

Features of the Mansi language writing¹

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Abstract. The article examines the features of the writing of the Mansi language, highlights the history of its origin, as well as the current state of the Mansi script.

Keywords. the Mansi language, language with a recent system of writing, creation of writing, history of Mansi writing.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Mansi language is one of the languages with a recent system of writing². The process of formation of the Mansi writing system can be conditionally divided into several stages, each of which is marked by significant transformations: 1) the second half of the XIX century – the beginning of 1930; 2) 1931-1937; 3) from 1937 to the present.

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² Language with a recent system of writing is the language for which the writing system was developed after 1917.

The first attempts to create the Mansi script date back to the second half of the XIX century, until that time Mansi communication was limited to oral speech, in everyday life they used tamga (generic family sign) and pictographic writing (writing, the signs of which represent the object depicted by them) [Balandin, Vakhrusheva 1957: 7]. The main merit in this is assigned to the Kazan Orthodox Missionary Society [Alkor 1931: 17] and local priests who, with the assistance of Russian-speaking Mansi, translated the main religious texts into the Mansi language. Graphically, the Mansi language was written in Cyrillic – Church Slavonic or Russian script was used. The most famous monument of these years is the Gospel of Matthew (1868) in the Konda dialect, written and translated by Grigory Popov. Efforts were also made to teach Mansi to read and write: by the end of the XIX – beginning of the XX century, the first schools were opened, Bishop Nikanor compiled the first primer for eastern Kondinsky Mansi ("ABC for the Voguls of the Urals", 1903). But due to the lack of reading skills among the local population, the efforts of the missionaries did not lead to the creation and consolidation of the Mansi script [Lytkin, Maytinskaya, Redei 1976: 234].

Since the mid-1920s of the XX century, systematic research activities have been organized on the creation of writing for the majority of the small peoples of the North: Sami, Mansi, Khanty, Nenets, Nganasans, Selkups, Evens, Itelmen, Aleut and others. The research was carried out on the basis of the Northern Faculty of the Leningrad Oriental Institute named after A. S. Enekidze. For several years of joint work, a group of ethnographers and linguists created the

"Unified Northern Alphabet" (UNA), consisting of 32 Latin graphemes and several diacritics to express palatalization, aspiration, longitude and some other aspects (Fig. 1). Later, the ESA served as the basis for the creation of the Mansi script (and writing systems of other languages) [Alkor 1931: 20].

Fig. 1. The Alphabet of the peoples of the North [Wikipedia 2021].

Aa	Bb	Cc	Ǝe	Dd	Зз
Зз	Ee	Əə	Ææ	Ff	Gg
Hh	Һһ	Ii	Ьь	Jj	Kk
Ll	Łł	Mm	Nn	Ŋŋ	Oo
Өө	Pp	Qq	Rr	ƦƦ	Ss
Šš	Tt	Uu	Vv	Ww	Xx
Yy	Zz	Ƶƶ			

The Northern Faculty of the Institute of the East, transformed in 1930 into the Institute of the Peoples of the North, continued to work on the study of the languages of small peoples and the creation of relevant writing for use in everyday life and literacy. The first stage during the formation process of the Mansi script ended by 1932 with the establishment of the composition of vowels and consonant phonemes of the language and the creation of a new special alphabet. The Sosva dialect was chosen as the basis for it, due to its greatest prevalence among the population and less exposure to foreign

influence: at the time of the research, about 65% of the population spoke the Sosva dialect, 31% – in Konda. The new alphabet was developed by V. N. Chernetsov and I. Ya. Cherntsova under the guidance of V. Steinitz and A. I. Yemelyanov. It consisted of 29 letters, including the designations of palatalized consonants, and had the following form [Wikipedia 2021]:

**Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Hj Ii Jj Kk Ll Łł Mm Nn Ńń Dŋ Oo Pp
Rr Ss Śś Tt Țț Uu Vv Zz Ъъ**

The researchers' decision to base the Mansi alphabet on the Latin alphabet was due to their belief that such graphics, combined with diacritical marks, are able to convey the features of the speech of the Northern people as much as possible. Until 1937, all scientific and other literature on the Mansi language was published on the basis of this alphabet [Rombandeeva 2017: 42]. The difficulties that arose in the process of its practical use by the teaching staff of Mansi schools caused its further revision and modification. By the decree of the Presidium of the Council of Nationalities of the USSR, the staff of the Institute of the Peoples of the North was instructed to develop a new alphabet, but already based on Cyrillic and Russian [Rombandeeva 2017: 42]. At the initial stage, the project was carried out by V. N. Chernetsov, I. Ya. Cherntsova and V. Steinitz, later – A. N. Balandin, E. I. Rombandeeva and others.

The Mansi script was translated into a Russian graphic basis in 1937, containing 34 letters: 33 of them corresponded to the Russian

alphabet, 34 were introduced – *h*, diacritics indicating palatalization of consonants were excluded, the longitude of vowel phonemes was not taken into account; the letters *б, д, ж, з, ф, ы, ч, ш, щ* were used for borrowings from the Russian language [Rombandeeva 2017: 42]. According to the responses of non-literate students and teachers, the new alphabet also caused difficulties in mastering the Mansi script.

In the post-war years, work on improving the writing of the Mansi language and the publication of textbooks and methodological materials was continued. In the 1950s, it was proposed to add a sign (*h*”) to the alphabet for a nasal posterior consonant [Burykin 2000: 153]. Researchers of the Faculty of Oriental Studies (A. N. Balandin, M. P. Tikhonov) and the Faculty of Finno-Ugric Studies (E. I. Rombandeeva) of Leningrad State University made a special contribution to the development of Mansi graphics and grammar. In the middle of the XX century they published several textbooks [Balandin, Rombandeeva, Tikhonov 1950] and dictionaries based on Russian Cyrillic [Rombandeeva 1954].

The late 1970s – early 1980s marked a significant breakthrough in the improvement of the Mansi script. According to the research of E. I. Rombandeeva, "laboratory experimental studies and auditory seminars on the Mansi language have shown that this language has long and short vowel phonemes, as in Hungarian, Finnish, Sami, Karelian and some other Finno-Ugric languages. There are no sonorous noisy consonant phonemes in the Mansi language, as in Finnish, Khanty and most Finno-Ugric languages" [Rombandeeva 2017: 46], and this meant the need to refine the current Mansi alphabet, like its predecessors,

which does not take into account long vowels specific to the Mansi language.

As a result of laboratory studies conducted in Mansiysk, 6 long and 6 short vowels, 4 long and 4 short iotized vowel phonemes were identified that were not taken into account in previous versions of the alphabet. The facts revealed showed the need to form a new version of writing that was not based on the alphabet of the Russian language, since this "was not acceptable for the Mansi language, because it did not reflect the essence of the sound system of Mansi speech in writing" [Rombandeeva 2017: 47]. As a result of large-scale measures to clarify and further reform the Mansi graphics and orthography, E. I. Rombandeeva developed a project on improving the graphics, spelling and alphabet of the Mansi language on the basis of the Institute of Linguistics of the USSR Academy of Sciences (RAS), taking into account the need to include new phonetic data, as well as the compactness of writing the Mansi script. The project was approved by the Ministry of Education of the RSFSR in Moscow on December 12, 1979. From that moment to the present day, all dictionaries, educational and methodological literature for schools and universities are published on this graphic and spelling basis.

Into the alphabet of the Mansi language 10 graphemes were introduced, denoting the vowel length expressed by a horizontal line above the corresponding grapheme, graphemes *б̄, ж̄, з̄, ф̄, ы̄, ь̄, ӱ̄, ӱ̄* are also included, to denote sounds not characteristic of the Mansi language, but used in writing in words borrowed from Russian

[Rombandeeva 2017: 49]. Thus, the Mansi writing system included 44 graphemes (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2. The modern Mansi alphabet. The correspondence of Cyrillic and Latin letters [Wikipedia: free Encyclopedia 2021].

Кириллица	Латиница	Кириллица	Латиница	Кириллица	Латиница	Кириллица	Латиница	Кириллица	Латиница
А а, Ä ä	A a	Э э	Z z	(Нь нь)	Ŋ ŋ	У у, Ў ў	U u	Ы ы	Ь ь
Б б	B b	И и, Й й	I i	Ў у	Ŋ ŋ	Ф ф	F f	Ь	-
В в	V v	Й й	J j	О о, Ъ ъ	O o	Х х	H h	Э э, Ё ё	E e
Г г	G g, Ğ ğ	К к	K k	П п	P p	Ц ц	C c	Ю ю, Ё ё	(Ju ju)
Д д	D d	Л л	L l	Р р	R r	Ч ч	S s	Я я, Яя	(Ja ja)
Е е, Ё ё	E e, (Je je)	(Ль ль)	Ľ ĺ	С с	S s	Ш ш	S s		
Ё ё, Ё ё	(Jo jo)	М м	M m	Т т	T t	Щ щ	S s		
Ж ж	Z z	Н н	N n	(ТЬ ть)	Ť ť	Ъ	-		

According to A. A. Burykin, this modification of graphics is considered one of the most successful and indicative for subsequent reforms of the languages of the small peoples of the North: "... the clarifications made during it are motivated phonologically (vowel length plays a meaning-distinguishing role) and are not associated with the invention of new graphic signs, which usually incredibly complicates the process of making fonts, republishing literature and requires retraining of personnel. The reform also preserved the opportunity for native speakers of the Mansi language to use previously published editions, since the continuity observed between graphic

systems leaves all the literature previously published in the Mansi language understandable to the reader" [Burykin 2000: 154].

It should be noted that the graphics of the Mansi language also differ significantly at the phonetic and phonological levels. Thus, phonological recording is characterized by the designation of each phoneme with a special sign, diacritics are used mainly only to indicate the length of vowels and the softness of consonant sounds. The phonological transcription of the Mansi literary language is presented as follows [Rombandeeva 2017: 53]:

- vowels: *a, ā, e, ē, ə, ä, i, ī, ĭ, ĭ̃, o, ō, u, ú, ū*;
- consonants: *γ, x, j, k, (k°), l, l', m, n, n', η, p, r, s, s', t, t', w*.

Phonetic writing is characterized by graphically very accurate writing, diacritics are actively used (Fig. 3). Such writing is used for purely linguistic purposes. On its basis, the number of vowel and consonant phonemes in the language is revealed, their variability is determined, phonetic, morphological and syntactic features of the language are revealed. Due to the obvious complexity of these two variants of graphic writing, no language in the world is built on their basis.

Fig. 3. Example of phonetic recording of the Mansi language by E. I. Rombandeeva [Rombandeeva 2017: 53].

pilas'i sōwir
sōwirris' ōli. akwnakt ājkwāl sājt ānlimate xāntamlaste:
matər ti xājti! roxtuptaxtas, ēl - ojmiytas.

The writing system of the Mansi language, proposed at the end of the XX century by domestic researchers, remains relevant and optimal for use in wide circles and at present – among the scientific community, in schools, in everyday communication.

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