This paper investigates the situation where only one speaker of a former language community is left. Klavdiya Plotnikova was the last known speaker of Kamas, a Sayan Samoyed language which gradually became extinct during the 20th century. As far as is known, the last speakers lived in the village of Abalakovo in the Krasnoyarsk Krai.

The objective of this paper is to determine the range of Plotnikova’s knowledge of Kamas and describe the changes the language has gone through in the processes of language shift and language contact. In order to do that, it is important to distinguish Pre-shift and Post-shift Kamas, Plotnikova representing the latter. Pre-shift denotes the language before the language shift from Kamas to Russian which took place at some time between the beginning of the 20th century and the 1940s. Tales from Kai Donner’s materials collected in 1912 and 1914 are used in this study as a comparative example of Pre-shift Kamas.

Plotnikova reportedly did not use Kamas for 20 years before the time she was discovered by A. Matveyev in 1963. Her native language had attrited and was suddenly reactivated by the interest of the linguists. Ago Künnap, the researcher who worked with Plotnikova for several years, reported her to have recalled the language gradually, at first remembering only separate words and phrases, then later being able to produce whole sentences and longer texts.

Studying Plotnikova’s Kamas raises several possibly unsolvable problems: it is impossible to acquire an assessment of her proficiency from other speakers, which could otherwise shed light on her proficiency level and whether she was in fact a semi-speaker. The information about the way the materials were collected from her and how her Kamas was reactivated is also scarce.

Klavdiya Plotnikova’s language was heavily influenced by Russian phonetically, as well as morphologically and syntactically. It has been subject to reduction and simplification of grammar. The typical converb constructions have almost completely disappeared from her Kamas and the sentences are constructed according to syntactic rules of Russian.

The method of research in this study is transcribing a part of recordings of Plotnikova’s Kamas and then comparing it to Pre-shift Kamas, taking into account different morphological and syntactical features. This study aims to describe these changes and determine her level of proficiency.

References:
Künnap, Ago 1964. Uued jäljed kamasside maal. – Keel ja Kirjandus 9: 561