

Description of the Tundra Yukagir project, March 2009-March 2012
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“Tundra Yukagir, a nearly extinct Paleo-Asian Isolate in Arctic Russia: a Collection on CD/DVD of Linguistic and Folkloristic Materials of the Language and Culture of a Siberian People for Documentation, Education and Safeguarding for Posterity”

In the book ‘Noord en Oost Tartarye, ofte Bondig Ontwerp van eenige dier Landen en Volken’ by Nicolaes Witsen (1705), mayor of Amsterdam, one of the first pages shows a Mongolian pointing at a map to Northeast Asia where the Yukagir live (De Graaf, 2007: 206). Witsen was the first to publish a text in Yukagir: The Lord’s Prayer. Two hundred years later Waldemar Jochelson (1926) reported linguistic and anthropological data from his expedition to the Yukagir. He wrote that no other area of Asiatic Russia was populated by such a variety of different tribes like the Yukagir. In August 2001, a seminar organized in Yakutsk (Sakha Republic) by UNESCO resulted in official recommendations on the safeguarding of traditional culture and folklore in the region of Siberia. One recommendation expresses the need to “elaborate a series of urgent and comprehensive measures aimed at the preservation and revival of endangered Siberian languages and to ensure language education and rehabilitation for all Siberian peoples” (De Graaf, 2002:165). One of these languages is Tundra Yukagir. Paraphrasing De Graaf (2002:163), it is our intention that “all over the world this voice from the tundra will be heard”.

Background

Tundra Yukagir (TY) is spoken in the northeast of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) between the lower Indigirka and the lower Kolyma (Maslova, 2003a/b). The population is approximately 700, but at present the number of good speakers is dramatically low with some 50 people still speaking their mother tongue properly (Unesco Redbook; website Salminen, 1993). Most TY speakers are fluent in Russian and Yakut, and in indigenous languages of the area: Chukchi, Evenki and Even.

In 2005 TY native speaker Prof. G. Kurilov (author of the Tundra Yukagir – Russian Dictionary, 2001) voiced thus his concern: “If we don’t hurry, the last Tundra Yukagir speakers still knowing the language properly, and mastering the traditional art of storytelling, will have died and with them a unique part of the Tundra Yukagir cultural inheritance”. In 2004, in the village of Andryushkino where most TY live, I witnessed motivated TY children learning their mother tongue at school from a very young age from local native teachers using home-made courseware. At home the language is hardly spoken anymore, and TY parents and language teachers blame themselves for not passing TY on to their children. In school children learn about the indigenous cultures of local peoples, and folkloristic festivals are frequently held in which villagers, young and old, participate. In all, the general attitude is positive towards language revival.

Language context

The Tundra Yukagir language belongs to the group of Paleo-Asian languages (Nikolaeva & Khelimsky, 1997; Burykin, 2002). According to Kreinovich (1968) two Yukagir languages exist, often described as the southern (Kolyma) and northern (Tundra) dialect, that are not mutually intelligible, and probably form an isolated language family. TY has a strong agglutinative morphology with SOV word order. The only available, but incomplete TY grammars are Kreinovich (1968, 1982) and a sketch with texts by Maslova (2003b); a small collection of texts with interlinearization and English translation is Maslova (2001).

Of special interest in the TY language is the system of morphosyntactic encoding of information structure. Comrie dedicated a short study to the “rich system of morphological means for the encoding of the focus in a sentence, where ‘focus’ is understood as the essential new information conveyed by a sentence” (Comrie 1992: 55). A more theoretical approach to the focus system in TY is Maslova (2005). In 2005 however, in addition to the system of grammaticalized focus, native speakers reported to me the prosodic marking of focus by means of intonation. So far the relationship and interaction between

grammaticalized and prosodic marking of focus has not been studied. The issue is not understood by TY linguists and will be an important issue to be studied.

TY is an especially unique language as regards prosodic features in traditional storytelling techniques: in narratives, speaking conventionally gradually changes into singing. This unique strategy in the characteristic art of TY storytelling has never been registered and analysed, and needs to be documented and preserved given its exceptional character. I made some first recordings in 2004.

In TY speech several more prosodic features on utterance and on word level have been observed that have never been experimentally verified and described. Native speakers of TY report discrete differences between short and long vowels and between long vowels and diphthongs, but these have not been analysed and verified in perception experiments; it is not clear whether TY has lexical word stress.

In the framework of the project “Voices from Tundra and Taiga”, I have visited Sakha in 2003, 2004 and 2005. In 2004 I made one linguistic fieldtrip to collect urgently needed recordings of elderly speakers. The local community was ready to work with me and I was able to record six hours of digital audio and video, reading of texts (daily narratives, folktales) and songs (traditional and modern songs) performed by ten native TY speakers. In preparation I studied parts of the available literature (e.g. works by Comrie, Ignatieva, Kreinovich, Kurilov, Maslova, Nikolaeva, Sheikin, Vyrdylina) and formulated questions with respect to word and utterance prosody, a poorly described issue of the TY language.

Research methodology

The research methodology is the one common in documentary linguistics (fieldwork, recording, interview, elicitation, transcription and interlinearization, translation into English and Russian). I will work with native consultants and linguists, using a laptop with required software, a digital video camera and audio recorder, and a high quality microphone.

The research programme consists of three parts:

- 1) Full description of the language, both as regards its morphosyntax and as regards its phonology
- 2) Documentation of the language through digital audiovisual recordings of narratives and songs, conversation and discourse, and the digital audio recording of the existing dictionary of Kurilov
- 3) Contribution to the development of courseware.

All three parts of the research will be carried out in close cooperation with linguists in the Russian Federation, in Sakha and elsewhere, and with native speakers during periods of fieldwork. Transcriptions, interlinearizations, translations and analyses will be carefully checked with native speakers in Sakha.

Knowledge Dissemination

Technical training and workshops in transcribing, interlinearizing and translating texts will be given for an audience of local linguists, students and for native language consultants who have expressed their willingness to participate in the project. Popular-scientific presentations will also be given for a larger audience.

All data will be documented and made accessible for specialists, schools and the interested public. Results of the research will be published in journals and presented on international platforms. A synthesis will appear with a multi-media CD/DVD that will also go online. The CD/DVD with video- and audio-recordings of stories and folk tales will be designed in such a way that it can be used by scientists as well as by the local TY community. Publications will be sent to mass media in Sakha and in the Russian Federation. Finally, courseware for TY will be developed and the TY dictionary will be digitally recorded and published on CD.

Composition of the Research Team

University of Amsterdam: Prof Dr. P.C. Hengeveld (Supervisor, Promotor), Dr C. Odé (Postdoc), M. Schmalz MA (PhD). Other members of the team (in alphabetical order):

Prof Dr A. Asinovsky	St Petersburg State University, Faculty of Arts
Prof Dr E. Golovko	Institute for Linguistic Research, RAS St Petersburg
Dr T. de Graaf	Fryske Akademy, KNAW
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Prof Dr F.F.H. Kortlandt	Department of comparative linguistics, Leiden University
Dr I. Krupnik	Smithsonian Institute, Arctic Center, Washington DC, USA
Prof Dr G. Kurilov	Northern Institute for Northern Minorities of the RAS, Siberian Branch (Yakutsk)
Prof Dr E. Maslova	Stanford University, Department of Linguistics
Prof Dr I. Nikolaeva	School of Oriental and African Studies, London
Prof A. Petrov	Institut Narodov Severa, St Petersburg
Dr T. Salminen	University of Helsinki, Dept. of Linguistics
Prof Dr Y. Sheikin	Arctic State Institute for Culture and Art, Yakutsk
Prof Dr N. Vakhtin	Institute for Linguistic Research, RAS St Petersburg

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