Voices from Tundra and Taiga
Vitality and Education

By Cecilia Odé

Native speakers of different ethnic groups in the region are bilingual; they all speak Russian. It is mainly elderly women who use or understand their indigenous language, sometimes rather poorly, by their own admission. From Stanislav Gorbachov, roughly speaking, languages other than Russian were, if not forbidden, at least not taught on the island of Sakhalin. Children were taken to boarding schools where Russian was the one and only language. This explains why most competent speakers of indigenous languages are of the older generation. It is, therefore, remarkable that one of their teachers, Nivkh language teacher Mrs. S.F. Bessonova, was recently awarded the title ‘Teacher of Merit of the Russian Federation’, showing that, in contemporary Russia, indigenous languages have been rehabilitated and may again be taught. Within this new environment, there is still urgent need for a project such as ‘Voices from Tundra and Taiga’, which aims to build a scientific digital photo- and video-library of ethnolinguistic materials on CD/DVD and on the internet (for example, spoken texts, songs, folktale narratives) to be used for research, and also to develop courseware for the safeguarding and revitalizing of the given languages.

Sakhalin
The island of Sakhalin, with a length of nearly 950 kilometres and a varying width from 15 to 40 kilometres, is home to a persistently decreasing population of approximately 600,000 today, some 170,000 of whom live in the capital Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Of the island’s total population by per cent is Russian. The indigenous population of Sakhalin as well as some of its languages are closely related to the indigenous people and languages on the Japanese side of the border. After a period of Japanese rule from 1905 till 1945, Sakhalin, together with the neighbouring Kuril Islands, is now part of the Russian Federation. As for the languages spoken on the island, Nivkh and Ulta are probably the oldest and only aboriginal ones. Nivkh is an isolated language, while the other indigenous languages of the area, including Ulta, belong to the Tungusic languages (explanation follows below). Ulta, being in a much worse situation than Nivkh, is in dire need of linguistic research and training programmes. Until 1995, Ulta was an unwritten language, and the only materials available consist of a limited language description and some booklets with fairy tales, games, and songs using the Cyrillic alphabet. At present, an Ulta alphabet is under construction and other steps toward its preservation are also taken.

In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (Sakhalin), at the Sakhalin Regional Museum, the week-long seminar ‘New approaches for safeguarding the disappearing languages and cultures of the aboriginal peoples of Sakhalin’ included a training in the teaching of phonetics for native teachers of the four endangered languages of Sakhalin: Nivkh, Ulta, Evenki, and Nanai. The group of participants of the seminars organized on the island was very heterogeneous with only some of them having had a linguistic education. All were highly motivated and had come to the capital wishing to improve their skills as a language teacher and, some of them, keen to research their own cultural heritage. Our main subjects were orthography, orthoepy, and prosody (stress, intonation, duration, and rhythm), for which there is so far hardly any courseware available. During lessons confusion arose, due to the fact that Nivkh has three dialects. The students addressed matters such as, “Which dialect do we teach our children?” These serious discussions were interrupted by pleasant breaks in which women came up with the origin of names, such as iuxuk ‘tremal spleen’ for females, and, to exorcize a new-born boy, ochan ‘sick and evil’.

This seminar was an important step in the process of developing courseware, and the students’ enthusiasm was the driving force behind this inspiration. Further steps will be taken, including the development of a centre to train and strengthen the knowledge of the indigenous population of the Sakhalin languages. In the future, Sakhalin will be an important centre for the training of the indigenous population of the region.

Language Vitality and Endangerment

In the tables below the total population of ethnic groups included in the programme ‘Voices from Tundra and Taiga’ on Sakhalin and in the Sakha Republic are given, including numbers of members still speaking their mother tongue. The degree of endangerment, according to the UNESCO Red-book of Endangered Languages, does not only depend on the number of actual speakers, although it is an important feature. For a detailed discussion see Language Vitality and Endangerment by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages: Paris, March 2003. Note that most data presented here are from various sources, some of which go back to 1899 and 1939. Numbers have been rounded off.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Population on Sakhalin</th>
<th>Speakers on Sakhalin</th>
<th>Degree of endangerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nivkh</td>
<td>4,700</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulta</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenki</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanai</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Population in Sakha Republic</th>
<th>Speakers in Sakha</th>
<th>Degree of endangerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yukagir</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>nearly extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenki</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>14,500</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>endangered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td>2,800</td>
<td>endangered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The island of Sakhalin and the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the north-eastern part of Siberia, Russian Federation.
In the IIAS project ‘Voices from Tundra and Taiga’, local young linguists study the languages of their communities. The project was initiated in 2000 by Tjeerd de Graaf (Groningen University) and is related to similar projects that focus on the Northern Arctic. ‘Voices from Tundra and Taiga’ is partly financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and by Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd. The seminar on Sakhalin was organized by the Sakhalin Regional Museum in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk by Director Tatyana Roon in cooperation with Tjeerd de Graaf (Frisian Academy, the Netherlands) and Cecilia Odé.

The Project in Brief

In Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, continuing workshops were organized with the aim of attracting young linguists to study local languages. And, during a long interview about the seminar on Sakhalin TV, young viewers were invited to express their opinion on the need to safeguard the culture of northern peoples: for scientific purposes (13 votes), for the peoples themselves (12 votes), and for mankind (123 votes). An encouragement to continue the fight to safeguard the area’s indigenous languages.

Sakha Republic

It takes five hours to travel from Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk to Yakutsk, flying north from autumn to winter over a landscape with white rivers like decorative ribbons gently draped on snowy plains and mountains. In the Sakha Republic, with a surface of, roughly speaking, 5 million square kilometres, and a population of over one million, of which about one third are Yakuts, large numbers of ethnic groups speak their mother tongue. Languages focused on in this project are the nearly extinct Yukagir (an isolated language), Evenki, and Even (Tungusic), which have fascinating prosodic phenomena. For example, in Yukagir there is a gradual change from speaking to singing in the art of storytelling, where the intermediate phase between speaking and singing is particularly striking.

In Yakutsk (Sakha Republic), at the Arctic Institute and the Institute of Northern Minority Problems, Odé held workshops for students and researchers. After this workshop some students showed interest in the project and even seriously considered continuing to study local languages after their Master’s degree. In fact, this is exactly what we are aiming at: local linguists describing a local language, enhancing its vitality and passing it on to future generations.

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www.iias.nl/iias/research/ode/index.html

Projects related to ‘Voices from Tundra and Taiga’

www.let.rug.nl/~degraaf

www.let.rug.nl/~markus

www.elpr.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp

www.nwo.nl; www.mpi.nl/DOBES

www.fa.knaw.nl

UNESCO Redbook on endangered languages in Northeast Asia

www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/nasia_report.html

The Sakhalin Regional Museum

www.museum.sakh.com

The Institute of Northern Minority Problems in Yakutsk

www.sakha.ru/sakha/ync/ync_eng/narod.htm

The Sakhalin Energy Investment Company

www.sakhalinenergy.com/