

Variation and change in the Russian dialect of Varzuga: a case study based on recordings from three different decades

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Russian village dialects have low prestige. Although dialectal speech varieties are hardly heard in public domains, they must have some covert prestige in local communities and might be much more widespread in people's homes than most Russian linguists are aware of, living in a society with a strong monoglossic ideology (Del Valle 2000) and no tradition of variationist sociolinguistic studies. Still, both the number of dialect speakers and the number of dialectal features in the speech of Russian villagers is decreasing, though not as fast as predicted earlier (cf. Kalnyn' 1997).

The variation and gradual loss of dialectal traits in Russian speech has been object of only a few earlier studies. They all compare phonological features in the speech of several generations in one village (Kochetov 2006; Vaahtera 2009; Krasovitsky, to appear). We have been lucky to obtain sound recordings of the dialect of Varzuga (Author, 2005), a traditional village on Kola Peninsula, from three different decades, covering the period 1964-2007. Some speakers are represented in two periods. Our own recordings (from 2001-2007) were obtained in varying social settings. Samples of these recordings will be available on a CD, accompanying Author, Pineda and Sappok (forthcoming).

In the presentation I will discuss to which degree these recordings are suitable for a study of variation and change in the use of dialectal features, not only in the speech community in general, but also in the speech of individual speakers. I will also present the results of the comparisons, showing which dialect features are more stable than others. A case study of the speech of one of the speakers, who was recorded in different periods and under various social conditions, suggests that changes in social setting had more effect on her speech than a time-lapse of 15 years.