

Voices from Tundra and Taiga

Report >
Northeast Asia

Since the summer of 2002, the IAS hosts an internationally acknowledged and supported field of scientific research in Northern Asia: 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga, A Development Programme for Research on Endangered Languages in Northern Asia', coordinated by Dr Cecilia Odé. The aim is to build up a scientific collection of audiovisual recordings containing daily-life and folkloristic narratives and songs in the endangered languages of the peoples of Yakutia and Sakhalin. The recorded materials will be analysed by specialists in the fields of anthropology, ethnolinguistics, phonetics, and musicology. The collection will eventually be published on the Internet, on CD-ROM, and on DVD.

By Cecilia Odé

G. Vokzybina teaches her native language Nivkh in a school in Chir-Unvd, Sakhalin.



In the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, (1996) edited by Stephen Wurm, the map of Siberia shows the serious situation in that part

of the world in terms of language extinction. Nivkh and Yukaghir, for example, both under research, are seriously threatened with extinction and might disappear in the next generation. Selecting this part of Northern Asia as the proposed research area for the 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga' programme is highly motivated by the blank spots in the atlas mentioned.

The current 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga' project further develops the IAS programme with the same title that Dr T. de Graaf initiated in 2000 and is related to other projects running in Northern and Arctic Asia. At present coordinator Odé is working out the cooperation with local scholars in Northern Asia and preparing workshops on ethnolinguistic and phonetic fieldwork on location in order to attract young scholars in Sakhalin and Yakutia for the project. They will be educated and trained for fieldwork by specialists in St. Petersburg and elsewhere in the Russian Federation with financial



Nivkh women in traditional dresses made of fish skin with handmade embroidery.

support by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and Sakhalin Energy Investment Company Ltd., a daughter of Shell in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Sakhalin, Russia. Sakhalin Energy guarantees, at least for 2002/2003, part of the financial support of equipment, fieldwork, and local assistants, as well as a training programme for students and assistants in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, including the trainings elsewhere in Russia.

Preserving languages

Odé will also set up her own research: a description of prosodic features in the disappearing Nivkh and Oroch minority languages on Sakhalin and in the Primorskij and Khabarovskij areas, and the Yukaghir and Tungus languages in Northeastern Siberia. Linguists in the Russian Federation and in various other countries are working on descriptions of the languages of Siberia as a geographical unit. A unique chance is offered to complete descriptions of the languages that are currently worked on by field-linguists in that area with a chapter on prosody. Prosody is defined as all supra-segmental phenomena that cannot be derived from the segmental structure of words, that is, from linear sequences of vowels and consonants. Prosody then includes word prosody such as tone and word stress, sentence prosody such as pitch variations in the course of an utterance, accentuation (which word is highlighted?), boundary marking (which words belong together?), and temporal organization (variations in syllable duration, pauses, rhythm, and tempo). All these phenomena, together with lexical, morphological, and syntactic aspects and other non-prosodic phenomena like gestures, facial expressions, and situation are linguistically relevant and contribute to the overall understanding of spoken messages in the interaction between speaker and hearer.

Spontaneous and prepared texts that are valuable for phonetic as well as for (ethno)linguistic analysis will be selected from existing recordings and will also be collected and audiovisually recorded in the field on digital tape. In preliminary linguistic descriptions that are available for the languages mentioned, prosody has not been tackled. The problem is that prosody can only be studied after the main features of phonology, morphology, and syntax of a given language have become available. The study of prosody thus comes

last and is usually neglected. As language material, field-linguists often use examples from the oral tradition. However, prosodic phenomena that are present in this material, and that are characteristic of the art of storytelling, such as speech tempo variations, and the intermediate speech between spoken and sung parts of tales, are not reflected in transcribed texts.

The result of the research, viz. the collection of recorded materials with analyses, will become available on CD-ROM, DVD, and via the Internet for further analysis to specialists in phonetics, linguistics, anthropology, history, ethno-musicology, and folklore. The materials are also important for the development of teaching methods for representatives of the related ethnic groups and the conservation of their language and culture. A good example in this respect is the revitalization of the Nivkh language on Sakhalin. While linguists E. Gruzdeva (Finland/Russia) and Hidetoshi Shiraishi (Japan/the Netherlands) are working on a scientific description of this language, members of the Nivkh community – who were forbidden to speak their language under Stalin – are now developing teaching materials for schoolchildren, publishing a newspaper in their mother tongue, reviving their traditional way of life (e.g. objects of birch bark and fish skin, clothing, and fishing), and organizing festivals in which they perform music, dance, and poetry. <

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The 'Voices from Tundra and Taiga' research project, financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) Russian-Dutch Research Cooperation, started in March 2002 under the supervision of Dr T. de Graaf (Groningen University, www.let.rug.nl/~degraaf). In a research group, young scientists are working on endangered languages of Northern and Northeastern Asia. While the project has counterparts in Sakhalin and Yakutia, it is also closely related to the NWO programme 'Endangered Languages', which includes the endangered languages of Northern Asia, and to the 'Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim' (www.elpr.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp) at the Osaka Gakuin University in Japan.