Koryak Ethnopoetics

Background
Koryak is severely endangered, and when one acknowledges the widespread variation hidden in the usual statistics of speakers of the 'language,' the need is even more urgent to document speech without children acquirers. The dialectal variations of Koryak are intertwined with Alutor. For many years, Soviet (Russian) linguists followed the dialectal breakdown provided by Stebnitskiy (2000:33) in the 1930s: Chavchuven (pop. 3,500), Alutor (1,900), Palana (750), Kamen (550), Karaga (300), Apuka (300), Paren (150), Itkana (100).

A ninth group, Kerek, was identified as a different language, nearly as distinct from Koryak as Koryak is from Chukchi. Zhukova (1968) argued that Alutor was a language separate from Koryak. Alutor is clearly more similar to Palana and Karaga than they are to Chavchuven (Chawchu), so those variants are classed as dialects of Alutor, although many linguists agree that it may be better to speak of a Nymylan language (autonym meaning 'villager') with Alutor, Karaga and Lesnaya/Palana as its three principal dialects. From Fortescue’s Chukotko-Kamchatkan Dictionary, one gets the impression that Koryak is the language of Chawchu reindeer herders living in the interior lands of the Penzhina River basin and northern Kamchatka along with dialects of the coastal villages of Apuka, Kamen, Paren, and Itkana. While the Chawchu Koryak is reasonably well documented through the publication of books, newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts, grammars, dictionaries and school textbooks, the variants of these four villages are very poorly documented.

Local terminology classes the people of these villages as “Nymylans” for they are culturally distinct from the nomadic reindeer herding Chawchu. The distinctiveness of their language from Chawchu is an open question requiring further documentation. They may be best classed as Koryak, or with Alutor, or perhaps separated as yet another language “Penzhina Nymylan.” The language of Chawchu herders is not the same everywhere. The villages of Middle Pakhachi and Achavayam in the northeast are famous for their conservative ethos and their ethnic identity as Chukchi. It is clear these two villages speak a variant of Chawchu Koryak and not Chukchi.

The sociolinguistic reality of Chawchu is that it is not a single speech community, but rather is found in a half-dozen multilingual small villages of 500-700 people each, sparsely dotting an area larger than all of Great Britain. Pakhachi and Achavayam are closely connected through kinship networks and regular travel. The total population of these two villages has fewer than 150 fully fluent speakers. There may be a dozen children learning the language, but schools have a habit of shifting fully fluent 7-year-olds to monolingual Russian speakers. The Paren variant is certainly moribund, as is Kamen (Mikino). I found absolutely no children
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with any conversational ability in Paren while I lived there for nearly two months in 1998 while conducting ethnographic research. Vakhtin (2000:127ff.) claims in his book that his surveys found no children or teens speaking Koryak. Ethnopoetic analysis requires learning the grammatical structures in order to carry out the necessary close reading of the text. The “output” is text formatted on a page that looks like poetry—high art. Franz Boas foreshadowed this function, and his documentary linguistics was connected to work in folklore and literature. Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Brian Swann and others called for closer attention to quality translations across several frames simultaneously: from one code to another, from one cultural context to another, from speech to writing. Ethnopoetic analysis is as much political as theoretical, for taking oral narratives of Koryaks as serious art is a profound political stance that cannot be overestimated in its importance to Koryaks and others in Kamchatka.

This will be the first publicly available multimedia archive. Publications by other linguists are all based on recordings, but they are not publicly available. The documentation of Paren is limited to Bogoras. Historical recordings made by Bogoras, Koryak Radio, King, and others will be included in the archive. We invite all fieldworkers with recordings of Koryak speakers to consider adding their material to this collection. The primary deposition is with ELAR in London and we are looking to mirror in Moscow and to produce hard-drive based versions of the archive for community use in Kamchatka.

Goals
1. Almost 67 hours of video recorded in 2013, undergoing transcription using Cyrillic and translation into Russian and English. A portion will also be transcribed in modified IPA.
2. About 70 hours of additional audio recorded at 48/24 and saved as wav files.
3. About 20 hours of analog audio and video digitized and transcribed.
4. About 189GB of media processed so far, with additional recordings and digitization planned.
5. At least 50 hours of corpus will include morphological analysis and grammatical notes.
6. Much of the corpus will include ethnographic annotations consisting of references to relevant publications and ethnographic explanatory notes.
7. DVD of 5 hours of best storytellers with subtitles in Koryak, Russian and English.
8. Book of facing-page translations (Koryak-Russian) of selected narratives analysed for ethnopoetic versification, totalling at least 200 pages of print. (Book of Koryak-English facing-page translated narratives will be in preparation by end of grant period).
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9. Hard drives with iTunes jukeboxes of entire archive annotated in Russian distributed to all contributing villages.
10. Digital multimedia application that will synchronise ethnopoetically arranged text with the sounds of the words.

Future Projects in Planning

The Aesthetics and Power of Storytelling across Sub-Arctic Russia and Canada

New project in development with Robert Wishart and Jenanne Ferguson focuses attention on both the artistry and the politics of storytelling across the Sub-Arctic, comparing Kamchatka, Russia with the Northwest Territories, Canada (NWT). Previous work has focused on aesthetics in Russia and the politics of storytelling in Canada. We will examine both ethno-aesthetics and the social power of storytelling in these two places, including all the local indigenous and creole groups.

This project roots social and linguistic analysis in place and does not privilege a specific group a priori as more or less rooted in that place. One aspect of the work will examine how local oral traditions are used in political conflicts large and small. The other aspect will seek to understand how the evaluations of narratives and narrative performances as more or less beautiful and cultivate a sense of the local aesthetic categories. In this way ethno-aesthetics of stories is connected to their political power and sociological utility.

Koryak Orature and Literature in Computational Comparison

This project with Valentina Dedyk will finish the digitization of all books published in Koryak by the first generation of writers (1926-46), providing both facsimile scans and digital text in Cyrillic and Latin scripts. It will then take the digitization of Koryak orature (oral narratives) produced in our current project and look for systematic differences linked to orality and literacy.

This project will examine writing by first-generation writers, taught to write their own language as adults. It will test theories of the ‘writing revolution’ developed from the study of ancient languages in a comparison of written and oral texts. Are certain features linked to medium? Do early writers use more oral formulations and usages than later writers of Koryak (after 1990)? Can a computer be taught to identify a given text as oral or literary? We are looking for potential collaborators interested in developing computational morpho-syntax and stylistics for indigenous Siberian languages.
Summary

This project documents several varieties of Koryak (kpy, Kamchatka, Russia) least studied by linguists. We are capturing a variety of genres, including conversation, songs, riddles & sayings, and descriptions of ritual and cosmology, but most of the material are narratives. Transcriptions will include grammatical and ethnographic annotations for each genre and all of the narratives will be analysed following Dell Hymes’s method of ‘measured verse’ in his theory of ethnopoetics. This project demonstrates the value of taking such analysis to a wide array of narratives, from myth to oral history to other kinds of stories.

People in Kamchatka are working on recording and publishing examples of Koryak and developing teaching materials for revitalization. This project will help establish a more comprehensive database of Koryak as spoken in particular villages. King has found that Koryak and Alutor speakers in small northern villages want documentation of the way they speak, which is markedly different from the textbook standard. This project does exactly that, and avoids standardizing the language of the recordings to build archives that will be useful to many people in Kamchatka and around the world interested in Koryak and its many dialects.

We recorded about 140 hours of new material in 2013 in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, Palana, Tilichiki, Khailino, Achaivayam, Srednie Pakhachi and Manily. Speakers in Palana and P-K come from villages such as Paren, Lesnaya, Apuka, Talovka, Rekininniki. The project will also include archival recordings made by Bogoras and Jochelson in 1901 on wax cylinder and transcribed in 2001 and 2013 with speakers from Manily and Paren. Recordings made by King in 1995, 1997, 1998 and 2001 in Korf, Ossora, Palana, Lesnaya, Manily, Paren and Verkh-Paren will also be included.