

The state of the Northern Mansi language in 2020s: education, media, resources

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This article provides a detailed description of the modern state of the Northern Mansi language (<Ob-Ugric <Finno-Ugric <Uralic) in media and education and gives an overview of existing projects and resources aimed at support of the language. We analyze the sociolinguistic situation among the Northern Mansi, the presence of the native language in education at all levels, from kindergarden to university level, as well as its use in other organizations in the area where the language is spoken, on TV, radio and in newspapers, in cultural projects. Finally, we provide an outline of all current projects aimed at support of the Northern Mansi language, with special focus on the project of an online translator. Finally, we discuss the impact of these initiatives on the dynamics of language revitalization, summing up positive and negative tendencies influencing Northern Mansi language vitality and giving our outlook on the further development of the linguistic situation. The information provided in the article is based on extensive fieldwork and communication with members of the Northern Mansi community.

keywords: Uralic languages, Northern Mansi, sociolinguistics, language revitalization, language policies, endangered languages

kulcsszavak: uráli nyelvek, északi manysi, szociolingvisztika, nyelvi revitalizáció, nyelvpolitika, veszélyeztetett nyelvek

1. Introduction

Mansi (also known by the exonym Vogul, Ob-Ugric < Finno-Ugric < Uralic) together with its sister language Khanty (also known as Ostyak, Ob-Ugric < Finno-Ugric < Uralic) is officially one of titular languages of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra. Nevertheless, it is listed among critically endangered languages (Janhunen 2010 (1996): 51; Skribnik–Koshkareva 1996; Bíró–Sipőcz 2009; and others). Only its Northern variety is still in use; Eastern, Western and Southern Mansi no longer have any speakers (on Mansi languages vs. dialects see Koryakov 2017: 94 and Koryakov et al. 2022: 74–75).

Northern Mansi is today spoken in two neighbouring regions of Russia: The Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra (hereinafter Yugra) and Sverdlovsk Oblast. Around 90% of the Mansi-speaking population live in Yugra. There is some governmental support for the language in the region; all organizations and institutions working with the Mansi language (e.g. the newspaper *Lūimā sēripōs* (‘Northern Sunrise’)¹ and the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development²) are located there. However, the Mansi in Yugra live mostly in large settlements³ (cities, towns, big villages) where the population is multinational consisting of Mansi, Khanty, Nenets, Komi, Tatars, Ukrainians, Russians and others (regarding the political and economic background see Skribnik–Koshareva 1996 and bibliography therein). In these settlements, mixed marriages are common and the language of daily interaction is Russian. Even in the family setting the use of indigenous languages is diminishing. As a result, the majority of Mansi native speakers in Yugra are elderly; there is a limited number of middle-aged speakers and no more than a handful of children speaking the language to some degree (see data below). In Sverdlovsk Oblast, the situation is strikingly different. There, members of the Mansi community reside in several small difficult-to-reach mono-national villages in the forests of the Ivdel District (the largest village, Ushma, has around 25 inhabitants) and in the town of Ivdel itself. However, the size of the community as a whole is very small, consisting of no more than 100 people, possibly even less. Until recently, almost all members of the community lived in the forest with very few connections to Russian towns; all communication in their everyday life was in Mansi and parents also spoke Mansi to their children (see more in Koryakov–

¹ <https://khanty-yasang.ru/luima-seripos>, accessed on 20.04.2024. It should be noted that some links cannot be accessed outside of the Russian Federation.

² *Обско-угорский институт прикладных исследований и разработок*, <https://ouipir.ru>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

³ In Yugra, there used to be a lot of small mono-national Mansi villages as well, however, very few of them are inhabited today; many function only as summerhouses for families who used to live there or have been fully abandoned.

Zhornik 2022, Zhornik–Koryakov 2022). Russian was a second language here; there were even Mansi-speaking monolinguals, though the last of them, Alexandra V. Anyamova from the Yurta Anyamova (Treskol'ye) settlement, died in 2023. Right now, with the arrival of Internet connections and more transportation options, the situation is shifting and mixed marriages with Russian as the main language are becoming more common. However, as of today, all children and youngsters in the area (except for the youngest child who spent the majority of his language acquisition period in hospitals surrounded by Russian nurses) speak Mansi fluently. Many of them only started learning Russian when they first arrived at the boarding school in the village of Polunochnoye, located 20 km from Ivdel.



Fig. 1. Map of the Mansi language distribution (by Yury Koryakov)

In order to estimate the prospects of language survival in such circumstances, we will sum up the available information on institutions and activities in the two regions with Mansi populations, based on the one hand on published research and

official documents, and on the other hand on personal communication with people living and working there as well as on our own fieldwork experiences. The attitude of the community itself and the role of language revitalization activists is of special importance here. In the following, section 2 gives a short overview of demographic and sociolinguistic data, section 3 focuses on education and language teaching, section 4 presents the use of Mansi in media, section 5 discusses projects aimed at promoting the Mansi language and their support, and finally section 6 provides a brief conclusion on the prospects of Mansi language revitalization in Yugra and the Sverdlovsk Oblast.

2. Demographic and sociolinguistic data

Many sociological and sociolinguistic publications state that according to censuses in the last hundred years, the ethnic Mansi population practically doubled, whereas the numbers of native speakers among them has constantly decreased (Table 1).

Year	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002	2010	2020/ 2021
Mansi	5.800	6.300	6.300	7.609	7.434	8.279	11.432	12.269	12.308

Table 1. Census data on ethnic Mansi since 1926

(Pusztay 2006: 93–4, Bíró–Sipőcz 2009: 322, data added for 2010 and 2020/21⁴)

The growing number of people identifying themselves as Mansi is explained by a change of national policy in Russian Federation in the 1990ies: Federal Law № 82-ФЗ from 30.04.1999 “On the guarantees of rights of indigenous small-numbered peoples of Russian Federation”⁵, which promised indigenous peoples rights on free land use in their traditional territories, compensations for the external use of their traditional territories, participation in administration and ecological control agencies, financial benefits, state support for reforming all forms of education, free medical help, etc. It was sufficient to have one Mansi or Khanty grandparent to get access to these benefits, which makes clear why 4 000 persons more registered as Mansi in 2020 compared to 1989. But this automatically means that the percentage of native speakers is dropping much more sharply than it would have based only on the ongoing language loss due to Russification. While the census 1989 showed 38%

⁴ www.perepis2010.ru/results_of_the_census/results-inform.php; Perepis’ 2020/2021.

⁵ «О гарантиях прав коренных малочисленных народов Российской Федерации», <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/13778>, accessed on 12.04.2024.

Mansi speakers among self-identifying Mansi, in 2002 it was 24%, and in 2010 only 7.6%.

As for the latest census (2020/21), its questionnaire contains additional questions not found in any previous one: it differentiates between bilinguals naming Mansi as their first or their second native language; furthermore, there are questions concerning language proficiency and language use. Table 2 shows this data for the Russian Federation, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra and Sverdlovsk Oblast' (Ivdel Mansi).

	Ethnic Mansi	Mansi as the 1st l-ge	Mansi as the 2nd l-ge	Language proficiency	L-ge use
Russia	12.308	2229	146	1346	1008
Yugra	11.107	2004	142	1183	898
Sverdlovsk Oblast'	345	92	2	85	69

Table 2. Census data 2020/21 (Perepis' 2020/2021)

Thus, the data from 2020/21 is not directly comparable with the previous data, but if we consider only language proficiency and language use, it is 10.65% and 8.08% in Yugra, 24.65% and 20% for Sverdlovsk Oblast'.

In times between the all-Russian censuses, the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development conducted its own small-scale surveys. All publications stress that the indigenous languages in Yugra are less and less acknowledged as native languages, giving way to Russian, and are fading not only from professional, but also from family communication (Khaknazarov 2012: 25; Islamova 2017: 147 and others.) Tkachuk–Semyonova (2020) present the results of the survey conducted in 2019 among Khanty, Mansi, and Nenets schoolchildren in different cities of the Yugra region (12–18 years, 5–11th form; among them 573 Mansi, 52.7% girls, 47.3% boys). Only 96 children of 573 named Mansi as their native language, all others named Russian. Further, only 27 children use only Mansi in family communication (first of all with mothers and grandmothers), 67 use both languages, 478 use only Russian⁶ (Tkachuk–Semyonova: 420–421, table 2). Russian absolutely dominates in

⁶ It is not clear from the presentation of results whether a differentiation was made between monolingual and mixed families; in our own communication with teachers and language revitalization activists in Yugra, at the most only five Mansi-speaking children were named. Thus, the number 27 seems extremely optimistic.

communication with friends, in cultural events, reading habits (ibid: 421). The authors stress that the use of indigenous languages is drastically decreasing in all communication spheres.

3. Education and language teaching

As education in or of national languages is considered one of the main factors of their preservation (see e.g. Zamyatin 2012), we have collected information on the state-of-art of teaching Mansi in Yugra on different levels.

The administration of Yugra demonstrates significant attention to the state of titular languages: there is a law on languages of indigenous minorities living in Yugra (2001, 2013⁷) and documents defining their teaching (2015⁸) and the development of ethnocultural educational systems directly in traditional territories of these minorities (2020⁹). Both documents contain data on educational institutions and the number of children taught there, but in 2015 (only), the statistical data mostly did not differentiate between the three indigenous minorities, Khanty, Mansi and Nenets, and instead used an umbrella term “indigenous Northern minorities” (*коренные народы Севера*). In the following sections, we will refer to these documents as Kontseptsiya 2015 and Kontseptsiya 2020.

3.1 Preschool and school education

For 2012, the educational department of Yugra administration reported that Mansi was studied by 71 children in 8 nursery schools, by 804 children in 33 primary schools, and by 215 children in two centres of additional education (Pivneva 2014: 63). Kontseptsiya 2015 mentions a “Language nest” project in a kindergarten in Beryozovo, started in 2013; in Kontseptsiya 2020 it is not mentioned. In 2015, there were ten nursery schools and five centres of additional education in five regions of

⁷ «О языках коренных малочисленных народов Севера, проживающих на территории Ханты-Мансийского автономного округа – Югры» (27 ноября 2001 года, в ред. Закона ХМАО - Югры от 30.09.2013 N 86-оз), <https://www.dumahmao.ru/decisions/detail.php?ID=7088>, accessed on 12.04.2024.

⁸ Концепция по обучению родным языкам, литературе и культуре коренных малочисленных народов Севера ХМАО-Югры (7 августа 2015 года N 451-рп), https://iro86.ru/images/struct/etno/2016/451-rp_Konceptsiya_obuch_rodn_yaz.pdf, accessed on 12.04.2024.

⁹ Концепция развития этнокультурной системы образования в местах традиционного проживания и традиционной хозяйственной деятельности коренных малочисленных народов Севера Ханты-Мансийского автономного округа - Югры на 2020 - 2024 годы (14 августа 2020 года N 465-рп), <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/570879410>, accessed on 12.04.2024.

Yugra where it was possible to study one of the indigenous languages according to Kontseptsiya 2020; it is unclear in how many of them Mansi was an option. In cities, the situation looks critical: the report of the Khanty-Mansiysk city administration's educational department for 2020 (Report 2020)¹⁰ states that out of 606 Khanty, Mansi and Nenets children in Khanty-Mansiysk nursery schools, only two speak their heritage tongue. Furthermore, according to our information there are no active language groups in nursery schools as there is not enough personnel with language proficiency and because parents do not want their children to learn the language. This is evident also from table 3 (based on table 2 in the Report 2020).

	altogether	native speakers	teaching native language
preschool education	50	15	0
school education	34	3	0
additional education	7	7	2
in summation	91	25	2

Table 3. Educators – representatives of indigenous peoples in Khanty-Mansiysk

One additional education centre is *Liliņ sōjum* ('A living stream') in Khanty-Mansiysk¹¹. It has programs for children from 5 to 18 years (arts and sports, traditional handicraft, local nature and ecology, history, ethnography and folklore, playing national instruments such as the *saņkwəltap*, national dances, etc.); in 2023, 17 such programs were offered. There are two Mansi educators working there (see Table 3), Raisa M. Gavril'chik and Vladimir S. Merov. Children take part in radio and TV programs, folklore festivals, and exhibitions; in summer there are ethnographic camps. Unfortunately, there are no language courses there, only so-called "language components" in other courses; according to reports from our colleagues, the language competence of the children remains on the level of basic simple phrases such as "hello", "goodbye". or "thank you". According to the 2020 report of the educational department, there were 238 Khanty and Mansi children in this centre and only 26 of them could speak their native language (11 Khanty and 15 Mansi). We can only guess what was considered a sufficient level of language competence

¹⁰ <http://eduhmansy.ru/storage/app/uploads/public/612/dbb/17a/612dbb17a5b73125754448.pdf>, accessed on 14.04.2024

¹¹ <http://lylyngsoyum.ru>, accessed on 14.04.2024.

to be considered “speaking the language” in this report as all other data suggest that there are no or almost no children in Khanty-Mansiysk speaking the Mansi language.

Another important topic is boarding schools with Russian-language teaching. The closing of many small village schools and introduction of boarding schools in larger villages in the 1950s is seen as one of the main triggers of the general language shift towards Russian place (Skribnik and Koshkareva 1996). According to *Kontseptsiya 2020*, there are 16 boarding schools in seven regions of Yugra today, with about 500 new pupils every year, 15% of them Khanty, Mansi and Nenets. Many parents, especially from families leading a traditional way of life, have a low opinion of this type of education, considering what children acquire when torn from their families (habits like smoking etc.) and what they forget (heritage language and way of life) (Tkachuk 2022: 437).

Schools in cities, both comprehensive and professional, offer native language teaching only nominally. *Kontseptsiya 2020* sets targets for teaching in all types of schools: two hours a week for native languages and one hour a week for national literatures, as on-demand elective courses, with separate options for native speakers and non-speakers/heritage speakers. In reality, only one hour for both subjects combined is allowed during a 5-day study week, and even this level of teaching is rare: very few children and parents elect these courses. For instance, (Report 2020) mentions only one school in Khanty-Mansiysk (Yu. G. Sozonov comprehensive secondary school № 1) that offers a program of Mansi language for 1st to 4th grade, and out of 25 participants only eight are Mansi¹². Some parents are of the opinion that learning the native tongue “makes no sense anymore”, “is useless, gives no perspectives for children”, “is too late” etc. (Tkachuk 2021: 545) and believe that choosing to study the indigenous language takes up time that could have been used to study “more important” subjects such as Russian or English.

Village schools are not numerous but the parents’ attitude there seems more positive. One of the questions in the 2019 survey in Beryozovo district was whether the respondent wishes to study their native tongue; the results among adults were: 62% “yes”, 11.3% “no”, 19% “don’t know” (Tkachuk 2021: 544). In a recent small-scale survey conducted by Daria O. Zhornik and Vasilij S. Kharitonov in March 2024 in the settlement of Beryozovo, 100% of respondents (ethnic Mansis, both speakers and non-speakers, ages 12 to 82) replied that they would like to know the language (better) and for their children (if they have any) to speak the language. But the staffing problem also arises in this area. For instance, when older teachers stop

¹² Interestingly enough, the list of teachers on the site of this school contains no native speakers or teachers of Mansi: <https://school1-sozonov.gosuslugi.ru/nasha-shkola/nash-kollektiv/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

working due to retirement or illness, often no replacement can be found: in 2020 teaching of Mansi ended in Nyaksimvol' after the retirement of Natalya K. Tasmanova¹³, as well as in Saranpaul after Olga V. Lelyatova died of COVID-19¹⁴. Another problem is the size and composition of nursery school groups: for example, in Beryozovo there are at least two nursery school workers who are proficient in Mansi, but as the settlement is large and mixed, there are usually only two or three Mansi children per nursery school group while all others are Russians, Khanty, Komi, etc. This makes it difficult to find a format to introduce one particular language into the educational process. However, due to the large interest in the Mansi language in the settlement, a summer school on Mansi language immersion is planned in Beryozovo in August 2024. It will entail methodological seminars for workers of cultural and educational organizations from Beryozovo and nearby villages, where language immersion, language nest and master-apprentice methods will be demonstrated and discussed, as well as activities with a small group of motivated children where all interaction will be in Mansi using a slightly modified master-apprentice methodology. The school was initiated by the Beryozovo community and especially Tatiana S. Gogoleva¹⁵ (a local politician and language activist); the main experts presenting language immersion methodologies will be Vasiliy S. Kharitonov (who teaches Nanai, a Tungusic language, in Khabarovsk Krai without any use of Russian), Anastasiya V. Anyamova (who conducts classes in Mansi in Polunochnoye, see below) and Daria O. Zhornik (who has learned Mansi herself and participated with Vasiliy S. Kharitonov in the creation of various content in Mansi with Mansi-speaking children in Polunochnoye).

As for the Ivdel Mansi, until recently there were no Mansi lessons in the boarding school in Polunochnoye, where all the children from the Mansi villages in the Ivdel District (as well as the village Leplya, which administratively belongs to Yugra) study. From 2017 until approximately 2020, Dina V. Gerasimova taught there occasionally (up to a month at a time with significant breaks), but the lessons were conducted in Russian and mostly consisted of studying Mansi grammar. Since autumn 2022, Anastasiya V. Anyamova, a member of the Ivdel Mansi community and a young fluent speaker, started teaching there; in her lessons, she and the children speak Mansi and are engaged in different creative activities such as sewing, making souvenirs from birch bark, and preparing performances for different holidays and festivals. This allows the children to better express themselves in Mansi and strengthens the connection to their indigenous culture.

¹³ See her article about the history of the village school in Nyaksimvol' <https://www.ugramediaperson.ru/works/work8001574417835/>, accessed on 15.04.2024.

¹⁴ <https://www.khanty-yasang.ru/news/11436>, accessed on 16.04.2024.

¹⁵ https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Гоголева,_Татьяна_Степановна, accessed on 26.04.2024.

Returning to the issue of boarding schools and taking children out of their families, it should be mentioned that the government of Yugra has a good understanding of these dynamics. An experimental project was launched to find an educational alternative with the help of modern technologies. *Kontseptsiya 2020* uses the notion of “territories of traditional nature use” (*территории традиционного природопользования*), i.e. families leading a traditional way of life in such territories and their children are in focus. One of the projects announced there is the “Nomadic camp school and nursery school” (*Стойбищная школа-сад*), built around the introduction of online learning, testing of which started in 2019 with five families and seven children (their location and ethnicity was not named, but newspaper publications suggest that they were Khanty from the Surgut region); for 2021, the involvement of eight families and ten children was planned. By 2025, it is planned to develop four online courses on the preschool level (for 3–7 years old children) and four online courses for primary school, 1st to 4th grade; all courses should be supported by teaching materials of the new generation, available online. Each family is supposed to get an individual supervisor; for tasks and homework, parents’ e-mail addresses should be used.

It should be noted that unlike the Khanty, the Mansi in Yugra have not retained the traditional way of life in nomadic camps. However, it might be beneficial to employ these technologies in smaller villages instead of sending children to boarding school. For example, children from the village Turvat (one of the villages of Yugra closest to the Ivdel District where one family with approximately 10 members lives) have to go to the boarding school in the village of Nyaksimvol’, which is quite far away. The village Turvat retains a traditional lifestyle like the villages in the Ivdel District and all children in this family are fluent in Mansi. Right now, the village of Turvat has a good satellite Internet connection; when children are home, they are deeply involved in traditional lifestyle and are learning skills like hunting, fishing and woodworking, thus it would seem beneficial to introduce an online school there.

3.2 Higher education

Teachers at national schools for more than 20 indigenous languages of Russia, including Khanty and Mansi, were traditionally educated in St. Petersburg at an institution known today as the Institute of the Peoples of the North at Herzen State Pedagogical University, which traces its roots to the Northern Institute of Leningrad University, established in 1925. There have been no Mansi-speaking teachers there since the death of Valentina S. Ivanova in 2022, but Mansi language groups are still organized every year, also with non-speaking students and teachers. Herzen University is unique in that it organizes language groups even for one student. In

the 2024 spring semester, there are two proficient Mansi speakers (from Ushma in the Ivdel District and Shchekur'ya in the Beryozovo District) and two rememberers studying in St. Petersburg (Zoya S. Ryabchikova¹⁶, Khanty, associate professor at the Uralic Chair at Herzen University, p.c.).

In Khanty-Mansiysk itself there are/were several institutions where Ob-Ugric languages were taught: the pedagogical college (since 1932), the teacher training institute (since 1974), the branch of Nizhnevartovsk pedagogical high school with specialization on the Ob-Ugric philology (1992–2002), and the Ob-Ugric Faculty of Yugra University (2001–2010).

The oldest institution is the Ostyako-Vogulskic/Khanty-Mansiysk National pedagogical school founded in 1932 for educating teachers for primary national schools in the region. Its history is briefly presented in (Stanislavets 2019): after several reforms, it was merged in 2009 with the polytechnical school under the name “Khanty-Mansiysk technological and pedagogical college” (*Ханты-Мансийский технологический педагогический колледж*); in 2010, one more professional school was added. In the beginning, all students were taught Khanty or Mansi, since the 1970s only Khanty and Mansi themselves had language courses; in 1992 a separate national department was organized. Languages and ethnocultural disciplines were defined as additional specialization. After the Federal State Educational Standards (*Федеральный государственный образовательный стандарт*) of 2011 set up an obligatory part (70%) and a variable part (30%) of the program, national languages, literatures and culture were moved as one block into the variable (optional) part of the programs for pre-school and primary school education¹⁷. In the 2010s, Mansi was taught by Albina R. Stanislavets, initially using the same textbook as in St. Petersburg (Rombandeeva, Vaxrusheva 1984, 1989); as the language proficiency of students was gradually decreasing, she started to use (Skribnik, Afanasyeva 2007), a textbook for self-learners (p.c.). Today the pedagogical teaching at the college is no longer aimed at national schools: the specialization part is taught optionally on demand, but for several years already there have not been enough applicants to launch a group and therefore there has been no teaching. Currently, there are plans to open a preschool Mansi language group attached to the college with Albina R. Stanislavets as the teacher, but there is no certainty that this plan will be implemented.

¹⁶ <https://atlas.herzen.spb.ru/teacher.php?id=4780>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

¹⁷ <https://vuzopedia.ru/ssuzy/hanty-mansiyskiy-tehnologo-pedagogicheskii-kolledzh/programs/spednego-professionalnogo-obrazovania/doshkolnoe-obrazovanie>, accessed on 20.04.2024; <https://vuzopedia.ru/ssuzy/hanty-mansiyskiy-tehnologo-pedagogicheskii-kolledzh/programs/spednego-professionalnogo-obrazovania/prepodavanie-v-nachalnykh-klassakh>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

The Teacher training institute¹⁸ was established in 1974 to conduct regular methodological courses for schoolteachers; from the beginning it was responsible for research on methods of teaching languages and culture of the Peoples of the North, later with the chair of ethnic education of Ob-Ugric peoples. One of its employees was Anastasia I. Sainaxova¹⁹ (1932–2018), a Mansi linguist and author of a series of Mansi textbooks for national schools from the 1st to 9th form and a derivation dictionary among other publications. Since 1998 and till its integration into the chair of philological education, the head of the chair was Dr. Klavdia V. Afanasyeva (1951–2021)²⁰, a Mansi pedagogue and philologist who was the founder of the Mansi newspaper *Lūimā sēripōs*, translated the New Testament into Mansi and compiled many manuals, study guides, textbooks and dictionaries for Mansi national schools. After her death, the institute's program in 2022 and 2023 still contained a course on methods of teaching indigenous Northern languages (Khanty, Mansi, Nenets) and literatures, focusing on federal educational standards and new teaching materials; in 2024, no such a course is being offered.

The Ugra State University was organized in 2001 on the base of several institutions and branches of different high schools opened in Khanty-Mansiysk. One of them was the branch of the philological faculty of the Nizhnevartovsk pedagogical high school with specializations in Russian philology, Khanty and Mansi philology, and literature of the people of the North, opened in 1992. It was initiated i.a. by Dr. Valentina N. Solovar²¹, a native speaker of Khanty and specialist in Khanty philology with a doctorate from the University of Novosibirsk. Her initiative was supported by her colleagues from Novosibirsk, who were flying to Khanty-Mansiysk in work shifts to teach courses on topics including general linguistics and Finno-Ugric studies (N. Koshkareva, E. Kovgan, E. Skribnik, and others). In 2002, this institution became part of the faculty of Ob-Ugric philology; in 2003, separate chairs for Khanty (headed by V. Solovar) and Mansi (headed first by A. Sainaxova, later by N. Lyskova²² and D. Gerasimova²³) as well as the Laboratory for language preservation (headed by Z. Ryabchikova) and the workshop of the

¹⁸ Russ. *Окружной институт усовершенствования учителей*; after several reorganisations and renamings, in 2007 the institute got the name “Institute of educational development”, see <https://iro86.ru/index.php/component/k2/item/13725-istoriya-instituta>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

¹⁹ <https://ugralit.okrplib.ru/authors/saynahova-anastasiya-ilinichna>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²⁰ <https://iro86.ru/images/biblio/Afanaseva.pdf>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²¹ <https://folk.oupiir.ru/entity/PERSON/3562007>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²² <https://lib.ugrasu.ru/upload/iblock/adf/adf634d1cd1eef92a11ff0913bb606ce.pdf>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²³ <https://www.ugrasu.ru/upload/iblock/856/2p554iv0g73a6rcf239cmtycy5ooi9tq.pdf>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

Mansi poet Yuvan Shestalov were established; several Mansi specialists were invited from Herzen University in St. Petersburg (D. Gerasimova, N. Lyskova), which led to considerable tensions in the faculty staff. The faculty was reorganized as “the Institute of Languages, History and Culture of Ob-Ugric Peoples” in 2004, later also the formerly separate Mansi and Khanty chairs were merged into the chair of general linguistics and Uralic studies; the institute was finally closed in 2010²⁴, despite international cooperation and exchange with the Universities of Helsinki, Szeged and Munich; with that, university training of language specialists in Khanty-Mansiysk came to an end. The laboratory was closed a year later.

Today, a specialization in Ob-Ugric languages and literatures is offered only in doctoral study programs²⁵, with two positions per year. According to the two currently enrolled Mansi doctoral students, there are no specialized courses on Ob-Ugric languages and philology or even Finno-Ugric studies, they are not involved in any educational process and the prospects of finishing their dissertations are unclear.

There is one mysterious unit mentioned in many resources providing information on universities in Russian Federation²⁶, namely, “the Humanitarian Institute of Northern Studies at Yugra State University” (*Гуманитарный институт североведения ЮГУ*) with programs such as “Journalism” and “Physical education”, but it cannot be found as a structural unit on the homepage of the Yugra State University itself – only a unit of the university administration (under the vice-rector for youth policy and educational work) called “Centre for Peoples of the North at Yugra State University” is listed there, but the homepage provides no information about its functions²⁷.

Considering these facts, it is no wonder that it is so difficult to find native language teachers in Yugra today. There is only one current development in the area of Ob-Ugric languages at the level of higher education. In autumn 2024, the launch of a new program at the Surgut State Pedagogical University, “Russian language and native language (Khanty/Mansi)”, is being planned with with 10 students²⁸.

²⁴ <http://finugor.ru/node/21292>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²⁵ <https://www.ugrasu.ru/university/education/higher-education/school/human/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²⁶ See, for instance, <https://vuz.profguide.io/6470/programs/?level=magistracy>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

²⁷ https://www.ugrasu.ru/university/university/structure/gala/prorektor_po_molodezhnoy_politike_i_vospitatelnoy_rabote/upravlenie_po_molodezhnoy_politike/tsentr_narodov_severa/ accessed on 07.04.2024.

²⁸ Information on this program can be found in the tables on this website: <https://www.surgpu.ru/Abitur/bachelor/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

However, as we found out in discussion with the vice-governor of Yugra, Elena V. Shumakova, this program is currently and possibly also in the future only planned to include Khanty as there are only Khanty villages around Surgut and there are also no Mansi language teachers in the city. It is also unclear what exactly the program will entail, especially considering ideas of merging this education with professional education (e.g. reindeer herding, legal representation of indigenous communities in oil companies, etc.). So far it does not appear that this will be a full-fledged indigenous language program; however, we are in contact with many participants of the committee that developed this new program and will monitor its progress.

4. Media

As regards media presence, the standing of Mansi is comparatively good. However, here too there has been a noticeable decline over the years.

The most active Mansi-language resources in media are written sources, first of all the newspaper *Lūimā sēripos*, financed by the Yugra administration. It was established in 1989, before that some articles in Mansi were published in the Khanty newspaper *Lenin pant xuwat* ('Along Lenin's road'). Today, *Lūimā sēripos* is published every two weeks and contains articles in Mansi on a variety of different topics; the journalists always try to come up with interesting ideas, e.g. there are sections on the life of the people of the North where they publish lively stories out of the lives of different Mansi people. Recently, there were also articles on language revitalization, e.g. pertaining to the Bashkir language. Moreover, the newspaper has a modern website where it is possible to access the archive of the newspaper back to 2012 and it is also possible to read Russian translations of all the articles²⁹. There are already linguistic studies using the texts from this newspaper as a corpus, e.g. (Bíró–Sipőcz 2023). The newspaper also has a social media presence, notably on VK and Telegram, and is a truly interesting and lively resource on various aspects of indigenous and modern life. In 2023, the newspaper received a grant from the governor of Yugra and journalists started making and publishing voice recordings of some articles of each issue, which provides even greater immersion into the content and can act as a good resource also for learning the language. However, there are also staffing problems in the newspaper. Right now, there are only five Mansi journalists employed and most of them are nearing retirement age, so finding young successors is critical, but difficult for myriad reasons. First of all, young Mansi in Khanty-Mansiysk with rare exceptions do not speak the language, but good command of the language is necessary in this line of work. There are young Mansi speakers from the Ivdel District, but it is difficult to attract them to Khanty-Mansiysk

²⁹ <https://khanty-yasang.ru/luima-seripos>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

as it is quite far from their home. Thirdly, and this factor applies to all potential workers, the salary at the newspaper is very low and it is impossible to survive without supporting family members, but many young speakers (especially those who came to Khanty-Mansiysk from Mansi villages) live alone and have to choose jobs with higher salaries.

Another essential resource is the website of the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development. It has a substantial library of Mansi-language editions published by the Institute; there are also media resources such as the depositary³⁰ which also contains a lot of audio samples in Mansi and Khanty, the dialectological atlas³¹ with a map of Mansi, Khanty and Nenets-speaking settlements as well as a dialectal dictionary, and a small audio dictionary of the Mansi language³² for learners. The Institute is also involved in various cultural projects that do not pertain to the language directly, e.g. since 2018 it has been working on a project “Ethnic game space” (*Этноигротекa*) aimed at collecting, documenting, and modernizing traditional Ob-Ugric games to integrate them into the educational process in schools and kindergartens. Also, a monthly journal for children *Vitsam* (‘Waterdrop’)³³, edited since 2014 by the Institute’s employee Svetlana Dinislamova³⁴ and containing content for children in Mansi, should be mentioned. The Ob-Ugric Institute also has a branch in Beloyarsky called the Folklore Centre³⁵, and earlier had a branch in Beryozovo as well³⁶, where local employees are also involved in gathering and publishing folklore materials.

One recent event significant to the Mansi community is the digitization of the archive of Evdokiya I. Rombandeeva (1928–2017), a renowned Mansi linguist. The project was carried out by the Museum of Nature and Man and the materials are kept in the Yugra State Archive. Her personal archive contains 1193 items, including photographs, diaries, correspondences, manuscripts and, importantly, field notebooks from her early field trips with handwritten texts and songs in Mansi. The materials are available on the website of the Yugra State Archive³⁷ on demand and

³⁰ <https://folk.oupiir.ru/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

³¹ <https://atlas.oupiir.ru/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

³² <https://mansy-audio-dic.oupiir.ru/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

³³ <https://oupiir.ru/content/проекты-наших-сотрудников>; issues for 2022 can be found here: https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199_000009_011505294/, accessed on 26.04.2024.

³⁴ <https://ugralit.okrilib.ru/authors/dinislamova-svetlana-silverstovna>, accessed on 26.04.2024.

³⁵ <https://oupiir.ru/departments/folklore>, accessed on 26.04.2024.

³⁶ <https://vestnik-ugrovedenia.ru/en/departments/berezovsky-branch>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

³⁷ <https://gahmao.ru/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

in April 2024 Daria O. Zhornik was able to access them. Some materials in Mansi are accessible through the e-library site of the Yugra State Library³⁸.

Another important event for the Mansi language and literature is the translation of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry into Mansi by Galina R. Kondina (who works in the newspaper *Lūimā Sēripōs*). The book was published in Germany in 2022³⁹. Unfortunately, only very few copies are available to the Mansi community so far.

The radio and TV company *Yugoria* (ugoria.tv) produces news and cultural programs in Russian as well as in Khanty and Mansi. One of them is a weekly Khanty and Mansi news program *Owəs mir potər* ('Words of Northern People')⁴⁰, another one is *Jə:mwə:š šūńəŋ jəχ* ('Happy People of Khanty-Mansiysk')⁴¹ which mostly deals with Ob-Ugric ethnographic topics in Khanty, but also in Russian and Mansi (the Mansi presenter is Raisa M. Gavril'chik, earlier Mansi programs were created by Tatiana S. Merova who has since retired). One Russian-language program, "Yugorian heritage", is dedicated to Ob-Ugric culture.

A further regional company, *Yugra* (ugra-tv), has two programs presenting Ob-Ugric cultures in Russian: "Many faces of Yugra"⁴² and the *Yugorica* program for school children (a quiz pertaining to different mostly ethnographic Ob-Ugric topics)⁴³. The archive of the company also contains some short programs in Mansi, all from 2019⁴⁴.

Radio in Mansi also seems to be still functioning, although no information about it can be found on the Internet. Evdokia I. Khozumova, the only Mansi-speaking radio announcer, works at the radio company *Yugoria* and is said to still produce radio releases in Mansi.

In Khanty-Mansiysk, there is a theatre of Ob-Ugric people⁴⁵ called *Solntse* ('Sun' in Russian), which is an important place of cultural entertainment for locals, especially those Khanty, Mansi or Nenets by nationality. The performances are mostly conducted by young people belonging to these nationalities and they often contain at least some words in indigenous languages, e.g. in a recent performance

³⁸ http://elib.okrlib.ru/jirbis2/index.php?option=com_irbis&view=irbis&Itemid=430, accessed on 10.04.24.

³⁹ https://petit-prince-collection.com/lang/show_livre.php?lang=en&id=6167, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴⁰ <https://www.ugoria.tv/video/broadcasts/uvās-mir-putār/77961>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴¹ <https://www.ugoria.tv/video/broadcasts/yomvosh-shunyāng-yoh>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴² <https://ugra-tv.ru/programs/archive/mnogolikaya-yugra/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴³ https://ugra-tv.ru/programs/detskie_teleprogrammy/yugorikaa/archive/, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴⁴ <https://ugra-tv.ru/programs/archive/luima-seripos/>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴⁵ <https://toun.ru/>, accessed on 26.04.2024.

“How mosquitoes appeared on Earth”, aimed at children aged 6 and above, there were about seven Mansi words introduced in an interactive way with Russian explanations, so we can suppose that these performances may successfully teach some of the very basic phrases of the language. As far as we know, a couple of years ago there was at least one (possibly more) performance fully in Mansi, but today there are no such performances in the theatre programme, probably because they did not attract enough viewers.

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in music in Mansi. The most striking example is the work of Evgeny D. Anyamov (artist name Bizzo), a young Mansi speaker from Treskol’ye in the Ivdel District, currently residing in the town of Ivdel. Since 2019, he has produced over 50 rap tracks in Mansi, as well as multiple videos⁴⁶ for his songs. Apart from the phenomenal amount of content in Mansi he produces, there is special value in his lyrics, as he carries the Mansi language into modern domains which were previously not represented, e.g. love lyrics, which also forces him to invent new linguistic strategies and his own linguistic style to sing on these new topics. Evgeny D. Anyamov is also frequently invited to perform at local events in various places in Sverdlovsk Oblast and Yugra, which helps popularize the Mansi language to the general public. He has also performed a mixed Russian-Khanty-Mansi song⁴⁷ with the group *Xājtnut ērij* (“The Wolf’s Song”), based in Khanty-Mansiysk, but so far the band does not have any releases in Mansi in spite of the band’s Mansi-language name.

On a more traditional side, recently a group of six Mansi women (workers of the newspaper *Lūimā Sēripas*, the centre *Liliņ sōjum*, and the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development) formed a Mansi vocal ensemble *Lūi sam* (‘Northern corner’) and perform traditional Mansi songs at various local city events.

Interestingly enough, the Mansi language and culture bring musical inspiration to people outside of the Mansi community as well. Mrtvesvit, a solo music creator from Yekaterinburg, has recorded two albums of shamanistic ritual neofolk music, many with Mansi texts⁴⁸. As the author shared, he was interested in Mansi culture and folklore from childhood, when he first encountered Mansi folktales in books. Later he studied indigenous mythology and religion and tried to study the Mansi language on his own with the help of existing textbooks and folklore collections. The lyrics of his songs come from existing Mansi folklore materials; he is motivated to study the language further (p.c.).

⁴⁶ One of the examples can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBnbwA6lpIM>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴⁷ https://youtu.be/Ml2Z64tvbUs?si=8ks_CxblZU_UGzc0&t=415, accessed on 20.04.2024.

⁴⁸ One of the albums can be found here:

<https://codmusicdistro.bandcamp.com/album/jolimaa>, accessed on 20.04.2024.

Since there has been a general increase in interest in indigenous culture among the young, we can expect the rise in Mansi-related and hopefully also Mansi-language content. The main active part of the Mansi community might be the young Ivdel Mansi speakers. Recently, Evgeny D. Anyamov decided to open a recording studio in Ivdel and received sufficient funds via crowdfunding; among his plans is creation of a teenage Mansi band with children who live and study in the boarding school in Polunochnoye, who are already engaged in some creative pursuits in the lessons of Anastasiya V. Anyamova. Another upcoming project is being carried out in Yugra and is aimed, among other goals, at the creation of a Mansi (and later possibly also Khanty) multimedia language portal, with various resources and diverse content. We will describe this project in more detail in section 5 below.

5. Projects of language and culture support

There are many projects in Yugra aimed at support of languages and cultures of “indigenous Northern minorities” on the one hand and acquaintance with the indigenous cultures for the Russian-speaking majority on the other. They are financed mostly by grants from the Yugra administration and donations from different companies and organizations. The first deserving mention is the association “To save Yugra” («Спасение Югры»), founded in 1989 by several young representatives of Khanty and Mansi intelligentsia (all of them women, so they were jokingly called the “founding mothers”); its first president was Tatiana S. Gogoleva⁴⁹. Initiators and implementers of these projects are first of all employees of the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development and the staff of both newspapers and television companies, but also the *Liliñ sōjum* educational centre and some others.

The newspapers *Xanti jasaŋ* and *Lūimā sēripōs* frequently organize competitions for children and teenagers involving knowledge of indigenous languages. For example, these competitions include writing a story in Khanty or Mansi, making comics using the language, and reading out poetry. Usually there are two age categories in these competitions, 7–12 and 13–17 years. One of the latest competitions in 2022 involved making videos where children are reading folktales in indigenous languages; 30 videos in Khanty and 25 videos in Mansi were submitted. Some of the videos quickly gained over 3 000 views and we believe that it is a good type of project for popularizing the language. Today these competitions are being held on social network platforms which attracts even more participants and viewers.

⁴⁹ <https://raipon.info/regiony/obshchestvennaya-organizatsiya-spasenie-yugry-khanty-mansiyskogo-avtonomnogo-okruga/>, accessed on 26.04.2024 ; spasenie_ugry.ucitizen.ru

Another important yearly linguistic event is the “Frontal Dictation” in Khanty, Mansi and Nenets, organized every year by the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development. In recent years, it was possible to participate both in person and online. The online test is simpler and consists of around 15 questions about the meaning and grammar of presented Mansi sentences. The in-person format is usually held in schools and various institutions in Yugra and consists of a native speaker reading out a text in one of the languages and the participants writing it down correctly. In 2024, Anastasiya V. Anyamova held a frontal dictation at the school in Polunochnoye, and among participants were not only the children she teaches, but also some adults from Polunochnoye and even Ivdel. The Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development gathers the frontal dictation statistics every year; the number of participants and the scores they get are steadily increasing. According to the latest report, over 1000 participants aged 7 to 87 took part in the event in 2024.

In 2023, Elena V. Frisorger started a small-scale project *Am omam lātəŋ* (“The language of my mother”) funded by a grant of the governor of Yugra. The project is aimed at creating a card game for learning Mansi words, and at least several sets of the game were created and given to different organization involved in promoting the Mansi culture and language, most notably, *Liliŋ sōjum* and the team of the *Māñ ūskwe* (‘Little town’) camp in Saranpaul. The game is a Memory-type game with cards containing pictures of objects and Mansi words for these objects.

The camp *Māñ ūskwe* mentioned above is a very important initiative for promoting the Mansi culture among young people in itself. It is a summer camp located near Saranpaul; it is led by Lyubov P. Stakanova and has several sessions every year. It involves immersion of children and teenagers into traditional Mansi crafts, music and ethnography; in 2024 the camp will be 30 years old. Many young Mansi who are motivated to learn the language and promote the culture have been to *Māñ ūskwe* several times. Unfortunately, there is almost no language education at the camp, although in 2023 participants learned some Mansi vocabulary through the game *Am omam lātəŋ*. In 2019, several Ivdel Mansi teenagers, native speakers of Mansi, came to *Māñ ūskwe* and sparked motivation for language learning. In that session of *Māñ ūskwe* there were workshops on creating comics in Mansi; we hope that such linguistic components in the program of *Māñ ūskwe* will be expanded upon in the future.

An important place in Khanty-Mansiysk for both Khanty and Mansi is the museum⁵⁰ *Tōrum mā* (‘God’s land’). It is located on the outskirts of the city in the forest and features many traditional Mansi and Khanty buildings, either reconstructed or brought from actual indigenous villages. There is also a holy place

⁵⁰ <https://torummaa.ru/>, accessed on 26.04.2024.

for indigenous people where they can pray and bring offerings. Many traditional holidays and rituals, such as the Day of the Crow (a festival on the first day of spring among the Ob-Ugric people) or the ritual of offerings to the moon are held there. Another part of the museum is located in the city centre; various exhibitions about indigenous people are held there, for example dedicated to Mansi and Khanty poets, writers, and painters. Another place in Khanty-Mansiysk where indigenous-themed exhibitions and events are held, albeit more rarely, is the Museum of Nature and Human⁵¹. There is however a general exhibition dedicated to the culture of Ob-Ugric people.

Local events are also organized in the so-called Houses of Culture (*дома культуры*) in villages in Yugra and often attract the indigenous population. For example, in Beryozovo, the Department of Applied Arts of the local House of Culture is the main location where locals can gather and speak their indigenous languages, including Mansi. The department also organizes celebrations of various indigenous holidays, such as the Day of the Crow.

Recently, a large-scale project pertaining specifically to the Mansi language was launched in Yugra. In November 2023, a group of specialists and members of the Mansi community started working on a Northern Mansi online translator. From the technical side, the project is implemented by the Yugra National Research Institute of Information Technologies. From the community side, 30 people are involved: 25 amateur translators (native speakers) from Saranpaul, Khulimsunt and Khanty-Mansiysk, 4 experts, mainly from the Mansi newspaper *Lūimā sēripōs* and the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development, as well as the project manager Nadezhda G. Alekseeva. The project is unique as its motivation and organization stems from the community itself and translation work unites native speakers from several places, as well as IT specialists (Mikhail A. Rusanov and his team) and linguists in the role of consultants (Daria O. Zhornik, Vladimir A. Plungian, Maria I. Satina). At the launch of the project, computers were bought and brought to the villages of Saranpaul and Khulimsunt and educational seminars were held. In some cases the translators are elderly and have difficulties using computers; in this case younger relatives help enter the translation into the software and are thus also involved in the project and start to learn the language. Right now, the project is planned to last at least until the end of 2025, by which time the programmers plan to create a working version of the online translator (possibly with a speech synthesis function), but also a website with different materials for learning Mansi, including video lessons, various media files, a library, an online dictionary and searchable corpora. Creation of a high-quality interactive website through cooperation between the Mansi community, linguists and programmers could

⁵¹ <https://www.ugramuseum.ru/>, accessed on 26.04.2024.

become a significant resource for language revitalization. Moreover, even if the payment for involved participants is not high, the project offers employment for people with Mansi language competence, thus significantly increasing linguistic prestige.

6. Conclusions

Summing up the information we have collected as well as our personal experiences is not an easy task. The emerging picture is complex and contradictory, as life itself.

The administration of Yugra is investing considerable finances into projects initiated by activists; the documents presenting plans like *Kontseptsiya 2015 and 2020* are positively convincing, reports are quite optimistic, but the actual statistics are devastating. There are no signs of any measures to restore the teaching of Mansi on the high school level (though there is some hope for Khanty); many of those responsible for closing down the Ob-Ugric faculty at Yugra University are still *in situ*. Mansi language teaching on the school and preschool level is also in decline as older teachers are retiring and younger ones do not possess sufficient Mansi language competence. Many workplaces involving the Mansi language, such as the Mansi newspaper, can only provide minimal income while the required amount of work is comparable to that of a normal full-time job. As the older generation of Mansi speakers ends their work in education or media, there is no one to replace them; this problem has become critical now as most of the people working with the Mansi language are nearing retirement age.

Despite this, there is still a considerable group of activists interested in revitalizing their languages; many projects they implement are responsible for a definite rise of interest among the young heritage speakers and non-speakers, especially the latest project of a Mansi online translator. There are some other exceptional examples, like the Mansi rapper Evgeny D. Anyamov (Bizzo) and his followers. Still, the majority of the Mansi community in Yugra cities enjoys the financial benefits of belonging to the group of “indigenous Northern minorities”, gladly take part in ethnographic festivals, demonstrating a growing interest in the native culture, but rarely invest their time and effort in learning their heritage language; their family language is Russian and their children prefer other subjects at school to optional Mansi courses.

Still, the situation in smaller villages inspires more optimism; the case of the Mansi linguistic situation is unique and especially exciting due to the existence of a small group of genuine young speakers in Ivdel. In many villages in Yugra, people also realize the importance of preserving the Mansi language. In such circumstances,

it would be preposterous for us to make any prognoses for the future of the language; we just wish the activists good luck and success in their efforts.

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