

## **6 LEARNING YOUR ENDANGERED NATIVE LANGUAGE IN A SMALL MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF TUNDRA YUKAGIR IN ANDRIUSHKINO <sup>1</sup>**

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*In admiring memory  
of Anna Gavrilovna Vyrdylina*

### **Introduction**

This paper discusses the language situation of the Tundra Yukagir in the multilingual community of the village of Andriushkino. According to the data for 2005 on the website of the Sakha Information Agency ([www.ysia.ru/nkol.php](http://www.ysia.ru/nkol.php)), the taiga and tundra of the Nizhnekolymsky *ulus* (Nizhnekolymsky district), where the village of Andriushkino is situated, has a surface area of nearly 88,000 km<sup>2</sup> with less than one person per 10 km<sup>2</sup>.

During fieldwork in Andriushkino in the winter of 2009, I collected some statistics at the administrative office of the village and at the school. In 2009, the population of Andriushkino was 895 people, 607 belonging to the minority peoples Yukagir (223), Even (349), Chukchi (21), Evenki (4), and a few Dolgan (6) and Nenets (4). The other 288 people are mostly Yakut, and only 30 Russians inhabit the village. These numbers include the nomads living on the tundra. This small and exceptional multilingual community with eight peoples poses an especially complicated picture for the schools in the village, where teachers have to deal with different ethnic groups speaking completely unrelated languages. There is a strong hierarchy though in the use of these languages. Russian is the dominant language in school, whereas Yakut is the dominant language in daily life, also among the minority peoples. This will be further discussed where appropriate in this article.

The people are fishermen, hunters, herders, and in the village they work in the school, in the polyclinic, in the administrative office, the meteorological station, the heating installation, shops and the like. But many people are unemployed and more or less self-supporting in their daily life. Sometimes they move to other villages hoping to find work, or move to the capital Yakutsk if they can afford the expensive trip. Others may fall into a state of depression and start drinking. As in many Siberian villages, drinking by both men and women, even at an early age, is a very serious problem. The village has a cultural centre where almost every Saturday concerts and other cultural events are held, often followed by a discotheque. For these events villagers sew costumes and make accessoires themselves and it is amazing how good and

inventive they are at designing these. Music and songs are usually accompanied by a disco-beat at an unbearable pitch, also the traditional music that they are so proud of. The commonly heard reason is that otherwise young people would not come to the concerts. Yet songs and storytelling performed in the traditional way by elders are silently listened to by all generations with respectful attention. The cultural centre is also used for bigger national and regional feasts. There is a small polyclinic with one doctor, some nurses, a cook and a pharmacy. For serious diseases patients go by helicopter to Chersky, some 300 km east of Andriushkino (over land 450 km), which has a hospital. If patients cannot be helped there either, they fly to the capital Yakutsk at a distance of 1800 km (over land more than 3000 km) to the southwest of Chersky, a flight that takes four to five hours.

Shops are mostly located in a room in a private house where articles and food are sold at ridiculous prices because of transport costs and the monopoly owners have on the products. Fresh food is not available, at best there are some deep frozen products. As many villagers are fishermen and hunters, there is no lack of fresh fish and meat. In summertime berries are gathered and preserved or deep frozen for the long winter. These berries are extremely rich in vitamins. Though the summer is short, villagers manage to make greenhouses of wooden poles covered with thick plastic and within a few months vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and cabbage can be harvested and are then preserved or bottled. Note that preserving products is no problem in the permafrost area, where it suffices to dig a cellar in the ground to keep your fresh stock deep frozen. During the three month summer holiday villagers are busy preparing for winter.

## **The Tundra Yukagir people, their villages and their language<sup>2</sup>**

Tundra Yukagir is, together with Kolyma Yukagir and other isolated Siberian languages like Nivkh, a Paleo-Siberian or Paleo-Asian language. To this group of languages belong, for example, also the Chukotko-Kamchatkan and Eskimo-Aleut languages (*Yazyki mira, Paleo-aziatskie Yazyki*, 1997).

Tundra Yukagir is a seriously endangered language in Arctic Russia that together with Kolyma Yukagir forms one language family. Tundra Yukagir (henceforth: TY) is spoken by the people with the same name in the northeast of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Sakha (also: Yakutia) between the lower Indigirka and the lower Kolyma. The exact size of the population is unknown, but is probably about 700. The number of good speakers of the language is dramatically lower than this. For a discussion of the term 'speaker' the reader is referred to Kasten and De Graaf (p. 10, *this volume*). In this article, a speaker is someone who is fluent in his native language in speaking and understanding, though not necessarily in reading and writing. In the literature, approximately 50 people still having a reasonable knowledge of their

native language is usually mentioned. During fieldwork in 2010, however, I registered the names of 62 speakers: 28 in Andriushkino, 13 in Chersky, 6 in Kolymskoe, 15 in Yakutsk. Their age varies from 4 to 80 years, but most speakers are over 50 years old. The older generation was mainly born on the tundra. Nowadays it is hard to tell how many members of the TY people living on the tundra master their native language, so the number may be even higher. Most TY speakers are fluent in Yakut and Russian, and often in other indigenous languages of the area, such as Even and Chukchi. Most TY speakers live in the village of Andriushkino on the Alazeia River and on the tundra, mostly north of the village. They also live in Chersky and Kolymskoe, on the lower Kolyma River.

As a Yukagir settlement, Andriushkino has a special official status: *Administratsiia natsional'nogo yukagirskogo obrazovaniia 'Olëriskiy suktul'* [Administration of the National Yukagir Education Settlement 'Olëra tribe'] in the Lower Kolyma District of the Republic of Sakha. The *Olëriskiy suktul* is named after the river and lakes Olëra and the TY word *suktuul* 'tribe'. Andriushkino is the only village in the Russian Federation where the TY language is taught in all classes of the school from kindergarten to the highest, eleventh, class of the secondary school. Note that all other subjects are taught in Russian and courseware and learning materials are also in Russian.

Traditionally, the Tundra Yukagir are nomadic reindeer herders. They adopted herding from the neighbouring Chukchi, as originally they were hunters. Since their origin is beyond the scope of this article, for a more detailed description the reader is referred to Forsyth (1992: 74–80), Kurilov (2006: 3ff.), Maslova (2003: 1–2) and Pakendorf (2007: 18). In these sources reasons why the TY people decreased from about 5500 in the beginning of the seventeenth century to about 2500 at the end of the seventeenth century, and to some 700 today, are also discussed. To give an impression: war, oppression by other peoples, natural disasters and epidemic diseases (smallpox), but also mixed marriages especially with Evens are the main causes of this decrease. Some Even and Yukagir don't even know exactly who they are, because they switched their nationality administratively more than once, if this was beneficial for them.

### Tundra Yukagir language consultants

Since 2004, the following TY speakers have been or still are my main native language consultants (the approximate ages indicated between brackets are from the year 2010):

- in Chersky: Akulina Innokent'evna Struchkova (74), Vasiliï Nikolaevich Tret'iakov (57), Liubov' Vasil'evna Kurilova (62), and the late Varvara Khristoforovna Neustroeva (†2008) and Anna Nikolaevna Kurilova (†2008);
- in Andriushkino: Fedora Ivanovna Borisova (50), Matriona Nikolaevna Tokhtosova (69), Svetlana Alekseevna Atlasova (65), Maria Nikolaevna Kurilova (65), Anasta-

sia Semënovna Tataeva (50), Proskop'ia Ivanovna Pavlova (46), Dora Nikolaevna Tataeva (48), Anna Egorovna Tret'iakova (78), Il'ia Ivanovich Kurilov (55), Vasiliï Ivanovich Kurilov (50), Fedosiia Il'inichna Kurilova (20) and her daughter Alayii (4) who is named after the TY tribe Alayii, Il'ia Ivanovich Kurilov, the singer (50), Dar'ia Nikolaevna Kurilova (67), Anastasiia Semënovna Kurilova (47), Akulina Ivanovna Malysheva (55) and the late Anna Gavrilovna Vyrdylina († 2010);

- in Yakutsk: Gavril Nikolaevich Kurilov (72), Nikolai Nikolaevich Kurilov (61), Polina Ivanovna Sintiakova (55) and the late Ekaterina Ivanovna Tymkyl' († 2005).

All consultants master speaking and understanding, but not all are good at reading and writing, if at all, which is not surprising, as there is no special need to write the language and hardly any written literature exists.

Our native consultants were almost all born on the tundra in a reindeer herder family and lived a nomadic life until the age of seven, when they had to go to school. Not all of them went to school at the obligatory age. Those who did had great communication problems as TY was usually the only language they knew, since until 1958 all subjects were taught in Yakut and learning materials were also in Yakut (Struchkov 2008: 91).

From 1958 until the present day, all subjects and learning materials at schools except native languages are in Russian. For the older generation (in 2010 fifty years old or older) going to school was a drama, as TY and all other minority languages were practically forbidden until 1980, though not officially or by law. School children were punished for speaking their native language and indoctrinated with the idea that they should be ashamed of their native language as being an inferior language, and using it would isolate them from other peoples, as I was told by a 48 year-old TY teacher at a primary school, recounting to me her personal experience. The school children rapidly started to learn Yakut and later Russian and became bi- or trilingual. This is long since the case, also in other regions. However, at home they were also discouraged from speaking their native language. Children did and do not always live together with their parents, but stay with other non-TY families, so depending on the frequency of contact with their parents, they may gradually start to forget their native language.

### **The school in Andriushkino**

The first school in the area Nizhnekolymsky *ulus* was founded in 1930 in the settlement Khara-Tale, some 3 km from the village. In 1941, the village was built under the name *Ondoriuské* 'Andriushka', hence the name Andriushkino. In 1947, the primary school was moved to the village and in 1961 the school was extended to eight classes. It was in 1993 that the school obtained the special status of National Secondary School (Vyrdylina 2006: 57–58).

Andriushkino has a kindergarten with two classes and a primary and secondary school with eleven classes. In 2010 in the kindergarten there were altogether 76 children, and 175 in primary and secondary school. Not all of the approximately 80 TY children go to TY language classes, as Yakut is considered more useful for the children's future and their career (see also p. 100 ff.). Sometimes non-TY children join the TY classes. Russian is obligatory for all. Until recently there were four teachers of Tundra Yukagir. In February 2010, the TY population lost its most experienced teacher and linguist, Anna Vyrdylina, in a tragic accident. Under her stimulating direction, both pupils and teachers worked together. Another good teacher left the school in 2010 to continue her university studies in the capital Yakutsk. She is ambitious and is pursuing a career in linguistics. In spring 2011, two new teachers, inexperienced in language teaching, have taken over their tasks.

### Tundra Yukagir and language education

According to G. N. Kurilov (*personal communication*), it was in 1979 that in Andriushkino Anna G. Vyrdylina started teaching TY as a separate subject in primary school. The first TY alphabet developed by G. N. Kurilov appeared only in 1987. Since 1990, the native languages TY, Even, Yakut and Chukchi are taught in primary and secondary school. Nowadays, TY lessons are given from 5 to 6 hours per week in the first four classes, 4 hours per week in the next four classes, and up to 2 hours per week in the last three classes. Besides the native language, pupils learn about the traditional TY culture, rituals, costumes, music, dance, cooking and utensils, and learn how to make handicrafts from, for example, fur and wood. Since 1992, learning TY starts in kindergarten *Podsnezhnik* 'Snowdrop', but, unfortunately, they just play with isolated words like those for relatives, colours and numerals; not even short full sentences are learned. The TY generation between 30–50 years old in 2010, who in their youth were not allowed to use their native language, has on average a poor command of the language, yet they usually understand it quite well. So sometimes young children now learning TY at school speak TY with their grandparents or with the nomadic TY who always lived and still live on the tundra, rather than with their parents. There is no nomadic school in the area and there was, to my knowledge, only one unsuccessful attempt to create one, in 2009. The proposal was accepted by the Ministry of Education, but nothing further happened. I addressed the issue with local teachers, but in their opinion there was no need for a nomadic school, as the few children whose parents live on the tundra always have relatives in the village they can stay with. Some teachers were even against a nomadic school: children should grow up in the village, they felt.

The method used for teaching is the so-called 'translation method'. Pupils translate sentences or words from Russian into TY and the other way round, and frequently

write dictation exercises. They answer improvised questions asked by the teachers about the texts they translate. Learning materials are very limited and exercises for practicing items they just learned do not exist. With financial support by UNESCO, a rich collection of audio recordings on CD with tales, poems and songs has recently (2009) been made available to the schools. However, these CDs come without any accompanying texts, transcriptions, directions or annotations. Moreover, in the classroom it is not possible to listen to the recordings, as in school there are no reliable CD-players, and computers work too slowly, don't work at all or have no sound card or speakers. There was no further initiative undertaken by UNESCO or the Sakha Ministry of Education to develop any additional materials for the discs. The available textbooks in the TY language have no translations or exercises to accompany the texts. There is no learner's dictionary and the only very limited dictionary which has both Yukagir-Russian and Russian-Yukagir is, unfortunately, full of errors and lacks many common words (Atlasova 2007). The academic dictionary (Kurilov 2001) has an impractical alphabetical order in the sense that words are presented with their compounds etc. by root and not in a strict alphabetical order. There is also no learner's grammar. I was told by the teachers that the grammar written by Gavril Kurilov (2006) for the higher classes in secondary school is much too difficult. And again, all existing materials have no exercises or practice tasks. Interactive materials are not developed at all.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, teachers prepare teaching materials themselves by drawing tables with, for example, verb conjugations and case inflections and pictures with names of objects on posters they hang on the wall. They make exercises in the classroom or improvise them on the blackboard. So it is thanks to the commitment of the teachers that there exist any teaching materials at all.

Many texts in TY were written before an orthography was actually developed, the official orthography by Gavril Nikolaevich Kurilov existing only since 1990. However, this orthography still leaves a lot to be desired. For example, in the orthography there is no agreement on long vowel /o:/ written by Kurilov as 'oo', which can be observed as pronounced with a short vowel [o], a long vowel [o:] or a diphthong [uo]. According to Kurilov's orthography, these three different phonemes /o/, /o:/ and /uo/ should be written as 'o', 'oo' or 'uo', respectively. A problem here is also dialectal difference in pronouncing the vowels. The result is, that if in spoken TY a word with /o/ or /o:/ occurs, one will have to check all three spellings 'o', 'oo' and 'uo' in the dictionary to see which one is correct according to Kurilov's orthography, supposing that he has it all right. The same holds for /o/ and /ö/, even if a minimal pair exists. Understandably, for teachers and for children learning the language this confusing spelling is frustrating, as it is for us linguists and our language consultants with whom we register and transcribe spoken TY.

As said earlier, parents and children hardly ever speak the TY language at home. At best it is spoken when children live with their grandparents who speak the language among themselves. This is the most preferable situation for learning to speak

TY, especially if also during the three month summer holiday they stay with their grandparents. Unfortunately, writing skills are as a rule very poor as there is no special need to write the language.

Despite all the negative factors discussed above, pupils are eager to learn their native language. I witnessed their pride during TY lessons. They are aware of their TY identity, but they are also aware of belonging to a minority people of the north and in this sense their awareness of identity is also a collective one. Important in this respect is also the fact that the TY language is now taught in a setting with improving modern facilities. For example, during my last field trip (March 2012), I noticed that language classrooms are provided with computers and more audio-visual courseware has been developed. Teachers would like to have karaoke in the classroom and develop TY rap. The TY language is often considered a traditional language of nomadic people. This attitude should be changed to TY being a modern language, making it much more attractive to learn and practice. Twice a week there is a radio programme by TY writer and artist Nikolai Kurilov, with news, interviews, songs, old recordings, not only about the TY people and is, except for interviews with non-TY people, exclusively in the TY language. All TYs in the village listen to it.

Unfortunately, the local TY community has not been very active in promoting TY language education. Only recently are the TY people and also other peoples increasingly interested in language education and actively support its development. It is therefore disappointing that hardly any financial support from governmental authorities is given or is expected in the near future, as I was told (March 2012). The local authorities cannot be blamed too much for this situation, as they try hard to get financial support and themselves have hardly any means to help the schools.

### **“What does learning your native language mean to you?”**

#### **Children express themselves<sup>4</sup>**

The following short essays that were written upon my request by pupils in the third class tell about motivation to study TY. The question was: “What does learning your native language mean to you?” Note that the family name *Kurilov* is very common in the area and does not necessarily indicate any kinship between people carrying that name. The short essays were collected in 2009 by TY teacher Anastasiia Kurilova who, unfortunately, paraphrased the texts a little bit to make them, as she suggested, sound better. The texts were translated by the author as close to the original as possible.

“For me the Yukagir language is important so that when we are gone it is passed on to our children. I want the Yukagir language to live and sound loudly. Each Yukagir must know and love it so that it does not disappear but will always live in our hearts. And our children should not lose it!” (*Igor Kurilov*).

“For us the Yukagir language is a native language. We are Yukagirs. In the old times our great grandparents talked in this language. Everybody must know and love his native language. I like to study the Yukagir language. In each lesson we learn new words, we translate from Yukagir to Russian, we sing in our native language, I know Yukagir writers. I love, respect and preserve my native language!” (*Eseniia Tre'iakova*).

“The Yukagir language is necessary for conversation, for example, somebody asks you something in Yukagir and you don't know how to answer, that is why the native language is needed. Only few of us are left. Our great grandparents spoke Yukagir from their childhood. And we also must know our native language. If we don't know it, it will disappear, it will die. Preserve your native language!” (*Lena Toiento*).

“I need the Yukagir language in order to know my native language. If we don't know it, few Yukagirs will be left. We will soon be adults, we will know and understand the language, and then we will be proud of ourselves. I want to know my native language!” (*Maria Kurilova*).

“My native language is the Yukagir language. When we are old, our language will be passed on to our grandchildren, will be passed on from generation to generation. I love my native language very much and cherish it. If I didn't know it, then our children and grandchildren will also not know it and they will be ashamed. I will learn my native language!” (*Sergei Nikulin*).

If all TY children are indeed so consciously proud of their native language as stated in their essays, then revitalisation can be considered possible. Unfortunately, as we will see below, only a small percentage of all TY children attend TY language classes.

### **TY teachers on teaching their native language**

During fieldwork in winter 2009, I organised a meeting with TY teachers. The aim was to discuss the present situation of TY language teaching and to make an inventory of unpublished teaching materials written on cards and posters by themselves. We expected that this inventory could serve as a checklist for what exactly is lacking. On the basis of such an inventory a list of priorities could then be made. This was expected to be a difficult task, because the materials are not documented or sorted as to type or level, but are kept in boxes by each individual teacher.

A general complaint of the teachers is that they have no time to develop teaching materials to make these ready for publication, and there is also no money to publish them. They also complain about the fact that there is not enough support by the Ministry of Education, and now they are frustrated and don't try anymore to get support.

They especially need methodological support. Andriushkino is a very remote village, they said, and it is easily forgotten unless villagers raise their voices loudly. The village is extremely hard to reach; sometimes helicopters don't come for months. There is only one helicopter for a region of 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and it is often only used for urgent transportation of seriously ill people, or of officials. Another complaint is that teachers' wages are very low (in 2010 some 30,000 Roubles per month, approximately 750 Euro) as compared to the quantity of working hours.

The three-hour-long meeting held in Russian was so useful that I will now present some relevant parts of the script of this meeting that I recorded. As can be understood from the fragments below, three obligatory languages are learned in primary and secondary school: Russian as a first language, in which all other subjects including local knowledge are also taught, English as a second language, and a national language as a third language. The third language can be chosen by the pupils themselves, but in practice it is the parents who make the choice. Since Yakut is for them an obvious choice, as Yakut is the national language of the Sakha Republic, and in the future children will benefit most from Yakut, most children are sent to the Yakut group. But children learning in the Yukagir, Chukchi or Even group also learn Yakut, because that language is most frequently spoken among villagers and is the lingua franca of the area. In summertime, when many children live with their parents on the tundra in small settlements or in tents with the herders, the language commonly used is also Yakut. Note that in Andriushkino it is an every-day situation that people of different ethnic groups and language backgrounds come together and have to speak a language they all understand. All children know Russian quite well too, but despite a high degree of motivation their English is very poor, also in the higher classes.

The three teachers involved in the discussion were the late Anna Vyrdylina (linguist, qualified language teacher, classes 9–11; director of the school), Valentina Tokhtosova (non-qualified language teacher, classes 5–8), and Anastasia Kurilova (non-qualified language teacher, classes 1–4). The others attending were PhD student Mark Schmalz (working on TY morphology) and the author (language documentation, prosody, language teaching). The English translation is mine and names of speakers are abbreviated to their initials AV, VT, AK, MS and myself as CO. First the selected fragments are presented, followed by my comments.

AV: "We have no methodology. Of course we need exercises and tasks to go with the grammar."

VT: "I made a TY alphabet in poetry with pictures, but I cannot finance the publication. Can you help me to publish it?"

AV: "Here is a book in which I participated. I compiled texts by TY writers." AK: "You hide your materials from us!" AV: "Yes, of course I hide it from you. (...) These are stories from Kolyma Yukagir which I translated into Tundra Yukagir and I typed the texts myself. (...) Stories, texts and dictations, lots of texts, but we don't edit these

texts in a proper way. (...) I don't have the time. (...) Nothing is ready. We have to learn how to edit texts properly (...) in a methodologically correct way."

CO: "Do you have written exercises or tasks for the pupils that they can carry out themselves?" VT: "In the classroom I ask them, for example: find the verb in this sentence." CO: "So you improvise exercises during the lesson?" VT: "In the course of the lesson, yes." CO: "So you would need such materials in written form." AV: "Yes, of course. They read a text, analyse it, and do the exercises during the lesson." VT: "Before school I sit down to prepare the lesson, take the dictionary, translate the TY text into Russian, then think about what to tell the pupils, what meaning the story has, what exercises to do with them."

AV: "Of course nobody works on grammar. We tell the children what we know and have them learn it. (...) In this respect teaching is very difficult for us. Because our children don't know the language. And it will become even more complicated because fewer and fewer people master TY."

AV: "It is probably my fault, but I never have time. I should make a programme, because only I know all eleven classes."

VT: "I understand Yukagir, but I haven't fully mastered the language. I only teach children. It is only my third year. Therefore it is sometimes very difficult for me. Then I go to Anna Gavrilovna who helps me. She plans the lesson, how to run the lesson. Each word, everything she writes down for me. Then I learn it all by heart, go to school and teach how it was written down."

AV: "This is of course the biggest problem. They all have to address me for help. On the other hand, that is not convenient for them. And not for me, because I have a programme, I have it all ready." CO: "In your head?" AV: "In my head, yes, my whole life I have it all, but I did not register it in written form, well, in a scientific way, how would you call it. Well, for example, I will not always teach. They, the young ones, will stay. I am always afraid: who will do all this after me? I am afraid, all the time, it scares me." VT: "That's why I say: everything must be published so that it will be left behind for us." AV: "During my whole life many linguistic expeditions came here, they collected materials. Many times they collected materials at a time when I didn't understand that there is a need to do so. If these materials had been in written form, or phonetically, uh, in a phono-library, then maybe it would be easier. Even I forget some words. I forget them, I don't remember everything, then I have to ask someone. But who?" VT: "Publish everything, so that it is kept." AV: "Nowadays many people work on course books for other subjects. There are so many authors for other subjects, aren't there? We don't have that. In the whole world there are standardised course books, methods. Well, that is exactly what we need."

AV: "There are many minority peoples in the world. Each people has something interesting. Well, such interesting aspects should somehow be taken together, so that each people learns something about the others, if only a little bit. That would be interesting. On the other hand, text materials about modern life are also necessary." (...) "I

am happy that we teach conversational speech. But conversational language does not exist without writing. You say a word and it flies away. It's another thing if you have seen its written form or a picture."

AV: "I would like, for example, to have a kind of scientific model and a programme and course books, in the first place for the primary classes. (...) The teaching materials must be interesting, nice, very attractive, in such a way that they learn something new and recognise themselves. (...) We are an experimental school and that requires a good methodologist in all respects, because we must make programmes, produce materials, we must finish our work, but where are we going to do this in this constant rush? That's the problem." (...) CO: "I don't think that text materials is the problem, but how to structure them, so that they become a real course book with exercises and tasks, especially for the first classes." AV: "Exactly. Starting with the first classes, because everything depends on them."

VT: "We have to wake people up. Because a complete degeneration is going on. People somehow go down, down, down and don't want anything. (...) In hospital on the cards you can see that every second newborn is a Yukagir. But they learn Even or Yakut." AV: "That is because of the mixed marriages. If it is lucrative for them, they are Yukagirs. If not lucrative, they are not. It is lucrative where they get certain things for free, like medicine." VT: "Come on, Yukagirs, send your children to the Yukagir group. They say: No, the Yukagir group is so complicated, the child will not be able (to learn the language, C.O.), because it is difficult to pronounce, words are very long." AK: "But in the pharmacy they get their medicine for free." VT: "We must work on the parents. My mother didn't tell that she is Yukagir, my father is Yakut, but my mother is Yukagir. However, she didn't say: Daddy is Yakut so send her to the Yakut group. (...) Let the children learn Yukagir because it is disappearing!" AK: "In the first class half of the children are Yukagir but I have only one pupil (in my Yukagir group, C.O.). Everything should happen in kindergarten and when they come to the first class..."

AV: "Russian is obligatory in all public schools. Yakut is the state language. Our Russian children learn Yakut. We consider English (the second obligatory language, C.O.) necessary as international language." VT: "We are a national school." AV: "Whatever nationality the pupil has, that language he studies. (...) As a national village, languages are studied according to the nationality you have."

MS: "Children choose the language (as a third language, C.O.) they want." VT: "What the parents want, to that group they go." CO: "A third language is obligatory, but which one they choose themselves." AK: "They choose themselves."

The remarks and complaints about teaching materials sound alarming, especially since the death of Anna Vyrdylina. Though there was, according to her, no structure in her materials, they could still be used as a basis to develop a language course, but we don't know where they have gone. All her belongings have been taken away from the school by her family. Particularly alarming is the role of the TY parents, who do not

send their children to the TY groups. Very often a TY parent is married to a speaker of another minority language, and so at home they speak mainly Yakut. Yakut is considered the best choice for children with respect to their future education, profession and career. In this respect the strength of the influence of Yakut nationalism should not be disregarded. Language ability, both in Yakut and Russian, gives you even better chances. In the Andriushkino setting this is very understandable given the increasing unemployment in the area. Even if both parents belong to the TY community, they do not know why their children should learn their native language. It is thus highly recommended that parents of newborns learn what it means for their children to learn the native language, and why as early as kindergarten they should send their children to the respective language group. In this group they should not learn only isolated words as is the situation now. Special emphasis should be placed on culture, traditions, nomadic life and nature in the environment of the child, using a methodology that is attractive to them. For example, learning to pronounce words, certainly not difficult at a young age, can be done by repeating words from a recording referring to traditional TY nomadic life with audio-visual illustrations. But, as said earlier (p. 93ff.), it should also be made clear to children that the TY language is a modern language in which modern life as well as traditional life can be expressed. I would also suggest teaching local knowledge in the local languages, not only in Russian as is now done.

In the 2009 situation, not all teachers were equally fluent in their native language, and some had no full education in language teaching and were not well enough equipped for their task, but they all were very motivated. In the 2011 situation things had changed for the worse, because now there was no TY teacher who was fully educated and fluent in all skills.

### **Teaching and learning TY: is there a future?**

Given the disappointing data presented above on TY teaching and learning, it would seem that if parents do not send their children to the TY language group, the TY language will soon disappear as a native language in school and hence in daily-life communication. However, there are examples of minority languages in the Siberian northeast that have enough courseware, but that are not spoken anymore, not even by the older generation. Such an example is Itelmen (Kasten 2008). In the context of TY, today there are only some families left who use their native language in daily communication. The number of TY reindeer herders who live their nomadic life on the tundra is decreasing rapidly. Only three herds are left. Next to the nomads there are some settlements where TY families live. A particularly striking and unique example is the TY Kurilov family with members living on the tundra and in the village, where four generations speak only the native language among themselves, the youngest, Alayii (see *Illustration 14*), being five years old in 2012. Unfortunately, in 2011 she



moved to the village and lives with her grandparents. Her grandmother is an Even who understands but does not speak TY. With her grandfather and mother Alayii used to speak TY, but since 2011 she has been speaking Yakut with her friends and grandmother. Since 2011 she has been going to the kindergarten and her grandparents will send Alayii to the TY group in kindergarten where she has the great advantage of understanding TY and knowing nomadic life, but the disadvantage is that the language lessons, in the way they are given, as I pointed out above, will not be much use to her. It only helps her not to forget words that other TY children may not know at all. I met Alayii in March 2012 and

[14] Alayii in front of her tundra dwelling

[15] School children in Andriushkino



noticed that she understands TY but does not speak it anymore. Her mother, fluent in TY, lives with the herders on the tundra, where little Alyaii seems to be happy too, as I witnessed during my last field trip.

Extra school activities like excursions with a TY would motivate both teachers and pupils. These could take the form of, for example, trips to the Kurilov settlement to spend a traditional day with the family, while only speaking TY, and engaging the students in activities like making a ritual fire, feeding it with tea and food while improvising words that ban evil spirits, cooking a meal, making traditional clothes and decorations, going fishing, etc. The teacher could prepare such a day before setting off to the Kurilov settlement.

Every young TY child in the village has his or her own unique cultural and linguistic background which makes it complicated to develop a language education programme for all TY children. Differentiated instruction in the TY language classroom would be the ideal solution, but in the given situation, as described in the previous sections, is impossible to realise: lack of sufficient qualified teachers, no methodology for language teaching and learning, no appropriate courseware.

The minimal requirement for safeguarding the TY language for future generations would be a specific curriculum development for the Andriushkino situation. It would include, for example, the planning and development of an effective language education programme, organising teacher training courses, writing a learner's grammar and dictionary, developing exercises and tests to add to the existing collection of textbooks and sound recordings. However, developing such a curriculum is unrealistic. As Anna Vyrdylina clearly pointed out during our meeting in 2009: "We are an experimental school and that requires a good methodologist in all respects, because we must make programmes, produce materials, we must finish our work, but where are we going to do this in this constant rush? That's the problem."

Our research project 'Tundra Yukagir' (<http://www.tundrayukagir.info>) is limited in time (2009–2013). We cannot meet all the urgent needs of the Andriushkino school staff and supply the language teachers with a specialised methodologist. That is the task of the Sakha Ministry of Education and the local authorities in the district, but so far no methodologist has been willing to work in the village and, moreover, there has been no financial support. What we can do is provide teachers with instructions on developing course materials (exercises and tests) for the collection of texts and sound recordings, as well as with our continuing moral support. Informing the authorities and making publications for a broad audience about the situation in Andriushkino would also be desirable.

Very encouraging is the new initiative in March 2012 by TY Vasilii Tre'tiakov to create a TY community in Chersky with official statutes, which gives him the possibility to apply for grants. This community of which Vasilii is the chairman now has a board with a secretary and a treasurer. All TY people who accept the statutes can become members, for which they pay a yearly fee of 600 Roubles (15 euro). Vasilii already

started a 'Sunday school' in Chersky where TY children learn their native language. So far such a possibility did not exist in Chersky. Unfortunately, as in Andriushkino, the TY teachers suffer from a lack of courseware.

Finally, a main and first requirement for the safeguarding of Tundra Yukagir is informing the parents of the youngest TY children about what their children may win or lose in joining or not joining the TY language group: their native cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge, stories and legends, ecological knowledge. Moreover, they can be proud of their native language which has a unique status, being an isolated language not related to any other language group in the world. And it is language in which culture is expressed. Losing yet another language decreases the diversity in the world, languages and cultures become lookalikes, and non-natives and TY who don't master their language will be unable to access the TY language, history, culture and their vision of the world. That is the message that somehow must reach the TY children in a way they can understand.

## Notes

- 1 The present research is financially supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).
- 2 Parts of the first sections are taken from Odé's work in progress on the Tundra Yukagir language.
- 3 The only person capable of developing and constructing appropriate learning and teaching materials, Anna Gavrilovna Vyrdylina, to whom the present article is dedicated, died at the age of 68 in 2010. For years she was the director of the school in Andriushkino, the TY teacher for the advanced pupils and the 'walking TY encyclopedia' for the younger TY teachers. Her passing is a tragedy for the teaching of TY. In autumn 2009, together with the young teachers, we were just about to make an inventory of learning materials that exist in one form or another and a listing of materials that were most urgently needed. Developing such materials is part of the current TY project.
- 4 The essays by TY children have earlier been published in Russian in Odé (2011).

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