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6 WITNESS NOW, WRITE LATER? CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONLINE LANGUAGE-FOCUSED RESEARCH DURING WARTIME

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Introduction

Sometime in late March 2022, I was chatting to a non-anthropology colleague at home in Canada about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despondent for numerous reasons to do with the war, I mentioned that I felt a bit hopeless about ever doing research in the Sakha Republic again – the site of most of my ethnographic work since 2010. "But you do language work, right? Can't you do something online?" they suggested. I had, incidentally, been pondering that possibility, and told them that maybe it would be possible. However, I was reticent: there remained the question of whether it would be safe and ethical for my research participants. I mentioned this, and my colleague asked: "But online, it could be completely anonymous, right? And you're talking about language, which can't be that controversial?" I replied simply that no, anonymity in online research is actually hard to guarantee completely, and that no, the theme is not uncontroversial: the question of Indigenous and minority language promotion is indeed politically charged.

When invited to write for this volume, this conversation quickly resurfaced in my memory, as it highlighted two key issues I have been pondering and negotiating over the last two years. As I cannot physically be present in my place of research, are there other ways to stay engaged with the myriad questions that are emerging during this period? Can – and should – I analyze them? Write about them? Here I present and contextualize some of the research questions I have been considering. I then discuss how I have been attempting to ethically navigate them. I cannot promise clear and unequivocal guidelines, but I can suggest what I believe are key considerations when researching online contexts in which Russian citizens – especially minoritized or Indigenous groups – are the focus.

With the increasing use of social media as a space to examine linguistic data, both technical and anthropological, discussions of ethics and best practices have been ongoing over the last two decades among language-focused researchers (as well as ethnographers and other social sciences scholars more broadly). As will be detailed below, there is no consensus on how to best gather online language data – choices about how to go about this in the most ethical and least onerous way for the participants (i.e., those who are generating the language data online) need to be highly contextualized, and there are benefits and drawbacks to many different strategies that researchers may take. What has worked in the past in a different sociopolitical moment is not necessarily a feasible or ethical practice at present.The ensuing intensification of surveillance in both in-person and online spaces from February 2022 onward led me to reassess and reconsider what best practices should look like at present. Considering the anxieties of Sakha speakers inside Russia that I am able to ascertain as well as my own concerns about the repercussions of research, I then suggest a few guidelines that I find useful as I focus on witnessing the linguistic trends and processes of the present moment.

Research with Sakha speakers past and present

Beginning with my PhD studies in 2010, I have visited the Sakha Republic numerous times over the last decade and a half to work with Sakha speakers on linguistic and sociocultural anthropological research. I have engaged with both solo-authored and long-term collaborative work on language-related, ethnographic projects broadly concerned with the maintenance and revitalization of Sakha language, mostly in the urban spaces of Yakutsk. I have cultivated deep friendships and working relationships, seen my friends and colleagues' children grow up. I envisioned many further years of trips there to engage in research, attend conferences, and catch up with everyone and their families. After a couple years away, early 2020 saw me planning to start a new project and follow up on some further research threads later that year during the summer and a following sabbatical semester. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled these plans. After 2021 passed with further COVID waves, I tried to plan again for a trip in the summer of 2022, but this was abruptly dashed in February as the full-scale invasion began.

I had paid close attention to the build-up of the war (for the prior eight years since the first incursions and annexation of Crimea) and was not exactly surprised by the invasion, but it was still shocking to me in a personal way. Having second-generation connections to Ukraine on one side of my family, speaking the language and being raised in the very Ukrainian-Canadian city of Edmonton, the war hit me – and continues to affect me – deeply on that front, as well as through concerns for my Sakha friends and their families. In the weeks and months following the full-scale invasion, I also worried about Sakha friends and acquaintances in Russia trying to avoid mobilization, or having relatives trying to do the same. I still worry about those who were and are involved in anti-war activism, who are under scrutiny by peers and the FSB, especially when I don't see them update social media for several days. I have experienced the abrupt loss of connections with those who support Russia's invasion, and with whom I will never work again. But I have mourned the impossibility of travelling to visit the people I care about even more than the disintegration of research plans and have experienced profound disappointment and directionlessness over the last several years.

Like many, the war has kept me glued to my mobile, waiting on news and messages. In my time on Instagram, which – along with WhatsApp – is the primary platform I use to share messages and check up on friends in the Sakha Republic, I began to notice numerous new pages appearing that piqued my curiosity. I had conducted online research on Sakha language-related questions previously, when I was interested in looking at ideological issues around writing the language and the literacy-orality nexus in the transmission of *algystar*, or blessing poems, so was quite attuned already to various spaces online where these discussions and postings occurred. While some key forums (like Ykt.ru) that I had once scrolled for research shut down following the invasion, certain new pages on Instagram caught my eye – some discussed decolonization and freedom (from the Russian state) very explicitly, while others that popped up around this time were more squarely focused on Sakha language promotion.

Watching these appear and following their development, I became curious. I saw hints of things that intersected with my interest in the politics of language usage and issues of language rights – aspects of my research I am particularly passionate about. And I began to wonder if there would be possibilities for ethical research online during this time. Early conversations with a colleague in Yakutsk (which I will describe below) had assured me there might be some ways to continue work on another joint project of ours; perhaps there was also a way to investigate the language-related trends I was seeing emerge online. The questions felt compelling, as they followed the threads of central themes I've been studying with Sakha language speakers since I began – questions of language maintenance, the impacts of micro- and macro-level language planning and policy, language ideologies and what the Sakha language means to its speakers.

Some pages were simply about promoting language use (and speaking it in certain ways). However, some of the Sakha language use I was interested in following and analyzing occurred on pages with more overt decolonial, anti-Kremlin focus, broadly speaking, rather than being solely about language usage. The interesting part of looking at the language use and promotion would be to examine these kinds of pages in tandem with each other, rather than simply picking the 'less risky' language promotion pages. I felt stuck, as this situation seemed ripe with possibilities of potentially endangering, or at the very least, inconveniencing the people who posted. In view of the steady creep of authoritarianism manifest prior to 22 February 2022 (see Yusupova 2019), what were the new best practices and parameters for doing this type of work, and how had they changed with the war?

Contextualizing current questions

My research questions are not directly related to the content of antiwar protests or sentiments, but certainly to a question that is communication-centered. With rising sentiments connected to federal ethnonationalism in Russia already intensifiying prior to 2022, there have been impacts on language policies, as well as on language ideologies circulating among speakers. This brings up myriad interconnected questions about the role of Indigenous and minority languages online. Over the last two years, I have increasingly noticed the prominent usage of non-Russian, minoritized languages, Sakha among them, on public social media pages on Instagram that express anti-war and decolonial ideologies. These pages do use Russian, and sometimes English – but the use of Sakha is notable. At the same time, I have witnessed a proliferation of pages devoted only to the promotion of using these languages (e.g, many of these pages introduce new vocabulary words, while others point out what the page-runners consider issues or inconsistencies in Sakha language usage, providing "more correct" alternatives). As alluded to previously, I have become curious about the symbolic role of Sakha on each of these kinds of social media pages. My research has long engaged with work on ideologies and ontologies of language, and the role of language choice in these discursive spaces seemed important.

Perhaps conducting more straightforward linguistic research at this time – focused on documentation and technical description or theory – would indeed not be so controversial. However, I would argue that there is no possible way to completely disentangle language and politics. In the contexts I discuss online, language choice may be an overt political statement, or even if it is not meant as such, it could be interpreted that way by different audiences. Furthermore, the proliferation of Sakha language promotional and educational sites on the platform can not be understood as disconnected from politics, considering the recent Russian laws and constitutional amendments that have directly targeted non-Russian languages.

Over Putin's two-plus decades in power, we have seen the façade of a multicultural, multiethnic state stripped off as the Russian federal government moves towards a model of ethnonationalism that elevates Russian culture, Russian language, and Russian religion (i.e., Orthodox Christianity) to the exclusion of all the others (Zamyatin 2016). A key domain in which federal support for minority linguistic freedoms has declined is the educational system; new policies ratified in a 2018 language law (Federal Law No. FZ-273 "On Education in the Russian Federation" (2018) removed some of the bolstering for Sakha-language education that had been developed since 1991. A Republic could no longer make learning a 'national language' (e.g., like Sakha – the "titular nation" of that Republic) obligatory in schools, and language teaching hours for any language besides Russian were severely reduced.

In June 2018, citizens rallied near the Republic's governmental buildings in Yakutsk, calling on local representatives to refuse support for that law. The turnout was around 150 people. The group had been physically marginalized – I heard that though the group for one demonstration had received permission to protest in a busier thoroughfare downtown, at the last minute the police told them they would have to gather in a less public area behind the government buildings. The protesters held a variety of signs expressing key language ideological stances, among them some that read: *"Ije* *tylbytyn kömüsküöghüng!"* (Save our mother language) *"Törööbüt tyl – noruot baaja!"* (The native language is the wealth of a people) *"Sakhalyy tyllaakh kylaastary ükseting! Noruot tyyna – tylygar, keskile – ychchatygar!"* (Increase Sakha language classes! The life of a people – is in the language, their future – in the youth!)[1]

Nevertheless, changes to the law were approved by the government shortly after. The changes reduced the number of hours that languages other than Russian can be taught in schools, and forbade Republics from making minority language courses mandatory even if they are co-official languages; they must remain "voluntary." Concern over the proposed amendments was registered in many of the Republics, with citizens feeling that this restriction on minority language instruction was merely a first step in further assimilation of non-Russian ethnic groups after a period of relatively greater self-determination since the end of the Soviet Union (see Zamyatin 2018). Sure enough, similar changes to wording in federal constitutional amendments (the ones that made Putin president for life in 2020) continued to elevate Russian language – and ethnic Russians – over others: as Article 68 of the Constitution now states, "The state language of the Russian Federation throughout its territory is the Russian language as the language of the state-forming people." Widespread criticism of these words led to further changes to the amendment to add "part of the multinational union of equal peoples of the Russian Federation." However, ethnic Russians were still described as "state-forming."

Some research participants I spoke with in Yakutsk in 2017-2018 had already mentioned feeling the Russian ethnonationalist pressures becoming more noticeable after Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014. They cited increased public discourse on "unity" (that excluded diversity). Concerns about Sakha language loss were being voiced to me a little more often than several years earlier. Acquaintances and friends who supported Sakha as an educational requirement in the Republic were often uneasy about speaking out about that; they told me they had heard about punishments to language activists in other parts of Russia. Guzel Yusupova, in her work with Tatar speakers and language activists, has been tracing these impacts over the last decade or so, and has covered both the issues of being an insider researcher in an authoritarian context (Yusupova 2019) and how the "politics of fear" are transmitted in both online and offline activism (Yusupova 2021). Tatarstan in particular has been a space where federal crackdown on language activism has been prominent over the last several years, even prior to the constitutional changes of 2020. For instance, in 2018 a Tatar citizen was charged with "inciting ethnic hatred" against Russians (much like a call of "reverse racism") due to social media posts in which he complained that tax authorities and a bank hadn't provided him with service in Tatar, despite the language's co-official status in that region (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2018).

1 See Lagom 2018 for a photo showing protest in Yakutsk against changesto Federal Law No. FZ-273, in June 2018.

Around this time, Tatar scholars (Suleymanova 2018; Yusupova 2018) noted that that many individuals' claims to their ethnic and linguistic identities happen less in public demonstrations around causes and more on a subtle level, through daily actions and choices, rather than through official, overt channels. Often, as Yusupova (2021) notes, activism went online (and in this way, began to develop into a bottom-up, grassroots movement). This can mean language activism, but also other forms of activism centered around issues of ethnic self-determination. Thus, I was not at all surprised to see how these post-invasion discussions of decolonization in Russia are also happening online, in both private Telegram channels and on public Instagram pages. These discussions did not appear out of nowhere – they had been present in certain circles for years prior to February 2022 – but they took on both greater urgency and sharper visibility in the weeks and months following the invasion.

The formation and/or increased activity and visibility of many groups like "Svobodnaia Buryatia/Free Buryatia" and "Svobodnaia Yakutia/Free Yakutia" were spurred on by the disproportionate mobilization of Indigenous minorities from across the country; this was a prominent catalyst in Buryatia in particular (Vyushkova and Sherkhonov 2023). In the Sakha Republic, an article published in *Cultural Survival* (Anonymous 2022) revealed similar targeting of Indigenous groups in the Sakha Republic. Both pieces noted that anti-war activists had documented attempts by the Kremlin to obfuscate the numbers of those mobilized from the minority groups. The groups have been working to support members of their communities to evade mobilization, and also spread awareness about the realities of the war in Ukraine and experiences of local soldiers there. They also popularize discourses of decolonization and aim to illuminate the abuses of the Kremlin on social, political, and ecological scales, among others.

As mentioned, part of my interest involved looking at the use of Sakha on these new decolonization-focused pages, along with those solely focused on language promotion. Even if what I was pointing out was linguistic code choice rather than content, these two elements are inextricably linked through their context. Thus, the act of singling out and analyzing these spaces could have negative consequences for the posters.

Crackdowns and surveillance

As many readers will know, in early March 2022, laws restricting criticism of the war (and even calling it a "war," or *voina*, rather than a "special military operation" or *spetsialnaia voennaia operatsiia*) and otherwise "discrediting" the Russian government or army were enacted. While some of the more well-known cases of punishment for speaking out involved the hanging or holding of physical banners, and oral speech, speech discrediting the Russian army on online channels was also scrutinized.

Many independent news outlets across the country also shut down in early March 2022. In the Sakha Republic, most notable was Ykt.ru, a regional independent journalism site that had challenged incursions on freedom of speech in the past while also illuminating corruption and other controversial topics in the media. The forums hosted on this site were an incredibly popular space for debate and discussion, sharing of information, and connecting people across the Republic. Arsen Tomsky, one of the site's founders, wrote, "It has become clear in recent days that this portal cannot last long as an independent space […] In order to preserve the reputation of this portal and its team, our illustrious history, we have decided to end the work of Ykt.ru" (Coalson 2022).

It is difficult to know exactly how extensive or in-depth the surveillance of online posting on social networks and other places currently is. Recent news articles have highlighted some of the surveillance technology that Russia was developing in order to better keep a close eye on its own citizens and what they were saying. As Krolik et al. (2023) noted, the applications were extensive: "[they] offer ways to track certain kinds of activity on encrypted apps like WhatsApp and Signal, monitor the locations of phones, identify anonymous social media users and break into people's accounts, according to documents from Russian surveillance providers […] as well as security experts, digital activists and a person involved with the country's digital surveillance operations."

The technology is complimented by tacit encouragement by the government for citizens to report posts they see that disagree with the war. As both my own acquaintances and others quoted in news articles have stated, it's not just the known activists who are being watched; anyone may be subject to surveillance. Despite the blocking of many foreign platforms (Instagram, Facebook) in the weeks following 24 February 2022, many users in Russia began using VPNs to continue posting as before on these networks. Simultaneously, Telegram and Signal became increasingly important spaces for discussion. They afford users greater levels of privacy (if you use the settings for encryption), though they too are hackable, and it is uncertain as to whether the app companies may be volunteering information to government officials (Krolik et al. 2023).

While we hesitated to talk about it directly, I paid close attention to how people I knew were feeling as we chatted via various platforms and apps. In conversation with an older acquaintance shortly after the war began, they insinuated that it felt 'a little like back in the 70s', referring to Soviet era surveillance – people were becoming more suspicious of their colleagues and others they met on a regular basis, wondering who was in support of the full-scale invasion and its goals. Attention to one's own verbal hygiene was raised regarding how much was said and implied; listening to what others said – or did not say – was also heightened. These chats with friends in Yakutsk gave me a glimpse into the kinds of anxiety that some researchers there were feeling regarding what could and could not be said, attuning me to the kinds of precautions that people might be taking.

I experienced the distancing of some of my connections to circles beyond close friends and colleagues as the war went on. During the pandemic, I had provided a series of weekly Zoom guest lectures for masters-level students in a program at the North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. These talks discussed comparisons between Indigenous linguistic and cultural revitalization and maintenance in Russia and Canada. However, I was advised it would not be possible in 2023 as not only was this MA program not admitting any new students, but there were suggestions of more scrutiny around foreign researchers and scholars. Thus if I gave further lectures, I would have to present all materials beforehand for examination by the department; I knew that critical discussions of (de)colonialism and impacts of policies devaluing Indigenous language and culture – in both countries – would not be approved!

It was clear I needed to tread very cautiously. I did not want anything I wrote or said to implicate colleagues there with any work I continued to do. I worried that my foreigner's status, as well as things I have posted on my own Instagram in support of Ukraine (not under my given name, but on a page followed by many Sakha friends and acquaintances) could make things precarious for them. I also became concerned that being involved with ongoing research with me – even in a very passive capacity – could be concerning for my colleagues. For instance, I have ongoing longitudinal research with Lena Sidorova at North Eastern Federal University, concerning the dynamics of the linguistic landscape in Yakutsk. We initially published on this research between 2014-2018 (Sidorova et al. 2014, Sidorova et al. 2017, Ferguson and Sidorova 2018), but have been collecting further data since. In this case as I could not be present (first due to COVID restrictions, and then the war), Lena and her students had continuied to collect data that they shared with me for analysis.

Lena was not carrying on with the interview part of the work: simply collecting photos of public signage seemed less risky to me initially and I thought we could keep doing this. Nevertheless, I was reminded of possible surveillance risks when Lena recently told me that during one of the photography walks she did, a family member warned her (in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner) that some people might be suspicious "of the lady in Ploshchad Lenina [Lenin Square] taking pictures of official banners." While generally the photography elements are not too threatening (especially the more mundane business signs, rather than what is seen near government buildings), there are, in fact, things on those banners and their placement that are significant to talk about and might involve implicit critiques of power structures. Considering that, we are still thinking about how, when and even whether, we might publish anything on the latest trends we are seeing. Perhaps – as I will discuss further in the conclusion – the key lesson here is that with the unknown and known risks connected to increased surveillance, it is just important to (quietly and unobtrusively) witness things now and write about them later.

General ethical considerations for online research

What, then, can be done in a safe way online, during a time of war and heightened surveillance? Discussions of the moral and ethical considerations of conducting online research in varying new media spaces have been ongoing over the last two decades, and have intensified in recent years as social media platforms continue to rise and fall. These platforms have opened up a critical and generative space for language research – while also creating a novel host of concerns that are similar to – though not quite the same as – the considerations for linguistic research conducted offline:

> On the one hand, this communicative landscape appears to open up many opportunities for empirical research in applied linguistics, ranging from large scale corpus-based projects to smaller scale ethnographic explorations … On the other hand, the rights to access or reproduce the language used in 'new media' cannot be considered in exactly the same way as they would in offline contexts for linguistic research, for many online sites for interaction blur a clear boundary between private and public contexts, text and context … (Page 2016: 315)

Questions about representation, identity, and attribution are part of continuing debates on best practices for online language and linguistic research, as well as more ethnographic studies of online interaction in general, and the ethics of online research engagement are still being queried and negotiated in numerous contexts.

The boundary between the private and the public that is highlighted in the above quote is particularly salient when considering what is written online by Russian citizens living in Russia during the war. Who is the public they are addressing? Do they expect that anything written there will ever be written about, or discussed, beyond the platform they have posted on? How aware are people – when they press that button to post something – of what Marwick and boyd (2011) call a kind of "contextual collapse?" This means that spatial, social and temporal boundaries become harder to define, and assumptions about control over content and private-public distinctions are increasingly contested and questioned in the process of ethical decision-making about research methods.

A researcher could perhaps simply go through the posts and mine them to find what is needed – it's a "persistent," "searchable" and "replicable" public archive, after all, in boyd's (2011) words. Many will assume that a poster assumes a vast "scalable" audience. But should they go with the default notion that everyone is comfortable with such an analysis being performed on their words? Sugiura et al. (2017) mention how Eysenbach and Till (2001), when conducting work on listservs on the early internet, noted that just because something is posted to communicate for others does not necessarily mean the poster wants their post taken from its original context to be analyzed. The audience is naturally assumed to be peers, not researchers scrutinizing their form and content – this matters to many posters, especially those posting on sensitive subjects (in the case of Eysenbach and Till, illness support groups).

This expectation varies immensely, of course, depending on where something is posted – on a private group or channel versus a public page. In several previous research projects concerning language online, I have only analyzed material from wholly public pages (tweets, Facebook and forum comments) that do not require permission to join. In observing the language use trends I mentioned above, I continue this practice. In essence, what I am doing at the moment mirrors the collection of photos of public signs that my colleague Lena and I were assembling for our linguistic landscape project. I have been saving posts that are only the most public to begin with; they are not part of private or restricted networks, or those that you need an owner's or moderator's permission to join. That is, they are the posts that their authors have already decided to minimally protect in making them available to a wider audience. They are out there for any user or peruser to happen upon, and they can be recirculated. On Instagram, these are posts to open groups, and are shareable by others in the 'Stories' function – they are not restricted only to others who are following that page. Nevertheless, I find myself increasingly attuned to the question of expected audience, and how that relates to consent in this particular moment, considering the surveillance concerns already mentioned.

Generally, online research has long been divided into studies taking a passive approach, wherein researchers refrain from interacting with posters and those taking active approaches, in which researchers interact with participants through asking questions and eliciting discussions, or more intensely through the recruitment and collection of interviews (Eysenbach and Till 2001). Regardless of how "passive" the research is, though, the question of consent arises. Sugiura et al. (2017) identified several other questions for online research regarding consent – should it be sought for public data? Is gaining consent feasible, and how can anonymity be preserved? Some ethicists feel that posters should be directly contacted for informed consent before posts are collected, while others suggest that might be too involved, onerous for the posters and not necessary unless you are dealing with private groups (rather than publicly accessible data for all). However, yet other researchers prioritize unobtrusiveness; they treat public posts like reading op-eds in a newspaper rather than ethnographic interactions (Sugiura et al. 2017). Wilkinson and Thelwall (2011), in discussing what they consider best practices for data on the public web, concluded that anonymity of posters was important to ensure, though asking for permission to use such posts anonymously – e.g, without attribution – was not necessary, especially if they were not being quoted directly or otherwise reproduced.

So far, my approach has been primarily passive. I can be seen as "following" these pages on IG, and all I have been doing is making screenshots of posts and comments on public pages that did not require approval to join, and making notes on the metadata (where and when it was posted). At this stage, I am positioning myself only as a silent witness. I am not sure if – and when – I will conduct extensive analysis and write about what I am noticing on these sites. As an anthropologist, I find myself wanting to contact posters and follow up and interview them, but that feels too risky at the moment, as a foreign researcher putting people on the spot. Writing about content in a generalized fashion would pose less concern, certainly; but in work on language – and language ideologies – at times looking more deeply into structure and form as well as content becomes necessary, and a quote or image might be useful to reproduce in a paper. If I do, and want to use a specific quote or image of a post, I would reach out to the poster for consent, especially if identification could arise. Should I become more active and fully ethnographic in this work, and consider that interviews with posters or even just further comments and conversations are necessary, I will file a full Research Ethics Board application with templates for consent and maintaining anonymity. As Page (2016: 17) also succinctly reminds us, "Transparency is perhaps all the more important when social media interactions have become associated with practices of surveillance…." It is also critical to remember that individuals posting from outside of Russia may also have different feelings about having their posts researched than those still located within the country, and this may also depend on whether the former hope to be back in Russia as well. Location is likely already affecting what people are writing and potentially would be important to verify.

In past research I have looked at forums as something of "archives of opinions" (cf. Sugiura et al. 2017) where many posters already are not using their real names. I have also posted less-anonymized screenshots in previously published articles – though these have been pieces of transcribed verbal art with uncontroversial content. This work was conducted in a different sociopolitical time period, however, and it reminds me that both context and content matter. Including direct screenshots – even with posters' names removed – still feels risky, due to the uncertainty regarding just how much people are being surveilled – especially those posting and commenting on pages like "Free Yakutia" or the "Sakha Independence Movement."

All of this comes down to the central question of what is "minimal risk" in this current political milieu. Many online researchers, especially others working with people posting on sensitive or controversial issues, have suggested ways to (semi)anonymize data. However, one concern that arises is that even if you remove a poster's name, back-searching may be possible; for example, typing quotes verbatim into a search engine could bring up the post so that the surveilling agent might find the username and attempt to track down an individual. On sites like Facebook that enforce real-name policies, this would even involve fewer steps for someone hoping to discover a poster's identity! Trevisan and Reilly (2014), when analyzing online posts by disability dissent activists in the United Kingdom, mentioned the importance of gradations in anonymity. They settled on a "medium" level of cloaking: direct quotes from participants were not used in publications unless they weren't traceable in a search engine, and no other identifying data was published. While using paraphrased quotes could defeat the purpose of some language-related work (e.g. if looking to highlight specific linguistic forms or syntactical structures), it is possible in the work I am thinking of doing to at the very least offer this as an option to those whose quotes or posts I seek to replicate in a publication. This approach is likely what I will adopt if and when I publish on these topics.

Best practices for now

Nearly every day when I check Instagram, I screenshot and save posts, and keep them in a password-protected folder with metadata. I read through them, and I make note of phrases, trends in language usage, as well as content, to get a sense of what is arising and unfolding in real time. At this point, I honestly do not know when I might write about them, but for now, it feels important to witness. Witnessing these projects – of people raising awareness of Sakha language and encouraging its use – as well as having discussions on decolonization and resistance – seems vital enough. Ultimately, I want to honour the varying levels of risks that these posters are taking without adding extra risk.

For others interested in online language research – or content analysis of even more contentious subjects – right now in Russia, I would suggest the following, taking Spilioti and Tagg's (2016) advice that privacy concerns and orientation with participants is key:

- Save your screenshots carefully with all possible privacy precautions taken if you are keeping any identifying information attached (e.g., to contact posters at some point for permission, etc. or to follow up with interviews).
- Do not analyze anything from pages or groups that are private; focus on only the most public-facing fora and platforms that are broadly searchable by anyone.
- If you do decide to publish anything on the research while the war is ongoing, consider the highest levels of anonymization possible (no inclusion of screenshots at all, or at the very least, anonymized ones; no direct quotes) after gaining consent from participants.

Perhaps one could safely publish on this kind of research. However, it doesn't sit well with me personally at this time, even if I were to adhere closely to the strictest anonymization protocols possible.

Even with the above precautions observed, publishing on these themes sometimes feels wrong to me simply because it feels like I am capitalizing on war, especially since writing about these topics is not going to tangibly benefit any of the people posting in any way. Furthermore, there also the consideration that posting about these trends of language promotion and decolonization in this political moment could even negatively affect Sakha speakers and citizens as a group, over and above just the individual poster. Might I, in writing about language usage like this (in light of resistance and decolonization, self-determination, etc.), negatively portray Sakha speakers as a community who are antagonistic toward Russian national unity and the erasure of cultural and ethnic difference? After all, early on in the war the push for the use of the word "russkii" (Russian-as-ethnic-group) instead of "rossiiskii" (citizen of Russia) was highly prominent.[2]

I was reminded of past instances of this being the case: during the Soviet period as well as the early post-Soviet years, Sakha people were often collectively portrayed by non-Sakha, in particular by ethnic Russians and Party leaders, as particularly "nationalistic" and engaging in "ethnic chauvinism" (against Russians and the ideologies of Soviet unity). This led to losing university admissions and jobs, among other kinds of social blacklisting in various environments (see Argounova-Low 2012). Do I want to inadvertently reinforce anything right now that could be (mis)interpreted by the Russian federal government, and play right into those the resurrection of old labels for Sakha people?

As I was finishing up writing this piece in July 2024, news of continuing crackdowns on Russian citizens supporting Ukraine crossed my feed from the BBC, titled "Fined for yellow and blue shoes: how Russian laws smother dissent" (Shevchenko 2024). The article examined how the vagueness of many Russian laws allow officials to forbid many everyday activities; the law that penalizes anyone caught "discrediting the Russian army" is being ever extended – semiotically, blue-and-yellow colours together is automatically interpreted as support for Ukraine, so a pair of Asics running shoes with blue uppers and yellow soles got their wearer in trouble when he crossed paths with an anti-war protest back in April 2022 (Shevchenko 2024). Language too, is an "everyday" activity, and one that is never completely neutral. Discussions about decolonization, of course, are overtly politicized, and the place where language and decolonization intersect is certainly charged territory. Regardless of how a speaker intends their message, let's say, of promoting Sakha language usage, there is always possibility it could be seen by authorities like that running shoe – possibly meaning more than a poster might intend it to.

Certainly, the decolonial discourses are out there on the internet; sites promoting Sakha are prominent and active, and anyone who read the posts could interpret them as engaging in the kind of "*natsionalism*" that Sakha were previously accused of. The posts are not entirely hidden and these public groups are certainly attempting to reach out to an audience. But would an article, even published in English, create a shortcut for providing evidence for those looking to prove something or denounce people as a whole? I have run into scholars (non-Russian-citizens) who have assumed writing in English is safer, but in my work editing a journal to which many Russian citizens contribute in English (*Sibirica*), I have also heard from Russian citizens within the country that the language does not guarantee safety from scrutiny in the current climate of

2 See https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=7929042923779797&set=pcb.7929043240446432. [accessed 19.02.2025]. Photo of billboard in Kalmykia, taken in March 2022; "I am Kalmyk, but today WE are all Russians" (using ethnic label – *russkie*). Photo taken by K. Galiev; shared with me on social media by an acquaintance.

calling for purges of Western and liberal influences. The expulsion and prosecution of students and professors, and the dismantling and revamping of institutions (e.g., St. Petersburg State University's Liberal Arts and Sciences program) reveals great reason for this anxiety to persist.

Concluding thoughts

At this sociopolitical moment, I have settled on the fact that publishing about Sakha language, decolonization, and resistance will come later, at some unknown point in the future. However, a lingering question sometimes arises, as voiced by Trevisan and Reilly (2014) as they sought to ethically consider writing about online disability dissent activists in their own study: By not doing research and not writing about it, are we potentially silencing people further? I wonder this too, but the risks feel too great. As someone connected to this community of speakers, but not from that community, not living within it everyday, it feels like it is not for me to make the move to publicize these activities further.

The discussion of an anthropologist's role as a witness is another longstanding topic of debate, and one I continue to personally negotiate. In light on the 2020 American Anthropological Associations Annual Meeting theme of "truth and responsibility," Liana Chua (2021: 125) revisits just what "bearing witness" means for an anthropologist, calling for:

> … a relational, decentred mode of anthropological witnessing … For a discipline built around revelation, explanation and, increasingly, mobilization, the prospect of concealing knowledge, staying silent or refusing to (bear) witness is unsettling, yet these practices too must be understood as constitutive of the anthropologist's task.

Right now it feels impossible to estimate when I will be able to write about this online language work and activism, but I am at peace with witnessing and waiting – not even as an anthropologist, but simply a concerned human in support of language rights and a friend to many of those engaged in the work. So I will document the things that are being said (posted), but whether I disseminate that more widely, amplify it, or ever draw attention to it, currently remains to be seen.

Thus, while the present moment is replete with processes and trends in Indigenous and minority language use within Russia that are vital to document and to (quietly) witness, there is also the importance of remembering that it is not necessarily the time to write and publish about them. Above, I share how I have ended up at my current decision to focus on witnessing now and think about writing – and publishing – a bit later. Like the process of establishing informed, ongoing consent, it is critical that the steps we take regarding deciding what – and how – to write and publish need to always be checked in light of changes to the sociopolitical climate for our research participants. As researchers we must never become complacent; we must never default to thinking only about the time the research is done, but also try to respond as much as possible to what is unfolding when we think about how, and when – and what – we write. What might seem like an innocuous or tangential topic to the main political debates surrounding the war – like language usage and ethnic sovereignty – is more deeply bound into those discussions than it might seem at first.

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