

Ferguson, Jenanne. *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practices in the City*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 336 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00, hard bound.

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Jenanne Ferguson's *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practices in the City* is an expansive ethnography of language maintenance and resilience, past and present, in the Sakha Republic, a Far Eastern autonomous republic of the Russian Federation. Sakha, a Siberian Turkic language with strong Mongolic influences, is unique among the minority languages of the Russian Federation in its large number of speakers and high degree of intergenerational transmission. The book primarily focuses on how Sakha speakers adapt their language use amidst shifting historical and indexical fields, from the early Soviet *korenizatsiya* policies to the assimilatory pressures of Putin's Russian Federation. Though Ferguson uses a variety of methods, she mainly relies on chain-referral sampling within rural villages and the city of Yakutsk. Ferguson uses in-depth interviews with speakers about their "linguistic trajectories" to carefully attend to the movements and flows of Sakha speaking practices across various historical moments (196). Her methodology is particularly incisive in her discussion of rural-urban migration in the Sakha republic and its effects on language use. While the text is dense with ethnographic detail, her arguments are twofold: (1) local Sakha conceptions of words themselves as having agency actively shape Sakha language use, and (2) Sakha language maintenance is contingent upon dense social networks that connect the city with the *ulus* (the rural Sakha village). In other words, Sakha notions of linguistic agency, together with communication practices across diffuse kin networks are key in shaping Sakha language use in the 21st century.

Ferguson devotes the first three chapters of the book to a discussion of Soviet-era pressures and ideologies of speaking, noting the effects of historical shifts in Soviet language policy, from *korenizatsiya* to Stalin-era assimilatory pressures, to the late-Soviet burgeoning national consciousness, on Sakha language use. Through her extensive interviews with older Sakha speakers, Ferguson traces the impressions of these macro-level historical shifts in the speech patterns and "family language policies" of her interviewees (34). Interestingly, she observes a gap between the top-down official language policies of the Soviet era and actual language use, and her

interviewees give many examples of covert Sakha language use within these repressive contexts. Later, in the third chapter, she discusses the late-Soviet national movement in the Sakha republic, when the Sakha language and national symbols acquired a sense of pride and cultural cache that they had not held for decades.

Ferguson's discussion of contemporary Sakha language use is focused on the demographic shifts resulting from migration from the countryside to urban Yakutsk. This shift has complex implications for minority-language maintenance in the Russian Federation. Associations between indigenous languages and the idealized countryside are well-established in the Russian context, and furthermore, urban centers are more often Russian-dominated language domain than the villages. Ferguson approaches the effects of rural-urban migration on Sakha language use by analyzing the various social networks in which her interviewees are embedded, including *ulus* networks, networks of school classmates, and emergent digital networks dispersed across various media platforms. She finds that these networks of kinship and obligation bring speakers back to the Sakha language, keeping them connected to village life and instilling a sense of pride in being a Sakha speaker. These informal institutions of language maintenance also intersect with more formal institutions, such as the Sakha-language kindergartens and schools. Ferguson interviews several families about their decisions to pursue Sakha-language education for their children, finding that a complex set of emotional, practical, and bureaucratic factors shape their decisions.

What is interesting about Ferguson's focus on Sakha language use in urban contexts is her discussion of how speakers innovatively use Sakha in Yakutsk despite its strong ideological ties to ruralness, or at worst, backwardness. Ferguson analyzes how speakers create a post-Herderian conception of indigenous language use, one that is not iconic of the rural landscape, but generative of new, possibly cosmopolitan meanings. One of the primary innovative Sakha strategies that Ferguson discusses is Sakha-Russian code-switching, a practice that is emblematic of urban speech in Yakutsk. Yet, where there is innovation, there is also friction; as is the case in many post-revitalization minority language contexts, Ferguson observes a widespread discourse among speakers that Sakha speech must be 'pure', that is, free of Russian loanwords and phonetic influence. The emergence of a syncretic register of Sakha speech is a dialectical process, Ferguson argues, which ultimately involves a renegotiation of the indexical ties of Sakha and Russian, respectively.

Ferguson spends the final chapter discussing exemplary genres of this emergent register of urban Sakha, that of Sakha-language hip-hop and Sakha social media. Scholars of language and culture have long understood hip-hop as a genre of linguistic innovation and globalization, and drawing upon the work of Homi Bhabha, Ferguson sees this genre as a “third space,” a site that allows for the synthesis of oppositional discourses and cultural forms (253). She suggests that Sakha hip-hop manages to introduce elements of cosmopolitan un-markedness to the Sakha language, while retaining its indexical ties to the *ulus* and nature. Another “third space” is Sakha social media, which similarly serves as an avenue for ideological shift and the reification of urban Sakha speech as a legible and commendable register.

Words Like Birds is a valuable addition to the language maintenance literature in its focus on emergent bilingualism, new media, and rural-urban migration. Ferguson’s writing is clear, sharp, and exact, moving between micro and macro scales of history with ease. Her book delves into the personal and emotional underpinnings of language maintenance, which, as she demonstrates, exert a crucial impact on language ideologies and intergenerational linguistic transmission. Ferguson gives a remarkable amount of space to her interviewees’ distinct understandings of language, history, and homeland, and prefers to present well-chosen interview excerpts to explicit theorizing. This is both a strength and a weakness: her claims about language maintenance across social networks, for example, are sharp, innovative, and thoroughly backed up with evidence; but her claims about Sakha language ontologies are less so, her interventions into the language ideology concept are not fully convincing. This text will be of interest to scholars of postsocialism, language maintenance, Siberia, and indigenous studies.