

The Problems of Revival and Preservation of Languages of Some Small Turkic Peoples of South Siberia (On an Example of Tofalar and Soyot Languages)

Valentin Ivanovich Rassadin

Kalmyk State University, Elista City, Kalmyk Republic, Russia

Abstract: State support is essential for revival and preservation of languages of small peoples of South Siberia that have no written form and that are critically endangered. The problems are considered on an example of Tofalar and Soyot languages. Support of Tofalar from Russian government and Soyot from the government of Respublika Buryatiya allow creating written languages of these peoples, primers and other school manuals. The article provides brief data about ethnic composition of these peoples, their settlement and characteristics of their economy. The article also provides brief history of scientific description of the system of these languages.

Key words: Language preservation • Language revival • State support • Small peoples • Turkic languages
• Written language • Schooling • Scientific research

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that there are more than 6000 languages that relate to different groups and families. Most of them are disappearing languages of small peoples living in different places of the Earth. Modern linguistics so far did not lose interest to the problems of existence, functioning and development of these disappearing languages. It is proved by numerous works of linguists analyzing these problems published lately. Articles by N. Dorian [1], R. Moore [2], D. Ormana [3], etc.

Major parts of these languages are the languages of different Turkic people some of them being critically endangered. Importance of this problem is highlighted partly by the IV International Symposium on the languages and the culture of endangered Turkic languages held in May, 2012 in Ankara (Turkey). E. Ragagnin [4] known for her research of the languages of uigur-tsaatan in Mongolia and T. Eriksson [5] who works with the languages of uigur-uryankhai in Mongolia participated in this Symposium. Languages of uigur-tsaatan and uigur-uryankhai of Mongolia are the closest languages to Tofalar and Soyot languages and together with them form the Sayan subgroup of Turkic languages of taiga area.

Major Part: We try to give brief review of the works on revival and preservation of Tofalar and Soyot languages. They are close languages of genetically allied Turkic peoples that inhabited the region of Eastern Sayan from the earliest times and until recently living as all nomadic hunters and reindeer breeders. From the middle of XVII century Tofalar were influenced by Russian although kept on contacting with neighboring Buryat. Soyot had been keeping contacts with Mongol and Buryat and almost fully became Buryatified to the end of the XX century. Languages of Tofalar and Soyot were in different state. While to the moment of transition of nomadic reindeer breeders Tofalar and Soyot to settled living in 1930s they knew their native languages on 100 percent, during the period of settled living the situation started to change. Tofalar in their settlements lived among Russians and studied in school in Russian due to the absence of written Tofalar language. This situation caused supplanting of Tofalar language by Russian even in family communication. Soyot were in analogous situation but their native language had been supplanted by Buryat languages and they started to become rapidly Buryatified. Tofalar had been becoming Russified not as intensively as Soyot had been becoming Buryatified and Tofalar language had been kept in domestic use longer than

Soyot. It allowed stopping oblivion of Tofalar language in 1980s and reviving it by scientific research and creating its written form. These works were backed by government order from the State Committee of the North and the Ministry of Education of The Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic. State support caused rapid positive changes. This work was preceded by comprehensive scientific research of modern Tofalar language that started in 1963 and had been lasted for many years.

Tofalar language may be considered out of danger now. Tofalar now are the smallest Turkic people of Russia. Tofalar language together with Tuvian language in classification of N.A. Baskakov is included in uigur-tukyu subgroup of uigur-oguz group of Turkic languages [6:323, 7:182].

The original name of Tofalar is *tofa*, before the revolution they were called *karagas*. They had been living in tribal system separated into five exogamic families: *khaash*, *sary-khaash*, *chogdy*, *kara-chogdy*, *cheptay*. As aboriginals of the region until the late 1920s Tofalars had been living as nomadic hunters and reindeer breeders. They lived mainly in conic tents. After transition to settled living in stationary settlements Tofalars mastered in the new types of economic activity but kept some traditional activities: reindeer breeding that transferred to outrun with changing shepherds, fur-bearing animal hunting, spring Manchurian deer hunting on saline soil, autumn Manchurian deer hunting in rut period, bear hunting. Gathering is presented by autumn laying-in of pine nuts. All these types of economic activities both new and traditional were the base of Tofalar collective farms until 1962 and cooperatives after 1963.

Nowadays Tofalar are being introduced into the post-sovietic society with developing market relations. New Tofalar society with increasing interest to traditional more rational methods of nature management, to traditional individual economic activity, to native spiritual culture and native language is being formed now.

As Soyot language and Soyots until recently had been almost unknown in scientific society it is worth providing more detailed information about them.

According to the "Red Book of the Peoples of Russia" [7:164] modern Soyot language is Turkic language that is included into uigur-tukyu subgroup of uigur-oguz group of Turkic languages as Tofalar language. Soyots now is one of the small people of Russia settled compactly on the territory of Okin and Tunkin regions of Buryat Republic of Russian Federation. Until 1993 they were not officially distinguished from

Buryat population of the region although even in 1920s according to B.A. Petri [8], there were more than 500 Soyots and they recognized themselves as autonomous nation different from Buryats. During ethnographic expedition to Soyots in 1926 Petri discovered that they were engaged in different types of economic activity and with different types of living. Soyots that settled in Tunkin region adapted economical and cultural type of living and rapidly merged with them. Soyots engaged in reindeer breeding moved to Okin region in Ilchir and preserve their typical hunting and reindeer breeding living the same with neighboring Sayan hunters and reindeer breeders – Tofalars of Russia, Uigur-Tsaatans of Mongolia and Tubin-Todjints. Soyots had been traditionally closely connected with them and always bought deers.

In 1930s reindeer breeding started to decay due to significant loss of deers. Besides in 1930s people in USSR were engaged in collective farms forming and transition of small nomadic peoples of Siberia on settled living. Soyots were forced to go in for stockbreeding of local Buryat type adapted also their type of living. Deer herds in collective farms were kept for transportation and for hunters provisioning during winter hunting in mountain taiga. But in 1963 reindeer breeding in Okin region was eliminated by the order of the government of Buryat Autonomous State Soyus Republic. With the loss of reindeer breeding traditional Soyot type of living had also passed. When older generation Turkic Soyot language and national culture had also passed. Even the name of the people was almost forgotten.

The history of Soyots is little-studied. There are rare notes about the origin of this people. L.R. Pavlinski [9:41-51] who carried out detailed research of today Soyots assumed that in their ethno genesis were Sayan Samodi tribal people that made the base lately covered by ancient Turkic ethnos that Turkicized their Samodi substrate in the language. In other words Soyots are Sayan Samodi that was Turkicized in Ancient Turk time somewhere in VII-VIII centuries maybe even earlier.

According to old-timers of Okin region Soyots represented by *irkit*, *khaasuut* and *okhot* tribes relatively recently about 350-400 years ago moved from the region of the lake Khusbugul in Mongolia. After leaving Mongolia they initially settled in Tunkin and Zakamnensk regions and turned to stockbreeding assimilating with local Buryats.

In Dartakh area in Mongolia to the west from the lake Khusbugul still live Turkic reindeer breeders called by the Mongols *tsaatan* (that means reindeer breeder) as well as

uigar i.e. *uigur* and sometimes *uigur tsaatan*, *tsaatan uigar* (that means uigurs reindeer breeders). Tsaatas uigurs call themselves *tukha* that is similar to the original name of Tofalars – *tofa*, that may be compared with the name of Tyva – *tyva-dyva*. It's worth mentioning that Okin Buryats use the words "uiguro speaking" to name Tyva and Tofalar besides the ethnic name "uryankhaisy". It indicates that in the memory of Buryat these Turkic ethnoses are connected with ancient uigurs. In tsaatans as well as reindeer breeding groups of darkhats that originated from Sayan Turkic reindeer breeders there are tribes *irkit*, *khaasuut*, *onkhot*. Probably modern Okin Soyots originated from these Sayan Turkic reindeer breeders.

In 1990s national and cultural revival of small peoples started in Russia and Soyot were among them. Researches carried out that time by different scientists show that many Soyots do not only remember about their being a separate people of Soyots but also about their being one of three Soyot tribes – *khaazuut*, *onkhot*, *itkit*. They preserve the features of their domestic and spiritual culture and not only legends, tales, songs but also shamanic appeals although for all of them Buryat language was used.

The movement for restoration of Soyot's rights as independent small northern people stated in Buryatia in 1992 has been going on different levels all 1990s ended up by inclusion of Buryatian Soyots in the Integrated List of native small people of Russian Federation by Decree of the Government of Russia No 255 dated March, 24, 2000. In this document the population of Soyots in 1999 was 1973. In 2001 the population of Soyots was 2002.

In 1993 the Soyot National Rural Council was founded. Now it is the administration with the centre in the village Sorok. In the same year Association of Soyots of Okin region of Buryatia was founded and officially registered in the Ministry of Justice of Buryatia. By the way of fulfillment of Decree on revival of reindeer breeding in 1994 in Okin region from the neighboring Tofalaria there were driven 60 deers and Tofalar shepherds started to assist Okin Soyots to recall the skills of reindeer breeding.

There are also undertaken measures to revive spiritual culture and language. National Soyot festival *Zhogtaar* ("Meeting") is being held in Sorok village. In 2004 it was renamed and is now called *Ulug-Dag* ("the Great Mountain" in the honor of the mountain Burin-khan – the patron of the people).

Modern Soyot language that until recently was known only for several elderly people and that the

scientists could hear in 1970s and even in 1990s during our expeditions to Okin region has typical Turkic system. It is the most close to languages of Tofalar of Russia and to the language of tsaatan-uigurs and uigur-uryankhai of Mongolia. Tofalar language have been studied since 1964 and the two latter – from 1989 when the first recordings in the places of living of these people were taken. From the very beginning of taking recordings of tsaatan and uigur-uryankhai languages their similarity started to manifest itself as well as their similarity to Tofalar and Soyot languages and significant difference from Tyva language although all of them belong to the same Sayan subgroup of Siberian Turkic languages. According to classification of Turkic languages of N.A. Baksakov [6:323] Tyva and Tofalar languages are included in uiguro-tukyusk subgroup of uigur-oguz group of Turkic languages. We add to this subgroup the languages of uigur-tsaatans and uigur-uryankhai as well as Soyot language.

Comparative research of Turkic languages of Sayan region including Soyot show that all of them: Tyva of Russia and Mongolia, Tofalar and Soyot of Russia, tsaatan and uigur-uryankhai of Mongolia, kyok-monchak of Mongolia and China are merged into the one subgroup of Siberian Turkic languages that is called uigur-tukyu according to N.A. Baksakov. To our mind this subgroup may be divided into two distinct areas: steppe with Tyva language and the language of kyok-monchak and taiga with Tofalar, Soyot, tsaatan and uigur-uryankhai languages. Tadj dialect of Tyva language may be related to taiga area by a number of characteristics. Native speakers of taiga area are mainly the reindeer breeders and hunters (except for uigur-uryankhai of Mongolia that had the same economic type as Mongol and are engaged in stockbreeding). In addition to the same language they have the similar type of nomadic reindeer breeding and hunting economy and original material culture that allowed them adapting to nomadic living in mountain taiga.

Not only our observations of Soyot language and the language of tsaatan and uigur-uryankhai prove the similarity of Soyot language to Tofalar but a number of scientific works of researches that have observed Soyots. According to B.S. Dugarov who learned the ethnogenesis of Buryat and Soyot of Okinsk region M.A. Kastren who visited Soyots Tunki in XIX century wrote that they spoke "in the same Turkic dialect as karagas [10:99]. Active using of their Turkic language was mentioned in XVIII century according to G.D. Sanzheev who researched darkhats and the population of Darkhat area at the end of

the 20s of XX century. This fact was mentioned in the book "Description on the Earth" by German geographist of XVIII century A.F. Bushing. He wrote that the language of tunkin Soyots is the same that of karagas of Nizgneudinsk district [11:13-14]. B.A. Petri who organized in 1926 the special ethnographic expedition to learn the economy, living and culture of Soyots by the order of The Committee of North wrote that elderly people of Soyot remembered the language and that it is extremely close to uryankhai-soyot [8:19]. Tyva people were called Soyot, Soyon and Uryaukhai in Russian literature until the 20s of the XX century. They were not separated from tsaatan and Tofalar.

The problem of the right of people on national culture and language now became actual again. The problem of revival and preservation of the cultures and languages of small people of Russia and especially the small people of Siberia and North regions is very urgent. While in the first years of Soviets national cultures and languages were alive and had been actively used and the only problem was to create written form now the situation has dramatically changed and not only the languages but the people themselves urges for reviving. In Buryatia it is not the problem of Evenk but also Soyots recently acknowledged as small people aimed on revival of native language, national culture and economy. Sceptics argue that it is too late and all the Soyots have become Buryatified. But we are sure that it is wrong. The same sceptics recently assured that the problem of reviving of such people as Soyot was not worth considering because there were no Soyots at all: all of them became Buryats. But practice proved that the will of a people to revival has no obstacles. Soyots gain the right to be acknowledged as an independent people and to be included into the list of small people of Russia. They are taking measures to revive their traditional economy based on reindeer breeding that was preserved until 1960s. One should hope that the will of the people to revival of the language will be stronger than the scepticism of some scientists and politics. The most important is that there is a will of the people to revive the language. Soyot language being Turkic language the most close to Tofalar and tsaatan languages so for its revival the practice of creation of written language for Tofalar and the material of Tofalar and tsaatan languages may be considered. Tsaatan has no written language but there is an experience of fixing of some scientific materials in tsaatan language by Mongol colleagues and our attempts to use it for writing of the letters of Tofalar language in 1989. This attempt was very successful because tsaatan language has the same

phonetic system as Tofalar language. This system is represented in Soyot language. So we think it is possible to use for Soyot language the alphabet we have developed for Tofalar language and the same orthographic principles.

The language of Soyot is well developed and reflects the type of their traditional economy, living, culture. In 1970s during dialectologic expedition to Orin region we wrote more than 5 thousand Soyot words from Soyot elderly people. We get the main information on the grammar of Soyot language and defined the phonetic system of this language. In 2001 at the instance of the Government of Buryatia administration of Okin region and Association of Soyot people we developed written form of Soyot language and set orthographic rules [12].

CONCLUSION

Soyot language was almost forgotten and was out of practical use so it might have been considered endangered. But by mutual efforts of scientists, Soyot society, Association of Soyot people and the Government of Buryatia the oblivion and disappearing of Soyot language was stopped.

Resume. We believe that as for Tofalar language for Soyot language the dangerous period of disappearing and oblivion was passed, the language has been revived and the conditions for its preservation and further development were created. In this efforts the science made its contribution.

REFERENCES

1. Dorian, N.C., 2010. Documentation and responsibility. *Language and Communication*, 30(3): 179-185.
2. Moore, R.E., 2006. Disappearing, Inc.: Glimpsing the sublime in the politics of access to endangered languages. *Language and Communication*, 26(3) 3-4: 296- 315.
3. Orman, J., 2013. Linguistic diversity and language loss: a view from integrational linguistics. *Language Sciences*, 40: 1-11.
4. Ragagnin, E., 2012. Taiga vs. steppe sayan Turkic varieties in northern Mongolia. *Proceedings the 4th International Turkish Research Symposium: Turkic Communities whose languages and Cultures are Endangered*. 23-26 Mayis Ankara, pp: 49.
5. Eriksson, T., 2012. The phonology and Morphology of Tuha: the last undocumented language on the

Turkic Frontier. Proceedings of the 4th International Turkish Research Symposium: Turkic Communities whose languages and Cultures are Endangered. 23-26 Mayis Ankara, pp: 23.

6. Baskakov, N.A., 1969. Introduction to learning of Turkic languages. Moscow.
7. Zhukovskaya, N.L., M.V. Oreshkina and V.I. Rassadin, 2002. Soyot language. Languages of the people of Russia. Red Book. Encyclopaedic dictionary and reference book. Academia, pp: 164-170.
8. Petri, B.A., 1927. Ethnographic researches of small people in Eastern Sayan (preliminary data). Irkutsk.
9. Pavlinskaya, L.R., 2002. The Nomads of the Blue Mountains (the fate of traditional culture of the people of Eastern Sayan in the context of connection with today life). European House.

10. Dugarov, B.S., 1983. On the origin of Okinsk Buryat. Ethnic and historical and cultural relations of Mongol Peoples, pp: 90-101.

11. Sanzheev, G.D., 1930. Darkhaty. Ethnographic report about the expedition to Mongolia in 1927. Leningrad.
12. Rassadin, V.I., 2003. Soyot-Buryat-Russian dictionary. Ulan-Ude.