The Digital Language

Diversity Project

Karelian — a digital language?

Table of Contents

Imprint

Cover design: Eleonore Kruse

Disclaimer
This publication reflects only the authors' view and the Erasmus+ National Agency and the Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

List of Figures

1. Overview

How does the linguistic diversity of Europe reflect in the new media? Do regional and minority languages contribute to EU digital language diversity, and to what extent? Is it possible for regional or minority language speakers to have a digital life in those languages?

In this report we present the results of the first survey about the actual needs of European minority language speakers regarding digital opportunities. The survey is part of the work carried out by the Digital Language Diversity Project (DLDP), a three-year Erasmus+ project started in September 2015.

The goal of the DLDP is to help minority language speakers in the acquisition of intellectual and practical skills to create, share, and re-use online digital content, and, at the same time, defining general guidelines and best practices for the promotion of minority languages with poor digital representation. This lack of digital presence further prevents their usability on digital media and devices.

The focus of the project is on four European minority languages at different stages of digital development (Basque, Breton, Karelian and Sardinian). This focus enables a comparison on the role of the availability of digital content for the promotion of digital usage of these languages and the development of language-based digital applications.

With the aim of understanding the specific needs and the particular behaviour of speakers of these languages, during the spring of 2016 we conducted a survey focused on gathering information about their personal digital use of the language and about any known digital resource and services that make use of the language. We received feedback from almost 2,000 speakers and we are now in the position of showing the results for future actions.

The survey was launched on the Internet, using social media in particular; thus, the profile of the respondent belongs to a person who makes at least a minimal digital use of the language in their everyday life. This fact must be taken into account by the reader.

2. Karelian, a Brief Profile

Karelian is a Uralic language of the Finnic branch. Within Finnic languages it is distinguished from the Western and Southern Finnic languages, making Karelian closely related with Veps, Ingrian and Ludic languages, as well as the eastern dialects of Finnish.

Today Karelian is spoken in the Republic of Karelia and Tver oblast in Russia, as well as in Finland, where the speakers are not concentrated in any specific region. In Finland, Karelian was traditionally spoken in the easternmost region of Finland, called Border Karelia, in the North-Eastern region of Petsamo, and in a few border villages in North Karelia and Kainuu. After the Second World War these areas were ceded to the Soviet Union and the residents, including Karelian speakers, were relocated to various parts of Finland. Karelian became a non-territorial language in Finland, with the speakers living in different parts of the country.

Linguistically Karelian is divided into two main dialects: Olonets Karelian (also called Livvi) and Karelian proper, the latter of which is divided further into North Karelian (also called Viena Karelian) and South Karelian.

The number of Karelian speakers is hard to estimate accurately. In the national census of 2010, 25,605 people in the Russian Federation said that they spoke Karelian, with many more identifying themselves as ethnic Karelians. However, the reliance on self-evaluation in the case of fluency combined with a long history of hiding one's ethnicity in fear of repercussions, make this estimate less reliable. In Finland Karelians do not appear on censuses or on any other administrative registers, so the best estimates on the number of speakers have been done by independent researchers. The latest estimate, made by Anneli Sarhimaa based on the ELDIA study results and the studies by Finnish historian Tapio Hämynen, place the estimate at around 11, 000 people who speak Karelian well to fluently, with another 20,000 with some knowledge of the language.

3. Speakers' Identities: Gender, Age and Provenance

Gender-wise the distribution of respondents is very equal, with 51.9% being female, 46.2% male and the remaining 1.9% identifying as "other" or preferring not to specify.

The average age of the respondents is very high. 46.8% of the respondents are over 60 years old with only 14.7% of them being under 40. This reflects the statistics of the speakers as well.

After the Second World War the natural chain of the language being taught to children was quickly severed, as Karelians were distributed to different parts of Finland. The previous speaker communities were broken apart and the Karelians often faced discrimination by the native Finnish population. The children of many Karelian families were often raised speaking Finnish, and intermarriage with Finnish speakers was commonplace.

A vast majority of the respondents were born in Finland (or those parts that were ceded to the Soviet Union after the war), with some born in the Republic of Karelia and a few in Sweden. The distribution within Finland largely follows the pattern of relocation after the war. The population of the Karelian speaking areas were relocated to North Karelia, North Savonia, Kainuu and Northern Ostrobothnia, and we see that most respondents were born in this area, with a large number being born in Helsinki as well.

In the map showing the current residence of the respondents we see that the trend follows the general trends of the Finnish demographic development of the past decades. The respondents still live all around Finland, but they are now much more concentrated in the bigger cities and regional centres. Greater Helsinki area has by far the most respondents, with Joensuu taking a lead compared to other smaller cities. Most of those respondents that were born outside Finland are now living there.
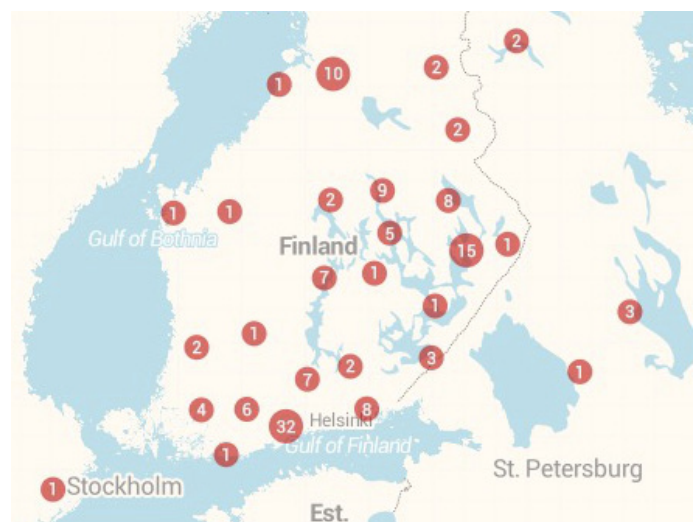

Fig. 1 – Distribution of places of birth

Fig. 2 – Distribution of places of residence
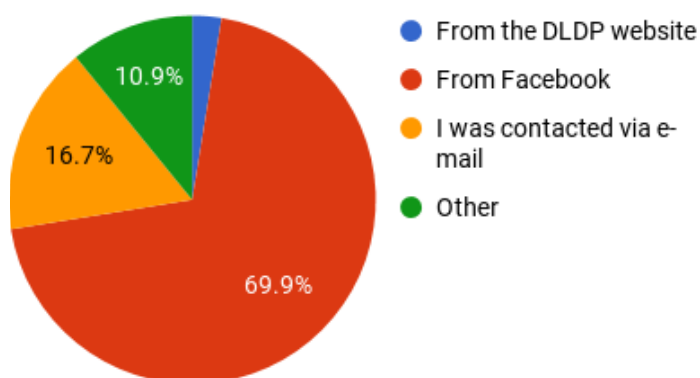
How did you learn about this survey?

Fig. 3 - Source of information on this survey
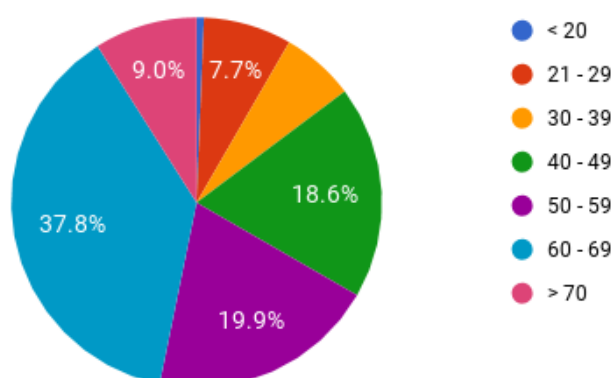
Age distribution of respondents

Fig. 4 - Age of respondents

Gender
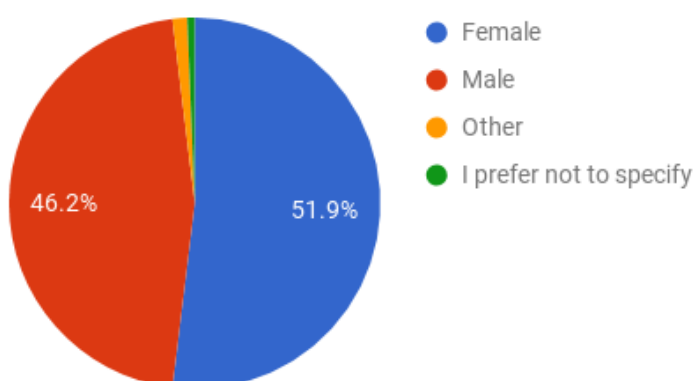

Fig. 5 - Gender

Do you take part in any revitalization or protection activity related to Karelian?
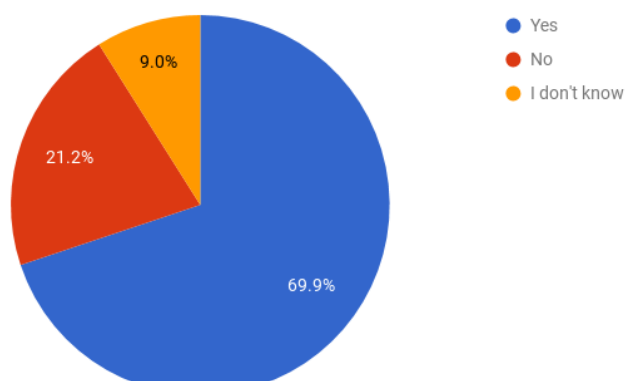

Fig. 6 - Karelian revitalization activities

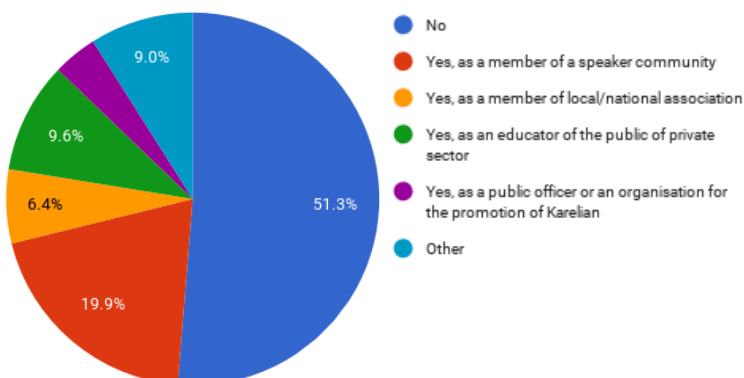## Are you professionally involved with Karelian?

Fig. 7 - Professional involvement with Karelian

4. Self-Evaluation of Competence in Karelian

A total of 48.1% of respondents identify themselves as either native Karelian speakers or bilingual speakers of Karelian and Finnish, meaning that over half of the respondents are still native Finnish speakers. Almost all respondents report at least some level of expertise in Karelian, with only a few individuals claiming a non-existent level of understanding in the language.

These self-evaluations should not be taken at face value, and instead should be treated as indicative values. Not only was there no way of actually testing the credibility of the respondents' claims, but they were also left to use their own assessments on what "good proficiency" or "native language" means, so definitions might differ between individual respondents.

A relatively high number of respondents report using Karelian either daily or regularly both in their personal life and in institutional settings. This is somewhat surprising especially considering that there are very few institutional settings in Finland where Karelian is officially used, since it is taught only in the University of Eastern Finland and it does not enjoy a legal status of any kind.

This can partly be explained by the fact that since the survey was largely distributed through Karelian organizations and Karelian groups on social media, this could attract a lot of people who are in one way or another actively involved in revitalization efforts, and thus both have better opportunities to use Karelian and actively strive to do so.

Regarding the importance of Karelian, the overwhelming majority of respondents finds Karelian important for a variety of reasons. Many find Karelian to be important because it is somehow a part of their identity, either through being the family of their childhood or their actual family, because it represents their history or it because it gives them a sense of belonging.

From the point of view of the relationship with Finnish, how would you describe yourself?
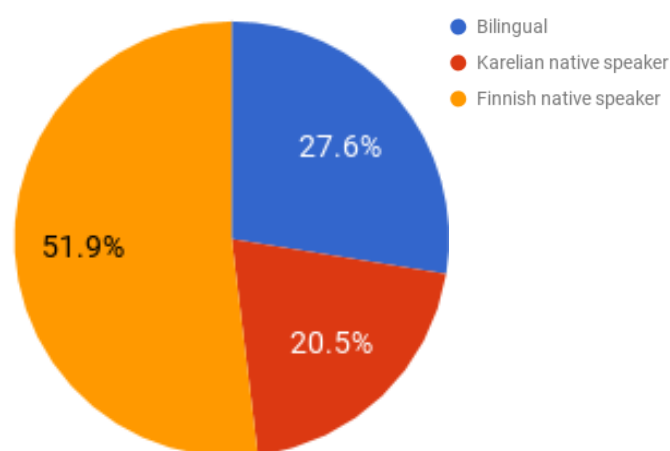

Fig. 8 - Native language

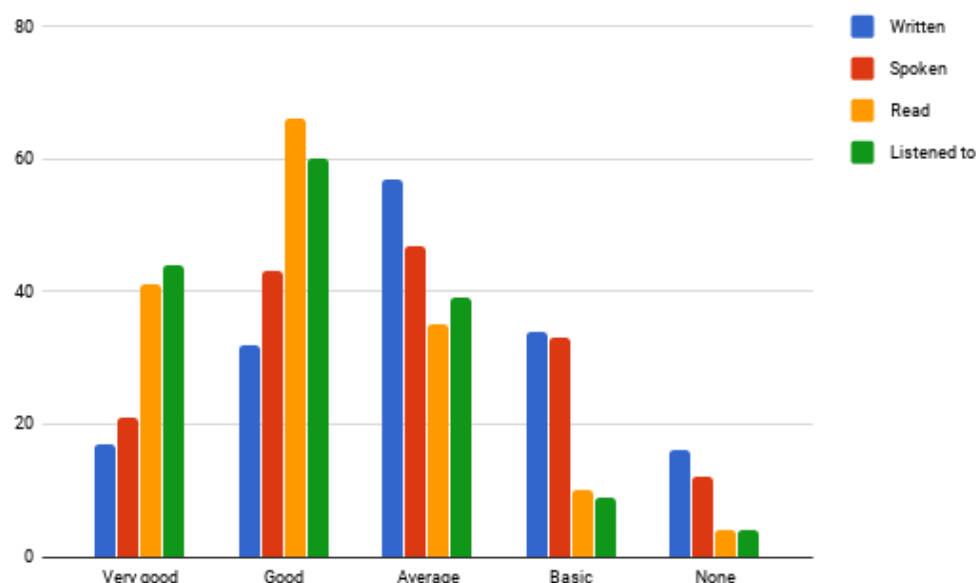**How would you evaluate your own knowledge of Karelian?**

Fig. 9 - Knowledge of Karelian

How and how often do you use Karelian in an institutional setting?
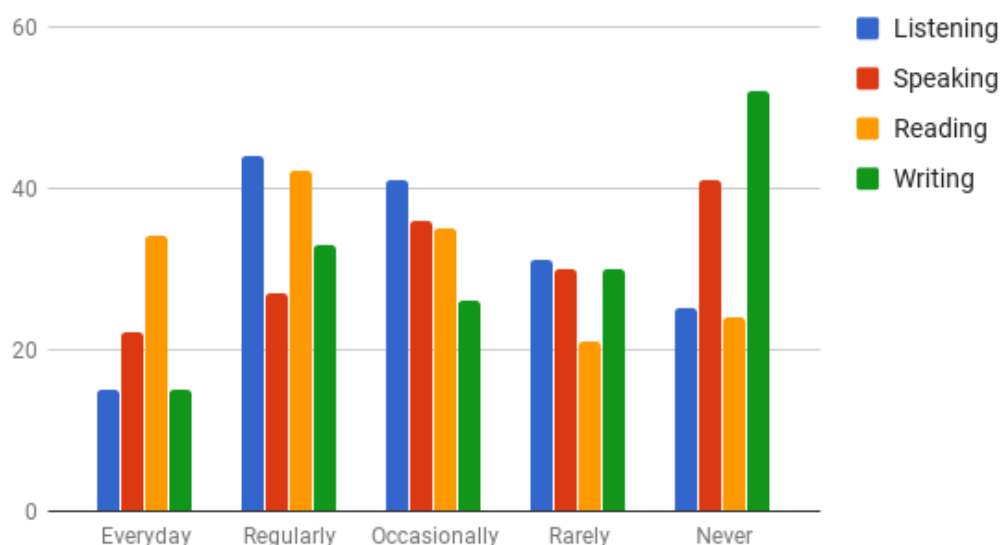
Fig. 10 - Use of Karelian in an institutional setting

How and how often do you use Karelian outside an institutional setting?
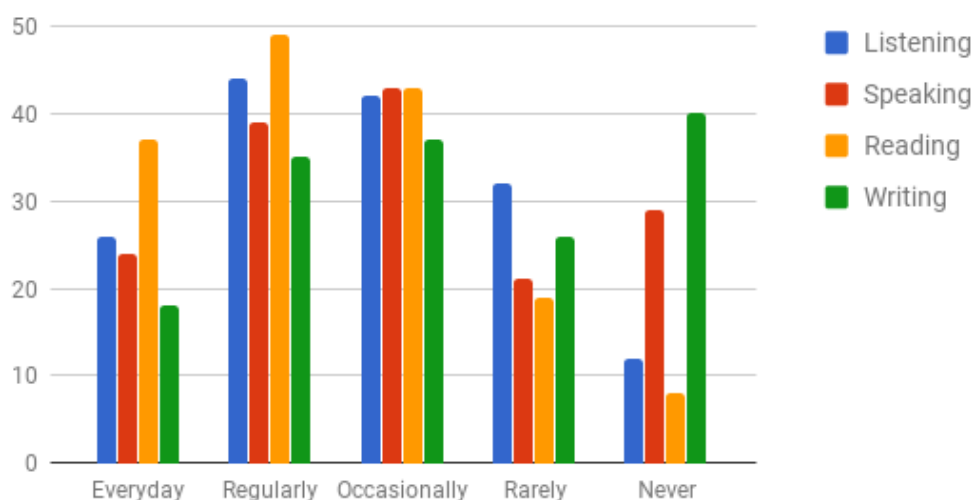
Fig. 11 - Use of Karelian outside an institutional setting

Karelian is important because...

1) ...it embodies the history and culture of the region/country.
2) ...it is the language of my childhood/my parents/grandparents.
3) ...it gives me a sense of who I am and where I belong.
4) ...it is a tool for communicating with the people of the community I belong to.
5) ...it provides access to opportunities (work, studies, access to information).

Fig. 12 - Importance of Karelian

5. Digital Use of Karelian

Of all respondents, 73.7% report using Karelian online. Karelian is used both for reading and writing blogs, posts and comments on forums and websites, with most people only reading and not creating content themselves. The majority of the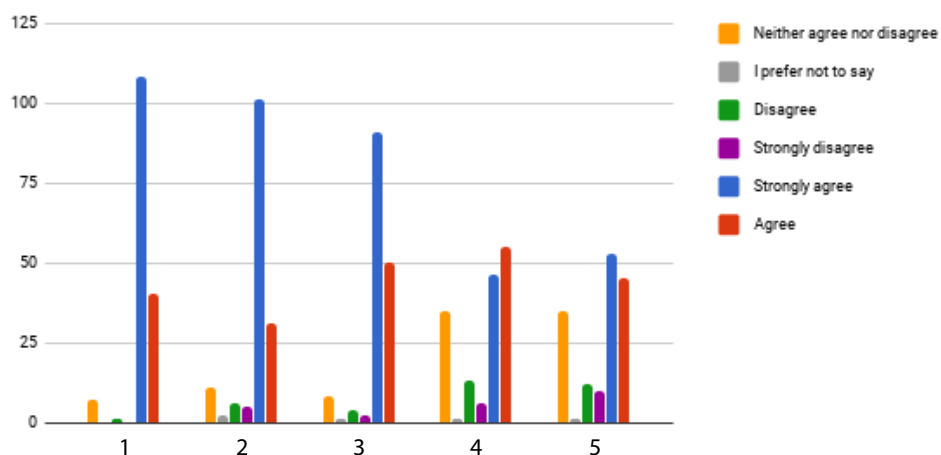 respondents also report using Karelian at least occasionally for e-mail and texting. For chatting/instant messaging the numbers are lower, but still fairly high.

The majority of respondents agree that Karelian should be used in all areas of life, including online. They think that it is important to show that Karelian is a modern language and a good way to do so is to use it on the Internet. This would make sense since the survey was distributed solely online, meaning that the people who found it were very likely to already use Karelian online. However, it is noteworthy to point out that almost half of the respondents find it easier to use Finnish online.

This could reflect the fact that there are not many opportunities to use Karelian online, and that many people find writing Karelian to be difficult on a keyboard due to orthographical differences with Finnish.

Do you use Karelian on the Internet?
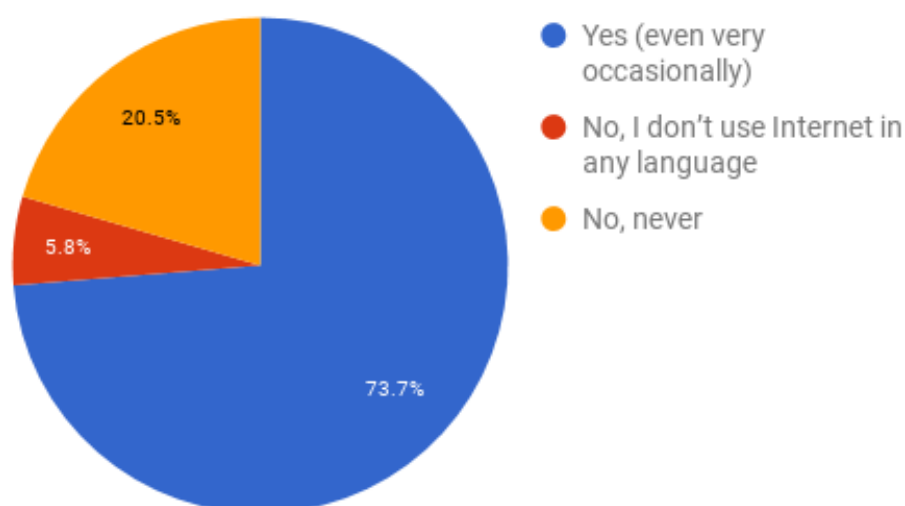
Fig. 13 - Use of Karelian on the Internet

If yes, how do you use it?

Fig. 14 - Karelian language activities on the Internet

Do you ever use Karelian for electronic communication?

Fig. 15 - Use of Karelian for electronic communication

How often do you use Karelian for electronic communication?

Fig. 16 - Frequency of use of Karelian for electronic communication

How much do you agree to the following statements?
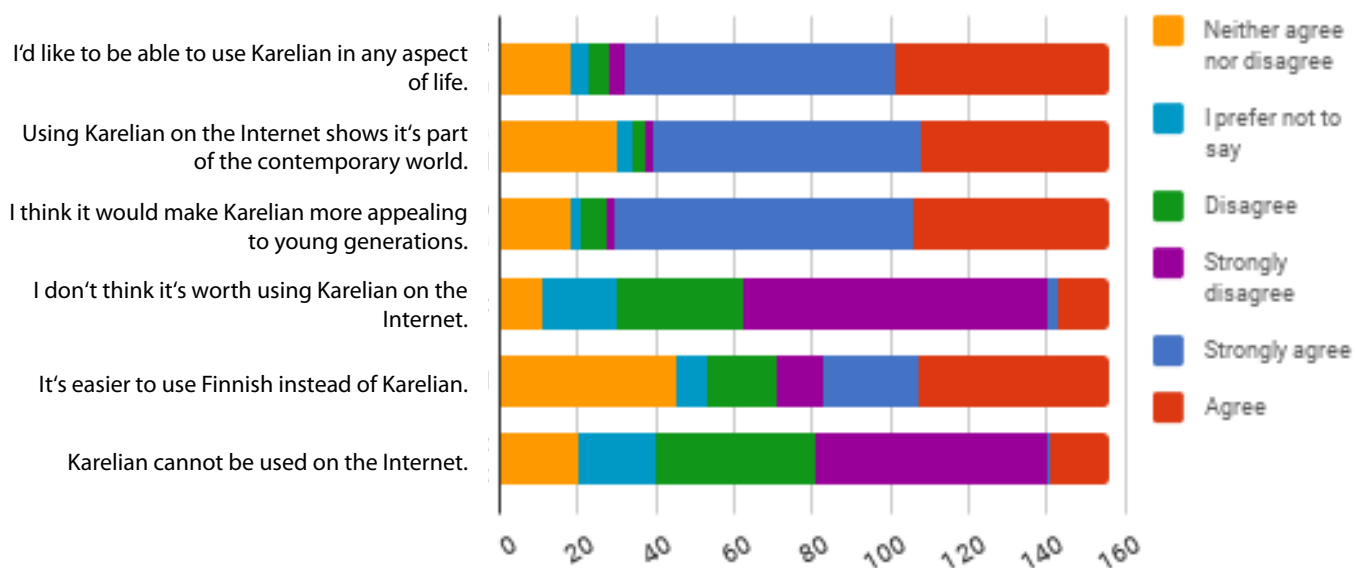
Fig. 17 - Statements on Karelian

5.1 Karelian on Digital Media

In the responses there are many reports of websites, smartphone apps, internet television, blogs, forums, message boards, streaming audio and vid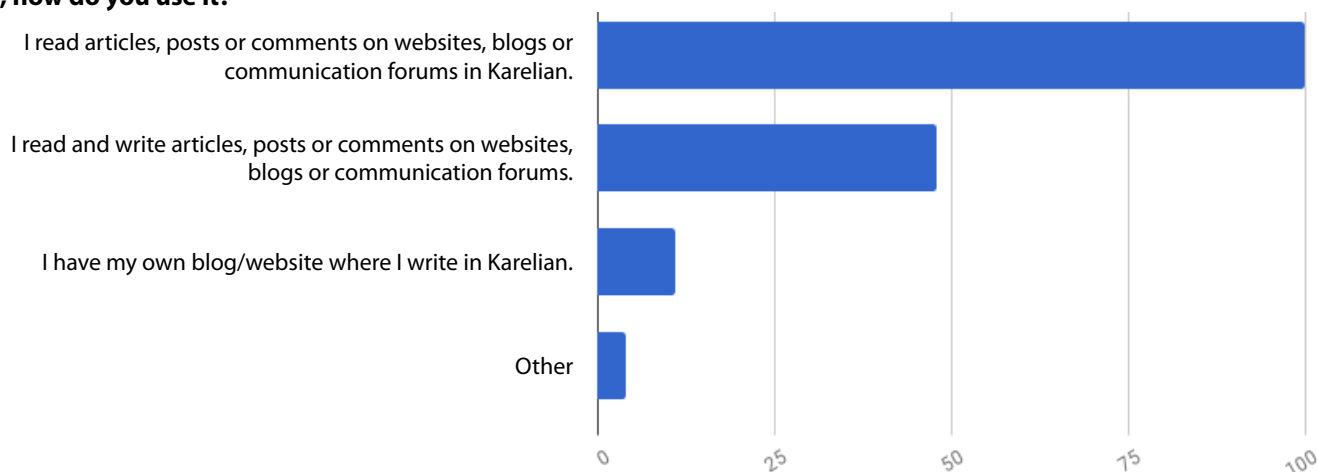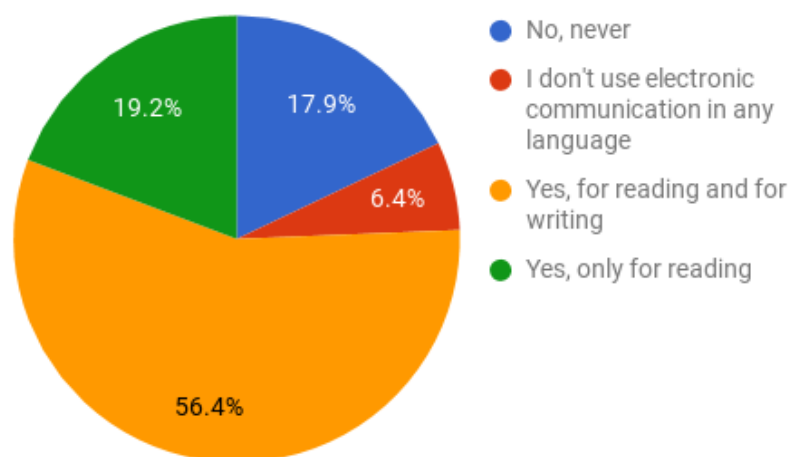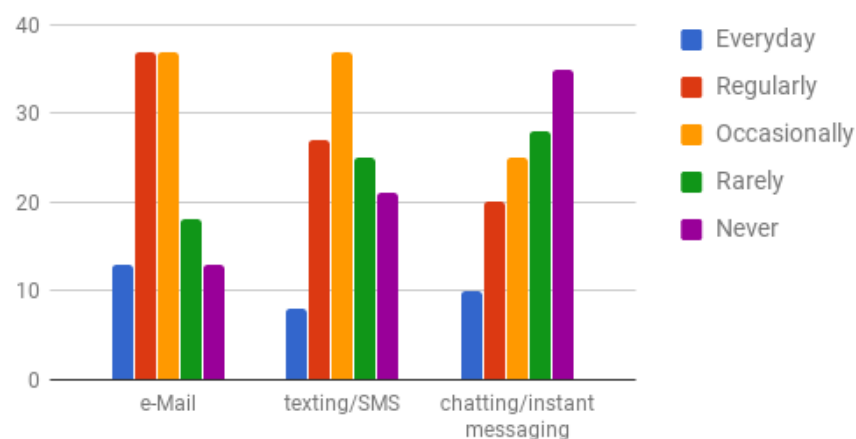eo, ebooks, digital archives and libraries existing in Karelian. From these, all except smartphone apps, also exist in Karelian, so people seem to be quite aware of the existence of different resources. However, the number of people reporting that they are not aware of any of the above is substantial. Since the respondents mainly come from Karelian organizations and online groups, their knowledge of such resources can be expected to be higher than average. This means that there is still much work to be done to inform the community of existing online resources.

To your best knowledge, which of the following media are available in Karelian?

Fig. 18 - Existing media in Karelian

5.2 Karelian on Social Networks

In terms of social networks, people mainly use Karelian on Facebook. There are some individual reports of use also in Twitter, Goo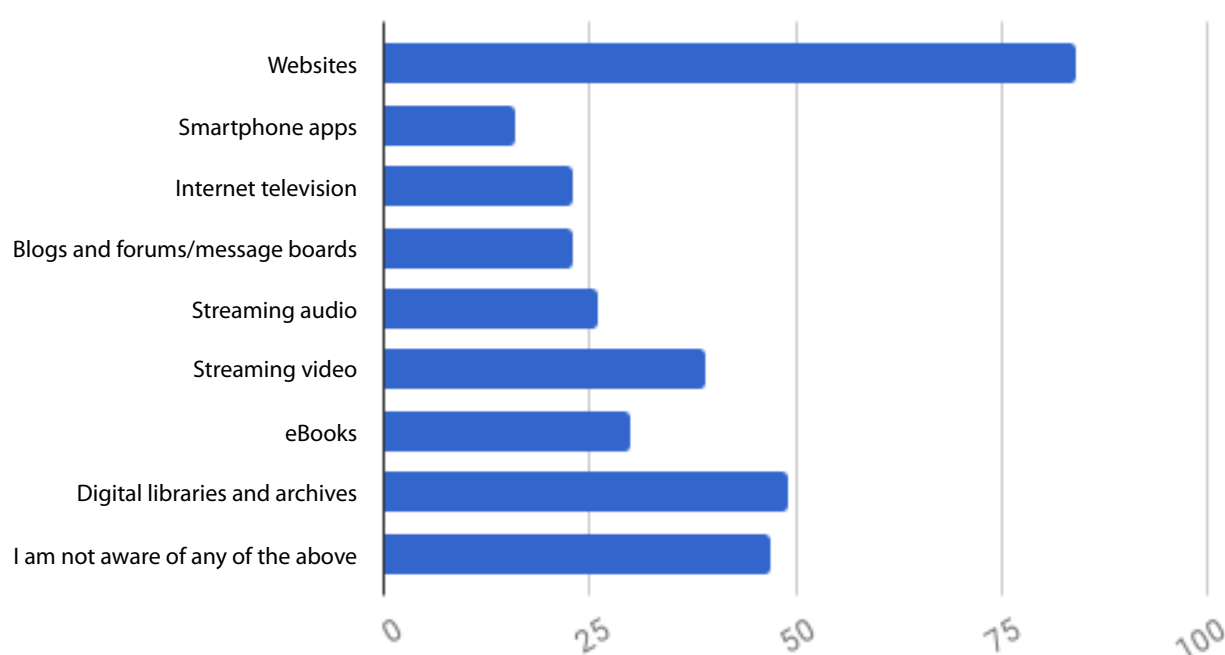gle+, LinkedIn, Instagram and Snapchat as well, but these are marginal compared to Facebook. Most of those who report using Karelian on Facebook report both reading and writing material in Karelian.

Facebook has been a very important medium of communication for the Karelian community in Finland. As Karelians are a non-territorial language minority in modern Finland, it can be difficult to meet other Karelian speakers, and this is where Facebook comes in. There are many active Karelian groups on Facebook where people discuss all kinds of things in Karelian. These groups were also an important method of disseminating this survey.

The profile of Facebook compared to other social networks can explain why it is so popular among Karelian speakers. Facebook allows for easy and extensive written communication and interaction, whereas Instagram and Snapchat are focused on visual communication, and Twitter only allows short messages. LinkedIn on the other hand is for professional communication, and there are not many professional settings in Finland where the use of Karelian is possible.

Facebook is also widely used by all demographic groups in Finland, which makes it easy to find other Karelian speakers on it. Snapchat and Instagram are preferred by younger people whereas the average age of Karelians is rather high. Twitter on the other hand is mainly used for a more professional communication in terms of politics, administration and the private sector, and Google+ is not very popular in Finland in general.

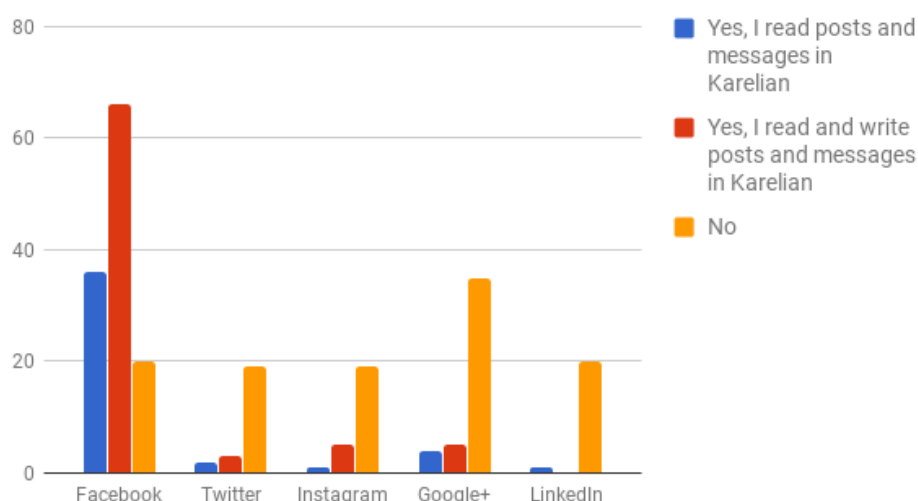**Do you ever use Karelian on the following networks?**

Fig. 19 - Use of Karelian on social networks

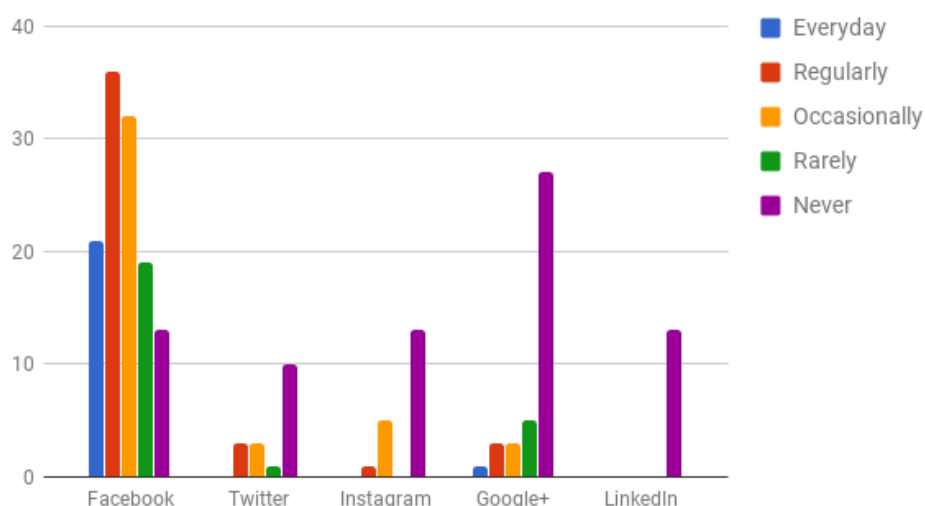**How often do you use Karelian on those networks?**

Fig. 20 - Frequency of use of Karelian on social networks

5.3 Localised Digital Services/Interfaces for Karelian

From question about the most widely used and easily available digital services it emerges that almost all respondents know about the existence of online news and newspapers. Some also report other existing resources, such as edu-tainment, entertainment and cultural services.

There are, however, also many reports of services that do not in fact exist in Karelian. These include for example search engines, healthcare and eBanking. The same trend of false reports continues in terms of Karelian localisations for different programs and platforms. There are reports of Karelian localisation existing for all of the 13 listed platforms, and even people using the Karelian versions of these platforms, when in fact no Karelian localisation exists for any of these.

These false reports can stem from two possible sources. Either respondents have misunderstood the questions, or they think that Karelian versions of certain services and programs exist when they in fact do not. In any case, this highlights the importance of informing the Karelian community of the existing resources.

In terms of digital resources many respondents know about the existence of online dictionaries, but the number of people who report that no such resources exist is also surprisingly high. There are in fact some online dictionaries for Karelian, such as the very large Karelian-Finnish dictionary published by the Institute for the Languages of Finland, which is freely available for public use online. There are also some reports of non-existing resources, such as machine translation and spelling corrector. In terms of the keyboard for Karelian, only 26,9% report that they can easily write all the letters for Karelian on their keyboard. There is no Karelian setting for the keyboard available for Windows yet, but all the necessary letters can in fact be easily written using the Finnish and Sami keyboard setting. Still, a need for a Karelian keyboard certainly exists, as 60,3% of respondents report that they would like such a keyboard, with 11,5% reporting that they are unsure.

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following services are available in Karelian?
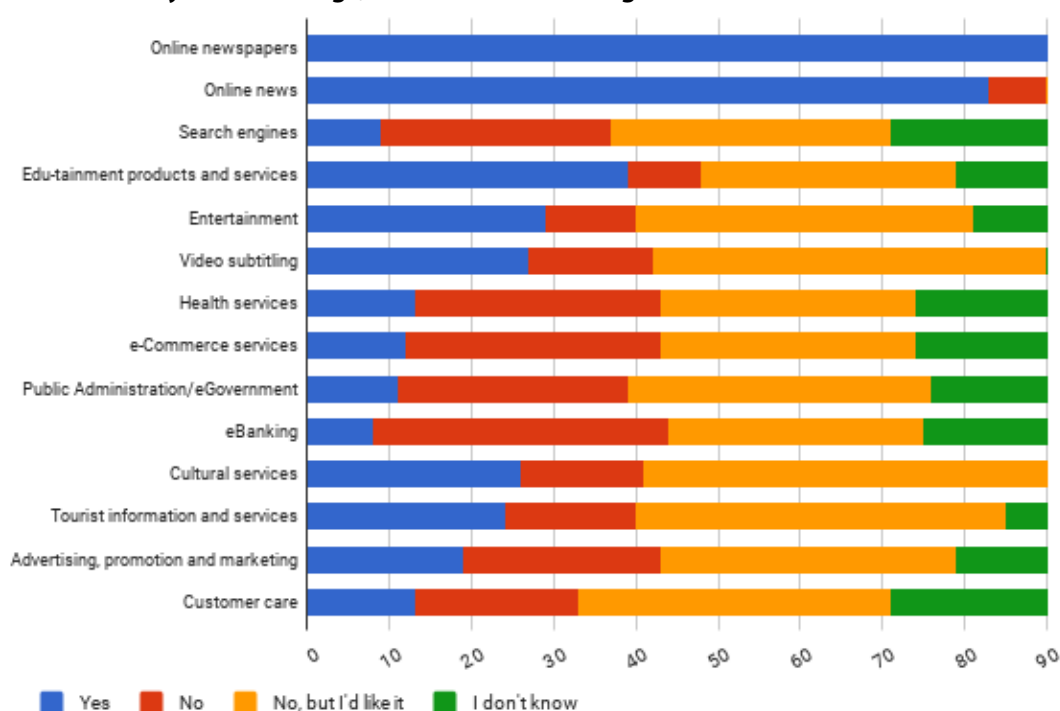

Fig. 21 - Existence of Karelian internet services

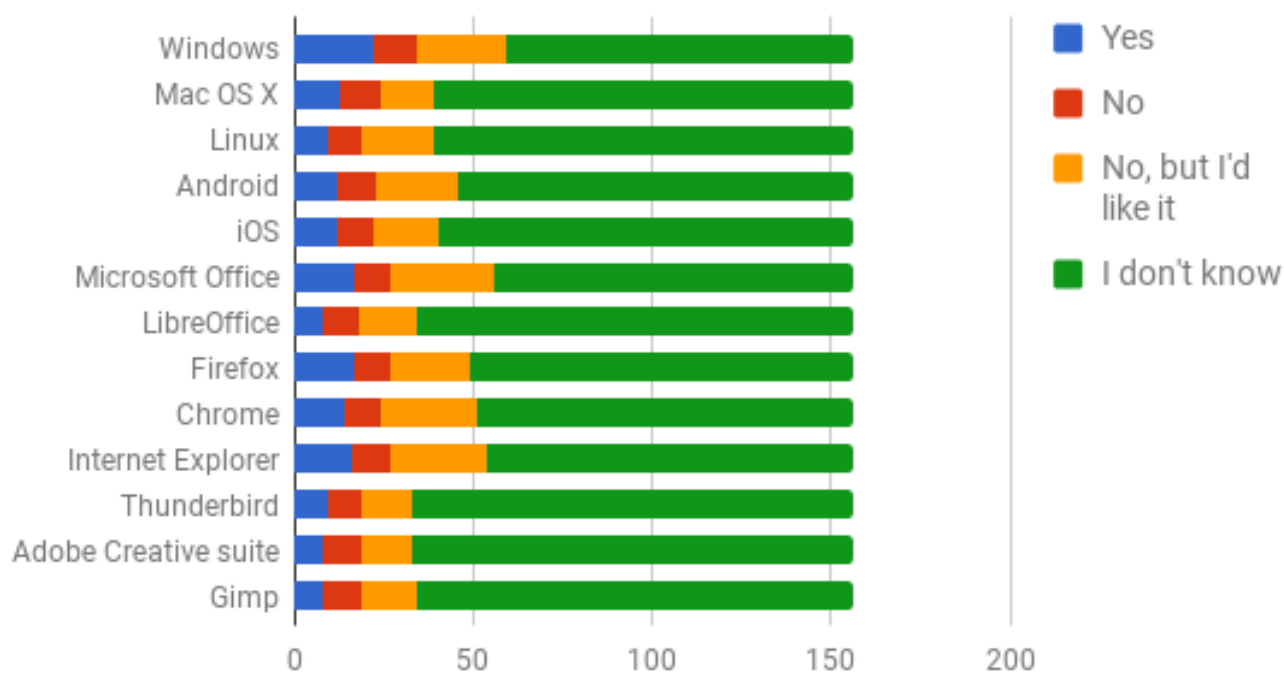**Do you know if any of the following software can be set to Karelian?**

Fig. 22 - Software in Karelian

If yes, did you select Karelian as first in the list?
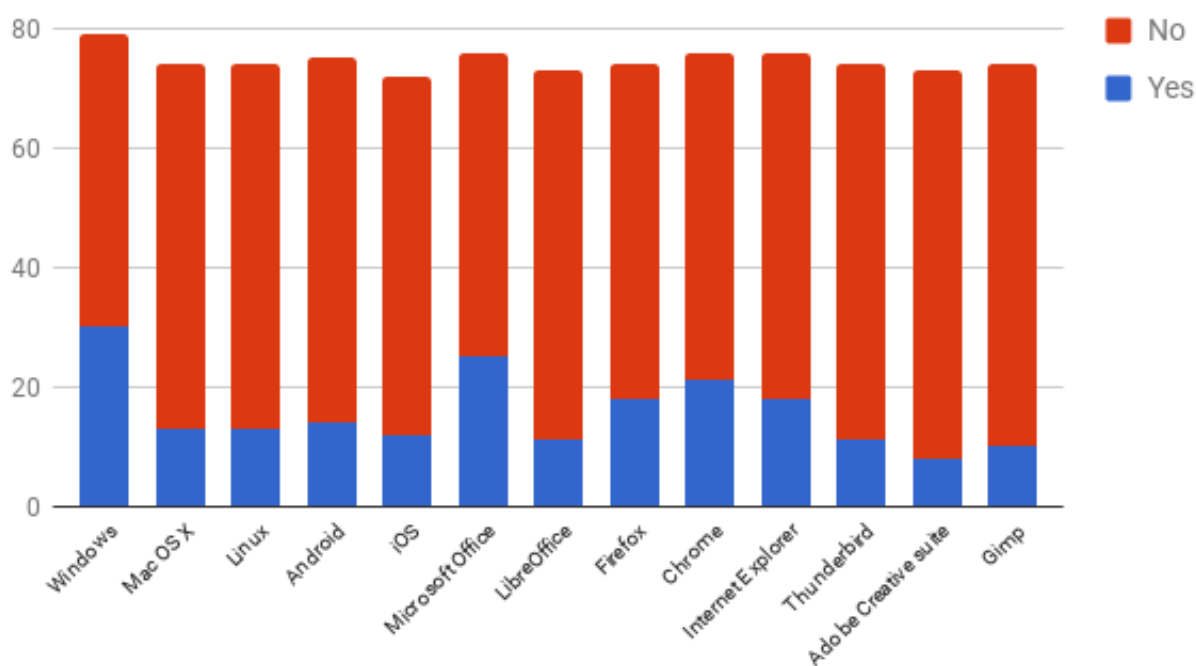

Fig. 23 - Use of software in Karelian

To the best of your knowledge, which of the following digital resources are available in Karelian?
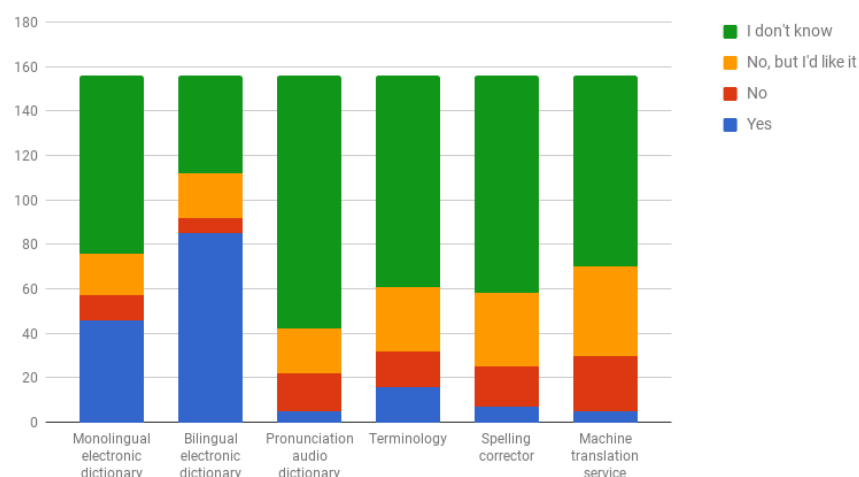
Fig. 24 - Existence of digital resources in Karelian

Is your PC keyboard adapted to Karelian?

Legend:
- No problem, I can type all the characters of Karelian with the keyboard I use for Finnish
- I can type most of the characters of Karelian easily
- Many characters are missing for Karelian and it is very difficult to use it on computers
- Some characters are missing in the keyboard I am using and writing it is not easy
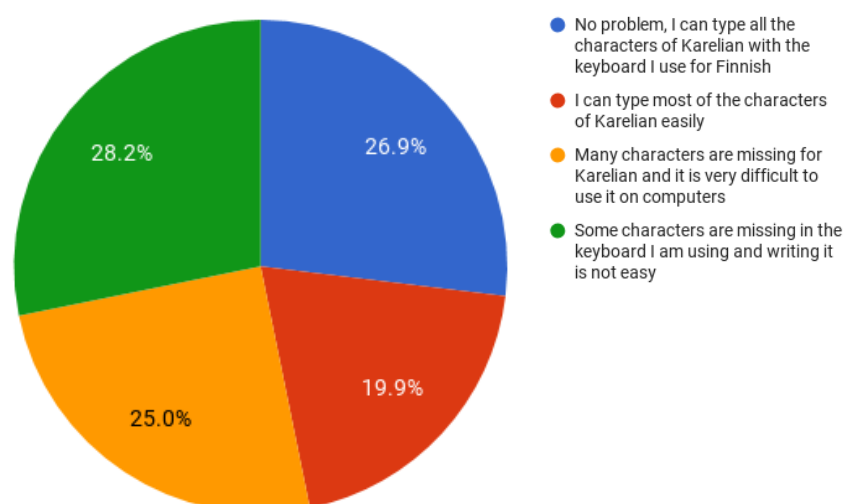
Fig. 25 - Karelian PC keyboard

Would you like a specific keyboard for writing in Karelian?

Legend:
- Yes
- I don't know
- No

Fig. 26 - Need for Karelian PC keyboard

6. Conclusion

From the results we can see that the Karelian digital presence is developing, but still needs much work done. We see that the speakers have a high linguistic self-esteem an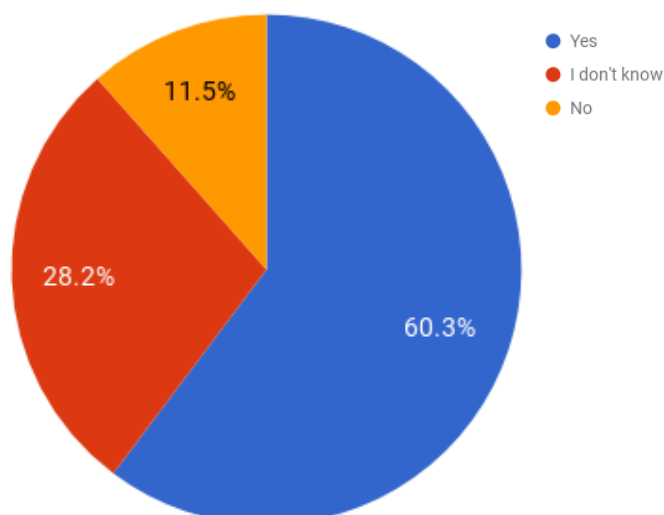d this translates to a will to use the language online. Online presence is also particularly important for Karelian revitalization, since as a non-territorial language minority the speakers live far from each other in all parts of Finland. However, there are a lot of necessary online and digital resources missing, and speakers often have missing or untrue information about those that do exist.

In terms of social networks the use of Karelian is very heavily restricted to Facebook. This could be because Facebook has users from all demographic groups and it is very well suited for extensive written communication, making it easy to connect with Karelians from different parts of the country and even across the border. The situation is not likely to change considerably anytime soon, although the amount of people using Karelian on Facebook might increase and there might be an increased Karelian presence on Twitter and Instagram, if more young people get interested in the language and start using it and if the Karelian revitalization efforts can get a better visibility in Finnish political discussion.

The results clearly highlight the importance of informing the speaker community of the existing resources. The existence of online dictionaries and a Karelian Wikipedia could benefit many Karelian speakers and the community if only they were aware of the existence of such resources. The results also show that many people are unaware of the fact that they could easily change their keyboard settings so that they could write Karelian letters. This would be an important point to communicate to the community, since if writing Karelian is perceived as something that is difficult, it can easily demotivate people from using it.

7. List of Relevant Websites

http://opastajat.net
http://omamua. ru
http://yle.fi/uutiset/18-44136
https://www.karjal.fi
http://www.karjalansivistysseura.fi
http://tv-karelia.ru/natsionalnoe-veshhanie/omin-silmin/lahtin-mina-lakkoilah-rodnyie-serdtsuimena
http://kianna-hanke.blogspot. fi
http://www.salmi-seura.net
http://www.kolumbus.fi/leo.mirala/Karjalan_kielella/Karjalankielisia_pakinoita.htm
http://havvinkukkaro.blogspot. fi

Some Comments from Respondents

Mie duumaicen, shto pidäs elävyttiä karjalan kieldä da lizhätä sen käyttömahtoloi nepremennä internetas. Karjalankielizet eletäh muida kielie pagizijoin kessessä eigo voija käyttiä omua kieldä ylen äijiä. Internetta voibi olla karjalan kielen pelassus!

I think that Karelian should be revitalized and the possibilities to use it should be increased, for example on the Internet. Karelians live among speakers of other languages and can't use their language that much. Internet might be the savior of Karelian language!

Karjalaisien tulisi pitää yhtä digitaalisessa maailmassa, eli pyrkiä yhteiseen kirjakieleen tai ainakin kutsua ja kannustaa toisiaan samoihin verkkopalveluihin.

Karelians should stick together in the digital world, trying to achieve a common standardization or at least encourage each other to use the same online resources.

Tahtozin, što karjal olis ainos vai enämbän sežo digitualline kieli.

I wish that Karelian could always increase its digital presence.

Himoittas, gu karjalan kieldy olis enämbäine internetas, sendäh gu sidä kaikin nygöi käytetäh.

I wish that there were more Karelian online, since everyone uses the Internet nowadays.