable on Vkontakte and with search engines like Google or Yandex. The easier it is to find these communities the easier it is for users to join these groups. They also had to be relatively active during the research period, which was April 2016. There were 326 posts analysed altogether. The materials were collected and archived in May 2016, but all posts of the communities were saved from their beginning for statistical analysis. The following paragraph shows the relative stability in the number of posts per month. There is usually at least one post per day per community.

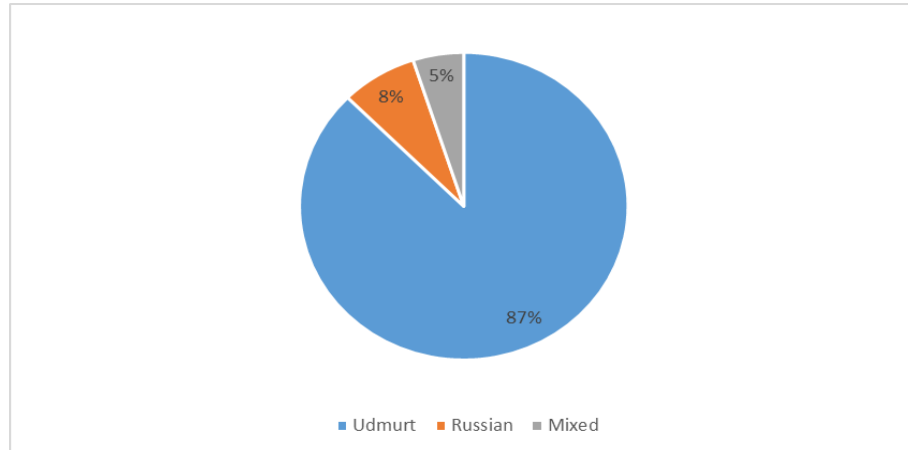
¹ Here I would also like to mention that I received a lot of help and advice from my Udmurt-Russian teacher, Ekaterina Suncova, without whom this research would have not been possible.



1. Number of posts per month

УМОО «ШУНДЫ»

The community has been active since January 2008. Only the administrators of the page can create posts, but besides the original content, they also repost materials from other pages. Their own posts are nearly always in Udmurt and they usually share content on the topic of culture and of public interest. Sometimes, their reposts are in Russian, but only if they contain Udmurt related information. Almost every post contains an attachment, either a picture or a video, and the administrators frequently use emojis to enhance their posts. They try to create an Udmurt-only atmosphere, but if the information is crucial for the ethnic Udmurt community the language of the source is irrelevant, however they try to lessen the Russian influence by writing a few words of introduction in Udmurt.

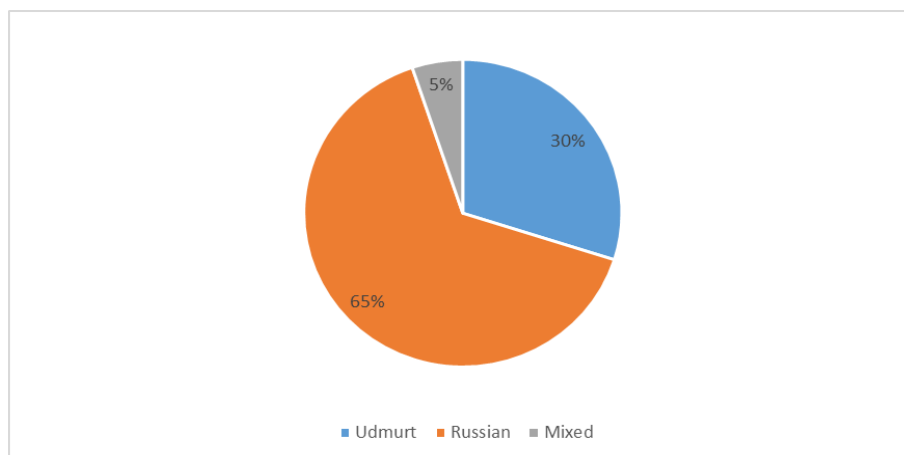


2. Language of posts on the page УМОО «ШУНДЫ» (40 posts)

УДМУРТЛЫК

Russian and Udmurt bilingual community of users, but gathering all kinds of ethnically, culturally or linguistically Udmurt related content and users. Not only ethnic Udmurts, but Russians who are living in the Udmurt Republic, or those who are interested in the Udmurt culture, are also a part of this group. The page consists of mostly news and information about Udmurtia, but one could find a variety of post types, from theatre programmes to «cats-for-sale» posts. This is due to the free posting policy, because every member of the group has the right to create content on the community's news feed. This group is also one of the first and most popular Udmurt themed communities on Vkontakte.

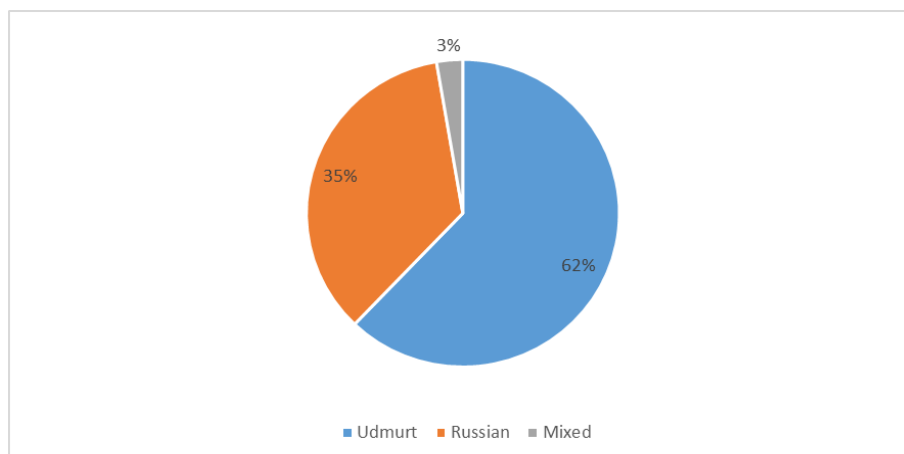
The language of the posts is mostly Russian, but there are also a lot of Udmurt posts. The ratio is about 2/3 Russian, 1/3 Udmurt, but there seems to be no correlation between the topic and the choice of language.



3. Language of posts on the page УДМУРТЛЫК (97 posts)

Удмурт Кенеш

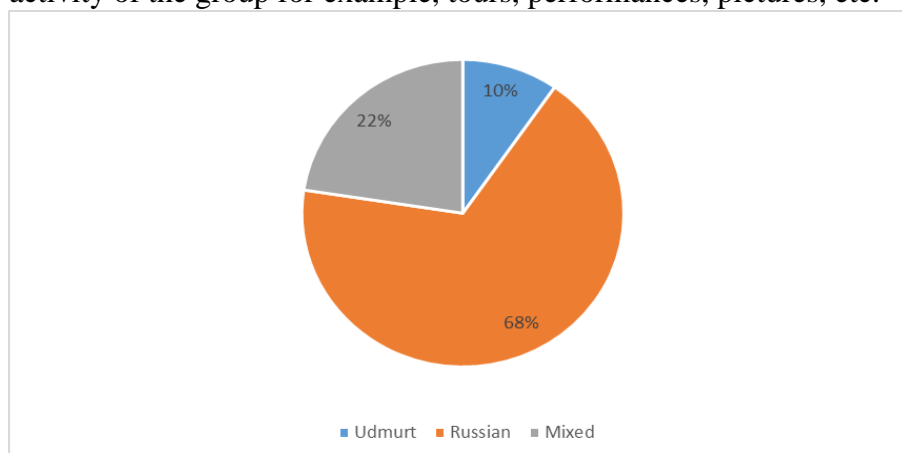
This community was created in February 2009, as an official Vkontakte page for the Udmurt Кенеш, which is an independent group of Udmurt activists, who are trying to help the Udmurt effort. This is the reason why the administrators are usually just sharing news of their activities, and important information for the Udmurt ethnic community. This page functions as a collection of Udmurt related news and posts on social media, so the topics of all posts are very similar.



4. Language of posts on the page Удмурт Кенеш (37 posts)

Эктоника [UDM]

The Vkontakte page of a popular Udmurt music group. Surprisingly, most of the posts are in Russian, but there is also a notable amount of mixed language use. All of the posts are closely connected to the activity of the group for example, tours, performances, pictures, etc.

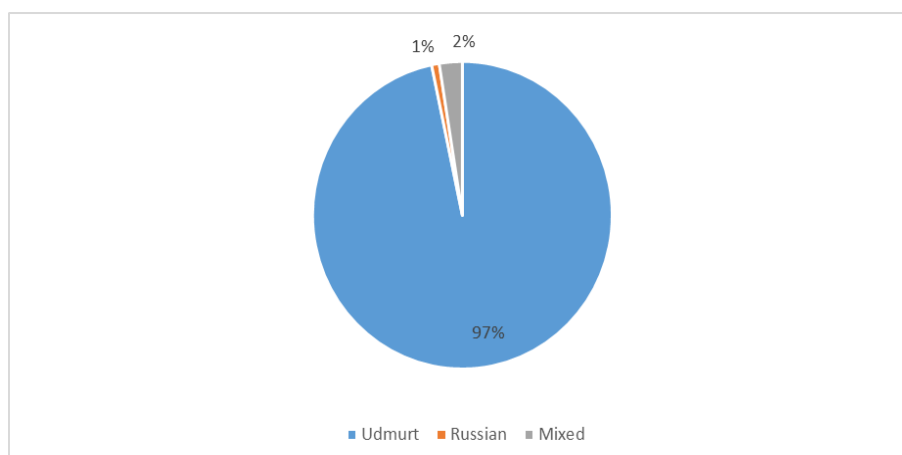


5. Language of posts on the page Эктоника [UDM] (31 posts)

УДМУРТ ДУННЕ газет /Газета УДМУРТСКИЙ МИР

The most established and the longest running Udmurt newspaper's Vkontakte page. In the researched period the УДМУРТ ДУННЕ газет was the most active with an average 4 posts per day.

The content of the posts is mostly original, and only rarely in Russian. The admins are trying to eliminate any kind of Russian influence. There is no topic (or so it seems) which cannot be explained via the Udmurt language.



6. Language of posts on the page УДМУРТ ДУННЕ газет /Газета УДМУРТСКИЙ МИР (121 posts)

Conclusion

The results of the study show that there seems to be no correlation between the content of a post and the language of it. Every topic can be expressed with both languages without problems of understanding. There are also no tendencies that would suggest a certain topic would be more present in either Russian or Udmurt in these communities. Even the language of the information's source is irrelevant in the choice of a post's language. The most important factor in the choice of language seems to be the individual's conscious choice of language. This phenomenon is also supported by the fact, that there is just a small amount of mixed language use or balanced bilingualism. The two extremes are the most frequent: either only Russian or only Udmurt. The reason is most likely to be the format and the nature of the texts, because on

the Internet, the use of language can vary from similar-to-spoken to similar-to-printed, and in this case, the users tend to create well-formed texts [6].

The number of the posts and the activeness of the community suggest that Udmurt is not an endangered language, at least not from the digital point of view [7]. However, it remains a question, how many users follow actively these communities, because the number of followers is not equal to the number of users reached by each post. It is also unclear whether this activeness is only present online, or in everyday life too.

While the aim of this paper was to give some insight into the Udmurt language use on Vkontakte, there is a lot more questions in the field of the Udmurt language in virtual space. There is a great amount of online content, online communities, blogs, and there are other Web 2.0 scenes as well. There are a lot of Youtube videos in the Udmurt language, for example, there are more than a thousand news broadcasts, hundreds of talk show episodes, and a lot of programmes from the television channel Мынам Удмуртия, all in the Udmurt language. With this amount of material, it would be interesting to research the Udmurt virtual linguistic landscape as a whole [9]. And it would also be interesting to compare the results with the traditional linguistic landscape of Udmurt cities in real life, because it might give some ideas about how a language can thrive digitally while being endangered offline[10].

References:

1. *Pischlöger, Ch.* Udmurness in Web 2.0: Urban Udmurts Resisting Language Shift. In *Finnisch-Ugrische Mitteilungen*. 2010. N 38. P. 143–162.
2. *Shklyayev, A.* Udmurt Language not Obligatory in Udmurtia. 2014. <<http://mariuveren.wordpress.com/2014/01/24/udmurt-language-not-obligatory-in-udmurtia/>>.
3. *Grosjean, F.* Life with Two Languages. Cambridge.: Harvard University Press, 1982. P. 135–145.
4. *Zamyatin, K.* An Official Status for Minority Languages? PhD Thesis. Helsinki, 2014. 145 p.
5. *Salánki, Zs.* Az udmurt nyelv mai helyzete. PhD Thesis. Budapest, 2007. 282 p.
6. *Crystal, D.* Internet Linguistics: a Students' Guide. Routledge, 2011. P. 19–57.
7. *Kornai, A.* Digital Language Death. 2013. PLoS ONE 8(10): e77056. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0077056.
8. *Drisko, J. W., Maschi, T.* Content Analysis. Oxford University Press, 2016.
9. *Ivkovic, D., Lotherington, H.* Multilingualism in Cyberspace: Conceptualising the Virtual Linguistic Landscape. In *International Journal of Multilingualism*. 2009. N 6(1). P. 17–36.
10. *Landry, R., Richard Bourhis.* Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality. In *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. 1997. N 16. P. 23–49.