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The Dolgan language and its speakers

Dolgan is a Northern Siberian Turkic language spoken on the Taimyr Peninsula and in adjacent areas in the extreme north of the Russian Federation. Administratively, the speakers of Dolgan are settled mainly in the Taimyr Dolgan-Nenets District of the Krasnoyarsk Territory and in the Anabar National (Dolgan-Evenki) District of the Republic of Sakha. Together with its closest linguistic relative, Sakha (Yakut), Dolgan forms the Northern Siberian group of the Northeastern branch of the Turkic language family. According to the latest Russian census of 2020, 3,757 people speak Dolgan in everyday life (3,642 in the Krasnoyarsk Territory, 80 in the Republic of Sakha, 35 elsewhere in Russia). Notably, the number of Dolgan speakers has almost increased fourfold since the Russian census in 2010, when 1,054 people were said to speak Dolgan. Although this seems to look very promising for the preservation of the Dolgan language, there are two crucial aspects to be kept in mind: (1) the increase is undoubtedly due to different questioning techniques applied in the 2020 census; (2) it also points clearly toward a stronger self-confidence of Dolgan people and a higher degree of identification with their language. Overall, the census data must be handled carefully and regarded as indicating a good estimation rather than an exact number of speakers.

Map 1 shows the settlements where Dolgan is or was spoken. As a tendency, the more northeastern a settlement is located, the better the language is preserved. Not surprisingly, this is due to the remoteness of the northeasternmost settlements and them being ethnically almost homogenous. In contrast, settlements towards the southwest are mixed with Samoyedic-speaking Nganasans, Tungusic-speaking Evenks and, finally, Russians, of course. Three settlements in the Taimyr Dolgan-Nenets District – Syndassko, Popigaj and Novorybnaja – are to date predominantly Dolgan, and everyday chat in Dolgan can be heard on the street.



As a rule, Dolgan is mainly spoken by older generations, although there are some valuable initiatives, including school teaching, to preserve the language (see Siegl 2013 for details). Dolgan can best be classified as oscillating between “6b” (vulnerable) and “7” (definitely endangered) on the EGIDS scale. In the settlements mentioned above, it is “6b” due to the partial transmission of the language to children, but in other settlements, it is “7” since this transmission is basically lacking.

The traditional way of life among the Dolgans is middle-scale reindeer herding, accompanied by subsidiary hunting and fishing. Traditionally, the Dolgans were semi-nomadic, spending winters at the edge of the forest tundra, but migrating north to the Arctic tundra in spring and summer. Forced by the Soviet authorities, however, most Dolgans were sedentarised at the latest in the 1970s, so they live in settlements today. Whereas the living conditions in the settlements were satisfactory in Soviet times, the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the subsequent implementation of a market economy has led to a rapid decay of the settlements. The latter is rendered visible by run-down buildings, a lack of medical supplies, and ubiquitous alcoholism, among other things. See also Stapert (2013: 14–20, 47) and Däbritz (2022: Ch. 1.2 & 1.4) for a description of the Dolgan people, their lives and living conditions. Recently, there has been a growing awareness among the Dolgans of their traditions, culture, and language. However, it remains unclear to what extent this may result in a stable preservation of the Dolgan culture and language, given the ubiquitous presence of Russians and Russian in all spheres of life.

The ethnonym Dolgan is of Tungusic origin, designating one of the clans from which the Dolgan people arose. It literally means ‘people of the middle reaches’ and is composed of the stem *dul* ‘middle’ and the demonym-forming suffix *-gan*. The Dolgans themselves use this ethnonym rarely; it occurs primarily in official contexts and written language (Däbritz 2022: 7). Instead, the Dolgans call themselves *haka* ~ *hakalar* – undoubtedly cognate to *saɣa* used by the Sakha people as self-denomination – and *tīa* ~ *tīa kihitā* ‘(person of the) forest-tundra’. One group of Dolgans, which lived until the 1930s in the area of what is today Norilsk, called themselves *tägä*, again being of Tungusic origin and simply meaning ‘tribe, clan, people’. See a more detailed discussion of the ethnonyms in Däbritz (2022: 6–7).

The literal meaning of the ethnonym *Dolgan* points to the origin of the Dolgans since the river meant by this denomination is not any river on the Taimyr Peninsula but the Lena River in Eastern Siberia. It can be assumed that the Dolgan and Sakha (Yakut) ancestors had their homeland in Southern Siberia, from which they moved northeastwards during the 13th and 16th centuries. Within this period, they had intensive contact with Mongolic-speaking people, visible in a broad layer of Mongolic code copies in both Dolgan and Sakha. In the first half of the 17th century, Russian colonists reached the Lena basin, from which both Sakha/Dolgan and Tungusic-speaking Evenki people fled northwestwards. Although no solid historiographic sources are available for this period, it seems reasonable to assume that those people developed a fair amount of bilingualism, or even trilingualism, during their migration. In the 18th century, both Dolgan/Sakha and Evenki people were listed in tax books on the Taimyr Peninsula, which was not wholly uninhabited then either. There were the Samoyedic-speaking Nganasan, Tundra Enets, and Tundra Nenets, as well as Russian traders called “Tundra Peasants”. The latter had erected a chain of trade bases across the Taimyr Peninsula, which was essential for the Dolgan ethnogenesis. Both Dolgan/Sakha and Evenki people became increasingly engaged in trade, which led to the formation of a social milieu called “Dolgan”, and the ingroup language of this milieu was Sakha with a notable Evenki substrate. Roughly speaking, this variety was the predecessor of today’s Dolgan. Finally, it is worth noting that a significant number of Taimyr Evenks shifted to Dolgan in the late

19th and early 20th centuries. The ethnogenesis of the Dolgans and the development of the Dolgan language are amply described by Dolgich (1963), Stapert (2013) and Däbritz (2022).

The closest linguistic relative of Dolgan is unsurprisingly Sakha (Yakut), with which it shares many inherited and innovative features. As a tendency, the languages are mutually intelligible, presupposing the speakers' willingness to understand each other; in older research, Dolgan was even treated as a dialect of Sakha. The most salient feature distinguishing Dolgan from Standard Sakha is, without doubt, the development of word-initial h-, e.g. Dolgan hulus 'star' vs Standard Sakha sulus 'id.'. This development has clear parallels in Northern Evenki dialects, and it seems plausible to account for it as a joint innovation of Northern Evenki and Dolgan. However, it should be noted that the change s- > h- is also present in many Sakha dialects, so the picture is more complex and not yet fully understood (see Pakendorf 2008 for a detailed discussion).

Dolgan forms a dialect continuum, which can be divided into Upper/Upriver Dolgan and Lower/Downriver Dolgan. Mutual intelligibility between the dialects is never compromised; as a tendency, the Lower/Downriver dialect is closer to Sakha. Besides these dialects, there is Anabar Dolgan spoken in the Anabar National (Dolgan-Evenki) District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), which can be regarded as a transitional variety between Dolgan and Sakha.

From the very beginning of its existence, Dolgan has had close contact with Evenki, which has led to an ample layer of Evenki code copies in Dolgan. Dolgan-Evenki bilingualism or even Dolgan Evenki-Russian trilingualism was frequent on the Taimyr Peninsula before Soviet times. In contrast, there was only superficial language contact between Samoyeds and Dolgans, which can be explained by their different periods of nomadising, leading to the fact that they hardly met each other in the vast tundra. Only in early Soviet times, Dolgan-Nganasan bilingualism became relevant to some extent, but only in specific settlements, mainly Voločanka and Ust'-Avam. Nowadays, indigenous bilingualism has lost its importance entirely, being replaced by Russian-Dolgan bilingualism, whereby among younger generations, Russian tends to be the first and more vital language. In the easternmost settlements, also Dolgan-Sakha bilingualism can be observed.