

The use of historical data and fieldwork for the study of ethnic groups in Eurasia

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1. Introduction

In this conference contribution we consider several projects for the study of endangered languages and cultures in Eurasia, which have been undertaken by research groups in the Netherlands, Germany, Russia and Japan. The Witsen project is a Dutch initiative to publish the historical data contained in the book *Noord en Oost Tartarije (North and East Tartary)* by Nicolaas Witsen. Historical data can also be found in sound archives and we have reconstructed a number of recordings from these archives and made them available to the scientific world and to the (often endangered) languages communities, from where they originate. Finally, some projects of the Foundation for Siberian Cultures will be illustrated.

2. The Witsen Project

The Witsen Project is aimed at an investigation of the minor peoples of Eurasia, their history, culture, language and way of life. It gets its inspiration from the book *Noord en Oost Tartarije* by the Amsterdam mayor Nicolaas Witsen who traveled to Russia in 1664/65 and collected data on the physical appearance of the country, its fauna and flora and, in particular, on the peoples of Siberia and the Far east (Witsen 1705). In his book Witsen gives for instance the first list of words in the Yakut language and in other Siberian languages, which provides interesting information for scholars in Russia (De Graaf 1996). In 2010, a Russian translation of the book has been published and has been provided to many libraries in the Russian Federation. This makes it possible for scholars in this country to study the historical details in the book. The language material consists of word lists, short texts, specific writing systems and other data, which might be interesting for the scientific world. In 2015, a digital version of the book has been published together with the Russian translation and various related articles:
<http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/witsen/>.

As a follow-up of this work a team of scholars in the Netherlands is preparing a separate volume devoted to the study of all language samples in Witsen's *North and East Tartary*. In this collection of essays earlier publications on these data will be summarized or re-printed and reviewed. We will also present a substantial number of new contributions by scholars who are familiar with the related languages. The following languages are represented in the book, some of them with long word lists and text samples, others with only a few of the language's graphemes: Georgian, Kabard-Cherkes, Ossete, Crimean-Tatar, Kalmyk, Mordva, Mari (Cheremis), Komi-Zyryan, Mansi (Vogul), Khanty (Ostyak), Nenets, Enets, Nganasan, Mongol, Dagur, Yakut (Sakha), Evenki (Tungus), Even (Lamut), Manchu, Yukagir, Korean, Chinese, Tangut, Persian and Uygur.

The main text of the book with about 600 pages will be in English, but articles in other languages with summaries in English are also allowed. The project started in January 2014 and was planned for a period of two years. Before the book will be published in the series Pegasus Oost-Europese Studies, we shall prepare a digital version which later can become available on the Internet.

We requested the co-operation by specialists in the languages of NOT who have written their comments on the linguistic materials in NOT and earlier articles, indicating the relation to

other historical data, the development of the language, its present status and further relevant topics. The publication of this book is expected in 2017.

3. Sound archives and fieldwork

Historical data come not only in written form: since the end of the 19th century there have also been sound and video recordings presenting data on languages and cultures from earlier times. Since 1992 we have completed a number of research projects in St.Petersburg concerning the recordings of Russian dialects and minority languages in the Russian Federation (De Graaf and Denisov 2010). One of our aims has been to use these recordings for the construction of a phonetic database of the languages of Russia, which has many scientific, cultural and technical applications. Within the framework of the research programme *Voices from Tundra and Taiga* we combined the data from old sound recordings with the results of modern fieldwork in order to give a full description of the languages and cultures of ethnic groups in Russia. Our work on the reconstruction technology for old sound recordings found in archives in St.Petersburg has made it possible to compare languages still spoken in the proposed research area with the same languages as they were used more than half a century ago. The sound recordings in the St.Petersburg archives consist of spoken language, folk songs, fairy tales etc., among others in Siberian languages (Burykin et al 2005, De Graaf and Shiraishi 2004, Denisov et al 2009).

These research projects and the related documentation are carried out in close cooperation with scholars in local centres such as the Regional Ethnological Museum of Sakhalin, where in 1990 our first international ethnolinguistic expedition took place (De Graaf 1993). Since then, specialists from St. Petersburg and the Netherlands visit the island, setting up new centres for the study and teaching of local languages and related subjects. For this purpose we organised a special seminar for Nivkh teachers in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in October 2003.

Spontaneous speech and the reading of prepared texts is collected for ethno-linguistic as well as for anthropological, folkloristic and ethno-musicological analysis. These data are video-recorded and analysed; they illustrate the art of story telling and language use. The above-described texts will be published in scientific journals and books with audiovisual illustrations on CD-ROM and/or on the internet. The materials are thus available for further analysis to scholars working in the field of phonetics, linguistics, anthropology, history, ethno-musicology and folklore (De Graaf and Denisov 2010, 2015).

The Japanese scholar Hidetoshi Shiraishi and his Nivkh colleague Galina Lok published a series of books with Nivkh stories, songs and conversations; the corresponding audio-recordings are made available on CD and on the internet. The series, *Sound Materials of the Nivkh Language I-VII* (Shiraishi and Lok 2002 - 2010), appeared as a result of the Japanese programme on *Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim* (ELPR), supported by the Japanese Ministry of Education and the Sapporo Gakuin University, and the research programme *Voices from Tundra and Taiga* supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research NWO. This unique material is not only used by linguists, but also by the language community itself, where it can be applied to teaching purposes. Using data from this series, Hidetoshi Shiraishi wrote a dissertation with the title *Topics in Nivkh Phonology*, which he defended at Groningen University in 2006 (Shiraishi 2006/2010).

4. Foundation for Siberian Cultures

In 2010 the Foundation for Siberian Cultures has been established (www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de). The idea for this foundation emerged from many years of research related to the Peoples of Siberia and from initiatives for the preservation of their cultures. Until recently the focus has been on the Russian Far East (Kamchatka and Sakhalin). Beyond the preservation and further enhancement of art and craft traditions of indigenous peoples, some of the main

aims of the foundation are the preservation of indigenous languages and the knowledge (especially ecological knowledge) expressed in them. Furthermore, exhibitions, cultural exchanges by means of tours of artists and workshops, as well as conferences in Germany and Russia serve to enhance mutual understanding among peoples with different cultural backgrounds and encourage valuable and productive dialogues between them.

A digital library and ethnographic collections on the world wide web provide above all indigenous communities open access to relevant scholarly resources and research materials. Recent or current projects are presented at regular programs on the web in the form of alternating photo-video shows. This provides a forum through which indigenous communities can participate and are informed about how their traditions are presented and received abroad.

On the website of the Foundation for Siberian Cultures (www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de) one can find more details, characterized by the following topics:

- Endangered Languages and Traditional Knowledge (De Graaf and Kasten 2013).
- Indigenous Worldviews, Mythologies and Landscapes, and their Significance for Cross-cultural Dialogue in the Arts.
- Historical Sources and their Contribution to Modern Discourse.
- DVD Learning Tools for the Preservation of the Languages and Cultures of the Itelmens, Evens and Koryaks.
- Publications.

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July 2016: Landscapes of Kamchatka in the Form of Images and Sounds.

April 2016: Tundra Yukaghir

February 2016: Math in Cultural Context.

August 2015: The Itelmen, an indigenous People on Kamchatka.

January 2014: Forest Nenets and Eastern Khanty of Western Siberia.

January 2012: Learning tools: DVD "Traditional knowledge in the world of Koryak fishing".

October 2011 and January 2012: Seminar: "Endangered languages and local knowledge"

July 2011: Learning tools: "Itelmen language and culture".

January 2011: Learning tools: DVD "Traditional knowledge of Koryak Reindeer Herders".

October 2010: Exhibition: "250 years of German-Russian research on the nature of Kamchatka and the cultures of its indigenous peoples".

February 2010: Exhibition: "Shamans of Siberia".

At present, a comprehensive program is in preparation on "Vanishing Voices from Northern Eurasia", that will build on and expand the previous activities on the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures in Kamchatka, Sakhalin and other regions. This program is related to a general initiative by the Foundation for Endangered Languages (www.ogmios.org) to create Regional Interest Groups for specific areas in the world, where languages and cultures of the local minority peoples are studied.

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Short biography:

Since 1990, Tjeerd de Graaf, associate professor of Phonetics at Groningen University until 2003, has specialized in the phonetic aspects of Ethnolinguistics. In 1990, he made his first fieldwork trip with a Japanese expedition to the minority peoples of Sakhalin. Since then, he has contributed to various research projects on endangered languages and the use of sound archives related to ethnic minorities in Russia. This takes place in cooperation with colleagues in the Russian Federation and Japan. Most of these projects were financially supported by special grants from the European Union and the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research NWO. In 1998, Tjeerd de Graaf received a Doctorate Honoris Causa from the University of St. Petersburg for his work in the field of ethnolinguistics. Since 2002, he has been a board member of the Foundation for Endangered Languages (Great Britain) and a research fellow at the Mercator Centre of the Frisian Academy, which co-ordinates research on European minorities - in particular the language, history and culture of Frisian, one of the lesser used languages of Europe. In the first half of 2003, he spent a semester as visiting professor at the University of St. Petersburg. In 2004 and 2005, Tjeerd de Graaf worked as guest researcher at the Slavic Research Center of Hokkaido University (Japan). Since 2006 some of his projects have been financially supported by the Endangered Archives Programme at the British Library.

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