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Komi language sustainability in urban Syktyvkar: Changes in the linguistic environment and language attitudes

The article focuses on language sustainability, the functioning of a language in the multiverse of its relations with speakers, non-speakers, other languages, and surrounding environments. Highlighted is the case of the Komi language, approached through the analysis of the language attitudes of Komi and non-Komi residents of Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic, and changes that have affected the language's role. The empirical data includes interviews with urban Komi, social media posts, and historical and census data.

Unlike previous studies, the article demonstrates historical transformations in the language attitudes of urban Komi. Widespread Russification and marginalization have previously spurred the development of negative language attitudes. Increased interregional communication, digitalization, and access to information have influenced later improvements in these attitudes.

Changes in the attitudes of non-Komi residents are observed as well: while these attitudes were previously acutely negative, they have been replaced by indifferent and moderately positive ones. The prevalence of positive attitudes was registered in situations where direct interaction with the Komi language was not expected, while direct interaction, such as inclusion of Komi in the school curriculum, triggered more negative reactions.

The prevalence of a utilitarian approach to language maintenance and widespread narratives about the Russifying influence of Syktyvkar have negatively affected the sustainability of the Komi language within the city. Simultaneously, the influx of rural-born Komi-speaking youth with positive language attitudes and the presence of places and communities where Komi is used and valued exert a favorable influence on the language.

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1. Introduction

Urbanization is frequently regarded as detrimental to the maintenance and promotion of non-dominant languages (Saarikivi & Marten 2012; Sánchez et al. 2018). At the same time, with the ever-increasing speed of urbanization, it is imperative not only to engage in urban sociolinguistic research but also to challenge our approaches to language studies, namely by paying more attention to environments in which languages exist and the relations they are part of. For this reason, the focus of the present article is language sustainability, which I define as the functioning of language in the multiverse of its relations with speakers, non-speakers, other languages, and surrounding environments. Specifically, I focus on the sustainability of the Komi language in Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic, which I approach through an analysis of the language attitudes of Komi and non-Komi urbanites supported by the study of the transformation of the role of the Komi language.

Komi[1] is one of the Finno-Ugric languages of Russia and one of the state languages of the Komi Republic. Like other Finno-Ugric languages of Russia, Komi has been experiencing a steady decline in the number of its speakers. Like many other non-dominant languages in Russia, Komi is widely equated with rural areas, but contrary to this assumption, Komi has been an integral part of the urban environment, particularly in Syktyvkar,[2] the capital of the Komi Republic.[3]

Previous studies on attitudes towards the Komi language in urban areas have quite unilaterally focused on one social group, namely Komi-speaking youth and particularly students (Kuznetsov 2009; Mironova 2011; Mironova & Jaanits 2012; Juldašev & Vokuev 2022). This group, relocating from rural settlements to Syktyvkar, was presented as ignorant of their native language, and their attitudes were described as overwhelmingly negative, loaded with emotions of shame, embarrassment, and fear (Kuznetsov 2009: 123). According to Juldašev & Vokuev (2022), such attitudes were attributed to the linguistic dominance of Russian and what the authors called a "cultural inferiority complex among Komi language speakers". The city was depicted as a place where formerly rural Komi abandoned their language by speaking exclusively Russian, leading, as a result, to the suppression of their ethnic identity (Mironova & Jaanits 2012).

The obvious shortcomings of the existing research are the exclusive concentration on a specific social group, an oversimplified depiction of language attitudes of urban Komi residents, and a lack of a critical analysis of the structural causes behind the language shift that urban Komi have undergone. Furthermore, such scholarship omits the language attitudes of non-Komi speakers as such. In this article, I aim to overcome these

1. There are two major Komi groups and respective languages, namely the Komi Zyryans and Komi Permyaks; sometimes a third group, the Komi-Yazvinians, is distinguished as well (Kuznetsov 2022: 487). In this article I exclusively focus on the Komi Zyryans and in referring to this group, I use the endonym *Komi*.
2. The city received its current name *Syktyvkar* (Komi *Сыктыв* 'Sysola (river) + *кар* 'city') in 1930. From 1780 until that time, it was officially known as *Ust-Sysolsk*. In this article, the name *Syktyvkar* is used to designate the city regardless of the historical period concerned.
3. At various times, the Komi Republic has been known under different names that reflected its political and administrative organization. In this article, the name *Komi Republic* is used to designate the region regardless of the historical period concerned.

limitations by involving diverse social and age groups of urban Komi and by approaching their attitudes as evolving phenomena. By providing a historical overview of the transitions that the Komi language in Syktyvkar and the Komi Republic has undergone, I further place such attitudes in specific political and social contexts. This background, I argue, assists in comprehending the particularity of people's beliefs at different time periods. In addition, I expand my analysis to include a study of language attitudes as expressed by non-Komi residents of Syktyvkar.

The main research questions this article aims to address are the following: What is the role of the Komi language in Syktyvkar and how has it transformed over time? What attitudes towards the Komi language do Komi and non-Komi residents of Syktyvkar express? How do these attitudes affect the sustainability of the Komi language in Syktyvkar?

The empirical data for this article consists of interviews with Komi urbanites recorded in 2021–2022, posts from public city groups on the social media website VKontakte, and census data. My own knowledge of the context further enriches these datasets: I was born and raised in Syktyvkar and have long followed Komi-related matters out of both personal and academic interest.

Investigating urban Komis' experiences from the late Soviet period until recent times, I demonstrate the evolution of their language attitudes and indicate the determinants for such changes. Exploring non-Komi residents' attitudes, I discover the variability in these attitudes that depends on the mediums and places where the Komi language is used. I identify the prevalence of a utilitarian approach to language maintenance and widespread narratives about the Russifying influence of Syktyvkar as challenges to Komi language sustainability. Simultaneously, I emphasize the positive impact of the influx of rural-born Komi-speaking youth and assert the significance of places where Komi is used and valued for language and identity maintenance within the urban environment.

2. Exploring language sustainability through language attitudes

In engaging with language in the framework of its connection to the surrounding environments, academic scholarship utilizes several conceptual frameworks, among which are language ecology, language sustainability, and language vitality. While language vitality appears to be a rather

traditional concept employed by UNESCO and used by a large body of scholarship studying the health and current state of languages, language ecology, which originated in the scholarship of the late 1960s and early 1970s, seems to attract more polarized opinions (Mufwene 2000; Willans & Jukes 2017).

In this article, I am inclined to use language sustainability as the guiding concept (Bastardas-Boada 2014). Like language ecology, language sustainability promotes an ecological and relational approach that perceives languages as interactive and open phenomena situated in a network of diverse relations that form a holistic ecosystem (Ferguson & Siragusa 2017). In this sense, the sustainability of languages and language diversity are one of the components of the meta-level sustainability of diverse communities (Virtanen et al. 2020). Unlike language ecology, frequently criticized for its use of analogy between languages and biological species, language sustainability appears to be a more inclusive, accommodating, and flexible term. It allows one not only to fix the current state of a language and its use, but also to present these in their dynamic quality, from tracing their historical premises to analyzing their prospects. As Bastardas-Boada (2014: 139) concludes, language sustainability is both ecosystemic and dynamic, and I would also add that it is inherently future-oriented.

Cities are a distinctive area in studies of language sustainability, particularly of non-dominant languages. They are typically perceived as areas with limited resources to support such languages and cultures (Saarikivi & Marten 2012; Chao & Waller 2017; Sánchez et al. 2018). While relocation to urban areas has long been equated with assimilation, with loss of language and identity, research among Indigenous peoples shows that some of them do not perceive their relocation exclusively in such terms, and many of them choose to maintain their roots through continuous mobility, participation in cultural festivals, and connections through social media (Toivanen & Fabritius 2020: 60–61).

It is not enough to view the vitality of a non-dominant language and its sustainability in urban areas from solely the perspective of the traditional quantifiable elements, such as number of speakers, level of proficiency, etc. Rather, it is crucial to embed language use in the larger context of people's belonging, sense of community, and relationships established within and outside urban areas. With that said, I argue that for language maintenance in urban areas, it is particularly important to have dedicated spaces that

function in non-dominant languages or provide opportunities to practice them (for research on so-called "safe spaces" or "breathing spaces", see Fishman 1991; Taylor-Leech & Tualaulelei 2021; Kroik 2023; Sams 2024).

Acknowledging the strong relational focus of language sustainability, it is important to underline that each of the relations that situate language within social, economic, political, cultural, and ecological environments may differ among various communities. Depending on a community and local context, they influence language sustainability in different ways and to different degrees. In the case of the Komi language, aspects such as governmental support, inclusion of the language in the school curriculum, and digitalization have attracted particular attention from language activists and planners. In this article, however, I aim to bring another angle to this discussion and analyze attitudes that surround the Komi language and its use. Ultimately, the decision to use a language, transmit it, or engage in its maintenance in any other way, is individual and heavily influenced by speakers' and others' beliefs about language, its role, utility, and prestige (Kasstan et al. 2018: 389).

Language attitudes are the totality of people's beliefs about linguistic forms, their feelings, actions, and inactions related to these forms (Gomashie 2023: 2). Incongruence between speakers' beliefs, feelings, and actions is not uncommon, and thus for effective language use, maintenance, and transmission, consistency among all three elements is essential (Baker 1992: 13). Such incongruence also explains why, in certain cases, positive language attitudes do not directly translate into increased language use (Choi 2003; Gomashie 2023).

Language attitudes are usually dynamic and transformative. Their development is influenced by speakers' personal experiences, social environment, and language policy, as well as other factors important to the community (Garrett 2010: 22; Mamontova 2019: 110).

3. Data and methods

This study employs a range of methods and data, including ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, digital ethnography, and analysis of historical statistical data. Additionally, my own experience as a (former) Syktyvkar resident born into a Komi-Russian family and my knowledge of local matters assist me in comprehending and presenting the urban language environment.

3.1. Statistical data

To represent changes in the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Syktyvkar and the Komi Republic, I make use of the results of censuses conducted consequently from 1897 to 2010. One could argue that using Russian census data (whether Soviet or from the Russian Empire) carries inherent risks due to potential falsifications and inconsistencies during the original data collection. For this reason, due to significant methodological limitations and inadequacies in data collection, I do not include the results of the recent 2020 census. Still, I believe that referring to census data is important, as such data informs experts' recommendations and official language policies.

3.2. Urban ethnographic fieldwork

From October 2021 to February 2022, as part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I conducted 6 group and 31 individual interviews with 67 Komi residents of Syktyvkar. Most interviewees were women (N=53, 79.1%) and first-generation internal migrants (N=62, 92.5%), who had moved to Syktyvkar from rural areas due to studies or work. My interlocutors included all generations born successively from the 1950s to the 2000s. In terms of their occupation, they were students, cultural and administrative workers, journalists, university lecturers and staff, private-sector employees, and retirees.

Interviews were organized in Syktyvkar, Saint-Petersburg (one interview), as well as online (one interview) at interlocutors' workplaces, homes, and in city cafes. During the interviews, I communicated with my interlocutors predominantly in Russian, while they chose to express themselves in either Russian or Komi or engaged in code-switching throughout the conversation. Interviews were either audio-recorded or documented in the form of notes, transcribed, and analyzed using the qualitative data-analysis software ATLAS.ti.

The scope of interviews was not limited to the discussion of the interlocutors' opinions about the Komi language, but rather covered the personal and professional biographies of the interlocutors, as well as their urban experiences. However, the Komi language, its use in the city and role in the construction of interlocutors' identities, as well as interlocutors' language attitudes were discussed in almost all interviews. I must also acknowledge

that a significant part of my interlocutors were professionally associated with the Komi language, culture, or nationality policy. I recognize that this fact may affect the representativeness of this study, but I nevertheless argue that even this seemingly homogeneous group of people can express contrasting opinions.

In this article, the interlocutors were anonymized, except when they expressed their opinions as public figures or experts.

3.3. Digital ethnography

To determine the language attitudes of non-Komi residents, in the spring of 2023 I conducted a study of posts on the city groups on the social-media website VKontakte (alternatively VK; known as *ВКонтакте* in Russian). The reason for choosing VK over other social-media platforms is its overwhelming popularity among city residents.[4] VK largely resembles Facebook, but unlike the latter, it allows the use of pseudonyms, although it does not recommend it. While publicly available data on the use of pseudonyms in VK is lacking, based on my own extensive user experience, I see most people using their real names.

During the first stage of my study, I searched for public groups related to Syktyvkar by typing "Syktyvkar" (*Сыктывкар*) into the VK search bar and checking all results in the "Groups" category. I identified 13 groups that met my criteria: 1) the group was open, 2) there was a possibility for group members to write their own posts or leave comments, and 3) the number of subscribers was at least several thousand.

Next, using the three keywords "Komi" (*коми*), "Komi language" (*коми язык*), and "komyak" (*комяк*, a derogative word used in relation to the Komi people), I mined these groups for posts related to the Komi language and Komi residents of Syktyvkar. Five groups that yielded relevant results were selected for further analysis. In addition, a group already known to me was included in the final list.

General information about these groups and selected posts is presented in Table 1. A total of 57 posts with 4,595 comments published from 2014 to 2023 were analyzed. It was impossible to identify users' ethnicities unless

4. For example, in 2021 VK made up 51% of all social-media traffic consumed in the Komi Republic (BNK 2021).

Table 1: The Syktyvkar public groups on VKontakte selected for the analysis

Group name	Number of subscribers (as of 12 June 2023)	Number of posts analyzed	Average number of views per post	Total/average number of likes of these posts	Total/average number of shares of these posts	Total/average number of comments to these posts
Doska pozora: Syktyvkar	26,000	2	2,100	31/15.5	0	31/15.5
Menja besit: Syktyvkar	3,500	2	NDA	130/65	2/1	27/13.5
Podslušano Syktyvkar	86,000	31	7,100	1,812/58.5	40/1.3	2,308/74.5
Pro Gorod Syktyvkar: Novosti	154,000	16	10,100	354/22.1	45/2.8	1,163/72.7
Važnoe v Komi: Syktyvkar	159,000	3	16,500	845/281.7	22/7.3	113/37.7
Žest' Komi	181,000	3	65,200	4,835/1,611.7	174/58	953/317.7

NDA = No data available

they were clearly stated. Since posts were collected to analyze the language attitudes of non-Komi residents, I thus set an additional task to highlight those comments, which clearly indicated that their authors did not self-identify as Komi.

4. Changing linguistic environment of Syktyvkar

The development of Syktyvkar as an ethnically non-Russian city distinguishes it from other cities in the European North of Russia (Rogačev 2010: 20). I have depicted the key aspects of the ethnic development of Syktyvkar in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries elsewhere (Fedina 2022a). Here I expand the previous description with a presentation of the changes that have affected the Komi language in Syktyvkar and the Komi Republic.

4.1. Statistics on Syktyvkar's ethnolinguistic diversity

According to the All-Russian Census of 2010, more than 100 ethnic groups resided in Syktyvkar. While it remains unclear how many languages were spoken in Syktyvkar, on the regional level representatives of less than 100 out of 130 urban ethnic groups declared a knowledge of their groups' native languages. Nevertheless, this indication says nothing about real language proficiency. Analyzing Syktyvkar's ethnolinguistic diversity in its entirety lays beyond the scope of this article, and instead I focus on Russians and Komi, the two largest urban ethnic groups and, consequently, the two major languages, overwhelmingly dominating the urban environment. Historical changes in the shares of these groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Shares of Komi and Russians in the population of Syktyvkar (Skvoznikov et al. 2001; All-Russian Census 2002; All-Russian Census 2010; Fauzer 2022)

	Komi		Russians		Total
1897	3,699	83%	731	16%	4,464
1926	3,486	69%	1,511	30%	5,068
1926[a]	7,760	80%	1,816	19%	9,713
1937	18,549	80%	4,637	20%	23,186
1939	17,106	68%	7,079	28%	25,285
1959	32,423	50%	23,186	36%	64,461
1970	47,783	38%	52,537	49%	125,088
1979	61,040	36%	89,422	52%	170,980
1989	79,011	34%	127,619	54%	234,903
2002	75,140	31%	143,453	58%	245,768
2010	62,040	25%	158,147	63%	250,874

a. Recalculated in 1938.

As shown in Table 2, over the span of a century Komi have gone from the absolute majority to a quarter of the city's population. As I described elsewhere (Fedina 2022a), the primary reason for this was extensive involuntary and professional migration to the Komi Republic that both brought new ethnic groups to the region and increased the Russian population severalfold.

It is believed that the actual number of urban Komi may be higher than what is reported by the census. Several factors have contributed to this discrepancy. First, up until the 2020 census, it was possible to declare only one ethnicity, even if a person identified with multiple ethnic groups; the documented ethnicity, in such cases, was commonly the dominant, more prestigious, or economically beneficial one. Second, people's denial, indifference, and ignorance of their own ethnicity appeared to impact the reported number of urban Komi residents as well. The roots of denialism can be found in the past experiences of marginalization discussed in Section 6.1. Indifference and ignorance, in turn, can be attributed to the existing utilitarian approach, which promotes the idea that appreciating and embracing a Komi ethnic identity would only occur when it would bring practical benefits for its bearers.

As it was impossible to find comprehensive data depicting the self-reported native languages of the population of Syktyvkar, in Table 3 I present corresponding (largely incomplete) regional data on the native languages of the Komi people distributed across urban and rural areas (for a discussion on the meaning of cities, see Fedina 2022a).

Table 3: Native languages of the Komi people in the Komi Republic (Fryer 1998; All-Russian Census 2010; Fedina 2022b)

	Komi			Russian		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
1926	NDA	NDA	~100%	NDA	NDA	~0%
1959	84%	97%	94%	16%	3%	6%
1970	70%	95%	87%	30%	5%	13%
1979	63.5%	92%	80%	36.5%	8%	20%
1989	58%	89%	74%	42%	11%	26%
2010	41%	82%	63%	59%	18%	37%

NDA = No data available

This data clearly signals the linguistic Russification of the Komi people, starting in the second half of the twentieth century. While it has particularly affected urban Komi, according to official statistics and supported by the stories of my interlocutors, it has recently intensified in rural settlements as well (see interview excerpt 2 in Section 5 for an example of Russian-speaking rural Komi children).

4.2. From the 1900s to the 2020s: changing language policies and their impact on the Komi language

By the beginning of the twentieth century, constant contacts between Russians and Komi had led to relatively widespread bilingualism among city residents. At the same time, even though Komi was the language of the majority of the city, Russian remained the sole official language of public administration and education (Smetanin et al. 2004: 300; Rogačev 2010: 91). The situation changed briefly in the 1920s with the introduction of *korenizatsiia*,[5] or 'indigenization', a nationality policy aimed at promoting nation-building among the non-Russian ethnic groups of the newly formed Soviet Union. *Korenizatsiia* led to predominantly positive results, including the omnipresence of the Komi language in all spheres of public life, including administration and education, but ended abruptly in the early 1930s and was replaced by a rapid transition to Russification (Smetanin et al. 2004: 305; Fedina 2022b).

From the 1930s on, the ethnic composition of the Komi Republic started to change dramatically. According to the family stories of one of my interlocutors, with the growing number of Russian-speaking residents, Russian became the dominant language in Syktyvkar by as early as the 1950s (male, 19 years old). As a result of the school reform begun in 1958 (for further discussion see Fedina 2022b), Komi was suppressed as a medium of school education. Even today there are no schools in the Komi Republic and Syktyvkar where Komi is used as the official language of instruction.

By the end of the Soviet period, the use of Komi was limited to a few spheres, and the language became regularly associated with rurality and inferiority. As for the Komi people, they became regularly marginalized and were often perceived as "second-rate" people by the Russian-speaking majority. According to my data, ethnolinguistic marginalization could be a distinguishing characteristic of urban areas, as it did not occur in Komi-speaking rural settlements.

The late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s were a period of ethnic revival that originated and culminated in Syktyvkar. It was at this time that the Komi representative organization Komi Vojtyr was created, the Komi Ethnic Gymnasium and Arts Gymnasium, two major Komi schools, the Komi

5. In Komi, *korenizatsiia* was known as *zyryanizatsiia*, or 'Zyryanization'. This stemmed from the word "Zyryan", a Russian exonym for the Komi people.

Culture Center, and the Finno-Ugric Faculty at the Syktyvkar State University began operation. In 1992 the "Law on State Languages" was adopted. In its initial version, the law designated Komi and Russian as the state languages of the Komi Republic and included such provisions as mandatory knowledge of both state languages for certain professions and compulsory study of both languages in schools. However, in 2002, after the Moscow's campaign to harmonize regional and federal legislation (Zamyatin 2013: 132), many provisions were relaxed, for example, the requirement to know both state languages was substituted by the requirement to know at least one. Today the Law on State Languages stands as the main legal act pertaining to the functioning of the Komi language, but its notable weakness is the lack of defined measures in the event that the law is breached.

The centralization and de-federalization of Russia, begun in the early 2000s, slowed the pace and limited the areas of ethnic revival. The study of the Komi language remained compulsory until the mid-2010s but was later abolished. Nowadays, unlike the dominant Russian language, the use of which is widespread in all spheres of life, Komi is perceived as a place-based language, the use of which is limited to certain areas, networks, and situations. Unlike Russian, Komi is extremely rarely used in governmental bodies and by authorities. Due to legacies of marginalization, as well as stereotypes surrounding the upbringing of bilingual children,[6] for a long time Komi was rarely transmitted to younger urban generations, leaving rural-to-urban Komi migration as the main source of reproduction of urban Komi speakers (for a similar observation on reproduction of urban Sakha speakers, see Ferguson 2022: 216). In recent years, however, there has reportedly been a rise in the presence of the Komi language in Syktyvkar, a trend that is further explored in Sections 6.2–6.4 and 7.2.

A long-lasting impact of restrictive language policies can, among other things, be observed in the changing role of the Komi language in the Komi ethnic identity. The scholarship of the 1990s unanimously ascribed the language as the foundation of the Komi identity and justified this assumption by the attitudes of Komi people themselves (Fryer 1998: 60). At the beginning of the 2020s, many of my interlocutors continued to define Kominess

6. According to Ljudmila Kambalova (2021), an active member of Šuda Kotyr, a Syktyvkar network of Komi-speaking families, even today many parents believe that raising bilingual children puts children's intellectual and speaking skills at risk.

by referring to language, place of origin, familial roots, and knowledge of traditions. The account of the following interlocutor serves as an illustrative example:

(1) I am Komi because I speak the Komi language and grew up in a village where everyone also speaks Komi. And in principle, the family is also Komi. (Female, 18 years old)

At the same time, based on the results of a number of sociological surveys conducted among Syktyvkar youth (2004, 2007), Mironova & Jaanits (2012) demonstrated that for urban youth, the Komi language held a symbolic significance, whereas for rural Komi youth it served a functional purpose and was intricately tied to the knowledge of traditions and self-identification as Komi. According to my observations that support the argument of Mironova and Jaanits, for some Komi the significance of language in shaping their Kominess diminished and was overshadowed by other factors, such as familial roots. This was notably visible among Russian-speaking urban-born Komi, although similar opinions were expressed by several Komi-speaking rural-born Komi. This development may be a direct consequence of the overall decline in Komi language proficiency, challenges of intergenerational transmission, legacies of previous marginalization, and the lack of governmental support for language promotion and maintenance. This process indeed reflects evident negative trends. I argue, however, that it also signifies a changing and adapting understanding of what Kominess entails and supports the possibility of preserving Komi identity amid and despite language shift and loss.

5. Komi perspectives of Syktyvkar: narratives of Russianness and "culture"

To comprehend the language attitudes of urban Komi residents, it is essential to incorporate them into the broader context of Komi people's perspectives of Syktyvkar. Two fundamental elements of these perspectives are narratives of "culture" and Russianness. The meanings of these notions deviate, to some extent, from their conventional use. In the accounts of my interlocutors, "culture" was equated to being civilized, educated, and modern. The image of Syktyvkar as a hub of "culture" is, otherwise, historically entrenched in Komi images of the city: for example, the "cultural" character of Syktyvkar influenced the selection of the local dialect as the basis on which to standardize the Komi literary language (Lytkin 1928: 30).

In turn, associating Syktyvkar with Russianness, the interlocutors referred to Russian, the dominant language spoken in Syktyvkar and used across all aspects of urban life. Being urban was equated with speaking Russian. This association was unquestionably assumed by many urban Komi residents and was also projected by rural Komi on the Komi youth born and raised in the city, symbolically depriving them of an opportunity to be simultaneously urban and a Komi speaker. As one parent of an urban-born bilingual Komi–Russian child shared:

(2) *Roč* [Komi *роч* 'Russian'] is immediately urban. And when all the [rural] children spoke Russian, and he started speaking Komi, my [rural] parents had such big eyes, "Is he *roč*, or what?". I said, "He is not *roč*." "*Karsa roč*?" [Komi 'A Russian from the city?']. "He is not *karsa roč*." That's why it was surprising for them that a child came from the city and spoke pure Komi. (Female, 44 years old)

This interlocutor and her husband, both native Komi speakers, aspired to raise bilingual children in the city, challenging an assumption that the Komi language could not be transmitted to the next generations in urban areas. Still, it was her own rural Komi-speaking parents, associating urban with Russian, who found their own urban grandson's proficiency in Komi to be surprising.

Speaking Russian, as well as being Russian, as reported by my interlocutors, have long been perceived by Komi as indicators of higher social status. From this perspective, speaking Russian, possessing a higher social status, and being an urban resident appeared to be intrinsically linked and practically synonymous. This was well illustrated by one interlocutor who was discussing the differences between rural areas and the city: "Here are the Komi from the village, and there [in Syktyvkar] is the Russian *elite* [Russian *небожители*]" (female, 31 years old; emphasis mine). Another interlocutor echoed this sentiment when discussing rural Komi-speaking residents relocating to Syktyvkar: "[and rural residents are like that] oh, I'll come to the city, so I need to learn to speak Russian beautifully, because this is the city, the *elite* lives here" (female, 24 years old; emphasis mine). Both interlocutors referred to urban residents as *elite* rather sarcastically, nonetheless, these descriptions serve well to illustrate this popular association.

I argue that the language shift experienced by a substantial number of Komi individuals relocating to the city can serve as a direct consequence

of associating Syktyvkar with Russianness and "culture". Speaking Russian was frequently perceived as the sole means to validate oneself in the city, leading to the suppression of everything Komi, as the latter is associated with a less-privileged rural identity. Below are two stories shared by my interlocutors that illustrate this phenomenon:

(3) There are also those who come from the village […] to the city, and they immediately speak Russian and completely forget about Komi, because they are ashamed to speak [Komi]. (Female, 20 years old)

(4) My friend feels uncomfortable […], she prefers not to say that she has rural roots, that she is a Komi. For her, this no longer corresponds to her image precisely, because the image of a Komi for her is some kind of ridiculous image, some kind of uneducated [person], and so on. She wants to prove herself as a person. She has three, four higher educations, all honors diplomas, she is cool, smart, beautiful. […] For her, this [speaking Komi] does not correspond to her image, and therefore she switches to Russian. (Female, 29 years old)

The shame associated with speaking Komi, coupled with the belief that being Komi and speaking the language implied a rural background and lack of education, led acquaintances of the interlocutors to suppress their use of the Komi language. As excerpt 4 shows, this suppression can extend beyond the language, impacting the identity linked with it.

Despite the perceived Russifying influence of Syktyvkar, the position of the Komi language in the capital appeared to be more promising compared to other cities in the Komi Republic. This was exemplified by the experience of an interlocutor who lived in one of these cities for several years:

(5) I lived in Pečora for two years, and, of course, we consider that Pečora, since it's the north, is more of a Russian-speaking city. It seems there are no Komi there. In general, you won't hear Komi spoken in shops. But in fact, there are a lot of Komi there, as it turned out, they simply hide the fact that they are Komi. (Female, 25 years old)

While the study of language attitudes in other cities of the Komi Republic lies beyond the scope of this article, it is nevertheless important to highlight that Pečora, the city mentioned in excerpt 5, along with other regional cities such as Vorkuta, Usinsk, and Uxta, in contrast to Syktyvkar, did not develop organically around long-existing human settlements. Instead, these cities were the result of industrial projects of the Soviet era.

Historically, their population primarily consisted of non-Komi ethnic groups who were forcibly sent or voluntarily relocated to the region, with Russian always being the main language used in these cities.[7]

6. Transformation of language attitudes of urban Komi: from shame and fear to affection and care

6.1. Late Soviet period: marginalization, shame, and inferiority

My oldest interlocutors were born in the 1950s and 1960s and relocated to Syktyvkar in the 1970s and 1980s; some were born in the city. The experiences of urban and rural-born interlocutors varied to some extent, but both groups encountered marginalization in Syktyvkar. Below are the accounts of two interlocutors, one born in a rural area and the other in Syktyvkar, in which they discussed their first experiences of marginalization in the city:

(6) I first encountered this [marginalization] at university. […] They always wrote down your ethnicity, and when everyone applied to the university, everyone saw it. And then people who came here from Pečora, Inta, and Vorkuta approached me and asked: "Are you Komi?" Disparagingly. I said, "Well, yes, I am a Komi." Yes, and [there was a feeling of] a little bit of such second-rateness. That is, apparently, I grew up in such an intelligent environment, among writers […] and I did not encounter this. I first encountered this at the university. (Female, 55 years old; the interlocutor was urban-born, her experience was from the early 1980s)

(7) I studied at the music college […], it was 1985, 1989. We knew that we were all Komi […], we knew that this girl knew Komi, that girl knew Komi, [but] we all spoke Russian. Because everyone laughed, everyone laughed. Everyone pointed at us, everyone. In general, the attitude was very negative, so we were afraid to speak openly in Komi, even with each other. (Female, 51 years old; the interlocutor was rural-born, her experience was from the mid- and late 1980s)

7. Information about the Komi share in the populations of these cities is presented in the Appendix.

Both experiences occurred within educational institutions, where the interlocutors were exposed to non-Komi Russian-speaking ethnic groups, who reportedly held overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards ethnic Komi and Komi speakers. The emotions elicited in the interlocutors by these attitudes can best be described as shame, fear, and a sense of inferiority.

As evident from excerpt 6, the urban space was not inherently "Komi-unfriendly"; particular attitudes prevailed in certain places and situations and among certain communities. In that recollection, for example, a hostile student community was contrasted with family and friends, who valued the Komi language. The importance of having an appreciative community was further underscored by another interlocutor:

(8) […] personally, I never experienced being ridiculed or anything like that. I was constantly in a Komi-language environment, both at the university and later at work. (Female, 53 years old; the interlocutor was rural-born, her experience was from the late 1980s and the 1990s)

For this interlocutor, the university, particularly the program in Komi philology in which she was enrolled, and work related to the Komi language, served as spaces where Komi could be constantly used and was valued. Connections with these Komi-speaking communities helped her to avoid the marginalization experienced by other interlocutors.

6.2. From the 1990s to the mid-2000s: ethnic revival and inception of changes in language attitudes

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was accompanied by an ethnic revival in the ethnic republics. In the Komi Republic, this revival intensified in the late 1980s and culminated in the 1990s. The rapid emergence of opportunities to openly express one's ethnicity triggered a change in the language attitudes of urban Komi residents. This is how an interlocutor reminisced about that decade and her personal transformation:

(9) And then this revival of the Komi people, 1990, 1992, 1993, so I really felt that this wave was already coming. It was already possible to hear Komi a little, from old women, yes. […] That's the whole economic and political situation in the country, and it echoed in our republic. Then we began to [openly] speak Komi. (Female, 51 years old)

Political and economic liberation were believed to be instrumental in the shift of the interlocutor and other Komi people's attitudes towards the public use of the Komi language. As reported by other interlocutors of the same generation, however, this change was not experienced by younger Komi who relocated to Syktyvkar in the same period:

(10) In the 1990s, that's when my elder sisters were studying [in Syktyvkar], then they generally … as they said, they felt scared and ashamed.[8] (Female, 37 years old)

Experiences of the interlocutor's relatives reflected common narratives of marginalization, typical among early migrants to Syktyvkar. In this vein, contrasting excerpts 9 and 10, one might wonder how attitudes formed in the same place and at the same time could be so strikingly different. In addition to age-related and life-stage variations, another crucial factor, from my perspective, was the length of stay in Syktyvkar. Long-term residents, predating the ethnic revival and comparing the current language situation to the past, tended to view it more positively. Conversely, for recent arrivals, contrasting Russian-speaking Syktyvkar with their Komi-speaking rural homeland, their perceptions were shaped differently.

A similar pattern was detectable among the experiences of Komi who relocated to Syktyvkar during the 2000s and reported being embarrassed to speak Komi, despite changes that improved the language situation in the city. The following is the account of an interlocutor who relocated to Syktyvkar for her studies in the 2000s:

(11) I was born in the village and came to Syktyvkar to study at the Arts Gymnasium in the 8th grade. At that time, to be honest, it was shameful[9] to know Komi. I remember we spoke Komi in the gymnasium, it was normal there, there was a rather tolerant atmosphere, and in general Komi was somehow supported. But as soon as you left the gymnasium, it felt like you were entering a completely different dimension. And we spoke Russian when we walked along the road, because we were ashamed that we knew Komi. (Female, 28 years old)

8. The original Russian verb used by the interlocutor was *стрематься*. It can be roughly translated as 'be afraid' or 'be ashamed to do something'.
9. The original Russian adverb used by the interlocutor was *стрёмно* (which has the same stem as the verb *стрематься* 'be afraid', 'be ashamed to do something'). It can roughly be translated as 'frightening', 'scary', or 'shameful'.

In her account, this interlocutor did not offer any details behind the perceived shamefulness of speaking Komi, unlike earlier migrants who attributed marginalization as its main reason. Was the suppression of Komi once again occurring due to negative attitudes of the Russian-speaking majority? Or was it internalized by Komi speakers themselves, possibly due to a perceived lack of language prestige? While these reasons remain ambiguous, this excerpt emphasizes, unequivocally, the importance of places and communities where Komi was valued and could be actively used.

The paramount importance of the inclusion of the Komi language and other elements of Komi culture in the urban environment and creation of safe spaces for the preservation of the Komi language and identity, is undeniable in any historical period. Contrary to the claim by Jaanits (2012: 75–76) of the lack of such places and the impossibility of accommodating the Komi and their culture in the urban space, such places do exist in Syktyvkar, the Komi Culture Center founded in 2001 being the most emblematic. For many Komi who relocated to Syktyvkar in the 2000s and later, the Center was the key place to speak Komi, meet Komi residents of Syktyvkar, establish networks, and participate in Komi-related events. Furthermore, through participation in the Center's activities, new Komi urbanites symbolically and practically maintained a vital connection to their own roots and rural homelands.

6.3. From the late 2000s to the mid-2010s: "Something changed"

Many of my interlocutors observed a transformation between the late 2000s and the mid-2010s. It was marked by an increased use of the Komi language in public and resulted in a transformation of interlocutors' attitudes towards it, from viewing it as something associated with inferiority and rurality to regarding it as a source of pride and heritage. This sentiment was echoed by the same interlocutor who had once characterized speaking Komi as shameful:

(12) Then something changed. It probably took about two years, from 8th to 10th grade, maybe. And then we began to speak Komi. Somehow, we felt cool [Russian *нам стало прикольно*] because we started talking, maybe within our class, and everyone there was a very cool guy [Russian *крутые ребята*] and we had this understanding that Komi was cool [Russian *круто*]. And so, we began to speak this language. (Female, 28 years old)

The narrative of "coolness", strongly present in excerpt 12, was echoed by multiple interlocutors across various age groups. In essence, being cool was similar to being distinct from the dominant group. Another interlocutor summed this up by stating:

(13) It [being Komi or speaking Komi] identifies them [urban Komi], it distinguishes them from Russians, who … well, excuse me, there are so many Russians, but you are a little different. It means that I am different. Oh, that's cool, one doesn't have to get a tattoo. (Female, 37 years old)

The interlocutor's use of the tattoo metaphor emphasized the narrative of distinctiveness: one did not need to make modifications to one's appearance to stand out; being inherently different and speaking another language was already enough.

The shift in language attitudes among young people can indeed be seen as one of the developmental and psychological changes experienced by this group. At the same time, supporting Baker's (1992: 97) argument that while language attitudes do transform due to internal individual changes, more often they change due to external factors, I argue that individual changes were not the only determinant, as similar transformations were observed among and by other generational groups. According to my observations and assumptions made by the interlocutors, factors contributing to the increased appreciation of one's ethnicity and language may include increased use of the internet, access to a wider range of sources of information, and increased interregional and international interactions with Finno-Ugric peoples and other non-Russian ethnicities. These new opportunities acted as gateways for self-realization and self-appreciation: speaking a minority language and being part of a minority group was no longer exclusively perceived as unprestigious, rather it was regarded a source of differentiation and possibilities.

6.4. From the late 2010s to the present: Komi-speaking youth and increased public use of Komi

Finally, I would like to emphasize recent developments acknowledged by many interlocutors who have resided in Syktyvkar over the long term: a noticeable increase in the number of Komi-speaking youth and a consequent rise in the public use of Komi in the city. Talking about youth, one of the interlocutors shared:

(14) Now there is such a positive trend that I hear a lot of Komi from young people on the streets. I can leave the cinema and hear Spider-Man being discussed in Komi. And well, there are such things, these are really good, it seems to me, good signs. (Female, 29 years old)

The influx of Komi-speaking youth was believed to assist in the revitalization of the Komi language in the city. As shown in excerpt 14, the youth, for example, have extended the use of Komi to various situations and spaces, challenging the traditional perception of Komi as a language primarily confined to family and more discreet communication.

The majority of contemporary Komi-speaking youth were born in rural areas and, like previous generations, relocated to Syktyvkar for their studies. According to my observations, unlike previous generations, this youth did not seem to undergo dramatic shifts in their language attitudes, being the first contemporary generation that consistently demonstrated strong positive emotions and beliefs towards their native language. As shown in excerpt 15, they still acknowledged the possibility of marginalization in the urban environment, but they reacted to it differently than previous generations:

(15) Well, they can call you *komyak*. So what? I, unlike them, understand it [Komi language], I know it, I speak it. (Female, 21 years old)

Speaking Komi was no longer associated with shame; on the contrary, the interlocutor took pride in knowing the language. Another common feeling associated with the Komi language reported by the youth was care. This was clearly articulated in the following reaction to the negative opinion about the Komi language:

(16) I have heard such an opinion about the Komi language that it is ugly, it is incomplete, it does not have the terms that are needed, it somehow sounds clumsy, somehow ugly. […] It just hurt me so much, it hurt so much. (Female, 18 years old)

This passage is interesting not only due to marked stereotypes about the Komi language but also because of the interlocutor's response: "it hurt me so much". This reaction, standing in contrast to the shame and feeling of inferiority reported by previous generations, can be translated into a genuine affection and concern for one's own native language.

The influx of Komi-speaking youth, expressing pride in knowing and speaking the language and unafraid to use it in public, has contributed to a transformation in the language attitudes of both Komi and non-Komi

urbanites. Alongside this, grassroots initiatives such as the creation of Komi language memes, stickers, and other entertainment content by social-network users or production of t-shirts and hoodies featuring Komi phrases, have contributed to the development of a positive image of the Komi language in the urban environment and its wider presence.

7. Non-Komi urbanites' views on the Komi language and its presence in the urban environment

Discussing the attitudes of the Russian-speaking majority with my Komi interlocutors, I observed that, in most cases, Komi urbanites tend to characterize such attitudes as predominantly negative and contributing to the marginalization of the Komi people. This evaluation was particularly pronounced in older interlocutors' recollections of the Soviet period and the early post-Soviet years. Younger generations, however, reported experiencing much less overt verbal marginalization.

In this section, I aim to scrutinize the grounds of these opinions by exploring contemporary language attitudes held by non-Komi urbanites. To achieve this, I first discuss general stereotypes and beliefs about the Komi language, and then continue with attitudes towards the presence of Komi in education and the city's audio and visual landscapes.

7.1. Stereotypes and beliefs about the Komi language

For non-Komi residents of Syktyvkar, whose knowledge of Komi tends to be minimal or even non-existent, the link between the Komi language and the Komi ethnic identity is unequivocal. At the same time, authors of posts and comments demonstrated a growing awareness of the rising number of Russian-speaking Komi. Notably, however, there was a limited understanding of the underlying reasons for the continual language shift. For example, acknowledgment of the widespread impact of Russification was surprisingly rare. Instead, as emphasized in the following comment, people more commonly attributed the decline in Komi language use to the associated sense of shame:

(17) Well, the Komi in the cities themselves do not speak Komi. Why should I learn the language of a people who are ashamed of their language?" (Pro Gorod Syktyvkar, 30 Oct. 2019).

This commentator failed to elucidate the rationale behind attributing the limited use of the Komi language in urban areas to feelings of shame among its speakers. Given that some Komi indeed reported experiencing shame when speaking Komi, it would be interesting to investigate why non-Komi residents also perceive it as a factor influencing the linguistic choices of Komi speakers.

Various commentators reported occasionally hearing Komi being spoken in the city, yet the prevailing belief was that its usage was far more frequent in villages. This association of Komi with rural areas reinforces several sub-narratives. Firstly, it perpetuates the notion that villages are the only locales for sustaining the Komi language. Secondly, it reinforces stereotypes about the typical Komi speaker, portraying them as either retirees or alcoholics, characters allegedly typical of rural areas.

Another frequently mentioned and widespread belief was that learning Komi is challenging and time-consuming. Challenges were attributed to the grammatical complexity of Komi, which indeed exhibits grammatical features that significantly differentiate it from Russian. Among all these features, the higher number of grammatical cases in Komi attracted particular attention from VK users: "How are you even able to speak Komi? There are 16 cases, it would really tie my tongue in knots" (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 5 March 2023).

Additionally, the perceived language difficulty was rationalized by the discrepancies in the standard literary Komi and its dialectical variations. In discussions about dialects, commentators regularly expressed the opinion that different Komi dialects were mutually incomprehensible. The following is an example of such statements:

(18) Do you know how many dialects the Komi language now has? In Komi villages, people do not understand each other. The television news is shown, people watch, and half the words are not clear to them […]. (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 6 Aug. 2017)

This passage vividly illustrated the intertwining of various beliefs. The perceived incomprehensibility of different dialects was justified by the claim that their speakers were not able to understand each other. Further, when talking about television news, which is, in fact, conveyed in standard Komi, the commentator asserted that "half the words are not clear". The commentator's dissatisfaction with standard Komi can be due to the prevalence of neologisms, which might indeed be challenging to comprehend.

This sentiment was echoed by two other commentators: "In schools they tried to impose an artificially created language called Komi, which the Komi people themselves did not understand" (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 20 Aug. 2018), "The Indigenous Komi people do not understand the modern invented Komi language at all" (Žest' Komi, 6 March 2022).

The challenges of learning Komi and its limited use in Syktyvkar, in turn, lead to the perception that the Komi language is impractical. Commentators expressing this view were frequently guided by the pragmatic approach, viewing practical utility as the sole valid reason for learning Komi:

(19) Why learn it, what is its practical use in Syktyvkar? To understand what old women are talking about? In general, if you live in Syktyvkar, then you don't need any language other than Russian […] (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 5 March 2023).

It is indeed true that knowing Komi is not necessary to access all city services and live a full life in the city. However, this excerpt is illustrative for another reason as well: it highlighted the popular belief about the average Komi speaker being a person from the older generations ("old women").

At the same time, not every commentator was driven solely by a pragmatic approach. Some commentators, conscious of their Komi roots, felt regret at not knowing the language and expressed a desire to learn it. Other VK users argued that when living in an ethnic republic, one should know at least the most basic expressions in the local language, in order to show respect for the territory and its people.

Discussions about the impracticality of Komi often attracted commentators that highlighted the serious endangerment of the Komi language. While the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages indeed recognizes Komi as potentially vulnerable, the motivation of such VK users was typically not to raise awareness of the real issue, but rather to use the characterization of Komi as endangered and "dying out" in order to justify its perceived uselessness. In some comments, as shown by the following example, this narrative was applied to Komi people as well:

(20) I am against the forced introduction of a half-dead dialect of an endangered people (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 29 Sept. 2017).

Not everyone, however, subscribed to the belief that Komi was a moribund language. Comments that introduced the narrative of endangerment were often met with counter-responses, as exemplified by the following excerpt:

(21) I have been to many places, and I must say that Komi is not an endangered language. There are many villages, and even on an ordinary bus there are enough people who speak Komi. If there are no Komi people among your friends and acquaintances, then there is no need to shout about the extinction of the language. (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 29 Sept. 2017)

Generally, most commentators exhibited a range of indifferent and neutral to moderately positive attitudes toward the Komi language. While they might have not perceived any practical benefits in knowing it, VK users seldom ridiculed other individuals expressing a desire to learn Komi. Instances of negative attitudes, such as deeming the language unnecessary or asserting its uselessness in life, were also present. However, it appeared that these instances were not as prevalent as in previous historical periods.

7.2. Attitudes towards the Komi language in the urban environment

The main interconnected areas and spaces where non-Komi speakers and non-Komi urbanites may encounter the Komi language in the everyday environment of the city are schools, and outdoor visual and sound landscapes. The components of the visual landscape include bilingual signs in governmental institutions, cultural centers, and shops, as well as bilingual street signs. The mandatory use of both Komi and Russian on street signs and public offices' signs was established in 1992 by the Law on State Languages. In recent years, Komi was also introduced on navigation signs in major chain stores and social-cause advertising (Syktyvkarsa komi vojtyr 2020; Komi Daily 2022). The soundscape, in turn, consists of the multiple ways in which people talk as overheard in various urban spaces, as well as the bilingual audio announcements on the bus which were introduced in 2019 (Komsomol'skaja pravda 2019). An analysis of the attitudes of city residents towards the use of Komi in the digital sphere, television and radio, and other spheres is beyond the scope of this article.

When examining posts on the use of Komi in the urban audiovisual landscape, I was surprised to encounter contrasting reactions to these forms of linguistic expression. Commenting on the use of Komi in bus announcements, many people reported that they were either annoyed or found it funny. Nonetheless, when discussing the new Komi signs in local stores, the vast majority of commentators reacted positively and even wondered what other possible reactions they should have caused:

(22) And what can one think about this? In the Komi Republic, signs are in the native language.[10] Wow, such a miracle, right? Well, excuse me, have you not seen Komi signs with street names before? (Žest′ Komi, 6 March 2022).

In this excerpt, the commentator, while emphasizing the normality of the Komi language being incorporated into shop signs, noted its longstanding presence on street signs. In this vein, considering that the majority of negative comments on Komi bus announcements dated back to the year of their introduction, I can speculate that such negative reactions were primarily caused by the novelty of the announcements and their unfinished state at that time, rather then by the mere introduction of the Komi language into a new urban space. This hypothesis can be supported by the fact that negative comments about other instances of the presence of the Komi language in the urban soundscape, for example, overhearing people talking in Komi, were indeed rare. At the same time, the absence of such comments cannot fully encapsulate the real-life situation; remarks from some of my interlocutors regarding occasional public mistreatment for speaking Komi imply that certain prejudices persist.

The only area where negative attitudes clearly predominated was the study of the Komi language in schools. Until 2018, studying Komi was compulsory in city schools, which caused a lot of criticism from Russian-speaking parents. VK users who opposed the study of Komi appealed to, among other things, the limited use of Komi in Syktyvkar, its alleged uselessness, lack of comprehensive pedagogical and supporting materials, as well as their own inability and lack of knowledge to help their children with homework.

While supporters of mandatory school study of Komi were clearly the minority, people who favored the voluntary study of Komi, according to some polls, amounted to and sometimes even outnumbered respondents who opposed it. In this regard, according to a poll organized by the VK public group Pro Gorod Syktyvkar in 2018, 20% of people believed that Komi should be a compulsory school subject, 37% supported the voluntary study of Komi, and 43% were against any inclusion of Komi in the school curriculum (the total number of respondents was 1,165; Pro Gorod Syktyvkar, 27 Oct. 2018). In another poll conducted by the same group in

10. Many commentators (including non-Komi), for some reason, frequently equated the concept of "native language" with "regional language".

2019 on the necessity of knowing the Komi language in Syktyvkar, 17% of urban residents supported it because "it is the second state language", 19% opposed it, and an overwhelming 64% voted for the option "Let those who want to, study it, but there is no need to force it" (total number of respondents = 1,138; Pro Gorod Syktyvkar, 1 Nov. 2019).

Posts and comments related to the compulsory study of Komi were the most prone to conflict and full of users' mutual grievances. It is therefore unsurprising that it was in one of these discussions that a commentator, referring to the hostility of such discussions, remarked:

(23) Komi is the only region of Russia that has its own language which the population hates and is trying to eradicate (Podslušano Syktyvkar, 28 April 2018).

Unlike the elements of audiovisual landscape that can be acknowledged but do not require interaction, the study of the Komi language in schools for many non-Komi urbanites may be the only instance when they and their children engage with the language on a practical level. Thus, undoubtedly, negative attitudes towards the study of the Komi language are detrimental to its vitality, as the maintenance of non-dominant languages depends not only on the actions and decisions of its speakers but also on acknowledgment and support from the dominant group.

8. Conclusions

In this article, I approached the sustainability of the Komi language in the urban environment by studying the changing role and usage of the language, analyzing the evolution of urban Komi speakers' language attitudes, and shedding light on language attitudes expressed by non-Komi urbanites. I have presented a century of history of the transition of Komi from a dominant language to a minority language. The diminishing role and usage of Komi, in turn, have led to accelerating language shift and an increasing number of Russian-speaking Komi.

Analyzing Komi speakers' language attitudes, I have discovered that in the Soviet and early post-Soviet periods they were strongly influenced by the orientation of state nationality policies. During times of Russification, urban Komi marginalized by the dominant population were embarrassed and afraid to speak Komi, while in the period of ethnic revival, many of them began to change their attitudes. With the onset of Putin's regime,

prioritization of a Russian identity and the Russian language at the expense of regional and local languages became widespread, though ethnographic data has not shown a complete correlation between the direction of the modern nationality policies and the language attitudes expressed. It, in fact, has depicted the opposite situation: affection, pride, and self-sufficiency were the feelings reported by Komi urbanites, particularly by Komi youth. It appears that such factors as digitalization, interregional contacts, and increased access to information have assisted in the improvement of language attitudes. By presenting such evolution of language attitudes of Komi urbanites and describing the transition of the language's role, I have emphasized the dynamic quality of both language attitudes (Mamontova 2019) and factors that affect language sustainability (Bastardas-Boada 2014), as well as the importance of addressing environments in which a language exists (Ferguson & Siragusa 2017).

The attitudes of non-Komi urbanites toward the Komi language have evolved as well. Most non-Komi urban residents exhibited indifferent or moderately positive attitudes towards the Komi language, especially in situations where their direct interaction with the language was not expected. On the contrary, the inclusion of Komi in the school curriculum triggered more negative opinions supported by various stereotypes and belief in the impracticality of the language and its low prestige. By including attitudes of non-speakers in my analysis of the Komi language sustainability, I aimed to stress their influence on language sustainability, particularly of non-dominant languages, and to outline that languages exist not only within the framework of relations with their speakers, but with non-speakers as well.

Among the factors detrimentally affecting the sustainability of the Komi language are a utilitarian approach to language acquisition, use, and transmission, and particular narratives about Syktyvkar and its language environment. A pragmatic approach was typical even for those Komi urbanites who otherwise hold positive attitudes towards the Komi language, which supports the idea that positive language attitudes can lead to an increase in language use and transmission only if aligned with respective actions (Baker 1992; Gomashie 2023). As for the language environment, the dominance of the Russian language in Syktyvkar has led to equating the city with Russianness in the public imagination; such a narrative is detrimental in that sense that it deprives an urban resident of an opportunity to be simultaneously urban and a Komi speaker. By engaging with public

narratives and imaginations about places and their linguistic environments, I assert that the consideration of subjective beliefs is as important for language sustainability as examination of objective factors.

Finally, I have emphasized that the influx of rural-born Komi-speaking youth with positive language attitudes had a positive impact on language maintenance and language attitudes of Komi and non-Komi urbanites. I have also asserted the crucial significance of places and communities where the Komi language was spoken and valued. The respective experiences of my interlocutors supported the significance of belonging in and maintaining ties with language communities inside and outside urban areas for urban language sustainability.

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Appendix: Population of the cities in the Komi Republic according to the All-Russian Census of 2010 (All-Russian Census 2010)

City	Founding year	Total population	Komi population		Russian population	
Emva	1941	14,570	2,471	17%	10,212	70%
Inta	1932	35,181	3,660	10%	23,204	66%
Mikun′	1937	10,730	1,078	10%	8,018	75%
Pečora	1940	57,364	7,155	12.5%	40,439	70.5%
Sosnogorsk	1939	46,775	4,007	8.5%	36,230	77.5%
Syktyvkar	1586	250,874	62,040	25%	158,147	63%
Usinsk	1966	47,229	6,548	14%	26,395	56%
Uxta	1929	121,701	9,100	7.5%	93,112	76.5%
Vorkuta	1936	95,854	1,401	1.5%	63,739	66.5%
Vuktyl	1966	14,873	1,489	10%	9,986	67%
Komi Republic		901,189	202,348	22.5%	555,963	62%
Urban		693,436	94,736	14% of all urban population, 47% of Komi	472,174	68% of all urban population, 85% of Russian
Rural		207,753	107,612	52% of all rural population, 53% of Komi	83,789	40% of all rural population, 15% of Russian