

Strategies and learning tools for sustaining indigenous languages: the work of the Mercator Centre and the Foundation for Siberian Cultures

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Introduction

In this paper we consider the work of two organisations which are involved in the study of multilingualism and linguistic diversity: the Mercator Centre in the Netherlands and the Foundation for Siberian Cultures in Germany. Both institutions are involved in activities related to the education of minority languages, preservation of endangered languages, languages in education and intercultural communication and - in particular - the use of information technology (Cyberspace). The experience obtained during these activities can be applied to situations in other parts of the world, in particular the Russian Federation.

The Mercator European Research Centre

The Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning (<http://www.mercator-research.eu>) is an important institution within the Fryske Akademy, the research institute in the Netherlands with an academic focus on the regional Frisian minority in the Netherlands, its history, language and culture (De Graaf 2016). Mercator addresses the growing interest in multilingualism and the increasing need of language communities to exchange experiences and to cooperate in a European context. It gathers and mobilises expertise in the field of language learning at school, at home and through cultural participation. The Centre aims to be an independent and recognised organisation for researchers, policymakers, and professionals in the field of education and language learning and it endeavours to favour linguistic diversity within Europe.

In Europe there is a growing awareness of the value of linguistic diversity and the need to learn languages. The objective is that all Europeans learn to speak at least two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. This not only refers to some of the major languages of Europe, such as English, French, German, or Spanish, but also to smaller state languages, immigrant languages, regional and minority and sign languages. All these languages together create the linguistic diversity of Europe. This characteristic diversity, however, needs to be protected and promoted at all levels.

The work of the Mercator Research Centre creates a clear need for up-to-date information and research. It tries to meet this need by participating in and developing a multitude of activities ranging from carrying out research projects and making inventories of existing research, to conducting comparative studies and providing language dossiers, search engines and articles on regional and minority languages, immigrant and smaller state languages as well as sign languages. The work of Mercator can also be applied in other parts of the world. As an example we mention the appearance of a special dossier on the teaching of Nenets, Khanty and Selkup in the Yamal Region of the Russian Federation, for which also a Russian edition was launched in 2017.

The series of **Regional Dossiers** meets the growing need for basic information on education in minority language settings. These dossiers present an up-to-date description of the position of minority languages at all levels in the educational system of a state. They are written by experts according to a fixed structure and can be used for comparative research. Each dossier is updated once every ten years and more than fifty languages of EU member states have been covered. In the years to come the series will be extended with the coverage of other languages: smaller EU state languages, minority languages of Council of Europe member states outside the EU and beyond. The whole series of regional dossiers is online available at the website of the Mercator Research Centre.

The Mercator Centre has an intensive co-operation with the **Department of Frisian Language and Culture at the University of Groningen**. For many years the Frisian language has been taught and studied at this university. At present, Frisian studies are embedded in international, comparative research towards minorities and multilingualism. A cross-disciplinary approach enables the Department to offer bachelor and master programmes and to host a research group with a broader focus on ethnolinguistic minorities and multilingualism. The Frisian specialisation track within the Bachelor programme provides the student with a robust knowledge of Frisian Language & Culture. It is composed in such a way that Friesland and the Frisian language function as a specific example of the general story of minorities and multilingualism. The Frisian track offers the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge on a European minority, to improve language proficiency in a minority language, and to develop comparative research skills. As an important application for the use of Cyberspace the Department developed special computer courses for learning the second official language of the Netherlands (www.futurelearn.com/courses/frisian) and getting familiar with multilingual practices (www.futurelearn.com/courses/multilingual-practices)

The **Network of Schools** consists of about 100 schools in 20 European regions where a regional or minority language is taught. The goal of the Network of Schools is to create a platform for bilingual and multilingual schools in minority regions in order to facilitate the exchange of information and experiences. These schools actively teach and use the minority or regional language, aside from the state language in the curriculum and they often teach English as a third language. Mercator is setting up a European Network of Teacher Training Institutes, which are training future teachers for bilingual and multilingual education. This Network uses Cyberspace in order to build a platform for the exchange of information and experiences. It also functions as the instrument to the further development of common projects in terms of language transmission, adequate levels of language command, didactics and testing. In the Russian Federation the Cheboksary municipal school with minority language Chuvash is a member of this network.

The **Mercator European Network of Language Diversity Centres** connects multilingual communities across Europe, promoting knowledge sharing and facilitating structured exchange of best practice and cutting edge initiatives through its programme of activities. Focus lies on multilingual regions dealing with regional or minority languages, but also immigrant languages and smaller state languages, with emphasis on language needs arising from migration and globalisation. The specific topics chosen are: the use of media and information technology, legal provisions with respect to minority language learning, and developments in language teaching and learning. Communication among policy-makers, language planning professionals and those involved in language transfer and teaching will take place in face-to-face meetings at annual conferences and workshops as well as through publications and in on-line activities. In addition, the Mercator Network aims to be a

reference point for these target groups as well as for academics and students by providing accurate and reliable information, which can inform policy development at all levels of government and administration.

For all Mercator projects, Friesland is used as a living example of a bilingual laboratory. Within the Fryske Akademy, the Mercator Research Centre also takes the lead in researching the **influence of new media on the use of minority languages**. The research focuses on the influence of social media on language use. Firstly, the research analyses the language use of Frisian adolescents on social media. A study of 6,000 tweets of fifty persons in this age group has been finished. On a regular day, 13% of the tweets are in Frisian compared to 65% in Dutch. To validate these results and to get insight into language use in different contexts, demographic background data and other variables, the research continues with a large scale online questionnaire (Jongbloed et al. 2016)

The Foundation for Siberian Cultures

The Foundation for Siberian Cultures (www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de) is dedicated to maintaining cultural diversity in Siberia and the Russian Far East. The idea for the Foundation, established in 2010, emerged from many years of research among the peoples of the North and from initiatives focusing on the sustainment preservation of their cultures. Aims of the Foundation are: Sustaining the indigenous languages of the North, along with the traditional knowledge expressed in them; and preservation and further enhancement of the art and craft traditions of Northern indigenous peoples.

Learning tools by and for indigenous communities may help to counteract the forces bringing about the loss of cultural diversity and the dissolution of local and ethnic identities. The Foundation for Siberian Cultures produces a variety of materials in collaboration with indigenous experts. They include documentations of the endangered languages and traditional knowledge of the peoples of Siberia and the Russian Far East. For this purpose more and more use is made of the facilities provided by Cyberspace.

Exhibitions, cultural exchanges by means of tours of artists and workshops, as well as conferences in Western Europe and Russia serve to enhance mutual understanding between peoples with different cultural backgrounds and encourage valuable and productive dialogues between them. In seminars, international scholars discuss in comparative perspective specific issues pertaining to the cultures of the peoples of Siberia. This allows indigenous traditions and experiences from many parts of the world to be used in launching initiatives and in designing learning tools that help to maintain cultural diversity. The Foundation for Siberian Cultures also hosts researchers from Russia with whom scholars in Germany and the Netherlands have been developing ethnological materials. The results of these seminars are made available through online or print editions.

Publications by the **Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien | SEC Publications** and former works are distributed both in print and in electronic form in order to provide scholars and in particular indigenous communities in Siberia easy and free access to these materials. There is a number of series such as new editions and the digitization of older sources, monographs on Social and Cultural Anthropology, ethnographic documentaries on DVD, and edited volumes on exhibitions and symposia.

From the entire publishing programme, the series **Languages and Cultures of the Russian Far East** is of particular interest. The electronic and print editions of texts in indigenous languages with Russian translations, along with their supplementary DVDs, are especially designed even for individual extracurricular use at home. English translations aim to stimulate interest not only in Russia itself, but also beyond, among other peoples of the North. Some texts are presented in linguistic transcription as well, and serve as a source for international research in this field. Recordings of dialects, often by some of the last speakers when they were still alive, document the languages of these peoples. Among the recorded themes are: life histories; tales; dances and songs; rituals and worldviews; arts and crafts; and ecological knowledge relating to sustainable resource use.

These publications intend to motivate in particular the young to learn more about the language and traditional knowledge of their elders and ancestors. Accordingly, these materials have proved useful as learning tools in school classes and at community events. The presentation of the texts in the regional minority language and in Russian on facing pages rather than in interlinear form corresponds more to the common standard of polyglot literature editions than to common linguistic conventions. When reading the Russian text on the right side, these readers might become interested to learn more about a particular expression in the original regional minority language. While moving from time to time to the corresponding lines on the left page, more interest can be generated, not only recalling single words, but also full phrases in their language. Therefore, in the given form the texts fulfil the practical purposes of sustaining indigenous language and knowledge. In order to make the texts available to readers from other parts of the world, the books also contain English translations. Latinized transcriptions with interlinear glosses facilitate linguistic analysis of the texts and are available on the Internet for those with more academic interests.

The accompanying DVDs, which are recommended for all user groups as they contain full audio and video files, are also available on the Internet. By means of the video time count that corresponds to the lines in the book, particular phrases or sections can be listened to and viewed. This is certainly not only more informative, but also triggers additional interest among the youth, who can see and remember their grandparents and ancestors. Such visual materials, together with the spoken and translated texts, aroused particular interest during earlier presentations even in other northern indigenous communities outside Russia, where they encouraged useful cultural exchanges.

Here we consider the **Project on Itelmen language and Culture** on Kamchatka as a specific example of the more general situation which applies to many minorities in the Russian Federation. For the analysis and assessment of the meaning and role that the preservation of the Itelmen language can play nowadays, especially for the younger generation in the wider context of sustaining Itelmen culture, it was important to study and to participate in a variety of community driven projects that took place after perestroika in the spirit of the Itelmen cultural revitalization movement at that time (www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de/vir_37_E.html)

Fragments of Itelmen speech are preserved in greetings and some general chatting, although code switching sets in as soon as terminology becomes more specific, in which case people use Russian more comfortably. One of the domains in which people were most motivated to keep up the language and where the use of Itelmen (or fragments of it) has been encouraged are ceremonial settings and traditional feasts, i.e. activities and occasions that centre on the expression or celebration of Itelmen ethnic identity, where the native language is a central element. Furthermore, performing arts such as traditional Itelmen songs and dances, with their

respective staged performances, appear to be a domain of continued use of the Itelmen language.

Itelmen cultural revival activities have centred on the Alkhalalalai festival that has been held every fall in Kovran since the late 1980s. A DVD on that festival, recorded in 2001 and published in a new edition by the Foundation for Siberian Cultures in 2015 [Kasten 2015b], highlights various episodes, in which the Itelmen language is used at times of certain rituals, as well as during song contests when traditional Itelmen songs were presented by young singers.

It is remarkable how local speech variants of Itelmen and other indigenous languages could live on until now, side by side with the formal teaching of these languages in school. Elders still occasionally used their local vernacular (although with strong diglossia) at home in the mid-1990s – whereas they had not become confused by Itelmen language standards that were encouraged in school time. Experience from the Itelmen project and more recent similar project work on Koryak and Even language preservation have shown that the DVD format in combination with print editions, and respective online editions for free download in the Internet, provide at the moment a good base for useful learning tools sustaining indigenous language and culture. In the coming years, the DVD format will be replaced by computerized databases, where the film and language data will be hosted for open access on the Internet. But for the time being, for indigenous communities in the Russian Far East – the primary target group of these learning tools – Internet access is still limited and often too costly. Therefore, print and online editions of the text in a package with supplementary DVDs is still the more practical option for this region.

Creating new learning tools that on the one hand contain local or situation-specific language variants and on the other hand remain compatible with already established standards for grammar and orthography that have been in use for over 20 years was one of the main challenges faced in the Itelmen project. Such discrepancies between standardized ‘school book’ language and ‘originally spoken’ language became even more evident in later projects for sustaining Even and Koryak languages.

Learning Itelmen first at school and using the same methodology as used for learning ‘foreign’ languages (such as English) seems to be not so effective: among other elements, it requires particular justification to the question of motivation: ‘what for?’ – especially when other options such as English classes provide young Itelmen with the prospect of better professional career opportunities, and the possibility to manage their local resources later more independently. Unless specific native language pedagogy along with a philosophy and viable approach that indicates the importance of preserving the language is used, the motivation of students is usually low. In the Itelmen context, the coupling of cultural knowledge with language acquisition in textbooks was one way in which the project team attempted to counter this effect.

In short, indigenous language learning tools require a specific methodology together with accompanying efforts beyond the regular school curriculum – a combination that had been neglected in the past. The Foundation’s director, Erich Kasten has, in collaboration with community experts, tested various options in Kamchatka during the past 15 years. This was discussed with other scholars of similar projects at a symposium at the Foundation for Siberian Cultures in winter 2011/2012 and published in an edited volume [Kasten and De Graaf 2013] and on DVD [Kasten and Dürr 2015a].

The Foundation for Siberian Cultures is not only concerned about discussing in a comparative way approaches and methodologies for sustaining indigenous languages and knowledge. Furthermore, relevant linguistic data are viewed in a broader ethnological perspective within the framework of other projects mentioned above. The way the data is presented offers opportunities to develop particular linguistic agendas [Kasten 2017]. From a sociocultural perspective, the Foundation for Siberian Cultures will follow up also other questions, for example, how social values that are reflected in special stories have been varying in diachronic view, i.e. at different times of their recording. Of great interest is the expression of significant cultural motifs in indigenous languages and in family songs or in combination with fine arts. A future special research focus will be on traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable resource use, for which the more detailed vocabulary in our recordings in the given indigenous languages will be particularly informative.

The project on Itelmen Language and Culture is given as one of the positive experience reports in the **UNESCO Register of Good Practices in Language Preservations** (UNESCO 2005). This Register was launched in 2005 in order to provide a useful source of information for the safeguarding of languages in danger of extinction. In accordance with UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in the past the Endangered Language Programme has supported the preservation of linguistic diversity and provided assistance to language safeguarding efforts across the globe. For the present new initiatives by UNESCO to create a **World Atlas of Languages** the examples described in this article may also play a role.

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