

УДК 392:316.64 (571.511)

## The Dolgans' Ethnic Identity and Language Processes

**Victor P. Krivonogov\***

*Siberian Federal University  
79 Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041 Russia*

Received 21.11.2012, received in revised form 18.12.2012, accepted 26.02.2013

---

*Ethnic identity of the Dolgans is characterized by separation from the closely related Yakuts and identification as the separate independent ethnic group. However, together with the main ethnonym "the Dolgans", the older generation uses other ethnonyms, such as "Sakha", "Tia", "Hakha". In the Dolgans' ethnos there are several ethno-territorial groups with peculiarities in the language and culture. The language processes are characterized by beginning of assimilation of languages, which is most noticeable in childhood. As for territorial boundaries, assimilation of languages is typical for western part of Taimyr, in the east of the peninsula the situation does not impose any hardship. Today, a little bit more than a half of the Dolgans can fluently speak the Dolgan language.*

*Keywords: Ethnic identity of the Dolgans, ethnonym, ethno-territorial groups, assimilation of languages.*

*The work was fulfilled within the framework of the research financed by the Krasnoyarsk Regional Foundation of Research and Technology Development Support and in accordance with the course schedule of Siberian Federal University as assigned by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation.*

---

If the Dolgans, the indigenous people of Taimyr, are autonomous ethnic group or ethnographic group of the Yakuts is a controversial and complex issue, even for the Dolgans. In the early 20th century, the different parts части of the Dolgans, according to the statistics, belonged to different peoples – to the Yakuts, the Tungus (Evenks) and part of them were considered the Russians ("the peasants from tundra"). Although by this time, the Dolgans, most likely, had already been formed as a separate ethnic group, but the statistics didn't record the real situation, and displayed

the situation of the previous period. Indeed, the Dolgans were formed by the merger of these three components – the Yakuts, the Evenks and the Russians. In this case, the Yakut language, to be more exact – its local dialect, became the winner. In the 1930s, the point of view that the Dolgans were the separate ethnic group was prevailing, and, as the result, the autonomous region was called "Dolgano-Nenentsky", thus, the name of the people was formalized. But, according to our informers, for a long period of time, until the 1950s in the passports of the Dolgans there were such nationalities as "the

Yakut” or “the Sakha”. Only at this period of time the nationality “Dolgans” was written in the passports. However, up to this day the problem of ethnic definition of the Dolgans causes different interpretations. The question of ethnic identity was included in the questionnaire during the ethno-sociological research among the Dolgans in 1993 and 2003. According to the data, 25 % of the Dolgans population of the region was interviewed. How do the Dolgans define themselves in relation to their relative ethos – the Yakuts? On both questions the similar results, indicating that the majority of the Dolgan consider themselves as an independent ethnic group, although related to the Yakuts, were obtained (Table 1).

According to the age of the respondents, the highest index among those who consider themselves to be the one people with the Yakuts (23-25 %) is observed among the respondents in their 50s, the minimum index – among the young population (11-16 %); among the young population there are a lot of respondents who can not answer the question (up to the quarter). There is definite correlation with the level of education. The number of those who consider the Dolgans

and the Yakuts one people rises from 16.4 % in the group with primary and subaverage education up to 23.4 % in the group with the higher education.

Thus, at the present time the Dolgan themselves believe that they are special people, although related to the Yakuts. The affirmation of this opinion was facilitated by the fact that 30-40 years ago, the special Dolgans writing was developed, the textbooks on the Dolgans' language were published and teaching of the Dolgans' language began in the local schools.

Along with the ethnonym “the Dolgans” there are other, informal ethnonyms that are used in colloquial speech in Taimyr (Table 2).

100 % of the respondents use the term “the Dolgans”.

Table 3 illustrates use of the different ethnonyms in the groups of settlements.

The informal ethnonyms are more often used in the east than in the west and in the cities, primarily due to the fact that the Russian-speaking Dolgans do not know them, and they live mostly in the west and in the cities. There is a clear separation of these ethnonyms based on geographical criterion: in the west, in the villages Levinskie Peski Volochanka and Ust-Avam the

Table 1. Answers to the question about belonging of the Dolgans to the Yakuts (in %)

	1993	2003
The Dolgans and the Yakuts are the same people	19,5	19,5
The Dolgans and the Yakuts are different peoples	67,2	70,9
Cannot say	13,3	9,6

Table 2. Use of the informal ethnonyms (in %)

Do not use	21,3
Hakha	63,7
Sakha	7,4
Tia	7,5

Table 3. Use of the informal ethnonyms in different populated areas (in %)

Ethnonyms	Do not use	Hakha	Sakha	Tia
Lower settlements*	8,1	84,9	7,0	0
Khatanga	23,2	69,7	7,1	0
Upper settlements*	12,8	74,4	11,1	1,7
Western settlements*	48,8	3,3	5,8	42,1
Dudinka	33,3	56,1	4,9	5,7

\* «Lower» settlements – to the east from Khatanga, «upper» settlements – to the west from Khatanga, «western» settlements – in the territory of Dudinka, down the Yenisey river and in Avamsk tundra.

Table 4. Use of the informal ethnonyms based on the age criterion (in %)

	Do not use	Hakha	Sakha	Tia
70 years and older	5,6	88,9	0	5,5
60–69	6,8	70,5	18,2	4,5
50–59	2,9	71,8	9,7	15,5
40–49	8,7	62,1	13,7	15,5
30–39	15,5	70,1	8,0	6,4
20–29	33,5	61,4	2,5	2,5
16–19	56,4	43,6	0	0

informal ethnonym “tyalar” is used, the rest of Taimyr uses the word “hakalar”, which indicates the presence of two ethno-territorial groups. Ethnonym “sakha” came to Taimyr due to the documentation (the official record on the Dolgans in the passports up to the 1950s was “sakha”) and is used by the Dolgans only when they speak Russian, thus, this ethnonym obviously came from outside. The Dolgans know that the Yakuts call themselves “sakha”, and if they want to say, for example, that their grandfather was the entrant Yakut, they say: “He was a real sakha.” The term “hakha” is actually of the same origin as “sakha”, but in the local pronunciation. Its widespread use could have been an argument in favor of those who believe that the Dolgans are a part of the Yakut ethnic group. But now the term has been redefined and it is not considered by the most Dolgans as a synonym for “sakha”, and

the opposition appeared: “We, the Dolgans are hakhalar, and they, the Yakuts are sakhalar”.

Comparison of the different ethnonyms based on the age criterion indicates that young people use informal ethnonyms not as often as middle-aged and elderly people (Table 4). From this we can conclude that the use of these ethnonyms will continue to decline. This is indicated by the fact that those who have insufficient knowledge of the Dolgan language or do not speak it use these ethnonyms less often (Table 5). The same can be said about the people of mixed origin (Table 6). The share of both these categories among the Dolgans is increasing. But this figure doesn't depend so much on the level of education: on the one hand, these terms are used more often by the less educated groups, and the other hand, by people with the higher and vocational secondary education.

Table 5. Use of the informal ethnonyms based on knowledge of the Dolgan language (in %)

	Do not use	Hakha	Sakha	Tia
Language fluency	6,9	76,4	9,4	7,3
Not fluent language	43,5	43,5	3,1	9,9
Do not know the language	90,9	5,5	1,8	1,8

Table 6. Use of the informal ethnonyms in different groups of the Dolgans (in %)

	Do not use	Hakha	Sakha	Tia
Pure Dolgans	16,5	69,0	9,1	5,4
Mongoloid metis*	20,1	63,0	5,2	11,7
Caucasian metis*	37,3	48,5	4,3	9,9

\* “mongoloid metis” – a group of descendants from the mixed families of the Dolgans with the Nganasans, the Nenets and other Asian peoples; Caucasian metis – a group of descendants from the mixed families of the Dolgans with the Russains and other European peoples.

Within the Dolgan ethnos there are several ethno-territorial groups of different degrees of hierarchy. Most Dolgan are aware of their belonging to a particular group, and in 10 years, the proportion of those who named their group did not decrease but even increased – from 66.6 up to 72.2 %. Thus, this phenomenon can not be called disappearing.

Currently, 26.0 % of respondents classified themselves as the “lower” (among the studied settlements – Novorybnoe), 25.3 % as – the “upper” (Novaya, Heta), 8.8 % – as the “middle” (Zhdaniha), as the western or “Avamsk” – 6.7 % (Voločanka, Ust-Avam, Levinskije Peski), as the “Popigai-Anabar” – 4.9 % (Popigai), as the “Kamensky” – 0.5 %, 27.8 % did not classified themselves to any group. This structure doesn't adequately reflect the numerical ratio of the groups, as settlement Khantaiskoe Ozero – the main habitat of the “Kamenskaya” Dolgans was not studied; their actual share in the Dolgans is approx. 4 % (they are called “Kamenskije”, because they were resettled to Khantaiskoe Ozero from the settlement Kamen in Avamsk

tundra). The share of the “Avamsk” was lower than the real number, because here, in the West, there is the maximum number of those, who don't know the internal ethnic structure, which means, those, who are not able to classify themselves to any group. This happens due to the fact that the Russian-speaking Dolgans know this structure worst of all, and they live mostly in the West. In settlement Popigai the opinions about belonging to a certain group split: some identified themselves as the “Anabar”, and some as the “upper”, and not because the population of the village is mixed, but because many believe that the Popigai-Anabar Dolgans are the part of the “lower”. That is why some named the lower level division (the “Anabar”) and the others – the broader (the “lower”). In settlement Zhdaniha one part identified themselves as the “lower”, and the other as the “middle.” The settlements Zhdaniha and Kresti are located on the border of the “upper” and the “lower” groups, so they have some vague self-identification, because they often feel their intermediate position and call themselves the “middle”, one part of them tend

Table 7. Knowledge of sub-ethnic division in different age groups of the Dolgans (2003, in %)

Age	Do not know the group	Identify the group				
		The lower	The Anabarsk	The middle	The upper	The Avamsk
50 and older	17,5	30,7	6,6	7,8	27,1	10,3
30–49	21,8	27,2	5,9	10,5	26,4	7,1
16–29	40,6	22,1	2,6	7,3	23,1	4,3

Table 8. Identified their ethnic group depending on age (in %)

70 and older	22,2
60–69	20,5
50–59	22,1
40–49	17,3
30–39	9,5
20–29	6,9
16–19	0

to be the “lower” (Zhdaniha), and the other part – the “upper” (Kresti). The position of different groups in the general structure of the Dolgans the Dolgans themselves define on the basis of the peculiarities of pronunciation.

The largest number of those who do not know the internal ethnic structure is observed in the younger age groups (Table 7), due to this, it is possible to draw a conclusion that this phenomenon is disappearing, but our interval study showed that it is not true, as the most of the Dolgans know this structure. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that the knowledge about these groups is acquired not in the younger, but in the middle-aged and older age groups. It is connected with the life experience of the people, travels to the different parts of Taimyr, to Dudinka and personal acquaintance with the inhabitants of different settlements of Taimyr. Naturally, senior citizens have more experience in migration and communication.

The Dolgans clan structure is known to a very limited number of people – in the survey 11.7 % of the respondents were able to identify

their ethnic group. Most often, these are senior citizens (Table 8).

There is no certain regularity in identification of ethnic group in the settlements, more in the east, less in the west (Table 9).

Interest of the intellectuals in the history of their own people affected the degree of competence in clan structure – people in more educated groups identify their ethnic group more often (in groups with primary and lower level of education – 7.9 %, in the groups with the secondary and higher education – 15-17 %).

Population censuses indicate of decrease in the Dolgan language index. The index especially decreased during the last censuses.

*The data of the censuses about the native language of the Dolgans (Taimyr, in %):*

1979 – 93,5 %;

1989 – 90,2 %;

2002 – 75,9 %.

However, we consider the data of the censuses to be overstated, as in our research the figures were different:

Language	1993	2003
----------	------	------

Table 9. Identified their ethnic group in different settlements (in %)

Popigai	22,8
Novorybnoe	9,4
Zhdaniha	3,3
Khatanga	9,1
Novaya	15,0
Heta	17,5
Ust-Avam	8,1
Volochanka	11,9
Levinskie Peski	0
Potapovo	0
Dudinka	10,4

Table 10. Native language in different age groups of the Dolgans (1993, in %)

Age	Identified as native language		
	Dolgan	Dolgan and Russian	Russian
70 and older	100	–	–
60–69	92,9	–	7,1
50–59	98,8	–	1,2
40–49	95,7	2,6	1,7
30–39	87,5	2	10,5
20–29	71,5	1	27,5
10–19	45,5	1,8	52,7
Under 10	32,2	5	62,8

Table 11. Native language in different age groups of the Dolgans (2003, in %)

Age	Identified as native language		
	Dolgan	Dolgan and Russian	Russian
70 and older	94,4	5,6	–
60–69	90,9	6,8	2,3
50–59	89,4	7,7	2,9
40–49	82,8	9,2	8,0
30–39	61,8	19,4	18,8
20–29	24,1	22,2	53,7
10–19	12,7	19,4	67,9
Under 10	11,4	14,2	74,4

Native Dolgan      62,5 % 38,6 %  
 Both languages    2,5 % 16,1 %  
 Russian             35 % 45,3 %

Distribution of the language index among the age groups indicates of its decrease in the Dolgan language in all the age groups (Tables 10, 11).

As the main spoken language – the Dolgan language was named by the respondents less often as the native language, this index has significantly decreased in ten years. In 1993 for 24.3 % (in 2003 – 8.9 %) of the respondents the main spoken language was the Dolgan language,

Table 12. The main spoken language of different age groups of the Dolgans (1993, in %)

Age	The main spoken language		
	Dolgan	Dolgan and Russian	Russian
70 and older	81,8	18,2	–
60–69	47,6	26,2	26,2
50–59	42,2	39,7	18,1
40–49	38,5	36,7	24,6
30–39	41,5	25,5	33
20–29	26,5	32,5	41
10–19	7,9	24,7	67,4
Under 10	11,1	17,2	71,7

Table 13. The main spoken language of different age groups of the Dolgans (2003, in %)

Age	The main spoken language		
	Dolgan	Dolgan and Russian	Russian
70 and older	50	50	–
60–69	20,5	56,8	22,7
50–59	14,4	73,1	12,5
40–49	18,4	57,7	23,9
30–39	10	58,6	31,4
20–29	4,9	32,5	62,6
10–19	2,7	27	70,3
Under 10	7,1	17,8	75,1

for 25,9 % (38,7 %) – two languages, for 49.7 % (52, 3 %) – the Russian language, for 0.1 % – the Dolgan, the Russian and the Nganasan languages (in 2003 – 0.1 % the Russian and the Nenets languages).

However, only the index of use of the Dolgan language decreased, but its use along with the Russian language has increased. In general, to any extend 50.3 % of the respondents used the Dolgan language, now – 47.6 %, thus, the decrease is minimal.

Tables 12 and 13 show age dynamics in the main spoken languages. The younger age groups are characterized by the increase in use of the Russian language exclusively, and senior age groups by the increase in the number of bilinguals.

Indexes of the level of comprehension of the main languages of the region point to increasing development of the Russian language and slow

decline of the Dolgan language (tables 14 and 15). Only 3.7 % of the Dolgans knew the Nganasan language and in 10 years this index has fallen to 2.8 %, at that, only 0.1 % has good command of the language, despite the proximity and close interaction with the Nganasans. The Dolgans prefer to communicate with them in Russian, and in Khatanga area – in Dolgan, as many of the Nganasans master the language of the surrounding Dolgan society.

Distribution of the indexes of the level of comprehension of the Dolgan language in different age groups point to the gradual decline of the index (Tables 16 and 17).

Analysis of the above table indicates that deterioration of knowledge of the Dolgan language is not so straightforward. If we compare the same age groups, the decline is evident. But if we compare the figures for the same age group with a difference of 10 years,

Table 14. The level of comprehension of the main languages of the region (1993, in %)

Languages	Know the language					total
	have good command	have some difficulties	have serious difficulties	understand, but do not speak	do not know the language	
Dolgan	55,1	6,8	7,5	15,5	15,1	100
Russian	90,2	5,5	1,8	1,2	1,3	100
Nganasan	0,3	0,2	0,4	2,8	96,3	100

Table 15. The level of comprehension of the main languages of the region (2003, in %)

Languages	Know the language					total
	have good command	have some difficulties	have serious difficulties	understand, but do not speak	do not know the language	
Dolgan	50,6	5,5	6,6	19,2	18,1	100
Russian	95,6	1,6	1,4	0,8	0,6	100
Nganasan	0,1	0,1	0,4	2,2	97,2	100

Table 16. The level of comprehension of the Dolgan language in different age groups (1993, in %)

Age	Know the Dolgan language					Total
	have good command	have some difficulties	have serious difficulties	understand, but do not speak	do not know	
70 years and older	100	–	–	–	–	100
60–69	95,2	2,4	–	2,4	–	100
50–59	96,4	2,4	–	1,2	–	100
40–49	93,2	6,0	–	–	0,8	100
30–39	86,0	3,5	3,0	5,5	2,0	100
20–29	64,5	6,6	5,6	17,2	6,1	100
10–19	28,0	11,8	16,5	22,9	20,8	100
Under 10	24,4	7,2	9,5	25,0	33,9	100

Table 17. The level of comprehension of the Dolgan language in different age groups (2003, in %)

Age	Know the Dolgan language					Total
	have good command	have some difficulties	have serious difficulties	understand, but do not speak	do not know	
70 years and older	100	–	–	–	–	100
60–69	93,2	4,5	–	2,3	–	100
50–59	94,2	2,9	1,9	1,0	–	100
40–49	90,8	2,4	2,5	3,1	1,2	100
30–39	77,0	5,2	4,2	8,4	5,2	100
20–29	41,9	7,9	15,7	20,7	13,8	100
10–19	25,9	8,3	8,6	34,8	22,4	100
Under 10	22,4	3,2	4,6	24,9	44,9	100



we will see a different data – the index of the Dolgan language is growing. For example, in 1993-1994, 64.5 % of the people aged 20-29 had good command of the Dolgan language, and now, at the age of 30-39 – 77.0 %. The difference of knowledge of the Dolgan language at the age of 10-19 years (1993) and 10 years later: 28 % and 41.9 %, respectively, is even more impressive. These facts indicate that many

Dolgans master the Dolgan language not in the early childhood, but later, and as they grow older the index is growing. Thus, the process of language assimilation is hindered by the late initiation to the Dolgan language. If not for that, the process of the language assimilation would be faster and decrease of the overall index of comprehension of the Dolgan language would be more evident.

## **Этническое самосознание и языковые процессы у долган**

**В.П. Кривоногов**

*Сибирский федеральный университет  
Россия 660041, Красноярск, пр. Свободный, 79*

---

*Этническое самосознание долган характеризуется отграничением от близкородственных якутов и определением себя в качестве особой самостоятельной этнической единицы. Однако наряду с основным этнонимом «долганы» в старшем поколении используются и иные этнонимы – «саха», «тыя», «хака». В составе долганского этноса сохраняется несколько этнотерриториальных групп, имеющих особенности в языке и культуре. Для языковых процессов характерно начало языковой ассимиляции, особенно заметной в детской возрастной группе. В территориальном плане языковая ассимиляция сильнее проявляется в западной части Таймыра, на востоке полуострова ситуация благополучная. В настоящее время свободно владеют долганским языком немного более половины долган.*

*Ключевые слова: этническое самосознание долган, этнонимы, этнотерриториальные группы, языковая ассимиляция.*

*Работа выполнена в рамках исследований, финансируемых Красноярским краевым фондом поддержки научной и научно-технической деятельности, а также в рамках тематического плана СФУ по заданию Министерства образования и науки Российской Федерации.*

---



Svetlana Petunskaya, Popigay village



Kristina Agapievna Aksenova in a festive parka, Ust-Avam village



An old frame hut near Popigay village



Popigay children in national clothes



Spectators at the festival of the Dolgan-Nganasan village Ust-Avam