

The Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN): Adding Chuvash to MAIN

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This paper describes the process of translating and adapting the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to Chuvash. Chuvash is one of the largest minority languages in the European part of Russia. The Chuvash MAIN not only extends the empirical coverage of MAIN by including the only extant member of the Oghur (Bulgar) branch of the Turkic language family, but also offers an important tool to assess the narrative abilities of Russian-Chuvash bilingual children in their first language.

1 Introduction

Narrative abilities are one of the most ecologically valid measures of communicative competence in various speakers' populations (Botting, 2002). In the last decades, the study of narratives has become a widely used method for the assessment of bilinguals' language abilities (Boudreau, 2008; Karlsen et al., 2021; Veneziano & Nicolopoulou, 2019; among others). One of the instruments that allows such assessment is the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (LITMUS-MAIN, hereafter MAIN; Gagarina, Klop et al., 2012, 2015, 2019). MAIN is a tool originally designed for bilingual preschoolers and primary-school children. Later, it has also been used to assess older children, adolescents, and adults (e.g. Gagarina, Bohnacker et al., 2019) as well as second language (L2) learners (e.g. Krasnoshchekova & Kashleva, 2019). MAIN can be used to evaluate the comprehension and production of narratives in three elicitation modes (telling, retelling, model story) and to assess macro- and microstructure (Gagarina, Klop et al., 2019).

This paper briefly introduces the process of adapting MAIN to Chuvash. Chuvash is the second official regional language in Russia for which a MAIN version has been created (after

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Yakut; Androsova & Trifonova, 2020). Adding Chuvash to MAIN is significant for at least two reasons. First, the Chuvash language is the only extant member of Oghur (Bulgar) branch of the Turkic language family and it is typologically different from most of the existing MAIN language versions. Thus, adding Chuvash enriches the typological diversity and empirical coverage of MAIN. Second, Russia is among the countries with the highest linguistic diversity in the world (with 97 indigenous languages; Simons & Fennig, 2017), but its languages often lack instruments for assessing children with and without developmental language disorder (DLD). The Chuvash MAIN offers an important tool to assess not only narrative abilities of children who are growing up as Russian-Chuvash bilinguals, but also language itself, since it allows for the analysis of the lexicon and grammar of a child producing or comprehending an oral text/narrative.

2 A brief overview of the Chuvash language

Together with Russian, Chuvash is an official language of the Chuvash Republic. Chuvash is primarily spoken in the Chuvash Republic (or Chuvashia) and adjacent areas. However, it is also widely spread beyond the administrative boundaries of the Chuvash Republic: The Chuvash people form one of the most dispersed ethnic groups in Russia. Fomin (2016) notices that the Chuvash diaspora make up 43.3% of the Chuvash-speaking population. They live primarily in the Volga region (23.0%), e.g. in the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, in the Urals (10.0%), and in Western Siberia (3.7%).¹ According to the Russian Census (2010), the number of Chuvash native speakers in Russia is 1,042,989. In the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (Moseley, 2010), Chuvash is classified as a vulnerable language, which means that it is not spoken by children outside the home, because of the dominant position of the Russian language.

The Turkic language family consists of two branches: a) Common Turkic (which includes Oghuz, Kipchak, Karluk, Siberian Turkic, Khalaj, Turkmen, and Turkish), and b) Oghur (Bulghar), where the only extant member is the Chuvash language (Johanson, 2021). The Oghur branch, i.e., Chuvash, does not have mutual intelligibility with the Common Turkic languages.

Chuvash is written in a variant of the Cyrillic alphabet that was devised by Ivan Yakovlev in the 1870s and reformed in 1938 (Johanson, 2021). The alphabet contains 37 letters: the 33 letters of the Russian alphabet and four special letters (*ă, ě, ŷ, ç*). Eleven letters are used only in Russian loanwords. Chuvash has variations in spelling, since loanwords from Russian should be read in accordance with the Russian spelling (Alòs i Font, 2015). One of the distinctive phonetic characteristics of the Chuvash language is vowel harmony. Chuvash has two classes of vowels: front or soft vowels (*e, ě, ŷ, u*) and back or hard vowels (*a, ă, y, ы*). The principle of vowel harmony states that words may contain either exclusively front or exclusively back vowels. Therefore, most grammatical suffixes, except for some invariant suffixes such as the plural suffix *-сем*, have front and back forms, e.g. *кушакна* (kushakpa)

¹ Chuvash national societies are also functioning in Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova (Fomin, 2016).

‘with cat’, but *mulĕne* (tilĕpe) ‘with fox.’ Vowel harmony does not apply to loanwords and for some native Chuvash words (such as *anne* (anne) ‘mother’). Chuvash has two slightly different dialects: the lower one (*anatri*) in the southern regions of the Chuvash Republic and the upper one (*turi*) in the northern, i.e., upstream of the river Volga. These dialects have some differences both from phonetic and lexical points of view. The written language is based on both of the dialects.

Most of the vocabulary of daily communication in Chuvash are of Proto-Turkic origin. However, many of the Turkic words in Chuvash have gone through sound changes and hide their origin. However, the main differences between Chuvash and Common Turkic basic vocabularies are in semantic shifts that accumulated over two thousand years of parallel evolution. Moreover, different contact languages (Russian, Tatar, Mari) have deeply influenced the lexicon of Chuvash (Savelyev, 2020).

In terms of morphology, Chuvash, as the other Turkic languages, is an agglutinative language. Each morpheme expresses only one grammatical function and is clearly identifiable. Suffixes are added to nominal stems; they indicate possession, number, and case (Savelyev, 2020). In contrast to other Turkic languages, the plural suffixes in Chuvash follow possessive ones. Chuvash has no grammatical gender. It has eight cases marked by suffixes which are different for singular and plural nouns: a) nominative; b) genitive; c) dative-accusative (which is a merger of dative and accusative cases that marks both direct and indirect objects); d) locative; e) ablative; f) instrumental-comitative; g) abessive (or caritive), and h) causative (e.g., Andrejev, 1963). There are six personal pronouns which are declined in all cases. The genitive forms also serve as possessive pronouns. Verbs express nine tenses: a) present tense; b) future tense; c) definite past tense; d) indefinite past tense; e) indefinite imperfect tense I; f) indefinite imperfect tense II; g) pluperfect tense I; h) pluperfect tense II; i) pluperfect tense III (Lebedev, 2016).

Syntactically, like all Turkic languages, Chuvash has a basic SOV word order. Attributes precede their nouns with no agreement with them in case, number or person. Both direct and indirect objects are marked by accusative-dative case. For negation, the suffix *-ma* after the verb stem and the word ‘*mar*’ at the end of a clause are used. Main clauses follow subordinate ones. The subordinate clauses are formed with participles or converbs (Savelyev, 2020).

3 Adaptation of MAIN to the Chuvash language

The Chuvash MAIN version was adapted from the revised English version of MAIN (Gagarina, Klop et al., 2019) following the guidelines (Bohnacker & Gagarina, 2019). We translated the MAIN protocol into Chuvash with the help of two native speakers with university education, who also proofread it. The story scripts have been controlled for their complexity and parallelism in macro- and microstructure. Moreover, we took into consideration the recommendations about ensuring the functional, cultural, and metric equivalence given by Peña (2007) for the translation of different assessment instruments and their instructions in cross-cultural child development research. The critical points in the adaptation of MAIN to Chuvash are described below.

First, Chuvash has no grammatical gender. In this regard, there were some difficulties connected with the translation of the 3rd person pronouns, that are expressed in Chuvash with the form *вӑл* (*väl*) ‘he/she/it’. In the *Baby Goats* and *Baby Birds* stories, the authors observed two sentences where the pronoun *ӑна* (*ăna*) ‘him/her/it’ might refer either to (a) the fox or the baby goat or (b) the cat or the baby bird. Since this might be challenging, especially for the children with DLD, who are vulnerable to difficulties in following the reference to characters (e.g. Fichman et. al., 2022, among others), the personal pronoun in these sentences was substituted with the nouns *тилӗ* (*tilĕ*) ‘fox’ and *кушак* (*kushak*) ‘cat’, respectively: (a) *Тилӗ качака путеккине вӗсертрӗ те, кайӑк тилле хӑваласа ячӗ* ‘The fox let go of the baby goat and the bird chased *the fox* away’; (b) *Кушак кайӑк чӗппине вӗсертсе ярчӗ те, йытӑ кушака хӑваласа ячӗ* ‘The cat let go of the baby bird and the dog chased *the cat* away’

Second, Chuvash is a pro-drop language allowing for the omission of pragmatically/grammatically inferable classes of pronouns. For example, pronouns were omitted in the sentences *Кайӑк амӑшӗ хӑйӗн ачисем валли пысӑк хурт йӑтса таврӑнчӗ, анчах Ø кушака асӑрхамарӗ* ‘The mother bird came back with a big worm for her children, but *she* did not see the cat’ and *Качака-амӑшӗ путеккине шыврап тӗксе кӑларчӗ, анчах Ø та тилӗне асӑрхамарӗ* ‘The mother goat pushed her baby goat out of the water, but *she* did not see the fox.’

Third, for the expression of the meaning ‘X wants to do Y’ in Chuvash, different constructions can be used. One of them is formed by combining the future participle suffix and the causative case suffix, e.g. *Ача кӑмӑлсӑрланчӗ, вӑл мечӗкне шыврап кӑларасшӑн пулчӗ* ‘He was sad and *wanted to get* his ball back.’ Another one is the construction of the future tense participle + the verb *кил* ‘to come’, e.g., *Манӑн кӑлтасси ҫиес килет* ‘I *want to grab* a sausage.’ When translating the stories, we equally used both constructions.

Finally, in contrast to English, Chuvash has no articles and is an agglutinating language with a high number of suffixes. Thus, the total number of words in each of the four stories is much lower than in the English version (e.g., 127 Chuvash words vs. 178 English words in *Baby Birds*; 124 Chuvash words vs. 178 English words in *Cat*).

4 Conclusion

The Chuvash MAIN has an extensive potential to be used in various areas of research and language didactics. On the one hand, it can serve as an assessment tool for the narrative abilities of bi-/ multilingual children growing up in the Russian-Chuvash bilingual environment, which is very important for the screening of DLD. On the other hand, the Chuvash MAIN has a practical implementation in the Chuvash language teaching. It can be used either as an oral part of a Chuvash language proficiency assessment tool or a placement test at local schools and universities. Also, it can serve as an example of a task for the development of oral speech in the lessons of the Chuvash language. Moreover, there is currently a growing scientific interest for studying minority languages in the world and, in particular, in Russia (e.g. the project ‘‘Minority Languages of Russia’’ led by the Laboratory for Study and Preservation of Minority Languages, Russian Academy of Science). However, there is a lack of instruments that allow researchers

to assess and compare different aspects of languages with each other. When MAIN will be adapted to additional minority languages of Russia, there will be a great opportunity to compare the situation with minority languages in different regions of the country. The Chuvash MAIN will be piloted in three different elicitation modes (telling, retelling and model story) by the end of 2022.

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