



# Language attitudes and endangered languages: a pilot study on the Kalmyk language

Piergiorgio Mura<sup>1</sup> · Gilyana Namrova<sup>1</sup> · Francesca Santulli<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the sociolinguistic situation of the Kalmyk language, focusing on the role of language attitudes. It initially offers background information on the language and its recent history, focusing on the language policies carried out both in the republic of Kalmykia and at Federal level in Russia (Sect. 1.1). The paper then refers to the literature concerning language endangerment and the importance of language attitudes in this special context (Sect. 1.2). The methodology adopted for the study is then illustrated (Sect. 2), examining materials, procedures, and participants. We studied language attitudes by running a questionnaire, whose results, despite the limits of a direct method, offer valuable resources to describe the present sociolinguistic status of Kalmyk (Sect. 3). Participants expressed generally favourable attitudes towards the Kalmyk language, although such a disposition emerged more in generic questions than in questions about specific language-related activities. The younger respondents (18–29 y.o.) turned out to be less positively oriented towards the minority language than the older ones. Therefore, although there seems to be widespread interest in the Kalmyk language, concrete actions for its promotion may not be easily implemented, especially when they concern the younger generations.

## 1 Background and theoretical framework

### 1.1 The Kalmyk language and its sociolinguistic condition

The Kalmyk language (*xalymg keln*) (ISO 639-2, Language Code: xal) belongs to the western branch of the Mongolic language family and is the only Mongolic language spoken in Europe. It has an official status in the Republic of Kalmykia, which is a sovereign entity within the Russian Federation. According to the 2021 census conducted in the Russian Federation, the number of ethnic Kalmyks is 179,547, 107,742 of whom are reported to be proficient in Kalmyk (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2021). However, the population coverage

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✉ P. Mura  
[piergiorgio.mura@unive.it](mailto:piergiorgio.mura@unive.it)

<sup>1</sup> Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Dorsoduro 1405, 30123 Venice, Italy

in the census is estimated to be incomplete, as the Levada Center<sup>1</sup> (2021) data indicates that 42% of respondents did not participate.

Today, despite its official status in the Republic of Kalmykia, according to the UNESCO Atlas of Endangered Languages (Moseley, 2010) the Kalmyk language is defined as ‘definitely endangered’. Language endangerment is the result of a long and complex process caused by overlapping factors (see Sect. 1.2), and the reasons leading to the current state of the Kalmyk language are no exception. Demographic loss is one of the decisive factors. From a historical perspective, the first significant demographic crisis was the exodus of a substantial part of the Kalmyk population in 1771 back to their original homeland, Dzungaria. Although there are no precise statistics on the number of Kalmyks who migrated, there is consensus that it was a very large part: Darvaev (2003), for example, claims that two-thirds of the population migrated in that period. The 20th century was marked by tragic historical events, including the October Revolution in 1917, followed by the subsequent civil war, and later the Second World War, all of which resulted in colossal demographic losses. The episode that most profoundly influenced Kalmykia’s demography was the Siberian exile, which lasted 13 years. In 1943, due to Stalin’s repression, a mass operation codenamed ‘Ulusy’ was addressed to all residents of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Guchinova, 2006, p. 57). The republic itself was abolished on December 27, 1943, and all ethnic Kalmyks, regardless of their official position, were subjected to deportation. The operation took place between December 28th–31st, 1943 and resulted in the forced relocation of more than 93,000 people to Siberia (Maksimov, 2013). Socio-cultural and labour conditions, moral and psychological trauma, and a sharp climate change seriously affected the health condition of the deported Kalmyk population (Maksimov, 2013). The deportation of the Kalmyks was officially recognised by the Russian government as a genocide in 1991 (On the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples, 1991). The consequences of this deportation had a long-lasting impact on the Kalmyk people and their language. As Guchinova (2006) mentions, prior to the deportation, the majority of Kalmyks were monolingual or had minimal knowledge of Russian. After thirteen years of living in dispersed settlements over different territories without regular language contact, Kalmyks were obliged to use Russian and weaken the use of their native language. Guchinova (2006) also points out that although Kalmyk was used at the household level, Russian was a language of survival and partially the language of social upscaling. During the deportation period, Kalmyks were actually deprived of freedom and civil rights and were declared enemies of the Soviet society. Even after their rehabilitation in 1956 and subsequent return to their home region in 1957, Kalmyks continued to struggle with social stigma and discrimination. Furthermore, the post-traumatic period that followed was marked by a significant disruption of Kalmyk culture, which had profound consequences for this ethnic group (Guchinova, 2006).

Another important factor that significantly impacted the Kalmyk language state was the language policy implemented by the Soviet regime. Zamyatin (2021) notes that, although the idea of “equality of all peoples and their languages” was promoted during the Soviet period, putting such an idea into practice was particularly challenging due to the sociolinguistic context of the country. Indeed, language planning and policy in the Soviet era was subjected to several transformations and different trends depending on the political agenda. The early Soviet period was characterised by an effort at standardising minority languages via a new approach to language planning, called *korenizacija* (nativisation, indigenisation, rooting). From the perspective of status planning, this approach aimed at supporting and promoting

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<sup>1</sup>Levada Center is an independent, nongovernmental organisation in Russia that conducts polling and socio-logical research.

the position of minority indigenous languages in the Soviet Union. However, the emphasis soon shifted from strengthening the positions of ethnic languages to strengthening Russian, and this was done with the introduction of the approach called *jazykovoe stroitel'stvo* (policy of language building). This type of policy involved active implementation of the Russian language into official life and all spheres of social life as well as Russification in corpus planning<sup>2</sup> (Hogan-Brun & Melnyk, 2012, p. 593). As a result regional languages gradually lost domains of use, developing mostly in private and family contexts. The growing prestige of Russian resulted in the development of bilingualism predominantly in an asymmetrical form among titular groups<sup>3</sup> with a shift toward Russian as a “second native language”. (Hogan-Brun & Melnyk, 2012; Zamyatin, 2021). After the collapse of the USSR, the language policy of the country underwent substantial modifications. The language legislation of this period led to the recognition of the titular languages as official languages alongside Russian. This co-official status was established to address both the needs of titular groups and the concerns of ethnic Russians, to balance between promoting titular languages and preserving Russian dominance (Zamyatin, 2021). In 1991, the Kalmyk language became an official language of the Republic of Kalmykia alongside Russian according to the released Decree ‘On the Languages in the Kalmyk Soviet Socialist Republic’. The Decree proclaimed the equal status of the official languages of the Republic of Kalmykia in the governmental, administrative, socioeconomic, cultural, and educational spheres.

According to the Law on Languages (2014), in the Republic of Kalmykia multilingualism is recognised as the daily norm of communication. The languages of peoples living in the republic that do not have the status of state languages are entitled as “other” languages. Based on the 2021 census results, the most commonly spoken among these were Dargin (5.553 respondents), Turkish (3.877 respondents), Kazakh (2.995 respondents), and Chechen (1.931 respondents).

However, over the past few decades Russian has been constantly promoted at the expense of minority languages, resulting in increasing monolingualism. The changes and amendments to the Federal Law ‘On Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation’ (1991) and the Federal Law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation’ (2012) led to the centralisation of education and a reduction of minority language teaching (Krouglov, 2022). As a result, the Kalmyk language, which was previously a compulsory subject, was actually removed from the curriculum in 2018. The Council of Europe’s Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 2018 published the report ‘Fourth Opinion on the Russian Federation’, which accurately describes the language policy regarding minority languages. The report stated that despite the ethnic diversity of the Russian Federation, the official language policy of the country regarding minority languages emphasises the role of the Russian ethnicity and language, describing it as “the core of an overarching all-Russian national identity” (Council of Europe’s Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018, p.1). There are serious concerns about the inefficiency of a language policy conceived to support minority languages amid the emphasis on strengthening Russian, as lack of actual support for linguistic diversity leads to the vulnerability of minority languages.

The current language situation in the Republic of Kalmykia is characterised by the predominance of the Russian language in all domains of use. Despite partial usage in public

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<sup>2</sup>Russification in corpus planning refers to the process of developing language norms for literary languages based on Russian grammar, incorporating Russian loanwords and changes in their orthography (Hogan-Brun & Melnyk, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>A “titular” group refers to the indigenous ethnic group of a republic from which it takes its name (Zamyatin, 2021).

domains such as education, mass communication and ethnocultural aspects, Kalmyk has practically ceased to be a functional language (Esenova, 2015). Baranova (2009) further argues that all speakers of the Kalmyk language are bilingual and are fluent in Russian. Most fluent Kalmyk speakers belong to older age groups and live in small rural areas. In Elista, the capital city, and in the larger settlements, Russian is the mainly spoken language.

## 1.2 Language endangerment and revitalisation, and the role of language attitudes

Language endangerment is a concept concerning the risk of extinction or death of a language due to the absence of active speakers of it (Crystal, 2000; Campbell & Rehg, 2018). It has become an issue of growing concern in linguistics, in view of the unprecedentedly rapid rate with which languages have been dying or going into conditions of serious threat of extinction in the last 50 years (Krauss, 1992; Crystal, 2000; Himmelmann, 2008; Austin & Sallabank, 2011; Campbell & Rehg, 2018). In a recent study, the worldwide problem of language loss has been connected to the process of decreasing linguistic structural diversity; moreover, it has been specified that the rate of language loss seems to be faster in certain areas of the globe, such as Northeast South America, Alaska, northern Australia (Skirgård et al., 2023). As concern around the issue of language loss rises, scholars have come up with classifications that allow us to identify languages' health state and recurrent features of the languages under threat, such as the 'Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale' by Fishman (1991), the 'Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework' by UNESCO (2003), the 'Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale' by Lewis & Simons (2010), and the 'Language Endangerment Index' by Lee (2018). Specifically for the languages of Russia, parameters to classify the vitality of a language have been set by the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS); according to this classification, which was lastly updated in 2022, languages can lie in a vitality continuum that goes from prosperous to extinct, based on their conditions in each parameter (Kharitonov et al., 2022). Generally speaking, all classifications that have been just mentioned agree in considering the transmission of the language to children (i.e. the intergenerational transmission) as one of the most significant indexes of language vitality/endangerment. The degree of vitality/endangerment of languages also depends on other parameters. In the above-mentioned scales by Fishman (1991), UNESCO (2003), Lewis & Simons (2010), Lee (2018) and Kharitonov et al. (2022), also the number of speakers is taken into account, in terms of both absolute number and relative to previous periods, as well as the variety of domains of use and, thus, functions that a language can serve, especially in terms of written uses for literacy and schooling, presence in mass and new media, and use as an institutional language. Generally speaking, and simplifying for the sake of clarity, a language is endangered when it is not transmitted to children, its speakers are not numerous and are constantly (and often rapidly) decreasing, and it is used only in private contexts, often not being the main means of communication even in those contexts.

Scholars seem to agree on the most impacting factors that lead to language endangerment. Brenzinger & de Graaf (2009) propose a combination of factors that can be classified as external (e.g.: economic, military, educational and cultural) and internal, such as the spread of negative attitudes of speakers.

An attitude can be defined as a negative or positive mental disposition, or a favourable or unfavourable orientation, towards some social object (Sarnoff, 1970; Garrett, 2010). Language attitude has become a central notion in sociolinguistic studies dealing with language endangerment, since a negative disposition and an unfavourable orientation towards a language is likely to push its speakers to abandon it and avoid passing it on to future generations. Campbell & Rehg (2018), in addition to economic, demographic, sociocultural, political and

linguistic factors, include motivations and subjective attitudes within the possible causes of language decline and endangerment. With subjective attitudes and motivations, the authors refer to the speakers' disposition towards both the dominant language and the language under threat, the opinions of the mainstream society about those languages, their prestige, symbolic values and capability of being markers of identity. The authors underline that the endangered language often acquires a symbolic value of backwardness, poverty and lack of opportunity, while the dominant language becomes a symbol for affluence, progress, upward mobility and being international (Campbell & Rehg, 2018).

Attitudes are also considered a prerequisite for actions of language revitalisation and maintenance to be undertaken and succeed. Language revitalisation refers to a series of efforts made to make an endangered or dying language vital and used within a community again (Hinton, 2011; Campbell & Rehg, 2018). The term language maintenance is preferred when dealing with a community where the local language is not critically endangered or dying, but it has started to show signs of language decline and language shift (Hinton, 2011; Campbell & Rehg, 2018). Language revitalisation/maintenance efforts – just like language policies with which they are strictly connected (Sallabank, 2011; Spolsky, 2019) – may stem from the individual or family level, from organisations at the grass-roots level within the community, as well as from the institutional, governmental level (Hinton, 2011, 2018; Spolsky, 2019). In any case, the perception of inferiority that communities usually have of the threatened language preliminarily needs to be turned into interest in maintaining or rediscovering it (Bradley, 2002; Hinton, 2018). Hence, “a change of attitudes needs to happen before language revitalisation can occur” (Hinton, 2018, p.443). It is also true, though, that institutional language policies, i.e. policies proposed by governments or different kinds of authorities, often aim at influencing the perception of languages in a community with measures of language revitalisation, such as those that try to expand the domains of use and functions of an endangered language, which also serve as prestige triggers (Spolsky, 2009; Sallabank, 2011). For such measures to be constantly implemented in the long term, it is necessary that positive attitudes gradually spread throughout the community involved (Baker, 1992; Spolsky, 2009). Therefore, it is quite relevant for linguists and sociolinguists to study not only the orientation and predisposition of people towards the endangered language *per se*, but also towards the efforts for its revitalisation. This means eliciting opinions and beliefs on the language in general, as well as on its intergenerational transmission, on its role as a marker of (ethnic) identity, on the appropriateness of using it in a variety of activities and contexts.

This is in line with Bakers' (1992) claims on the different levels of specificity language attitudes should be dealt with. Positive attitudes towards the general idea of preserving a language might not correspond to people's disposition towards specific actions or activities they should be involved in for the safeguard of the language (Baker, 1992). This also reflects the well-known idea of the internal stratification of attitudes in cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural components (Ajzen, 1988; Baker, 1992; Garrett, 2010). The conative/behavioural component corresponds to people's readiness to act, which might or might not be in line with the other two components, namely with what people rationally think or emotionally feel (Baker, 1992; Garrett, 2010). This seems likely to be often true when dealing with endangered language communities, as nowadays the consciousness of the state of endangerment of many languages, a renewed appreciation of local cultures, and calls for greater attention on such topics seem to be rising in many parts of the world, but this does not necessarily imply that community members are willing or ready to carry out specific activities or changing their linguistic habits, which usually requires more time (Grinevald & Bert, 2011; Sallabank, 2013).

In light of all these considerations, therefore, for an endangered minority language such as Kalmyk, it is fundamental that attitudes are favourable towards it, since without this aspect it is very difficult to envision successful actions of language maintenance or revitalisation being undertaken in the short-medium term. For such a reason, studying the attitudes of Kalmyk people towards their local language seems to be crucial to gaining a more complete picture of the sociolinguistic condition of this language and what can be attempted and achieved in terms of language policies for its promotion. To understand all this, investigating Kalmyk people's opinions on the language in general appears to be as important as investigating their desire and willingness to use the language in specific contexts and domains.

Thus, this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What are Kalmyks' general opinions and beliefs about the Kalmyk language and what kind of affective connection is there with this language?
- 2) Would Kalmyk people use the Kalmyk language while carrying out specific activities? Namely, are Kalmyk people's attitudes towards the Kalmyk language the same when looking at a higher level of specificity compared to their generic ones? In other terms, it is our intention to explore whether the conative component of Kalmyk people's attitudes is in line with the cognitive and affective component.
- 3) Are there categories of people who have particularly favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards Kalmyk? In particular, we want to understand whether people of different ages hold different attitudes towards Kalmyk and whether opinions and perceptions of this language differ between Kalmyk people who reside in the Republic of Kalmykia and those who do not live there.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Data collection

Exploring attitudes towards a language can be a complex endeavour (Garrett, 2010). One of the most common techniques for measuring and investigating attitudes is through questionnaires, i.e. a direct approach (Garrett, 2010). We are aware that the social desirability bias, where participants tend to give answers that they consider as socially appropriate and likely to be viewed positively by the researcher, and acquiescence bias, a general tendency to respond positively to a questionnaire's items, may affect responses and may lead to a misrepresentation of self-reported attitudes (Garrett, 2010). Nonetheless, a questionnaire was deemed suitable for this study due to its ability to efficiently gather data from a wide-ranging and diverse sample of participants, and to shed light on attitudes towards the language in general and towards specific activities involving that language (Baker, 1992).

To examine the attitudes towards the Kalmyk language and related activities, the questionnaire that was adopted was based on the Second National Indigenous Languages Survey (Marmion et al., 2014). The questionnaire was originally written in Russian to encompass more participants. The original version and its English translation are attached in [Appendix](#). The questionnaire comprised 3 sections. The first one, 'Language background and language use' was not aimed at collecting attitudinal data but at grasping information about participants' level of competence and use of the languages. Indeed, this section included questions about participants' language background and proficiency, frequency of language use, and information about the contexts of use of the languages. It is worth noting that the term 'proficiency' is used in accordance with the definitions provided in the NILS 2 (Marmion et al., 2014). The following levels of proficiency were considered:

- ‘no proficiency’ (I do not speak the language at all).
- ‘words and sentences’ (I can say some words and simple sentences).
- ‘part-speaker’ (I can have a conversation in limited situations. I cannot express everything in this language).
- ‘full-speaker’ (I can have a conversation about anything in any situation. I can express everything in this language).

The second section, ‘Language attitudes and attitudes toward language activities’, aimed to elicit respondents’ general attitudes towards the Kalmyk language and towards specific language-related activities. To be more precise, the former were presented in the form of statements referring to the importance of knowing and passing on the Kalmyk language, with which participants had to express their degree of agreement on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 = “completely disagree” to 6 = “completely agree”). The following four statements were presented to participants: “It is important that Kalmyk language speakers pass on their language to future generations”, “It is important to me to know and use Kalmyk”, “It is important to me that my children learn and know Kalmyk”, “Traditional culture can survive without the Kalmyk language”. The results of the last statement were reversely decodified, as – differently from the other three statements – agreeing with it would mean to express a negative attitude towards Kalmyk.

The questions about participants’ attitudes towards specific language-related activities were presented in the form of statements referring to activities that participants had to indicate whether or not they would be interested in doing in the Kalmyk language. The activities were: attending courses outside school, reading newspapers, watching TV or listening to radio programmes, attending school classes, visiting websites, and attending cultural programmes. The response options were “I would do it” (= 1) or “I would not do it” (= 0). In fact, participants could also choose “I have already done it”; however, we finally decided not to assign a score to such answers, as they do not reveal much about participants’ attitudes. Indeed, we do not know whether respondents chose to do the activity in Kalmyk themselves (or, for example, their parents pushed them to do so) and whether they would do it again. In this respect, these questions referring to particular activities aimed at exploring participants’ desire to actively engage in every-day endeavours using the Kalmyk language, independently of their actual current language skills. The goal was to examine how much interest there is in the Kalmyk language not only at a general level, but also at a higher level of specificity, namely it was our objective to see Kalmyks’ attitudes not only in a generic cognitive and affective dimension, but also looking at the conative dimension (see Baker, 1992; Garrett, 2010). We are aware that, even though these questions did not pertain to respondents’ actual language skills but to their desire and interest in using Kalmyk, it is not implausible that participants also took their language abilities in Kalmyk into account in answering them, and this should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

Finally, the third section of the questionnaire included socio demographic questions, in order to obtain information on participants’ gender, age, and place of residence.

## 2.2 Participants

The current study includes 276 participants who self-identified as members of the Kalmyk ethnic group. The majority of respondents who participated in the survey were female, 207 (75%), while male respondents were 66 (23.91%) and 3 respondents (1.09%) identified themselves as ‘other’. The participants in our study were divided into the following age groups: 18–29 y.o. comprising 114 participants (41,3%), 30–49 y.o. comprising 105 participants (38,04%), 50–69 y.o. comprising 47 participants (17,03%), and 70 y.o. or older with

**Table 1** Percentages related to the languages used by participants during their childhood and as adults

	Only Kalmyk	Only Russian	Kalmyk and other	Other
Language used in childhood	10.14%	59.42%	27.9%	2.54%
Language used currently	2.54%	79.35%	9.42%	8.7%

only 10 participants (3,62%). The respondents who indicated the Republic of Kalmykia as a current place of residence were 204 (73,91%), and those who indicated a place of residence outside the Republic were 72 (26,09%). The above-mentioned sociodemographic variables are commonly chosen in sociolinguistic research as potential predictors of language attitudes. Men and women might have a different orientation and mental disposition when it comes to expressing opinions on an endangered minority language and engaging in activities involving that language, which is why gender is a widely considered variable in research on language attitudes (for studies conducted on endangered minority languages, see, for example, Baker, 1992; Valdes, 2007; Altinkamış & Ağırdağ, 2014; Ubalde et al., 2017). We also decided to recruit participants in different age brackets, as differences in the attitudes of young, middle-aged and older people might reveal an ongoing trend that could be crucial for the ethnolinguistic vitality of an endangered language. It is common to observe a decline in the favourableness of the attitudes towards a minority language as participants' age decreases (e.g. Sharp et al., 1973; Baker, 1992; Valdes, 2007), thus it was interesting to investigate whether such tendency holds true in the Kalmyk context. Unfortunately, it was not possible to perfectly balance the number of participants belonging to each age group; nonetheless, given the potential importance of this factor, we still decided to take this variable into account in the analysis of the results. Finally, the place of residence was deemed a salient variable for the present study. As many Kalmyk people emigrated in the second half of the last century, it was particularly relevant to understand whether the prestige of the language varies for people who live in the Republic and have been directly concerned by the language policies implemented there, and those who do not live in the Republic and for whom Kalmyk is now an heritage language (for a recent investigations of migrants' and migrants' family members' attitudes, see Regan, 2023).

As far as participants' language background is concerned, we asked them which language(s) they used in childhood, and which language(s) they currently use (see Table 1). Then, we asked participants to indicate how frequently they currently use the Kalmyk language (see Fig. 1), and to self-evaluate their proficiency in the Kalmyk language (see Fig. 2). As can be seen from Table 1 and Figs. 1 and 2, most participants only speak Russian on a daily basis, and use Kalmyk rarely; moreover, their competence in the minority language is very limited.

### 3 Results and discussion

#### 3.1 General language attitudes

The attitudes towards Kalmyk – a language that the majority of participants barely know and speak – were investigated by means of direct questions. With regard to the questions with Likert-scale type of response, four statements were presented to the participants (see 'Methodology' for more details). Table 2 presents some descriptive statistics related to these



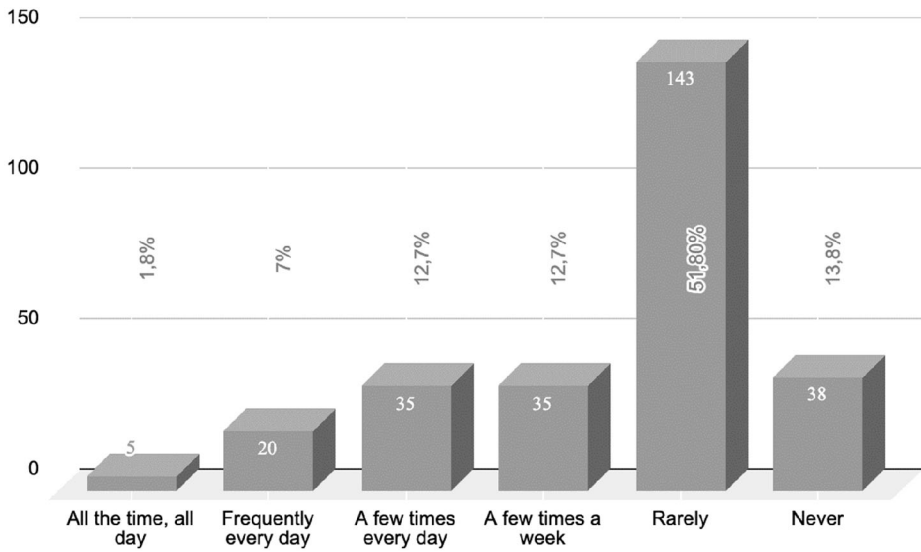


Fig. 1 Participants' frequency of use of the Kalmyk language

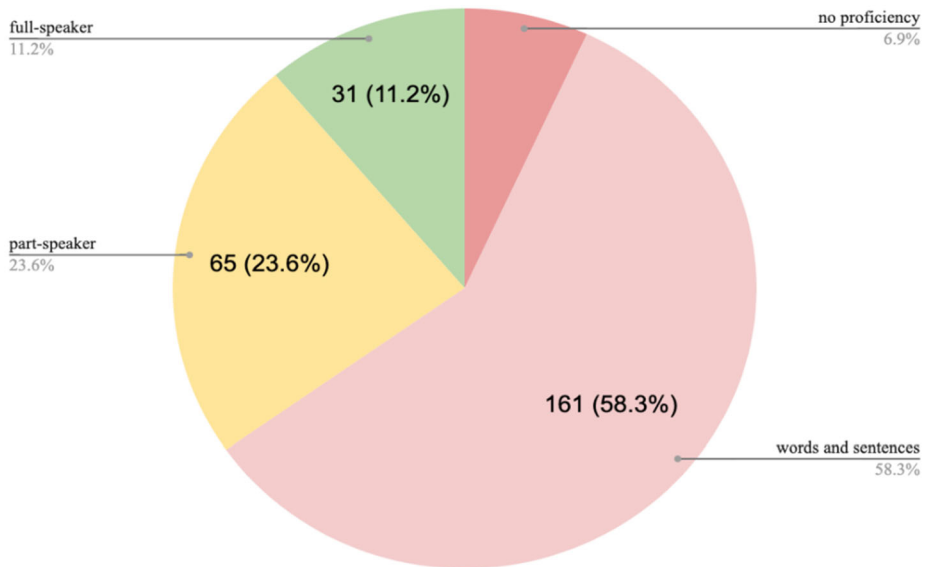


Fig. 2 Participants' self-reported level of proficiency in the Kalmyk language

four questions. More precisely, it shows the percentage of positive responses<sup>4</sup> given to each statement by the different categories of participants.

<sup>4</sup>Positive responses corresponded to the three options of agreement ('somewhat agree', 'agree', 'strongly agree') for the first three questions presented in Table 2, while for the question relating to the traditional culture (which was reverse coded) positive responses corresponded to the three options of disagreement.

**Table 2** Percentage of positive responses in the Likert-scale questions, in total and by different categories of speakers

	Total	Male	Female	Inside Kalmykia	Outside Kalmykia	18–29	30–49	50–69	70+
Passing on Kalmyk to future generations	98.91	98.55	98.48	98.53	100	97.37	99.05	100%	100
Importance of knowing and using Kalmyk to me	89.49	87.92	93.94	88.73	91.67	81.58	93.33	97.87	100
Importance that my children learn and know Kalmyk	83.70	83.09	83.36	81.37	90.28	69.30	93.33	95.74	90
Kalmyk and traditional culture	87.31	88.89	83.33	86.27	90.28	83.33	87.62	93.62	100

The percentages in Table 2 make it possible to claim that participants generally expressed very positive attitudes towards Kalmyk, acknowledging the importance of knowing and transmitting the language. These initial general results suggest that policies for the promotion of the Kalmyk language would be likely to meet with general favour among Kalmyk people, and this could be important for the short and long term vitality of the language. Curiously, though, participants agreed much more with the statement generally referring to the importance of keeping the language alive in the future than with the statement specifically referring to the transmission of the language to their children. It has to be specified, however, that the two questions are not perfectly comparable, as respondents may have answered differently depending on whether they already have children, intend to have children or are still far from parental age.

As far as the different categories of participants are concerned, men and women proportionally gave quite similar numbers of positive responses in the four questions. Participants who lived outside the Republic of Kalmykia expressed slightly more favourable attitudes in all four questions than those who lived in the Republic, even though, also in this case, the gap does not seem to be particularly large. As for the different age groups, the percentages shown in Table 2 give the impression that the youngest participants (age 18–29) are less favourably disposed towards Kalmyk than participants in the other three age groups, which, instead, exhibit very similar numbers. All these impressions had to be verified with inferential statistical testing. As data were ordinal, non-parametric tests were chosen. Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon tests were performed in *R* (R Core Team, 2021, version 4.1.2) to compare the answers given by female and male respondents, as well as the answers coming from respondents who lived inside the Republic and those who lived outside. In no question was a statistically significant difference found, neither in the comparisons concerning gender, nor in those concerning place of residence. To compare the answers given by different age groups, the Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon test was not suitable, as the comparison involved more than two groups. Therefore, a Kruskal-Wallis test was performed in *R*. In all four tests conducted for the four questions, a *p*-value lower than 0.05 was found (see Table 3). Pairwise Wilcoxon-test comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment were performed as post-hoc analysis. They revealed that, for each question, the statistically significant difference was that involving the comparison between the 18–29 age group and at least one of the other three age groups. No statistically significant difference was found in comparisons that did not include the 18–29 age group. It has to be specified, though, that, in the question concerning the link between traditional culture and Kalmyk, the pairwise Wilcoxon tests involving the 18–29 and the other age groups gave *p*-values = 0.05, which is the threshold for statistical significance. Although this means that we should be less confident about the generalisability of this specific result, it very hardly

**Table 3** Kruskal-Wallis tests and pairwise comparisons (Wilcoxon rank sum test with continuity correction) among age groups for each statement with Likert-scale response

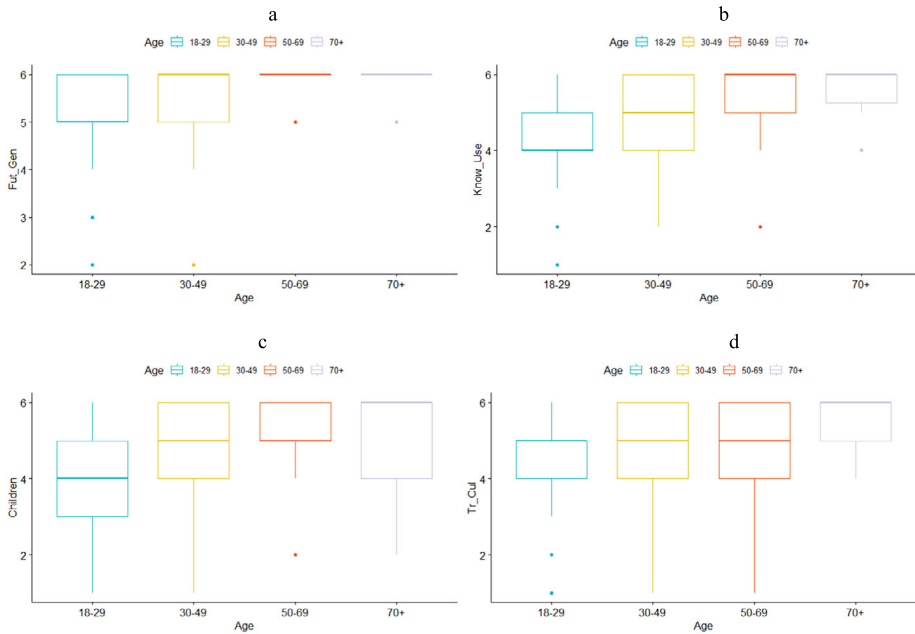
<i>It is important that Kalmyk language speakers pass on their language to future generations</i>				<i>It is important to me to know and use Kalmyk</i>			
Kruskal-Wallis chi-squared = 38.758, df = 3, p-value < 0.001				Kruskal-Wallis chi-squared = 38.758, df = 3, p-value < 0.001			
Post-hoc analysis				Post-hoc analysis			
	18–29	30–49	50–69		18–29	30–49	50–69
30–49	p = 0.002	-	-	30–49	p < 0.001	-	-
50–69	p = 0.002	p = 0.442	-	50–69	p < 0.001	p = 0.674	-
70+	p = 0.029	p = 0.322	p = 0.429	70+	p = 0.021	p = 0.824	p = 0.376
<i>It is important to me that my children learn and know Kalmyk</i>				<i>Traditional culture can survive without the Kalmyk language</i>			
Kruskal-Wallis chi-squared = 28.095, df = 3, p-value < 0.001				Kruskal-Wallis chi-squared = 38.758, df = 3, p-value < 0.001			
Post-hoc analysis				Post-hoc analysis			
	18–29	30–49	50–69		18–29	30–49	50–69
30–49	p < 0.001	-	-	30–49	p = 0.05	-	-
50–69	p = 0.001	p = 0.777	-	50–69	p = 0.05	p = 0.82	-
70+	p = 0.128	p = 0.8	p = 0.777	70+	p = 0.05	p = 0.23	p = 0.25

questions the general picture. It is also worth specifying that in the question concerning the importance for participants of passing on Kalmyk to their children, the pairwise comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference between 18–29 and 30–49 ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as between 18–29 and 50–69 ( $p < 0.001$ ), but not between 18–29 and 70+ ( $p = 0.13$ ). In this respect, it should be said, though, that the number of participants that made up the 70+ age group was very low, thus making the results concerning that group less reliable. As numbers are more balanced among the other three age groups, the comparisons involving them are more reliable, and interesting. Table 3 shows the results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests and relative post-hoc analyses, Fig. 3 helps visualise the differences among age groups with box plots (generated in *R* with the *ggpubr* package, Kassambara, 2020).

From these analyses, it clearly emerges that the youngest group of respondents hold relatively less favourable attitudes towards Kalmyk. It is possible to speculate that as Kalmyk has been losing domains of use and functionality even in private contexts, young people feel less affective attachment to it. Moreover, respondents from 18 to 29 years old are arguably at the beginning of their working career, thus they look at the concrete socio-economic importance of Russian and are relatively less committed in the promotion of a ‘weak’ language such as Kalmyk (cf. the ‘utilitarian function’ of a language by Katz, 1960, p. 170; or the ‘instrumental orientation’ to language use by Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 3).

### 3.2 Attitudes towards specific language-related activities

The last part of the analysis concerned the answers given to the statements referring to activities participants would or would not do in the Kalmyk language: the response option was dichotomous, being either “I would do it” (= 1) or “I would not do it” (= 0) (see ‘Methodology’, Sect. 2.1). In Table 4, we present the percentages of “I would do it” responses given to each question in total and by the different categories of participants.



**Fig. 3** Box-plots showing the distribution of answers in the different age groups for each statement with Likert-scale response. a = “It is important that Kalmyk speakers pass on their language to future generations”, b = “It is important to me to know and use Kalmyk”, c = “It is important to me that my children learn and know Kalmyk”, d = “Traditional culture can survive without the Kalmyk language”

**Table 4** Percentage of positive responses in the questions related to the activities in Kalmyk, in total and by different categories of speakers

	Total	Male	Female	Inside Kalmykia	Outside Kalmykia	18–29	30–49	50–69	70+
Attending language courses	77.27	75	77.95	76.57	79.10	71.72	80.85	82.5	77.77
Reading newspapers	57.53	62.5	55.82	57.32	58.06	46.06	63.21	66.66	85.71
Watching/Listening TV/radio	70.7	73.07	69.93	70.70	70.68	59.09	76.54	81.57	87.5
Viewing websites	74.06	75.86	73.48	72.88	77.41	71.42	79.34	75	44.44
Attending school classes	71.35	78.26	69.06	70.07	75	60.65	75.30	79.41	77.77
Attending cultural programmes	82.57	79.62	83.53	79.50	91.22	76.54	86.51	86.84	80

It is possible to note that the attitudes towards the Kalmyk language are quite favourable, even though the percentages of positive responses are generally lower than those pertaining to the questions on the general importance of the minority language seen in Table 2. However, it should be pointed out that the two groups of questions are not perfectly comparable. Indeed, when answering the questions pertaining to specific activities it is possible that some participants also considered their actual proficiency in Kalmyk, making the answers to this

second group of questions also related to the ability to perform certain activities in Kalmyk, rather than to attitudes only. Our intention was to explore participants' desire to use the local language in specific endeavours, regardless of their actual skills. The positive answers given in this section, despite the general low level of competence and use of Kalmyk by the participants, suggest that the respondents tended to interpret these questions in this way.

Once again, to analyse the differences among categories of participants, we also resorted to inferential statistics. We think the best approach was to look at the results coming from the single questions. Indeed, the activities in question were quite different from one other, and therefore it comes with no surprise that different questions did not elicit the same results. The analyses concerning the individual questions were conducted with logistic regression models (with no random effects) and subsequent post-hoc analyses with pairwise comparisons. No significant difference was found in the questions related to attending Kalmyk language courses outside school and attending Kalmyk classes in school, but, especially in the latter, the comparison between the 18–29 and the 30–49 age groups, as well as that between the 18–29 and the 50–69 age groups, approached significance level (*attending school classes: 18–29 vs. 30–49* → odds ratio = 0.511, SE = 0.19, z. ratio = -1.802, p. value = 0.071; *18–29 vs. 50–69* → odds ratio = 0.381, SE = 0.19, z. ratio = -1.93, p. value = 0.054). Thus, it seems that the importance of having Kalmyk as a language being taught inside and outside school is widely shared among Kalmyks; however, the youngest appear slightly less supportive in this sense, and this may slow down or hinder the process of fully integrating the local language in educational settings. In the question related to websites, the largest differences were found between the first three age groups and the 70+ age group (although only the comparison with participants aged 30–49 reached significance level). It is noteworthy that, in this case, the older participants were the least favourably inclined towards the activity at issue, and this is arguably due to the general resistance of older participants to digital platforms, rather than to purely linguistic reasons. In the question related to attending cultural programmes, the Age variable did not turn out to have a significant (or almost significant) effect, while significance level was approached by the Residence variable, with those who lived outside the Republic of Kalmykia expressing a more favourable disposition towards that activity than those who lived in the Republic (*attending cultural programmes: Inside vs. Outside* → odds ratio = 0.398, SE = 0.207, z. ratio = -1.776, p. value = 0.076). This result is probably linked to the emigrants' willingness to stay connected to their roots by participating in activities dedicated to the Kalmyk language and culture. In the other questions, a statistically significant effect was found in the Age variable (between the 18–29 and the 30–49 age groups, and between the 18–29 and the 50–69 age groups), with the youngest participants proving to be less supportive of the activities in Kalmyk, while no significant effect (nor nearly significant) was found as far as the Residence and Gender variables were concerned. Generally speaking, then, it is possible to assume that the desire to engage in specific activities using the local language is stronger among middle-aged and older Kalmyk people, while the youngest are more sceptical about the usefulness of this possibility. Perhaps, as has happened in other contexts, young people who have past the stage of adolescence are more interested in the economic benefits of using a majority language such as Russian rather than actively promoting the daily use of a minoritised linguistic code that is largely devoid of socio-economic power in today's society (cf., for example, Lambert, 1967; Sharp et al., 1973; Baker, 1992; Ubalde et al., 2017).

## 4 Conclusions

The research illustrated in this paper aimed at investigating present language attitudes towards the Kalmyk language. From a descriptive viewpoint, the results seem to offer a rather encouraging picture, although the limits of a direct methodology may have influenced the respondents and inflated the percentage of favourable responses towards Kalmyk. However, a more refined analysis of the ongoing trends discloses a few interesting, and less positive aspects.

Among the variables singled out for the analysis, gender did not turn out to be influential, while the age variable proved significant. On the all, the younger generations tend to display a less positive attitude towards the language, with the youngest group always behaving differently from the other ones. This element is particularly worrying, as it seems to indicate that a negative trend is developing – which could prove fatal for the future of the language. In this respect, the answers concerning the passing of the language to the future generations are especially relevant. As for the difference between those who live inside and those who live outside the Republic, despite the data emerging at the descriptive level which are apparently linked to outsiders perceiving Kalmyk as a heritage language, there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups. As far as sociolinguistic variables are concerned, we could not control and balance participants' educational attainment. We are aware that such a factor might be an important one in orienting attitudes: indeed, nowadays in different contexts throughout Europe it seems that more educated groups are more willing to promote a local language even if they do not speak it fully, sometimes as a way of political contestation or as a result of acknowledging the value of a 'small' language after gaining full confidence in the majority language (Woolhiser, 2014; O'Rourke et al., 2015; Berruto, 2018). It would be interesting to investigate whether this general trend holds true even in Kalmykia. Therefore, our understanding of the sociolinguistic situation of this region can certainly be enriched by future studies that take full account of this specific variable.

In any case, interesting results could be also found in this study, for example by looking at the questions concerning language-related activities. The lower number of positive responses in this section compared to the answers to the more generic questions suggests that the actual commitment to keep the language alive is less strong than the general willingness to recognise the importance of Kalmyk *per se*. As already said, it is possible that respondents took their actual language skills into account while replying to the questions pertaining to specific activities, but it is also likely that the level of concrete commitment in preserving Kalmyk is lower than a general positive feeling towards that language. After all, it is often the case in bilingual contexts where an endangered minority language is involved that people acknowledge the value of such a minority language, but this feeling turns out to be largely tokenistic and does not necessarily convert in concrete actions (see, for example, Kelly-Holmes et al., 2009; Berruto, 2018; Mura, 2019). This implies that the conative/behavioural component of the attitude, as described above, is not completely aligned with the cognitive and affective components (cf. Baker, 1992; Garrett, 2010).

A final comment is due concerning the connection between the attitudes shown in the survey and the policies implemented in the last few decades. It is undeniable that, following the promotion of monolingualism in the Soviet period, the new official attitude towards minority languages after the dissolution of the USSR has helped them recover strength in different domains. Yet a renewed emphasis on the pivotal role of Russian and recent policies concerning the use and status of Kalmyk – in particular, its elimination from educational curricula – have been perceived as a sign of weakness of the language, which is considered marginal and basically useless for the purposes of a modern globalised world.

In this cultural and institutional context, we would like to open the door to future developments of the present study. From a methodological point of view, it would be desirable that future research adopts other types of methodologies to study language attitudes, for example indirect ones such as the Matched-Guise Technique (cf. Lambert et al., 1960; Loureiro-Rodriguez & Acar, 2022) and the Implicit Association Test (cf. Greenwald et al., 1998; Roessel et al., 2018; Vari & Tamburelli, 2020). Another aim to be reached in future research would be to further investigate the relation between language and identity, and to ascertain whether the latter may prove to be a decisive element in triggering a positive attitude, which in turn may significantly contribute to keep the Kalmyk language alive.

## Appendix

### *Original version of the questionnaire*

#### Анкета

Уважаемый респондент,

Настоящая анкета направлена на исследование состояния калмыцкого языка, отношения к языку и языковым активностям.

Ваши ответы помогут в данном исследовании.

Анкета анонимна, полученные данные будут анализироваться в виде статистических обобщений.

#### Раздел 1

##### **Знание языка и использование языка.**

На каком языке Вы говорили в детстве? Вы можете указать более одного ответа.

На каком языке Вы чаще всего говорите сейчас? Вы можете указать более одного ответа.

Какой язык чаще всего используется в Вашем сообществе сейчас? Вы можете указать более одного ответа.

Насколько хорошо Вы говорите на калмыцком языке? Пожалуйста, отметьте наиболее подходящий ответ.

Я совсем не говорю.

Я могу сказать несколько слов и простых предложений.

Я могу вести беседу на определенные темы и в определенных ситуациях. Не могу выразить все на калмыцком языке.

Я могу вести беседу обо всем в любой ситуации. Я могу выразить почти все на языке.

Когда и как Вы изучали калмыцкий язык? Пожалуйста, отметьте все подходящие варианты.

- В детстве
- Во взрослом возрасте
- От своих родителей
- На работе
- Самостоятельно
- В школе
- Через языковую программу
- Из книг
- По телевизору
- Я так и не выучил(а) язык
- Другое (пожалуйста, укажите ниже)

Как часто Вы сейчас говорите на калмыцком языке? Пожалуйста, отметьте наиболее подходящий ответ.

- Всё время
- Регулярно, каждый день
- Несколько раз в день
- Несколько раз в неделю
- Редко
- Никогда

## Раздел 2

### Отношение к языку и отношение к языковым активностям.

Традиционная культура (калмыцкая) может выжить и без калмыцкого языка.

- Полностью согласен
- Согласен
- Скорее согласен
- Скорее несогласен
- Несогласен
- Полностью несогласен

Для носителей калмыцкого языка важно передавать знания языка будущим поколениям.

- Полностью согласен
- Согласен
- Скорее согласен
- Скорее несогласен
- Несогласен
- Полностью несогласен

Для меня важно, что я знаю и использую калмыцкий язык.

- Полностью согласен
- Согласен



Скорее согласен  
 Скорее несогласен  
 Несогласен  
 Полностью несогласен

Для меня важно, чтобы мои дети выучили и использовали калмыцкий язык.

Полностью согласен  
 Согласен  
 Скорее согласен  
 Скорее несогласен  
 Несогласен  
 Полностью несогласен

Вам были бы интересны следующие языковые активности? Участвовали ли Вы уже в каких-то из них. Пожалуйста, отметьте свои ответы.

Активности	я бы <b>НЕ</b> участвовал(а)	я бы участвовал(а)	я уже участвовал(а)
Посещение курсов калмыцкого языка			
Чтение газет на калмыцком языке			
Просмотр телепередач или прослушивание радиопередач на калмыцком языке			
Просмотр веб-сайтов, контент которых на калмыцком языке			
Посещение уроков калмыцкого языка в школе			
Посещение культурных программ на калмыцком языке			

### Раздел 3

#### Личные данные

К какой возрастной группе Вы относитесь?

18–29  
 30–49  
 50–69  
 70+ years

Укажите Ваш пол.

мужской  
женский  
другое

Где вы живёте в настоящее время?

*English version of the questionnaire*<sup>5</sup>

#### Questionnaire

Dear respondent,

This questionnaire is aimed at studying the state of the Kalmyk language, attitudes towards the language and language activities.

Your answers will help in this study.

The questionnaire is anonymous, and the data obtained will be analysed through statistical generalisation.

Thank you for participation in this study.

### Section 1

#### Language background and Language use

What language did you speak in your childhood? You may list more than one.

What is the language that you speak most often now? You may list more than one.

What language is most commonly used in your community now? You may list more than one.

How well do you speak the Kalmyk language? Please tick the most appropriate answer.

I do not speak the language at all.

I can say some words and simple sentences.

I can have a conversation in limited situations. I cannot express everything in this language.

I can have a conversation about everything in all situations. I can express almost everything in this language.

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<sup>5</sup>Here we have reported the parts of the questionnaire that were used for analysis in this study; for the sake of clarity and for space constraints, some parts of the questionnaire that were later disregarded have not been reported.

When and how did you learn the Kalmyk language? Please tick all that apply.

- As a child
- As an adult
- From my parents
- At work
- On my own
- In school
- Through a language program
- From books
- On television
- I never learned the language
- Other (please specify below)

How often do you currently speak the Kalmyk language? Please tick the most appropriate answer.

- all the time, all day
- Frequently every day
- A few times every day
- A few times a week
- Rarely
- Never

## Section 2

### Language attitude and attitude towards language activities

Traditional culture (Kalmyk) can survive without the Kalmyk language.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

It is important that Kalmyk speakers pass on their language to future generations.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

It is important to me to know and use the Kalmyk language.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree

Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

It is important to me that my children learn and use the Kalmyk language.

Strongly agree  
Agree  
Somewhat agree  
Somewhat disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

Would you be interested in the following language-related activities, or have you already participated in any of them? Please tick your answers.

Activities	I would NOT do it	I would do it	I have already done it
Attending Kalmyk language courses			
Reading newspapers in the Kalmyk language			
Watching TV or listening to radio programs in the Kalmyk language			
Viewing websites where the content is in the Kalmyk language			
Attending Kalmyk school classes			
Attending cultural programs in the Kalmyk language			

### Section 3

#### Personal information

Which age group do you belong to?

18–29  
30–49  
50–69  
70+ years

What is your gender?

Female  
Male  
Other

Where do you currently live?

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