

## The endangered state of Negidal: A field report

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Negidal is a Northern Tungusic language closely related to Evenki with two recognized dialects, Upper and Lower Negidal. This nearly extinct language used to be spoken in the Lower Amur region of the Russian Far East by people whose traditional way of life was based on fishing and hunting. While the number of remaining active speakers of Upper Negidal was more or less known, the current state of Lower Negidal was still uncertain. We here report on a trip to ascertain the state of Lower Negidal and give a precise assessment of the linguistic situation of both dialects. While the Upper dialect is still represented by seven elderly female speakers, varying in proficiency from fully fluent to barely able to produce a narrative, not a single active speaker of Lower Negidal is left. The language will therefore probably be extinct in the next decade or two.

**1. Introduction** Negidal (ISO 639-3: neg) is a Northern Tungusic language, and as such is closely related to Evenki, Even, Oroqen, and Solon, with particularly close ties to Evenki. It is spoken in the Khabarovskij Kray of the Russian Far East in the vicinity of its Southern Tungusic relatives Nanai and Ulchi, Evenki, and the unrelated language Nivkh. The language contains two dialects, Upper Negidal (called *Verkhovskoj* in Russian) and Lower Negidal (*Nizovskoj*). The term *Negidal* (*ne:gidal* in Negidal) is an exonym of probable Evenki origins. It can be segmented into *ne:-gida-l* ~ *ne:-gida-l* ‘riverbank[bottom]—SIDE—PL’, and although it literally means ‘sides of the riverbank’, it is understood as referring to ‘dwellers of the riverbank’ (cf. Myl’nikova & Cincius 1931:109; Kolesnikova & Konstantinova 1968:109; Pevnov 2016:7). The endonym formerly used by Negidals was *ilkan bəjənin* ‘true person’ or *amgun bəjənin* ‘Amgun’ person’ (Myl’nikova & Cincius 1931:108–109). Nowadays, however, the ethnonym Negidal is widely accepted, probably due to its use in governmental contexts. As for the language, there is no separate term for it in Upper Negidal:<sup>1</sup> when exhorting themselves or others to speak in Negidal, speakers use *mandattəij* ‘in one’s own way’ or *mundattəij* ‘in our way’.

In the early 20th century, all Negidals were settled along the river Amgun’ (a tributary of the Amur): Lower Negidals were settled from the mouth of the Amgun’

<sup>1</sup>For Lower Negidal, Pevnov (2016:7) reports the complex construction *bitta na: bəjə-n bəjə-nin* [1PL.INCL earth person-POSS.3SG word-POSS.3SG] obtained from one speaker.

upriver for about 150 km, whereas Upper Negidals were settled even further up the Amgun', along its middle reaches. This geographical split coincided not only with dialectal differentiation, but also with a difference in lifestyle, with the Lower Negidals living in relatively large and compact settlements, whereas the settlements of the Upper Negidals were small and scattered (Myl'nikova & Cincius 1931:107–108). Lower Negidals were always in the majority, comprising more than two-thirds of all Negidals counted by Myl'nikova & Cincius in the mid-1920s (Myl'nikova & Cincius 1931:108) and being 1.3 times more numerous than Upper Negidals in the 1980s and 1990s (Khasanova & Pevnov 2003:228).

Most of the Lower Negidals were resettled along the Lower Amur in the 1940s to 1960s (Khasanova & Pevnov 2003:1; Starcev 2014a:7). This was due partly to the closure of the largest Negidal settlement, Ust'-Amgun', on account of frequent flooding (Cincius 1982:3), and partly to the state policy of merging small settlements into larger ones (Starcev 2014a:7). Currently, Upper Negidals are mainly settled in Vladimirovka village in the Polina Osipenko district (see Figure 1), with a few having moved to the district center in the past few years. Lower Negidals are mainly settled in the villages Udinsk and Kherpuchi of Polina Osipenko district, the villages Kal'ma, Tyr, Beloglinka, and Takhta of the Ulchi district (with a few having moved to the district center Bogorodskoe, mostly for health-related reasons), and in the village Mago of the Nikolaevsk district (Starcev 2014a:7; Pakendorf & Aralova 2017:Lower\_Negidal).

The Russian census of 2010 counted 513 ethnic Negidals,<sup>2</sup> of whom 19 claimed to speak the language;<sup>3</sup> however, linguists have long known that the actual state of endangerment of Negidal is far more serious (Khasanova 2003; Kalinina 2008; Aralova & Sumbatova 2016). While the number of speakers of Upper Negidal was known to a certain extent (Kalinina 2008), nothing definite was known about the state of Lower Negidal. We therefore aim to provide an assessment of the state of language endangerment of Negidal in this article, especially of the Lower dialect, based on fieldwork conducted in July–August 2017.<sup>4</sup>

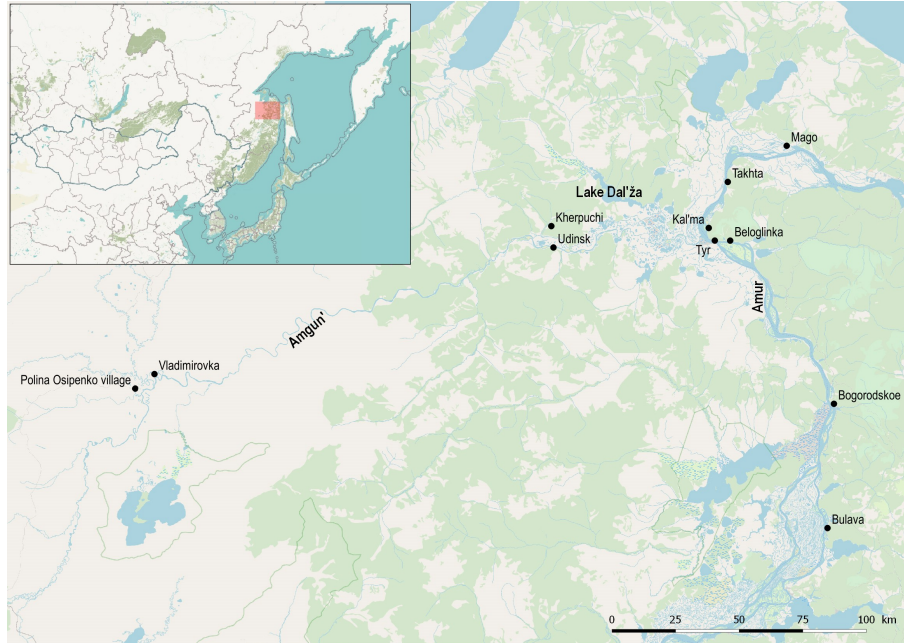
**2. Methodology** The main objective of our trip was to find speakers of Lower Negidal with sufficient competence in the language for us to record narratives to augment our ongoing documentation of (Upper) Negidal (Pakendorf & Aralova 2017). Only five recordings of Lower Negidal are available (Kazama 2002), and these represent only three speakers, comprising four narratives produced by a single woman plus a conversation between two other women. Furthermore, although published Negidal

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol4/pub-04-01.pdf](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol4/pub-04-01.pdf), accessed August 16, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol4/pub-04-20.pdf](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/Documents/Vol4/pub-04-20.pdf), accessed August 16, 2017.

<sup>4</sup>This project was funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP), [www.eldp.net](http://www.eldp.net). We furthermore acknowledge the LABEX ASLAN (ANR-10-LABX-0081) of Université de Lyon for its financial support within the program “Investissements d’Avenir” (ANR-11-IDEX-0007) of the French government operated by the National Research Agency (ANR), and we thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a previous version of the paper.

**Figure 1.** Map showing the Amgun' and Lower Amur rivers and the villages mentioned in the text (with the exception of Ust'-Amgun', for which we have no coordinates). Note that the village Dal'za was closed down, and we are unsure of its exact coordinates. We therefore show Lake Dal'za instead to indicate its approximate location. Base map © OpenStreetMap contributors, modified by Christian Fressard, Lyon.



text collections (Cincius 1982; Khasanova & Pevnov 2003) include large numbers of Lower Negidal narratives, these were obtained via dictation rather than recordings of relatively spontaneous speech, and they are heavily biased towards folklore. We had therefore hoped that we would be able to record spontaneous narratives on everyday topics in the Lower Negidal dialect in order to achieve as comprehensive a documentation as possible of the Negidal language as a whole.

This focus on active speakers drove our approach to the trip we undertook, which had as its specific aim the search for speakers of Lower Negidal. We had initially intended to visit all the settlements with a substantial Negidal population listed in Starcev (2014a:7), with the exception of Beloglinka, since that is specifically mentioned by Kalinina (2008:footnote 2) as having been the object of a fruitless search for speakers in 2005. We had thus planned to visit Udinsk, Kherpuchi, Bogorodskoe, Kal'ma, Tyr, Takhta, and Mago, using the public hydrofoil boat that runs four times a week between Komsomol'sk-na-Amure and Nikolaevsk-na-Amure and stops in Bogorodskoe, Tyr, and Takhta, and using private transport elsewhere. However, as explained in §4, we were strongly discouraged from making the trip to Udinsk and neighboring Kherpuchi by a woman who has lived in Udinsk all her life.

Since none of the villages we were planning to visit had a hotel, with the exception of Bogorodskoe, we were very much dependent on the goodwill of the local inhabitants during our trip, and we had therefore tried to obtain as many contacts as

possible before setting off.<sup>5</sup> With the help of the administration of Polina Osipenko district, we obtained the contact information of the representatives of the indigenous minorities in Tyr and Takhta, and we were able to establish contact with the daughter of one of the last speakers of Lower Negidal in Mago (see §4) via an inhabitant of the village who maintains a blog about the settlement. Fortuitously, while we were travelling to Tyr on the hydrofoil boat, an encounter with a Nivkh businesswoman with a wide local network resulted in the name of a supposed speaker of Negidal living in the vicinity of Bogorodskoe; we were subsequently able to trace this woman with the help of the head of the Takhta administration. In each village, our primary contacts used their private networks to arrange meetings with Negidals for us. During these meetings, we presented our documentation project and played some Negidal video recordings we had made in Vladimirovka, enquired about still-living speakers of Negidal, and recorded the names and approximate life dates of individuals identified as having been the last speakers of the language in a given settlement. We also recorded in an unstructured manner any personal biographical information offered by the attendees, which allowed us to better understand the circumstances in which Negidal was lost (Pakendorf & Aralova 2017:Lower\_Negidal).

In addition, we asked the village administrations for census data on the ethnic composition of each settlement in order to understand the social context of the language loss. Even though ethnicity is not registered in Russian passports anymore, in contrast to previous Soviet policies, most village administrations still retain a register of each individual's ethnic identification. This is important for the administration of benefits to which members of the official minority peoples have access; in the Lower Amur region, the most important of these is access to fishing rights. These material advantages – which are of vital concern to everyone living in the region – lead to individuals registering themselves or their children as belonging to an ethnic minority even when their family background might actually be largely Russian. For instance, a Russian woman who was married to a man with a Russian father and a Negidal mother told us that she had registered her children as Negidals so that they could obtain fishing rights. Thus, the census data we provide in our discussion of Upper and Lower Negidal (§3 and §4, respectively) do not necessarily give a true indication of the size of the Negidal community. Rather, very few of the registered Negidals would have actually had much contact with the language or culture.

We should point out that our assessment of the linguistic proficiency of the Negidals we met is based solely on observation, not on any tests targeting linguistic competence. For our evaluation of the speakers of Upper Negidal, we rely on our observations during fieldwork and our interactions with the different individuals, as well as on the recordings included in the documentation project. Our assessment of the Lower Negidals as passive speakers is based on the way they reacted to videos of

<sup>5</sup>We sincerely thank all the individuals who helped us with advice, information, food, and accommodation during our trip. In particular, we thank Evgenij V. Vasil'chenko, Galina I. Kandakova, Daria I. Nadeina, Marina V. Ycha, Ol'ga A. Zjukht, Evgenija V. Timofeeva, Svetlana A. Kini, and Al'bina D. and Ol'ga Odoko.

Upper Negidal speech we showed them.<sup>6</sup> For instance, several individuals picked up particular words and commented on the fact that these were the same as or similar to Lower Negidal. However, since our search targeted active speakers, we did not specifically test the degree of comprehension of these individuals, and thus our evaluation of the number of passive speakers of Negidal is somewhat anecdotal.

Whereas in Table 1 we break down our assessment of the linguistic competence of the Upper Negidal speakers into the different parameters proposed by Grinevald & Bert (2011), in our discussion we use more descriptive labels that encompass several of these parameters. We thus distinguish between “active” and “passive” speakers, by which we mean on the one hand individuals who are still able to produce cohesive narratives in Negidal, vs. those who are able to understand spoken Negidal to various degrees, but who cannot themselves produce cohesive speech. This is clearly a gradient feature, ranging from a) the ability to produce fluent narratives on a large variety of topics with complex syntactic structures and only occasional slips of the tongue, via b) more hesitant production with a limited range of syntactic complexity and a considerable number of structural errors, to c) the ability to produce at most a limited number of sentences, but full comprehension of spoken speech, to d) the inability to produce any cohesive sequences of speech and comprehension limited to individual words picked out of discourse. Our category of active speakers encompasses categories a) and b) on the cline, while c) and d) fall into the category of passive speakers. While we do not make any fine-grained distinctions in the domain of the passive speakers, for which we lack the requisite information, in the domain of active speakers we distinguish “fluent” speakers from “semi-speakers”, with the fluent speakers roughly representing category a) on the cline and semi-speakers representing category b). We here also include a “dysfluent” speaker who corresponds to what has been called “terminal speaker” in the literature (Grinevald & Bert 2011:50), and who is probably situated between categories b) and c) on the above cline. Among the fluent speakers we furthermore make a descriptive distinction between “fully fluent” speakers – two individuals who produce Negidal speech without hesitation, inserting Russian words freely when they cannot think of the Negidal equivalent – and a “fluent” speaker. This latter probably knows Negidal as well as the fully fluent speakers, but she is more insecure, so that occasionally her slips into Russian or the inability to find the correct Negidal word result in considerable hesitation.

**3. The state of Upper Negidal** Thanks to our ongoing documentation project (Pakendorf & Aralova 2017), we know with reasonable certainty that there are still seven speakers of Upper Negidal of varying proficiency living in Vladimirovka and Polina Osipenko villages. Vladimirovka is a relatively small village (257 inhabitants as of

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that these videos had Russian subtitles, which certainly helped some of the speakers follow them. However, two speakers were unable to read the subtitles, and yet they appeared able to understand the gist of the narrative nevertheless (Pakendorf & Aralova 2017:Lower\_Negidal). This is shown by the fact that one of them laughed in appropriate places during a humorous anecdote, while the other commented on how he had understood large portions of the humorous anecdote – a narrative containing basic everyday lexicon – whereas he had been unable to understand a description of birch bark vessels.

January 1, 2016),<sup>7</sup> comprising largely Evenks and Negidals; Russians and other Europeans are in the minority. All of the last speakers are women, and none is younger than 60 years of age. The oldest still-living speaker was born in 1916, and both she and her oldest still-living daughter, who was born in 1942, are still fully fluent<sup>8</sup> (speakers #1 and #2 in Table 1, below). Interestingly, the oldest speaker switches into Russian fairly frequently in some of the recordings we have so far analyzed, even though her proficiency in (standard) Russian appears somewhat limited. Her second-oldest daughter (speaker #3 in Table 1), who was born in 1945, is still fluent, but experiences occasional difficulties in finding the correct Negidal word. These women still practice Negidal on a more or less regular basis, since they live in very close proximity, and the daughters take care of their mother, with whom they speak in Negidal (although they mostly speak Russian with each other). There are also three semi-speakers of this dialect (two of whom were classified as passive speakers by Kalinina 2008:footnote 3). One of these (speaker #4 in Table 1, born 1947) has moved to Polina Osipenko village, while the other two still live in Vladimirovka: the youngest still-living daughter of the oldest speaker (speaker #5 in Table 1), who was born in 1948, and an unrelated woman born in 1950 (speaker #6). These semi-speakers fully understand spoken Negidal and are also able to produce narratives, but with some difficulty and frequent switches to Russian, which considerably exacerbate the linguistic insecurity of the two individuals living in Vladimirovka. Finally, a woman born in 1955, who moved to Polina Osipenko village in 2004, was recommended to us by various parties as a further speaker of Upper Negidal (speaker #7 in Table 1). However, she turned out to be already quite dysfluent and needed the help of speaker #6 to translate what she had planned to say from Russian into Negidal. There are probably further passive speakers in Vladimirovka that we have not taken into account here; for instance, one man (approximately 55–65 years old) is known to have spoken only Negidal until he reached school age, but he has since switched entirely to Russian and claims to know only individual Negidal words.

In Table 1, we map the linguistic portraits of the speakers onto the typology proposed by Grinevald & Bert (2011). A certain correlation between the age of the speakers and their proficiency can be observed, with the older speakers still fluent in the language and the youngest speaker hardly an active speaker anymore. However, this correlation does not appear to have been caused by increasing erosion of Negidal, since at the time when speakers #2–7 were acquiring their mother tongue the language seems to have still been within the category called “at risk” by Grenoble & Whaley (2006:18; cf. Starcev 2014b:307).<sup>9</sup> Rather, subsequent personal circumstances affected their proficiency and the extent of language loss they each experienced to different degrees.

<sup>7</sup>Information taken from a billboard in Polina Osipenko village on March 12, 2017.

<sup>8</sup>However, due to ill health, the oldest speaker has been practically confined to her bed since December 2016, and we have not had any direct interactions with her. Our assessment of her fluency is thus based on recordings made between 2005 and 2010 by Elena Kalinina, Nina Sumbatova, Svetlana Toldova, and Valentin Gusev.

<sup>9</sup>Languages in this category are still being learned and are used by speakers of all ages, but are not used in all domains and are spoken by a smaller number of people than surrounding languages. This corresponds to category 4 “Unsafe” of the UNESCO document on Language Vitality and Endangerment (2003).

An additional potential speaker of Upper Negidal is an 83-year-old woman living in Bulava (a village situated on the Amur about 62 km upriver from Bogorodskoe; see Figure 1). She is a cousin of speaker #7 and originally from Vladimirovka, but moved to Bulava after she got married. Unfortunately, we were unable to meet her, since during our stay in Vladimirovka her health worsened radically. We are thus not in a position to assess her linguistic competence.

The loss of Upper Negidal appears to be due mainly to two factors: personal life histories and the consequences of Russian schooling. For instance, speaker #5 explained her relative lack of proficiency with the fact that as a child she preferred to play with her age mates in the village rather than sitting at home with her parents, as her older sisters (speakers #2 and #3) did, and speakers #4 and #7 were married to men from the European part of the Soviet Union with whom they spoke Russian. As to the impact of the school system, Vladimirovka has never had more than a primary school, and all children have to go to Polina Osipenko village from grade 5. Although the two villages are less than 20 km apart, there is no good regular transport (and there was even less in the years when the last speakers were of school age), so that children have to spend the week in boarding school, coming home only for the weekend (or only for the holidays, in the case of some of the last speakers). In the boarding school, Russian was enforced not only as the medium of instruction but also encouraged as the medium of overall communication. A related factor appears to have been the concern of parents that their children learn Russian properly: in 1961, a meeting of Negidal and Evenk parents was called in Vladimirovka school to decide upon the language of instruction in the primary school. During this meeting the parents unanimously voted for Russian, pointing to the confusion that would be caused by instruction in the local minority languages after the children had been exposed to Russian in kindergarten and with both Russian and the minority languages being used in the home (Bereznickij & Jančev 2014:15).

**4. The state of Lower Negidal: Searching for speakers** While we already had a fairly good idea of the number of speakers of Upper Negidal before the start of our project (cf. Kalinina 2008; Aralova & Sumbatova 2016), the state of Lower Negidal was not clearly known. As mentioned in §1, Lower Negidals have always been in the majority, so given the existence of speakers of Upper Negidal one might have expected some active speakers of Lower Negidal to be left as well. Furthermore, based on fieldwork conducted in 1961, Kolesnikova & Konstantinova (1968:109) claimed that Negidal was still widely used in everyday life, even though practically all Lower Negidals knew Russian. In contrast, later assessments by linguists who had worked on Negidal were quite dire (Kalinina 2008:footnote 2; Khasanova 2003:340–341). In order to establish for certain whether there are any active speakers of Lower Negidal left, we conducted a search along the Lower Amur in August 2017.

As mentioned in §2, we had initially intended to visit all the settlements with a substantial Negidal population listed in Starcev (2014a:7), with the exception of Beloglinka, i.e., Udinsk, Kherpuchi, Bogorodskoe, Kal'ma, Tyr, Takhta, and Mago. However, during our stay in Vladimirovka in July, one of our Upper Negidal speakers

**Table 1.** Classification of the Upper Negidal speakers in terms of Grinevald & Bert (2011)

Speaker	Language competence		Sociolinguistic factors		Relation to the community		Psycholinguistic factors	
	Level of acquisition attained	Degree of individual loss	Language vitality at acquisition	Date of birth of the speaker	Level of use	Attitude towards the language	Linguistic insecurity	
1	full	none	safe	1916	everyday use	positive	fully secure	
2	full	none	at risk	1942	restricted everyday use	positive	fully secure	
3	full	none	at risk	1945	restricted everyday use	positive	secure, but cautious	
4	full	partial loss	at risk	1947	occasional use with the other speakers	positive	secure, though aware of Russian insertions	
5	full	partial loss	at risk	1948	occasional use with her mother	unknown	insecure, aware of Russian insertions	
6	full	partial loss	at risk	1950	occasional use with the other speakers	positive	insecure, aware of Russian insertions	
7	full?	advanced loss	at risk	1955	probably not in use	unknown	very insecure	



(speaker #3 from Table 1) put us into contact with her sister-in-law, who has lived in Udinsk all her life. This woman strongly discouraged us from making the trip to Udinsk and Kherpuchi when we called her by phone on August 1, 2017, since these villages are very difficult to reach and since in her words there are no more active speakers of Negidal left in either of them. While it would certainly have been preferable to ascertain this claim ourselves, we decided not to do so for the following reasons: first of all, these two villages are inaccessible by public transport and not reachable from the Amur river. In order to visit them we would have had to travel by boat down the Amgun' from Vladimirovka to Udinsk, a journey that would have taken an entire day, returning to Vladimirovka the same way before making our way to the Amur for our further survey. Thus, we would have had to undertake a trip of at least three days with the probable outcome of confirming the absence of active speakers. Furthermore, the opinions of our consultants varied as to the feasibility of making the trip down the Amgun' by boat, since there are supposedly checkpoints along the way that can be passed only with a permit. Given the length and difficulty of the trip and our time constraints, as well as the primary objective of our search, namely to find speakers still able to produce relatively cohesive texts, the effort did not seem warranted in view of the slim chances of finding active speakers. Secondly and most importantly, as outlined in §2, we depended on locals for accommodation during our search. Since our primary contact in Udinsk had clearly stated that we should not come, we would not have been able to stay with her, nor could we have relied on her for further contacts in the village (which numbers only 94 inhabitants).<sup>10</sup> These considerations induced us to abandon our plans of travelling to Udinsk and Kherpuchi.

The last speaker of Negidal in Udinsk would have been a woman born in 1926, who died around 2014. According to speaker #3 from Vladimirovka, even in the 1970s, when she had spent some time in Udinsk with her husband, there were not very many speakers of Negidal left in that village (Pakendorf & Aralova 2017:Lower\_Negidal): she was able to remember approximately 15 individuals, most of them old (including her parents-in-law and her husband's grandparents).

In Tyr, we obtained information not only on Tyr, but also on the state of the language in Kal'ma and Beloglinka, since these villages belong to the same administrative district (with Tyr as the administrative center). In this administrative district, the indigenous peoples are in the minority, making up only 44% of the 852 total inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> In none of the villages are Negidals the sole indigenous group – rather, they are settled together with Nivkhs, Ulchi, and a few Nanai individuals. In Tyr and Kal'ma, Nivkhs constitute the majority indigenous group (95 and 67 individuals, respectively), with Negidals in second place (56 and 21 individuals, respectively); in Beloglinka there are approximately equal numbers of Negidals (17 individuals), Ulchi (16), and Nivkhs (11).

<sup>10</sup>Data from January 1, 2016; information taken from a billboard in Polina Osipenko village on March 12, 2017.

<sup>11</sup>Data from 2015 obtained from the village administration in Tyr.

We spoke with two men aged approximately 55–60 on August 8, 2017, whom we judge to be passive speakers, since they were able to understand to a certain degree the Upper Negidal video recordings that we played to them, as shown by their discussing the similarity and differences of some of the Upper Negidal words to Lower Negidal words. They discouraged us from personally visiting Kal'ma, since there are no active speakers left in the village, and they confirmed the lack of speakers in Beloglinka (the village in which one of them grew up). The last speakers of Negidal in these villages would have been a woman born approximately 1952, who died in 2016; another woman who died in 2016 (year of birth unknown) and her brother who was born around 1949 and died in 2014 or 2015, and a man who died in February 2017 aged less than 70. However, given the relatively young ages of these individuals, it is unclear to what extent they would still have been active speakers: we had the frequent experience that people were recommended to us as speakers merely because they had known Negidal in early childhood, because they knew a few individual words and phrases, or because they were publicly active. A woman who is more likely to have been an active speaker of Negidal, since her son (who lives in Mago; see below) turned out to be a passive speaker, had died in Tyr in 2007 (with a birthdate in December 1933).

In **Takhta** we were able to gather information on the last speakers from a group of women called together by the local representative of minority peoples on August 9, 2017. None of these women still spoke the language, although some of them again picked up certain words and phrases in the Upper Negidal videos that we showed them. One woman who was born in 1936 or 1938 had been named to us as an active speaker of Negidal, but she refused all contact with us (and with other linguists who had visited approximately two years ago). While this reluctance to interact with us may have been motivated by her ill health, her daughter explained that she claims to have forgotten the language. Among the last known speakers of Negidal in Takhta would have been a woman born in 1933 who died in February 2016 and a man born in 1938 who died in 2015. All the Negidals in Takhta were resettled there from a village called Dal'za on the lower Amgun', which was closed in 1968; in Takhta they were vastly outnumbered by Russians and were forbidden to speak Negidal in kindergarten. According to the census data,<sup>12</sup> indigenous people comprise about a quarter of the population in Takhta (211 out of 791 inhabitants in total). As in Tyr and Kal'ma, Nivkhs are in the majority in Takhta, with the 54 Negidals in second place; other ethnic minorities include Ulchi, Evenks, and Nanai.

The Negidals in **Mago** were always vastly outnumbered by people of European descent: this used to be a busy port in which ocean-going ships were able to dock to load wood. According to statistics obtained in Mago administration, on January 1, 2017, only 43 of the 1367 inhabitants of the settlement were Negidals (with a total of 80 individuals claiming to belong to indigenous minorities). We were here able to collect information on August 10 and 11, 2017, from the last living son and daughter of one of the last known speakers (who had worked with Khasanova & Pevnov (2003) and Kazama (2002)), from the son of one of the last speakers from Tyr, and from

<sup>12</sup>Data from November 2016 provided by the Takhta administration.

the local representative of indigenous minority peoples, whose grandmother was a speaker of Negidal. The sons and daughter of the last speakers turned out to be quite competent passive speakers, able to understand some of the Upper Negidal videos we showed them; the daughter especially was clearly able to understand everything of an audio recording of her mother made in 1998 and published in Kazama (2002). Although they lived with their Negidal-speaking parents throughout their childhood, neither she (born 1952) nor her siblings (born between 1954 and 1948) learned to speak Negidal actively because their mother wanted them to be fully competent in Russian; thus the parents spoke only Russian with them. A 69-year old woman who had been recommended to us as a probable active speaker did not want to meet with us, again on the grounds that in fact she is able to say only a few phrases in Negidal.

Among the last speakers in Mago (here ordered by year of death) would have been the speaker represented in Khasanova & Pevnov's (2003) materials, who was born in 1927 and died in 2006; a woman born in 1926 who died around 2010; a man born in 1951 who died around 2010; the older sister of the supposed active speaker, who died in 2011 or 2012 in Nikolaevsk-na-Amure aged around 80; a woman born in 1921–1922, who died in 2012 or 2013 (represented in a recording published by Kazama 2002); and a woman born in the mid-1930s who died in 2013 or 2014 in Komsomol'sk-na-Amure.

We had been told that there were at least two active speakers of Negidal currently living in **Bogorodskoe**, the administrative center of the Ulchi district. However, as we learned during a meeting with one of them on August 13, 2017, this information was wrong. One of the presumed speakers, a woman aged 71, had never spoken the language: her Nivkh mother had spoken Russian with her Negidal father, and both parents had spoken only Russian with the children. Furthermore, even though she had been born in Dal'za, her family had moved to Tyr when she was only three years old, and in the 1950s theirs was the only Negidal family in the village (with only six or seven families of indigenous origin in the village). Nevertheless, this woman turned out to have a passive knowledge of the language: she appeared able to understand substantial portions of one of the Upper Negidal videos we played to her, laughing in the right places. The other presumed active speaker of Negidal in Bogorodskoe is a woman who originally used to live in Kal'ma. She refused to meet with us, but explained to our local contact in a phone call that she, too, has forgotten the language: she used to speak it in early childhood, but then had to go to boarding school and for further studies, where she had to speak Russian, and later she married a Nivkh with whom she spoke Russian. She thus felt that she would not be able to produce anything more than isolated words or phrases. One last speaker of Lower Negidal originally from Bogorodskoe is supposedly a 90-year-old woman living near Komsomol'sk-na-Amure. However, she is in bad health and apparently also has memory problems, so that we did not try to find her to check whether the information concerning her competence in Negidal was correct.

**5. Conclusion** From our search for possible last speakers of Lower Negidal it has become clear that by now Negidal is *nearly extinct* (in the terms of Grenoble 2011:40).

Only six active speakers of varying proficiency remain of the Upper dialect (with the seventh speaker not really having any active competence anymore), while there are no more active speakers of the Lower dialect left. Probably some 10–20 passive speakers of the language remain, although we do not have any precise information on their numbers or their degree of competence. Thus, Negidal will be extinct within the next decade or two.

If one considers the fact that only 90 years ago Myl'nikova and Cincius were able to record fluent narratives from people in their 20s (see the footnotes concerning speakers in Myl'nikova & Cincius 1931 and Cincius 1982:180–181), this is a case of relatively rapid language loss. The reasons that have led to this rapid loss are those known from this and other parts of the world (e.g. Kibrik 1991; Grimes 2001; Tsunoda 2005:58–59; Grenoble 2011:32–35): 1) Schooling in boarding schools, which led to the disruption of family life and declining use of Negidal in daily life. Furthermore, the enforcement of the dominant language Russian as a medium of communication in the boarding schools led to a switch to Russian in the younger generations of Negidals.<sup>13</sup> 2) Resettlement (both voluntary and forced), which led to the dispersal of formerly cohesive Negidal communities and their becoming small minorities in more urbanized contexts, leading to a loss of both their culture and their language. It is notable that this is the fate that befell speakers of Lower Negidal, while speakers of Upper Negidal remained concentrated in a single settlement, Vladimirovka. This might well explain why the formerly more numerous dialect died first. 3) The concern of parents that their children might not do well in school if they learn Russian as a second language, so that parents voluntarily did not transmit Negidal to their children (as in the case of the children of one of the last fluent speakers of Negidal in Mago). 4) Linguistically mixed marriages, in which Russian is chosen as the language of communication between the spouses and thus within the family. Negidals have always been one of the numerically smallest indigenous groups in Russia, with their numbers varying between 411 and 587 in censuses (and linguists estimating the actual number of Negidals at 350–370, cf. Khasanova & Pevnov 2002:129). They have therefore frequently been obliged to choose marriage partners outside of their linguistic group, so that this factor is likely to have played a considerable role. Conversely, it is perhaps no coincidence that of the two women in their 70s who are still fluent speakers of Upper Negidal, speaker #2 was never married, but lived most of her life with her older sister and later on her mother, while speaker #3 was married to a Negidal.

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Grenoble (2003) about the education policy in the former Soviet Union. Discussing the Soviet education system and its influence on the nomadic communities, Grenoble (2003:169) writes: “No other single policy had a greater impact on language vitality in the North than the boarding school system”. Kibrik (1991:9) identifies the boarding school system as one of the factors that specifically led to the demise of Negidal.


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