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Voices from Tundra and Taiga: The Study of Endangered Arctic Languages in Russia

T. de Graaf, M. Bergmann en H. Shiraishi

INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years the authors of this paper have contributed to the teaching programme of the Groningen Arctic Centre by presenting lectures on the peoples of Arctic Russia, their languages and cultures. On the occasion of the Centre's jubilee we should like to indicate how our research is related to this topic and describe some of the results of our projects.

Traditionally research institutes in the Russian Federation have paid much attention to the multicultural aspects of Russian society, and in recent times interest in these fields has again been growing. This holds true in particular for the University of St.Petersburg, where in the past many scholars have been active in the field of language description, ethnolinguistics and related disciplines involving the languages of Russia. Large collections of data on these languages and cultures can be found in the archives of St.Petersburg, such as the many sound recordings of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the Pushkinsky Dom, the Russian Museum of Literature. These recordings contain valuable information on cultural developments in the Russian Federation, with in particular recordings of spoken language and songs made since the beginning of the 20th century. Together with the Department of Phonetics at St.Petersburg University we have reconstructed part of these recordings and put them into databases, which are now available for specialists in linguistics, ethnology, folklore and other fields, who can use this material for various purposes.

In 1992 we initiated a number of research projects which have been financially supported by the organisation INTAS of the EU, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research NWO and the Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd. In addition the two PhD projects by Markus Bergmann and Hidetoshi Shiraishi are related to the topic. The results of our work have also been reported at various international conferences (De Graaf 2004a,b,c)

SOME PROJECTS ON THE LANGUAGES OF RUSSIA

Prior to 1890, linguistic and ethnological fieldwork was based on direct contacts with representatives of various cultures, in which the investigator took notes by

hand after many repetitions of tales and songs during recording sessions. This was a laborious process for both the investigator and the performer or informant. At the end of the 19th century, the great invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison changed all this. For the first time in human history, people were able to store and rehear acoustic data, in particular speech, songs and music. As recordings were made, it became obvious that a central facility was needed for the preservation of the valuable material which had been collected. Around the beginning of the 20th century this led to the establishment of sound archives, the earliest of which were located in New York City, Vienna and Berlin. Soon afterwards, the first Russian collections were made and the sound archives in St. Petersburg were founded.

At that time, expeditions, often financed by philanthropists, were sent to various parts of the world to gather data, which were then returned to the archives for preservation and study. In 1897, for instance, on the initiative of the famous American anthropologist and linguist Franz Boas, the Jesup Expedition set out from the American Museum of Natural History to examine evidence of similarities among the peoples of Siberia and the Northwest Coast of America. The Russian ethnologists Waldemar Bogoras and Waldemar Johelson made recordings during this expedition to Siberia. Many of these recordings are stored in the archives of the Pushkinsky Dom and they form one of the basic collections used in our INTAS projects (Schiff and Marchenko, 1996). These sound archives at the Russian Academy of Sciences contain about 10,000 wax cylinders from the Edison phonograph and more than 500 old wax discs. In addition, an extensive fund of gramophone records exists and one of the largest collections of tape recordings of Russian folklore. They represent the history of Russian ethnography and contain a wide range of materials.

We were able to reconstruct part of the many recordings in the Pushkinsky Dom and to make them available for further research, which is not only important for historical and cultural reasons, but also for the possible direct evidence of language change. In our first INTAS project (1995–1998) we completed the reconstruction of sound archive material with the Zhirmunsky collection (Svetozarova, 1996) of German dialects spoken on Russian territory. Important activities related to linguistic databases in St. Petersburg also concern the many recordings of Russian dialects and minority languages in the Russian Federation, such as Nenets, Komi, Karelian, Vepsian, Khanty, Mansi, Tungus, Nivkh and others. One of our aims is the construction of a phonetic database of the languages of Russia, which has many scientific, cultural and technical applications. At the beginning of 1998 we started a second INTAS project with

the title *Sound Archives on the World Wide Web with Sound Recordings from St. Petersburg Collections*. We constructed a database, which includes texts and sound material made in the first part of the 20th century in the Arkhangelsk region of Russia. Of special interest for the project are the recordings, made in that region, of the northern Russian dialects and the Komi and Nenets languages. This database has been made accessible on the World Wide Web by implementing a dedicated Web-server at the Department of Phonetics of St. Petersburg University. In this way scholars around the world (linguists, phoneticians, ethnologists, musicologists and folklorists) can get access to this material from the Internet address (www.speech.nw.ru/phonetics/homepage.html).

Another INTAS project on *The construction of a full-text database on Balto-Finnic languages and Russian dialects in Northwest-Russia* (2000 – 2003) has been initiated together with research groups at the universities of St. Petersburg and Petrozavodsk (Karelia). The north-western regions of the Russian Federation are interesting from the linguistic point of view because of the fact that, during the last centuries, the original Uralic tribes in this part of Europe have been assimilated by the Russian population. As a result, speakers of Uralic languages such as Komi and Nenets are still to be found only in limited areas. In a PhD project on *Language Contact in the Russian North*, supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for the period 2000 – 2005, Markus Bergmann is investigating language contact phenomena in Russian dialects and local languages in this area, which are based on recorded sound material from the sound archives and on a contrastive study of Russian and these Uralic languages.

In the summer of 1990 T. de Graaf took part in the first international field work expedition to the island of Sakhalin, which was organized in order to investigate the linguistic and ethnographic situation of the smaller nationalities on the island (De Graaf, 1992, 1993). The idea was to look for remnants of the Ainu population and for other small minority groups, in particular Nivkh (Gilyak) and Uilta (Orok).

In the Russian demographic data a distinction is made between those representatives of a nationality who still speak their native language as their first language and those who speak Russian or another language. The last census of the USSR took place in 1989 and the statistic results for the Sakhalin area can be found in De Graaf (1992). From these data we could conclude that in 1989 the aboriginal peoples of the North formed a very small minority within the total

population of Sakhalin: for the Nivkh ethnic group, which has the largest number of members, the percentage is only 0.3 %.

The Nivkh language is classified as Paleo-Siberian and spoken by tribes inhabiting the lower reaches of the Amur river in the Far East of the Asian continent, and the northern and central parts of Sakhalin island. One of the linguistic complications is the fact that the language has two (or maybe more) rather different dialects: the Amur dialect and the Sakhalin dialect. Both groups of speakers are rather small: altogether about 4400 people have the Nivkh nationality, and less than 25 % of them are speakers of the Nivkh language (De Graaf, 1992). After World War II several of them went from their homeland in Southern Sakhalin to Japan, where Japanese and other non-Soviet linguists studied their language. The more northern dialects have been mainly studied by Soviet linguists, e.g. Kreinovich (1937, 1973) and Panfilov (1968).

In recent times a development has been taking place in favour of the native language and culture of the small minorities in the Russian Federation, such as the Nivkh. Attempts are being made to revive the Nivkh language, for example by introducing language classes in Nivkh in several schools. In 1980, the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation initiated a programme for primary and secondary schools, for which textbooks and dictionaries have been edited (Sangi and Otaina, 1981). Special instruction was given to teachers of Nivkh descent about the education of Nivkh children in their own language. This teaching programme was introduced in the special boarding schools for children from the ethnic minorities in Nogliki, Chir-Unvd and in Nekrasovka. We were able to visit the schools in Nekrasovka and Chir-Unvd, where we learned about the teaching methods for Nivkh used in the primary school. During our fieldwork expeditions on Sakhalin, important linguistic material on the languages of these minority groups has been collected.

The Groningen researcher Hidetoshi Shiraishi contributes to the study of the Nivkh language in the framework of his Groningen PhD project. Together with the Nivkh specialist Galina Lok he has produced two collections of Folktales of the Nivkh language in the series *Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim (ELPR)*, a project initiated by a Japanese research group directed by Osahito Miyaoka. These texts together with the CD in the book are not only important data for linguists, but also useful for the members of the Nivkh community (Shiraishi and Lok 2002, 2003). Similar new publications are in preparation.

In a study made during a recent stay at the Slavic Research Centre of Hokkaido University (De Graaf 2004b) the situation of the Nivkh on Sakhalin has been

compared with that of the Ainu on Hokkaido. For Ainu much important work has been done with active support from the Japanese and local governments. The Ainu situation can be considered as an example of how in Russia and elsewhere one could further proceed with projects on language revitalisation in cooperation with the local language communities. This can be realized by the promotion of the language and culture, and by setting up language courses, broadcasting in the language, speech contests, training storytellers, etc. The main problem in the Russian Federation is the lack of sufficient financial support for these activities and for special programmes necessary to protect the indigenous endangered languages, such as Nivkh.

Our research programme *Voices from Tundra and Taiga* is devoted to the study of endangered Arctic languages and cultures of the Russian Federation, which must be described rapidly before they become extinct. This research is in the fortunate position that earlier work on reconstruction technology for old sound recordings found in archives in St. Petersburg has made it possible to compare languages in the proposed research area with the same languages as they were spoken more than half a century ago. These sound recordings consist of spoken language, folksongs, fairy tales etc. in the languages of Russia.

We apply the techniques developed to some of these disappearing minority languages and cultures of Russia, in particular to Nivkh and Uilta on Sakhalin. We are preparing an audio- and video-library of recorded stories, and of the folklore, singing and oral traditions of the peoples of Sakhalin and Siberia. For this purpose the existing sound recordings in the archives of Sakhalin and Siberia are used together with the results obtained from new fieldwork expeditions. The data are added to the existing archive material in St. Petersburg and part of it is made available on the Internet and/or CD-ROM. Spontaneous speech and prepared texts are collected for (ethno)linguistic as well as for anthropological, folkloric and ethno-musicological analysis. Described texts have been published in scientific journals and books with audiovisual illustrations on CD-ROM and on the Internet. This material thus becomes available for further analysis to researchers working in the field of phonetics, linguistics, anthropology, history, ethno-musicology and folklore. The information is also important for the development of teaching methods for representatives of the related ethnic groups and for the conservation of their language and culture.

Our research and documentation are carried out in close co-operation with members of the local language community on Sakhalin and with the Sakhalin Museum of Regional Studies. In October 2003 we organised a special seminar in the Sakhalin Museum, where training was given to local teachers of Nivkh and

Uilta and their assistants, who participate in the archiving of the sound recordings and in fieldwork expeditions. Students from Sakhalin will also be trained at St. Petersburg State University and specialists from St. Petersburg and the Netherlands have visited Sakhalin in order to set up a new centre for the study of local languages and related subjects. For this purpose this centre is equipped with computers, software, sound- and video-recorders, monitors, literature, etc. We also receive financial support for this work from the Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd.

The documentation of the linguistic and cultural heritage and the way of life in the Arctic areas of the Russian Federation is very important, not least for speakers of the endangered languages in future generations. It is important that institutions like universities and sound archives in Western Europe continue to be involved in these joint projects for the study of the languages and cultures of Russia and that scholars in many countries are able to learn about developments in the Russian Federation by studying them together with Russian colleagues.

SAMENVATTING

Het onderzoekprogramma *Stemmen van Toendra en Taiga: De Studie van Arctische Talen in Rusland* wordt uitgevoerd door een aantal onderzoekers in Nederland en Rusland en gecoördineerd door Dr. Tjeerd de Graaf, die tot 2003 werkzaam was bij de Faculteit der Letteren van de RuG. Sinds 1992 wordt in het kader van dit programma onderzoek verricht: het promotie-onderzoek van Hidetoshi Shiraishi (*Klankaspecten van Arctische Talen, i.h.b. Nivch*) en Markus Bergmann (*Taalcontacten in het Russische Noorden, i.h.b. bij Nenets*) en de projecten in samenwerking met de universiteit van Sint-Petersburg, die financieel worden gesteund door de organisatie INTAS van de EU en de Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek NWO. Het artikel beschrijft de voorgeschiedenis van deze projecten, die voortkomen uit de reconstructie van oude geluidsopnames uit de archieven van Sint-Petersburg. Dit werk wordt aangevuld met gegevens van veldwerkexpedities en de daarbij verkregen resultaten zijn niet alleen interessant voor de wetenschappelijke wereld, maar ze worden ook gebruikt voor het ontwikkelen van onderwijsmethoden ten behoeve van de betreffende taalgemeenschappen. Omdat daarbij sprake is van talen die in hun voortbestaan worden bedreigd, kan er gewerkt worden aan de mogelijke revitalisatie van deze talen en de bestudering van taalcontactsituaties en taalverlies in het Arctische gebied.

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Inuksuk bij Iqaluit, hoofdstad van Nunavut. Foto: Kim van Dam.