

Urban Mansis in the 2000s
Katalin Sipócz
(Ob-Babel, Hungary, Szeged)

0. Introduction

In my presentation, I will be introducing the recent situation of the Mansi people and the Mansi language. I will be covering contradictions regarding today's Mansi language use. I will be introducing these contradictions, attempting to explain the phenomena causing them, and answering questions about them in the process.

I will be covering the following contradictions:

- (1) While census data shows an increase in Mansi population, data regarding language use reflects a drastic decline.
- (2) While language use has declined to a near minimum, lingual revitalization has appeared, national activity is intensifying, and the number of Mansi-themed publications is growing steadily.
- (3) While Mansis traditionally lived a rural lifestyle, and their language was used in this environment, it is in urban areas where revitalization of the language can be observed.

1. Mansi people and Mansi language use

Mansis are the smaller ethnic group of the Ob-Ugric people beside the Khantys.

Census results 2010

Mansi	Khanty
12.269	30.943

The number of the Ob-Ugric people was probably never too high; there never have been more than a couple 10.000 of them. We have census data since the beginning of the 20th century.

Ethnic Mansi population according to census data since 1926

Year	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002	2010
Mansi	~5,800	~6,300	~6,300	7,609	7,434	8,279	11,432	12.269

(Source: Pusztay 2006: 45, http://www.perepis-2010.ru/results_of_the_census/results-inform.php)

The figures indicate that the Mansi population – or rather the number of people reporting themselves as Mansi – underwent a slight increase during the 20th century, and this tendency seems to have been increasing since the 1990s. A similar tendency has been noted on the basis of the results of censuses for the other Uralic peoples in Siberia, such as the Khantys, Nenets, and for other non-Uralic peoples of North Russia. This, however, does not reflect a population increase, but rather an increase in the number of people choosing to claim their nationality – a change not surprising in view of the ethnic policy changes in Russia since the early 1990s, and, especially, present-day Siberian conditions. While a few decades ago belonging to smaller ethnic minorities was a disadvantage, today the situation has changed; it is advantageous and in some cases also the basis for receiving extra (e.g. financial) benefits. All this explains the increase in population observed in the census results.

Previously, parents registered their child as having Russian nationality in mixed marriages (these marriages are usually of the Russian-indigenous type, where the woman is usually a Mansi or other minority and the husband is a Russian or some other nationality). In the majority of such families, children speak only Russian. In the last decades parents tend to choose “indigenous” status for their children. This, however, does not change the negative way parents relate to passing on the minority language to their children. The prevailing view is that Mansi is not worth acquiring; it is enough to know Russian in order to secure a successful future. Even if there is a possibility for students to take 1-2 Mansi classes a week, parents believe it is useless, and teach their children English or German instead, because these are “more useful” languages.

The first contradiction that I would like to mention has to do with language use. While more and more people classify themselves as of Mansi nationality, fewer and fewer of them use their mother language. This language loss tendency has been significant since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, but it has been outrightly drastic in the last decade. Among the Uralic peoples, Mansis have been among those suffering most intensively from language loss.

Census data on proficiency in Mansi.

1989	2002	2010
cc. 3.000 (38%)	2.746 (24%)	938 (7.6%)

The strengthening of the Mansi identity is due to positive changes, partly manifesting themselves in minority politics. The studies regarding the last couple years’ cultural anthropology emphasize that the names Mansi, Khanty, Ob-Ugric, Ugric, and Yugra (the name of their territory) have become a sort of brand name in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District. Khantys and Mansis are the ones whose names the district and Khanty-Mansiysk bear, as do numerous significant institutions, programs, and places (e.g. Yugra University). These names have a positive ring, and thus are easier to advertise and sell.

Why doesn’t this positive direction show in language use? This roots in the history of the 20th century, and basically can be traced back to two main causes: education and oil. In the now compulsory public education the role and scale of the mother language has decreased. In the multinational boarding schools education in the mother language has not been set up, and children soon broke away from the family – to the detriment of the daily use of their mother language.

On the other hand the expansion of the Siberian oil- and gas exploitation drastically altered the composition of the local residents; oil workers and their families moving in en masse have basically dissolved the native minorities.

Census data on the ethnic composition of the population of the Khanty–Mansi Autonomous District, 1950–2002 (percent)

	1950	1970	1979	1989	2002
Khanty	15% in 1950	5.0 %	2.0 %	0.9 %	1.2 %
Mansi	for Khanty and Mansi combined	2.0 %	1.0 %	0.5 %	0.7 %
Russian	no data available	76.9 %	74.3 %	66.3 %	66.1 %

Other ethnicity	no data available	16.1%	22.7%	32.3%	32%
-----------------	-------------------	-------	-------	-------	-----

(Source: Pusztay 2006: 14)

Affected by all this, the mother language first became the parents' language, then the grandparents', and now, the ones turning grandparents are the ones who have been speaking Russian decidedly since their childhood; so the number of families where the young can hear Mansi words from at least the grandparents is growing fewer and fewer.

2. Urban Mansis

The following phenomenon that I will be covering, which involves a great change regarding the Mansi population and language use, is the resettling of Mansis in the cities. Unfortunately, this is a logical consequence of the processes that spoiled the natural territories and traditional ways of life of the native peoples of Siberia. One of the factors includes the aggressive centralization of the 20th century, and massing hunters, fishermen and reindeer-keepers into so called "kolhoz"-es. The other factor is, again, the oil- and gas industry, that, with its contamination, destroyed the areas that secured the existence of these peoples for hundreds of years. Furthermore, the fact that the young soon break away from the family and after having lived in the city seek their livelihood there afterwards, is partly connected to education, which therefore has to be mentioned once again. Also, in Siberia, larger cities provide a much better livelihood than the spoilt countryside, and this is why foreigners move in in such large numbers.

This way, from the 1970s on, the Mansis have gradually become an urban ethnic group, and this fundamentally contradicts what was typical for them before. Their original way of life, territory, culture, and mythology all related to a rural lifestyle, and last but not least, their language also formulated and lived in this environment. This is not a unique phenomenon, it is peculiar to other Siberian peoples as well. Khantys follow the same tendency, but – as we can see – to a lesser extent. This is one of the reasons why nowadays the Khanty language is used substantially more than the Mansi.

Change in the scale of urban population

	1926	1970	1989	2002	2010
Mansi	0,2%	25,8%	45,6%	51,8%	57,3%
Khanty	0,6%	15%	29,8%	34,6%	38,4%

Итоги переписи-2010: резкое сокращение финских народов, обские угры и ненцы процветают, <http://finugor.ru/node/22478> and Пивнева Е.А., Этническая культура в условиях урбанизации (по материалам обских угров). In: Ученые записки Петрозаводского Государственного Университета. Но.3. (116) Общественные и гуманитарные науки. 2011: 45.

Most of the urban Mansi can be found in Khanty-Mansiysk. According to one of my Mansi acquaintances living there, there is one family in the city where Mansi is used on a daily basis, even for communication between several generations. The grandmother communicates in Mansi with her middle-aged daughters, the grandchildren's generation understands Mansi, however, communication with her becomes bilingual: they respond to the grandmother's Mansi speech in Russian.

Although there is only one family where Mansi is more or less used, in the last two decades, a Mansi intellectual layer has developed in the city, whose members are of the middle-aged generation. They have been speaking Russian since their childhood; many of them learned Mansi during their years in higher education, studying Mansi in the Herzen Institution in Saint Petersburg, or later in the Yugra University in Khanty-Mansiysk. Thanks to the work of this intellectual layer, the Mansi culture is present in Khanty-Mansiysk, and

revitalization processes have started. It is important to note that in contrast to the previous decades, the decisive proportion of these revitalization attempts is an internal civil initiative, such as the youth center called *Liliņ sōjum* (“Living stream”), where the young from kindergarten to higher education get to know the folk arts through craftsmanship, learn about folk music, ethnic sports, and have a chance to learn Mansi. Ob-Ugric themed theater plays, Ob-Ugric holidays and sports events are organized in the city. It is an important aspect, with which ethnographical studies have been dealing with lately as well, that the role and perception of the urban Ob-Ugric population have changed. Before, the minority living in the city was decisively stigmatized, and could only get low-end jobs, had issues with alcoholism, and lagged behind in education. By the 21st century, another kind of minority role has developed, to which being well-educated and ethnically active can be associated.

3. The revitalization processes in the city

I would like to talk about only the lingual aspect of these revitalization processes. Ob-Ugric themed publications are printed in quite substantial numbers; these have, for example, ethnographical, historical, or literary themes, and as a non-local are next to impossible to follow. Let’s narrow it down only to publications in Mansi! The number we get is significantly less, and they are more similar regarding their subject matter. Typically these are folklore texts; collections containing tales, stories, riddles, and many of them have already been published in earlier books. The publishing of the Mansi folklore texts collected by the Hungarian linguist, Bernát Munkácsi, at the end of the 19th century and rewritten in Cyrillic and with a Russian translation is a bit of novelty, though. These are Mansi texts from some 120 years ago, which are an interesting ethnographical and linguistic jewel from the times preceding the substantial Russian lingual influence. Unfortunately, I have no knowledge whether native Mansi speakers – those not being researchers or teachers – read these, and if they do/did, how much a modern speaker can comprehend of it. I am not too optimistic; I think the audience for these texts is quite small.

The only writer having Mansi as her mother language, and who presents new literature, and not a folklore collection is Svetlana Dinislamova. Her volume of poetry came out in 2004 (Dinislamova: *Vitsam* ‘Water drop’). The poet’s newest publication is expected to appear in the winter with her poems and stories (*Tōwlayəm* ‘My wings’). She is also the editor of the publication which contains the life stories of Mansi people, and conversations with them (Dinislamova: *Lāwim lōḡxanuw* ‘The way destined for us’ 2007). Dinislamova thus is a typical representation of the urban Mansi intellectual: her mother still spoke Mansi, she as a child already used Russian, but decided as an adult to learn and use her mother language.

Beside these publications, a regular Mansi paper is the *Luima Sēripōs*, which comes out weekly on 4 pages. Nowadays, this is the only forum where we can regularly read Mansi. Writers of the *Luima Seripōs* belong to the urban Mansi intellectual: they have spoken Russian decidedly since their childhood. *Luima Seripōs* has existed since 1989, this also reflects the reformation, which can be observed in other areas as well, regarding Mansi culture in the 2000s. At first it appeared biweekly on 2 pages, it expanded to 4 pages and nowadays to 16 pages and became weekly in the 2000s. Lately, the paper can be read on the internet as well, in an up-to-date form. It has had a circulation of 200-600, earlier it was distributed free among the Mansi, nowadays it is no longer free. There are a couple hundred subscribers, according to my acquaintance, the people who actually read it number less than a hundred.

The subject matter of the paper in the last 23 years has not really changed. A typical *Luima Seripōs* issue contains articles of local interest on political or public life issues on the front page, and in the rest of the paper one finds articles on local holidays and events as well as interviews mostly with “respectable” Mansi people, those maintaining their language and

traditions. Earlier the paper regularly published stories, riddles, accounts of hunting adventures, and, rarely, stories of mythological characters, which were not written by journalists, but were recorded discourses from “everyday” people. Often readers themselves sent in such texts. Nowadays, the latter has been decreasing, but there are more current news articles and reports pertaining to the everyday lives of the residents of the capital and the area, and often these have no Mansi aspects whatsoever. Renovation of houses in the capital, modernization of water lines and heating systems, building of roads, parking lots, playgrounds, creation of ski tracks, or the hauling away of the snow are examples of this. But we can read about the mass running day, where there were 4000 people running in Khanty-Mansiysk as well. It is worth mentioning that among the articles, there are numerous ones that deal with the topical questions of the Mansis and Khantys, education in the mother language, and helping young intellectuals resettle in villages.

These articles contain a number of words that did not exist in the Mansi language before. In the last couple of years, it is hard not to notice the effort not to include Russian words in the articles. This also means that the news sometimes contains lexical innovations by the dozen. For example *wit os rēγ kōlān tōtne tēr* ‘plumbing’ (lit. ‘iron bringing heat and water into the house’), *mašināt xultuptālān janiγ mā* ‘parking lot’ (lit. ‘big place to leave car at’). We can often read articles in which the only Russian words are proper names, names of institutions, geographical names, everything else is in Mansi. This poses the following question: if journalists wish to write in a “usable” Mansi language, which is “meant to be used”, shouldn’t bilingualism be present in the articles as well? Doesn’t all of this indicate that what is happening here is the creation of a Mansi language which is severely lacking in terms of usage, usability and is a break-away from reality? According to my Mansi acquaintance, the topics in the paper are interesting, but the texts are not really in Mansi, as she put it: “they have no soul”, referring to the artificial nature of the composition. Structural changes are obvious in the language (mostly the use of simple sentences, and the simplified nature and structure of the grammatical system), but the minimal presence of conceptual metaphors, which vitalize a language, can also be observed.

Beside the newspaper, we can note that the Mansi language has appeared on the latest medium, the internet, but only on a very small scale. The same group, the urban intellectuals sometimes converse in Mansi for example on Facebook; most of the time these are wishing happy birthday, happy holidays, commenting on photos, and – an interesting phenomenon – a couple, 1-2 sentence-long dialogues with foreign researchers and students of Ob-Ugric languages. Mansi language use has not become substantial here.

There are no translations and fictions in Mansi anymore, which would attract for example younger readers: at the moment, it is inconceivable that the type of genre such as for example Harry Potter would ever be published in Mansi.

Today’s printed Mansi language reflects urban Mansi existence in every aspect, which can be briefly summarized in that a reinterpretation of the national identity is occurring. While previously language played a key role in the perception of the ethnical identity, today, the Mansi language cannot have such a decisive role. Language is just one factor, and identity must be conserved and kept through multiple factors. The Mansi youth and urban intellectuals have reacted well to the more favorable circumstances: to the political changes of the minority, to the agricultural development of the area, and to the international phenomenon which has drawn attention to minority languages all around the world. All of this might assure the preservation of Mansi culture for decades to come, but we can not be this optimistic regarding the Mansi language.

References:

- Dinislamova Svetlana. 2004. *Witsam* [Waterdrop]. Khanty-Mansiysk.
- Dinislamova Svetlana. 2007. *Лавим ләнханув*. [The way destined for us.] Khanty-Mansiysk.
- Luima Seripos*. [Mansi language newspapers] Khanty-Mansiysk.
- Munkácsi Bernát. (1892–1896). *Vogul Népköltési Gyűjtemény I–IV*. [Mansi Folklore Texts]. I-IV] MTA, Budapest.
- Pusztay, János. 2006. *Nyelvével hal a nemzet. Az oroszországi finnugor népek jelene és jövője 11 pontban* [Nations die with their language: On the present and future of Finno-Ugric peoples in Russia]. Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány
- Rombandeeva, E.I. (ed.) 2010. *Героический эпос Манси*. (Munkácsi Bernát. *Vogul Népköltési Gyűjtemény*. II. kötet) Khanty-Mansiysk.
- Schestalov, Yuvan (ed.) 2010. *Именные богатыри Обского края*. (Munkácsi Bernát. *Vogul Népköltési Gyűjtemény*. II. kötet) Khanty-Mansiysk.
- .