

# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## General remarks

Much has been said and written about the endangered languages and cultures of native minority peoples in the recent past. Maps and extensive lists with shrinking numbers of speakers have continuously been compiled and numerous conferences have been held, where these issues have been discussed by well-informed international scientists, most often with participation of representatives of the *intelligentsia* of the given native peoples. These organisations and scholars must be credited for having directed attention to this issue within the academic community and among the general public. But at the same time the loss of cultural and linguistic diversity and the underlying processes that are the subject of critical debate here have sped up on a global scale, and as it is documented by the authors of this volume, this has also taken place in Russia during the last 20 years. Even more worrying is the fact that solutions are not in sight to stop or to divert such problematic trends.

Perhaps it is time that we, scholars and representatives of the academic community and of relevant international organisations who have been promoting these issues with honest and best intentions, ask ourselves why the proclaimed goals are far from being accomplished. At first sight it seems that most individual programmes and activities are appropriate and certainly quite useful as such. What might be missing is a coordinated strategy that takes some very basic considerations for future orientations and relevant efforts into account. In other words: it will be useful to consider certain important parameters which might have been missing and compare these parameters for several different cases.

But ‘coordinated strategy’ should not be misunderstood as it can in fact be misleading (see Vakhtin, p. 262, *this volume*), because it immediately reminds us of the top-down language preservation policies and programmes during the later Soviet period, with the introduction of standardised teaching materials for the languages of the peoples of the Russian North (cf. Kasten 78, *this volume*). There is no doubt, that community driven diverse grassroots movements that carefully listen and pay attention to particular local needs, are the most appropriate strategy here. Although, these might draw upon the broad experience of previous developments that we aim to discuss and to coordinate here for this volume and for future initiatives.

In this book we present a series of papers which are related to the way in which indigenous knowledge in minority communities is sustained and how attempts are made to safeguard endangered languages. In October 2011 and January 2012 we organ-

ised two seminars where a limited number of scholars – most of them authors who contribute to this book – discussed the drafts of their contributions. These seminars were devoted to the preparation of learning tools for preserving endangered languages and traditional knowledge in Siberia, with comparative examples from other parts of the world. They were attended by scholars with backgrounds in social anthropology, ethnolinguistics and related fields who study the documentation of endangered languages and traditional knowledge and the use of new media for the implementation of learning tools for native communities, in particular in Siberia.

The main part of the book consists of articles on community experiences and alternative pedagogical concepts in the Russian North, but we have added some contributions from colleagues who consider similar problems in other parts of the world (Europe, China, Japan). During the seminars, a collegial and lively intellectual exchange took place which resulted in detailed reports. This process has made it possible for the authors to improve and refine their papers. In the following sections we shall specify some general critical questions which resulted from our discussions and briefly summarise the contents of the various papers.

### **The question of motivation**

Most vital for the success of any activity to sustain linguistic and cultural diversity is the motivation of the local people to share these concerns, and accordingly to take up relevant measures that we – as foreign scientists – can only help to design and encourage, but which we are usually not able or supposed to implement. Closely linked to the indispensable proper motivation is the credibility of such initiatives that is further discussed by Kasten (p. 83, see also Kraef, p. 234, Lavrillier p. 116, *this volume*). If local communities perceive these programmes as serving mostly the individual or academic needs of the researcher or funding organisation, it becomes difficult to communicate to them the real meaning of the entire endeavour.

But also for other reasons than those mentioned above the necessary motivation among the local population can sometimes be low or even lacking. One reason might be that the particular cultural heritage of one's people or ethnic group often no longer has sufficient status in the given native community as opposed to other expressions of mainstream culture, against which it is not always easy to compete. In Soviet times, native culture, as representing a lower stage of society's development towards communism, was declared inferior by the state propaganda (see Lavrillier, p. 114, *this volume*), while some ethnic features had been demonstrated often more as 'folkloristic' elements that even today can sometimes serve as 'ethnic ornamentation' (see Dudeck, p. 150, *this volume*). The former role of state propaganda is now assumed more subtly and even more efficiently by commercial mass media, in which 'global' lifestyles and values are incessantly transmitted and presented as – often questionable – role models

for one's own behaviour. However, this is a more general problem that certainly does not apply to native communities alone.

But what does it mean to members of a native community to preserve their own cultural heritage, and what can induce them to do so? First of all, a particular language has local variants which have often developed over time and distinguish each given group from others. In this way language serves as one (of many) important constituents of a person's multiple or layered identity (Kasten 2005a: 246 ff.; see also Dudeck, p. 149, Lavrillier p. 120, *this volume*). At the same time, a certain language is usually intimately connected to other kinds of traditional knowledge, especially the particular ecological knowledge of the group, as well as to its oral traditions such as stories and legends through which important worldviews and values are transmitted to the young from an early age. Such worldviews and values have developed over generations and have proven to be useful or even indispensable to securing and enhancing social life and appropriate behaviour towards nature with regard to the sustainable use of their natural resources – under often extreme conditions. To be in command of this knowledge connects a person back to his or her distant past, to one's ancestors and to the history of the entire group – this usually provides an essential sense of security and self-esteem. For most of us such identifications are self-evident, but one usually only becomes aware of them when one is about to lose them.

Many native people, especially youth, are facing this situation, and not only in Russia, but also in many other parts of the world, with all the well-known consequences resulting in psychological and behavioural problems of various kinds. In contrast, examples have shown that useful discourses with new ideas from the outside – and in future mostly via internet (see Michael Rießler, Olivia Kraef, *this volume*) – and consequently the needed adaptations to the modern world are much better accomplished when such natural steps are taken from the basis of pride and self-esteem with regard to one's own culture. Therefore, preserving and strengthening one's own cultural heritage makes it easier especially for native youth to integrate successfully into mainstream society. Here the use of modern facilities provided by information technology (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) can play a crucial role.

Some essays in this volume stress this important fact: how ethnic pride and self-esteem can be built up in various ways (see Kasten, p. 73, *this volume*). Presenting native culture to foreign audiences can also lead to other and sometimes misleading motivations, if it is seen that way more (or exclusively) as a commodity (Kasten 2004: 25 ff.). Therefore, community members should be convinced that it is in their own interest to see the maintenance of their cultural heritage not exclusively with a view to immediate – financial – return. However, this is not always easy to explain or to justify under the given pressing economic conditions that many of them are facing and have to master these days.

This relates to the complicated and probably controversial issue of whether or in which ways the efforts of community members should be remunerated in this col-

laborative process. One problem is that paid information is usually biased and of a different quality (cf. Margaret Mead's correspondence with Ruth Benedict that vividly illustrates such shortcomings, Mead 1979: 97) if it is not connected to the informant's more far-reaching own interests such as the preservation of the cultural heritage of one's ethnic group. Furthermore, it can turn out to be counter-productive even in other ways, if the native expert is too generously compensated for his or her contribution. Usually this creates envy and anger within the community, if certain persons become privileged and singled out that way. This consequently would only distance or even isolate them from others. Thus, often well-meant attitudes on the part of the researcher can cause the opposite of what is desperately needed: the strong motivation of the whole community to work together for the given common goal without internal tensions or jealousies. Kasten (p. 81f., *this volume*) discusses some options of how to deal with this sensitive issue; Odé and Lavrillier also address how jealousies can counteract or raise negative consequences within a project (*this volume*).

In sum, it is important for the credibility of the given joint effort that everybody lives up to the same standards that are proclaimed and set for the proper motivational foundation in such projects. As an indispensable precondition for any successful work, it seems that this has to be made clear to all who are involved in this process. The entire native community should be convinced that it, in the first place, would benefit most in the long run from the expected outcome. But it should be a prime concern as well for foreign researchers to contribute to such projects which will preserve the linguistic and cultural diversity of humankind in general. They should pursue such activities even if they are not adequately acknowledged and academically and financially supported by governments and other authorities.

### **Further topics of general importance in the contributions to this volume**

In most papers the common use of the unqualified term 'speaker' is problematic unless the actual language competence is further explained. In most cases the numbers appear more or less random and are often misleading. In most case studies of this volume the important difference is pointed out between a person who still masters the language fluently or has only auditory competence (the so-called 'passive user'), while in many cases he or she might still be able to respond in more or less fragmentary speech in that language. Furthermore, a distinction should be drawn between those who still have learnt the native language from their parents at home and those to whom it had been taught as a second language at school – as those in the latter case have often acquired different characteristics during this process. (More on the typology of speakers, see: Tsunoda 2005: 117–133.)

A central issue in the book is how to specify the position of the endangered languages which are considered: how many dialects, how many speakers (according to

their degree of speech competence), how it is used in various situations, etc. Some of these languages have very few or no speakers left and one could ask the question how these last active speakers use the language. This will also determine how a literary standard can be developed for the written language. Is this standard based on one of the dialects and is it accepted by speakers or passive users of the other dialects? In most of the cases presented here (such as for Nenets, Nivkh, Itelmen, Evenk, Even and Koryak), this creates problems and people refuse to learn the standard or do not accept it from their children when they get lessons at school (Kasten, p. 78, Lavrillier, p. 109, *this volume*).

Stephan Dudeck remembers a comment by Eugen Helimski that some elders deliberately decided to break the transmission of their Nganasan language, as they saw the inability of the younger generation to learn the language in a complete way with all its folklorist richness and different registers, and with all poetic forms and expressions. Thus, instead of spoiling the language they opted for a language shift. The protagonist of the film *Itelmen stories* had shared similar concerns with Erich Kasten in the mid-1990s, such as those given here for the Nganasan, especially that the dialectal varieties of his (and other) villages were not sufficiently reflected in the standardised Soviet teaching materials since the 1980s (Kasten, p. 68, *this volume*). A blog on our seminar that referred to this elder's comment (<http://arcticanthropology.org/2012/01/11/sec-seminar/>) could not grasp this broader background of his isolated quote from the film.

The use of prescriptive dictionaries and grammars presents specific problems: most of these are not written for the teaching of children and often they use a variety of the language different from the language which the children speak at home or hear from their (grand)parents. Therefore, the use of sound material of various dialects might be useful. It can be shown in combination with one written standard while the teacher can use the spoken variety which is appropriate.

An important aspect is the use of information technology for e-learning, which in several articles (see Kraef, Lavrillier and Rießler, *this volume*) has been mentioned as an important way to teach and learn the endangered languages. In particular the new social networks can play a role when stimulating the use of these languages among young representatives of communities, where a minority language is less used.

The use of special alphabet conventions, such as additional diacritics in the writing system, requires special attention in the educational process. It will be very difficult for children (who often do not speak the language) to master a system of new graphemes in addition to the existing letters of the main language (see Rießler, *this volume*). This is in particular the case when the required phonemic differences do not exist in the main language and have very low functionality or are practically no longer in use.

Most of the papers show that much can be done for the benefit of minority communities and their language and culture. The following sections of this introduction summarize the contents of these papers which describe some programmes to pre-

serve endangered languages, community experiences and alternative pedagogical concepts in the Russian North and experiences in preserving indigenous languages and knowledge from other parts of the world.

### **Programmes to preserve endangered languages**

The first part of the book presents a number of programmes that contributed successfully to the preservation of endangered languages. Tjeerd de Graaf and Cor van der Meer inform us in their article on *Multilingualism and Language Teaching in Europe* on the case of Frisian and the important work of the Mercator European Research Centre, whose programme is also devoted to the study of other minority languages in Europe. The primary involvement of the Fryske Akademy lies in the domain of the history, literature and culture related to the West-Frisian language. The users of its nearest relatives, the East- and North-Frisian languages in Germany, are less numerous and these languages are included in the list of the most endangered languages of Europe. This report describes the present-day position of the Frisian language as one of the minority and regional languages of Europe. A survey is given of the available resources on Frisian and on the work of the Mercator Centre in the field of minority language learning. This may be useful for the study of minority language situations elsewhere in the world.

In another article Tjeerd de Graaf and Victor Denisov underline *The Use of Sound Archives for the Investigation, Teaching and Safeguarding of Some Endangered Uralic Languages*. In Russia many old sound recordings still remain hidden in archives and in private possession where the quality of preservation is not guaranteed. This review article presents the results of the project on ‘Safeguarding and Preservation of Sound Materials of Endangered Languages for Sound Archives in Russia’ (2006–2008) and describes some earlier projects related to these historical recordings, such as the project ‘Voices from Tundra and Taiga’ (2002–2005). The authors have made part of these sound materials available and added them to the acoustic database developed with colleagues in the sound archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The aim of these projects is to re-record the material and safeguard it in storage facilities, which will modernise the possible archiving activities in the Russian Federation and bring them up to date with the present day world standards of the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA 2005). The authors concentrate on a selection of recordings of some endangered languages in the Russian Federation, for which documentation is very important. As specific case studies, they consider the recovered sound material for a few Uralic languages, in particular Khanty and Udmurt, for which historical sound recordings are presented in sound archives in the Russian Federation and abroad. The authors consider these materials’ potential for the development of modern learning tools and teaching methods and evaluate the present day situation for the teaching of Udmurt and other minority and regional languages in the Russian Federation.

The final chapter of this first part of the book deals with the *Documentation and Revitalisation of Two Endangered Languages in Eastern Asia: Nivkh and Ainu*. Tjeerd de Graaf and Hidetoshi Shiraishi draw a comparison between two adjacent ethnic groups, namely the Ainu of Hokkaido and the Nivkh of Sakhalin. They follow the historical development of the border areas between Japan and Russia and describe the prevailing situation of these aboriginal peoples on both sides of the border. The legal measures taken by the Japanese government for the promotion of Ainu culture and the development of learning tools have consequences for the Ainu community and the possible revitalisation of the Ainu language. The Nivkh community within the Russian Federation is a typical example of the multitude of ethnic minority groups spread across this vast territory. The Ainu case can be compared and used as a model for possible (legal) measures to be taken regarding minority languages and cultures such as Nivkh with an outlook for future improvement. The authors consider the use of new media for these native communities and pay attention to the development of adequate modern learning tools and culturally related teaching methods. Various options are provided, starting with such basic ones as organising language courses and arranging other language-related activities.

### **Community experiences and alternative pedagogical concepts in the Russian North**

In the second part of this volume, the authors discuss community experiences and alternative pedagogical concepts in the Russian North that aim to sustain endangered languages and local knowledge and that they have followed and closely monitored during many years, in some cases since the early 1990s. In his article *Learning Tools for Preserving Languages and Indigenous Knowledge in Kamchatka*, Erich Kasten gives first an overview of various projects on these issues that he and his team have carried out in Kamchatka with the Itelmen, Even and Koryak peoples. A particular emphasis of these projects was on producing together with native experts new learning tools in which modern technologies have been applied and continuously adapted to rapidly developing newly available formats. He tries to capture the intense community discourse over these programmes that include besides initiatives to preserve endangered languages even more aspects of endangered cultural traditions such as ecological knowledge. Furthermore, he analyses the role that performing arts can play, in particular for the youth, to preserve and to further develop important traditions in order to maintain and enhance new cultural diversities.

Cecilia Odé addresses similar issues in her article *Learning your Endangered Native Language in a Small Multilingual Community* in which she presents a case study of Tundra Yukagir in Andriushkino. In her analysis she points out the quite unique multilingual environment that is created by various native peoples living in

this village, and with them it is not easy for the Tundra Yukagir language to compete. Cecilia Odé first describes the curriculum and the learning tools and clearly identifies their shortcomings and offers prospects for future improvements. For this, she gives much room to children and to teachers to express themselves about what learning their native language can mean to them.

In her article on *Anthropology and Applied Anthropology in Siberia*, Alexandra Lavrillier focuses on questions and solutions around a nomadic school among the Evenk reindeer herders. She first gives an overview of the history and the actual debate on applied anthropology within the theory of anthropology. Besides this, the demand of the indigenous people gave her the main impetus for her direct involvement in designing and implementing alternative pedagogical concepts in the form of a nomadic school, as such a model relates more closely to traditional lifestyles of reindeer herding communities. This paper also gives an overview of the attempts at the creation and the experiences of nomadic schools in eastern Siberia in the early 1990s. On the basis of her many years of experience with the creation of a nomadic school in 2005 which is still functioning, Alexandra Lavrillier discusses the particular ethical, political, social and educational issues that such a school may raise, and explains the solutions adopted by this applied anthropology project.

Similar experiences with alternative educational models that are connected to the cultural past and actual traditional lifestyles of the given native people are presented and discussed by Stephan Dudeck with regard to Forest Nenets reindeer herders. In his article *Challenging the State Educational System in Western Siberia: Taiga-School at the Tiutiakha River* he emphasises that it was not as much the content of the school curriculum, which was almost the same as that of the boarding school in the village, but the organisation of the educational process and the context of the work of the small taiga school that differed so much from the conventional system of education. He analyses the difficulties that arose after the thirteen years of existence of that school, which might lead to a discontinuation of this initially promising initiative. In his conclusion, Stephan Dudeck places the school project and its educational ideas in the broader context of attempts to reform the educational system for indigenous groups in Siberia after the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

In her article *Boarding School on Yamal* Elena Liarskaya analyses the changes in the relationship between school, state and Siberian indigenous peoples, based on the archival, printed and field materials connected with the school at the Yamal cultural centre in Yar-Sale. The author shows that there was no integral Soviet school policy in the North. She gives a short description of the main stages of the interrelations between the school and local people in Siberia and demonstrates how tasks and functions are fulfilled by the school at different stages. The author discusses in detail certain features of the school in the 1930s (the period of initial mass education in that region), and the specifics of relations between boarding schools and nomadic schools at that time. Then she compares the aims and functions of the school on Yamal at



present, and, consequently, shows the fundamental changes that have taken place over time.

Roza Laptander's article *Model for the Tundra School in Yamal* refers to another Nenets group, the Tundra Nenets who live in Western Siberia. She investigates a project that represents a new educational system for children from nomadic and semi-nomadic Nenets families. The first nomadic schools started to work earlier than boarding schools in the 1930s but they were not successful. Recently this type of education was introduced again by the Nenets writer Anna Nerkagi and aims to overcome the harmful consequences of earlier boarding schools during the later Soviet period. Roza Laptander presents and discusses the pedagogical outline of this new experimental nomadic school. The trailblazer, Anna Nerkagi, wants the children to be aware of the harmful effects of civilisation. The children are taught life and love through dedicated labour and they speak just Nenets language.

The language situation of the Kildin Saami, living further west on the Kola peninsula in Northwestern Russia, is at the centre of Michael Rießler's article *Towards a Digital Infrastructure for Kildin Saami*. Its focus is on language planning and the creation of a digital infrastructure in the minority context. Methodologies of applied linguistic research at the interface between language planning, language documentation and language technology are discussed on the basis of ongoing research being undertaken in cooperation between local research centres and from the perspective of a critically endangered language of Northern Russia. Outcomes of this project have good potential to be used for similar learning tools with other peoples of the Russian north.

### **Experiences in preserving indigenous languages and knowledge from other parts of the world**

In another part of this book, comparative experiences are given on similar initiatives to preserve linguistic and cultural diversities for other native or minority peoples living beyond Russia in other parts of the world. In her article *Building Yi (M)other Tongue* Olivia Kraef addresses virtual platforms, language and culture in a Chinese minority context, while using the example of the Yi. Based on a content analysis of the main and most popular websites and online forums relevant in this context, this article examines and analyses the function these virtual platforms play in regard to Yi (Nuosu) language proliferation among groups of young Yi. The author specifically attempts to assess through what means (and potentially with what aims) these virtual platforms promote, or perhaps even reverse, the meanings of Yi language preservation among young Yi communities in China. Furthermore, Olivia Kraef gives an outlook on whether or not Yi language as promoted through these platforms can in the long run become a 'true' alternative means to current language and culture preservation in academic and educational institutions.

Finally, an even more distant perspective on the issues that have been discussed here mainly for indigenous peoples in the Russian context is given by Teresa Valiente Catter and Michael Dürr. Their article *Bilingual Intercultural Education in the Andes* presents the practice of intercultural bilingual education in Latin America, focussing on the Quechuan languages. It raises questions of curriculum development and the factors relevant for preparing teaching materials related to the intercultural approach and the aptness of the national language as a medium for the education of indigenous communities. On the other hand, the practical linguistic factors to be taken into account in defining a written variety of an indigenous language and the social factors favouring or obstructing language loyalty are discussed.

In the *Epilogue*, Nikolai Vakhtin discusses previous and present trends and possible future ways for preserving endangered languages and indigenous knowledge among the peoples of the Russian North. The editors thank him for having directed our attention to problematic academic attitudes and approaches in this regard in the past that have been discussed at length and frankly in many of the articles of this volume, with the aim and the hope of providing possible answers and showing new directions.

The editors and all authors would also like to sincerely thank Beverley Stewart for her insightful – and certainly often not easy – copy editing of the texts that were written by authors from various foreign linguistic backgrounds. The Foundation for Siberian Cultures is thanked for having hosted the seminars and provided the inspiring and warm atmosphere which led to the outcome of this productive discourse.

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