

# Endangered Languages in Northeast Siberia: Siberian Yupik and other Languages of Chukotka

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## Introduction

Chukotka and the neighboring north-eastern part of Siberia are sociolinguistically an extremely challenging region. It demonstrates a variety of linguistic situations for different languages of the area which have been in close contact with each other for centuries. It also shows different patterns used by ethnic groups in their resistance to cultural and linguistic pressure and in their search for identity.

Chukotka and the neighboring area (see map, next page) is home to several languages (not counting Russian): Siberian (Chaplinski) Yupik (pop. about 1,200, about 200 speakers); Naukanski Yupik (pop. about 400, about 70 speakers); Old Sireniki (last active speaker died in January 1997); Chukchi (at least seven dialects, pop. about 15,000, no more than 10,000 speakers); Koryak (northern dialect, tot. pop. 9,000, about half of these are speakers); Kerek (pop. about 400, no more than two speakers); Even (eastern dialects, tot. pop. 17,000, about 7,500 speakers); Chuvanski (pop. 1,400, about 250 speakers)—statistics from Krauss (1997).

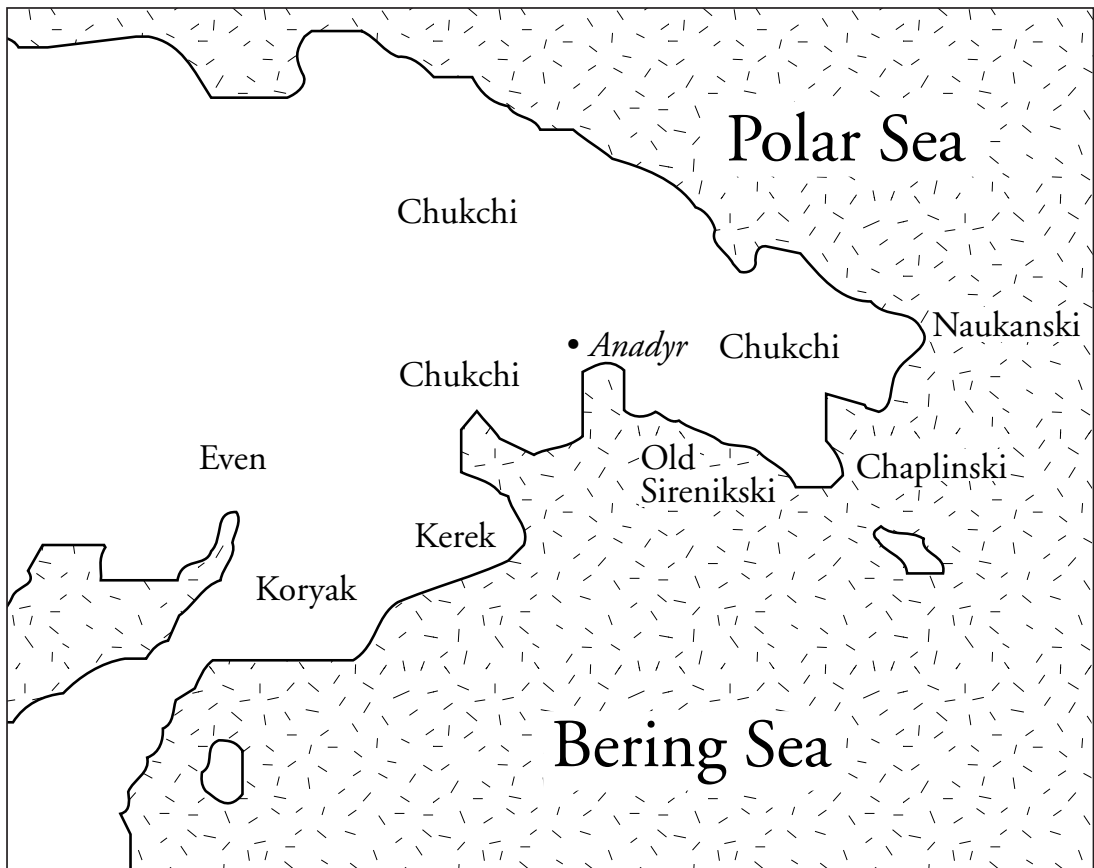
The boundaries between languages are in some cases difficult to draw. For example, it is hard to speak about “the Chukchi language” as a unit. The borderline between northern Koryak and southern Chukchi dialects is also quite doubtful.

All indigenous languages of Chukotka have at present reached the state where they can be described as “endangered”, that is, to use the definition suggested by Michael Krauss (1992: 4), languages which are no longer being learned by children, or no longer transmitted by parents to their children in a traditional oral manner (Krauss 1997: 25). However, some of these languages demonstrate unconventional models of adaptation to linguistic pressure from Russian.

The purpose of the present paper is to give a brief outline of the language situation for each of the indigenous languages of Chukotka, and to com-

ment on the issue of ethnic identities of the indigenous people. I will try to present a two-fold perspective on the indigenous languages of Chukotka: an *outsider's* perspective, that is, the condition of the languages and the indigenous groups from the point of view of the researcher, and an *insider's* point of view: that of the members of the indigenous community—to the extent that such a perspective can be formulated by an outsider.

FIGURE 1: Chukotka and Neighboring Area



## Language Situation

### 1. Eskimo Languages

There existed, in “pre-contact” times (up to 1940s), three distinct Eskimo languages in Chukotka: Chaplinski, Naukanski, and Old Sirenikski. The first two belong to the Eskimo-Aleut language family (Eskimo branch, Yupik group). The genetic affiliation of Old Sirenikski is unclear; in all probability, this language is the last representative of a third group of the Eskimo family.

#### 1.1 The Chaplinski Yupik Group

Historically this was the largest and the strongest Eskimo group in the area. At least four idioms were distinguished within this language in pre-contact times: Ungazighmit, Avatmit, Imtugmit, Kigwagmit, with further subdivision into smaller idioms. In fact, until the mid-1950s, “Chaplinski” Eskimos lived in up to 15 smaller settlements in south-eastern Chukotka (Krupnik 1983; 1989: 35–36), and each of the settlements probably had an idiom of its own.

In the mid-1950s, the forced relocation and amalgamation of the Northern settlements began; in 1958, the Yupik people from smaller villages like Ungazik, Avan, Kivak and others were brought together into the newly built village of Novo-Chaplino (see Krupnik, Chlenov n.d.).

Today the majority of “Chaplinski” Eskimos (around 900 people) live in four settlements: Novo-Chaplino, Sireniki, Providenia and Uel’kal and in the city of Anadyr. All these have mixed population: only in Novo-Chaplino do Eskimos constitute more than 50% of the population; in Sireniki they constitute about 40%, in Uel’kal—about 30% (data from 1992–93). In all these settlements, the Eskimos live side-by-side with Chukchis and the newcomers (Russian, Ukrainians, etc.); the number of newcomers decreased drastically in the last 6–7 years.

The Chaplinski language is today spoken by the older generation, and to a very limited extent by 40 to 50-year-olds who still know it passively. The younger generation speaks only Russian. The Chaplinski language is taught at school and in kindergarten; due to the dramatic decrease in the non-native population, many school teachers left the area, and village schools had to switch from an 11-year teaching program to 8- or even 6-year teaching programs (see Vakhtin 1992).

The poor condition of the language notwithstanding, the “Chaplinski” Eskimos have maintained (and to some extent, rediscovered) a feeling of common identity based not so much on the language as on the preserved and reinvented elements of traditional cultural practices, as well as on their attachment to the territory. The loss of their native language by the younger people is regarded by the older generation as a real tragedy; I have not documented similar attitudes among the younger generation. The younger Yupiks seem to be able to maintain their identity as Yupiks without the language.

## 2. The Old Sirenikski Group

In the early 20th century, the Old Sirenikski speakers lived in the village of Sireniki (Sirinek) and in several smaller villages to the west of Sireniki along the south-eastern coast of Chukotka. There is evidence that in the past there existed at least two distinct territorial dialects of the language. In 1895, there were 79 speakers of the language in Sireniki, and 43 in Imtuk (Gondatti 1897b). By the mid-20th century, the population of both villages shifted to Siberian Yupik and later to Russian (see Krupnik 1991), maintaining nevertheless their unaltered identity as “Sirenikski Eskimos” throughout the process. By 1930, about 30 speakers were left (Menovschikov 1964); in 1990 I found only four elderly women in Sireniki who still spoke the language. The last fluent speaker of the language died in January 1997 (see Krupnik 1991, especially pp. 12–13 and footnote 9). The Old Sirenikski language is thus now extinct.

As I have mentioned the inhabitants of Sireniki—although they long ago shifted to Chaplinski and later to Russian—maintain a very clear “Sirenikski” identity: minor features of the local variety of Chaplinski, as compared with the Chaplinski of Novo-Chaplino, are regarded as clear symbols of “their language”; the people of the village are also proud of the fact that Sireniki is the only Eskimo village which was never relocated from the place where it has been standing for the last 2500 years. Again, the younger generation, who speak neither Old Sirenikski nor Chaplinski and communicate only in Russian, do not seem to regard this as a barrier in forming an identity.

### 3. The Naukanski Group

Due to its geographical location, the village of Naukan occupied a special place in the Bering Strait area. It had intensive family and trade contacts with the Chukchi communities, as well as with the Eskimo communities on the two Diomide Islands and around Cape Prince of Wales. In the early and mid-19th century, many Naukan residents were bilingual in Naukanski and Chukchi, and many also spoke Inupiaq (the language of the Alaskan side of the Strait) to some extent (Schweitzer and Golovko 1995: 53–54).

In 1958, the village of Naukan was “closed”, as part of the country-wide campaign of “termination of villages which have no future”, and its population was moved to the neighboring villages of Nunyamo and Pinakul, where they lived together with Chukchis, forming a minority in the communities. Twenty years later, in 1978, these villages were also proclaimed “to have no future”, and the people were relocated to the regional centre Lavrentia and the villages of Lorino and Uelen (Schweitzer and Golovko 1995: 91; for the details of Naukan history see Chichlo 1981). Naukanski does not show any dialectal varieties.

The Naukanski community thus went through a very harsh period of suffering due to several forced relocations; for this group, the language, which it has to a great extent lost, remains a powerful instrument in constructing and maintaining the Naukanski identity. In spite of this distressing history (or perhaps because of it) the Naukanski community remains politically and culturally the most active of the Eskimo groups in Chukotka. The main objective of their political movement is “to return to Naukan”, which for many of them is perhaps a metaphoric, rather than a practical, goal.

### 4. The Chukchi Group

The nomadic reindeer Chukchis, as opposed to settled Eskimos and maritime Chukchis, were for at least two hundred years economically the most active and prosperous group in the region. The Chukchis travelled with their herds all over the vast area between the Kolyma river and the Bering Strait, thus acting as a natural mediator for the Eskimos in the east, Koryaks in the south, and Yukagirs, Evens (Lamuts), Evenki (Tungus), and Yakuts in the west. Their language, in turn, was a kind of lingua franca for the area in the 18th and the 19th centuries, and well into the 20th century.

Since the Chukchis consistently preferred speaking their own language to the outsiders, they must have had special language-simplifying skills. Norden-skiöld, reporting on the Vega expedition (1878–79), writes that the Chukchis were so courteous as not to correct but to adopt mistakes in the pronunciation or meaning of words (deReuse 1988: 493). The Chukchi obviously demonstrated here a clear pattern of linguistic convergence: this strengthens once again the likelihood that there existed in the area a lingua franca based on Chukchi. Nikolai Gondatti claims that the Eskimos of Chukotka were unable to understand each other's languages and had to use Chukchi as a means of communication (Gondatti 1897a: 167–168). This may not be entirely correct: Waldemar Bogoraz claims that he witnessed many times Eskimos from different branches of the tribe understanding each other quite well while each was speaking their own dialect (Bogoraz 1949: 29). This does not exclude the alternative mentioned by Gondatti: since Chaplinski and Naukanski are mutually intelligible by approximately 60%, it is quite possible that a Chaplinski and a Naukanski speaker who both spoke fluent Chukchi might have preferred to communicate in this language. Bogoraz also points out that other native groups in the area, the Chuvantsy, Evenkis and Yukagirs, had a certain command of Chukchi (*ibid.*).

Today, the majority of the Chukchis are bilingual: on the average, those over 40 years old demonstrate Chukchi-Russian bilingualism, while those below that age show Russian-Chukchi bilingualism (Krasnaya 1994: 65). Among the more settled groups, few or no children speak the language; among the still nomadic groups, all adults and some children still speak Chukchi. The age of the youngest speakers averages 25 to 35 (Krauss 1997: 13).

There exist at least seven territorial dialects of Chukchi. In fact, the Chukchi people themselves, although they have a definite concept of the people as a whole, distinguish clearly “their” group from “other” groups. The knowledge about neighboring groups is best modelled by concentric circles: for the nearest groups, today's informants are capable of giving not only the name but also specific traits of the vernacular, appearance, habits, customs and psychological characteristics; for those farther away, only a general name is known. For example, my Chukchi informant in Anadyr, herself from the tundra south of Anadyr, in the south-eastern part of Chukotka, calls her own group *llyoravetllat* (ЛЫОРАВЕТЛЪАТ) “Chukchi”, and distinguishes the following groups in the same part of Chukotka: *villungegremkin* (ВИЛЪЮН'Э-ГРЕМКЫН) “those who live in the vicinity of Mountain Villungei”; *kerekit*

(керекит) “Kereks”, onm<sup>2</sup>yll<sup>2</sup>yt “interior” (cf. onmyn [онмын] “depth”), and tellqeryllyt (телькерыллыт) (meaning unclear). She also knows of a group which she calls eigisqi<sup>2</sup>llit (эйгиски<sup>2</sup>ллит) “northern”: this group includes all the rest. She also mentions that the south-eastern groups of Chukchis may have difficulties understanding the dialect of the “northern” Chukchi, and the other way round.

(It is worth noting that the Kerek group, which is considered by anthropologists a distinct ethnic group, is for this Chukchi informant as different from her native Chukchi group [and no more different than] as other Chukchi groups).

The Chukchi group (to the extent that it is possible to speak about one group here) is linguistically the most stable of all. It is currently living through a difficult time, however, because for it, the problem of language endangerment is relatively new and therefore highly salient. Without exception, all my Chukchi informants, regardless of age, complained about the danger of losing their native language.

## 5. The Even Group

According to the 1989 census, there were 1,336 Evens in Chukotka, primarily in the Bilibino and Anadyr regions, two-thirds of these live in three settlements: Omolon, Aniuisk and Vaegi. A small but permanent Even community lives in Markovo (Istoria 1997: 11). Traditionally a group of hunters, fishers and reindeer herders, the Evens experienced in the 1940s–1950s, like other minorities of Chukotka, strong Russian/Soviet influence which seriously affected their language: in 1959, 77% of Evens regarded Even as their native language; by 1989, this figure was down to 44% (Krasnaya 1994: 70).

The Even group is the only group of Chukotka native population on which I do not have first-hand data; I will limit myself to mentioning that, from indirect evidence, it looks like the Even language is in a better position than the languages of the Eskimos. According to Michael Krauss (1997: 15), the average age of the youngest speakers is now approaching the thirties.

## 6. The Chuvanski Group

The Chuvanski community, an ethnic group of mixed Native and non-native origin, formed around a Yukagir group. The majority of the group live today in the village of Markovo, founded in the 1840s. The Chuvantsy lost their original language (probably a Yukagir dialect) as early as the 1890s (Dyachkov [1894] 1992, Maidel 1894) and actually formed a mixed community with a very strong Russian element. The group shifted to a new language, which was shaped on the basis of the idioms of Russian settlers of the 17–18th centuries. It has today a great number of Yukagir, Even, Chukchi, and Yakut borrowings both in its lexicon and in its grammar. Nevertheless, the Chuvantsy distinguish themselves both from Russians and from the neighboring Native peoples (Gurvich 1992: 81), and have developed a clear and proud sense of identity.

The majority of the population of Markovo are bilingual in Chuvanski and Russian, with a clear diglossia: Russian is used in the official domain, Chuvanski is used at home, in traditional subsistence activities, and in friendly chat: in short, in all the more intimate domains.

## 7. The Kerek Group

This small group of maritime hunters and fishers (never more than 700 people, today only several families) lives in two villages: Mainepilgyno and Khatyrka. They are surrounded by the Chukchi majority; their language, originally closer to the Koryak dialect continuum, experienced strong influence from Chukchi and is at present almost extinct (Krasnaya 1994: 30).

## 8. The Koryak Group

As I already mentioned, it is hardly possible to draw a clear boundary between the northern Koryak dialects (northern parts of Kamchatka) and the southern Chukchi dialects (southern parts of Chukotka). Very little is known about the Koryaks in Chukotka: there is evidence that Koryaks live in Beringovski and Anadyrski regions (Popov 1997: 142), numbering up to 100 people. According to 1897 census, there were 177 Koryaks in Anadyr area (Iochelson [1908] 1997: 40). Their dialects have, to my knowledge, never been studied.



## Discussion and Conclusion

It is well known from numerous recent publications (and it can be seen from this presentation) that the indigenous languages of Chukotka have been influenced very strongly by Russian, to the extent that many of them have been almost completely abandoned by their speakers, who shifted, or are in the process of shifting, to Russian. Even the languages that are in a relatively good shape, such as Chukchi or Even, demonstrate strong Russian influence, deep traces of language contact in their lexicons, grammars, and even phonology. I won't go into details here; some information about the Russian-Yupik contact can be found in Vakhtin (1997). At this point I would like to mention a very interesting and challenging feature of the process of language loss.

Although language is a very strong, perhaps the strongest, symbol of ethnic identity, and an instrument for supporting it, it is not the only one. In a situation when the Native language is rapidly yielding to a majority language, the group in question begins to look elsewhere for support for its group (and individual) identity. The group can find such support in its silent opposition or resonant resistance to the "dominant culture"; or in its indigenous territory, "the land"; or in traditional beliefs "of the ancestors"; or in cultural practices; even in native diets and subsistence activities (cf. Hensel 1996). Interestingly, it isn't really very important whether the cultural practices or traditional beliefs are "authentic" or "reinvented" (see Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997). In short, the group builds its identity using almost everything at hand.

When such an identity has been built, the next step for the group is to fill in the lacunae, to make the set of identity instruments and symbols complete. For this, the group needs a language. Since the "language of the ancestors" was forgotten long ago, the group may "construct" a new language, "our language", out of the language it speaks.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the new ("reinvented") language can even retain the name of the former language of the group, as in the case of the Chuvanski language: my Chuvanski informant says that "everybody in Markovo, including children, speaks Chuvanski today"—although she is well aware of the fact that Chuvanski became extinct in the 1890s. As Chase Hensel puts it in his recent book (1996: 90),

"There are some situations /.../ where the same speech communities have continued to exist, albeit relexified. People interact in a new language primarily

with the same people or the children of the same people with whom they interacted in the old language. Typically, there have been gradual changes, but fundamentally there is continuity in social and economic interactions, and in ideology and worldview. Pre-existing relationships have continued”.

Important here is the principle of the point of view: for those who speak the language it can continue to be “their language” regardless of how great the changes in its structure and lexicon are, and even regardless of whether it is the same language at all. From an external point of view, Chuvanski is of course extinct. But for the people, the successors of the original ethnic group, it is alive and flourishing, and serves perfectly well as a symbol of, and a means of support for, their group identity.

And I do not have a simple answer to the question: What is more important for linguistic continuity and linguistic survival—the purity and integrity of the grammatical shape and lexicon of a language, or its ability to serve as an instrument of ethnic identity, to support the integrity of a community?

Another result of Russian/Soviet influence is the change of the ethnic pattern, of the ethnic map of Chukotka. Old ethnic groups disappear, new ones emerge. This process has been under way in Chukotka for at least the last 150 years (and, in all probability, much longer than that), which can be demonstrated by the mixed groups like Chuvantsy. Today, new “ethnic groups” are being consolidated in Chukotka, different from those of 50 years ago, such as for instance the “Sireniskii” and “Chaplinski”, instead of the Avatmit (the community of Avan, a small village which was “closed” around 1958) or the Lakaghmit (a group within the Ungazik community)[see Krupnik 1983 for detailed description of Yupik Eskimo groups]. Other groups, like the “Naukanski”, which did exist before, look for, and find, instruments for their identity in new spheres of social and cultural life. In spite of the obvious fact that the functional domains of the indigenous languages of Chukotka are drastically narrowing, the loss of languages does not automatically (by simple subtraction) lead to the loss of ethnic groups. The interdependence between the language and the ethnic group seems to be much more complicated. And I wouldn't be too surprised if, after a while, these newly formed ethnic groups begin to develop their “ethnic languages” as instruments of their group identities. In this case, the number of different languages in Chukotka may someday, contrary to all forecasts, begin to increase. Such an increase will be at first noticeable only from the “insiders” point of view: for an “outsider”, the process of language loss and dying is clear and obvious, while the process

of “language birth” (this metaphor, as opposed to the metaphor of “language death”, belongs to William Foley) is concealed by the veil of our linguistic prejudices, stereotypes, and conventions.

As J. Dillard wrote in 1972 in connection with the rapid expanding of Black English, “It is not completely impossible that the United States will become a bi-dialectal nation in the near future” (Dillard 1973: 115)—meaning that Black English may become a second variation of English alongside the Standard American; it seems that Dillard was right if we think of the recent Ebonics boom. Such a development is thus possible even if the language in question is under constant and strong pressure from a dominant language, in this case a language structurally and genetically very close. Such a development may be even more probable if the pressure is less, or from a language that is structurally dissimilar.

Let me finish by quoting two Russian linguists. The first citation belongs to Alexander Potebniya and was written in 1880:

“If it were possible for mankind to become unified in language and in ethnicity, this would be fatal for human intelligence, like the replacing of many senses by one <...> For the existence of a human, other humans are needed; for a people, other peoples” (1976 [1880]: 229).

The second citation is from Nikolai Trubetskoï’s paper “The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Languages” written in 1923. Trubetskoï compares the Biblical metaphors of “the punishment for Original sin” and “the punishment for an attempt to unite”, that is, build the Tower of Babel:

“Both the first and the second damnation manifest themselves through establishing a natural law against which mankind is helpless. The law of human physiology is such that winning one’s daily bread is connected with physical labor. The law of ethnic evolution is such that it inevitably leads to developing and maintaining differences between languages and cultures <...> physical labor is so closely connected with the normal functioning of a human organism that the lack of it is bad for one’s health. Likewise, the dialectal differentiation of language and culture is so intimately connected with the very essence of a social organism that any attempt to put an end to ethnic diversity would lead to cultural impoverishment and demise” (1995: 327).

One can read this quotation in two different ways: as a mere statement of the value of cultural diversity, and hence the desirability of language maintenance policy, of “linguistic affirmative action”; or as a statement that there

exists an imperative, a law of cultural diversity which acts with the same inescapable force as the physiological law “to survive, one needs food”.

I think Nikolai Trubetskoi had in mind the second reading. The inevitable preservation (or reconstruction) of linguistic and cultural differences is an imperative which even the most malicious pressure upon the minority languages and cultures is unable to break. The horrible totalitarian mincing machine in which the Chukotkan minorities found themselves in the 1950s–1980s could decrease their ability to resist, could decrease the linguistic and cultural differences between them, but was far from what is needed to wipe those differences (and those people) out. As soon as the levelling pressure went down, immediately new groups, new types of individual and group identities, even new languages, began to appear. At this symposium, a very exciting example was given (in papers by Klavdiya Khaloimova and Erich Kasten [this volume], see also Khaloimova et al. 1996) of how the lexical differences between the northern and the southern dialects of Itelmen have recently been “upgraded” by the speakers from minor and insignificant vernacular differences to boundary-setting markers of two distinct ethnic identities.<sup>2</sup>

This also has relevance for the activities of scholars and cultural activists towards language preservation and maintenance. Another participant in our symposium, Jonathan Bobaljik, has shown that language shift can not be explained by internal linguistic causes, but only by economic, social, and cultural ones. He goes on to show that educational programs are thus not the main instrument for language preservation: economic, social and cultural causes of language shift should be removed, and the shift will be automatically reversed. The creation of school books and educational programs for and in the languages children no longer speak is, according to Bobaljik, the “curing of symptoms”, not the curing of causes (see Bobaljik, this volume). Nevertheless, hundreds of scholars, cultural activists and local leaders continue to do this work, continue diligently to “cure the symptoms”.

I think that the scholars and cultural leaders are doing this not only because it is—or is not—important for reversing language shift, but rather because they are unable not to do it. And if something is done because it is not possible not to do it—this again looks like the operation of a law which we may not consciously be aware of.

It seems that the law “highlighted” by Trubetskoi—*the law of conservation of diversity*—operates for, not against, ethnic and linguistic minorities, which allows us to look to the future with cautious optimism.

## Notes

- 1) Compare the situation with Mombassa Swahili as opposed to standard Swahili described in (Wald 1985) where the Mombassa Swahili speakers maintain that their language is a different language regardless of the fact that “objective” differences between the two are indeed almost intangible.
- 2) The Itelmens, according to Erich Kasten, are today looking for support for their identity not in the “Itelmen language” but in smaller “dialectal” forms, in their localities. This is why the existing language maintenance projects which are mostly directed at generalized “languages”, hinder the creation and emergence of new languages.

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