

(Fighting) the Linguistic Decline and Isolation of the Mari Language

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Who Speaks Mari?

Mari is a Finno-Ugric language spoken by roughly 365,000 people in the Volga and Ural regions of Russia (**Federal'naâ služba gosudarstvennoj statistiki 2011**).

Mari has official status in the Republic of Mari El, a subject of the Russian Federation. It is the voice of a vibrant culture – novels, daily newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and scientific theses are published in Mari, and the language is taught in schools and at university. It is also the working language of the traditional Mari animist religion, which has been practiced by the Maris without interruption for thousands of years.

In spite of all this, Mari is still “definitely endangered” (**UNESCO 2009**).



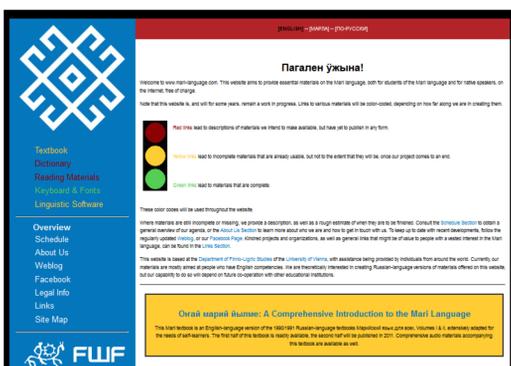
Why is Mari in Decline?

Even though Mari is a codified language with official status, definite constraints exist with respect to its usage. For example, on the Internet, Mari is primarily used by a small circle of enthusiasts; even Mari-related discussion forums primarily use Russian as their working language (**Bartholomä & Schötschel 2013**). There seems to be a stubborn feeling that Mari is an “old-fashioned” language not suitable for such modern contexts. An increasing number of Maris are choosing not to pass on the language to their children – they see it as more of a burden than an asset.

Foreign linguists cannot change the geopolitical and societal conditions in which such attitudes thrive. This does not mean, however, that they must sit by helplessly and watch a language die.

Linguistic Isolation

One clear hurdle to international collaborative efforts aimed at boosting the Mari language's status is its current linguistic isolation: materials geared to foreign students of the language are few and far between, difficult to obtain, often seriously dated, and generally written in Russian, Hungarian, or Finnish. No English-language textbooks, dictionaries, and grammars have been available. Consequently, foreign students have had little chance of developing Mari language skills.



These circumstances motivated the launch of the website www.mari-language.com in 2010. It seeks to provide anyone interested in the Mari language the means needed to learn it in an autodidactic manner: an English-language textbook, an extensive Mari-English dictionary (~45,000 headwords), assistance with using the Mari alphabet in computing, and a number of electronic tools (e.g., a morphological generator, a morphological analyzer, and a spell checker).

A number of these resources are of direct interest to the Mari speaker community as well – first and foremost, the Mari spell check and the Mari-English dictionary. Furthermore, since the Mari language uses a variant of the Cyrillic alphabet that differs slightly from the Russian alphabet in that it has a few additional characters, usage of Mari in computing is not trivial for Mari native speakers. Tools and instructions for this target group are provided on the website.

Mari Participation

During the greater part of the 20th century, the study of Mari in the West mainly took place with archive materials: due to the political situation, direct interaction with the speaker community was not possible. More than twenty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, these constraints no longer exist. All of our resources have been and continue to be developed with the active participation of Mari native speakers. This has been essential to us for several reasons. On the one hand, it gives us quick access to the answers we need. On the other, Mari native speakers have a better grasp of the needs and expectations of Mari users of our products.



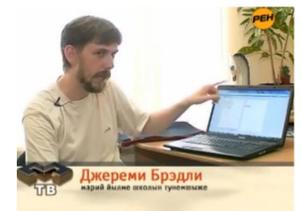
As practical and financial circumstances only allow occasional consultation trips – either from Russia to Vienna or from Vienna to Russia – we have been relying very heavily on the Internet. Work blocks have been exchanged via emails, and consultations and conferences have been carried out using Skype and other web conference tools.



Community Interactions

Sustaining community interest in our project and the resources it is producing has been of great importance to us. Considering the fact that a very significant factor in the declining language transfer of Mari is the general opinion of its speakers that their language is archaic, unneeded and unappreciated, it would be a great pity if our international effort were to be largely unnoticed.

We have been collaborating closely with Mari-language and Mari-related Russian-language media of various types: television channels, radio stations, newspapers, and web publications. The Internet has been invaluable in this regard: the same tools used for consultations with fellow scholars have been used in long-distance Q&A sessions in Mari schools and universities and at cultural events.



References

Bartholomä, Ruth; Schötschel, Monika 2013: *Language policy and linguistic reality of the Mari in the republics of Mari El, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan (Russian Federation)*, Finno-ugrische Mitteilungen, Helmut Buske Verlag, Hamburg (to appear).

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