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Maintenance and revitalization of the languages of Russia: Problems in research and practice

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Abstract
Some years ago, "the preservation of linguistic diversity" was included among the official language policy goals in Russia. The goal is difficult to conceptualize and operationalize for practical purposes by the given broad official definition of "linguistic diversity" and by a lack of the official definition of the "preservation". Meanwhile, the goal is pursued as practical activity by language policy practitioners and language activists as well as applied research by scholars. In this context, understanding of what the actors present as its achievement is, therefore, both a practical and scientific problem. The aim of the paper is to analyze academic and official discourses and practices in order to understand how scientific experts in interaction with public officials conceptualize and operationalize the preservation of linguistic diversity in Russia and what they do in practice. The research material consists of texts of official documents, oral discussions by participation of experts and officials during the drafting and approval of their draft versions, and ethnographic data. The material was collected and interpreted drawing on participant observation and discourse analysis. The results show that the unresolved theoretical problem of interdisciplinary causes also problems in applied research. Due to the underdevelopment of the research program on language policy in Russia, applied research is currently carried out mainly within the framework of language revitalization, which, however, is hardly able to provide effective solutions in a country with a state-centric political culture. In practice, efforts at revitalization and documentation replace work on maintaining languages. The study argues that without high-quality scientific expertise in the socio-political sphere of language use, language policy and language revitalization remain ineffective also as a practical activity.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, language preservation, language maintenance, language revitalization, language policy, Russian Federation

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Сохранение и ревитализация языков России: проблемы науки и практики

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Аннотация
Несколько лет назад «сохранение языкового многообразия» было включено в число официальных целей языковой политики России. Однако из-за широкого официального определения «языкового многообразия» и отсутствия официального определения «сохранения» эту цель сложно концептуализировать и операционализировать на практике. При этом к ее достижению в практической деятельности стремятся как практики политики и языковые активисты, так и ученые в рамках прикладных исследований. В этом контексте понимание того, как участники процесса представляют себе достижение этой цели, является одновременно практической и научной проблемой. Цель данной работы — проанализировать академические и официальные дискурсы и практики, чтобы понять, как научные эксперты во взаимодействии с политиками и чиновниками концептуализируют и операционализируют сохранение языкового многообразия в России и что они делают на практике. Материалом исследования послужили тексты официальных документов, устные обсуждения с участием экспертов и должностных лиц при составлении и согласовании версий их проектов и этнографические данные. Материал был собран и проанализирован с использованием включенного наблюдения и дискурсивного анализа. Результаты показывают, что нерешенность теоретической проблемы междисциплинарности обуславливает проблемы в прикладных исследованиях. В связи с недостаточной развитостью исследовательской программы по языковой политике в России, прикладные исследования в настоящее время проводятся в основном в рамках языковой ревитализации, которая, однако, вряд ли способна предложить эффективные решения в стране с государственно-центричной политической культурой. На практике усилия по ревитализации и документации заменяют работу по сохранению языков. В исследовании утверждается, что без высококачественной научной экспертизы по использованию языков в социально-политической сфере языковая политика и языковая ревитализация остаются неэффективными и как практическая деятельность.
Ключевые слова: *языковое разнообразие, сохранение языка, поддержание языка, языковая ревитализация, языковая политика, Российская Федерация*

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1. Introduction

In new matters, research offers policymakers innovative methods to find solutions, make decisions, and bridge good practices and policies. For that reason, it is interesting to study a case of such application of scientific research to the real-life problems, namely language preservation, when researchers participate in drafting official documents, thus, trying to fit their ideas and values into the public discourse to persuade decision-makers. In this article, I will analyze what expertise the Russian academic community could offer and what influence applied science had on the practice of language policy and revitalization, as measured against international experience, which should allow to advance in our understanding of how it is theoretically possible to achieve the preservation of languages, and what kind of agency is necessary for this.

The aim of the paper is to analyze academic and official discourses and practices of the preservation of linguistic diversity in order to understand the role of applied research and expertise in its achievement. The material consists of texts of written documents, oral discussions in their draft versions, and ethnographic observations. I collected and interpreted the research data on discourses and practices through participatory observation of expert work and advancing applied research pursued in the Russian academia under the umbrella of language maintenance and language revitalisation in the interaction with public officials during the process around drafting of the "Concept of State Language Policy of the Russian Federation" (hereafter — Concept) and the "Program of the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences for the Maintenance and Revival of the Languages of Russia" (hereafter — Program).

I directly participated in the practice of language policy in 2021–2023, taking part in a group of experts from the Institute of Linguistics in the advancement of the Draft Concept and also in preparing the text of the Draft Program. The study combines discursive and ethnographic analytical techniques to ensure triangulation of data and identify the gap between what they say and what they do for language preservation. Two documents were selected for the analysis not only because of the accessibility of the field and data but also because they represent two key processes of policymaking: policy formation and adoption ("language policy") in regard to the Concept and implementation ("language planning") in regard to the Program, in which the academic community attempted to make an input.

This article discusses some results of this applied work and is organized into three sections: in the next — second section it discusses the role of science for practice in general and in the third section its role in Russia in particular, followed by discussion in the fourth section. The study addresses in the subsections the following research questions:

- What is the state of research on language preservation in Russian and world science?
- What tools applied research offers to its practitioners?

- How “language preservation” is understood in Russia in theory and practice?
- What and why hinders the practical implementation of preservation goals?

2. Research and practice of language preservation

2.1. Interdisciplinary research and the practical task of maintaining and revitalizing languages

The reduction of linguistic diversity and the disappearance of languages is a complex intergenerational social process that is currently taking place with varying intensity throughout the world and is one of the consequences of modernization. Countries differ both in the degree of population diversity and in their reactions to its change. In societies with deep social cleavages, the demand for preserving diversity is usually higher than in societies characterized by high social cohesion. Language preservation can be understood both as the state of preservation of languages and as an activity that ensures the preservation of this state. In accordance with the degree of population diversity, and sometimes in spite of it, countries have historically developed strategies for managing diversity aimed at preserving or reducing existing social differences in society.

The management of linguistic diversity can also correspond to different types of policies (Kloss 1998). At the present stage of history, most developed countries in Europe confirm their commitment to preserving linguistic diversity. In practice, the corresponding policies often prove ineffective because they are mostly ambivalent. On the one hand, states are by default interested in promoting a single common language, but, on the other hand, they are forced to take into account the risk of deepening social cleavages and to respond to the demand of communities for the preservation of languages, the value of which has been recognized in international human rights standards. Often, the resulting policy of compromise symbolically supports the coexistence of many languages at the level of discourses, but promotes the dominant language at the level of instrumental policy practices.

In such conditions, the task of maintaining and revitalizing languages is non-trivial, because the success of such efforts depends on many variables characterizing both the society itself and the position of the state with respect to diversity. Science plays a leading role in finding answers to new challenges, since it is capable of finding ways to solve such a problem. However, contemporary science is only just approaching the answer to the public demand for the preservation of languages, which has become increasingly universal in recent decades in the context of globalization and simultaneous regionalization and localization.

While fundamental science accumulates new scientific knowledge, applied science applies scientific knowledge and methods in practice to solve problems and tasks in the real world. Applied scientific research is aimed at obtaining new knowledge for the purpose of its practical use to solve various social problems. The

result of applied research is not only new theories and methods, but also forecasts and recommendations for practitioners. In addition, research scientists themselves can participate or be involved in practice as experts. Expert activity is a special type of professional activity, for the implementation of which special knowledge about the object and subject of expertise and the corresponding professional skills for their application in practice are necessary.

In order to meet the challenges of the complexity of social and political processes, scientific research takes on an interdisciplinary character. The trends of language shift, i.e. the transition to another language, and the threat of language extinction were first noticed in the scientific communities of linguists and sociologists. Since the second half of the last century and to this day, an extensive literature on endangered languages has appeared in Western academia, studying primarily the sociological factors of language "withering". Sociolinguists and sociologists of language study the issues of the relationship between language and society, moving towards each other, respectively, from the perspectives of language and society. In an applied vein, they write about "language extinction" ("language death"), "language shift", "reverse language shift", "language preservation", "language maintenance", "language spread", "language revival", or "language revitalization". In other words, on the basis of the study of sociolinguistic processes, modernist goals for changing social realities began to be put forward that envisaged intervening in the areas ("domains") of language use in both the public and private spheres (Fishman 1991).

From these origins, depending on whether they took a top-down or bottom-up approach, scholars initiated the development of two interdisciplinary research programs, i.e. research directions, which were typically pursued by different scientific communities. The first followed the path of revitalizing endangered languages, carried out within the framework of applied linguistics, although interdisciplinary issues were also addressed from the outset (Ferguson 1971, Rehg & Campbell 2018). However, linguists often consider sociolinguistics to be a part of applied linguistics, and the latter, in turn, a section of linguistics. While linguists focus on languages and applied linguists focus on language learners, sociolinguists focus on ideologies and the social meaning that learners attribute to these languages (De Korne 2021). In addition, sociolinguistics as a theoretical and methodological framework attempts to promote social change and development in communities (Farfán & Ramallo 2010). However, communities are often not understood as "language communities" in the terms of sociolinguistics, but rather as "communities of practice". In other words, sociolinguistics in its applied aspects is closer to pragmatics and linguistic anthropology than to linguistics proper.

The second is called "language policy and planning". Some linguists and sociolinguists still consider, I would say mistakenly, language policy and planning to be part of applied linguistics or sociolinguistics. The reason is that often representatives of a certain scientific community, for example linguists, do not see the phenomena that are beyond the "accessibility space" of their academic

discipline, because the latter is an institutionalized form of this very "epistemological community", which separates it from other such communities (Merton 1973). A striking example of the lack of a transdisciplinary perspective is the use of the concept of "language policy", in which linguists pay attention to the adjective that denotes specificity, and do not see the generic concept of "policy". Given the centrality of the relationship between language and power, since the establishment of this direction, language policy has been studied by political scientists and legal scholars, since it is the political choice of languages and their status that often predetermine their future. To this day, language policy research is primarily a public policy research within political science, which makes a key contribution to the interdisciplinary project of "language policy and planning" (Gazzola et al. 2023).

It thus seems obvious, but remains insufficiently articulated in the scientific discourse, that policy "from above" and practice "from below" turned out to be the fields of study of different interdisciplinary research programs, dominated by different specialists — linguists and political scientists — and which focused on different research objects — people, social groups, societies and states. In my view, however, the humanities-based program, which focuses on understanding people and small groups "from below," lacks anthropologists and ethnologists, while the social sciences-based program, which studies society and political structures "from above," lacks qualitative research and a normative perspective. As I will demonstrate below, this situation has created problems not only for applied research, but also for the practice of language policy and revitalization.

2.2. Theoretical and applied aspects of language policy and language revitalization

Traditionally, language policy was considered as a policy "from above", from the state, that is, state policy aimed at changing or preserving a language within the borders of a country or region by regulating the use of languages in the official sphere (Gazzola 2023). In recent decades, it has also become common to talk about the plurality of policy actors and "language policy from below", from the communities and activists, implemented through public activity outside the official sphere (Johnson 2023). For this reason, "policy from below" is often characterized as "language activism" in the sense of politics (De Korne 2021).

At the same time, in my opinion, it is impossible to draw a clear distinction between policy and politics without taking into account the context of the political system of a particular country. Usually, the development of the public sphere indicates a plurality of policy actors in countries with a developed civil society, which allows us to talk not just about state policy, but about public policy. In contrast, in some countries, such as modern Russia, the idea of the state as the guiding force of society ("nation") remains the cornerstone of political and administrative culture (Peters et al. 2022), which allows us to talk about their "state-centricity".

Language policy "from above" is shaped in practice by politicians and implemented by public officials. Accordingly, it is studied as a state or public policy primarily by political scientists. Within the framework of the "ethnographic turn", the importance of studying language policy "from below", that is, from the perspective of "people in politics", is also discussed. However, it is worth remembering their different, official and public, roles. The decisions of politicians are expressed in policy and are studied by political science and its subdiscipline of public policy, while the decisions of individuals are expressed in practices and are studied by sociolinguistics (Gazzola et al. 2023). In the latter case, ordinary people act as activists and participate in language activism. Moreover, if for activists from among ordinary people this is a practical activity, then for linguists and other scientists it is both a practical and scientific-applied activity on the practical application of their knowledge. To study such activities of activists, including activists from among researchers, a research program on "language revitalization" is developed.

Scientists not only study political, social and psychological realities within the framework of fundamental science, putting forward theories of language policy and revitalization, but also try to apply scientific results in practice, that is, they are engaged in applied science. Numerous studies, mostly of a practical and applied nature, have appeared, including attempts to reverse the processes of language extinction (Hinton et al. 2018). Moreover, in the course of their research, scientists can not only help language activists, that is, be an intermediate link between science and practice, but also engage in language activism themselves, that is, act as language activists, seeing their mission in language revitalization. Various forms of activism by scientists are possible, including supporting and expanding existing initiatives and networks, (re)producing a positive view of language and culture, and directly participating in or offering active measures and tangible products (De Korne 2021).

Thus, as in the case of language policy, language revitalization is also not only a practical but also a scientific activity within the framework of applied linguistics, although here the boundary between research and practice is rather blurred. Relatively arbitrarily, scientists divide studies into those that are essential for practice, which include language documentation, bilingualism research, sociology of language choice, linguistic anthropology, and others, and those that are directly related to language revitalization, which include language change studies in the context of revitalization, multilingual education, research on psychological factors, language policy studies, etc. (Hinton et al. 2018). These lists show that language policy studies and language revitalization studies are connected and intersect.

Language revitalization can also be understood as both a state and an activity, that is, a process aimed at giving new "vitality" to a language whose use is declining. If the use has ceased altogether, this activity is usually called "language revival". In English two other concepts — "maintenance" and "preservation" — are in use to denote efforts at preserving languages. While there is no agreed

definition, language maintenance usually refers to the ongoing effort to keep a language alive and in use, and language preservation often involves more formal strategies and initiatives to protect a language from disappearing and in that is close to revitalization. Further, the goal of revitalization is to increase the relative number of language speakers and expand the number of domains in which languages are used. This is different from language maintenance, which in this context is interpreted as maintaining the number of speakers and the number of language domains. Regarding the mechanism, revitalization almost always requires a change in the community's attitude to the language, while maintenance is aimed at protecting the community from the imposition of external views on it (Grenoble & Whaley 2005).

In an effort to transfer the ideas of language revitalization to Russian soil, researchers tend to forget that a favorable political environment and an appropriate language policy are a prerequisite for the success of revitalization. As comparative studies of attempts at language maintenance and revival in relation to "small" and "medium"-sized languages in different countries show, for example Hebrew, Northern and Inari Sami, Welsh and Cornish, Catalan and Basque, Hawaiian or Maori, the efforts of activists are crowned with success quite rarely and only if they are supported by appropriate language legislation and a functioning mechanism of language rights (Zamyatin et al. 2012).

Furthermore, even under favorable legislative framework, efforts of language activists alone are necessary but not sufficient. The experience of implementing the language policies of the republics in the post-Soviet period shows that policy "from above" is not enough due to its limitation to the official sphere, and to achieve results in language maintenance the work of language policy practitioners must be combined with the "bottom-up" practical efforts of activists from the communities themselves. In addition, language policy at the center in a complex state can limit language policy at other levels of government (Zamyatin 2014). Moreover, good practices at the "bottom" have to be conceptualized and operationalized to take decisions for their multiplication on the larger scale of policy. However, I also found in my applied work (Zamyatin 2024a, 2024b) that, it is difficult to integrate the diverging approaches "from above" and "from below", because so far their work remains without solid scientific and conceptual grounds, more about which is in the next section.

3. Applied Research and Practical Activity of Drafting the Program on the Maintenance and Revival of Languages

3.1. Program's envisaged format

To become state policy, language issues, including the issue of language preservation, are to be incorporated into official documents. The 2020 presidential

instructions[1] after the 2019 session of the Presidential Council on the Russian Language demanded, among other measures, drafting of the "Concept of State Language Policy of the Russian Federation" and ordered the Government to "provide financial, legal and organizational support" both"for the development and implementation of the Program of the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences for the Maintenance and Revival of the Languages of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia" and "for the development, formation and functioning of the "National Vocabulary Fund" on the basis of the Vinogradov Russian Language Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences", and in another provision the instruction "to develop and approve the state program of the Russian Federation "Support and Promotion of the Russian Language Abroad".

The initiated process of drafting of the Concept and also the Program provided a chance for developing and implementing the task of the preservation of linguistic diversity by participation of scientific experts, because, despite the prevalence of symbolic policy and other political obstacles, the threshold for the Program's approval was lower at the time. However, when the political leadership presented the demand for expertise in shaping language policy, there were no agency in charge of language policy and no obvious centers of competence in either the government structures or the academia that could offer expertise for drafting the document. This suggests that the reason for the failure to use this window of opportunity is not only in the political realm, but also in the inability of the scientific community to develop a blueprint for language preservation that could persuade politicians and be functional for policy practitioners.

The reason for this is that in Russia, the research program on language revitalization has been developing, while the research program on language policy remains underdeveloped, which is manifested, for example, in the absence of relevant scientific institutional structures. The lag in the development of studies is caused by both the absence of a corresponding tradition — there was no political science in the USSR — and the continuity in the policy practice itself, according to which language policy until recently was still considered as part of nationalities policy. The unresolved problem of interdisciplinarity predetermines the limited influence of Russian applied science on the practice of language policy. The marginal scientific impact, in turn, is expressed in the lack of institutionalization of language policy as a separate direction of state policy and a separate branch of public administration (Zamyatin 2023a).

While the legal basis for drafting the Program was created in the presidential instructions, the issues about its format and scope remained unspecified, whether this is "a state program" as another strategic document or a "scientific program" and, thus, what kind of activities it envisages, whether it refers only to corpus

[1] List of instructions following the meeting of the Council under the President of the Russian Federation on the Russian Language, which took place on November 5, 2019 [Electronic resource], March 1, 2020. URL: http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/62918 (date accessed: 12 August 2025).

planning or to all types of language planning in relation to other languages of the peoples of Russia. When proposing the Program's title for the inclusion into the presidential instructions, the Institute of Linguistics did not specify the format and, instead, added its own name to the title to remain in control of its drafting but also, at a later stage, of implementation in practice, i.e. as of a state program.

Language planning is the activity of implementing language policy. According to the classic work on language policy and planning by R. Cooper, of the types of language planning, the only one that can be related to the practical work of linguists is corpus planning, i.e. such activities as creating new terms, alphabets or rules, as well as compiling a list of languages, which can also be done under the auspices of "linguistic documentation". Planning the status of languages, including their functions and domains of their use in society, and their use in the field of education for the dissemination of language knowledge and skills is carried out by practitioners of policy and education, i.e. politicians, civil servants, school principals, teachers, etc. (Cooper 1989).

Regarding the support for the initiative of the Vinogradov Russian Language Institute, which is the language regulator for Russian, it is clear that this refers to planning the corpus of the Russian language. By analogy, the task to the Institute of Linguistics also envisaged rather a scientific program directed at corpus planning, even though oriented towards research into language revitalization. In a similar way, the format of the Program was interpreted in the correspondence between the Institute of Linguistics, which was developing its text, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, which supervised this activity on behalf of the Government. The Ministry expected only "methodological recommendations" as a result of the Program work, that is, it did not recognize itself as the "government procurer" of such a Draft Program. In other words, there was no "interested party" in the Government — a ministry or department that could act as the "government procurer" of the Program.

Another issue that remained undecided was whether the Program should have applied to all "languages of Russia" but Russian as the only safe language, to "the languages of the peoples of Russia", or only towards those usually smaller languages that did not enjoy support at the regional level, because since the early 1990s most republics and autonomous districts regularly approved their programs of the maintenance and development not only of their titular languages, including state languages of republics and official languages of autonomous districts, but usually also traditionally used minority languages (Zamyatin 2014).

The initiators of the Program intended to cover all non-Russian languages, that is, not only "minor" but also "middle-sized" languages, and translated its initial title "Programma sokhraneniya i vozrozhdeniya korennykh yazykov Rossii" as "Program for the preservation and revitalisation of indigenous languages of Russia" (Kibrik 2021, Gruzdeva 2022). Earlier, these were the Russian linguists who actually advocated for the inclusion of the formula of "the preservation of linguistic diversity" into the constitution and legislation and advocated for the concept of

"languages of Russia" instead of "languages of the peoples of Russia". This is a double-sided change, because, on the one hand, the concepts allow including also dialects and vernaculars but, on the other hand, are less concrete for the purpose of implementation than the formula of "the maintenance and development of the languages of the peoples" that is in use in legislation.

One concept "sokhranenie" is used in Russian for both "maintenance" and "preservation", but the distinction is also topical in dealing with linguistic diversity in Russia, where "middle-sized" languages and "minor" languages can be posited on a continuum of different types of their situations. Russian is the state language of the whole country and the dominant language; "middle-sized" languages typically include 37 state languages of republics and more than 35 languages of national minorities; "minor" languages include more than 30 languages of "small-numbered indigenous peoples" and other small languages. I argue that in the Russian realities "middle-sized" languages still function and usually are in need of "maintenance" and "minor" languages often are disappearing and in need of "preservation", "revitalization" and "revival".

To give more terminological nuances, it is further Russian specifics that since the late 1980s, the concept of "language revival" did not imply revival "from scratch", but by analogy with the concept of "national revival" and along with the concepts of "maintenance and development of languages", it was used to describe policy "from above" (Zamyatin 2014). For this reason, the later concept of "language revitalization" is often contrasted with them and usually interpreted as the activity of language activists, language activism coming "from below", although occasionally it was also used as a synonym for language revival. However, the times changed, and currently there is hardly any public discourse on language revival left.

The Draft Program was developed on the basis of the Program Concept[2], which does not explicitly indicate the meaning of distinguishing two separate aspects of "the preservation and revitalisation" in the title but these are different from the traditional legal formula for naming programs, "the maintenance and development". Therefore, I think that it is more accurate to translate the concepts "preservation and revitalization" in the title as "maintenance and revival", precisely because the Program was intended to cover also middle-sized languages, while "revitalization" ("revitalizatsiya") is not the same as "revival" ("vozrozhdeniye"). Language maintenance and revival are two types of activities that, in essence, coincide with the perspectives of two research programs discussed in the previous section — language policy and planning and language revitalization.

Such a combination of "top-down" policy and "bottom-up" efforts could have become a strength of the Draft Program. However, in practice, I argue that this was also one of the reasons for the failure to achieve its approval. Such a dualism of

[2] Concept of the Program for the Preservation and Revival of the Languages of Russia, approved by the Advisor to the President of the Russian Federation V. I. Tolstoy on August 13, 2020. Not published.

goals has no basis in the current legislation. If "preservation of linguistic diversity" is an official and potentially feasible goal of the state nationalities policy and language policy, then the goal of "language revival" is not set within the framework of the current policy. The issue of "language revitalization" is not on the political agenda, because "linguistic diversity" is stated to include only "functioning", that is, "living" languages. The revivalist goal is difficult to justify pragmatically and even more difficult to operationalize and implement. In view of this, in the context of limited resources inherent in any policy, it is unlikely that the goal of language revitalization will become part of state policy in the foreseeable future. It is unlikely that the state will allocate the necessary resources to revive "dead" and "dying" languages today.

Furthermore, the proposed approaches of the Program Concept do not correspond to the goal of "maintenance of languages". The idea was that the proposed approaches should correspond to the types of language situations of "medium-sized languages" or "minor languages" and, in the latter case, depend on whether they are considered "definitely endangered", "severely endangered" or "critically endangered" according to the criteria of the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. "Changing social practices, increasing the prestige of the language, primarily in everyday communication" is proposed as an approach to solving the problems of "medium-sized languages" and "minor languages", the language nest method for "endangered" "minor languages", and linguistic documentation for "minor languages" "on the verge of extinction" (Kibrik 2021, Gruzdeva 2022).

The goals and approaches were determined mainly by linguists who look at the issue of language maintenance from the perspective of revitalization, that is, as work "from below". Such a formulation of approaches primarily implies language revitalization, while planning the status and in the field of education is not set as a task here. While the focus on prestige planning could have potentially been a strong point of the Draft Program, one can strive based on these approaches in terms of language planning for the goal of "language revival", but not "language maintenance". The latter can be systematically implemented only through the activities of government bodies and public institutions. The very approach to solving the problem through the development of a state program is an example of an approach "from above". And rightly so, because in a country with a state-centric political culture, the problem of preserving languages can only be solved within the framework of a state program developed on the basis of research into language policy and implemented under supervision of a ministry or department. Without this, the Draft Program just remained a piece of paper not taken by authorities into their work and the respective government task was removed in 2024 from the control on implementation.

3.2. Program's envisaged content

Having the format of state program in mind, we with a colleague of mine compiled the initial Draft Program that was based on an analysis and selection of the best practices from measures listed in the programs for the maintenance and development of languages of the republics of Russia and structured according to the types of language planning. I left the team after realizing that, especially after the change in policy priorities since 2022, there is no prospect of the draft ever becoming a state program. The work on the Draft Program continued mainly by linguists, who considered it rather as a pretext for advancing the research program of language revitalization in Russian science. In substantial parts, the work was carried out as a one-off action on the principle of "stone soup", that is, on the basis of the expertise of invited specialists — lawyers and economists, but without politicians. As a result, the final product was not supported by high-quality expertise. Essentially, the final Draft Program is not based on the template for a strategic document and is also impassable for factual errors that begin from its proposed title.

Specifying the title of the Draft Program, in the final version the concept "revival" was changed to "development" to comply with the legislation. Further, the concept "indigenous peoples" was dropped from "languages of the indigenous peoples of Russia" leaving "languages of Russia" instead of legally correct "languages of the peoples of Russia"[3]. Another error in the title was the selection of the concept "federal program" in an attempt to present it as a state program, which is an existing but unfit form. In view of these controversies, it is not so much the text of the Draft Program itself that is interesting in a scientific sense, but the framing of the problem of language preservation in the Program Concept produced by the community of Russian linguists.

Since language revitalization research in Russia develops as a borrowing from the international scientific agenda, accordingly, the goals and approaches were taken from there. The goals corresponded to the approaches depending on the language situation and envisaged the maintenance of "middle-sized languages", the revitalization of "endangered" "minor languages" and the documentation of "minor languages" "on the verge of extinction". Theoretically, it is possible to interpret these types of activities as three successive stages of a comprehensive approach: first, languages are documented "for the purpose of revitalization", then they are revived, and then maintained. This classification of three types or areas of activity implies that language documentation and revitalization are not actually language maintenance.

In part of language documentation, the title of the Draft Program did not include such direction, but it was highlighted as a separate type of activity and was

[3] See Final Draft "Federal Program for the Preservation and Development of the Languages of Russia" dated September 9, 2024 [Electronic resource]. URL: https://iling-ran.ru/languages_of_russia/federal'naja_programma_soxranenija_jazykov_2024.pdf (date of access: 12 August 2025).

also included in the name of the new structural division that was created in the Institute of Linguistics specifically for the task of drafting the Program. Further, it was argued that the task of documentation is to be pursued for the purpose of revitalization, that is documentation in its applied aspect is not revitalization. Documentation could, under certain conditions, be considered preliminary work for revitalization, if we mean data collection for the purpose of sociolinguistic study. Indeed, language revitalization is closely related to documentation, but revitalization is rarely the main goal of documentation; rather, such a goal is linguistic research itself (Austin & Grenoble 2007).

My observation is that in practice linguists are rather interested in documenting languages because it allows them to collect personal materials for their own linguistic research. The key problem here is that descriptive (field) linguistics distances itself from speakers, and in the worst case, establishes exploitative relations with them when it treats them as objects and means to an end. For example, there is a practice that is called "parachute" or "helicopter research", when foreign researchers conduct fieldwork in third world countries, and complete the research at home without any further interaction with local colleagues and communities (on the problems of decolonization of linguistics, including during revitalization, see Hudley et al. 2024).

Similar practices also take place in Russia, when metropolitan scholars go to regions. It is characteristic that the work on documentation and revitalization is concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and only partly in Novosibirsk and Tomsk. Today, the desire to "give something back" to communities and to promote empowerment of their participants is widely recognized as an important ethical principle in endangered language research (Hinton et al. 2018). In language revitalization, such interactions involve balancing power relations between researchers and those being researched in an attempt to agree on priorities for reversing language shift (Fishman 1991). A clear consideration of the skill set that a particular linguist brings to a community and what the community can gain from such a relationship is crucial to avoiding conflict situations (Pine & Turin 2017).

In part of language revitalization, the specific tasks of applied work on the Program were not based on newly collected field data, but, in essence, were reduced to systematization of available data and creation of a database of the best foreign and Russian practices "on revitalization of languages" for the purpose of their adaptation for use in Russia. Of these, it was proposed to use for the revitalization of "medium-sized" and "minor" languages in Russia the internationally known and tested methods, respectively, of "language nest" and "master — student" (for more details on the methods, see Zamyatin et al. 2012). However, these methods are unadaptable, because the authorities repeatedly on different occasions stated that these "foreign" methods cannot be used in the Russian education system for political and legal reasons (see Zamyatin 2024a). Thus, the work on language revitalization is carried out only at the level of linguistic activism of researchers who are guided not by scientific, but by "everyday knowledge", because it is not in

their sphere of expertise and specialization. Modern knowledge is socially distributed, and each area of knowledge has its own special semantic field, which distinguishes the corresponding specialty or profession and the techniques of its reproduction.

In part of language maintenance, this task had to be achieved in view of the drafters through "popularization" of languages in state-wide information campaigns. Indeed, one of the main principles of the language policy of most countries, including Russia, is non-interference by the state in the freedom of use of languages in the private sphere. This means that only tools are available for encouraging, but not mandatory use of other languages than Russian as the state language of Russia. However, popularization of languages without a scientific justification in the program theory of the connection between policy inputs and outputs in the form of a system of performance indicators, a lot of resources can be spent on non-obvious results, as usually happens with advertising. Systemic prestige planning can only be done as part of a "state program", which would provide not only the corresponding organizational, regulatory and financial instruments, but also carefully selected information policy instruments (Gazzola 2023).

This brings us back to the issue about policy actors, including the role of scientific experts. Today prestige planning is the most relevant area of sociolinguistic research. The development of methodological recommendations in the framework of the "scientific program" also would have required the appropriate expertise. Prestige is primarily a category of social, economic and managerial sciences. Raising prestige is a matter of status planning, that is, a task for interdisciplinary research at the macro level and the "state program". Applied research support here could be effective only from the perspective of language policy research. Limiting the scope of work on language preservation to "everyday communication" and efforts "from below" by definition cannot be a solution to the problem of language maintenance. A conscious information impact at the level of symbolic policy could become an essential mechanism. Humanities knowledge could play a key role in understanding discourse and its role in the reproduction of power relations: discourse structures the existing social order and the interactive order that supports it, and it is very difficult to change.

This concerns also scholarly activism. In order to engage in activism, one needs agency, which is practically non-existent today beyond the state. Despite the rhetoric about the "participation of civil society institutions" in implementing policy, in practice, the authorities do not welcome independent initiatives "from below". Activists are dependent on the authorities and their language policy. Activism is possible only if the authorities allow, or rather, order and finance certain activities. The work of several self-organized activists will not change anything — what can change is the officially sanctioned systemic activity of organizations or activity within other institutional forms of language policy. In order to know how

to achieve political results in such a system, it is necessary to study the applied aspects of political science.

In these conditions, developing a draft of an official document is more than developing a text. The real text of a working document can only appear as a result of negotiations between experts and other actors, that is, when it collides with real politics in its struggle for limited resources. For this to happen, systematic practical work on preserving languages and promoting this task on the political agenda should be provided by a transdisciplinary "epistemic community". By forming such a community, experts unite in a network based on shared values and knowledge regarding the problem, being representatives of different disciplines — in this case, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists, as well as research economists and legal scholars. They also should form a community of practice to ensure the creation and maintenance of an environment for the production and transfer of knowledge and skills.

In practice, an academic discipline in the Russian academy, for example linguistics, is sustained by a respective disciplinary community that functions as a corporation uniting academic institutes in the main cities but within its academic boundaries, which becomes an obstacle to interdisciplinarity. Academic corporations pursue their own interests, first of all, in finding additional funding, when seeking assignment for governmental tasks even for topics beyond the scope of their academic expertise necessary for achieving a societal impact. Corporations function as hierarchical structures, in which leadership spreads funds in solidarity not to effectively fulfill the task but to sustain the community, members of which evaluate work also beyond their competence but approve each others' results. The desire for harmony or conformity within a corporation contributes to groupthink and leads not only to the lack of Mertonian skepticism, thus, violating one of the basic rules of the scientific method, but also to flawed recommendations for decision-making. The culture of groupthink is also the typical reason for the failure of large government projects, when such flaws come to surface, like the one on drafting the Program.

Scientific experts have agency when they advise authorities on a problem or even propose solutions. The demand of the state for the development of the Draft Concept and Draft Program by the scientific community was the recognition of such agency. However, experts have agency to the extent that they are authoritative in the eyes of politicians and officials, because they can create a high-quality product and advance it. The Draft Program was produced, if to cite a testimony from the oral discourses of linguists, with a narrow vision of work, which can be expressed in the conditional maxim: "we will write the Program as we see it, and let them think about how to implement it". However, the maximalism of demands put forward, not only for the preservation but also for the revival of languages, and documentation, does not help the cause, but justifies the mere symbolic policy of the authorities, who limit themselves to minimal support, because "it is impossible to preserve everything" anyway. Behind the seemingly ethically impeccable

demand for "everything at once" there is not the interest of the cause, but a corporate interest. This is the result of such a "cycle of show". Linguists may be sincerely interested in preserving languages and driven by the motivation of not only taking from community, but also giving, yet too often they lack the knowledge and skills how to do it. The theory of "small deeds" at the micro-level of revitalization legitimizes the practice of government technocrats in purely symbolic support like printing individual book titles with small circulations, developing table games, counting expeditions and focusing on "minor languages". All this the government reports as the work on language preservation.

4. Discussion

Agency as the ability of people to act and achieve a social effect can be exercised both through policy "from above" and through activism "from below". In recent decades, the states intensified their policies in order to change their linguistic situations, which often are a response to language activism. At the same time, even when policies symbolically support language preservation, they often lack mechanisms to pursue material results. Comparative studies show that successful attempts to preserve and especially revive languages are always ensured by appropriate language legislation and a functioning mechanism of language rights. Without creating a favorable socio-political macro- and micro-level environment, the existing social structure continues to predetermine social processes, that lead to a shift to the dominant language, and significantly limits the agency of policy practitioners and language activists. The policy "from above" is crucial, because if it does not substantially support the preservation of languages, then it thereby becomes an element of the social structure that significantly limits the effect of activist efforts "from below".

International science has advanced in understanding the possibilities and consequences of influencing language processes. Yet, the problem of interdisciplinarity in the study of language, society and power has not yet been resolved. Policy "from above" and practical activity "from below" have become areas of study for two separate interdisciplinary research programs, pursued by different epistemic communities. In Russia, sociolinguistics is interpreted broadly, when every topic connected to language, including language policy and planning, is counted under linguistics, and, thus, also in its applied aspect, done by linguists. Language revitalization and language documentation are the subdisciplines of linguistics and also the applied activities pursued by scholars in applying their knowledge. At the same time, measures of state support for "maintenance" and "development" are directed not at languages per se but at individuals, communities and societies, and, thus, are not the topic of (socio)linguistics, but of the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, political science.

In Russia, in the conditions of underdevelopment of the research program of language policy and planning, linguists mostly do applied research on the problem of language preservation and suggested to look for solutions in the research

program of language revitalization that was imported from international research. The underlying assumption is the plurality of actors of language policy that not only the state but also institutions of civil society and even individuals have agency. However, one should remember that agency in societies is distributed unevenly. This imported assumption does not take into account the Russian realities, because of a lack of understanding of how the political system works. Specifically, power in Russian society still mainly comes down "from the top down" as political and managerial decisions within the framework of state policy and public administration. An analysis of Russian official discourse in the policy documents also shows that language policy is still conceptualized and pursued as "state-centric." In this setting, the program of language revitalization is unable to propose effective solutions to language preservation.

Therefore, the unresolved theoretical problem of interdisciplinarity leads to a lack of high-quality scientific expertise in language preservation at the applied level, for which reason language policy and language revitalization as a practical activity also remain ineffective. The authorities express their commitment to the preservation of linguistic diversity and their demand for the "scientific-conceptual justification" of policy. However, these statements are to be understood as discursive actions of symbolic policy. This does not mean that the policy is just a smokescreen but only that it reinterprets contested symbols and embeds them into discourses to formulate official narrative. Potentially, even when the state is the main policy actor, scientific community as part of civil society can influence inputs also of symbolic policy.

In practice, government structures also demand for scientific-conceptual justification in the process of policy formation, but officials do not perceive scientific experts on language revitalization seriously due to inadequate supply of expertise to political realities. In this article, I provided some evidence of the inadequacy of scientific expertise that eventually manifested itself in the inability to use the opportunity to advance the cause for language preservation to be included in the Concept and to achieve the approval of the Program. The bureaucracy and the academia could not harmonize their discourses on the problem when drafting the Concept. Officials tried to fulfill the formal requirement for policy's harmonization with the scientific counterparts, but were provided with unprocessable expertise and ignored it. Notably, the failure of harmonization has not become an obstacle for the further approval of the Concept (Zamyatin 2023b).

What the Russian case can teach scholars and practitioners of language preservation? The lesson for academia is that it should preserve modesty. In order to influence policy, one must understand how it is formed, in terms of process, format and content. The applied knowledge and practical skills of language revitalization remained unclaimed as the scientific experts had limited awareness of the practice of language politics as a public policy, like the existing formal requirements for the development of drafts of strategic documents, and were unable

to formulate their vision as policy input in the language of political discourse, to conduct negotiations, etc.

In terms of the content proposed as policy input, the Draft Program envisaged the goals and approaches of language documentation, revival and maintenance that did not reflect the existing legislation and policy practice. Among the types of language planning to be a practical work for the language maintenance and revival, only corpus planning and composing the list of languages is done by linguists, which goes under the label of "documentation". However, documentation in its applied aspect is not revitalization. It could be counted as preliminary work, but by the lack of resources this should not be in the priorities, because it is not revitalization, and especially documentation should not substitute revitalization. Crucially, what lacked was a vision for language maintenance.

The lesson for policy practitioners is that the task of preserving languages must be solved, as is being done in the case of promoting the dominant language, primarily at the level of state policy of both the country as a whole and its regions and municipalities, and not only at the level of language activism. Grassroots work must not replace policy "from above" in the case of any community larger than a village. Moreover, joint efforts will be effective only if they are based on scientific research into language policy and language revitalization. Without qualified scientific justification and grounded only in the current political situation, policy practitioners take their political decisions that turn out to be not only ineffective, but also potentially and actually conflict-generating.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the interrelation between research and practice and explored the potential contributions of the research directions "language policy and planning" and "language endangerment and revitalization" to solving the practical problem of language preservation. I identified similarities and differences between the studies of language policy and language revitalization in their theoretical and applied aspects, as well as their partial overlap. These two interdisciplinary research programs are being brought to Russia, but at a different pace, and have to be adapted to the Russian political realities.

Studying the Russian case, I analyzed discourses and practices of drafting the official documents that reveal the current broad understanding of language preservation that impedes its practical implementation. Despite the rhetoric in support of the preservation of linguistic diversity both in the official and scientific discourses, the practical actions are not scaled up to the task, which is the evidence of the non-sufficient expertise and the current limited role of applied research work in its achievement. I demonstrated how, at the present stage, the lack of distinction between two research programs results in substitution of language maintenance by language revitalization and documentation.

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