

METAPHORS OF LANGUAGE: THE VEPSIAN ECOLOGY CHALLENGES AN INTERNATIONAL PARADIGM

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Abstract. At present Veps, a Finno-Ugric minority in north-western Russia, live in three different administrative regions, i.e., the Republic of Karelia, and the Leningrad and Vologda Oblasts. Due to several socio-economic and political factors Veps have experienced a drastic change in their communicative practices and ways of speaking in the last century. Indeed, Vepsian heritage language is now classified as severely endangered by UNESCO. Since perestroika a group of Vepsian activists working in Petrozavodsk (Republic of Karelia) has been promoting Vepsian language and culture. This paper aims to challenge an international rhetoric around language endangerment and language death through an analysis of Vepsian language ecology and revitalisation. Vepsian ontologies and communicative practices do not always match detached metaphors of language, which view them as separate entities and often in competition with each other. The efforts to promote the language and how these are discussed among the policy-makers and Vepsian activists also do not concur with such a drastic terminology as death and endangerment. Therefore, this paper aims to bring to the surface local ontologies and worldviews in order to query the paradigms around language shift and language death that dominate worldwide academic and political discourse.

Keywords: Vepsian, language endangerment, death and revival, metaphor of a language, heritage language, ways of speaking, communicative practices

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1. Introduction

Veps, a Finno-Ugric minority in the Russian Federation, live in three different administrative regions of north-western Russia (namely, the Republic of Karelia, and the Leningrad and Vologda Oblasts) (Strogaľščikova 2008). In fact, Veps traditionally live in rural areas of these three regions. Their traditional settlements are situated in the southern territory of the Republic of Karelia, in the north-eastern territory of the Leningrad Oblast and in the north-western territory of the

Vologda Oblast (see Figure 1). However, many of them have been moving to larger urban centres and now live permanently in cities such as Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia, Saint Petersburg and Podporozh'e in the Leningrad Oblast, and Vologda and Babaevo in the Vologda Oblast. Migration is not a recent phenomenon among Veps (Mead 1952, Strogaľščikova 2006). After World War II, it began manifesting in large numbers again as Khrushchev launched the policy of 'liquidation of the villages without prospects' in 1961. This policy classified the villages into two categories, those with prospects and those without (Egorov 2006). Those villages regarded as being without prospects stopped receiving any provision on public services and infrastructure (Kurs 2001: 73). Vepsian activists and many Vepsian villagers claim that this policy has prompted an urban migration which is continuing now. During my field work, the elderly inhabitants of Nemzha and Pondala, two Vepsian villages in the Leningrad and Vologda Oblasts respectively (indicated on the Figure 1), often complained about the lack of employment and consequently of youth in their villages. They often recollected how lively their villages used to be before people begun to move away and never return. Such a massive migration has also had an effect on Vepsian language use.

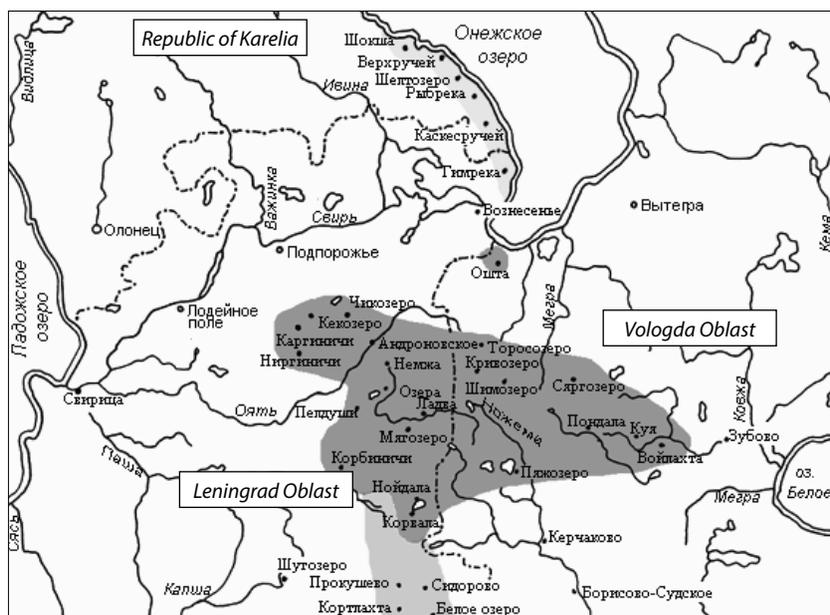


Figure 1. Vepsian traditional territory.

Adapted from <http://phonogr.krc.karelia.ru/section.php?id=25>.

The Vepsian language belongs to the Finnic subgroup of the Finno-Ugric languages together with Finnish, Estonian, Karelian, etc. (Grünthal 2007, Puura 2012: 5). It is the eastern most language of this subgroup while Livonian is the western most. Vepsian language comprises three main dialects. Veps who speak the northern dialect can be found in the south-eastern part of the Republic of Karelia. Veps who use central dialects live in the Babaevo and Vyterga districts of the Vologda Oblast and in the Podporozh'e, Tikhvin and Lodeynoe Pole districts of the Leningrad Oblast. The central dialects are further distinguished into eastern and western dialects. The southern-dialect speakers live in Boksitogorsk province of the Leningrad Oblast. At present, most elderly Vepsian villagers are bilingual and employ Russian and Vepsian in their communicative practices. Admittedly, Veps living in the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad Oblast tend to adopt bilingual practices, such as code-switching, more than Veps living in the Vologda Oblast who tend to speak Vepsian among one another in their daily spoken interaction. The reasons for this occurrence are multiple. Overall, those Veps inhabiting villages in the Vologda Oblast explained that they have maintained a more traditional way of living (and speaking), due to the remoteness of their rural settlements from the influence of urban centres. At present most Vepsian city dwellers with whom I became acquainted are monolingual Russian speakers. Indeed, their knowledge of Vepsian is often subject to the generation to which they belong, where they are originally from (a Vepsian village or an urban centre), and whether or not they have received Vepsian education at school or university.

The Russian language is an Indo-European language and differs in its morpho-syntactic structures and lexicon from Vepsian. Yet, due to long-term contact between Slavonic and Finno-Ugric groups, Veps have integrated many words from Russian language as well as some structural features in their ways of speaking (Pugh 1991b, 1994, 1999). Many Veps often perceive the structural boundaries between these two different linguistic systems as fuzzy and context-based. And it could be argued that Vepsian and Russian are two different codes of a common way of speaking. Nonetheless, many academics specialising in language studies around the world view this phenomenon as an initial sign of language shift and death, especially when dealing with the heritage language of a minority group (Dorian 1981, Fishman 1991, Laine 2001, Lalluka 2001, Pugh 1999). International academic and political discourse around languages-in-contact often emphasises conflict among languages. Such rhetoric tends to position one language as dominant

and one as endangered and doomed to vanish (Brenzinger 1997, Crystal 2000, Harrison 2007, Krauss 1992, Tsunoda 2005). This claim stands on the preconception that languages conceived as structural systems conduct an independent existence from life. And it is specifically the paradigm of a lifecycle of a language that I will contend in this paper, stemming from grassroots epistemologies and ontologies which do not detach language from life but fathom its manifestation in context (Haugen 1972, Hymes 1962).

To a certain degree the Vepsian revival movement matched the ideological position according to which languages have an independent lifecycle and can ultimately die. I emphasize the phrase *to a certain degree* since Vepsian activists do not necessarily and openly speak of the death of a language, nor to save a language, and I expand on this below. Yet, in the late 1980s they appreciated the urgency to maintain and promote Vepsian, as they witnessed its limited and diminishing use both in rural and urban areas. As already mentioned, Vepsian villagers dropped in number and most Vepsian urbanites embraced Russian ways of speaking. The Vepsian revival movement began with the *Elonpu* (Veps. Tree of Life) folk festival in Vinnitsy, a Vepsian village in the Leningrad Oblast, in 1987. The movement was later fostered in the Republic of Karelia. The regional administration of the Republic of Karelia has supported and financed the Vepsian revitalisation since its initial stages. However, the legislative measures taken in the Republic of Karelia have not always reached the other two administrative regions where Veps dwell (Strogal'shchikova 2008). The two conceivable founders of the movement, Zinaida Ivanovna Strogal'shchikova and Nina Grigor'evna Zaitseva, have generally operated in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, they have aimed to *soxranit' i razvivat'* (Rus. to preserve and promote) Vepsian 'culture', positioning it within the regional and federal legislations¹. As Maffi (2000: 187) points out, promoting a minority language transcends the fictitious separation between knowledge and its application in the world. On the other hand, they have aimed to preserve and promote the Vepsian language. The work of Nina Grigor'evna Zaitseva has primarily consisted in creating a standard language for publication, and educational and recreational purposes.

With this paper I aim to raise questions around the biological and oppositional metaphor which many socio-linguists and policy-makers

1 In the work of the Vepsian activists, 'culture' refers primarily to the traditional knowledge, value systems and ways of living that dominated life in Vepsian villages already before collectivisation.

have attached to minority languages within multilingual contexts around the world. Building upon fieldwork with Veps between 2009 and 2013 and a close analysis of the Vepsian ecology, I challenge the use of a biological metaphor when discussing minority languages. A metaphor of a language denotes how people understand, view, and simultaneously use language. The phrase minority language indicates the language spoken by a minority group within a multilingual context, such as that where Veps live. Language ecology should not be confused with the above biological and antagonistic metaphor of language which this paper questions. Indeed, the phrase language ecology can be understood as synonymous with context, i.e., all the forces in place when people use language and as an engagement and interaction with the environment where people manifest language (Bateson 1972, Garner 2004, Haugen 1972, Mülhäusler 1996, Mülhäusler 2000). Specifically, the use of the phrase language ecology matches contemporary ideas of interaction and socialisation with the world. Here language is analysed as a phenomenon which is dynamic and interactive with the forces in place at the time of speech and/or written acts (Garner 2004).

An additional scope of the paper is to contribute to a discussion on language revival which has dominated the international arena for the last few decades. Hopefully, this paper will contribute to galvanise a dialogue among scholars of different disciplines, such as Linguistics and Anthropology, by questioning a terminology which is now becoming obsolete and only partly serving those for whom it was first conceived. For this purpose, this paper with its dominant social analysis of Vepsian ecology, is published together with primarily linguistic studies. The cooperation among different agents involved in language revival discussions may inspire and produce a more context-based (as it were, ecological) terminology to describe the promotion of the heritage language of a minority group in a multi-ethnic environment (on the topic see also Errington 2003 and Maffi 2000). As mentioned above, knowledge and its application happen simultaneously and there is no real separation between the two (Maffi 2000: 187). Continuing and engaging in discussions with those involved in the revival of their heritage language also becomes particularly important now that the indigenous youth is taking on new roles and strategies in the promotion of their heritage language. Such engagement and dialogue enable researchers to better appreciate what hinders people from speaking their heritage language.

2. Language as a mirror of nature²

The biological metaphor of a language extends biological properties to language. It conceptualises language as a living entity that comes to life, develops, prospers and later on dies. In fact, there has been a difference between two biological analogies. One analogy views language as an organism and one views language as a species (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Mufwene 2001, Sutherland 2003). Yet, what unifies both analogies is the idea that language mirrors nature and it generally conducts a parallel existence to life. The use of this biological metaphor among intellectuals around the world finds its origin already in the 19th century. The Romantic Movement speculated over the origin of a language in search of a possible common proto-language from which all languages would have developed. Academic interest turned to the study of those languages (such as Sanskrit) from which modern languages had evolved. Pioneers like Grimm, Bopp, and Rask nurtured an interest for comparative work and extended the tree-of-life metaphor to language with all its possible ramifications and developments. Thanks also to the influence of Saussure, language was generally studied and appreciated as an abstract entity, context-less, as per its structural characteristics. On one hand, taking these positions enabled the scholars to view similarities and/or differences among modern ways of expression and to determine possible developments in the history of language. On the other, it reinforced a context-free understanding of language as well as its organic metaphor.

More recently such a metaphor extended to paradigms of language endangerment and death. Linguists and sociolinguists faced diminishing worldwide language diversity. The risk of losing linguistic variety generated a reaction from political agencies such as UNESCO, which a century later acted in order to ‘save’ the estimated endangered languages. UNESCO evaluated that a language is lost every fortnight and that “half of 6,000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century” (Crystal 2000, Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991). The concept of language shift as a result of competition among separate languages began to be used in both international academic and political discourse (Haugen 1972, Mackey 1980). New studies committed to find appropriate ways to rescue those languages in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Dorian 1981, Fishman 1991). A large volume of global literature

2 I borrow the phrase *mirror of nature* from Errington (2003: 729).

has been dedicated to language revitalisation movements, accepting this metaphor of language lifecycle, which still persists in academic and political rhetoric.

Clearly, the organic metaphor is intended to serve the goals of revival movements and to support the activists in the promotion of a language whose use is often not transmitted generationally (as also noted by Errington 2003: 726–727). Errington (2003: 726) claimed that, “what is threatened by the death of any one language is the cumulative diversity of the whole”. Such a metaphor has enabled scholars to employ a deplorable and almost cataclysmic language and pressure political institutions into implementing their legislation and protecting language rights. This discourse also reiterated other biological catastrophes that created concern globally (Maffi 2000). And language endangerment soon became synonymous with other biological risks that threatened the earth. An example of this is the analogy with climate change. As Cameron indicated,

Climate change and language endangerment [...] are both gradual processes, whose most immediate negative effects are felt by poor people in remote places; presenting the bigger picture depends heavily on using statistical models which deal in probabilities rather than certainties. To make such issues newsworthy, it is necessary to inject drama and urgency. (Cameron 2007: 268)

By linking to biological global concerns and creating a terminology that screams urgency such as death the first socio-linguists might have hoped to receive attention from the policy-makers and to generate a positive reaction. Indeed, adopting such a catastrophic terminology has attracted massive funding from the Volkswagen Stiftung, European Science Foundation (ESF), National Science Foundation (NSF) and Hans Rausing. And the recent project on language endangerment promoted by Google appears to prove that such a metaphor has reached out to a wider audience.

However, the work financed by these foundations has not endured without criticism. Muehlmann (2007: 20) points out that most of the funding which scholars have received from international foundations has served the purpose of documenting multiple ways of speaking and to archive them, this way discarding their communicative and engagement account in context. Investing in archiving languages does not guarantee speaking it. Muehlmann (2007) also questions whom such scholarly endeavour benefit the most, whether those who work within academic

and often non-governmental institutions or the communities for whom the documentation is intended. Paradoxically, the adoption of this biological metaphor risks leaving behind those for whom it was initially conceived. By employing such terminology as language death, many scholars also demonstrate a disregard for the socio-economic and political factors that prevent people from speaking their heritage language. In fact, it is not the language that dies, but people might stop speaking their heritage language. It is important to understand what socio-political factors hinder people from using their heritage language, rather than separating language from their life experience. The scholars often appear to focus on biological issues as if to avoid “political concerns about human rights, social justice and the distribution of resources among more and less powerful groups” (Cameron 2007: 270). Such direct accusation does not encompass the activities of the Vepsian revival activists. They often revealed how challenging it had been to negotiate an economical investment in Vepsian rural areas with the regional and federal authorities. Indeed, they requested the promotion of village life and prompting a return to rural areas already at the very first conference on Vepsian matters in 1988 (Klement’ev et al. 2007: 17). Their request was declined. So, they turned to protecting language rights as a way to protect the people. However, Whiteley (2003: 713) stresses how focusing on language rights also has its own hiccups since once again it reduces language to a “detachable, portable, to some extent a product or effect put out by a community, even a commodity that may be alienable and circulate in a marketplace”. Paradoxically, the risk is that by adopting this urgent terminology and metaphor and focusing on language rights, scholars reinforce a gap between people and their life experiences. Applying biological analogies risks essentialising language and dehumanising people (Muehlmann 2007: 15). In other words, people can be viewed not as creator of language in context but as a medium that carry languages.

3. Re-thinking language endangerment and death through an analysis of Vepsian ecology

While conducting fieldwork with Veps between 2009 and 2013, I was able to observe that there was a mismatch between the grassroots levels of society, their metaphors of language and the biological metaphor used within international political and academic discourse. In fact, this mismatch meets both the language metaphors adopted by scholars

and activists at the Academy of Sciences in Petrozavodsk and by the Vepsian speech communities scattered around the Republic of Karelia, the Leningrad and Vologda Oblasts.

I will first introduce how minority languages such as Vepsian are generally described within the international arena in order to compare their terminology with what Veps use. In the 1960s and 1970s scholars around the world began grouping languages into those that are safe and lively and those that are endangered, unhealthy and at risk. In this way they followed the model of endangered species discourse that had come into the mainstream in the 1970s. In her 1981 book, *Language Death: the Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*, Nancy Dorian employed biological terminology to refer to the changes of a language throughout time. She investigated the dynamics of language competition, which can ultimately lead to the death of a disadvantaged language (Dorian 1981). Dorian's reference to language death remained largely uncontested in the 1990s. Crystal (2000) uncritically discusses the death of a language. In accordance with Dorian and Crystal, Tsunoda demonstrates how the shifting language "is variously called, abandoned language (Sasse 1992, Thomason and Kaufman 1988), disappearing language (Brenzinger 1997), fading language (Brenzinger 1997), receding language (Brenzinger 1997, Dorian 1973, Fishman 1991) and recessive language (Dorian 1999)" (Tsunoda 2005: 44). Krauss (1992) went further by proposing the medical term moribund to refer to the terminal stages of a language life, in line with Fishman (1991) who introduced a scale for the vitality of a language, moving from 'vestigial use' to 'use in formal domains without political independence'. Similarly, Sasse (1992) and Kibrick (1991) provided a schematic representation of language death and explicitly pronounced their medical metaphor, discussing the health of a language. Health refers to the number and age of its speakers and whether or not the language is transmitted generationally (Tsunoda 2005: 11). Additionally, Dixon (1997) suggests 'sudden' and 'gradual' changes which can affect the longevity of a language differently. And Harmon (1996) went as far as to connect the life of a language to the life of any other species. Overall, scholars and academics of the 2000s continued to embrace the evolutionary, biological and medical metaphors, such as Harrison (2007) and Tsunoda (2005).

At the end of the 1980s Vepsian scholars working at the Academy of Sciences in Petrozavodsk also appreciated the urgency to act upon Vepsian language since its use was diminishing in urban and rural areas. However, they called the language shift phenomenon differently from the description given in the international literature on multilingualism

and languages-in-contact. The scholars and activists usually speak Russian among one another at the Academy of Sciences in Petrozavodsk. When referring to Vepsian, they privilege the term *jazyk maločislennogo naroda* (Rus. language of a minority group/ethnos), or *rodnoj jazyk* (meaning literally, ‘language of kin’. However, I will translate it as ‘heritage language’, as I explain below). This way they demonstrate emphasis on the number of speakers, on the political status of the language and on its ethnic component, more than on its health condition (as implied in the term endangered and the others mentioned above). When addressing a decline in the number of speakers is a clear indication of social inequalities, this reference does not comprise a detachment of language from life nor does it portray language as an independent being from its speakers (as entangled in the phrase *rodnoj jazyk*). The Russian word *rodnoj* has its root in the word *rod* (Rus. family, kin, clan). Other Russian words have this root such as *rodstvennik* (Rus. relative, kinsman), *narod* (Rus. people, nation, folk), *priroda* (Rus. nature) (Paxson 2005: 59). In this sense the use of the phrase heritage language well summarises how Veps conceptualise their mother tongue which they believe is used to relate to and engage with the surrounding world.

In this paper, the phrase heritage language is meant to connect to both tangible and intangible aspects of language, i.e., its communicative and experiential potentials through written and oral use. Vepsian heritage language refers to communicative and experiential practices that find their origin in the past and also to those practices that are constructed today in the engagement with the present language ecology. Blackledge et al. (2008: 236) contest such a view of ‘heritage’, since for them, “‘heritage’ refers to elements of past experience which a group deliberately sets out to preserve and pass on to the next generation”; whereas, “‘culture’ is reproduced and emerges in people’s activity together – it exists in the processes and resources involved in situated, dialogical, sense-making”. My position on tangible and intangible heritage as a dynamic phenomenon is not new. Indeed, part of the literature has already stressed the dynamism of the term heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Smith and Akagawa 2009). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines heritage as,

Not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. Despite a discourse of conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, re-creation, recuperation, revitalization, and regeneration, heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 149)

The phrase heritage language is intended to emphasise dynamic processes as it comprises both a sense of continuity from the past and lived practices in the present. Apart from this, employing the phrase heritage language also implies establishing a link with the broader discourse on heritage. This has become a contemporary concern after the development and ratification of the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 (Smith & Akagawa 2009). Such terminological choice concurs with the conceptualisation of language ecology and engagement with the forces in place at a specific time that supports the main argument of the paper.

Similar considerations can be made about the word *save* in revival movements. Should a conversation on Vepsian language revitalisation occur, indeed, Vepsian activists and scholars often adopt the terms, *soxranit' i razvivat'* (Rus. to preserve and develop). While 'saving' a language links to the biological metaphor and suggests that languages can die, to 'preserve' a language has gained a different symbolism among Veps. The terms *soxranit' i razvivat'* unequivocally stress the dynamism of the revival process. These terms link to past traditions and traditional knowledge and launch new ways of expression that project into the future. Such dynamism is found in a language that can develop while maintaining its long-standing and passed-on characteristics and worldviews. Many former university students at Petrozavodsk State University view Vepsian writing as a bridge between two oral traditions, the one of the *babuški* (Rus. grandmothers) and the other of the children (my own field notes). They demonstrate an appreciation of language and its written and oral domains of use in continuous transformation and development. Many of them systematically gather at the Centre of National Cultures to speak Vepsian in Petrozavodsk, where Russian takes over most institutionalised and non-institutionalised social settings. During these gatherings they speak Vepsian and often compare their different ways of speaking, such as the dialects and standard form of the language (Figure 2). They also have created a network with an international forum through the medium of the Internet, providing a lively interaction with contemporary technologies and expanding Vepsian domains of use.



Figure 2. A *Paginklub* (Veps. Speaking club) meeting in Petrozavodsk on 24 October 2013. I have borrowed the picture from the archive of the group on the Russian social network *Vkontakte* with the permission of the founder of the club, Larisa Chirkova.

I also put into question the terms endangerment and death after observing how the villagers define, understand and use their heritage language. Vepsian country dwellers in the Leningrad and Vologda Oblasts do not speak of endangered language when discussing Vepsian. The term that Vepsian villagers usually adopt is *ičemoi kel'* (Veps. our own language). And they often portray the language as well as the dialects which others speak simply as *toine* (Veps. different). Their description of their own ways of speaking does not focus on language competition and does not appear oppositional. Nor does it focus on the health conditions of the language. Rather, it emphasises identification with their own community with which they share worldviews and life metaphors. Veps living in the Republic of Karelia also do not link to discourse on language endangerment. However, they tend to refer to their heritage language as Vepsian and not *ičemoi kel'*; hence, they demonstrate to be influenced by a discourse on language which views them as separate entities. This is not surprising since the northern Vepsian villages are located closer to Petrozavodsk. Here the main Vepsian activists

operate and their continuous work on the preservation and maintenance of Vepsian is regularly presented at the regional TV and radio programs.

In addition, the adoption of rather pessimistic and gloomy terminology, such as death and endangerment does not match Vepsian traditional ontologies and worldviews. Vepsian villagers who master Vepsian in its oral form do not describe their heritage language as endangered and in need of being saved. It is precisely such a negative and unenthusiastic approach towards language that does not concur with the way Veps speak about Vepsian. During my fieldwork, I was able to appreciate how the multi-ethnic population of this north-western territory of the Russian Federation often applies a complex network of social stereotypes to differentiate the several nationalities living there. In this complex network, Veps are often described as optimistic people (my own field notes). From their self-description it seems that this is also how they like to portray themselves on the whole. Indeed, they often extend such an optimistic attitude to life in general and seem to portray the world they live in as a place where catastrophic events do not occur. Vepsian general optimism does not allow a catastrophic and competitive discourse about language either. None of the elderly Vepsian villagers mentioned the language biological metaphor with its pre-determined path, leading to language death. On the contrary, many of them asserted that there were far more speakers than those the statistical data showed. Zinaida Ivanovna Strogal'shchikova conducted quantitative research in the villages and confirmed this to me. Some elderly Veps even claimed that there were “thousands of speakers around the whole territory where Veps live”. Some were very surprised to hear that the Vepsian language was, in fact, endangered when the Endangered Language Project promoted by Google was released in June 2012³.

This optimism is also reflected in their desire to pass on their language and traditional knowledge to those who are interested in it. During my work in Rybreka (indicated on the Figure 1), Kurba and Pondala, three Vepsian villages of the Republic of Karelia, the Leningrad and Vologda Oblasts respectively, I repeatedly received phone calls and visits from those who knew about my work and wanted to share their language knowledge and language experience with me. Admittedly, their interest in engaging with me might also have been led by curiosity and their understanding of what researchers should do in the field. In

3 Interestingly, Zinaida Ivanovna Strogal'shchikova mentioned that Karelians have the opposite perception of their heritage language, despite being larger in number.

Pondala, the villagers mainly speak Vepsian among one another. The idea that their heritage language is doomed does not even occur to them. They do not doubt its vitality as they live and experience life through it. Vepsian is felt at once with their bodily-experienced feelings, as I more thoroughly develop in the next section.

I now want to raise another issue when analysing a local ecology such as the Vepsian which international discourse on language endangerment might be neglecting. Local ecology pertains to the complexity of forces in one place as well as their agency on people's life trajectories. This issue concerns the social and relational dynamics among several groups in a multi-ethnic society. Indeed, employing a metaphor of doom for the Vepsian language fuels mistrust towards the activities of the Vepsian activists among the multi-ethnic population where Veps live⁴. This is an example of what a Russian woman told me as I returned from an interview in Petrozavodsk: "I heard your Veps on the radio today. I could understand everything they said. Do you know why? This is because they are so simple. They do not have enough words in Vepsian and always borrow our Russian words". The Vepsian activists often find it challenging to operate in an environment where the dominant ideology says that Vepsian is simple as well as that it is doomed. In fact, the challenges are two-fold since the activists often find themselves torn between the regional and federal governments, which frequently question their activities and the multi-ethnic population of this territory. Many inhabitants of Petrozavodsk perceive the promotion of Vepsian as being in conflict with the interest of the majority of the population. Some more subtly, others more directly, revealed that they do not understand why the regional government invests in such a 'small and doomed language', instead of financing services for the whole population (for example, opening new nurseries for all the children living in this territory). The work of the Karelian NGO *Nuori Karjala* (Kar. Young Karelia) in opening language nests for Finnish, Karelian and Vepsian has proved very problematic because many view their work as in conflict with the interests of the majority of the population. Language nests are immersion programs in the heritage language. These programs aim to promote the heritage language before children enter school, where they will mainly be using Russian. Paradoxically, adopting the biological metaphor reinforces the position of the assimilationists since it puts

4 This does not mean adjusting metaphors to certain political agendas, but it means understanding the ecology where people speak (or not) their heritage language and what socio-cultural factors obstruct them.

emphasis on the risks involved in promoting diversity rather than on its positive outcomes. Here, assimilationists can be understood as those who favour the integration (or assimilation) of the minority groups into the larger group. In a way, their position consciously (or not) upholds the ‘one language, one nation’ motto. In this case the language should be Russian. In other words, the biological metaphor enables the majority population to claim that it is natural for the minority language to die and this gives them the right not to co-operate and/or to support its revitalisation.

3.1. Experiencing Vepsian language

The last argument that I want to raise is that the biological metaphor risks detaching language from life, reinforcing a separation between body and mind and between different ways of speaking. Admittedly, this claim is not entirely innovative within anthropological dialectics since it stands on the assumption that communicative practices encompass a bodily involvement and that languages are not detached entities (Bateson 1972, Hanks 1996, Hymes 1962, 1974, Ingold 2004). This does not mean negating the scientific achievements of linguistic studies. If anything, it indicates how little anthropology has affected the terminology used to discuss language revival movements and how this still proves problematic.

I intentionally chose to use the phrase ‘ways of speaking’ instead of ‘languages’ to emphasise the importance of the language ecology and context where people use language instead of its structural features. I borrow this expression from Hymes (1962, 1974). Ways of speaking indicates multiple ways to communicate, engage and socialise with the world using the oral form of language. Ways of speaking are structurally and symbolically shared within speech communities and enable communication. Bilingual Vepsian villagers speak Vepsian and/or Russian often simultaneously in their speech practice, giving the impression that for them these languages are simply different codes of a singular way of speaking. The adoption of one code or another often depends on the context where people use language and on the interlocutor with whom they interact.

The biological metaphor relies on the basis that languages are distinct entities and that when contact between language systems occurs, competition will kick in and the speakers of the majority language will dominate, assimilating the language of the minority group (Dorian

1981, Myers-Scotton 2002). By accepting such a metaphor, linguists tend to accept that dynamism and movement between these systems are a threat to the heritage language spoken by the minority group. However, bilingual Veps did not refer to Russian as a competitor and possible threat to their way of speaking, since they often switch from one language to the other. The use of language among Veps challenges the idea that languages are to be understood as independent entities and/or systems of rules as well as that their contact will necessarily cause the disappearance of one of them. Vepsian villagers often do not detach language from life, but perceive it as an integral part of life. They manifest language in relation to life events, to the forces surrounding them, to the people they relate to, to their memories, etc.

Veps experience a sense of unity through Vepsian language, not separation. Veps use their heritage language to relate and interact among one another, but also to connect to the environment in which they live and to its human and non-human inhabitants. They speak their heritage language to the animals. They tend to believe that this is the language that both domestic and non-domestic animals dwelling in their land understand. If an animal has a foreign origin, they often point this out and tend to speak Russian to it. The language of the animals can bring auspicious as well as unfavourable news; so, villagers read their messages carefully. Through the adoption of spoken Vepsian, Veps also maintain a relationship with the spirits that dwell in their territory. One should never claim that one will go *hotkas* (Veps. quickly) to the forest to pick berries or mushrooms as this often depends on the *mecanižand* (Veps. spirit of the forest). In fact, this spirit might decide to play some tricks on those who operate in its territory. It is not a random occurrence that people (and animals) get lost in the forest. Their return home then is contingent to the intervention of the Vepsian *tedai* (Veps. the one who knows)⁵. The *tedai* is a local villager who has been taught how to address (in Vepsian) the forest spirit and can ask him/her to set the villagers free from the forest and help them find their way back home. Overall, Veps use their language very carefully, as they understand its power and do not want it to start generating problems. They often warned me not to shout in the forest, just as not to swear in the *ban'ja* (Rus. Russian/Vepsian sauna) and, on the whole, to use a positive language.

5 Arukask (2002: 54) has indicated possible etymological connections between the noun *tie* (Fin. road) and the verb *tietää* (Fin. to know) in Finnic languages.

Vepsian villagers experience unity with the surrounding environment through the use of Vepsian. In fact, this sense of unity extends to feelings that each person experiences individually, and to socially shared emotions. When asked, many villagers stressed that they felt more accurate and closer to their own emotional state when speaking Vepsian. Vepsian helps them express their feelings and what they want to say better. Villagers in Pondala, particularly, pointed this out since they regularly operate in Vepsian and speak Russian only when interacting with those who do not know their *ičemoi kel'*. Language becomes the manifestation of the relationship between a physical sensation and the surroundings that prompted it (Rosaldo 1980: 53–60). A few locals confirmed that “there is a difference in quality when speaking Vepsian. It better reflects what one feels and what one wants to say”. Indeed, some of these elderly villagers admitted feeling at odds when speaking Russian, since they cannot as freely express themselves in Russian as they do in Vepsian. This aspect of language use is particularly important for revival movements as it shows what social and personal aspects of a language matter for the bearers of Vepsian and where they would feel comfortable continuing to speak their heritage language.

Experiencing the heritage language also encompasses the use of the specific words and the production of specific sounds found in Vepsian dialects. Speaking the dialect of origin helps the native speaker make sense of the world. Vepsian elderly villagers in Pondala persistently told me their stories of how they used to go to school in Kuya, a neighbouring village. They recollected how children from Kuya used different words, to which they were not accustomed, and this caused laughter among them. In Pondala, the villagers say *mado* and in Kuya they say *kü*, meaning snake. I heard similar stories in the Vepsian villages in the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad Oblast. Such an attitude extends also to phonemes. The word *d'äpuraz* (Veps. icicle) came up during a discussion with a group of Vepsian *babuški* in a shop in Rybreka. They could not remember the Vepsian word for *icicle*. I took my Russian-Vepsian dictionary out of my bag and read aloud what was written there. The dictionary indicated the word *jäpuraz*. The *babuški* took their time to think, discussed together for a bit and agreed that it made sense, since *jä* means ice. So, they repeated *d'äpuraz* after me, adjusting my pronunciation to their dialect. The word *jäpuraz* has been created for the literary form of Vepsian and the Vepsian elders accepted it in their way of speaking after some consideration. Elderly Vepsian villagers tend to understand the standard form of Vepsian, which most former

students of Vepsian speak. However, some of the villagers admitted finding it demanding to spontaneously interact with a speaker of the Vepsian standard form since the sounds are different, as are some of the words. The general consensus was that, “you can guess what the discussion is about, but you cannot understand every word they say”. I then understood that the native speaker hears phonemes and not just sounds (Sapir 1933). That is, the speaker hears meaning in sounds. He or she recognises sounds within his or her knowledge and system of values and consequently is capable of spontaneously responding to them.

As mentioned above, a bilingual way of speaking comprises practices in which the speaker can freely switch from one language to another. Such occurrences often arise spontaneously, demonstrating that the bilingual speaker does not understand the languages as separate entities, but as different codes of a single way of speaking. Among the bilingual elderly Vepsian villagers (those in their 60s onwards), Russian and/or Vepsian are two codes that are part of a single way of speaking. They can better suit specific moments in specific places. The middle-aged villagers (those in their 30s and 40s) employ Vepsian differently. Many admitted being able to understand Vepsian, but not being active speakers themselves. Others, instead, claimed to speak Vepsian very strongly. In their practices, language choice is often driven by ideological (if not political) ambition, having experienced the rise of the Vepsian revival movement⁶. In contrast to their parents’ generation, they distinguish one linguistic system from another. During fieldwork I began to recognise that for the mainly elderly bilingual speaker there is no marked line between the two languages (Auer 2007: 320). Such linguistic boundaries are usually fuzzy (Heller 2007: 7). Indeed, “the assumption of bound linguistic systems as the object of linguistic research is questioned by bilingual practices” (Auer 2007: 337). This is particularly true in those Vepsian villages that are situated in the Republic of Karelia and the Leningrad Oblast, where the villagers operate in Russian and Vepsian on a daily basis. Rather, the Vepsian villagers of Pondala in the Vologda Oblast separate Vepsian and Russian more consciously. They intentionally speak Russian when in the presence of someone who cannot speak their heritage language. But they regularly speak Vepsian among one another. Adopting Russian for them equals speaking *toižin* (Veps. differently) and not speaking their *ičemoi kel’*. Indeed, some of

6 Undeniably, language ideologies are more than just negative and biased. As Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 55) state, “such ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology”.

the villagers in Pondala acknowledged that Russian is not felt to be as close as their *ičemoi kel'*, although they can understand everything and engage in any life situation.

Loanwords as a linguistic category also need some investigation. From my observation I began to understand the movement of words from one way of speaking to another as a practice that matches traditional Vepsian epistemology in embracing foreign elements into their ways of speaking. The Veps have appropriated syntactic, phonological and morphological features into their language from trade and religious exchange with Slavonic and Germanic groups. Vepsian words generally maintain consonant clusters at the beginning of those words with a Russian origin such as *zناموита* (to know) (Pugh 1994). Vepsian has also adopted the Russian suffix *-ik*, for example, *kalanik* (fisherman), *mecoik* (hunter) (Pimenov 1965: 193). Vepsian speakers have adopted several Russian conjunctions such as *a* (and, but), *i* (and), *no* (but) (Pugh 1999: 26). The incorporation of the negative prefixal particle *ni-* also has a Slavonic origin, for example, *ni konz* (Veps. never) (Pugh 1999: 26). Pugh (1991a) pointed out how a number of prefixes have entered the Vepsian verbal system. The most productive prefix among Vepsian speakers is *pro-* (Pugh 1991a). The lexical movement from Vepsian into Slavonic languages has not been as abundant. It is visible in the contemporary toponymy, for example, the name of the village Myatusovo comes from *mätas* (hill), Gymreka from *hijm* (relatives), etc. (Pimenov 1965: 43). Some words used in Vytegorskiy province, Vologoda Oblast, also have Vepsian origin, for example, *kokač* in Russian (rye pie; Veps. *kokat'*), *lajda* in Russian (the middle of the lake. *Laid* means being in the lake far from the banks in Vepsian), *gabuk* (hawk; Veps. *habuk*) (Pimenov 1965: 159). This lack of movement into the language of the majority group is usually viewed as an emblem for language competition where the dominant language assimilates the minority language⁷. I claim, rather, that this resistance to movement on behalf of Russians matches a shared worldview and understanding of the *svoj-čužoj* dichotomy. In other words, Russians tend to fear the *čužoj* and to keep it outside their *svoj* and this is reflected in their language (Paxson 2005). This resistance to movement also matches the language hierarchy existing among the multi-ethnic population of the north-western territory where Veps live. The recent integration of several English words into Russian can

7 See, for example, Comrie (1981), Kurs (2001), Laine (2001), and Lallukka (2001).

be interpreted as an indicator of acknowledgment of the current prestige and usefulness of the English language.

This lexical movement can be understood as linguistic and cultural enrichment instead of a first indication of language death. Some scholars often find the main cause for language loss in the phenomenon of languages-in-contact, especially if dealing with the language of a minority group (Pugh 1999, Siegel 1985). But this is not necessarily the rule. When new elements, either linguistic or more broadly cultural, enter a different cultural system people may embrace them and give them new meanings often matching their worldviews (Baltali 2007). Baltali (2007: 5) refers to this cultural integration as a “way of appropriating foreign elements”. The idea of appropriation is connected to the Vepsian way of relating to what is foreign. Indeed, Veps tend to carefully observe the new elements, which might be people as well as words. Once they have found commonality with what they already know, they tend to embrace the new elements, adjusting them to their social practices. The term loanword also implies returning what has been borrowed to the linguistic system of origin, and this is rarely the case for Vepsian, as demonstrated above.

4. Ecological method

This section is dedicated to my research methodology. Hopefully, this will help the reader appreciate how linguistic anthropologists operate in a volume mostly dedicated to Linguistics analysis. It will accentuate the need for interdisciplinary co-operation, bringing to the surface the strength of my own discipline.

Research methods differ from country to country often depending on the methodological tradition existing in the institution where one receives their training. As an anthropologist, I was educated in Aberdeen and my research methods have matched those adopted within the British anthropological tradition. Within this tradition it is understood that fieldwork, ethnography and anthropology are different entities. As opposed to ethnography and anthropology, which comprise the analysis and writing of the data, fieldwork is when data gathering and engagement with the people occur. Anthropology as a discipline endeavours to unveil ontologies and epistemologies of human beings in the world in which we live (Ingold 2008). Instead, ethnography describes “the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed

by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience” (Ingold 2008: 69).

Between 2009 and 2013 I have undertaken extended field work among Veps where I employed participant observation and engaged in semi-structured and open-ended interviews and discussions as well as visiting the archives. I let people manifest data spontaneously, while appreciating that my presence influenced the forces in place (if you wish, the ‘language ecology’) during my research. This is particularly important for language investigation, since language use and discussions about language occur very often once the researcher is present (Olson and Adonyeva 2012). This was important also to develop trust with those with whom I was working. Muehlmann (2007: 19) stresses the importance of developing trust in overcoming the perception that researchers come to the field to collect data. This way, many interviewees would respond to what they expect the researcher to want, rather than spontaneously use language.

Extended fieldwork dominates the research practice of anthropologists: the researcher engages in a number of activities together with the locals and conducts participant observation. In line with current anthropological methodology, my approach was to conduct fieldwork that was basically ethnographic and responsive to local conditions. Through my research findings I was able to accomplish the goals set at the beginning of the research (and more) by being flexible and open and letting events shape the research process and results. This enabled me to come into contact with different generations of Veps and to discover new and old usages of language (hence, my choice to employ the phrase heritage language). I was able to observe how Veps engage with the oral and written modes of their heritage language. Through my work with Veps, I began to appreciate the numerous and unexpected ways in which fieldwork changes and takes shape (Blommaert and Dong 2010). I learned routinised behaviour with which I was not familiar by taking part and being involved in several events and daily activities. By observing how people interacted among themselves, I began to understand their shared system of values, outlooks and language use. Thanks to fieldwork, I could become more sensitive to different cultural norms and world-views due to the experiences shared in the field and accurate observation of specific practices. I could only come near an understanding of these practices through close observation, work and communication and knowledge in context (Sayer 1984) and my first-hand and bodily experience. This understanding entails unveiling subconscious practices

and/or discrepancies and tensions between actual practices and ways of talking about them. Indeed, I could detect a discrepancy between the different metaphors of language and how these created friction with the revival efforts. This last point is particularly relevant as it speaks to language revival more generally and on the need to appreciate the local ecology in order to make the revival efforts more effective.

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how international discourse on minority languages and its biological metaphor of a language can be intrinsically conflicting. On the one hand, this serves the purposes of language revival movements, although, on the other, it hinders this purpose. Indeed, the internationally-accepted lifecycle/biological metaphor of a language risks overlooking language ecology as a whole, and neglecting, if not being in conflict with, specific local metaphors and world-views. While this metaphor first appeared as a way to support the local elites in the promotion of their heritage language and culture, it has also proved to be counterproductive in the case of Veps and to distance policy-makers and scholars from the Vepsian villages and their traditional ontologies and epistemologies. Instead of giving voice to the people, it stifles this voice. That is, academic debate on language death may serve to galvanise the powerful into political action. Some of the metaphors we live by serve the purpose also of instigating action (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) as well as financing research and academic work. However, such metaphors bear a highly politicised weight in context, which could interfere with or even deter the purposes of the revival movement itself (Hill 2002) without our awareness (Sapir 1929). Adopting a biological metaphor risks acting against the very scope of the revival movement since it describes languages as separate entities and often in competition with each other. By accepting the biological metaphor of a language, international and local socio-linguists and policy-makers often detach language from the context in which people use it. Instead of fostering co-operation, such a metaphor might reinforce separation among the various agencies involved in the revival of a minority language. This metaphor also allows people to assert that it is natural for a language to die.

Stemming from my analysis of Vepsian language metaphors and use, I suggest turning this pessimistic and mostly out-of-context metaphor

into a focus on experience of language, on its positive outlooks. The reason for this is that languages do not die, but rather that people stop speaking them for socio-cultural and political reasons. Understanding these reasons might make the revival efforts more effective. This is why I suggest shifting the terminology from *lifecycle* to *experience*, from *endangered language* to *heritage language*. Veps often describe speaking Vepsian as a depository of emotions, a physical experience in relation to life events, to the world. They have a positive experience of their heritage language. Speaking the heritage language helps the speaker feel at one not only with him/herself, but also with the surrounding environment, and with its human and non-human inhabitants.

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Abbreviations

Fin. – Finnish, Kar. – Karelian, Rus. – Russian, Veps. – Vepsian

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Kokkuvõte. Laura Siragusa: Keelekohased metafoorid: väljakutse rahvusvahelisele paradigmatule vepslaste keelekasutuse näitel. Tänapäeval elavad vepslased Loode-Venemaa kolmes administratiivpiirkonnas – Karjala vabariigis, Leningradi ja Vologda oblastis. Erinevatel ühiskondlik-majanduslikel ja poliitilistel põhjustel on vepslased viimasel sajandil läbi elanud drastilise muutuse oma keelekasutuses ja suhtluspraktikates. Vepsa keel on UNESCO poolt liigitatud eriti ohustatute hulka. Alates perestroikast on rühm vepsa aktiviste Petroskois tegelnud vepsa keele ja kultuuri edendamisega. See artikkel soovib vaidlustada keelelise ohustatuse ja keele surmaga seotud rahvusvahelist retoorikat vepsa keelekeskkonna ja keele taaselustamise analüüsi näitel. Vepslaste olemus ja suhtluspraktikad ei kattu just alati nende keele kohta kasutatavate metafooridega, mis käsitlevad keelt ja rahvast eraldiseisvate üksustena ja sageli vastanduses teineteisega. Püüdlused keelt edendada ning see, kuidas sellega tegeldakse poliitikute ja vepsa aktivistide seas, ei paku alust nii drastilisele võrdlusele nagu surm või ohustatus. Artikkel püüab tuua esile kohalikku ontoloogiat ja maailmanägemist seadmaks kahtluse alla keelemuutuse ja keele surmaga seotud paradigmat, mis domineerivad üleilmses akadeemilises ja poliitilises diskursuses.

Märksõnad: vepsa keel, keele ohustatus, keele surm ja taassünd, keelekohased metafoorid, pärimuskeel, kõnelemisviisid, suhtluspraktika