

Reconstructing language contacts in the Amur-Sakhalin area

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The geographical focus of this paper is the territory that covers the Lower Amur valley and the Island of Sakhalin in the Far East of Russia. This area has been historically inhabited by several indigenous ethnic groups: the Tungusic-speaking Neghidal, Ulcha, Nanai (Gold), Oroch, Udeghe, Ewenki (Tungus) and Uilta (Orok) peoples, as well as by the Nivkh (Ghilyak) and the Ainu, both speaking isolate (Paleosiberian) languages. Nearly all of these groups — except for the nomadic Ewenki and Uilta — were sedentary fishermen and hunters. They shared similar social and cultural structures and had family and clan ties with each other. During various historical periods the Amur-Sakhalin region and its indigenous groups were under Manchurian, Mongolian, Japanese and Russian dominance.

Although it is obvious that the historical indigenous peoples communicated both with each other and with any newcomers to the area, little is known about the history and character of these contacts. Possible information on the topic can be found in research papers, memoirs of European and Japanese explorers, traditional legends and stories, as well as language biographies of the contemporary (heritage) speakers and their descendants.

The paper suggests that the Amur-Sakhalin region has involved several contact zones with various levels of multilingualism. This claim is addressed from various perspectives. *Historically*, the linguistic diversity of this area can be seen as a result of several ways of expansion and interaction of languages — an on-going process currently leading to the gradual loss of all local indigenous languages. The *political* perspective helps shed light on the hierarchy of peoples and languages and offers hypotheses concerning the time span and direction of contacts between them. The *social* perspective gives clues to understanding how the clan structure and marriage patterns led to intermarriage between different ethnic groups, which facilitated bilingualism within the family. The existence of areas with mixed population and presumably with active language contacts can be also explained from the *geographical* perspective. For instance, the mouth regions of the two biggest Sakhalin rivers Tym and Poronai, as well as the mouth of Amur, have always been attractive to various indigenous groups due to their convenient location and richness in bioresources. Finally, the *economic* perspective emphasizes the role of various economic activities, chiefly trading, in the developing and maintaining multilingualism along trading routes and especially near trading points. The paper pays a special attention to Santan trade — an extremely active trade network which in the 17th-19th centuries stretched from Japan to China via Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Amur. In the region around Lake Kiji, this trade was operated by the ancestors of the modern Ulcha, Nivkh and Oroch.