

# The Problems of Preserving the Language and Culture of the Selkups

ALEKSANDRA KIM

## 1.

At present the only representatives of the southern Samoyeds are the Selkups, who live in the Tomsk and Tyumen regions. According to the census of 1989 the total number of Selkups is 3,612 people, of which about 2,200 live in the Tomsk region. The language situation is different for the two Selkup groups: It is disturbing among the northern Selkups (Tyumen region) and disastrous among the southern Selkups (Tomsk region). This report will consider certain measures that are being developed to mitigate the process of assimilation among the southern Selkups.

Several factors have tended to accelerate the extinction of the Selkup language and culture in southern (Tomsk) dialect areas:

- (1) Administrative disconnection. At present the level of ethnic consolidation among the Selkups is not high. Unlike the earlier Tym national district, they do not represent an autonomous national entity.
- (2) The destruction of the traditional life-style, including the disappearance of villages and increasing urbanization among the younger generation. Contributing to this situation, there is also a low level of national self-consciousness.
- (3) The absence, for the Selkups, of a written language or educational and methodological literature.

## 2.

Tomsk scientists have been trying to help Selkups to overcome this latter negative factor. At the Tomsk Pedagogical University we have had at our disposal extensive linguistic materials, collected over more than 40 years, to help us create a program to revive the Selkup language. Let me mention briefly the history of this tradition, which has been the background to all our efforts.

The Tomsk State Pedagogical University has long played a leading role in working out the linguistic aspect of the problem of the origin of the indigenous peoples of Siberia and their languages. This work was begun by Professor A. P. Dulson, the State Prize Laureate (cf Galkina and Osipova 1995).

At the beginning of the Second World War, in the autumn of 1941, A. P. Dulson, who was of German nationality and was professor of Germanic languages at Saratov University, was exiled to Tomsk, Siberia. From that time on, he headed the German Department at the Pedagogical Institute and lectured on general linguistics at the University.

Dulson's love of languages brought him into contact with the indigenous peoples of Siberia. In 1947 he developed a plan to study indigenous peoples and their languages. His idea was to study and describe not only the languages of these peoples, but their history, culture, ethnography and archaeology as well. Simply by using all aspects of the available data, he was able to resolve the most fundamental questions concerning the origins of Siberian peoples and their languages.

He was able to explain many mysterious phenomena and the similarities that were found between languages spoken far away from each other, e.g. Khanty and Hungarian, Ket and Iberian-Caucasian etc. The territory of Siberia is particularly important to the field of linguistic studies because so many nationalities once settled there. At least 4 groups lived in Siberia for certain: Turkic, Selkup, Ugric and Ket. Their ties and interrelations over a considerable period of time, the mixture of dialects, the place names left by them—all these are of great interest to science.

Gradually Dulson interested more and more people in the origins of indigenous peoples and their languages. To enhance the exchange of information and opinions, he organized all-Union scientific conferences. To collect material, alone or accompanied by his assistants, Dulson undertook 35 expeditions to the North of the Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk regions. He investigated and described the Chulym-Turkic people and their language, the place names left by the Kets, Selkups, Khanty, Altaic and other peoples of Siberia, the Selkup language of the Tomsk region, the structure of Ket, and certain features of the languages of the Khanty, Mansi, Nganasans, Shohrs, and Evenki. None of these are written languages, and they are often referred to as the so-called disappearing languages. Everything about them that has been established and collected will, therefore, be of great value.

The collection of Siberian language vocabularies had particular importance for establishing the origins of different peoples. Thus, for example, the fact that the Selkups have many words of Iranian origin indicates that this people, who today live in the far North, once lived somewhere in the South in proximity to Iranians. Dulson developed a special program for analyzing the languages of indigenous peoples. It included 91 groups of words, along with their variations, and 917 sentences. This allowed him to specify the linguistic position of a particular dialect or language in relationship to the rest of the dialects of this group of languages and their main grammatical forms. The purpose of collecting such materials was to create dictionaries of these languages and to further the comparison of all Siberian languages. During his lifetime, Dulson, assisted by his colleagues, gathered extensive word materials to compile dictionaries predominantly for Ket (120,000 cards), Selkup (80,000 cards), somewhat less for Chulym-Turkic, Nganasan, Dolgan (334,000 word-cards all in all) and a very rich collection of geographical names (242,000 cards) for Siberia, the Russian Far East and Central Asia. The linguistic materials comprised fully 155 volumes. Each volume represents the equivalent of 800–1000 pages of school exercise-books.

The school of linguistics founded by Dulson has continued his efforts in Siberian languages. It works closely with specialists in archaeology, ethnography and history, and holds scientific conferences nearly every year in Tomsk, at which further data on these problems are discussed. Scientists come from all over Russia and often from Hungary, Germany and Japan as well. Some joint expeditions, with the participants from these countries, have been undertaken to the North of the Tomsk region, where the indigenous population lives.

In 1991, the Laboratory of Siberian languages, based on Dulson's work, was established at the Pedagogical Institute (now University). Its origins date back to 1953, when Dulson began collecting his cards of place names and the vocabularies for various languages of Siberia. The Laboratory of Siberian languages continues this traditional investigation into the languages of indigenous peoples. To date, the Laboratory has compiled 187 volumes of field work. These materials provide the basis for practical work, which is aimed at writing alphabet books, school dictionaries and other teaching modules for aboriginal peoples.

## 3.

There have been several distinct developmental periods in the history of Selkup writing and education (cf Morev 1995). The first was connected with missionary activity (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries); the second went from the nineteen-thirties through the nineteen-fifties; the third period is since the nineteen-eighties.

Under Tsarist rule the education of the indigenous people was neglected. And any education that was given was restricted to pure Russian. The first attempt to create a Selkup written language for the natives was carried out in 1879 by Grigorovski on the basis of one of the southern dialects. But nowadays it is of only scholarly interest. As an educational aid it was never accepted, because the Selkups were hardly able to recognize their own language.

After the Revolution, in the thirties, there was an effort to encourage and develop the national cultures of minorities. A number of schools and boarding schools were established for indigenous people, including the Selkups, and attempts were made to create a form of Selkup writing based on the *Tas* dialect by Prokofeva (1932).

With regard to the Southern dialect, however, all teaching continued to be in Russian, because there were no teachers or primers to introduce the Selkup language. And this despite the fact that there was such a pressing need to revive the Selkup language. Some teachers of Selkup nationality tried to speak in Selkup with their pupils, but only during school recess periods and other free time.

During the post war years, it was only towards the nineteen-eighties that the problem of Selkup education was raised again. Numerous official resolutions on this topic were sent out to regional authorities, but usually they remained nothing but words on paper.

## 4.

All these problems could be successfully resolved if only the following aspects were considered and attended to: 1) the linguistic, 2) the social, and 3) the organizational.

The linguistic aspect of the problem is difficult to solve because of the numerous Selkup dialects. Attempts to teach Southern Selkups on the basis of the text books of the *Tas* dialect have failed. Children did not understand this dialect. Members of the laboratory of Siberian languages were asked to

create for Southern Selkups an alphabet, a basic grammatical primer, text books and other teaching aids. Some of these have already been published and introduced into primary schools. They include the first primer of the Selkup dialect of Ivankino (1993), a Selkup-Russian and Russian-Selkup school dictionary (1993), a text book (1994), a conversation book (1994) and a folklore book (1996).

The Selkup primer is based on an old tradition of compiling single-language primers. A guide book for teachers was written containing translations of the texts, assignments and recommendations on how to organize the teaching process (compiled by V. V. Bykonya, published in Tomsk, 1997). Three other books (a conversational Selkup-Russian book, a Selkup text book, and a Selkup reading book) are bilingual (i.e., Selkup-Russian). In these books an attempt is made to apply the method of teaching foreign languages in national schools.

The difficulty is that there are no more than 200 Selkup school children (the data for 1982–83 cites 178 Selkup children) from different dialect areas. At least 2 or 3 regions need their own primers, text books and teaching modules.

## 5.

The Tomsk region is populated not only by Selkups but by other minorities as well. Among them are Khanty. The laboratory has completed and published a Khanty-Russian dictionary, which took 20 years to collect by the Khanty themselves (Mogutayev 1996). We look forward to publishing a Khanty conversation book for Khanty children and all who want to refresh their skills in the language.

Reviving the languages of the national minorities also involves the training of future Selkup and Khanty teachers in their own language and culture at the Tomsk Pedagogical University. All items of the program to revitalize aboriginal languages and cultures are included in this effort. We have special evening courses for students of Selkup nationality at which they acquire their own language, history and culture. The accredited teachers who have created the text books and primers work with these students. This year courses are being given for Altaic students. Some of indigenous students take part in scholarly research and present papers at academic conferences or seminars. We hope that in the future they will be able to assist the education of their

people, especially in raising their cultural level and learning their language. One of the graduates of our University—Denis Pshenicnikov, who attended these courses—is of Selkup nationality. He now lives in Kolpashevo. Tomsk region, and heads the Selkup Society “*Kolta Kup*”.

Closely linked to preserving the Selkup language and developing teaching modules is the problem of preserving Selkup culture. The culture of the Selkups, especially the Southern branch, is in urgent need of reconstruction, because it has never been completely described. One way to solve this problem is to reconstruct the Selkup culture on linguistic bases. The first attempt at such work was done by means of the analysis of the Selkup cult lexicon (Kim 1997).

The Selkup cult lexicon was selected from the available sources: glossaries, dictionaries and texts (both published and unpublished). It was then classified and examined from the semantic, etymological and morphological points of view.

Notional spheres were defined, which group the cult lexicon into: cult persons (shamans and the like), cult accessories (shaman’s attributes and Shaman’s language), cult elements (souls and sacrifices), and cult objects (supernatural creatures, such as deities, spirits, devils, idols, animals etc.). The lexic-semantic portion of the cult lexicon embraces more than 500 lexical units, including phonetic variants and derivatives. Linguistic analysis shows that the Selkup cult lexicon is formed in the following ways:

- (1) the basic Selkup vocabulary is used with new meanings, e.g. *quwej* breath > soul, *tity* shadow, cloud > soul;
- (2) new words are constructed (some suffixes are adjusted to convey abstract meanings), e.g. *il-* to live > *il-sat* / *il-la* soul (literally, “live” with a new suffix becomes “the thing we live with”), *küty-* to be ill > *kütyn* shaman’s apron (literally, “the thing that makes a man insensitive.”);
- (3) the composition of words, e.g. *\*pejkär* a musical instrument used in conjuring from *\*pej*, a basic term for selkup shamanism + *kär*, skin; *quwalos*, spirit, idol < *quwej*, soul + *los* spirit;
- (4) the way words are combined, e.g. *sumpytyl’ qup* shaman (literally “a singing man”), *swa qup* shaman (literally “a good man”);
- (5) borrowings, e.g. *lo/los*, for spirit, or devil < Kalmyk. *lus* < Old Turkic, *lü* < Chinese, *luŋ* dragon, *qamytyryl’ qup* shaman < Turkic *qama-* to move, to soar (about a bird);

(6) euphemisms, e.g. *mirssawe sōj* tambourine < literally “precious throat”, *mykamy* bear < literally “my younger brother”.

## 6.

The ethnocultural situation helps us to reconstruct the cult sphere of Selkup life in the following way:

The most ancient cultural perceptions of the Selkups are evidently linked with reality: animals, which they worship because they considered them to be their ancestors (e.g. bear, eagle); natural things, such as stones, which they turned into idols (stone images); trees, which they spiritualized and from which they carved idols.

Life was associated with the sun and light and was considered to be the source of women, so the Selkups considered *Ilyntyl' Kota* to be their original mother or vital woman. The name itself includes elements signifying life sources—the sun's rays, which give life, and the term of relationship from the woman's side. The Selkup original mother corresponded to a horizontal model of the world, where the basic ‘life-space’ was visualized as a river: the upper course of the river was associated with the upper world, the middle course with the middle world and the mouth of the river with the underground world.

*Ilyntyl' Kota* was not the only female deity of this ethn. Selkup folklore testifies to a significant role played by female images during the historical period. The appearance of male deities marked a transformation of this space (the horizontal model was replaced by a vertical one) and a social transformation as well. The male supreme deity—*Nom*—appeared as the result of this change in the meaning of pre-Uralic spatial relations, which is reflected in his various names: *nom* sky, top.

The appearance of other deities—*Yj/Ič i*, *Kyzy*, *Los*—was the result of other cultural influences. The word *Yj/Ič i* was evidently a Turkic loan word; the word *Kyzy* was borrowed from the Sayan tribe *kassy*; the word *Los* evidently came from China by way of Turkic. Probably these terms indicate earlier links by the Selkups to these other ethnoses. *Yj/Ič i* appeared as a hero and defender of the Selkups, *Kyzy* as an enemy, *Los* as a changeable creature who could either damage or help the Selkups. These deities occupy places in the vertical pantheon: *Nom* became the supreme deity, *Yj* referred to upper deities as well, but came out of the middle world, *Kyzy* was the antipode of *Nom* in the

underground world. As for *Loses*, they were numerous and changeable and could dwell everywhere. Thus the vertical system of cult perceptions in Selkup developed to a considerable degree under foreign influence.

Shamanism also enters into the cult sphere. Lexical analysis has shown that, as a rule, shamanism has a secular but not sacred nature. Thus, the phenomenon of shamanism can be considered not as a closed system but as a dispersed one entering into many spheres of life.

Alongside shamanic traditions there developed in Selkup culture the notions of spirit-sections and sacrifices. As with shamanic terminology, one can observe in the naming of spirits and sacrifices an autochthonous Siberian layer with changes of meaning or foreign influences.

## 7.

The study of the Selkup lexicon revealed the following pattern: any cult notion presents a complex entity, which is composed of concrete elements that are reflected in language. For example there is no abstract notion for “soul”, but certain elements vital for life which are abstracted from concrete sensual experiences, along with other expressions that more or less correspond to the meta-notion “soul.” This situation is reflected in the language, where there are seven terms signifying soul, all formed from different stems: *qwej-*, *il-*, *kaga-*, *kəty-*, *qor-*, *ŋj-*, *ti-*. The same situation exists for other cult spheres: there are 10 terms signifying shamans; the bear cult can be represented by nearly 20 terms; one of the Selkup spirits—*los*—is represented by more than 30 different combinations of words, etc. L. S. Vygodski and A. R. Lurya believe that such richness of vocabulary, (as found in the Selkup language) reflects peculiarities of thinking or memory.

The integral part of the notion appears in the process of primary nomination (primary conceptualization), which has weak lexical ties. Under the influence of the cultural paradigm, primary meanings are sometimes transformed into secondary conceptualizations. Words, formed from different roots and having individual significance, gradually come to express some common semantic sign, e.g. become synonyms, because they are linked by one and the same notion.

Various lexic-semantic groups have entered the Selkup cult lexicon. They are linked to such notional spheres as space (top>deity), functions of the human organism (breath>soul; excitement>shaman), everyday life-phenomena



(to live>soul; shadow>soul; to sing>shaman; to tell>shaman etc.).

The cult lexicon, which goes back to a pre-Samoyedic or even pre-Uralic language-base, expresses abstract notions on a semantic level. Sometimes these are fixed by word-building processes. The cult lexicon may be compared with the more concrete meanings of words in the language base. And in this respect, it correlates closely with the abstractness of spiritual culture, which has developed on the basis of life's concrete realities.

## 8.

Another way of preserving the Selkup culture relies on Selkup folk lore and involves the gathering and publishing of material in Selkup accompanied by Russian translation and analysis. One such book has already been written and published by the members of the laboratory of Siberian languages: "Fairy tales of Narym Selkups" (Tomsk, 1996). This book consists of two parts: (1) Selkup fairy tales written on the basis of a new Selkup alphabet. Each sentence in the text is numbered and different tasks relating to these sentences are given after the text. (2) The second part consists of Russian translations along with ethnographic and grammatical commentaries.

In addition, one other project is under way. It concerns the so called "Samoyede Epic". Each Samoyedic ethnos possesses rich folk lore, which formerly was passed down from generation to generation, thereby remaining the only form of recorded history, because they had no writing. The original Samoyedic legends, stories and tales were written down by Russian and foreign scholars and travellers who came to Siberia and the North.

At the beginning of this century, a young Finnish explorer, Kai Donner, spent about three years in Siberia undertaking expeditions and collecting linguistic material from the peoples of Siberia and the North. The Tomsk region attracted his attention because the Ostjako-Samoyeds (called Selkups nowadays) lived there, and they were related to the Finno-Ugric peoples. Travelling along the Ket-river, Donner started to collect very interesting Ostjako-Samoyed folk lore. He wrote about his work in a paper titled "A Samoyede Epic" (Donner 1913). The scholar includes the narrative of a great epic Samoyede poem, in which the hero *Itja* struggles against the giant *Penegesse*. He compares this poem with the famous *Kalevala*, and the region of the river Ket with Karelia, where the richest material in the *Kalevala* was gathered. The antiquity of Ostjako-Samoyed *Kalevala* is supported by the fact that all

Ostjako-Samoyed tribes from near Tomsk down to the Tas bay (gulf) on the Arctic Ocean know the names of all heroes in the poem and are familiar with the most important episodes as well.

The traces of the Samoyede Epics, which were not described in detail but only in general outline, can still be found today.

Another great scientist (linguist and ethnographer—the Tomsk professor Andrei Dulson—dedicated the greater part of his life (after his fifties) to the collection of linguistic materials among many indigenous peoples of Siberia, including the Selkups (formerly the Ostjako-Samoyeds). This work has been carried forward by Dulson's school of linguists. In the Selkup linguistic repository, which is kept at the Tomsk Pedagogical University, there are a lot of stories about *Ija* and *Pennegesse*.

Since 1996, when Dr. Jarmo Alatalo of Helsinki University came to Tomsk, people have been think of combining the records of the famous Finnish linguist and those of the Tomsk explorers. For several years, Alatalo has been deciphering the collected linguistic records of K. Donner, and he is now preparing them for publication. Supplementing this collection will be Potanin's travel notes and texts from Warkovitskaya's archive in Moscow.

Illustrations will be based on the collections of two museums: The Joint Historical-Architectural Museum and The Museum for Archaeology and Ethnography of Siberia (at Tomsk State University). There will be photos of typical Selkup objects, including fragments of dwellings and clothes, house utensils and equipment for fishing and hunting, dugouts, oars, nets, traps, skis, snow-shovels, etc.

Mythological objects belonging to the Selkups are represented by castings, which have been discovered in various places in the Tomsk region. These fantastic animals, fish and birds are the embodiments of Selkup spirits and idols.

In conclusion: The approaches and planned methods being used to preserve Selkup language and culture, as outlined above, leave unanswered some extremely important social and economic questions. Only by means of a complex approach to the solution of all these problems will it be possible to support these first steps and generate the enthusiasm required to revitalize the national minorities.

## References

- Bykonya, V. V. 1997. *Metodicheskiye ukazaniya v pomosh uchitelu dlya raboty po sheshkupskomu bukvaryu*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Nauchno-tekhnicheskoi literatury.
- Bykonya, V. V., A. A. Kim, and S. C. Kuper 1993. *Shöshkuj bukvar*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Nauchno-tekhnicheskoi literatury
- Bykonya V. V., A. A. Kim, S. C. Kuper., N. P. Maksimova, and I. A. Ilyashenko (red.), 1996. *Skazki narymskikh selkupov*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Nauchno-tekhnicheskoi literatury.
- Bekker, E. G., V. V. Bykonya, A. A. Kim; S. C. Kuper, and L. V. Moreva 1994. *Posobiye po selkupskomu yazyku*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Nauchno-tekhnicheskoi literatury.
- Donner, K. A. 1913. Samoyede Epic. *Soumalais-ugrilaisen Seuran* 30: 1–12. Helsinki.
- Galkina, T. V., and O. A. Osipova 1995. *A. P. Dulson*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Tomskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta.
- Kim, A. A. 1997. *Ocherki po selkupskoj kultovoi leksike*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Nauchno-tekhnicheskoi literatury.
- Kuper, S. C., and J. Puszay 1993. *Selkupski razgovornik (narymski dialekt)*. Savariae. Koeszeg: Peter Tillinger.
- Mogutayev, M. K. 1996. *Khantisko-russki slovar (vasyuganski dialekt)*. Tomsk: Izdatelstvo Nauchno-tekhnicheskoi literatury.
- Morev, Yu. A. 1995. Pismennost i shkolnoye delo u selkupov: proshloye i nastoyasheye. Sbornik, posvyashenni pamyati etnografov G. Grachevoi i V. Vasileva. In *Moya izbrannitsa nauka, nauka, bez kotoroi mne ne zhit*, 216–225. Barnaul: Izdatelstvo Altaiskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta.
- Prokofeva, E. 1932. *ᠨᠠᠷᠠᠪᠪᠦ ᠠᠨᠠᠨᠦᠨᠦ. Posukol sol qumbl, togbltspätbt nəkər*. Leningrad.