Russian Journal of Linguistics
ISSN 2687-0088 (Print), ISSN 2686-8024 (Online)

2026 Vol. 30 No. 2 417–441
http://journals.rudn.ru/linguistics

https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-47476
EDN: CMUSCT

Research article / Научная статья

Four generations, three languages, one island: Language shift and identity negotiation among Sakhalin Koreans

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Abstract
This article investigates language shift and identity negotiation among four generations of Sakhalin Koreans, drawing on 44 life-history interviews conducted in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. The study aims to reveal the patterns and strategies used by speakers of highly endangered languages via complex analysis of the contexts of unbalanced bilingualism. It examines how Korean, Russian, and Japanese have accumulated distinct ideological meanings across a century of displacement, colonial rule, Soviet assimilation and post-Soviet transformation. The analysis demonstrates that language shift in this community does not follow a linear path toward Russian, but instead reflects patterned strategies developed within families to maintain heritage connections while adapting to institutional and social pressures. First-generation multilingual repertoires illustrate the historical layering of linguistic resources; second-generation speakers navigate the closure of Korean-medium schools by developing 'kitchen Korean' as a functional domestic code; third-generation speakers rely on symbolic and receptive ties to Korean; and fourth-generation speakers engage with heritage largely through popular culture and transnational mobility aspirations. Across these trajectories, identity emerges as a negotiated and historically situated process rather than a fixed category. Speakers draw on available linguistic and cultural resources to position themselves within overlapping layers of belonging (ethnic, regional, national, and transnational). The findings highlight the durability of heritage identities even under conditions of linguistic assimilation and contribute to broader debates on multilingualism, diaspora identity, and the long-term dynamics of language maintenance and loss in minority communities. The study contributes to understanding how identity negotiation operates in contexts marked by multiple displacement experiences and shifting political arrangements.
Keywords: *language shift, language ideologies, language and identity, Sakhalin Koreans*

For citation:
Zoumpalidis, Dionysios & Mira B. Bergelson. 2026. Four generations, three languages, one island: Language shift and identity negotiation among Sakhalin Koreans. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 30 (2). 417–441. https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-47476 EDN: CMUSCT

Четыре поколения, три языка и один остров: языковой сдвиг и конструирование идентичности у корейцев Сахалина

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Аннотация
В данной статье проводится комплексный анализ процессов языкового сдвига и конструирования идентичности среди четырех поколений сахалинских корейцев на основе 44 биографических интервью (life-history interviews), проведенных в Южно-Сахалинске. Целью работы является выявление паттернов и стратегий, используемых носителями языков, находящихся под серьезной угрозой исчезновения, в условиях несбалансированного билингвизма. В исследовании рассматривается, как корейский, русский и японский языки приобретали специфические идеологические значения на протяжении столетия, отмеченного депортациями, колониальным правлением, советской ассимиляцией и постсоветскими трансформациями. Анализ показывает, что языковой сдвиг в данном сообществе не является линейным процессом перехода на русский язык. Напротив, он отражает структурированные семейные стратегии, направленные на сохранение связей с культурным наследием в условиях адаптации к институциональному и социальному давлению. Мультилингвальный репертуар первого поколения иллюстрирует историческую многослойность языковых ресурсов; представители второго поколения, столкнувшиеся с закрытием корейских школ, выработали «кухонный корейский» в качестве функционального домашнего кода; третье поколение опирается на понимание и символические связи с корейским языком; четвертое же поколение взаимодействует с этническим наследием преимущественно через массовую культуру и стремление к транснациональной мобильности. В рамках этих траекторий идентичность предстает не как фиксированная категория, а как динамичный, исторически обусловленный процесс. Носители используют доступные языковые и культурные ресурсы для самоопределения в рамках пересекающихся уровней принадлежности (этнического, регионального, национального и транснационального). Результаты исследования подчеркивают устойчивость этнической идентичности даже в условиях языковой ассимиляции и вносят вклад в дискуссии о мультилингвизме, диаспоральной идентичности, а также в изучение долгосрочной динамики сохранения и утраты языков в миноритарных сообществах. Работа позволяет углубить понимание механизмов конструирования идентичности в контекстах, характеризующихся перемещением населения и сменой политических установок.
Ключевые слова: *языковой сдвиг, языковые идеологии, язык и идентичность, сахалинские корейцы*

Для цитирования:
Zoumpalidis D., Bergelson M.B. Four generations, three languages, one island: Language shift and identity negotiation among Sakhalin Koreans. *Russian Journal of Linguistics.* 2026. Vol. 30. № 2. P. 417–441. https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-47476 EDN: CMUSCT

1. Introduction

Language shift among diaspora communities rarely follows predictable patterns. What appears as straightforward assimilation often hides complex negotiations between heritage language maintenance, institutional pressures, and individual agency (Albury & Schluter 2021). The Sakhalin Korean community presents a particularly interesting case for examining these dynamics, shaped as it has been by successive waves of displacement, colonial experience, and political transformation across nearly a century.

The Sakhalin Island, positioned between Russia and Japan in the North Pacific, has served as home to ethnic Koreans since the early twentieth century. Unlike other Korean diaspora communities that emerged through voluntary migration, Sakhalin Koreans experienced multiple layers of forced migration and institutional reorganization. Japanese colonial authorities initially brought Koreans as manual laborers during the 1920s and 1930s in southern Sakhalin which, at the time, was under Japanese rule. Following Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, these communities found themselves under Soviet administration, subject to new language policies, new language ideologies and new assimilationist strategies. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the consequent post-Soviet period opened up new possibilities for transnational connections with South Korea while consolidating Russian as the dominant societal language.

This socio-historical complexity makes Sakhalin an ideal site for examining how language shift intersects with identity negotiation across multiple generations of Sakhalin Koreans. The community's linguistic repertoire spans three languages, each carrying distinct ideological weight: Korean functions as a heritage language tied to ancestry and cultural continuity; Japanese persists in memory as the language of colonial subjugation; Russian operates as the language of institutional legitimacy, prestige and modernity.

Recent scholarship on language and identity in multilingual contexts has moved beyond simple models of language loss or maintenance to examine the strategic ways speakers employ linguistic resources across different social contexts (see García & Wei 2014). Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) influential framework for understanding identity negotiation in multilingual settings proves particularly relevant here, as it emphasizes how speakers actively navigate between imposed identity categories and self-determined positioning.

The present study draws on 44 interviews conducted in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk during September 2021 to examine language shift and identity negotiation among four generations of Sakhalin Koreans. The research addresses three interconnected research questions:

1. How do different generations of Sakhalin Koreans negotiate their ethnolinguistic identities through strategic use (or avoidance) of Korean, Russian and Japanese linguistic resources across family, institutional and community contexts?

2. What ideological meanings do Sakhalin Koreans attach to their trilingual repertoire, and how do these meanings shape intergenerational family language policies and transmission patterns?

3. How do institutional changes, particularly the early 1960s closure of Korean-medium schools and the 1990s establishment of cultural centers, influence language shift trajectories and identity construction strategies?

2. Historical background

2.1. The Japanese colonial period (1905–1945)

Japanese control over southern Sakhalin began following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, when the Treaty of Portsmouth of 5th September 1905 awarded Japan territorial rights of southern Sakhalin. The island, known to Japanese administrators as 'Karafuto', became a site of intensive resource extraction and colonial settlement (Din 2013). Korean migration to Sakhalin during this period occurred through multiple channels, creating a heterogeneous population with varying legal statuses and economic positions. Early settlements of Koreans, mostly from southern provinces of Korea, established small communities engaged in agriculture, fishing, and petty trade. The largest influx of the Korean population took place in the 1930s and early 1940s when Japanese colonial authorities intensified resource extraction efforts. Labor recruitment campaigns and later, during the WWII, forced labour migration, brought thousands of Korean workers to Sakhalin to perform hard manual labour in coal mines, timber operations, and construction projects (Pak Syn Y 2007). The Japanese authorities pursued the policy of cultural assimilation. Thus, the schools opened on the island followed the Japanese system, and instruction was conducted in Japanese.

2.2. Soviet period of integration (1945–1991)

In 1945, as a result of WWII the entire Sakhalin (and four Kuril Islands) became part of the Soviet Union. Dozens of thousands of Koreans stayed behind along with the ethnic Japanese. Repatriation of all of them, at that time — Japanese subjects — was part of the political agreement between Japan and the Soviet Union where Japan was obliged to evacuate all its citizens. Most of the Japanese people and some Koreans left in 1945. Since Korea became independent, and stopped being part of Japan, Sakhalin Koreans were, technically speaking, no longer part of this agreement. The agreements stopped to work for both the Japanese and Soviet sides. Initially, the Soviet Government planned to repatriate Koreans back to their native land, but repeatedly postponed the plan because of the potential manpower shortage for Soviet Russia (Park & Balitskaya 2015: 84, cited in Yusupova 2022).

Political divisions after the Korean war also contributed to the situation. For political reasons, the Soviet government would not allow the Sakhalin Koreans to return to South Korea, where they were from, but instead promoted their relocation to North Korea. Thus, the Korean population of Sakhalin, which numbered by that moment around 23 thousand, was left behind with a strange status of non-citizens, without a right to leave the island and some other restrictions (Din 2015). Korean tradition of hard work made them a valuable workforce, especially at the scarcely populated island of Sakhalin. They were paid relatively well for their work, but found themselves trapped in the middle of political, ideological and economic controversies.

Another controversy came from the fact that thousands of people who were needed in the Sakhalin economy were hard and experienced workers but they did not know Russian. They and their children had to learn Russian, become literate and integrate in Soviet society without becoming full-fledged citizens. Very soon, in spring of 1946, 2300 Korean children started attending 27 primary and secondary schools. Instruction was held in Korean using the Japanese pedagogical system. In spite of the shortages and simply lack of the teaching materials and qualified teachers, the number of the Korean schools continued to grow and did the work they were created for: teach the Korean population Russian and adjust them, especially the younger people, to life in the Soviet Union. Russian language was taught from 3 to 12 hours a week and Korean three hours every day (Kuzin 2011: 253).

The main problems were that less than qualified local teachers who often spoke Japanese better than Korean were seconded by the Koreans from the continent who were returning to the Primorsky Krai after forced evacuation in the 30-ies. Some of them, returning from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were happy to teach in Sakhalin, but originating from the northern parts of Korea, their language differed from that of the Sakhalin Koreans who in most cases came from the southern parts. Still, up to 1963–64 when instruction in Korean stopped, the Korean youth was getting primary and secondary education in their language, and Korean theater and newspapers and magazines in Korean were actively instilling Soviet values onto the Korean community (Din 2014). Almost all of this was terminated in the early sixties. The language and cultural policies targeted for assimilation.

By that time, Korean young people could get permission to continue education outside Sakhalin. The citizenship issue became even more complicated, as the Soviet authorities were no longer pushing the Sakhalin Koreans to adopt the North Korean citizenship and started to grant Soviet citizenship (though it was a very complicated process). Still the majority of the older generation born outside of Sakhalin kept their status of non-citizens and hoped to get back to their homeland and relatives.

2.3. Post-Soviet transformations (1991-present)

The next wave of the revival of Korean in Sakhalin schools took place in the last Soviet years. The collapse of the USSR signified a relief of assimilation policies, and many ethnic minorities living in the post-Soviet territories began regaining and reconsidering their ethnic and cultural identities, which led to a heightened interest in minority languages. The Korean language was introduced as an optional class at one Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk school with the help of the Korean specialists from both Koreas that visited the island (see Yusupova 2022).

In the early 1990s, the Korean language was already taught at 12 schools around Sakhalin. Strong ties with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea were established that helped to create instructional materials and train future teachers of Sakhalin schools at South Korean universities (Kuzin 2010). At that time there still was intergenerational transmission of the language from grandparents who studied Korean at schools before 1963 to their grandchildren. This transmission was interrupted when the so-called 'first generation' started to leave the island after the Korean Republic eventually agreed to repatriate those Koreans who were born before August 15, 1945. This was a long and painful political and social process that led to the second wave of family separation. Not all of the representatives of the first generation left. While in 1993 about 15,000 Koreans expressed their wish to return to Korea (of those less than 4,000 left), in 1997 there were less than 5,000 of them (Pak Syn Y 2024).

But it also heightened the interest towards studying Korean among the younger generation triggered by the new opportunities to visit South Korea, work and get education there. Not the least part of this was and still is the interest in the modern Korean mass culture among the youth. The success of Korean TV series, fashion and style were very visible all over the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

The last 25 years saw quite a lot of changes and contradictory trends. The repatriation program officially ended in 2015, and by that time some representatives of the 'second generation' were also allowed to the program to take care of their elderly parents. As of today, the Korean population of Sakhalin is around 30,000 people of which half reside in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Less than 25% of Sakhalin Koreans speak the language at least to some extent.

3. Theoretical considerations

3.1. Identity as performance and negotiation

In this study we rely on Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) theoretical framework, which conceptualizes the idea that identity is something that speakers actively construct through discourse and language use rather than possess as a fixed attribute. Drawing on poststructuralist insights about the performative nature of identity, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) argue that multilingual speakers engage in ongoing negotiations between different identity positions, some imposed by dominant institutions and others claimed through individual or collective agency.

The negotiation aspect of their framework emphasizes that identity construction occurs within asymmetrical power relations that privilege certain identity positions while marginalizing others. Speakers cannot freely choose any identity they prefer, rather, they work within constraints established by dominant ideologies, institutional arrangements, and historical contexts. However, these constraints do not determine identity outcomes. Speakers retain agency to resist, subvert, or creatively reconfigure available identity categories, though such resistance may carry social costs. Central to their framework is the distinction between four types of identities that speakers may encounter.

1. **Imposed identities** are those that are assigned (imposed) by institutions or dominant groups. These identities are often imposed without regard for personal preferences or self-understanding. Additionally, these identities typically reflect power relations and may serve to justify exclusion, discrimination, or differential treatment.

2. **Assumed identities** are those that speakers accept and internalize. These identities may align with imposed categories or represent forms of resistance to dominant expectations.

3. **Negotiable identities** are those that speakers can actively construct and modify through discourse and practice, often by combining elements from different identity traditions or creating new hybrid categories. These identities represent the creative dimension of identity work, demonstrating how speakers exercise agency within structural constraints.

4. **Non-negotiable identities** are those that speakers experience as fixed or essential, often related to family history, physical appearance, or core values that resist modification through discourse or practice. These identities may be positive or negative but are experienced as unchangeable aspects of self-understanding (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004: 19).

For Sakhalin Koreans, imposed identities have shifted across historical periods, from Japanese colonial subjects to Soviet nationalities to Russian minorities. Assumed identities reflect strategic acceptance of these categories when they serve speakers' goals. Negotiable identities emerge through creative combinations of ethnic, national, and regional elements. Non-negotiable identities include physical appearance, family ancestry and historical memory that persist regardless of linguistic competence or cultural adaptation.

3.2. Language ideologies and symbolic capital

Identity negotiation is deeply intertwined with language representations and social attitudes, which serve as symbolic components defining the vitality of a language within a community (see Moskvitcheva et al. 2023). Understanding identity negotiation among Sakhalin Koreans requires attention to the ideological meanings attached to different languages within this community's social contexts. Language ideologies, that are beliefs about languages and their speakers that reflect broader social and political arrangements, shape how speakers understand and

evaluate their linguistic resources (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994). Similarly, in research on post-Soviet heritage language communities, language ideologies are shaped by a complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors that either hinder or facilitate the maintenance and transmission of heritage languages across generations (Zabrodskaja & Ivanova 2021). In the Sakhalin Korean context, three distinct ideological configurations have emerged around Korean, Russian, and Japanese.

Korean functions as heritage language ideology, associated with ancestry, cultural authenticity, and moral continuity across generations. This ideology persists even when Korean competence declines, allowing speakers to maintain ethnic identification through symbolic rather than functional language use. Russian operates through modernity ideology, positioned as the unmarked language of contemporary life, institutional participation, and social mobility. This ideology naturalizes Russian dominance while obscuring the historical processes through which this dominance was established. Japanese carries trauma ideology, associated with colonial subjugation, cultural suppression, and historical violence. This ideology effectively excludes Japanese from positive identity constructions despite its potential utility for regional economic connections.

These ideological configurations create complex symbolic capital arrangements that speakers must navigate strategically. Following Bourdieu (1991), linguistic resources function as symbolic capital when they provide access to social recognition, institutional legitimacy, or community belonging. However, the value of different linguistic resources varies significantly across contexts and audiences.

4. Data and methodology

The research material was obtained through interviews with Sakhalin Koreans during fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the administrative center of Sakhalin Oblast and the place with the largest number of ethnic Koreans on the island, during September 2021. It took place within the framework of the ‘Rediscover Russia’ programme, which included 10 second year students enrolled in the MA program in Language Policy and two HSE professors. The programme was financed by the Higher School of Economics. The timing proved fruitful for several reasons. September coincided with Korean cultural festivals and Sabantuy at a local park, providing opportunities to observe community gatherings and meet participants in culturally meaningful contexts. The month also marked the beginning of the academic year, facilitating access to educational institutions and younger participants through university connections.

The primary recruitment strategy involved a ‘friend-of-a-friend’ technique that began with contacts provided by the Korean Cultural Center and expanded through participant suggestions. This approach proved effective for accessing participants across different age groups and social networks while building trust through personal connections. Supplementary recruitment occurred through spontaneous encounters in public spaces, particularly during cultural events and community

gatherings. These encounters often produced more informal interviews that captured different aspects of language use and identity performance than scheduled interviews in institutional settings.

Interview locations varied according to participant preferences and practical considerations. Private homes provided intimate settings for family-focused discussions, while institutional venues such as the Korean Cultural Center, Sakhalin State University, and Korean-language media offices offered contexts where public Korean identity was more explicitly performed.

The final sample included 44 participants representing four generational cohorts based on the classification system used by Japanese and South Korean Red Cross organizations during repatriation programs.

First generation participants (born before August 15, 1945) experienced Japanese colonial rule during their formative years and witnessed the transition to Soviet administration as adults. This cohort includes both voluntary migrants who arrived during the early colonial period and forced laborers who were transported to Sakhalin. Their language repertoires typically include Korean as a heritage language, Japanese as a colonial language, and Russian as a language of Soviet integration.

Second generation participants (born 1945–1965) experienced childhood during the early Soviet period when Korean-language education was still available, but reached school age during or after the 1964 closure of Korean schools. This cohort navigated the transition from Korean to Russian as the primary language of education and social mobility. Their experiences provide crucial insights into how families adapted language practices to changing institutional arrangements.

Third generation participants (born 1965–1985) grew up entirely within Russian-dominant educational and social environments but maintained varying degrees of connection to Korean heritage through family networks and cultural activities. This cohort came of age during the late Soviet period and experienced the post-Soviet opening to South Korea as young adults, creating opportunities for heritage language revival and transnational identity exploration.

Fourth generation participants (born 1985–present) represent the first cohort to grow up with access to Korean cultural resources and transnational connections from childhood, but also the most linguistically assimilated into Russian-dominant environments. Their experiences show how heritage identity construction occurs when linguistic competence is minimal but cultural resources are available.

Our sample achieved a reasonable gender balance (23 women, 21 men) and included participants from various educational and occupational backgrounds. Educational levels ranged from secondary school completion to advanced degrees, while occupations included students, teachers, cultural workers, business owners, retirees, and various professional categories. This diversity proved important for understanding how language practices and identity negotiations may vary across different social and life circumstances.

Semi-structured life-history interviews were conducted in Russian, lasting between 20 and 90 minutes (average 45 minutes). All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed. The interview guide focused on language learning experiences, family language practices, identity constructions and community belonging across participants' lifespans. Questions (see Appendix 1) were designed to elicit narratives rather than categorical responses, allowing participants to construct their own interpretations of their linguistic trajectories and identity negotiations. All real names have been substituted with pseudonyms.

5. Results

The analysis of interviews reveals systematic patterns of language shift across four generations, though these patterns reflect complex negotiations rather than simple linear assimilation. Each generation developed distinctive strategies for managing multilingual resources that reflect both historical constraints and individual agency.

5.1. First generation: Multilingual survival strategies

First-generation participants, born before 1945, experienced their school years under Japanese colonial administration and retain the most complex multilingual repertoires within the community. Their language practices reflect the historical layering described in Section 2, with Korean functioning as the primary home and/or heritage language, Japanese as a remembered colonial language, and Russian as a language of later Soviet integration.

Korean remains the strongest language for most first-generation speakers, though their competence reflects the regional and social varieties they acquired during childhood rather than standardized forms promoted in contemporary South Korea. Many participants describe their Korean as 'village Korean' or 'home Korean', emphasizing its domestic and community-based character.

AV, a first-generation participant, illustrates the typical linguistic trajectory of her age-cohort when describing her childhood language environment:

(1)

MB: *(...) Скажите, а когда вы росли, дома вы разговаривали на корейском?*
AV: *Да, на корейском. Японский знала — все забыла. Корейский. Потом в школу ходила — корейский, русский там.*
MB: *А японский забыли?*
AV: *Да, я маленькая была, лет 4-5.*
MB: *Но вы же родились здесь — откуда японский-то был?*
AV: *А японцы здесь жили!*
MB: *Потому что японцы здесь жили?*
AV: *Японцы, да.*

[MB: (…) Tell me, when you were growing up, did you speak Korean at home?
AV: Yes, Korean. I knew Japanese, I forgot it all. Korean. Then at school, Korean and Russian there.
MB: And you forgot Japanese?
AV: Yes, I was little, about 4–5 years old.
MB: But you were born here, where did the Japanese come from?
AV: The Japanese lived here!
MB: Because the Japanese lived here?
AV: Japanese, yes.]

This account captures several important patterns. Korean appears as the unmarked home language, requiring no special explanation or justification. Japanese is acknowledged as a former competence but dismissed as forgotten, reflecting both the traumatic associations of colonial education and the lack of contexts for Japanese use in post-1945 Sakhalin. Russian enters through schooling, positioned as an additional rather than replacement language during her childhood.

The same participant's account of intergenerational transmission reveals how first-generation speakers understood their role in language maintenance during the early Soviet period:

(2)

Дочка у меня старшая понимает чуть-чуть, разговаривает. А младшая… ну, понимает, но не знает всего. Ну они врачом работают.
[My elder daughter understands a little and speaks, and the younger one... understands but does not know everything. Well, they work as doctors.]

This description suggests that first-generation parents expected their children to maintain some Korean competence, even as Russian became the primary language of education and social mobility. The distinction between 'understands' and 'speaks' indicates recognition that passive competence might be sufficient for family communication while acknowledging that productive competence was becoming more difficult to maintain, especially in light of the higher instrumental value and growing influence of the Russian language on career building.

First-generation accounts also reveal the crucial role of grandparent-grandchild relationships in language transmission during the transitional period. Several participants describe arrangements where grandparents provided childcare while parents worked, creating intensive Korean-language environments for young children before they entered Russian-dominant schooling. However, these transmission arrangements proved temporary. The same participants who describe successful Korean transmission to grandchildren also acknowledge that this competence was typically lost once children began formal schooling and reduced their contact with Korean-speaking elders.

Japanese competence among first-generation speakers presents a more complex pattern. While most participants claim to have 'forgotten' the Japanese language, the interviews reveal fragmentary retention of vocabulary, phrases, and

cultural knowledge that suggests more persistent competence than the informants initially acknowledged. This apparent contradiction can be seen as a reflection of the traumatic associations of Japanese language learning during the colonial period rather than actual complete language loss.

Additionally, one first-generation participant recalled the disciplinary context of Japanese language education:

(3)

Братья, в школу пойдет, японский язык выскакивает, указкой получали. Били их, мальчиков.
[The brothers went to school and if Japanese slipped out, they were hit with a pointer. The boys were beaten for Japanese.]

This memory illustrates how Japanese competence became associated with physical punishment and cultural suppression in post-1945 Soviet Sakhalin, creating negative ideological associations that persisted for decades after the colonial period ended.

Russian acquisition among first-generation speakers frequently occurred primarily through adult education and at workplace interaction rather than childhood education and/or socialization.

(4)

L: *Я, этот… японский школу три году ходила, японский. Девять лету было, сорок пятого года. И мне шесть лет, папа умерла. Поэтому мы вот так, тяжело жили.*
M: *А братья, сестры были?*
L: *Брата старший была. Ну, чуть-чуть старше. Вот так жили, и школу я бросила, все — потому что маму помочь надо*.
[L: I went to this em… a Japanese school for three years, Japanese. I was nine years old, in 45. And when I was six, my father died. So we lived like that; it was hard.
M: Did you have brothers or sisters?
L: I had an older brother. Well, a little older. That's how we lived, and I left school because I had to help my mother.]

The above interview excerpt shows incorrect case marking (*девять лету* instead of the correct *девять лет*), gender agreement mismatches (*папа умерла* instead of *папа умер*), and other inaccuracies indicating that Russian was acquired primarily through adult schooling and/or workplace use, with residual optionality in morphology and agreement, and a code that functions as a 'learned' rather than a medium in which a speaker has a high competence.

The linguistic repertoires of first-generation speakers thus reflect the historical complexity of their experiences, with each language carrying distinct ideological associations and functional specializations. Korean functions as the language of heritage and family authenticity, Japanese as a traumatic memory of the Japanese colonizers, and Russian as a practical necessity for Soviet integration, even with often limited language competencies.

5.2. Second generation: Language shift and 'Kitchen Korean'

Second-generation speakers (born 1945–1965) experienced the most dramatic institutional changes, particularly the 1964 closure of Korean-medium schools. The informants' accounts reveal creative adaptation strategies that maintained heritage connections while accommodating Russian-dominant education. This generation developed what participants frequently termed as 'kitchen Korean', a domestic register that preserved intergenerational communication at home (domestic-related topics while adapting to institutional constraints). The concept of 'kitchen Korean' emerged mostly in second-generation interviews, representing a strategic response to institutional language policies. As one participant explained:

(5)

> B: *Мы жили с бабушкой и дедушкой, да. Бабушка, она вообще не говорила, почти что, по-русски, и мы ей должны были отвечать по-корейски. То есть такой язык, который, я говорю, "кухонный", мы знали и могли отвечать. (…) И дома мы говорили по-русски. Когда мы ездили в Углегорск к другой бабушке, там уже немножко смешанная была речь. Но тоже, в основном, все русский — бабушка-то по-русски понимала, она нам говорила по-корейски, мы ей по-русски отвечали. Ну что тут такого?*
> [B: We lived with our grandparents, yes. My grandmother hardly spoke Russian at all, so we had to answer her in Korean. In other words, we knew that "kitchen" Korean and could reply in it. (…) And at home we spoke Russian. When we went to Uglegorsk to visit my other grandmother, the speech there was a bit mixed. But still, mostly everything was in Russian— the grandmother understood Russian: she would speak to us in Korean, and we would answer her in Russian. Nothing unusual about that!]

This interview excerpt shows several important patterns in second-generation language practices. The term 'kitchen language' suggests a register that was functional for basic domestic communication but lacked the vocabulary and grammatical complexity necessary for out-of-home or professional contexts. The arrangement described here is Korean for grandmother-directed interaction, Russian for general household communication, which represents a common compromise that allowed families to maintain intergenerational communication while adapting to Russian-dominant social environments. The distinction between 'kitchen Korean' shows how institutional language policies created hierarchies between formal and informal language varieties as well as strictly distinct spheres and places of use. As Kibrik (2021) notes for endangered languages in Russia more broadly, school-based support may complement heritage maintenance, but it cannot fully substitute for sustained intergenerational transmission in the home.

What is of interest is that the same informant's characterization of this language use arrangement as "Nothing unusual about that" indicates how second-generation speakers normalized complex bilingual practices as ordinary household pragmatics rather than conscious heritage maintenance strategies. This

normalization may have facilitated the gradual shift toward Russian dominance by reducing the ideological significance of language choice within family contexts.

Second-generation participants also experienced the 1963–64 closure of Korean-language schools as a remarkable turning point in their linguistic trajectories. GI, a second-generation participant, provided a concise timeline of this institutional change:

(6)

> *Корейский язык у нас преподавали в школе до 64 года — в 64 году по понятным причинам, так скажем, корейский язык перестали преподавать, а потом 90-е годы, 93, 92 год, начали снова изучать как дополнительный язык, курсы*.
> [Korean was taught in our schools until 1964, then for obvious reasons it was stopped, and in the 1990s, around 1992 to 1993, it started again as an optional subject, courses.]

The phrase *по понятным причинам* ("for obvious reasons") in this account reflects how community members understood the school closure as part of broader political pressures and ideological reorientation rather than educational policy decisions. This may suggest that second-generation speakers accepted this institutional change as inevitable, even if they regretted its consequences for Korean language maintenance.

Second-generation participants frequently describe their Korean competence in terms of functional limitations that reflect the restricted contexts in which they used the language. Many characterize their Korean as sufficient for family communication but inadequate for formal or professional contexts, acknowledging gaps in vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. These functional limitations reflect the broader pattern of domain restriction that characterizes heritage language maintenance in immigrant contexts. As Korean became increasingly confined to family and community contexts, speakers had fewer opportunities to develop the specialized registers necessary for formal communication, creating a cycle of functional reduction that made Korean less useful for younger generations, and hence language transmission.

However, second-generation speakers also demonstrate creative strategies for maintaining Korean competence despite institutional constraints. Several participants describe self-directed learning efforts, including reading Korean-language materials, participating in cultural activities, and seeking out Korean-speaking conversation partners within the community.

5.3. Third generation: Symbolic Korean and strategic bilingualism

Third-generation participants, born between 1965 and 1985, grew up entirely within Russian-dominant educational and social environments but maintained varying degrees of connection to Korean cultural heritage and (limited) language input through family networks and cultural activities. Their language practices

reflect the use of Russian as the primary language of social interaction while Korean persists in restricted domains and in increasingly symbolic forms. Most third-generation participants describe themselves as Russian-dominant speakers with limited Korean competence, often characterized as passive/receptive understanding.

In the group interview, three third-generation Korean participants described their relationship with Korean in terms that emphasize passive understanding over active production:

(7)

R1: *Везде одинаковые истории. Вот в корейских семьях нашего поколения*.
R2: *Мы учили в школе русский язык. Поэтому мы в совершенстве владеем русским. То есть вот да*.
I: *А вот в самом детстве не помните родители с вами на корейском разговаривали?*
R1: *Родители разговаривали на корейском. Мы все понимаем. Мы как собаки понимаем, но сказать ничего не можем. Какие -то там отголоски остались, конечно. Иди, открой дверь сходи там.*
I: *Да это такое*.
R3: *В обиходе то, что было*.
I: *Да*.
I: *А сложно сочиненные предложения нет*.
R3: *Или когда поесть позовут*.
[R1: Everywhere, the stories are the same. In Korean families of our generation, too.
R2: We studied Russian at school. That's why we speak Russian perfectly. Yes, that's right.
I: And in early childhood, do you remember if your parents spoke Korean with you?
R1: Our parents spoke Korean. We understand everything. We understand like dogs, we understand, but can't say anything. Some echoes remain, of course. Like "Go open the door", "Go there".
I: Right, that kind of thing.
R3: Everyday phrases that were used.
I: Yes.
I: But no complex sentences.
R3: Or when they called us to eat.]

This is reminiscent of second-generation 'kitchen Korean' where the language was used for limited purposes at home, for simple functions for food or other domestic spheres, but the children had only passive knowledge of it, i.e. understanding Korean of their parents/grandparents but not being able to utter anything in the language (comprehension without production), but respond in Russian, the only language they were fluent in.

Similarly, when VS (born 1967) was asked if his friends and/or relatives speak Korean, he argues along these lines that:

(8)

I: *А ваши друзья ровесники корейцы как, по-вашему, они говорят по-корейски? Или ваших ровесников всё-таки уже нет?*
VS: *И, да, редко-редко между словом между так между словами могут использовать, но в основном русский язык.*
[I: And your Korean friends of the same age, do they speak Korean, in your opinion? Or are there none of your peers left anymore?
VS: Well, yes, very rarely, between words, here and there, they might use something in Korean, but mostly they speak Russian.]

Third-generation informants also demonstrate creative strategies for engaging with Korean heritage despite limited linguistic competence. Many describe participating in Korean cultural activities, learning Korean songs or dances, or studying Korean history and culture through Russian-language materials. These cultural engagement strategies reflect the availability of new resources for Korean heritage exploration that emerged during the post-Soviet period. Korean cultural centers, university programs, and media outlets created opportunities for heritage engagement that did not require advanced Korean language competence, allowing third-generation speakers to construct Korean identity through cultural rather than linguistic means.

Along these lines, another third-generation informant continued:

(9)

Мы ходим в корейский центр на праздники, на традиционные танцы. Моя дочь там учит корейские песни. Дело не в том, чтобы говорить идеально, а в том, чтобы оставаться на связи.
[We go to the Korean center for holidays, for traditional dancing. My daughter learns Korean songs there. It's not about speaking perfectly, it's about staying connected.]

This account demonstrates how cultural engagement can substitute for linguistic competence in heritage maintenance strategies. The phrase "it's not about speaking perfectly" suggests a pragmatic approach to ethnic identification that emphasizes cultural participation over linguistic authenticity.

The Russian competence of third-generation speakers reflects their complete integration within Russian-dominant educational and social environments. Most participants describe Russian as their natural language of thought and expression, requiring no conscious effort or translation from other linguistic systems. This Russian dominance extends beyond functional competence to include cultural and ideological identification with Russian society and values. Many third-generation participants describe themselves as Russian in cultural terms while maintaining Korean ethnic identification, illustrating the complex relationship between linguistic competence and cultural identity in multilingual contexts.

5.4. Fourth generation: Heritage awareness and popular culture

Fourth-generation participants, born after 1985, represent the most linguistically assimilated age-group within the Sakhalin Korean community. Most

of the participants describe themselves as monolingual Russian speakers with minimal Korean competence, typically limited to a few words, or phrases, learned from grandparents and/or cultural activities.

At the same time, however, fourth-generation speakers demonstrate complex awareness of their Korean heritage and often express interest in learning more about the Korean culture and consequently, language. This heritage awareness often reflects the availability of Korean cultural resources that emerged during their childhood and adolescence in post-soviet Sakhalin island, including Korean popular culture, educational programmes, and transnational connections with South Korea.

NS, a fourth-generation participant described his relationship to Korean heritage and language in these terms:

(10)

I. *А вы по-корейски говорите?*
N. *пару слов знаю, выражений, там, счёт до 20-ти знаю. Ну вот, просто не учили. Если бы учил, сейчас многие моё поколение, они сами обучаются, а у меня просто времени не хватало на это. Сейчас…*
I. *Угу. А почему вот ваше поколение обучается?*
N. *А, многие хотят в Корею уехать. Вот уже, наверное, человек 10 у меня уехали, кто-то закончил школу всё, в этом году, в позапрошлом. Ну, просто в Корее как бы очень культура такая развитая и все хотят отсюда, особенно наше поколение корейцев.*
I. *Молодое поколение?*
N. *Да. Ну и все хотят вот, сейчас разрешают поколение бабушки, им разрешают сейчас переехать, если они здесь родились и у них родственники там были. Ну, переехать туда, им жильё дадут, всё обеспечат, и мы можем как кровные родственники тоже туда переехать, младшее поколение.*
[I: And do you speak Korean?
N: I know a few words and expressions, I can count up to twenty. But we simply didn't learn it. If I had studied, maybe… Now, many people of my generation are learning on their own, but I just didn't have the time for it. Now…
I: Uh-huh. And why is your generation learning it now?
N: Ah, many want to move to Korea. Around ten people I know have already gone, some finished school this year or last year. It's just that Korea has such a developed culture, and everyone here wants to leave, especially our generation of Koreans.
I: The younger generation?
N: Yes. And now they allow people of our grandparents' generation to move, if they were born here and had relatives there. They can move there, get housing, be provided for, and we, as their blood relatives, can also move, the younger generation.]

This interview excerpt highlights the link between language revival and migration motivation, for many diaspora youth, learning Korean is not only about heritage nostalgia but also, and primarily about mobility capital, a ticket to

opportunity in the homeland of their ancestors. In this sense, Korean begins to function as a commodified linguistic resource, not only a marker of ethnic belonging, but also a form of symbolic capital connected to education, migration, employability and access to South Korea. This resonates with Muth's (2017) discussion that in the contemporary global context, the shift towards neoliberalism has led to the commodification of linguistic forms, where language functions as symbolic capital and a "semiotic product" within wider markets and mobility tendencies.

At the same time, EL confirming Nikita's words, started learning Korean herself by watching Korean-language channels from South Korea via satellite TV:

(11)

EL. *Да. Да. Во-первых, здесь несколько каналов. Я больше смотрю корейские каналы. Там очень, ну, там, мелодрамы всякие разные, да, сериалы, поэтому мне интересно.*
I. *Ну, вы всё понимаете, когда смотрите?*
EL. *Практически да. Правда вот вижу… С техническим там назначением, допустим, более уже унифицированные такие слова, выражения есть, вот как бы. А так в обиходе вот так если в семейном, в житейском, мне как бы всё понятно. Первый раз я, когда начала смотреть корейские сериалы или фильмы, ну, это было, исторические такие фильмы были. Так я начала понимать только с третьего раза.*
[EL: Yes, yes. First of all, there are several channels here. I mostly watch Korean ones. There are lots of, well, all kinds of melodramas and series, so it's interesting to me.
I: And do you understand everything when you watch them?
EL: Almost everything, yes. Although, when it comes to technical terms, there are more standardized words and expressions now. But in everyday, family, or day-to-day speech, I understand everything. The first time I started watching Korean dramas or films, they were historical ones, I only began to understand from about the third time.]

EL's description shows fluency in Korean primarily acquired through media exposure, showing that entertainment can function as informal language learning. The reference to Korean popular culture indicates how transnational media creates new possibilities for heritage engagement that do not require family-based language transmission. The acknowledgment of Korean ethnic identity despite the limited Korean competence suggests that heritage identification can persist across generations even when language transmission fails.

The expressed interest in learning Korean together with practical constraints reflects the complex relationship between heritage identity and linguistic competence among fourth-generation speakers. While many express curiosity about Korean language and culture, few have the time, resources, or social support necessary for serious language learning efforts. Fourth-generation participants also demonstrate awareness of the historical trajectory that led to their linguistic assimilation, often expressing regret about the loss of Korean competence within

their families while acknowledging the practical reasons for this shift. This historical consciousness suggests that language shift is understood as a collective rather than individual phenomenon, reflecting broader social and political forces rather than personal choices.

The Russian competence of fourth-generation speakers represents complete Russian native-speaker proficiency across all domains and registers. Most participants describe Russian as their only natural language of expression, with no conscious awareness of translation or code-switching processes that might indicate underlying multilingual competence. However, some fourth-generation participants demonstrate subtle influences from Korean cultural patterns in their Russian language use, including cultural references that reflect their heritage background. These influences typically operate below the level of conscious awareness and may not be recognized by speakers themselves as markers of Korean identity. In other words, Korean identity has persisted through various symbolic and cultural means that demonstrate the complex relationship between language and identity in multilingual contexts (see also Hornberger & Wang 2008).

6. Discussion

The extension of Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) identity negotiation framework to the Sakhalin Korean context shows how identity construction operates across extended historical periods through both individual and collective processes. The four-generation span documented in the present study reveals that identity negotiation is not merely a synchronic phenomenon occurring within individual lifespans, but rather involves cumulative processes that span multiple generations and sociopolitical and historical transformations.

The concept of 'imposed identities' proves particularly relevant for understanding how external political changes create new identity categories that communities must navigate strategically. The transformation from Japanese colonial 'forced migrants' working mainly as manual labourers to Soviet citizens to Russian minority group highlights how imposed categories change across historical periods, requiring ongoing adaptation. However, the persistence of 'сахалинские корейцы' (Sakhalin Koreans) as a self-designated category demonstrates how communities can maintain coherent collective identities despite changing external impositions and ideological realities.

The data extends theoretical understanding of 'negotiable identities' by documenting how speakers construct hybrid categories that transcend binary ethnic-national frameworks. The emergence of regional identity markers like 'местный' (local) and institutional categories like 'сахалинские корейцы' (Sakhalin Koreans) demonstrates the creative potential of identity negotiation processes. These hybrid constructions challenge essentialist identity frameworks while showing how speakers can construct coherent positions that acknowledge multiple aspects of their social identity (Albury & Schluter 2021, Banki & Adhikari 2024). The hierarchical distinctions documented between Sakhalin Koreans, recent North

Korean migrants and mainland Russian Koreans illustrate how regional belonging creates new forms of authenticity claims and community boundaries. These findings contribute to recent research on diaspora identity construction by showing how local belonging can strengthen rather than weaken ethnic identification, creating multiple layers of community membership that reflect specific historical circumstances (see also Brubaker 2005, Anthias 2009, Ermak 2025).

The analysis of language ideologies reveals how Korean, Russian and Japanese carry distinct symbolic meanings that persist across generations despite changing patterns of linguistic competence. Following Woolard and Schieffelin's (1994) framework, these ideological configurations seem to function as cultural representations of the intersection of language and social life that mediate between linguistic practices and social structures. The persistence of Korean as heritage language ideology, Russian as modernity ideology, and Japanese as trauma ideology demonstrates the durability of symbolic associations even when functional language use changes significantly. This finding contributes to recent research on language ideologies by showing how symbolic meanings can outlast linguistic competence itself, continuing to influence identity construction processes across multiple generations (see Cavanaugh 2020, Woolard 1998).

The symbolic capital arrangements documented in this study illustrate Bourdieu's (1991) insights about how linguistic resources function as forms of cultural capital that provide access to social recognition and institutional legitimacy. However, the Sakhalin Korean case reveals the complex ways that symbolic capital operates in multilingual diaspora contexts where different languages carry value in different social domains. The limited convertibility of Korean linguistic capital outside heritage community contexts demonstrates how symbolic capital arrangements reflect broader power relations while creating opportunities for community-internal recognition and belonging (Norton 2000, Darvin & Norton 2015, Piller 2016).

The concept of 'kitchen Korean' provides a significant contribution to understanding how heritage languages survive institutional pressures through domain restriction and functional adaptation (see also Pavlenko 2001). This finding challenges models of heritage language maintenance that assume comprehensive preservation across all social domains is necessary for successful intergenerational transmission (Fishman 2001, King et al. 2008). Instead, the 'kitchen Korean' phenomenon demonstrates how families can maintain meaningful heritage language use through strategic domain restriction that aligns with available linguistic resources and social and political circumstances (see also Inan & Harris 2025). This adaptive strategy allows for intergenerational communication and cultural transmission while acknowledging the practical constraints imposed by Russian-dominant institutional environments, especially after the closure of Korean-medium schools in Sakhalin.

The documentation of asymmetrical bilingual patterns across generations contributes to recent research on family language policy by showing how heritage

language maintenance can occur through receptive competence rather than productive fluency (Spolsky 2012, Melo-Pfeifer 2015). The metaphor of 'understanding like dogs' captures the complex emotional dimensions of heritage language relationships that persist despite limited speaking ability, suggesting that heritage language connections may be more resilient than traditional measures of linguistic competence would indicate.

The role of Korean popular culture consumption in fourth-generation identity construction represents an innovative finding that contributes to understanding how diaspora communities maintain heritage connections through transnational cultural flows rather than traditional family transmission patterns. The extensive 'consumption' of Korean dramas, music, and digital content documented among younger participants shows how contemporary cultural resources can supplement (or even replace) traditional heritage language learning.

This finding aligns with recent research on digital diaspora communities and transnational identity construction, demonstrating how globalized cultural resources create new pathways for heritage engagement that do not require formal language learning or traditional cultural transmission (Park & Wee 2012). The preference for contemporary Korean culture over traditional heritage practices suggests that effective heritage language revitalization efforts may need to align with contemporary cultural interests rather than focusing exclusively on historical preservation.

7. Conclusion

In this study we examined language shift and identity negotiation among four generations of Sakhalin Koreans, revealing complex strategies for managing multilingual resources within changing sociopolitical and ideological contexts. The findings show that language shift in the Sakhalin Korean community involves complex negotiations between cultural heritage maintenance, social mobility, and personal autonomy. The processes of identity construction across four generations highlight how communities maintain integrity despite changing external political and social circumstances. The emergence of hybrid identity categories like 'Sakhalin Koreans' shows the need for the creation of a local regional identity and its negotiation while revealing how regional belonging becomes embedded within ethnic identity. Additionally, we believe the research contributes to a broader understanding of how multilingual diaspora communities may construct sustainable identity(ies) that acknowledge both historical heritage and contemporary realities. Moreover, the concept of 'kitchen Korean' language provides significant insights into heritage language maintenance through family language use and home domain restriction, and functional adaptation. While this study offers deep insights, its focus on Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk presents a limitation; future research could explore the experiences of Sakhalin Koreans in other geographic locations to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Additionally, the role of Korean popular culture 'consumption' in fourth-generation identity construction represents a modern and innovative way for heritage engagement that, in a way, supplements traditional family transmission policy. This finding has important implications for heritage language revitalization efforts, suggesting that effective programs must acknowledge diverse forms of heritage connections including all types of media and social networks rather than just giving priority to traditional linguistic competence.

Lastly, language loss and cultural assimilation of the Sakhalin Korean community is far from simple and as such it highlights how language communities, especially in diaspora contexts, can develop innovative social and linguistic arrangements that reflect their specific historical period of strategic adaptation while maintaining connections to both heritage and contemporary cultural resources. Thus, the significance of this research extends beyond the specific case of Sakhalin Koreans to broader theoretical questions in sociolinguistics. The study contributes to understanding how identity negotiation operates in contexts marked by multiple displacement experiences and shifting political arrangements. Empirically, the research provides detailed documentation of language practices within a community that has received limited scholarly attention from the standpoint of sociolinguistics, despite its unique socio-historical position.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dionysios Zoumpalidis: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal Analysis, Writing — Original Draft, Writing — Review & Editing. **Mira B. Bergelson:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing — Original Draft, Writing — Review & Editing.

Acknowledgements

The study was implemented in the framework of the Basic Research Program at HSE University (HSE-BR-2025-031). We would also like to express our gratitude to Aigul Yusupova for the annotated corpus of interviews, to Yulia Din for the recruitment of participants, and to all the students who participated in fieldwork and assisted in data collection. Last but not least, we would like to thank all our Sakhalin Korean informants for sharing their personal life histories with us.

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Article history:
Received: 05 December 2025
Accepted: 12 April 2026

Bionotes:

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