

# Chuvash and Linguistic Documentation

Emine Yılmaz

## Introduction

At the meeting of the International Linguistics Congress held in Quebec in 1992, linguists stated that the disappearance of any language means the permanent disappearance of any knowledge produced in that language, and that will lead to a culturally impoverished world. Therefore, they called UNESCO for immediate duty. Immediately after that in 1993, the UNESCO Endangered Languages Project was accepted. Two main approaches regarding endangered languages, have been on the agenda since then. The first is the view that languages with few speakers are an obstacle to globalization and their disappearance will facilitate international relations. The other approach is qualified as the humanist point of view. It says that language diversity must be preserved, just like the diversity of animals and flowers. This second approach has reached and influenced large groups, especially with books such as *Vanishing Voices* by Daniel Nettle-Suzanne Romain and *Language Death* by David Crystal.

The death of a language is as natural as its emergence, and there is nothing new in it. Languages have always disappeared when the people who speak them have died. The death of languages is viewed not as extinction but as social evolution. This is why most attempts to save endangered languages are useless. "Languages fade away when they are not needed, i.e. when they do not have sufficient social functions in order for parents to endeavor to transmit them to their children. The endangerment starts when the young generations begin to switch over to the dominant language because they find it more attractive and prestigious (Johanson 2001: 34). Therefore, the thing to do is to document these languages without wasting time using all available resources for scientific purposes.

In this paper, we will introduce a general purpose and comprehensive documentation activity which we carried out between 2014 and 2015 on Chuvash, whose speakers are constantly decreasing in number and which is constantly declining against Russian.

## Chuvash People and Chuvash Language

Chuvash people live mainly in the Russian Federation, in the Chuvash Autonomous Republic which is located in the region called the Volga knee. Apart from that, important Chuvash populations exist in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Siberia. According to the 2010 census, the Chuvash population in the Russian Federation numbered 1.386.090 and the total number of Chuvash speakers was 1.042.989.<sup>1</sup> Compared with the population figure given in the 2002 census 1.637.000, the Chuvash population had decreased.

## Linguistic Documentation of Chuvash: First Records

P. J. Strahlenberg, a military prisoner in Western Siberia, made a compilation over about ten years after 1711 of the languages spoken in this region, which was published in a book in Western Siberia: *Das nord und ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia*, in Stockholm in 1730. At the end of the book is a list of thirty-two languages, one of which is Chuvash. In this way, the Chuvash language was documented for the first time. Twenty-eight of the sixty German lexical items in the dictionary have Chuvash equivalents.

Written Chuvash texts between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are regarded as sources of the new Chuvash era. Until 1730, only sporadic data are available. These are mainly Chuvash or Bulgarian words in texts written in different languages and proper names etc. in travel notes and maps. More complete Chuvash texts emerged in the period between 1730 and 1872. Especially in the Russian and Hungarian literature, it is possible to find many publications in which these sources are evaluated collectively. Of these, the Hungarian Turcologist Clara/Klára Agyagási's article "On the Edition of Chuvash Literary Sources" (1982) and the evaluation on the first thirty pages of her book *Chuvash Historical Phonetics* (2019) are particularly important.

## Systematic Documentation of Chuvash

Systematic documentation of Chuvash was carried out by Russian missionaries and Hungarian researchers in the region from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. These were mostly for folklore purposes and were generally related to the religious beliefs of the Chuvash people. The main ones are by Vishnevskiy (1846) and Magnitsky (1881); in second place are lexical materials, and these are too many to mention here.

The first extensive and scientific documentation of the Chuvash language was by Ashmarin. The publication of this dictionary, which was first published in 1928 and which consists of seventeen volumes containing approximately 50,000 words, was completed in 1950. This dictionary, which is an extraordinary source in the field of Chuvash language, dialects and folklore, is translated into Turkish by Bülent Bayram.

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1 [http://www.perepis2010.ru/results\\_of\\_the\\_census/results-inform.php](http://www.perepis2010.ru/results_of_the_census/results-inform.php)

In recent years in Turkey, young researchers like Bülent Bayram, Oğuzhan Durmuş, Sinan Güzel and İbrahim Arıkan are contributing to the evaluation of these texts and publications. A vocabulary of 18<sup>th</sup> century Chuvash was published by Oğuzhan Durmuş with a detailed evaluation of all the material of that period (2014). Bülent Bayram has extensive reviews, especially on the Chuvash materials of the Hungarian researcher Gyula Mészáros (Bayram 2011, 2015, 2016). In the introduction of İbrahim Arıkan's paper *Edward Tracy Turnerelli'nin Kazan Yılları ve Çuvaşlarla İlgili Kayıtları* there is extensive information about the materials on Chuvash (Arıkan 2018). Likewise, detailed information is given about Chuvash documents in general in the introduction of Sinan Güzel's book, *Heikki Paasonen ve Çuvaşça Masal Derlemeleri*, and H. Paasonen's field studies on Chuvash are evaluated between pages 45 and 48 of the book (Güzel 2019a). Sinan Güzel's paper titled *Simbirsk Çuvaş Okulu Bünyesinde Gerçekleştirilen Derleme Çalışmaları Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme*, published the same year, is also one of the most comprehensive studies on Chuvash documentation studies (Güzel 2019b).

### Electronic Documentation: The Turku Chuvash Corpus (Version 1.0)

*Turku University is a database prepared by the Research Unit for Volgaic Languages.* (<http://www.hum.utu.fi/oppiaineet/volga/>). This database of 1.24 million words was obtained from texts representing the Chuvash literary language. These texts were collected by Eduard Fomin and Jorma Luutonen between 2003 and 2009.

### General Purpose Linguistic Documentation of Chuvash Spoken in Chuvashia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Southern Siberia:

Coincidentally, in 2015, the hundredth anniversary of the death of the famous Chuvash poet Konstantin V. İvanov, an international project for the Chuvash documentation was conducted by Turkish and Chuvash academics. The project named *General Purpose Documentation of Chuvash Spoken in Chuvashia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Southern Siberia* was supported by Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities and was implemented between 14 November 2014 and 14 November 2015.

The project was managed by Emine Yılmaz of Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey and Nikolay Yegorov of the Humanitarian Institute, Cheboksary, Russia advised the project. Fifteen linguistics field researchers from Turkey and Chuvashia took part in the project and a great amount of language material was gained from Chuvashia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Abakan/Khakassia, Moscow and St. Petersburg regions through eleven field studies.

The project team consisted of Nurettin Demir, Elçin Yılmazkaya, Gülhan Öz Açık (Hacettepe University), Feyzi Ersoy (Gazi University), Bülent Bayram, Venera Falakhova, (Kırklareli University), Oğuzhan Durmuş, Cemalettin Yavuz, İnga Andreyeva (Trakya University), Sinan Güzel (Katip Çelebi University), Oksana

Sorokina (Chuvash State University), Albina Kiran (Atatürk University) and Svetlana Polikarpova (Chuvash State Pedagogical University).

### Linguistic Field Research<sup>2</sup>

#### *Field Research in Moscow*

The first expedition under of the project was carried out in the Moscow region by Cemalettin Yavuz and İnga Andreyeva of Trakya University between 28 November and 4 December 2014. Here, they interviewed students who were attending the free Chuvash language course, which had been given for two years, and received information about the course and the situation of Chuvash in the Moscow region, as well as making recordings of the Chuvash language. During the expedition, a compilation was made from a total of eight Chuvash people. One of these was Savelyev, a twenty-five-year-old Tatarstan Chuvash. Savelyev is preparing a thesis on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Chuvash, and is also fluent in Russian and English. His mother and father are Chuvash and he can speak Chuvash very well. He spoke about himself, the Chuvash people, and the Chuvash language and culture, and these conversations were recorded with audio and video. Others are journalist Evgeny Stepanov, who is also proficient in Chuvash, English teacher Oksana Antonova, music teacher Marina Grigoryeva, Lira Petrovna Smirnova and her daughter Veronika Smirnova, İvan İvanov and Sergey İvanov. All of them are very concerned to keep Chuvash alive, and they can speak Chuvash fluently.



*In the back row, from left to right, Cemalettin Yavuz, Feyzi Ersoy, Sinan Güzel and Bülent Bayram with Tatarstan Chuvash in ethnic clothes, January 2015.*

<sup>2</sup> The expedition reports were used in the preparation of this section.

### *Field Research in Tatarstan*

The field research was conducted by Bülent Bayram, Feyzi Ersoy, Sinan Güzel and Cemalettin Yavuz between January 27, 2015 and February 4, 2015 in Tatarstan, where Chuvash has the most speakers after Chuvashia. First of all, sound recordings were made of Roza Chintayeva in Śinĕ Axsu, one of the villages that did not accept Christianity and continue their traditional religious beliefs (Russian *язычник*). In addition, records were made from the villages of Pürgel and Gorodishe of the Buva region in southwestern Tatarstan. In these villages, it was observed that Chuvash suffered a loss of prestige in rural areas.

After the program in these two villages, meetings were held with Tatarstan Chuvash in Dom Druzha Narodov in Kazan. Video and sound recordings were made by different people and many photographs were also taken. Tatarstan field research reports have shown that groups of four attracted attention in the region, and so the small size of the teams made movement easier. A Russian citizen Chuvash had to be present in each team. For this reason, the wife of Bülent Bayram from the project team, Russian citizen Venera Falakhova (ethnically Tatar) was also included in the team.



*In the back row, from left to right, Cemalettin Yavuz, Feyzi Ersoy, Sinan Güzel and Bülent Bayram with Tatarstan Chuvash in ethnic clothes, January 2015.*

*Field Research in on the Chuvashia – Viryal Dialect*

The third field research was carried out by Nikolay Yegorov, Oksana Sorokina and Svetlana Polikarpova, who worked as lecturers at universities in Cheboksary, Chuvashia, the whole region where the Viryal dialect is spoken, for thirty days between 1 and 30 March 2015.

*Field Research on the Chuvashia – Anatri Dialect*

The fourth field study was carried out by Feyzi Ersoy, Oğuzhan Durmuş, Sinan Güzel and Cemalettin Yavuz on the Anatri dialect in Chuvashia between 25- and 31 May 2015. First, a sound recording was made by Vitaliy Rodionov, who is working in the Folklore Department of the Chuvash State Institute of Social Sciences. Later, a sound recording was made in Batryel, where Anatri dialect is spoken. In Batryel, which is a multilingual region, 80% of the population are Chuvash, 15% Misher Tatars, and 5% Russian, Mari, Mordva etc. Although the common language of communication is Russian, it was determined that Chuvash and Tatars spoke their mother tongue very well. In addition, Chuvash is spoken by peoples such as Tatars, Mari and Mordva.

It was seen that Chuvash was also used for worship in religious ceremonies in the Batryel region. It was recorded by the field research team that Chuvash women performed their prayers in the Chuvash language with prayers and church melodies under the direction of a Chuvash priest on Friday. Over forty-five minutes of recordings were made by Nikolay Ivanovich Gluhov, the manager of the Batryel region, and information about the region and various customs and traditions were recorded. This review is extremely important in terms of exemplifying formal language usage. Also, the past tense with /SA/ (adverb suffix) attached, which is specific to the dialect of Viryal in the literature, was determined by the field research team in Gluhovs's idiolect.

As usual, some representatives of the local press were also present at this field research activity. In addition, compilations were made by Yevdokiya Andreyeva, Alina Sosyayeva, faculty members of Chuvash State Pedagogical University, and television presenter Marina Karyagina from Ahpürt village, Batirevo.



*In the back row, from left to right Oğuzhan Durmuş, Feyzi Ersoy and Sinan Güzel with informants, Baturyel, Chuvashia, May 2015.*

#### *Field Research on Tatarstan – Viryal, Anatri Dialects*

The fifth, sixth and seventh field research on the Tatarstan/Anatri, Viryal dialects, were conducted, between 5 July and 5 September 2015 by Venera Falakhova for sixty days by Bülent Bayram for thirty days between 16 July and 14 August 2015, and for seven days between 21 and 27 July 2015 by Nurettin Demir and Bülent Bayram.

Although there is a dense Chuvash population in the Tatarstan Republic, Chuvash is in decline against Russian. Sound and video recordings were made among the Anatri Chuvash in this region, especially of those who maintained their pagan beliefs. In Tatarstan, in the region called İzgë Ćišme (“Holy Fountain”), which is close to the villages of Śinë Axsu and Yerep in the Axsu region, it was seen in the records made by the pagan Chuvash that the language of communication between Tatars and Chuvash people above a certain age group, especially in the regions where they live together, is Tatar and Chuvash; but among the young population, the language of communication has now almost completely changed to Russian.

In Śinë Axsu village, where the research team spent a significant part of the compilation work, the traditional Chuvash life was actively practiced, and audio and video recordings were made. Significant recordings were made on food culture, gardening, plants, mushroom species, animal names, souvenirs, beekeeping, hunting, and the vocabulary of traditional Chuvash religious beliefs. Since Śinë Axsu is a village densely populated by pagan Chuvash, rich and valuable materials were compiled in the field of folk culture. Among these, it is possible to say that the funeral



ceremony, whose footage is recorded, has the characteristics of a documentary in itself.

In the abovementioned village of Ízgě Čišme, collections were also made from Chuvash people from Yerep village. A 40-minute Chuvash recording made by a Tatar informant living in this region with the Chuvash is considered to be important data in terms of language relations. During the review, as stated above, it was determined that many Tatars and Chuvash above a certain age could speak each other's language easily.



*Šině Axsu Village, Tatarstan, Ízgě Čišme “Holy Fountain”,  
Roza Chintayeva, July 2015.*

Audio and video recording was made from a Chuvash informant working in the old Bulgar city within the borders of Tatarstan. The Bulgar city is also a place which Chuvash and Tatars regard as sacred and is at the center of their mutual cultural



relations. There are also sound recordings made from Tatars here. After the Bulgar city, the city of Biler, which has a special place in Chuvash literature and historical research, was visited, and many narratives and beliefs about this old city were collected from Roza Chintayeva.



*Tatarstan, old Bulgar city, July 2015.*

During all visits to Tatarstan, many practices of the traditional Chuvash religious belief were also recorded on video because Roza Chintayeva, who continues the traditional pagan belief, was on the field research team. Again, in line with the information provided by Roza Chintayeva, a visit was made to the Risaykina village in the Samara region. According to the story, this village, was founded by a pagan Chuvash called Īrsay, when he escaped from missionaries about three hundred years ago, and is still a village where pagan Chuvash live. The images of the cemetery where the pagan Chuvash were buried are also a documentary film in itself. It was found that the Chuvash language is gradually losing its spoken language function in this region, where the review team could only speak Russian with many Chuvash. Especially among the young population, the use of Russian and Christianization is common.



*Risaykina Village, Samara, Tatarstan, village cemetery, July 2015, Chuvash people.*

*Field Research on Khakasia/Abakan – Chuvash Dialect*

This field research was conducted by Bülent Bayram among Chuvash people living in Abakan, the capital city of Khakasia, for seven days between 29 July and 5 August 2015.

Domayakova village, which is mainly populated by Chuvash people, was selected for the field study due to the large size of the Abakan region. Domayakova, which is about sixty kilometers from Abakan city, is home to other peoples such as Khakas, Tajik, Korean and Russian as well as the main Chuvash population. In the village where the Chuvash people migrated from Chuvashia in 1952–1953, young people and children never used Chuvash, but the elderly population used their mother tongue among themselves. During the two-day field research, audio and video recordings were made. According to the information given by the informant, this is the village where the most concentrated Chuvash population lives in Khakasia and its nearby regions.



*Domayakova, Abakan, Khakasia Chuvash people with Bülent Bayram, August 2015.*

*Field Research on Bashkir–Chuvash Dialect*

The Bashkir–Chuvash dialect field research trip was carried out between 10 and 16 August 2015 by Oğuzhan Durmuş and Sinan Güzel. The Bashkortostan Chuvash dialect compilation trip was carried out between 10 and 16 August 2015 by Oğuzhan Durmuş and Sinan Güzel. The compilations were made from bilingual Chuvash, who speak Tatar and Chuvash, in the capital Ufa and Belebey regions.

In the field research in Ufa, the informants were obtained from ‘Chuvash Sunday Schools’ or *Воскресная школа*. It has been observed that these schools, which are active on Sundays in order to enable children from various nations living in Ufa to learn their mother tongue, are also very important places of identity for Chuvash people. A compilation study was carried out on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in two of these schools, which allow the Chuvash people who live scattered in the capital Ufa to meet.

After being greeted by the head editor of the “Ural Sassi” newspaper published by the Bashkir–Chuvash in the Belebey region, Mikhailov Yuriy Nikovlevich made recordings from the informants there, and in the evening went to Slakpuš, the village where Konstantin V. İvanov was born. Here, in the house of the poet, which has been turned into a museum, a video was shot, accompanied by the explanations of the attendant. Tatars and Chuvash people in the region, who know each other’s languages.

The research team stated that the most important detail that draws attention in the collected materials in the city of Ufa and Belebey region is the Kipchak influence on the Chuvash language there. Many elements from the common vocabulary in the languages of the Bashkirs and Tatars (*xezër* ‘now’, *uy* ‘thought’, *eybet* ‘good, beautiful’, etc.) have also been copied into Chuvash language.



*Konstantin V. İvanov’s house turned into a museum Slakpuš Village, Bashkortostan, August 2015.*

*Field Research on the Anatri–Chuvash Dialect:*

Linguistic field research on the Anatri–Chuvash dialect was carried out by Emine Yılmaz, Nurettin Demir, Oksana Sorokina and İnga Andreyeva between 26 and 31



*First from left is Oksana Sorokina, third Emine Yılmaz, Śičĕ Pürt Village, Cheboksary, Chuvashia, August 2015.*

August 2015. The team went to Śičĕ Pürt village, 40 kilometers east of Cheboksary, and first toured the house of Puppeteer Terenti Dede’s puppets, which symbolize the Chuvash past. In this village, recordings were also made of Svetlana Yakovleva, daughter of Terenti Dede who teaches Russian in Cheboksary, the librarian of the village of Angelina Kuzanina, and Anna Nikolayeva, who works in the cultural center. All three informants are bilingual in Russian and Chuvash.

In addition, an authentic museum/hotel named Ludmilla’s Rest House in Narat Čakki district was visited and video footage was made. Some parts of the complex were devoted to displaying traditional items depicting old Chuvash life. Interviews were also held with the television personality Marina Karyagina and the director of the Cheboksary Humanitarian Institute Yuri İsayev.

On the last day, recordings were made of İnga Andreyeva’s uncle (Nikolay Andreyev) and his uncle’s wife (Galina Andreyeva) in the village of Kadıkası.



*Old irons and šăpata ‘wicker shoes’ in the museum section of the village library Śičĕ Pürt Village, Cheboksary, Chuvashia, August 2015.*





*Kadıkası Village, Cheboksary, Chuvashia, a Chuvash meal in the house of İnga Andreyeva's uncle for the research team: pıl 'honey', kämpa 'mushrooms', šêrulmi 'potato', August 2015.*

*Field Research on the St. Petersburg–Chuvash Dialect:*

This field research was conducted by Elçin Yılmazkaya, Gülhan Öz Açık and Albina Kıran among the Chuvash people living in St. Petersburg between 19 and 24 September 2015.

Here, first of all, contact was established with Prof. Anton Salmin, an academic at the Department of Anthropology at St. Petersburg University.

Prof. Salmin spoke in the Chuvash language about the history of the establishment of the city of St. Petersburg and the role of the Chuvash in the establishment of this city, the establishment of the Kunstkamera Museum, where he works, and said that anthropology and history are very important areas for understanding and telling the relations and history of the Chuvash people and Turks. Prof. Salmin's speech was important in terms of showing how Chuvash can be used as a language of science. It has been observed that the density of Russian words is higher in Chuvash as a language of science. The sound recordings show that Prof. Salmin is fluent in Chuvash.

Another important place that the team compiled is the Chuvash association. Chuvash people living in St. Petersburg regularly meet at the Chuvash association which they have established and aim to transfer the language and culture to new generations. In the same city, Chuvash people meet in the study room of a public library, and under the leadership of those with a strong command of the language, work to strengthen bonds with those who know the language little or not at all. Prof.

Anton Salmin is also the president of the association. Recordings were also made of the members of the association.

### General Evaluation of the Project

The main purpose of this project is to document the Chuvash language, the oldest Turkic language, with all its dialects before it disappears completely, and to provide data for future linguistic studies. With fifteen field researches, many sound recordings were made and, videos and photographs were taken in the areas where large numbers of Chuvash people live.

The data obtained through field research will be used to determine the linguistic development of both standard Chuvash and dialects by comparing them with texts previously compiled for different purposes. In addition, the collected material will be used to investigate issues such as language relations, language politics, bilingualism and multilingualism, it will be processed with different projects and the results will be presented in our future studies.

Not only linguistic data was obtained with the project, but also communication was established with the Chuvash people and other Turkic-speaking peoples in Chuvashia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Khakasia, and education agreements were made between universities. One of the important outcomes of working on the Chuvash in Chuvashia and Turkey has been to bring together all academics. The team's young researchers in particular gained experience in the field of language documentation and practiced their Chuvash, Tatar and Russian language.

Our project, which aims to compile a very important Turkic language, which is in danger of extinction, in all regions where it is spoken, has also shown how urgently these compilation activities should take place. A week after the end of our project, a Russian aircraft was shot down in Turkey, and a political crisis emerged between the Russian Federation and Turkey, so that it is no longer possible to do this type of work in the Russian Federation. It is clear that it is extremely important that *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities* should also support similar projects in regions outside of the Russian Federation.

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