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Capacity building for some endangered languages of Russia: Voices from Tundra and Taiga

Tjeerd de Graaf and Hidetoshi Shiraishi

1. Introduction

Traditionally, research institutes in the Russian Federation have paid a lot of attention to the multicultural aspects of Russian society, and in the last ten years, interest in these fields is again growing. This holds true in particular for the University of St.Petersburg, where, in the past, many scholars have been active in the fields of language description, ethnolinguistics and related disciplines involving the languages of Russia. Impressive collections of data on these languages and cultures can be found in the archives and museums of St.Petersburg, including 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, in particular spoken languages and songs recorded since the beginning of the 20th century. Together with the Department of Phonetics of St.Petersburg University, we have reconstructed a part of these recordings and entered them into databases, which are now available for specialists in linguistics, ethnology, folklore, and other fields who can use this material for a variety of purposes.

In 1995, we initiated a project on *The Use of Acoustic Data Bases and the Study of Language Change* which was financially supported by the INTAS organisation in Brussels (De Graaf 1997, 1998). INTAS stands for INTernational ASsociation for the Promotion of Co-operation with Scientists from the Independent States of the former Soviet Union. This organisation is part of the European Union in Brussels, and plays an important role in the exchange of scientists between the Russian Federation and Western Europe. Other research projects are financially supported by the NWO (the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) and Groningen University. Within the research programme *Voices from Tundra and Taiga* several projects have now been realized. First, background information is provided for this research programme and next we illustrate some useful results which have been obtained in our joint projects. Our aim is to reconstruct more old recordings of the Russian Academy of Sciences in the Pushkinsky Dom and to use these data for the study of the language, music and folklore of the peoples of Russia. We concentrate on the study of some of the endangered languages of Russia and stress the importance of this topic, particularly in relation to capacity building for some of the languages of Russia.

2. Some History

While visiting the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in 1994, local linguists in Yakutsk reported on the history of the Yakut language (De Graaf 1996). They noted that the first written information on this language could be found in a book by the Dutch author Nicolaas Witsen, but that they were not able to read this as it was written in 17th century Dutch. Witsen was a prominent Dutchman who had personal contacts with Peter the Great during the latter's visit to Amsterdam in 1697 and who provided information about Western Europe to the Russians. On the other hand, the Western world learned much about Russia from Witsen's publications: his book *Noord en Oost Tartarye* (Witsen 1705) describes the eastern parts of the Russian Empire, he gives many details on the peoples of Siberia, their languages and cultures, and provides the first maps of this part of the world. For many of the Siberian languages, such as Yakut and Tungus, lists of words and short sentences are provided. The fact that this book was written in 17th century Dutch makes it difficult for readers in Russia to access the interesting material it contains, such as the linguistic data on various languages. Within the framework of the Witsen project, a group of Dutch scholars is preparing a Russian edition of this work. It has already been translated into Russian and is now being supplemented with comments and annotations by specialists on all details contained in the book. For this purpose, an international research team with Russian specialists has been set up – and with financial support from the NWO – we are able to realize our plans.

Prior to 1890, linguistic and ethnological fieldwork was based on direct contacts with representatives of various cultures, whereby 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 consultant. At the end of the 19th century, the invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison changed all this. For the first time in human history, it was possible to store and rehear acoustic data, in particular speech, songs and music. As recordings were made, it became obvious that a central repository was needed for the preservation of this valuable material. This led, at the beginning of the 20th century, to the establishment of sound archives, the earliest of which were located in New York City, Vienna and Berlin. Soon thereafter, the first Russian collections were made and the sound archive in St. Petersburg was founded.

It was a time in history when philanthropists often financed expeditions that were sent to various parts of the world to gather data, which were then stored in 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 between the peoples of Siberia and of the Northwest Coast of America. The Russian ethnologists Waldemar Bogoras and Waldemar Johkelson made recordings of this expedition in 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 of the Russian Academy of Sciences contain about 10,000 wax cylinders of 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.

3. INTAS projects on the languages of Russia

We were able to reconstruct part of the many recordings in the Pushkinsky Dom and to make them available for further research. This was important not only for historical and cultural reasons, but also for providing direct possible 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). Zhirmunsky was a famous linguist who worked in St.Petersburg/Leningrad at the beginning of the 20th century. One of his main interests was the study of German dialects spoken on the territory of Russia. In the period between 1927 and 1930, he and his assistants recorded many vocal expressions on gramophone discs, in particular, songs by German settlers. Within the framework of our INTAS project, most of these discs have been copied onto tape. So far, only a small part of the collection has been published and made available both as a database and on compact disc. This sound material, together with written data from the archives on the work by Zhirmunsky will be made available for further research and will provide interesting information on the life and culture of German colonists in the Russian Empire.

Over the last ten years, it has again become possible to study German dialects in Russia with the aid of existing linguistic databases and new fieldwork. We have completed an interesting study on the language and culture of the Siberian Mennonites. Their Plautdiitsch language has certain similarities with the dialects spoken in the Low Countries. We collected recordings of their speech and added this to the acoustic database in our sound archives. This took place at a time when the increasing emigration to Germany has left many Mennonite villages more russified than decades of 'russification' policy could ever accomplish. The Plautdiitsch speakers who choose to stay find it more and more difficult to provide their children with a Plautdiitsch speaking environment, and in the long run it must be feared that the language will lose much ground to Russian. It is a pity that a language which has managed to survive centuries of isolation and many years of prohibition should now disappear where it has had most of its speakers for a long time – in Siberia. We considered it an important task to record this disappearing Siberian Mennonite language and to describe it as precisely as possible. In 1998, one of our projects resulted in a dissertation on Plautdiitsch that gives a description of various aspects of the language such as its phoneme system, its relation with other (Germanic and Slavic) languages, spelling problems of Plautdiitsch and language contact phenomena (De Graaf and Nieuweboer 1994).

The sound archives in St.Petersburg also contain other interesting and important data, such as on Yiddish, the language of the Jews in Eastern Europe, which at the beginning of the 20th century had millions of speakers in the Russian Empire. In the archives we found an unpublished manuscript on *The Ballad in Jewish Folklore* by Sophia D. Magid, together with material on corresponding wax cylinders. The manuscript is dated 1938, which explains why it could not be published at that time. In collaboration with specialists in St-Petersburg, we reconstructed the acoustic data in the sound archive, prepared an edition of the book and reported on this topic during conferences and in articles (De Graaf et al. 2004). This took place in the framework of a Russian-Dutch project with the title: *Voices from the Shtetl, the Past and Present of the Yiddish Language in Russia*, for which we obtained financial support from the NWO in the period 1998-2001.

Important activities related to the linguistic databases in St-Petersburg also include the many recordings of Russian dialects and minority languages in the Russian Federation, such as Nenets, Komi, Karelian, Vepsian, Khanti, Mansi, Tungus, Nivkh and others. One of our aims is the elaboration of a phonetic database of the languages of Russia, which will have many academic, 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 to the project are the recordings of the northern Russian dialects and the Komi and Nenets language made in that region. This database is now accessible on the World Wide Web through the implementation of a dedicated Web-server at the Department of Phonetics of St-Petersburg University. Scholars around the world (linguists, phoneticians, ethnologists, musicologists and folklorists) can access this material from the Internet¹. A continuation of this work is taking place in the research programme *Voices from Tundra and Taiga*, which over the period 2002-2005 has also received financial support from the NWO.

Another INTAS project on *The construction of a full-text database on Balto-Finnic languages and Russian dialects in Northwest-Russia* (2000-2003) was initiated together with research groups at the universities of St-Petersburg and Petrozavodsk (Karelia). The area surrounding St-Petersburg and the southern and middle parts of Karelia present a specific linguistic picture where, until this day, such languages as Vepsian, Ingrian, Votic, Ingermanland-Finnish and Karelian and various types of Russian archaic dialects are spoken in close vicinity. One of the main objectives of this project is the construction of a database on Balto-Finnic languages and the archaic north-western Russian dialects. This database can be used for academic purposes, such as the study of language variety in Russia, or language contact, or even for the development of methods for language teaching in a bicultural environment. It provides

¹ www.speech.nw.ru/phonetics/homepage.html

a good opportunity for investigating ethnic and cultural processes in the contact zone between ancient Slavonic and Balto-Finnic languages.

The north-western regions of the Russian Federation are interesting from a linguistic point of view because the original Uralic tribes in this part of Europe have been assimilated by the Russian population during the last centuries. Only in limited areas are there still speakers of Uralic languages such as Komi and Nenets. In a PhD project on *Language Contact in the Russian North*, supported by the NWO for the period 2000–2005, the research group on Phonetics and Ethnolinguistics of Groningen University is investigating language contact phenomena of Russian dialects and local languages in this area, based on recorded sound material from the sound archives and on a contrastive study of Russian and these Uralic languages.

As stated above about our projects, we intend to combine the data from old sound recordings with the results of modern fieldwork, in order to describe the languages and cultures of different ethnic groups in Russia. It is possible to use this information for the preparation of textbooks on certain languages, collections of folklore, data on ethnomusicology and for the study of language contact, language change and migratory movements. To illustrate this more specifically, we will now give some detailed information about one of the languages of the Russian Federation, namely Nivkh on the island of Sakhalin, which is the object of one of our research projects.

4. Nivkh as a case study

The island of Sakhalin belongs to the Sakhalin area (Sakhalinskaya Oblast'), one of the easternmost territorial units of the Russian Federation (Stephan 1971). The original population of Sakhalin consisted of some Paleo-Siberian and Tungusic tribes, in particular the Nivkh (Gilyak) and Uilta (Orok) in the North and Centre, and the Ainu in the South. Their population was not large and during the colonisation process carried out by the Russians from the north and by the Japanese from the South, they soon became numerically dominated by these stronger nationalities. Because of their isolated life far from the political centre, they were able to maintain their native languages and cultures for a long time, but since the beginning of the 20th century, the assimilation process has gradually become stronger.

In the summer of 1990, Tjeerd de Graaf took part in the first international fieldwork expedition to Sakhalin set up to investigate the linguistic and ethnographic situation of the smaller nationalities on the island. This project was initiated by Kyoko Murasaki, of the University of Hokkaido, who had been investigating the Ainu language of Sakhalin for several decades. The main idea was to look for the remnants of the Ainu population and for other small minority groups, in particular Nivkh (Gilyak) and Uilta (Orok). Unfortunately, our expedition was unable to find any Ainu people, the only person representing the Sakhalin Ainu language and culture was probably the consultant we met in Hokkaido, Japan. The dramatic events that took

place in 1945 after the Soviet occupation of the whole island have had enormous consequences for the ethnographic and linguistic situation on the island: the Sakhalin Ainu population disappeared, the only Ainu people left now live in Japan. In Japan the Ainu culture is being stimulated in many ways, but only a very small number of speakers still remain after the earlier assimilation policy, which makes it very difficult to effect a real revival of the Ainu language and culture. Ainu is the lone small indigenous language in Japan, whereas Nivkh is a representative of the many minor languages in Russia (Comrie 1981, De Graaf 1992, 1993)

In the Russian demographic data a distinction is made between those representatives of a nationality who speak their native language as a first language and those who speak Russian or another language. The last census of the USSR was carried out in 1989 and the statistical results for the Sakhalin area (Sakhalin and the Kurile islands) can be found in De Graaf (1992). It appears that in 1989 the aboriginal peoples of the north formed a very small minority group compared to the total population of Sakhalin: for the Nivkh ethnic group, which is the largest, the percentage is only 0.3%. Among the small nationalities in the Russian Federation, the minority peoples of the north play a special role. They consist of nearly thirty different groups, all living in the northern parts of the country bordering the Arctic Ocean, from Scandinavia to the Bering Sea and the Pacific.

The peoples of the north were the last to be put under effective Soviet rule. In the early 1930's the Soviet regime tried to extend its grip on these peoples and to encourage Russian culture and education among them. The schools in the northern regions brought literacy to the native populations. For this purpose the native languages were used, in many cases for the first time in a written form, initially with a Latin alphabet and, from the late thirties, with a Cyrillic alphabet. However, many subjects were taught in Russian and therefore the schools became a medium of 'russification'.

The northern nationalities are so small that even a very moderate introduction of (mainly Russian) manpower from outside into their territories had an adverse effect on their survival. In the case of Sakhalin, we saw earlier that the number of people belonging to the original population has become much smaller than the number of immigrants. This is another factor which has led to further 'russification': Russian culture is pushing forward into the remotest corners of the Russian Federation and more and more non-Russians are forced to adopt the Russian language and culture.

5. The Nivkh language

Nivkh is classified as Paleo-Siberian and spoken by groups 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. The linguistic tableau is complicated by the fact that the language has two (or maybe more) rather different dialects: the Amur and Sakhalin dialects. Both groups are rather small: altogether about 4,400 people have the Nivkh

nationality, and less than 25 % of them are speakers of the Nivkh language (De Graaf 1992). A very small group speaks the southern Poronaïsk dialect and for this dialect it is very difficult to find speakers. 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 northernmost dialects have been mainly studied by Soviet linguists, e.g. Panfilov (1968) and Kreinovich (1937, 1973).

The first all-Russian census was organized during the czarist regime in 1897. In that year, the total number of people on Sakhalin belonging to the Nivkh ethnic group was counted as 1,969; they all gave Nivkh as their mother tongue and probably most of them were monolingual. In the second census in 1926, which was organized for the first time in the Soviet Union, the total number of Nivkh people was lower because the inhabitants of the Japanese southern part of Sakhalin were not counted. Practically all of them still had Nivkh as their mother tongue. Since that year, however, a decrease in the percentage of Nivkh speakers has set in, whereas the total number of Nivkh on Sakhalin stayed more or less stable (about 2,000). Most Nivkh people who do not speak Nivkh anymore mentioned Russian as their first language.

From the early 1960's the Nivkh, like other small minority peoples, were (in many cases compulsorily) resettled from their small villages to larger settlements such as Nekrasovka, and to towns (Poronaïsk, Nogliki). These developments intensified the contact between the minorities and the Russian-speaking population. Important changes took place in the life of the Nivkh: they had to give up many of their customs and adapt to Russian habits and life style. The arrival of Russian radio and television in their homes has had a particularly great influence. The traditional professions of the Nivkh (fishing or hunting) were also replaced by other occupations, where the possibility of maintaining the native language, lifestyle, and culture was very limited.

As stated earlier, after the Russian revolution, the introduction of writing systems ended the illiteracy of the native peoples. In the case of the Nivkh language, an orthography was created in 1932 and was initially based on the Latin alphabet, which, according to some linguists, might have been better suited to the sound structure of the language. A few years later, however, this system was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet (Panfilov 1968) and has thus contributed to the increased influence of Russian. Furthermore, the creation of boarding schools for the peoples of the north has played a special role. In the 1950's the children were taken to those schools situated far away from their home villages. This meant that they could rarely see their family, with the result that they lost contact with their linguistic background. In most cases, instruction in these schools was provided in Russian only.

Recently, a movement in favour of the native languages and cultures of the small minorities in the Russian Federation, such as the Nivkh, has developed. Attempts have been made to revive the Nivkh language, by introducing, for example, 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 text books and dictionaries have been edited (Sangi and Otaina 1981). Special instruction has been given to teachers of Nivkh descent on the education of Nivkh children in their own language. This teaching programme has been introduced in the special boarding schools for children of 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 schools.

During our fieldwork on Sakhalin, important linguistic material has been collected on the languages of these minority groups. Most of the consultants for our research project were elderly people with a strong motivation to use their language, eg. as members of a folkloric group. Practically all the young people we met had no active knowledge of the language, and they only communicated in Russian with their parents. During the interviews we made with Nivkh consultants, they were very positive about the idea of keeping and cultivating their own culture but also wanted to combine this with a future life as members of the group of nations in the Russian Federation. They agree with the fact that the Russian language and culture play a very important role in their lives, and they would like to see the survival of their native language and culture stimulated by all possible means. The edition of a special newspaper (Nivkh Dif), the writing of more books and journals in Nivkh, and the organization of special language courses will be steps towards reaching that goal.

6. Voices from Tundra and Taiga

In a study made during a recent stay at the Slavic Research Centre of Hokkaido University (De Graaf 2004) the situation of the Nivkh on Sakhalin has been compared with the Ainu on Hokkaido. For Ainu, much important work has been done with active support from the Japanese and local governments. This could serve as a model – in Russia and elsewhere – of how to proceed with language revitalisation projects in co-operation with the local language communities. This can be realized by the promotion of the language and culture; by setting up language courses; broadcasting in the language; organising speech contests; training storytellers, etc. The main problem in the Russian Federation is lack of sufficient financial support for the activities and special programmes needed 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 can fortunately benefit from the reconstruction work done earlier on old sound recordings found in the archives in St-Petersburg which make it possible to compare the way the languages of our research area are spoken now to how they were spoken half a century ago. These sound recordings consist of spoken language, folksongs, fairy tales, etc. in the languages of Russia.

We apply the same techniques to some of the disappearing minority languages and cultures of Russia, in particular to Nivkh and Uilta on Sakhalin. We are preparing a phono- 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 academic journals and books with audiovisual illustrations on CD-ROM and on the Internet (see internet sites). 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.

Hidetoshi Shiraishi has contributed to the research programme through his work with the Nivkh specialist Galina Lok. They have produced two collections of Folktales of the Nivkh language in the series *Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim (ELPR)*, initiated by a Japanese research group directed by Osahito Miyaoka. These texts together with the accompanying CD are not only important data for linguists, but are also useful for the representatives of the Nivkh community (Shiraishi and Lok 2002, 2003). Similar new publications are in preparation.

Our research and documentation is carried out in close co-operation with members of the local language community on Sakhalin and the Sakhalin Museum of Regional Studies. In October 2003, we organised a special seminar in the Sakhalin Museum where training was given to local scholars and their assistants who are teachers of Nivkh and the other indigenous languages and who participate in the archiving of the sound recordings and in fieldwork expeditions. Students from Sakhalin are also trained at St-Petersburg State University and specialists from St-Petersburg and The Netherlands visit 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 get financial support for this work from the Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd.

7. Further projects on endangered languages and their importance

In our 1996 INTAS report we stated that quite a few languages on the territory of the Russian Federation are under threat of total extinction and that measures should be taken to put an end to this process of degradation and dying out of languages. Linguists and ethnologists should work together with representatives of endangered languages in

order to find solutions to these problems. During fieldwork in Sakhalin and Northern Yakutia (De Graaf 1992, 1996) and in our other projects, we have studied processes of language shift and language loss for the aboriginal populations of Russia. It is a very important task for the linguistic community to record the last speakers of the endangered languages in interviews using good sound recording equipment. The results of modern fieldwork and the reconstructed data from sound archives will provide important information for the preparation of language descriptions, grammars, dictionaries and edited collections of oral and written literature. These can also be used to develop teaching methods, in particular for the younger members of some ethnic groups who do not have sufficient knowledge of their native language and thus make them aware of their heritage. In this way, the Russian Federation can develop a good basis for the co-existence of Russians and many other ethnic groups in this country.

In certain cases the revival of endangered languages and cultures will be possible and for this purpose the work of linguists and ethnologists is of great value. We hope that the results of our INTAS projects and other joint projects with Russian colleagues will contribute to the documentation and preservation of Russia's cultural heritage.

One of our projects in the framework of the research programme *Voices from Tundra and Taiga* has as its object the study of prosodic phenomena in the languages and Russian dialects of Northern Russia. Here we plan phonetic/linguistic research on disappearing minority languages and Russian (archaic) dialects in Siberia and in the Far East of the Russian Federation. This aims, firstly, at a description of prosody (tones, intonation, word prosody, accent lending), and temporal organization (rhythm, duration, pauses) in natural speech, in the oral poetic folk art and also in singing. Secondly, an audio- and video-library will be made of recorded stories, if available with transcription and prosodic analysis, and of the folklore, singing and oral traditions of the Peoples of the North in the Russian Federation.

This work could further be stimulated by setting up more exchange programmes of Russian specialists with colleagues in Western Europe and elsewhere. This should include the organisation of fieldwork, further restoration of sound recordings, the construction of acoustic databases, and the preparation of scholarly publications like textbooks and dictionaries. Just as with our INTAS projects, we can work together on a larger scale in order to study the languages of the Russian Federation. First of all, a description of the linguistic situation in all its details is necessary. Linguistic databases and modern technologies will be used for phonetic and linguistic research, and new fieldwork will be organised.

This research will present an inventory and a description of various types of prosodic phenomena, as a contribution to language typology and language universals; and it will also describe phenomena in the folklore that cannot be discovered in written texts. Furthermore, it will contribute to the maintenance of cultural diversity in the world, and save from extinction many examples of the oral tradition (e.g. myths, fairy

tales, historical tales and songs) in the given languages. This documentation of the linguistic and cultural heritage and the way of life in the area being explored is of great significance, particularly for the speakers of the endangered languages of 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 for scholars in many countries to be able to learn about the developments in the Russian Federation by studying them together with Russian colleagues.

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