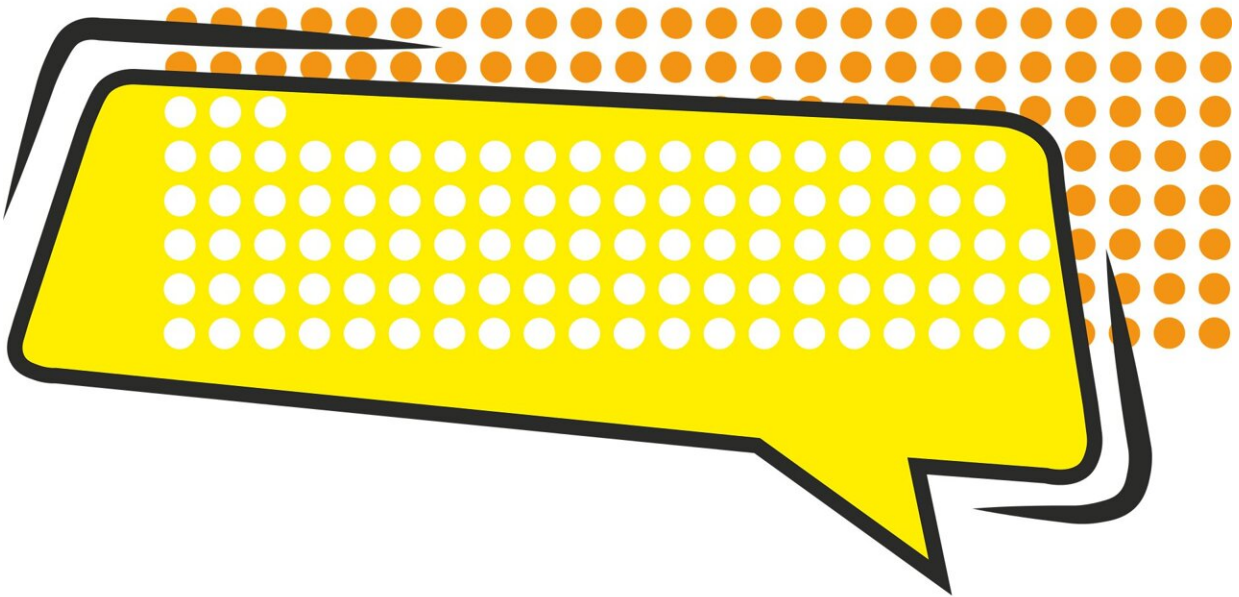


Khanty dialects found to differ more than Slavic languages

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Idalia Fedotova, researcher at HSE University and the RAS Ivannikov Institute for System Programming, examined lexical differences across Khanty dialects and found that members of this relatively small ethnic group speak three distinct languages—rather than two, as previously thought. The findings are published in *Ural-Altaic Studies*.

The Khanty are an [indigenous people](#) with a population of approximately

30,000 living in Russia's Western Siberia, mainly in Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug—Yugra. Their [native language](#) belongs to the Uralic family and is close to Hungarian. Scholars traditionally separate the Khanty [dialect](#) continuum into two dialectal groups: Northern (Western) and Eastern Khanty. Southern dialects of Khanty disappeared in the 20th century. In another terminology, these groups are referred to as separate languages: Northern and Eastern Khanty.

In the last decade, new sources on Khanty dialects have become available, including 18th-century archives, 19th and 20th-century vocabulary lists, new academic dictionaries, and records from many years of field research. The new findings, published on LingvoDoc, make it possible to perform etymological and statistical analysis of Khanty dialects' basic vocabulary. Terms for [body parts](#) (arm, leg, head), simple actions (walking, standing, lying down, sleeping), and [landscape features](#) (mountain, land) are considered basic vocabulary, because such terms exist in all languages and are independent of cultural specifics.

Fedotova used a list of 110 basic concepts, matched them with words from 14 sources, and calculated the percentages of coincidence across vocabulary variants. She found that Khanty dialects today consist of three, rather than two, groups, since the eastern dialectal group falls into two distinct variants: Surgut Khanty and Vakh Khanty. For language variants to be defined as a single language or at least as dialects of the same language, their basic vocabulary must coincide by more than 90%. In this case, coincidences were much lower: 79%. The researcher therefore argues that these variants can be recognized as separate languages.

"Generally, dialects are described as variants of the same [language](#) when people speaking different variants can still understand each other. Indeed, even speakers of different but closely related languages can communicate. In the case of Khanty, speakers of its different variants

are sometimes unable to comprehend each other's speech. While the Khanty identify as one people, the differences between their dialects are greater than those between certain Slavic languages, eg between Russian and Czech or between Serbian and Polish," says Idalia Fedotova, Lecturer, HSE School of Foreign Languages; Junior Research Fellow, Institute of System Programming, Russian Academy of Sciences

More information: Idalia Fedotova et al, Диалектное членение хантыйского языка по данным базисной лексики, *Ural-Altaic Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.37892/2500-2902-2022-47-4-117-166](https://doi.org/10.37892/2500-2902-2022-47-4-117-166) (in Russian)

LingvoDoc: lingvodoc.ispras.ru/

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