Assessing multilingualism of the past: the case of Siberia

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This study aims to develop and test a method for reconstructing patterns of small-scale multilingualism pertaining to the recent past, using an example of Siberia.

Today about 50 indigenous languages are spoken in Siberia, but most of them are extremely endangered, with this number always diminishing. Most of these languages are used by the older generation only, count no more than dozens or hundreds of speakers, and Russian is an omnipresent lingua franca between representatives of neighboring ethnic communities, even the oldest ones. However, for some areas local language ecologies are reported to have differed tremendously 50-60 years ago, even more so 80-100 years ago (e.g. various papers on Siberia in Wurm et al. 1996, and more recently, Khanina et al. 2018, Khanina & Koryakov 2018 for the Lower Yenisei area, Pupynina & Koryakov 2018 for the Lower Kolyma area). For even more areas of Siberia, no descriptions of former patterns of multilingualism are available, so our research question is how one can look back in time and get an estimate of the former patterns in this part of the world.

To answer this question, we have performed the following study. First, we have used data from the last all-Russian census (2010) to create a database reflecting modern geographic distribution of Siberian indigenous ethnic groups. Second, we have extrapolated the modern distribution of ethnic groups as representing a distribution of corresponding language communities before their language shift to Russian. Thus, if several ethnic groups are represented in the census as living in the same village, we have inferred the area surrounding this village as having been multilingual in the languages of these ethnic groups. Third, we have mapped the extrapolated multilingual areas of Siberia. Next, we have to check how reliable this extrapolation is. For this purpose, we have used two types of data, both related to Northern Siberia only: (1) the detailed Polar census conducted in 1926, (2) expert reports on multilingual patterns in the middle of the 20th century analyzed for several circumpolar areas within the project on Circumpolar language contact (http://circumpolar.iling-ran.ru). Based on this, we have mapped Arctic multilingual areas that really existed in the 1920s – 1950s. Finally, we have compared for Northern Siberia the linguistic maps based on the extrapolation of the ethnic groups of 2010 with the linguistic maps based on reliable sociolinguistic data pertaining to the middle of the 20th century.

Overall, the match seems to be satisfactory, and the discrepancies have actually turned out to be interesting cases for a more detailed sociolinguistic analysis. E.g. villages of Ust'-Avam and Volochanka (Taymyr peninsula in Central Siberia) show up in the 2010 census as having two ethnic groups, the Nganasans and the Dolgans (we have chosen 10% as a threshold for counting an ethnic group as present at a certain location). However, the verification data convey three indigenous languages being spoken in the area in the middle of the 20th century: Nganasan, Dolgan, and Tundra Enets. The experts' accounts reveal that 'disappearance' of the latter as an ethnic group is connected to the prevailing language ideology in the area: someone's ethnicity is seen as intertwined with the main language of communication to the extent that opting for another language leads to a change in one's ethnicity. 'When those Tundra Enets became Nganasans…' says a respondent in a sociolinguistic interview from one of these villages, referring to the fact of a local migration of a group of Tundra Enets to the predominantly Nganasan lands and their subsequent language shift to Nganasan.

In the proposed paper, we will present the two sets of maps of multilingual areas of Siberia, the one extrapolated from the modern distribution of ethnic groups and the one based on real language data, and will discuss in details several cases of discrepancies between these sets. Language ideologies and recent language shifts will be shown to be the major source of mismatches in the hypothetical and real multilingual patterns. Besides, we will give our

estimate of the reliability of the proposed methodology for reconstruction of multilingual patterns of the past and prospects for its uses in other parts of the world.

References

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