

## NEO-RENAISSANCE AND REVITALIZATION OF VOTIC – WHO CARES?

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**Abstract.** The paper deals with the reason for the decline of the Votic language and neo-renaissance and revitalization of the Votic. The reason for the decline of the Votic language are the small number of people, traditionally sparse population and the assimilation – the speakers of Votic have always lived in the sphere of influence of the Russian language and culture. The reasons for neo-renaissance are the collapse of the Soviet Union, a general trend to look for one's roots, enthusiastic votophiles and the local activities. In the earlier times Votic national movement originated from local people, but recently there has been interest in the Votic affairs on the state level. The plans for the near future are under common title the Votic project.

**Keywords:** decline of the language, stages of linguistic research, neo-renaissance, revitalization, votophiles, publications in Votic

### 1. Some general facts about the Votic language

Votes are the natives of Western Ingermanland, which belongs now to Leningrad oblast lying to the west of St. Petersburg.

The Votic language belongs to the southern group of Finnic languages, and it is the closest language to Estonian. There is no uniform Votic spoken in the region. Therefore, we can speak only about the Votic tribes and Votic dialects. From four Votic dialects three have become extinct. In Courland in Latvia the Crevin dialect became extinct during the first half of the 19th c., the last records in Eastern Votic come from 1968, the Kukkusi (rus Куровицы) dialect disappeared at the end of the 1970s. A sub-dialect of the Western Votic dialect is still spoken in Vaipooli at the estuary of the Lauga River. There are Votes living in two villages at the moment – Jõgõperä (rus Краколье) and Luuditsa (rus Лужицы). Luuditsa has become a village through the merger of two villages: Luuditsa and Liivtsülä (rus Пески).

Votic population has never been big. The first registered number of Votes was given in a description of Köppen's ethno-

graphical map (Köppen 1867) – there were 5143 Votes in 37 villages in 1867. According to census in the Soviet Union in 1926 there were 705 Votes, according to Paul Ariste in 1948 approximately 100 Votes (Ariste 1948: 3).

The total number of Votic speakers now could be 6 to 10 – this would exclude the people who have spoken Votic as children but forgotten it by now or these people, who understand Votic but cannot speak the language. Some of them live elsewhere (in Kingissepa, Narva, St. Petersburg, Sosnovyi Bor or Tallinn). Even so, they may speak Votic only two or three times a year, that is when the researchers come to the villages. They do not speak Votic among themselves. The last people are not young any more and they began to speak Russian with their children from the very beginning. The youngest native speaker of Votic was born in 1938. There was a family 7–8 years ago (three sisters and one brother) who definitely used Votic as everyday language. But now only the brother is still alive.

## **2. The reasons for the decline of the Votic language**

The reason for the decline of the Votic language are the small number of people, traditionally sparse population and the assimilation – the speakers of Votic (and also Izhorian) have always lived in the sphere of influence of the Russian language and culture. The assimilation happened through mixed marriages – at first between Votes and Izhorians, later between Votes (half-Votes) and Russians. Language of their education was Russian. The geographic factor is also not without importance – i.e. the proximity of the metropolis St. Petersburg and its attraction!

The role of religion is also important in the development of the language use and identity. The Votic people and also Izhorians are orthodox and as the language of religion is Russian their customs use also Russian. The orthodox Votes and Izhorians never married the Lutheran Finns who lived in the neighbourhood. At the same time Votes do not usually distinguish themselves from the Izhorians since they share the same religion. The common orthodox religion, and, certainly, living side by side for centuries has brought about assimilation. They have much in common in their history, spiritual and material culture. Today is common practice to characterise ones origin as follows: my mother is a Russian, my

father is a Finn. When questioned it appears that mother was a Votic and father an Estonian (in Ingermanland the Lutheran Church is called the Finnish Church). Thus loyalty to a Church has been related to one's nationality.

The Votics have not had any written language of their own. They have never received any education in their mother tongue. The language of instruction has always been Russian.

### 3. The stages of linguistic research

**The first stage:** *Discovery of the existence of a language, identification of the language.*

It was a pastor F.L. Trefurt of Narva who discovered in 1783 the linguistic importance of the Votic language. He published the first Votic folk song and two articles with a German translation. Trefurt saw the Votics as a separate nation.

**The 2nd stage:** *The language has been recognized and a more systematic research starts.*

August Ahlqvist published in 1856 the first Votic grammar “Votisk grammatik jemte Sprakprof och Ordförteckning”, which is strongly influenced by the Finnish grammatical principles. In 1871 F.J. Wiedemann wrote that the Crevins who live in Latvia near the town of Bauska are also of Votic origin (Wiedemann 1871).

**The 3rd stage:** *The circle of the researchers expands and the language area that is being investigated grows.*

The language area is fixed and different dialects distinguished. First descriptions of linguistic systems, grammars, translations and essential linguistic observations are published.

In 1867 Peter von Köppen completed his survey which listed 37 Ingrian villages where people spoke Votic. According to him, the Votics were divided into 19 purely Votic villages while the rest of the villages were Votic-Russian mixed villages.

Up to the point, all the linguistic records had been made in the village of Kattila (rus Котлы). In 1883 O.A.F. Mustonen published in the first number of “Virittäjä” lots of linguistic examples from the villages of Jõgõperä and Luuditsa (Vaipool dialect area) (Mustonen 1883).

**The 4th stage:** *Emergence of FUT (Finnisch-Ugrische Transkription), professional linguists take a keener interest in the phenom-*

*ena of this particular language, growing accuracy of linguistic notes.*

The so-called transcriptive literary language (narrow transcription) suitable for this particular language is developed. The transcription elaborated by E. N. Setälä was applied in Votic above all by Setälä himself. The materials collected in 1899 were recorded incoherently, whereas those collected 1909 already conformed to the transcription system. Setälä's materials were published in 1964 by Seppo Suhonen and Lauri Posti (Setälä 1964).

**The 5th stage:** *Filling in the gaps, systematization of information gathering.*

The danger of extinction is recognized, a conclusion is made that the fixation/fixing of the language must be systematic and as comprehensive as possible. The most important research work was Lauri Kettunen's "Vatjan kielen äännehistoria". It is the only phonetic description of the Votic language. Kettunen gives an exact survey of all Votic dialects and includes the existing materials on the extinct Crevin language.

In 1924–1926 Dmitri Tsvetkov completes a dictionary of the Jõgõperä dialect of the Votic language. This dictionary, edited by Johanna Laakso, was published in 1996 (Tsvetkov 1995). A grammar compiled by Tsvetkov in 1922 was published in 2008 as a version edited by Jüri Viikberg (Tsvetkov 2008). In 2009, a monograph was published on D. Tsvetkov by Enn Ernits (2009).

In 1930 J. Lensu publishes in his collection of works "Западнофинский сборник" materials gathered by the expedition of the Russian Academy of Sciences (1926–1927) on the Votic people. These are very valuable data as during the period between the two world wars only Soviet researchers had an access to the Votic area.

**The 6th stage:** *Systematization of research work. Organization of linguistic expeditions. Compilation of dictionaries. Editing and publication of the materials not yet issued. An attempt to get an overview of all the existing materials.*

During the 1930s Estonian researchers began to make a catalogue of all the materials on the Votic language which were going to be used as a basis for a Votic dictionary. In the Institute of the Estonian Language the catalogued material containing 204,000 word-cards. Six parts of the Votic-Estonian-Russian dictionary have been published (Vadja keele sõnaraamat 1–6, 1990–2009).

In 1942 and 1943 the Estonian National Museum organized two expeditions to the Votic territory. The materials gave rise to

important publications “Vatjalaiset“ (1960) by Gustav Ränk and “Vatjalaista kansankulttuuria“ (1981) by Ilmari Talve.

From 1956 on Paul Ariste organized with the help of his students regular expeditions to the Votes and Izhorians. In 1948 Paul Ariste published his “Vadja keele grammatika”, which is quite comprehensive, but is still based on the dialects of Kattila (the English version “A Grammar of the Votic Language” was published in 1968 in Bloomington). Paul Ariste is, undoubtedly the scientist who contributed the most to the Votic studies.

The tradition of linguistic expeditions organized by Tartu University is still alive. P. Ariste was the leader of them until the year 1975. Heinike Heinsoo has taken part in them since 1975, from 1979 on as a supervisor.

**The 7th stage:** *Observation of the assimilation of the language.*

It is practically impossible to gather any new material. It is possible to deal with the observation of the changes that have taken place during several decades within language groups and in the language spoken by single language users, to make the lists of language carriers and to collect the memories and biographies of single individuals.

The Votic studies have now reached the 7th stage. We can study the disappearance of linguistic memory – which groups of topics and vocabulary are disappearing, how big is the transference to Russian, and so on. But it can be done for a maximum of ten more years (Heinsoo 2004: 10–13).

## **4. The reasons for neo-renaissance**

### **4.1. The collapse of the Soviet Union and a general trend to look for one’s roots**

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the Votic movement started in the Votic land and St. Petersburg. It was initiated by votophiles who were interested in the subject because they originated from this region and scientists from Estonia, St. Petersburg and Moscow.

This is illustrated by the census in 2002 and the result – 73 Votes (Всероссийская перепись 2002). Why is this number suddenly so big? Village people claimed that they did not say they were Votic because this question was never asked. Therefore this

number refers to the Votes living in Moscow, St. Petersburg and so on who have now become aware of their nationality. There are several young people among them. According to the census in 2002 there are 774 speakers of Votic. Experts consider this figure to be a mistake. However, it is possible that people claimed to be able to speak the language because the bohemian circles in St. Petersburg allegedly called people to register themselves as Votes. The review published in 2002 by the Russian Academy of Sciences on languages spoken in the Russian Federation does not mention Votic (Moskva 2002), but the 2003 edition already does (Moskva 2003).

Attitudes among Votes themselves have changed too. During the Soviet period the Votes were rather ashamed of their language and did not use it. Although researchers stressed the importance and uniqueness of the language, the Votes still did not realise it. However, they were proud of all the famous visitors that went to their village to gather folklore and study their language. Like a Vote Nina Lenivenko has said: *õma tšêlt ni naku äppetî* 'People were ashamed of their own language'. Russians called both Izorians and Votes „chuhna”. It used to be difficult to find new language subjects. Even if we knew someone to be Votic, they would refuse to talk to the researchers. Now the situation is completely different – in the last years we were approached by people who claimed to be Votic and were very eager to talk to us. They could not speak Votic, but remembered some words and were able to understand us. They had heard Votic in their childhood, but had never used it.

## 4.2. Construction of the Ust-Luga port

When Estonia regained its independence, Russia needed a new transit port. The construction plan foresaw the destruction of Jõgõperä village in order to build dwelling houses for the construction workers (70,000). This has drawn attention to this region and united local people (articles in the newspapers, signing petitions against the construction of the port). At present the planners have promised not to destroy the village and design the dwelling houses in the Votic style, but this remains to be seen. In connection with the construction of a large port in the area there is a real possibility to be able to have financing for a Votic museum building planned in the spring of 2010 – various sums are donated by e.g. port constructors and local authorities – also for smaller events (like Day of

Indigenous People, held for the second time in Jõgõperä in the year 2009, where the revival of the language and culture was discussed, with the representative of the Izhorians and Ingrians Olga Konkova as chairperson).

## **5. Enthusiastic votophiles**

Beginning from the year 1957 the researchers from Estonia and especially of Tartu University have worked with the study of the Votic language. There were no local enthusiasts. The activities of the researchers were directed to the study and preservation of the language. Regular expedition activity did help to (re)use the ethnonyme, but again there was no cultural activity with own initiative. In the year 1995 the Votic cultural society was registered. The local activities were begun.

### **5.1. Tatyana Efimova, museum and the *Luuditsa-praaznikka***

One very important key person is Tatyana Efimova, who was the first to take initiative. Tatyana Efimova herself is actually a Russian who is married to a Votian who descends from an ancient Votic family (yet, her husband no longer speaks Votic, but he understands on some level). Tatyana began to study the family tree and language of her husband. She began to take interest in the Votic culture and language. Although Tatyana Efimova cannot speak either Votic or Finnish or Estonian, she has read the materials on Votic history with the help of her husband and a dictionary, compiled the family trees for the village people, collected lots of photos and village folklore. She made people think about their identity, which was something that the Estonian linguists who had been visiting the place for 50 years had not managed to do. She founded in her family home in the village Luuditsa in 1997 a local museum where she exhibited the items collected from the village people. Even schoolchildren from faraway towns came to visit the museum. Unfortunately there was a fire in the night of September in 2001 and the museum was burned down. It was a terrible loss for the Votic culture. All the collected 70 items, valuable old photos (more than 200) and books were destroyed in the fire (Ernits 2006a:

83). Village people and local authorities were very supportive and helpful. With the aid of various donors the museum has been restored and unfortunately burned down again 2006. Hopefully the museum will be restored again.

By initiative of some activists (led by Tatyana Efimova) the anniversary of Luuditsa village has been celebrated since year 2000 (it was symbolically the 500th birthday). A village party (vot *praaznikka*) was organized for both the Votes and the Izhorians, as well as Russians, who live in all three Votic villages, Liivtšülä (since 2000 joint to Luuditsa), Luuditsa and Jõgõperä. It was the first time they had officially organized so big traditional celebration. At the party village people took out their national costumes, tried to recall and search written texts for old lyrics and customs which were also taught to the young. Votes performed a song and the Lord's Prayer was read in Votic. This was captured in the film "...ja päästa meid ära kurjast" ("...but deliver us from evil!"), which was made in 2004 by Taisto Raudalainen and Ergo Västriik. It has to be said that the anniversaries of the village of Luuditsa were celebrated on the material and moral support of the village council.

## 5.2. The local Jõgõperä-school

The local school organizes days of local studies and various performances. The local children, none of whom are of Votic origin, are introduced the local language, culture and history. Only one teacher, Zinaida Savelyeva, teacher of gymnastics is from Jõgõperä and can speak Votic, she is of Votic origin. For the school the wonderful Votic language consultant and main protagonist in the film portrait "...ja päästa meid ära kurjast" Tatyana Prokopenko was a great help.

Local schoolchildren have carried out studies about the Votes and Izhorian and take part in the traditional events. They had also made the old traditional sets of national costumes for the pupils who performed in the party. Their song groups Linnut and Pääskolinnut (led by teacher Marina Petrova, attends village parties every year with songs in Votic and they have been visited Estonia some years ago. The Estonian folk music group "Hellero" has helped the children's ensemble a lot.

### **5.3. Enthusiasts from St. Petersburg and Moscow**

There is a folk music band Bestiarum from St. Petersburg that performs Votic songs and attends village parties every year. One member of the band Ekaterina Kuznetsova is of Votic origin. CD “Vad’d’a” was published in 2008. Her Votic theme photo exposition took place in 2004 at St. Petersburg in several foreign representative offices. E. Kuznetsova is preparing Votic theme colouring book, she has illustrated most of the issues of “Maavätsi” magazine.

In July 2003 the coat of arms was unveiled (design by Vladimir Zernov) and the Votic flag was hoisted (design by Aleksandr Gurinov) for the first time at the village party. Also the Votic anthem has been composed.

A couple of times each month Mehmed Muslimov who is another key person from St. Petersburg will come to teach the Votic language. M. Muslimov teaches the Votic also to the language-interested in St. Petersburg and soon a Votic spelling-book is going to be published by him. M. Muslimov does not have any blood relations with the Votes. He has graduated from the university in Leningrad, majoring in mathematics and mechanics. Last year he defended his doctoral thesis on language contacts in the West Ingermanland. He created the written language of Votic. And his five lessons of the Votic language is on the Internet on the Votic website (<http://www.vadjamaa.narod.ru>).

There is another study book for autonomous learners on the Internet by Vitaly Chernyavskiy “Vad’d’a tšeele (Izeöpöttaja)” (<http://vod.org.ua>).

## **6. Published for Votic readers**

In 2003 and 2004 the first publications in Votic written language were published, a collection of fairy tales – “Vaddja Kaazgöt. Водские сказки”. It has a number of authors, it is published in two languages, also in Russian. The second publication was a proper book and included 14 stories that are taken from the collections of texts compiled by Paul Ariste ja Julius Mägiste. In the first publication, dialects were preserved, but in the second publication texts were written in the Jögöperä dialect which is still spoken. There are problems in the creation of written language (Ernits 2006a, b).

So the folklore that was collected in just in time has now reached the Votes. Tatyana Efimova has staged fairy tales for village parties, performed by children.

In 2005 the newspaper in Russian “*Maavätsi*” was published. In the following years a couple of issues have been published that talk about the activities of the Association of Votic Culture, Votic history and include some fairy tales in Votic as well. The 10th issue of the paper was published at the end of 2009.

In 2009, two books were published by Olga Konkova with support from the Center for the indigenous languages of the Leningrad oblast: a story collection with Russian translations (Konkova 2009a), which, however, uses a somewhat irregular orthography, and an ethnographic overview on Votic people in Russian (Konkova 2009b). These books are important readings for Russian-speaking Votic people and their descendants.

## 7. Plans for the near future

Association of Votic Culture was founded in 2005, led by Tatyana Efimova. The plans are under common title the Votic project (Водский проект). The plans included: 1) spelling-book reader for beginners, 2) colouring book for children (1st part about ethnic dress), 3) Votic fairytale book with Russian translation, 4) virtual Votic museum, 5) computer games for learning Votic language, 6) animation films in Votic language or with Votic subtitles, 7) Votic calendar, 8) a book about music instruments, DVD. As of today computer games and animation films have proved unrealistic but the other plans will be implemented little by little. The colouring book and Votic calendar for the year 2011 will be published during 2010.

A Votic national school (*водская народная школа*) began in the fall of 2009. It deals also with obtaining and copying models for ethnic dress for sewing ethnic dress dolls. Beginning in 2009 the older people of the village started to meet once in the week under the leadership of Z. Savelyeva and they try to discuss in Votic language. Their objective is to prepare for the five-day Votic language and culture camp in the summer of 2010. In the camp the representatives of three generations will get together.

## 8. Interest in the Votic affairs on the state level

It can be said that the village community is small and creates the identity of one (or two) villages. The younger generation who earlier took no interest in the origin of their parents, tries to collect the existing items, memories and feels sorry about the disappearance of the intellectual inheritance. Being a Russian has lost the prestige it used to have. The Votes of Vaipoole have retained their own identity.

In the earlier times Votic national movement originated from local people, but recently there has been interest in the Votic affairs on the state level. In October 2008 Votes have been included in the list of minor indigenous people of the Russia (*единый перечень коренных малочисленных народов России*) (Единый перечень 2008). The local papers say that now October 13th can be named as the new birthday of the Votes and as national celebration – sadly the number of celebrators left is so small.

## 9. Forecasts, which has been made

In 1883 O. Mustonen predicted that in ten years there will be no speakers of Votic any longer (Mustonen 1883: 166).

In 1915 L. Kettunen said: “It won’t take more than one generation for the Votic language to disappear.” (Kettunen 1915: 4)

In 1925 D. Tsvetkov said: “The Votic people are in the last stage of assimilation.” (Tsvetkov 1925: 41). Tsvetkov, who was the first and only educated Vote at the beginning of the last century and loved the Votic nation and language, he nevertheless considered himself as a Russian by nationality but of Votic origin. Paul Ariste has called him “the true vote of our times” – in the sense of assimilation and loss of language and identity (Ariste 1936: 373).

P. Ariste said once: “We live to see who is the first one to surrender. Will I stop treasuring up Votic folklore or will those whose treasures I am treasuring up seize to be.” Paul Ariste passed away in the February 1990, in that time the number of people who still spoke Votic was around 50.

## 10. Neo-renaissance

Neo-renaissance is probably not an accurate term. This is their first awakening of all times. Now Votes are considered to be a separate nation.

Although you can count all the Votes by names on two hands and there will be less people every year, the Votic patriotism have become more visible than ever before and as far as there are the enthusiasts there will always be the reason to talk about Votes and their memory will always stay in their home villages.

By the window of the Votic museum there was the writing *Maa jääb, puud jäävad, meid eb lee* ‘the Earth will remain, the trees will endure, we will not be (in the future)’.

Paul Ariste has said: „The Votic language is facing extinction, but maybe the changing political situation will allow the memory to be preserved, the cultural heritage to be retained, the past of a small splinter of a people to be honoured.”

We agree with his words.

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## Websites on the Votic people:

In Russian:

<http://www.vadjamaa.narod.ru>;

<http://www.vatland.ru> (hold by Tatjana Jefimova and the Association of Votic culture) – includes articles and news, there is also the virtual Votic museum;

<http://vod.org.ua> – It is possible to download Vitaly Chernyavskiy's study book "Vad' d' a tšeele (Izeõpõttaja)" (on the basis of Russian, and contains Votic-Russian and Russian-Votic glossary, approximately 2000 words.

In Estonian:

<http://www.folklore.ee/rl/folkte/sugri/vadja/index.html> (Votic window):

<http://mariuvere.wordpress.com/2008/12/22/vadja-fatamorgaana>.

In English:

<http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/3259/index.html> (hold by Ferenc Válóczy) – includes Votic texts, poems, translations, grammar, the small Votic-English glossary, based on Cyrillic alphabet.

**Kokkuvõte. Heinike Heinsoo ja Margit Kuusk: Vadja keele uuestisünd ja taaselustamine – kes hoolib?** Artikkel käsitleb vadja keele allakäigu põhjusi ning vadja keele uuestisünni ja taaselustamist. Vadja keele allakäigu põhjusteks on madal inimeste arvukus, traditsiooniliselt tihe asustus ja assimilatsioon: vadja keele rääkijad on alati elanud vene keele ja kultuuri mõjusfääris. Vadja keele uuestisünni põhjusteks on Nõukogude Liidu kokkuvarisemine, üldine juurte otsimise trend ning vadja keele entusiastid ja kohalikud ettevõtmised. Varasemal ajal olid vadja rahvusliku liikumise kandjateks kohalikud elanikud, viimasel ajal vadjalaste tegevuste vastu hakatud huvituma ka riiklikul tasandil. Lähituleviku plaanid kannavad ühisnimetust „Vadja projekt“.

**Märksõnad:** keele allakäik, keeleuurimise etapid, uuestisünd, taaselustamine, vadjafiil, vadjakeelsed väljaanded