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Erich Kasten

Preserving Endangered Languages of Local Speech Variants
in Kamchatka

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Preserving Endangered Languages or Local Speech Variants in Kamchatka

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Abstract

This paper concerns various language preservation projects in the Russian Far East that center on the production and dissemination of multimedia language teaching materials (DVD with textbook) with culturally adapted content, designed for use inside and outside the classroom. They refer to the endangered language of Itelmen as well as to endangered local variants of the Even and the Koryak languages spoken in Kamchatka.

Introduction

In 1993, a first project to preserve the endangered Itelmen language in Kamchatka was initiated by me together with ethnolinguist Michael Dürr and local language expert Klavdiia Khaloimova, for which I could bring in my expertise as a social and cultural anthropologist. A number of teaching materials had been produced since then that employed new methodologies and modern electronic techniques. The main strategy for these materials has been to pick up and to present local contents, i.e. themes and environments that local people can more easily identify with, in order to tie language and cultural learning together.

Since 2000, the project has been extended to preserve the Koryak and Even languages spoken in the central and the northern parts of Kamchatka. According to formal standards, these languages are not (yet) considered to be endangered as they might currently have sufficient numbers of speakers. Although, similar trends have been identified that might lead – with a time lag of about one generation – to a similar situation of language endangerment, as it is the case for the Itelmen language now, if not immediate and appropriate measures are to be taken to preserve these languages. First, I will present our experience from our Itelmen Language and Culture project, and then expand to our current activities to preserve in particular local speech variants of the Koryak and Even languages – as this is seen as a key approach to stimulate necessary interest among community members to keep their native languages alive.

Itelmen Language and Culture

The main goal of the project is to preserve the Itelmen language in connection with local culture, i.e. the way specific natural environments, traditional worldviews and spatial boundaries between communities are reflected or emphasized and expressed in Itelmen language and in specific local variants of it. This corresponds to the project team's philosophy that presenting language data in connection with local

culture can most efficiently stimulate interest and contribute to the preservation of endangered languages.

One might have to accept that in the future, the Itelmen language will hardly ever be used again as a general means of communication in everyday practice. It seems unlikely for it to become revitalized for such a purpose – although this is still a prevalent but perhaps not very realistic long-term hope of some. Others have pointed out that it is also very worthwhile to preserve the Itelmen language at least in some of its restricted functions, domains, and meanings.

One of the domains in which people are most motivated and where the use of Itelmen language (or fragments of it) is still encouraged are ceremonial settings and traditional feasts, i.e. activities and occasions that center around the expression or celebration of Itelmen ethnic identity, as underlined by the existence and the use of the native language. Furthermore, the performing arts such as traditional Itelmen songs (together with dances) and respective staged performances appear to be a potential domain of continued use of the Itelmen language. Fragments of Itelmen speech are also preserved in greetings and some general chatting, although code switching sets in as soon as terminology becomes more specific, where people use Russian more comfortably now. This applies also to ecological terminology, although this may be a domain where the revitalized use of native language could set in first, due to the highly localized nature of the subject.

From extensive consultation with local residents, then, the project team learned that the preservation (if not full revitalization) of Itelmen language or even parts of it would help many people to maintain their particular and local identities, and to provide them with broader access to other forms of traditional – such as ecological – knowledge. This motivated the project team to direct particular attention to quite specific aspects of language preservation and to design specific activities of the project accordingly.

The Project's Strategies and Activities

The main strategy of the project has been to produce and disseminate new language learning tools (in addition to and complementing existing ones). Importantly, these new materials now pick up local contents, i.e. themes and environments that local people can more easily identify with, in order to tie language and cultural learning together, to make language learning more meaningful, and thus to increase personal motivation.

The first product coming out of the project was an Itelmen language learning textbook (with Russian translations) - *Istoriko-etnograficheskoe uchebnoe posobie po itel'menskomu iazyku* (1996) [Historical-ethnographical teaching materials for the Itel'men language]. The book is directed primarily at younger school children and those at pre-school and kindergarten level. It addresses relevant Itelmen cultural themes and refers to local social and natural environments, and thus stimulates native language maintenance in combination with preserving the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge and practices of Itelmen people in general. The book is set up according to thematic blocks drawn from life in the local communities. The thematic sections focus mostly on vocabulary and its use in simple expressions/sentences. There are no grammar lessons in this book, as a simple grammar (in a similar style) is planned for later.

As mentioned at the outset, the project team recognized that for Itelmen language to be passed on to younger generations, language learning would have to take place even prior to pre-school age. Thus, the new materials were in particular geared to facilitate learning situations where elders (grandparents) explained their local environment and culture to very young children (even at pre-kindergarten age), with the help of the illustrations and using the Itelmen words found in the new textbook. Such language learning situations proved most effective and rewarding for both 'teacher' and 'learner'; and this way, the very young could be provided at least occasionally with a native language environment at this crucial age for language acquisition, and in their home environment at that, where otherwise the Itelmen language was not used anymore. The illustrations of local scenes in the book furthermore serve to trigger remembrances on the part of the elders who explain these situations to the young. And the identification with local content was also seen as a key to providing incentives and motivation for picking up and using the teaching materials in the first place.

In the compilation process, the project team tried as much as possible to record local variants and to include them in the teaching materials, as this was the expressed wish of many local residents. Extensive consultations with local people were carried out, to identify and utilize such local content, as they considered important from their own point of view. For example, the topic of toponyms was given considerable attention, as it was obviously an important issue for local residents to keep

memories alive of those places from where they had been relocated into central settlements in the 1960s, against their will (again, it would probably not have been 'politically correct' to include such an issue in schoolbooks during the Soviet period).

In the course of the project, Itelmen people (and those who felt their roots to lie in Itelmen culture) who live in the central parts of the Kamchatka peninsula (Milkovo district) – they are also known as Kamchadals – and some Itelmen residing in the main capital Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski also started to actively take part in the effort. This led, among other things, to the inclusion of the particular Kamchadal vernacular and vocabulary into the teaching materials produced.

A multimedia CD-ROM *Itelmen Language and Culture* followed the textbook in 2001. The project team recognized that electronic learning tools (like a CD for computer use) add prestige to the project materials in the eyes of the youths, who were particularly targeted in the preservation effort, and that these tools make it more attractive for young people to devote energy to the endeavor. Also, the identification with local and well-known Itelmen personalities and traditional activities could be enhanced by enabling students to listen to actual speakers and to watch the activities in video clips.

The CD-ROM is based on the textbook, but in addition it also aims at more adult user groups, providing information such as scientific terms of local plant and animal species. The CD follows the same thematic structure as the textbook and can be used in parallel. On the CD, all vocabulary and sentences of the book are spoken (i.e. in the form of sound files), and many of them by various speakers. Thus, the listener can choose between different variants (such as e.g. one once spoken in his/her particular ancestral home village), a feature that has become very popular. To provide such a number (i.e. up to 8) variants for local pronunciations of a certain expression would have been quite confusing in the printed textbook, whereas in the electronic edition of the CD that was easily accomplished.

The CD also contains recordings and texts of some Itelmen stories and songs (although their number is rather small, as by the time of recording the formerly rich Itelmen oral tradition was only mastered by about 2-3 individuals). Further, the CD contains children's art work, collected for an exhibition project in Germany, which further illustrates the language data in their given contexts; and it provides short video clips on relevant local activities, such as dancing and staged ceremonies at the Alkhalalalai festival, setting up a fish weir, digging roots in the tundra with a special tool, etc.

Besides Russian translations, an English version was added to the CD, as some of the content was considered of interest for other Native peoples of the circumpolar North outside Russia, and for linguists and other scholars who are not in full command of the Russian language. (In particular, this concerns the natural

environments and related harvesting/procurement activities, which are very similar all across the circumpolar north.)

In addition to the above-mentioned publications that had been produced jointly by the team members, Klavdiia Nikolaevna Khaloimova also published the book *Metodicheskie rekomendatsii (materialy) uchiteliu itel'menskogo iazyka* [Methodical recommendations (materials) for the teacher of Itelmen language]. This book is directed mainly at future Itelmen teachers and is considered as a particularly useful teaching tool at the Institute for Advanced Teachers' Training in Palana. The book is a guide for teachers on how to systematically explain the rather intricate Itelmen grammar to schoolchildren of different levels, with the help of short examples. This had also been neglected so far in the textbooks of the 1980s.

Outcomes

The materials produced in this project are widely used in the communities. Most importantly, the 1996 textbook is, as intended by its producers, in use even in extra-school-curricular contexts such as in homes in the villages, in special courses at kindergarten level in the regional center Tigil, and in courses arranged by the head of the local library in Milkovo, that is, in places where Itelmen language is not part of the regular school curriculum and where people can choose materials based on what is most appealing to them. The same applies in the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where both the textbook and the CD have been extensively used; even in the very efficient courses that had been conducted there by the late Valentina Uspenskaia this new set of learning tools was given clear preference over the old materials.

Thus, an important goal was achieved, i.e. to introduce appealing language materials, and in particular in those areas where Itelmen people would otherwise hardly ever have become interested or involved in revitalizing their language with so far existing conventional school textbooks. Many local residents have voiced the opinion towards the project team that the project materials have contributed substantially in raising more interest and helping to preserve the Itelmen language at different levels. This became most evident regarding the CD, which has given Itelmen activists of the younger or middle generation (those between 20 and 50 years old) the chance and incentive to revitalize (parts) of their language, as they were already used to such new technologies. For them it would have been difficult and outmost boring to learn from types of already existing schoolbooks and according to the methodologies used there, which had been designed for school classes and children between age 7 and 12. The CD has also become quite popular in particular within the urban Itelmen community in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where it has helped Itelmen activists to restore and substantiate their revitalized Itelmen identity by strengthening their native language competence.

Conclusions

Learning Itelmen first at school under the same methodology as for learning 'foreign' languages (such as English) seems to be not so effective, as, among other things, it requires particular justifications and motivations in answer to the question 'what for?' – especially when other options such as English classes provide young Itelmen with the prospect of better professional career opportunities. Thus, unless there is a specific native language pedagogy, the motivation of students is usually low, which then results in insufficient outcomes such as those produced by the Soviet native language programs in the 1980s, and the schoolbooks introduced therein. In the Itelmen context, coupling cultural with language learning in the textbook was one way the project team attempted to counter this effect. Also, a summer workshop ('Deti severa / Children of the North') was held in 2000 (Kasten, 2002), where scientists, local community school teachers, and other native educators discussed new concepts of 'bicultural education' and prospects and first experiences of its implementation in local communities. Another attempt to encourage Itelmen language training beyond the regular school curriculum (and to provide learning tools for that) led the project team to conceptualize the CD *Itelmen Language and Culture* in a very culture-specific way, addressing even adults who are concerned about revitalizing their Itelmen language competence (and identity). In short, native language learning tools require a specific methodology and accompanying efforts beyond the regular school curriculum – and that had obviously been neglected in the past.

Koryak and Even Language and Culture

Since 2000 the project has been extended on Koryak and Even language preservation, and in particular on the endangered local variants of these languages. Language data is presented now on DVD in video films with full subtitles of spoken text and optional Russian / English translation, with additional bilingual booklets. These multimedia learning tools on native languages provide the great advantage to present text within an authentic local context. That makes it more appealing to the youth and easier for them to identify with the material – which clearly enhances their motivation to preserve their unique cultural and linguistic heritage.

The well-known and – for school children as well as for elders – confusing divide between standardized language in most textbooks and actual local speech variants can easier be bridged by multimedia learning tools. Especially here, however, a number of problems still remain unsolved and well-balanced compromises have to be found. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges is to make such new teaching tools – that contain local language variants – at the same time compatible with already established standards for grammar and orthography that have been in use already for the past 20 years, but still differ from the original speech of the elder generation.

Some of the more basic questions that resulted from our work in Kamchatka and that should be addressed are about the specific functions that native languages can have in the local context. This might explain and meet to the expressed wish of native community members to preserve its local variants. Having always been multilingual, the native peoples of Kamchatka were in command of foreign languages for the communication with others. At the same time, however, it has always been important for them to differentiate themselves from others, by means of a common local language or dialect of their own. Therefore specific language can link people to their particular local history and cultural heritage and can make it more attractive to them to preserve it.

Outcomes and Future Plans

For both languages, over 100 hrs. of spoken texts have been recorded on digital video during the past 10 years that are going to be structured for publication on DVD according to local speech variants and according to various themes. For the Even language spoken in Kamchatka, we have chosen two main dialect groups, those who live in the Bystrinski district and those who live in the most northern areas of the peninsula, namely the Penzhinski and the Oliutorski districts. In a similar way the Koryak materials are structured according to the more southern and northern Chavchuyen (Reindeer herder Koryaks) and the two coastal Koryak groups, the Nymylans of the northern Tigilski district, and the Oliutors, living on the opposite northeastern coast in the Karaginski and Oliutorski districts.

Each of the DVDs of both the Koryak and Evens series, and subdivided according to the mentioned dialect groups, are devoted to particular themes, such as:

- the remembered past
- traditional ecological knowledge
- clothing and decorative arts
- ritual practices and worldview
- expressive forms of human-environment relations (tales, songs and dances)

The main collaborators in this project are Aleksandra Urkachan from the Center for native crafts and folklore in Palana (Koryak language expert) and Raisa Avak, director of the Advanced Teachers' Training Institute in Palana (Even language expert).

The first 3 volumes (DVD with Russian/English subtitles and booklets with full transcript of the original text and Russian or English translations) had been presented this year (2008) at a special conference in Ossora and at other places in Kamchatka. They had received considerable attention, as they are seen as a most appropriate means to not only preserve endangered dialects of these two languages, but also to document and memorize for future generations the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge of the elders. It is hoped that most of the 60 volumes of both series will be finalized within the next three years, and to be provided

to local communities in Kamchatka for their school and cultural enhancement programs.

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