



**HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS**

**XVI Whatmough Lecture
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Understanding Language Shift

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Abstract

A large percentage of the world's languages—anywhere from 50 to 90%—are currently spoken in what we call shift ecologies, situations of unstable bi- or multi-lingualism where speakers, and often younger speakers, are not using their ancestral language but rather speaking the majority language. Widespread, ongoing language shift today provides opportunities to study language change and loss in process, rather than as an end product.

Shift ecologies are dynamic: language choices and preferences change, as do speakers' proficiency levels. One result is high levels variation of multiple kinds in these speech communities, including variation in the *linguistic systems* of speakers, as well as in terms of their *proficiency*. Even rapid shift occurs unevenly across the larger community of all speakers, with some members continuing to use the language in the home even after others have given it up. Moreover, people have varying opportunities to use the language, and varying motivations. Here I identify four broad categories of variation: regional (dialectal); generational (language-internal change without contact or shift); contact-based (contact without shift); and proficiency-based (shift due to contact and incomplete acquisition). These categories are somewhat idealized and are not necessarily distinct; regional variation, for example, cuts across the other categories.

In this talk I examine the relationship between changes in morphosyntax, variation and proficiency with attention to case marking, verbal categories and word order, illustrating differences between language-internal and contact-induced change, and loss. Changes across shifting speakers are not fully random or idiosyncratic but show systematicity. Some changes can be explained as interference from the majority (dominant) language, others as leveling and innovation.

The analysis draws heavily on my ongoing research in Arctic language communities in Greenland and northeastern Russia, with examples from Even (Tungusic), Sakha (Turkic) and Kalaallisut (Inuit-Yupiiit-Unangan). They are spoken in differing language ecologies, with differing outcomes. We take a deep dive into changes in Even as spoken in Berezovka (est. population 300 or so), an Even-dominant village where the language is still learned and used by some children; here we consider data across generations and across generations within single families.

Comparative data come from Sakha and Kalaallisut, each with a larger speaker population and status. Sakha is regionally dominant in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), but is a minority

language in the context of the Russian Federation. It shows signs of shift and loss, but at that same time is the only language (other than Russian) that speakers shift *to* in the country. In addition, I present preliminary findings from Kalaallisut, which has a smaller speaker base than Sakha but is robustly spoken, enjoying official status at the national level. It is under intense pressure from Danish and English and shows signs of change.

Methodology is an important part of this work. Research on language shift is often characterized by the description of the linguistic systems of a small subset of speakers, sometimes only one or two. Fieldworkers often report what appear to be changes but often rely on single examples and cannot assess whether such changes are tied to an individual speaker and idiosyncratic, or one-time errors, or whether they represent changes at the level of a community of speakers. Our projects have adapted several experimental methods to gather data that is comparable across different speakers and languages so that we can make generalization about patterns (or lack thereof).