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The Izhma Komi: As Kyy as a Part of Life

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Abstract. The modern Komi language is a multi-layered and complexly organized dynamic system, with a standardized literary variant and dialectal forms. The Izhma dialect is one of 10 dialects of the Komi language. Despite a fairly comprehensive scientific description of the Komi literary language and its dialects, the interaction between the literary language and dialects, as well as the acceptance or rejection of the literary language by dialect speakers, has not yet been adequately addressed in the scientific literature. These issues have not only scientific but also practical and social significance for local linguistic communities that use dialects as their primary language of communication. The purpose of this article is to analyze the linguacultural attitudes of Izhma Komi dialect speakers, residents of the Izhemsky district of the Komi Republic, within the broader context of the ethnolinguistic situation in the Komi Republic. The article analyzes the opinions of Izhma respondents on the interaction between the Izhma dialect and the literary Komi language, which were collected during a field study conducted in the summer of 2025, as part of an assignment of the Research Center for the Preservation, Revitalization, and Documentation of the Languages of Russia at the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences to clarify the state of languages of Russia. Local projects aimed at the development and intergenerational transmission of the Izhma dialect and culture are also examined. As the study showed, the Izhma dialect is defined by its speakers as a language, either as *ас кыы*, *ас кyy*, ‘our language’, or *изъва кыы*, *iz’va kyy*, ‘Izhma language’. Its opposition to the literary Komi language has existed historically and continues to this day. The state of both the Izhma dialect and the Komi language as a whole is affected by the depopulation of the indigenous population and an intense language shift toward Russian, especially among children and young people. Despite this, recognizing their responsibility for the preservation, development, and transmission of the Izhma dialect and culture, the Izhma Komi people initiate, implement, and actively participate in local linguacultural projects.

Key words: Komi language, Izhma dialect, linguistic shift, agency, Komi Republic, Izhemsky district

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Коми-ижемцы: *ас кыы* как часть жизни

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Аннотация. Современный коми язык представляет собой многоуровневую и сложно организованную динамичную систему, имеющую литературный стандартизированный вариант и диалектные формы. Ижемский диалект является одним из 10 диалектов коми языка. Несмотря на достаточно полное научное описание коми литературного языка и всех диалектов, вопросы взаимодействия литературного языка и диалектов, а также принятие и непринятие литературного языка диалектными носителями в научной литературе до настоящего времени должным образом не освещались. Эти вопросы имеют не только научную, но и практическую, социальную значимость для местных языковых сообществ, использующих именно диалекты в качестве основного языка общения. Цель исследования — анализ лингвокультурных установок носителей ижемского диалекта, жителей Ижемского района Республики Коми, на фоне общей этноязыковой ситуации в Республике Коми и Ижемском районе. Авторами представлен анализ мнений ижемских респондентов о взаимодействии ижемского диалекта и коми литературного языка, которые были собраны в ходе полевого исследования летом 2025 г., реализованного по заданию Научного центра по сохранению, возрождению и документации языков России Института языкознания РАН по уточнению состояния языков России. Также рассмотрены местные проекты, направленные на развитие и межпоколенческую передачу ижемских диалекта и культуры. Как показало исследование, ижемский диалект его носителями определяется именно как язык, *ас кыы* или *изьва кыы*. Его противопоставление коми литературному языку существовало исторически и сохраняется в настоящее время. На состояние ижемского диалекта и в целом коми языка влияют депопуляция коренного населения и интенсивный языковой сдвиг в сторону русского языка, особенно среди детей и молодежи. Несмотря на это, осознавая свою ответственность за сохранение, развитие и передачу ижемских языка и культуры, ижемцы иницируют, реализуют и принимают активное участие в местных лингвокультурных проектах.

Ключевые слова: коми язык, ижемский диалект, языковой сдвиг, агентность, Республика Коми, Ижемский район

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Introduction

The Izhma Komi, or Izvatas, are a distinct ethnic group of the Northern Komi people, possessing their own traditional culture and traditional livelihoods, among which reindeer herding occupies a special place, and language, which is defined in literature as the Izhma dialect of the Komi language. Speakers of the Izhma dialect, when defining the language form they speak, often use the Izhma word *кыы*, *куу*, ‘language’.

The Izhma Komi began to emerge as an ethnic group in the second half of the 16th century in the western and northwestern parts of what is now the Komi Republic as a result of the intermarriages between several ethnic groups, namely the Vym and Udora Komi, Russian resettlers from Veliky Novgorod and Arkhangelsk, and the Nenets living in the north of European Russia [1, P. 3–5]. Currently, the majority of the Izhma Komi live in the Izhemsky district of the Komi Republic. Izhma diasporas also reside outside the Komi Republic — in Murmansk Oblast, Yamalo-Nenets, Khanty-Mansi, and Nenets Autonomous Okrugs.

Travelogues and diaries of travelers and researchers contain descriptions of the Izhma Komi people's activeness, mobility, entrepreneurial spirit, and their abilities to both modify the surrounding environment and adapt to different conditions [2. P. 500–513]. My observations indicate that these qualities remain important to the Izhma Komi people nowadays as well, which has been noted by both the Izhma Komi themselves and representatives of other ethnic groups. It is also worth noting that Izhma Komi identity is one of the most prominent local Komi identities, which is particularly visible in the activities of Izhma Komi public organizations and activists. It also remains well spoken in non-traditional areas of Izhma Komi settlement, such as Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic [3].

The unique culture and language of the Izhma Komi people have been and remain one of the reasons for the scientific interest of many generations of Russian and foreign researchers [1; 4]. The Izhma Komi dialect (Izhma Komi: *изъва кыы*, *iz'va kyy*, 'Izhma language'), one of 10 dialects of the Komi language, was formed as a result of interethnic contacts between the Komi, Nenets, and Russians [1. P. 3]. Reindeer herding, borrowed from the Nenets people and subsequently commercialized, had a significant influence on the formation and development of both the Izhma Komi dialect and the Izhma Komi culture. It was among the northern reindeer herding collectives, especially those located in the Kanin, Bolshezemelskaya, and Malozemelskaya tundra, which included the Izhma Komi reindeer herders, that the Izhma dialect long served as a *lingua franca*, a language of interethnic communication [5].

The Izhma dialect of the Komi language differs significantly from the literary language and other Komi dialects in terms of vocabulary, phonetics and syntax [1]. The first researcher of the Izhma Komi dialect was the Finnish philologist and folklorist M.A. Kastren, who visited the lower reaches of the Pechora River, the villages of Izhma, Ust-Tsilma and Kolva in 1843.¹ He used the dialect's linguistic data to compile the first scientific grammar of the Komi language, *Elementa grammatices Syrjaenae*, published in Helsinki in 1844; for this work, Kastren was awarded half the Demidov Prize, the most prestigious scientific award in the Russian Empire. Later, Izhma linguistic material was collected by such scholars as

¹ Turkin, A.I. 1998. *Kastren, Mathias Alexander*. Komi Language. Encyclopedia, 177–179. Moscow: Publishing house DIK. (In Russ.)

F.J. Wiedemann, Y.J. Wichmann, T.E. Uotila and A. Schrenk for describing the grammar of the Komi language and compiling various dictionaries [4].

In the 20th century, interest in the Izhma dialect continued to grow, particularly among local Komi linguists. The linguistic material on the dialects of the Komi language, including Izhma, collected by researchers at the Komi branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences from 1944 to 1960 became the basis for the *Comparative Dictionary of Komi-Zyryan Dialects*.² In 1973, E.A. Igushev, who later became a prominent specialist in Finno-Ugric studies, defended his Candidate of Philology dissertation *Russian Borrowings in the Izhma Dialect of the Komi Language* [6]. In 1976, the Komi Book Publishing House published the monograph *The Izhma Dialect of the Komi Language* by researchers M.A. Sakharova and N.N. Selkov, in which they provided a systematic description of the Izhma dialect: its phonetics, morphological structure, and features of the vocabulary [1]. In 1992, a trilingual Izhma-Komi-Russian school dictionary, compiled by Z.P. Anufrieva, was published.³

At the beginning of the 20th century, and particularly in the 1920s, the modern Komi literary language was actively developing [7]. The literary Komi language was introduced into various state and party institutions, it began to be used in schools as a language of instruction, and a Komi-language press emerged. Expert assessments of that period were generally very positive [8]. Despite this, the interaction between the newly formed literary language and established dialects, as well as the acceptance or rejection of the literary language by dialect speakers, have not yet been adequately addressed in the academic literature.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to analyze the linguacultural attitudes of speakers of the Izhma dialect, residents of the Izhemsky district of the Komi Republic. Within this analysis, I examine the general ethnolinguistic situation in the Komi Republic and the Izhemsky district, analyze the opinions of Izhma Komi respondents on the interaction between the Izhma dialect and the literary Komi language, and highlight local projects aimed at the development and intergenerational transmission of the Izhma dialect and culture. This article is based on the results of a sociolinguistic study⁴ developed by the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences and conducted by me in the summer of 2025. This study, which aimed to clarify the current state of the Komi language in various settlements of the Komi Republic, included written and oral surveys of Izhma Komi

² Zhilina, T.I., Sakharova, M.A., and V.A. Sorvacheva. 1961. *Comparative Dictionary of Komi-Zyryan Dialects: About 25,000 Words*. Syktyvkar: Komi Book Publishing House. Print. (In Russ.)

³ Anufrieva, Z.P. 1992. *Komi Literary-Izhma-Russian Dictionary for Students in Grades 1–4*. Syktyvkar. Print. (In literary Komi, Izhma Komi and Russ.)

⁴ The research project was carried out on behalf of the Research Center for the Preservation, Revitalization, and Documentation of the Languages of Russia at the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as part of the task of clarifying the state of languages of Russia.

residents living in the Izhemsky district and follow up expert interviews with representatives of local administrations cultural and educational institutions. Surveys and interviews were conducted in both the Izhma Komi dialect and the Russian language. I also observed language use in various places and settings (for example, in a store, at a health station, etc.) and recorded instances of Komi language use in public spaces. The study also examined the linguistic competencies of representatives of the language community.⁵ Furthermore, the results of language projects developed and implemented over the past decade by representatives of the Izhma Komi community (or with their participation) both in the Izhemsky district and beyond were examined. Data from the All-Russian Population Censuses was also reviewed. As an additional source of information, I drew on my personal observations and experience: I was born and raised in the Izhemsky district, am a native speaker of the Izhma Komi dialect, a philology lecturer, a researcher, and the co-organizer and implementer of numerous projects on Izhma Komi topics.

What the Censuses Reveal

Over the past 100 years, the ethnic composition of the Komi Republic (known in various years as Komi Autonomous Okrug, Komi ASSR) has changed significantly [9]. For example, while in 1926 the Komi constituted 92.2% of the regional population, by 1959 this share had dropped sharply to 30.1%. According to the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, the Komi constituted 22.4% of the Republic's population,⁶ and in 2020, 17.2%.⁷ A number of different processes have led to the decline in the Komi population: from the mass forced and voluntary migration of other ethnic groups to the Komi region during the Soviet period to the impact of interethnic marriages, assimilation, and the consequences of stigmatization and marginalization, which was particularly prevalent in urban areas [3]. These processes, as well as the growing urbanization of the Komi people and the cessation of the use of Komi as a language of school instruction in the 1950s and 1960s, also affected the number of people who speak Komi as their native language. While in 1926 99.6% of Komi people spoke Komi as their native language, in 1959 this proportion dropped to 93.8%, and according to the results of the last All-Union Population Census of 1989, it fell further to 74.4%. According to the 2010 All-Russian Population Census, 62.8% of Komi people indicated Komi as their native language; in 2020, Komi was indicated as the native language by 70.1% of the Komi people.

⁵ Linguistic competencies were tested both orally during conversations and via written questionnaires completed by the respondents themselves.

⁶ *Results of the 2010 All-Russian population census. Volume 4. National composition and language proficiency, citizenship.* 2012, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://11.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn2010> (In Russ.)

⁷ *Results of the 2020 All-Russian population census. Section 5. Ethnic composition and language proficiency.* 2023, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://11.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn2020> (In Russ.)

Beginning with the 2002 All-Russian Census, the Izhma Komi were given the opportunity to indicate their specific local identity within the Komi group, becoming the first and currently the only local Komi group counted in the population censuses both as part of the Komi people and independently. It is believed that the inclusion of the Izhma Komi in the list of ethnic groups counted in the census was one of the results of the work of the Interregional Public Movement (IPM) of the Izhma Komi *Izvatas*.⁸ Since the early 2000s, *Izvatas* has been seeking recognition of the Izhma Komi as an indigenous minority population. Although there is still no official recognition, *Izvatas* was, nevertheless, accepted into the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation in 2004 [10. P. 46].

In 2002, of the 21,500 residents of the Izhemsky district, almost 19,500 (90.4%) identified themselves as Komi, of which 11,400 (58.6% of Komi and 53% of those who indicated their ethnicity) identified themselves as Izhma Komi.⁹ In 2010, of the 18,700 people, 16,600 (88.5%) were Komi, of which almost 5,000 were Izhma Komi (29.9% of Komi and 26.5% of those who indicated their ethnicity).¹⁰ Finally, in 2020, of the district's 16,500 residents, 14,400 (88.1%) were Komi, of which almost 4,000 were Izhma Komi (27.4% of Komi and 24.1% of those who indicated their ethnicity).¹¹ The decline in the official number of Izhma Komi is primarily due to the decrease in efforts of the *Izvatas* movement to obtain the status of an indigenous minority population for the Izhma Komi. At the same time, according to my observations, official data in this case does not provide a complete picture. Local Izhma identity remains well articulated, although it indeed rarely publicly interferes with the general Komi identity. For many Izhma Komi, therefore, their everyday reality, including the daily use of the Izhma dialect, is more important than abstract statistical data.

Currently, the level of Komi language proficiency varies greatly across different settlements in the Komi Republic. On the one hand, this is evident in the higher percentage of Komi speakers among rural Komi than among urban Komi. On the other hand, the settlements themselves can be roughly divided into groups based on the linguistic competence of local residents, as well as their ethnicity. For example, the Izhemsky district has the highest proportion of Komi in the Komi Republic. At the same time, it also has one of the highest rates of Komi population identifying Komi as their native language — 82.7% in 2020.¹² It is worth noting that,

⁸ The Interregional Public Movement (IPM) of the Izhma Komi *Izvatas*, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://raipon.info/regiony/mezhregionalnoe-obshchestvennoe-dvizhenie-komi-izhemtsev-izvatas/>

⁹ Federal State Statistics Service. The 2002 All-Russian population census, 10 Dec. 2025, <http://perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=11> (In Russ.)

¹⁰ *Results of the 2010 All-Russian population census. Volume 4. National composition and language proficiency, citizenship*. 2012, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://11.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn2010> (In Russ.)

¹¹ *Results of the 2020 All-Russian population census. Section 5. Ethnic composition and language proficiency*. 2023, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://11.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn2020> (In Russ.)

¹² Ibid.

unlike indicating a local Izhma Komi identity, it is not possible to record the number of speakers of the Izhma dialect in the census. Nevertheless, according to my long term observations, for data from the Izhemsky district, proficiency in the Komi language should primarily be understood as proficiency in the Izhma Komi dialect.

Izhma Dialect vs. Literary Komi Language

The distinction between the Izhma Komi and the literary Komi language was and is still recognized by its speakers themselves. Even during the period of *korenizatsiya*, or indigenization (known in Komi as *zyryanization* or *komization*), a national policy implemented in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s aimed at incorporating indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities into Soviet state structures and institutions, promoting local languages, and integrating them into education and record keeping, Izhma residents expressed concern and dissatisfaction with the introduction of the literary Komi language at the expense and detriment of the local dialect.

For example, in issues of the republic's newspaper *Yugyd Tuy* ('Bright Path') published in 1923, one can find the following debate about the introduction of the literary Komi language into teaching and official work in the northern regions of the Komi Autonomous Okrug. In Issue 61 of April 13, 1923, an author using the pseudonym 'Nash' ('Our') wrote, "In the Izhma-Pechora district, despite five years of the Soviet authority, there are still no native schools, and it seems they are not even thinking about organizing them. Likewise, there is no understandable (in the native language) extracurricular work for adults. It smells like outright Zyryanophobia, i.e., a continuation of tsarist policy" (*Yugyd Tuy*, April 13, 1923). In response, in Issue 71 of April 25, 1923, another author using the pseudonym 'Izhemets' ('Izhma Komi [male]') pointed out, "In conclusion, the author of the article *Vestiges of the Past* under the pseudonym 'Nash' calls on the Izhma Komi to wake up and look at the resolutions of congresses and conferences, as well as at Comrade Stalin's brochure on the national question. Reading such notes, one cannot help but remind the "informed" author of life on the Pechora ... The point is this: the Izhma-Pechora district will remain for many years between two "fications" [*фикациями*]: Russification and Komification. Neither is suitable for the Izhma people. The Izhma people have a poor but own dialect [*плохой, да свой говор*]" (*Yugyd Tuy*, April 25, 1923).

The critical attitude of the Izhma Komi people towards the literary Komi language was also noted during a sociolinguistic study in 2025. Firstly, the respondents clearly distinguished between the Izhma dialect, defining it in Izhma Komi as *ас кыы*, *ас күү* ('own language'), *изъва кыы*, *iz'va күү* ('Izhma language'), or *изъва сёрни*, *iz'va s'erni* ('Izhma speech'), and the Komi literary language, calling it *литературнэй кыы*, *literaturney күү* ('the literary language') or *зыран кыы*, *zyran күү* ('Zyryan language'). Secondly, when asked about their native

language proficiency, some respondents, along with their command of the Izhma dialect, noted difficulties understanding the literary language: “*ижемскейсэ бура, а зыранскейсэ даже ог понимайт*”, “*izhemskeyse bura, a zyranskeyse dazhe og ponimayt*” (‘I know the Izhma language well, but I don’t even understand the Zyryan language’).

My respondents were particularly critical of the teaching of the literary Komi language in schools and the quality of the corresponding textbooks. It should be noted here that Komi language classes in schools in the Komi Republic specifically teach the literary form, and the textbooks used are written in the literary language.¹³ Typically, respondents noted the complexity of the literary form and its incomprehensibility to the Izhma Komi people:¹⁴ “*литературнэй кыы вылас сьёкыдэсь, ми сійес ог понимайтэ, оз нравитчы вообше*”, “*literaturney kuy vyilas sökydes, mi siyes og ponimaet, oz nnavitchy voobshche*” (‘[texts] in the literary language are difficult, we don’t understand them, don’t like them at all’), “*мукед зырянскей кыысэ вообше он пöнимайт*”, “*muked zyryanskey kuyse voobshche on pönimayt*” (‘some Zyryan words are not understandable at all’). At the same time, some noted that with sufficient practice, understanding the Komi literary language does not cause problems: “*нравитче, сьёкыдджык, кöнешнэ, но частöджык кö*

¹³ It is noteworthy that already in the 19th century, some schools in the Izhma-Pechora region organized their teaching process in the Izhma dialect; textbooks and dictionaries were published for such schools: Mikhailov, P. 1873. *A Practical Guide to the Study of the Izma-Zyryan Language* [Zyryan-Russian Dictionary in the Izhma Dialect], Compiled and Published by Order of His Grace Nathanael, Bishop of Arkhangelsk and Kholmogory, for Theological Educational Institutions of the Arkhangelsk Diocese by P. Mikhailov. Arkhangelsk: Provincial Printing House. (In Izhma Komi and Russ.); *An ABC Book for the Izhma Zyryans Living in the Pechersky District of the Arkhangelsk Province*. In 3 Sections. I. Izhma-Zyryan; II. Russian; III. Prayers, Commandments, and the Nicene Creed. 1895. Arkhangelsk: Typographical Printing House of V. Cherepanov. (In Izhma Komi and Russ.). Modern Komi language school textbooks for Izhma Komi residing outside the Komi Republic are published in an intermediate linguistic form, which is lexically Izhma Komi, but orthographically close to the literary language: Rocheva, N.D., and E.F. Khozyainova. 2017. *An ABC Book: 1st Grade: Textbook in the Komi Language (Izhma Dialect) for General Education Organizations*. St. Petersburg: Branch of the Prosveshchenie Publishing House. (In Izhma Komi); Rocheva, N.D., Rocheva, A.I., and T.I. Filippova. 2017. *Komi Language (Izhma Dialect): 2nd Grade: Textbook for General Education Organizations*. St. Petersburg: Branch of the Prosveshchenie Publishing House. (In Izhma Komi); Rocheva, N.D., Eger, N.M., and E.F. Khozyainova. 2017. *Komi Language (Izhma Dialect): 3rd Grade: Textbook for General Education Organizations*. St. Petersburg: Branch of the Prosveshchenie Publishing House. 279 p. (In Izhma Komi); Rocheva, N.D., Svalova, U.E., and E.F. Khozyainova. 2017. *Komi Language (Izhma Dialect): 4th Grade: Textbook for General Education Organizations*. St. Petersburg: Branch of the Prosveshchenie Publishing House. (In Izhma Komi).

¹⁴ It is interesting that similar opinions about the incomprehensibility of the literary Komi language were expressed by the Izhma Komi people living outside the Komi Republic, for example, on the Kola Peninsula. [See: Blokland, R., and M. Rießler. 2011. Komi-Saami-Russian contacts on the Kola Peninsula. *Language Contact in Times of Globalization*. Vol. 38 : Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics / ed. by C. Hasselblatt, P. Houtzagers, R. van Pareren. Amsterdam: Rodopi (Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics. vol. 38.), p. 5–26.]

кучан лыддыны, велалан. Менум ставыс понятнэ’, ‘*nравитче, sökydzyk, köneshe, no chastödzyk kö kuchan lyddyny, velalan. Menu stavys ponyatne*’ (‘I like it, it’s a bit complicated, of course, but if you read it more often, you’ll get the hang of it. I understand everything’).

It’s worth noting that my respondents weren’t the only ones who spoke about a lack of understanding and the difficulties of learning the Komi literary language. These phenomena are also documented in historical sources, one of which is the personal diary of Nikolai Fyodorovich Terentyev, a student at the Mokhcha pedagogical college, written between 1936 and 1939. In one entry, he notes that the Komi literary language and the replacement of the Molodtsov script with Cyrillic “are difficult for children”.¹⁵

Due to repeated references to the incomprehensibility and complexity of the Komi literary language, I conducted an additional mini test, which was not originally included in the research plan. Several 9- and 10-year-old children, native speakers of the Izhma dialect, were given a text to read in the literary Komi language, taken from the children’s magazine *Bi Kin’* (‘Spark’). After the children read short excerpts from the text aloud, I asked them to underline any words they didn’t understand, which I then clarified. On average, 24.6% of the words in the text were unclear to the Izhma children. The director of the Vertep comprehensive school confirmed the validity of the mini test results, noting in an interview that “Komi children don’t really understand or perceive the literary Komi language, because at home and around them a different language is spoken.”

Language Shift and the Future of the Izhma Komi Dialect

The Izhma dialect is widely used in the Izhemsky district: at home, in stores, in houses of culture and village clubs, in schools, hospitals, and in village councils. According to the head of the Krasnoborsky rural settlement administration, all work meetings in the administration are conducted in Izhma Komi. At the same time, most kindergartens in the district teach in Russian in accordance with educational standards and due to the predominance of Russian-speaking teachers. A rare exception is the kindergarten in the village of Vertep, where the Izhma dialect is used for instruction, which also attracts children from other villages. The dominance of Russian as the primary language of instruction in preschools in the republics of the Russian Federation (even in areas with dense residence of local ethnolinguistic groups) has been noted by other researchers [12. P. 373–374; 13. P. 43–44, 147]. As a rule, local languages (even those considered state languages) are represented symbolically in kindergartens, and pedagogical practices, such as learning poems, do not fully transmit local languages or ensure their use by children.

¹⁵ Izhemsky District Museum of History and Local Lore. 2021. *Diary of Nikolai Fyodorovich Terentyev (1936–1939)*. Syktyvkar: Komi Republican Printing House, 159 p. (In Izhma Komi and Russ.)

Russian-language kindergartens, along with parents' reluctance to teach the local language, a lack of conversational practice at home, and children's reliance on telephone and internet access for communication, were cited by Izhma respondents as the main reasons for the widespread language shift¹⁶ among children from Komi families towards Russian. The reality of language shift among children and youth was noted by all respondents. Among children from Izhma Komi families, there are no monolinguals left; some children are active bilinguals, speaking Izhma Komi and Russian, while others speak only Russian but understand Izhma (so-called passive speakers). Language shift among children is common, including in traditionally Komi-speaking villages. According to my observations and the results of a sociolinguistic study I conducted in 2025, this phenomenon is even more pronounced in other districts of the Komi Republic.

When answering questions about the future of the Komi language (in this case, the form of the Komi language that the respondent considers native or most familiar), respondents, as a rule, declared its necessity and importance for themselves personally: *‘менум колэ, рӧднэй кыы’*, *‘menum kole, rӧdney kyy’* (‘I need it, it’s my native language’), *‘менум колэ, ме вед сӧен сӧрнӧма’*, *‘menum kole, me ved sien syornita’* (‘I need it, I speak it’). At the same time, most of the forecasts made regarding the future of both the literary Komi language and the Izhma dialect were pessimistic: *‘воше постепеннэ’*, *‘voshe postepenne’* (‘will gradually disappear’), *‘нӧжжен-нӧжжен мунас, а изьва кылыс тшӧтш, но бӧрвыйджык’*, *‘nӧzhen-nyozhen munas, a izva kylys tshӧtsh, no bӧrvyydzhyk’* ([the literary language] will slowly disappear, and the Izhma language will also disappear, but later’), *‘пыр-пыр оз же усь, уяс численностьыс, джынсэ воштам на, любительяс лоасны, пыр колясны сэтшемъяс, кодъяслы колэ. Литературнэй кылыслы вуйым господдержжа’*, *‘pyr-pyr oz zhe us, usyas chislennostys, dzhyanse voshtam na, lyubitelyas loasny, pyr kolyasny setshemyas, kodyasly kole. Literaturney kylyslы vuyym gospodderzhka’* (‘it will not disappear immediately, the population will fall, we will lose another half, but language enthusiasts will remain, those who need the language will remain. The literary language has state support’).

At the same time, there were also cautiously positive forecasts: *‘ставыс лоас бур. Ставыс мян сайын’*, *‘stavys loas bur. Stavys miyan sayyn’* (‘everything will be fine. Everything depends on us’), *‘кор пока йӧзыс вуйым, комиыс оз кус, но йӧзсэ колэ кутны, отсооны’*, *‘kor пока yӧzys vuyym, komiys oz kus, no yӧzse kole kutny, otsoony’* (‘as long as people exist, the Komi language will not disappear, but people need help’). As can be seen from these excerpts, respondents believed that

¹⁶ Language shift is the process by which a linguistic community, usually gradually, ceases to use one language as its primary language and switches to another, usually a dominant or more prestigious language. [See: Fishman, J.A. 2012. “Language maintenance, language shift, and reversing language shift.” In *The Handbook of Bilingualism and Multilingualism*, edited by T.K. Bhatia and W.C. Ritchie. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 466–494. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118332382.ch19>].

the key to preserving, transmitting, and developing the local language lies in both the agency and activity of the speakers themselves, as well as external support.

While declaring their own interest in the present and future of the Komi language, many respondents negatively assessed the possibility of a similar interest on the part of the Komi Republic and the Russian Federation. Typical responses to the question “Does the state need the Komi language?” were: *‘ог вермы висьтооны, кудз республикалы, но государствоыслы, навернӧ, точно оз’*, *‘og vermy vistoony, kudz respublikaly, no gosudarstvoysly, navernö, tochno oz’* (‘I can’t say, whether the republic [needs it or not], but the state probably definitely doesn’t need it’), *‘республикалы да государствоылы оз коо’*, *‘republikaly da gosudarstvoly oz koo’* (‘the republic and the state don’t need it’).

Local Linguocultural Projects

For Komi-speaking Komi, including the Izhma Komi people, the local dialect is typically their native, mother tongue (Komi: *мам кыв, там кыв*, ‘mother language’). However, as already noted, dialectal forms are almost never represented in school education, being supplanted by the literary language. Moreover, according to my observations, some language activists and experts who adhere to the standard language ideology¹⁷ have a critical, even derogatory, attitude toward dialectal forms, as “incorrect” and deviating from the norm. Unsurprisingly, in such a situation, dialect speakers may develop a feeling of inferiority of their language (and sometimes, as an extension, of their ethnicity), which can potentially develop into rejection and aversion to both their native dialect and the literary form. Sometimes, however, dialect speakers, wanting to prove and demonstrate the significance of their local language and attract the attention of both native speakers and speakers of other dialects, may take the opposite position.

In this regard, in my observations, language shift and pessimistic forecasts regarding the future of the Komi language are not perceived by Izhma Komi as an accomplished or inevitable fact, but often serve as motivation for action. Many Izhma Komi share a sense of agency, a recognition that the state and future of the Izhma dialect also depends on their own actions.

In recent years, a number of projects have been developed and implemented that can be considered good examples of popularizing and stimulating the intergenerational transmission of the Izhma dialect and culture. These projects also serve as a clear demonstration of the Izhma life philosophy of *‘ооны олэм вылэ’*,

¹⁷ Standard language ideology, or the ideology of a standard language, is understood as a system of beliefs and attitudes according to which the only correct and normative version of a language, superior to other linguistic forms (for example, dialects or mixed forms), is the standard (usually literary) language [See: Milroy, J. 2001. “Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization.” *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, no. 5, pp. 530–555. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00163>]. Such a language is subject to use in official, educational and public spheres.

‘*oony olem vyle*’ (‘to live for life’), which entails a responsible approach to the present life, an active stand in life, responsibility for future generations, and intergenerational connections. According to this philosophy, language and culture are an integral, organic part of life and are strongly connected to all generations of the Izhma Komi people.

A distinctive characteristic of these projects is the active involvement and initiative of local residents at all stages: development, material collection, fundraising, implementation, and promotion through presentations, open lectures, and other activities. The implementation of these projects also clearly demonstrates that large grants are not the primary factor in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, but, above all, caring individuals who recognize its importance and take proactive action.

Izhma Komi initiatives can be roughly divided into the following groups:

Digital projects. One example of a digital project aimed at creating electronic and online resources dedicated to Izhma topics is the portal *Izvatas. All about the Izhma Komi*.¹⁸ This trilingual portal, created in 2020 by two authors, researcher Maria Sergeevna Fedina and myself, thematically presents basic information about Izhma Komi history, culture, and language. The portal also features a media collection of films and TV program recordings and a research library with works dedicated to the Izhma Komi people. Another resource, *Komi Media Collection*,¹⁹ is a collection of annotated audio and video recordings in the Izhma dialect, made during field expeditions in 2014–2016 in the Izhemsky and Sosnogorsky districts of the Komi Republic, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, and the Murmansk Oblast, as part of the international research project *Izva Komi: Building an annotated digital corpus for future research on Komi speech communities in northernmost Russia*.²⁰ The Media Collection’s materials are actively used both by researchers of the Izhma dialect and the Izhma Komi people themselves: for them, the Media Collection serves as a repository of video recordings of interviews with deceased elders.

Media projects. Izhma Komi culture and language are represented in a variety of forms in the media sphere. Among the most well-known longstanding projects are the works of Genrikh Nemchinov,²¹ a well-known ethnoblogger in the Komi Republic. He is a native of the village of Brykalansk in the Izhemsky district and began his creative career with video sketches about the villages of the Izhemsky district. Among more niche projects, the death metal band Schiz²² is worth noting. It brings together natives of several villages in the Izhemsky district and performs songs in the Izhma dialect. In their texts, Schiz actively draws on Izhma Komi cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and local legends.

¹⁸ *Izvatas. All about the Izhma Komi*, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://izvatas.com/>

¹⁹ *Komi Media Collection*, 10 Dec. 2025, <http://videocorpora.ru/>

²⁰ *About the project*, 10 Dec. 2025, <http://videocorpora.ru/ru/info>

²¹ *Genrikh Nemchinov. Ethnoblogger*, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://vk.com/genrikhnemchinov>

²² *SCHIZ*, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://vk.com/schizdead>

Republishing historical publications. In recent years, Izhma residents have begun actively searching archives and republishing historical publications on the Izhma dialect, including dictionaries, scientific works, and popular science works. In doing so, they are introducing previously inaccessible 19th-century research materials into scholarly circulation and making them available to the local community. For the modern Izhma community, these materials represent a newly discovered cultural heritage. Particularly active in such projects are public figure T.V. Arteeva from the village of Izhma and Komi language teacher G.V. Khozyainova from the village of Gam [16].

Extracurricular activities and additional education for children and adults. These projects are aimed at creating educational and methodological tools for use in extracurricular activities of schools and kindergartens and in additional education for children and adults. A striking example is the ABC-Atlas *Изватаслӧн азбука-атлас да нӧдкыв тупыл*, *Izvataslön azbuka-atlas da nӧdkyv tupyl* ('The ABC-Atlas of the Izvatas and the Tangle of Riddles')²³, published in 2024 by the Izhemsky district's Children's Center with the support of the Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives. The main goal of creating the ABC book is to transmit the Izhma dialect to children. The book combines a geographical atlas of the Izhemsky district and the ABC book of the Izhma dialect, in which each letter of the alphabet is illustrated with toponyms, concepts important to the Izhma people, and elements of folk knowledge (Figure 1). The book includes a small explanatory dictionary, and all the material is presented in the Izhma dialect. The ABC book is very popular among the Izhma people, especially parents and teachers. Most of the copies were donated to Izhma children during workshops and public book presentations. Around 120 people were directly involved in the book's development, including Izhma children who drew the letters of the alphabet [17].



Figure 1. The cover and spread of the book “Izvataslön azbuka-atlas da nӧdkyv tupyl”

S o u r c e: VK (short for its original name VKontakte) (accessed: 10.12.2025). 10 Dec. 2025, https://vk.com/shur_shar

²³ *The ABC-Atlas of the Izvatas and the Tangle of Riddles*, 10 Dec. 2025, <https://vk.com/public221827340/>

Adaptation of the Komi literary language. Another area of focus is the adaptation of the Komi literary language. For example, with the support of the Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives, posters with poems dedicated to the traditional Lud holiday were created using an adapted language form; these posters are now displayed in all libraries in the Izhemsky district. For example, on one of these posters (Figure 2), the word *ayö*, *ayö* ('my father'; literary Komi: *батъöй*, *bat'öy*, or rarely, *айöй*, *ayöy*; Izhma Komi: *ae*, *aye*) is an intermediate form, between the literary and dialectal forms, as is the word *немся*, *nemśya* ('century-old'; literary Komi: *нэмся*, *nemśya*).



Figure 2. A poster with a poem by A. Rocheva, located in the Vertep library, Izhemsky district

Source: photo by M.S. Fedina.

It is worth noting that the Izhma Komi people living outside the Komi Republic are also adapting the literary language. For example, Komi language school textbooks for Izhma Komi residing outside the Komi Republic have been published in an intermediate language form, lexically Izhma Komi but orthographically close to the literary language, as mentioned above.

The adapted Komi language is used not only in cultural and educational institutions but also in the private sector. For example, in a grocery store in the

village of Diyur, the price tags on goods use the phrase *водзö волö*, *vodzö volö* ('come forward', 'come again'), a traditional farewell among the Izhma Komi people (Figure 3). It is written in a language form intermediate between the Izhma (*водзе волэ*, *vodze vole*) and the literary (*водзö волöй*, *vodzö volöy*) language forms.



Figure 3. A price tag written using the adapted Komi language.

S o u r c e: photo by M.S. Fedina.

Conclusion

Despite the established scientific division between the Komi literary *language* and dialectal *variants*, the Izhma dialect is defined by its speakers as a language — *ас кыы*, *ас кyy*, *изьва кыы*, *iz'va кyy*. As my research has shown, the opposition of the Izhma dialect to the Komi literary language was typical both historically and persists in modern times. The Izhma dialect is preserved by the Izhma Komi people as an important attribute of their territorial identity.

The current state of the Izhma dialect in the Izhemsky district is influenced by the same trends as the state of the Komi language in the Komi Republic as a whole: depopulation of the indigenous population and an intense linguistic shift toward Russian, especially among children and youth. Moreover, according to my observations, these phenomena are even more pronounced in other districts of the Komi Republic.

The future of their language raises serious concerns among the Izhma Komi people; however, these concerns are not perceived as fatal and often serve as motivation for action to preserve and promote the Izhma language and culture. Typically, such efforts are collective and grassroots, meaning projects aimed at preserving, developing, and transmitting the Izhma language and culture are conceived and implemented within the Izhma community itself. The Izhma community is well aware of its collective responsibility for its future, and collective engagement drives the implementation of linguacultural projects.

These completed projects are excellent examples of popularizing and stimulating the intergenerational transmission of the Izhma dialect and culture. However, the need for systemic institutional, academic, and governmental support for the functioning of local dialects, which are the source of the Komi literary language as the national language of the Komi people and the state language of the Komi Republic, remains undeniable.

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