



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Karagash (Astrakhan, Russia) – Language Snapshot

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SUMMARY

Karagash is an endangered Kipchak Turkic language spoken by five to seven thousand people in four villages and several urban localities in Astrakhan Oblast, Russia. Its complex and largely politicized status, with some considering it a Tatar dialect and others a Noghay dialect, has led to Karagash being under-described and having little formal recognition. However, it is clearly felt by its speakers to be a distinct language variety. Karagash speakers claim it has only limited intelligibility with any standard Turkic language, and there are ongoing codification efforts within the community. As younger Karagash speakers are rapidly shifting to Russian, documentation and revitalization work is essential.

Keywords: Turkic languages; Languages of Russia; Karagash; Nogai; Tatar; Kipchak

КРАТКОЕ СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

Карагашский — это кыпчакско-тюркский язык, находящийся под угрозой исчезновения, на котором говорят 5-7 тысяч человек в четырех селах и нескольких городах Астраханской области Российской Федерации. Его сложный и во многом политизированный статус, в

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рамках дискуссий о котором его относят то к татарским, то к ногайским диалектам, привел к тому, что карагашский остается недостаточно описанным и формально непризнанным языком. Тем не менее это, несомненно, особый идиом. По словам носителей, он обладает лишь ограниченной взаимопонятностью с другими тюркскими языками, и в сообществе ведется работа над его кодификацией. В условиях, когда молодые носители карагашского быстро переходят на русский, работа по документации и ревитализации языка совершенно необходима.

Language names: Karagash, Karaghash, Karaghash Noghay

Language family: Turkic

ISO 639-3 code: NA

Glottolog code: kara1509

Population: 5–7 thousand

Location: 46.66, 48.12 (Astrakhan Oblast, Russia)

Vitality rating: endangered

1. THE KARAGASH PEOPLE

Karagash, also known as Karagash Noghay, is a minority language spoken in Astrakhan Oblast, Russia. Although “Karaghash” is a more precise transliteration of how Karagash speakers call their own language, I use Karagash in English-language contexts. This spelling, presumably influenced by Russian, is preferred by the language community and is used in their own social media initiatives such as the “Karagash Nogay Project”. My spelling of other Turkic language names, including Noghay, follows the standard set in Johanson & Csató (2022). Russian-language place names, including those of Turkic origin, are transliterated in the way commonly preferred by English-language media outlets and websites such as Wikipedia.

Karagash is generally classified as a Kipchak Turkic language. However, its precise position within the sub-branch has been a matter of politicized debate and is discussed below (Arslanov 1996: 187). It is sometimes described as a dialect of larger languages like Tatar and Noghay, but measuring mutual intelligibility between Karagash and other Turkic languages is beyond the scope of this brief, descriptive article. Many Karagash speakers claim they have trouble understanding Standard Tatar and Standard Noghay. This fact is sociolinguistically significant, providing insight into speakers’ language attitudes and identity regardless of how factually correct their claims are. A basic lexical comparison of the entries for Karagash, Tatar, and Noghay in the Turkic Database confirms that certain words from the Swadesh list are dissimilar for two or all three of the languages and have unrelated etymologies, but these are a minority (Straughn 2023).

Once home to the capital cities of three medieval nomadic states, the Khazar Khaganate, the Golden Horde, and the Astrakhan Khanate, today Astrakhan Oblast is an ethnically and linguistically diverse region in southwestern Russia bordering on Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea (see map in [Figure 1](#)). Ethnic

Russians form a slight majority of the population, with Kazakhs, Tatars, Noghays, and Kalmyks being some of the largest minorities. Many of these communities are impoverished. They face institutionalized discrimination and are overrepresented among Astrakhan residents sent to fight in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. This has led to the emergence of secessionist movements aspiring to establish an independent Turkic state in Astrakhan (see Shabashewitz 2023).

Historically a nomadic group, the Karagash Noghays were forcibly sedentarized in the 1930s under the Soviet collectivization policy. Following this, until the dissolution of the USSR, they lived in about a dozen villages scattered in the steppes and deserts to the northeast of the city of Astrakhan. In the 1980s, a natural gas field was discovered near the geographic center of the Karagash settlement area. Gas extraction began, and a gas processing plant was constructed in the same location soon afterwards. As a result of extreme pollution caused by these facilities, Karagash people were forced to migrate away from several of their villages. Today, only three of the original settlements where the Karagash people were a majority have sizable populations. These are Janay and Yasyn-Sokan in Krasnoyarsky District and Lapas in Kharabalinsky District. Recently, one more rural locality has gained a Karagash majority: the village of Rastopulovka in Privolzhsky District, which had a small population mostly composed of Russians and Kazakhs, received over a thousand Karagash forced migrants in the late 1990s. An even higher number of Karagash ecological refugees moved to the city of Astrakhan and other urban localities in the region.



Figure 1: The Karagash settlement area today.

The precise size of the Karagash community is unknown because the Russian census agency does not consider them a separate ethnic group. Local ethnographers estimate that the ethnic community numbers about 10 thousand people (Skryl'nikova 2008a: 89), and my observations suggest that between five and seven thousand of them speak the Karagash language.

2. LANGUAGE STATUS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

In the formal system of ethnic classification that existed in the USSR, the Karagash were considered Tatars. This political decision was influenced by Nikolai Baskakov, a linguist and ethnographer who classified Karagash as a “mixed dialect of Tatar that shares some similarities with North Caucasus Noghay” (Baskakov 1962: 244) but without having done extensive fieldwork in the region. In accordance with the Soviet policy, schools in villages with major Karagash population would teach Standard Tatar as the local “mother tongue” even though it was not readily intelligible to Karagash speakers. Until recently, Karagash was an unwritten language, and some of the older Karagash people who received school education in the Soviet era still perceive Tatar as a prestigious language suitable for literature while viewing Karagash as a “rough and simple dialect you can use at home but not when writing poems” (Oksana Kaplanova, personal communication, 2018).

Even after decades of forced Tatarization, the Karagash preserved their pre-Soviet endonym, *karayaş noyaylar* or simply *noyaylar*. Despite the formal status of a Tatar dialect that Karagash had in the 20th century and Tatar's influence as the “school language” on informal Karagash speech, Leonid Arslanov, the first and only Soviet linguist to research Karagash in depth, unequivocally defined it as a Noghay language, both linguistically and based on speakers' perception. According to Arslanov (1992: 6), Karagash branched off the Kuban dialect of Noghay proper around 260 years ago, when a group of its speakers moved from the North Caucasus to the steppes of Astrakhan. Since then, it has been developing in isolation from Noghay proper and in intense contact with Kazakh and, later, Tatar.

The 1990s saw an uptick in ethnic activism all around Russia (see Gorenburg 2003), and the Karagash were no exception. The Noghay movement *Birlik* (“Unity”) was founded by the Karagash historian Ravil Dzhumanov in 1990 in response to the ecological crisis described above. Since most villages affected by gas mining and processing were Karagash, consolidation of the local community in the face of this problem took the form of ethnic mobilization and sped up the community's search for its identity. *Birlik* leaders declared that they sought to “revive” the Noghay identity that had been suppressed by Soviet-era Tatarization, and their ideas quickly gained popularity. Dzhumanov presented his cause to the regional government and managed to change the language policy so that Noghay rather than Tatar became the “mother tongue” taught at village schools (Skryl'nikova 2008b).

After a short-lived revival in the 2000s, the school curriculum changed again, now at the countrywide level. Vladimir Putin's rule brought a wave of linguistic Russification as a part of his “unity through uniformity” policy (Jankiewicz, Knyaginina & Prina 2020), which is still ongoing. Noghay classes, just like any other “mother tongue” lessons except for Russian, were demoted to non-compulsory subjects and limited to one or two hours per week.

Interestingly, the backlash in the community was mild, largely because most Karagash speakers (apart from those engaged in ethnic activism) never identified with the Standard Noghay that was taught in schools in the first place. Noghay classes used textbooks based on the North Caucasus dialects of Noghay

from which Karagash had long since diverged, and many would complain that this “textbook language”, just like Tatar, was not what they really spoke. Adult speakers of Karagash who received no Noghay language education often say texts in Standard Noghay are hard to understand. To quote a village librarian from Yasyn Sokan, “They ship these Noghay-language magazines from Dagestan and they lie here like museum pieces. No one ever reads them because they are not in our language. Sure, we are Noghays, but we are different Noghays” (Nadira Dzhumanova, personal communication, 2018).¹

Despite speakers’ perception that their language differs significantly from both Standard Tatar and Standard Noghay, Karagash lacks clear formal recognition. Russia’s school system and the Federal Statistics Service classify the Karagash as speakers of either Noghay or Tatar. Karagash lacks an ISO 639-3 code and is listed on Glottolog as a dialect of Noghay under the ID *kara1509*. But the World Atlas of Language Structures lists it as a separate language with the code *nok*. The list of Russia’s languages published by the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, too, lists Karagash as a separate language and marks it as “definitely endangered” (Korjakov et al. 2020).

3. LANGUAGE SITUATION AND VITALITY

Historical sources suggest that the Karagash have been living in a multilingual environment for centuries. Before their migration to Astrakhan, they were in contact with Circassian and Vainakh speakers. In Astrakhan, they have been in contact with Kazakh, Tatar, Kalmyk, and Russian. The influence of these languages can be seen in extensive lexical borrowing as well as certain morphological developments. For example, Dinara Satanova notes that the definite future tense formed with the suffix *-aĵaq/-äĵäk* in Standard Noghay has been lost in Karagash. This development may be explained by the lack of such a tense in Kazakh (Satanova 2015: 28).

Unlike those Russian republics that have some degree of linguistic autonomy, Astrakhan Oblast is not defined as an “ethnic” region. This means that Russian is used there as the sole language of administration, business, education, and media. The dominance of Russian, coupled with mass migration by Karagash people to urban and suburban areas as described above, poses a significant threat to the vitality of Karagash. More detailed research is needed to determine the actual degree of language shift to Russian among the Karagash, but preliminary personal observations suggest that no more than half the ethnic community has a good command of Karagash. It is still the default language of informal communication between people aged 45 and older in villages like Yasyn Sokan, Janay, and Lapas. People aged 20 to 30 who were raised in urban areas and in the large, suburban village of Rastopulovka usually say they understand the language but cannot speak it, while teens and children have little to no familiarity with it unless their parents are engaged in ethnic activism. Non-mandatory Standard Noghay classes offered at several rural schools do not seem to have much influence on students’ proficiency in spoken Karagash.

4. PREVIOUS AND CURRENT RESEARCH

Previous research on Karagash is largely limited to the grammatical descriptions by Arslanov (1992, 1996) and several short pieces on the language situation and ethnic identity such as those by Satanova (2015), Alekseev (2018) and Ishmukhambetov (2020).

1 Here and elsewhere, quotations attributed to informants were spoken in Russian and translated by the author.

During the recent few years, prominent local historian and language activist Ramil Ishmukhambetov has been working on a separate literary standard for Karagash. While Ramil's project lacks support from regional authorities, he is respected by many in the community. His lectures on history, language and culture attract many Karagash guests, and a few younger community members have been assisting him with his work. Even though Ishmukhambetov identifies as an ethnic Noghay first and foremost and does not consider Karagash an entirely separate language, he thinks the differences between Karagash Noghay and Noghay proper are too significant to be ignored. In his words, "We do not reject Standard Noghay, our codification project can and should co-exist with it peacefully. North Caucasus dialects-based Standard Noghay may be more useful for media that are of interest to all Noghays, but we need a standardized written Karagash to record, publish, and preserve local lore and promote Internet communication in the language we actually speak in our villages."

Ramil Ishmukhambetov is currently working on a unified spelling guide, a dictionary, and a self-study textbook for Karagash Noghay.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ramil Ishmukhambetov, Eldar Idrisov, Rufia Irgalieva, and Nadira Dzhumanova, who were my guides during my field trips to the Karagash villages of Rastopulovka and Yasyn Sokan. I also thank Serik Dzhumagulov and Liliya Dzhumanova, who provided me with information on the life of displaced Karagash people in urban environments, and my wife Ana, who made me fall in love with Astrakhan and its underappreciated diversity.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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