Reconstructing multilingualism through linguistic biographies:
a Lower Kolyma case

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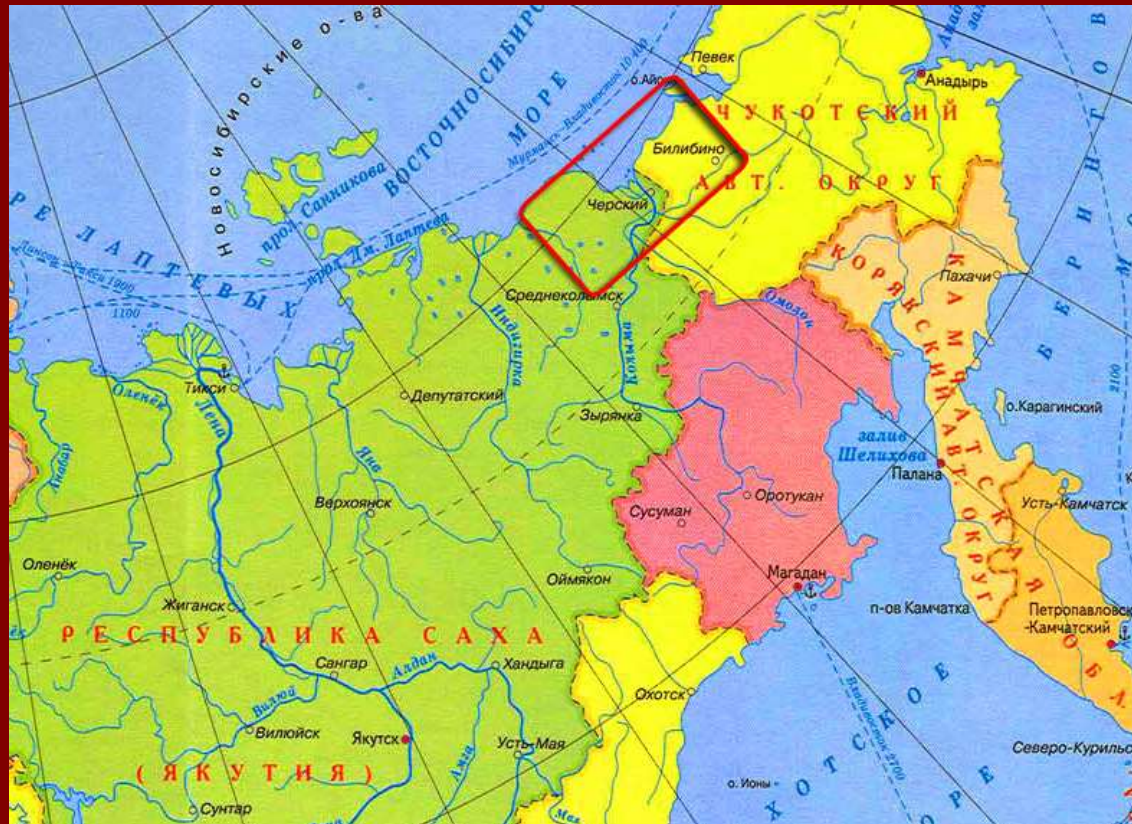*Institute for Linguistic Studies RAS & Institute of Linguistics RAS*

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Small-scale multilingualism in Lower Kolyma region: a brief overview

- Term *small-scale* refers to society where 'socio-political groupings are small in size, and there is no overarching hierarchical political structure that joins these smaller groups. In the situation at hand, the languages spoken are small in size, thus people usually marry speakers of other languages'

 (Singer, Harris 2016: 167. What practices and ideologies support small-scale multilingualism? A case study of Warruwi Community, northern Australia. IJSL 2016; 241: 163–208)
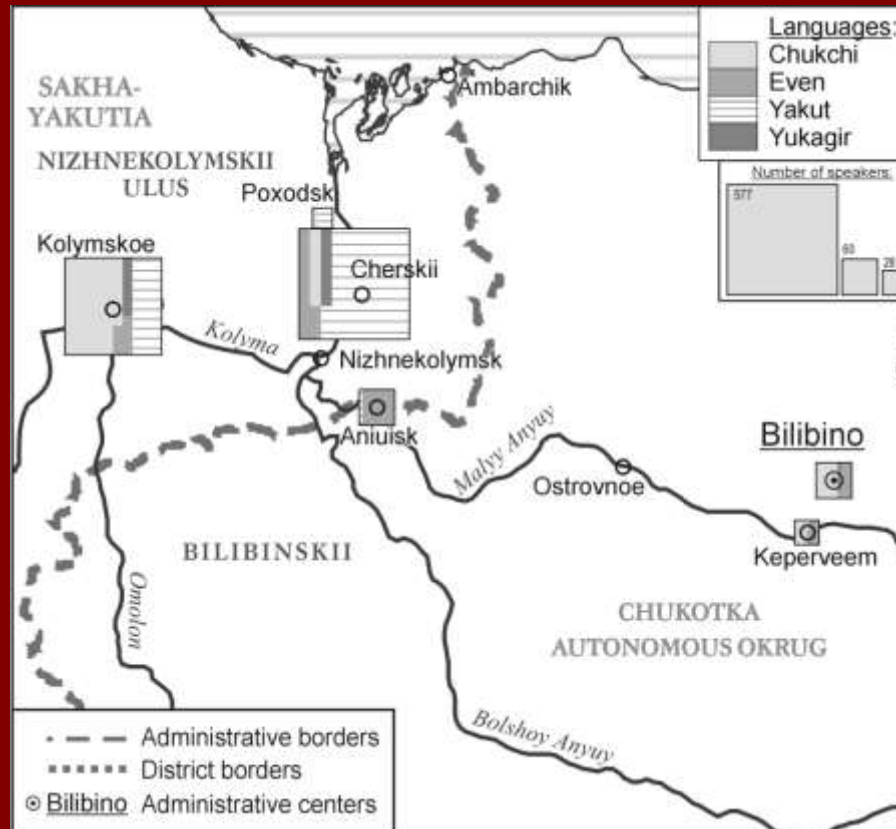
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	Total population in Nizhnekolymsky district of Yakutia	Number of speakers
Chukchi	506	298
Even	600	377
Yukaghir	390	217

Small-scale multilingualism in Lower Kolyma region: a brief overview

Map by Y. Korkyakov

Research area

Types of multilingualism found in Lower Kolyma region:

- Even/Yakut/Russian
- Even/Yakut/Yukaghir/Russian
- Chukchi/Even/Russian
- Chukchi/Even/Yukaghir/Russian
- Chukchi/Even/Yakut/Russian
- Chukchi/Even/Yukaghir/Yakut/Russian

Research area

Current study

- Does not concern bilingualism (Chukchi/Russian, Even/Russian)
- Considers only the cases of multilingual individuals with Chukchi competence

Previous studies

- *N.B. Vakhtin* 'Yazyki narodov Rossii v 20 veke: ocherki yazykovogo sdviga' (2001):

Detailed sociolinguistic study of languages of the area using methods of expert evaluation (analysis of language competence of an individual by other members of community)

Vakhin's scale

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Levels of language skills	Grade
Speaks fluently	1
Speaks	2
Speaks inaccurately	3
Speaks broken language	4
Understands everything	5
Understands general meaning	6
Does not know the language	7

+ linguistic biography coefficient

Yukaghir's linguistic repertoirs in [Vakhtin 2001]

Возраст	Юкагирский	Эвенский	Якутский	Чукотский	Русский
>60	2,3	5,1	5,4	2,9	5,4
51 60	3,5	6,0	6,4	2,3	3,9
41–50					
31–40	4,2	6,9	5,3	4,4	2,8
21-30	5,3	7,0	6,6	4,6	2,6
11–20	5,6	7,0	7,0	6,1	1,8

Таблица 28. Юкагиры поселка Колымское

Even's linguistic repertoirs in [Vakhtin 2001]

Возраст	Эвенский	Юкагирский	Якутский	Чукотский	Русский
>60	1,5	6,1	4,8	4,5	4,9
51–60	3,0	7,0	6,0	2,4	4,0
41–50	2,9	7,0	7,0	3,3	3,5
31–40	2,7	7,0	3,0	5,7	3,1
21–30	3,9	7,0	4,9	6,0	3,2
11–20	5,6	7,0	6,0	5,6	2,3

Таблица 29. Эвены поселка Колымское

Chukchi's linguistic repertoirs in [Vakhtin 2001]

Таблица 30. Чукчи посёлка Колымское

Возраст	Чукотский	Русский	Эвенский	Якутский	Юкагирский
>60	1,0	4,8	5,8	6,4	5,4
51–60	1,1	4,1	6,5	6,4	5,2
41–50	1,0	3,4	6,0	5,9	6,6
31 40	2,7	2,8	6,4	6,8	7,0
21–30	4,3	2,4	7,0	7,0	7,0
11–20	5,4	2,0	7,0	7,0	7,0

Research questions

- Discovering speech practices of multilingual individuals (natural conversations, participant observation, linguistic biographies)

- Reconstruction of multilingualism of 1920s-1990s:
  - Collecting linguistic biographies of people born in 1900s-1920s via interviews with their descendants
  - Analyzing historical sources on multilingualism in 1890s-1930s (Bogoras biogrhaphy texts collected in 1890s, memoir books of travellers etc.)

Monitoring multilingual situation over a 100-year period

- Discovering speech practices of multilingual individuals (recording natural conversations, participant observation, linguistic biographies)

Present-day multilingualism: becoming extinct

- Yekaterina Delyanskaya: Chukchi-Even-Russian

Present-day multilingalism: becoming extinct

- Nikolay Yaglovskiy: Chukchi-Russian-Yukaghir-Yakut-Even

- In total - 5 multilingual consultants with expressive skills in 3+ languages
- Chukchi, Yukaghir and Even acquired in early childhood from one of the parents
- Russian acquired in school
- Yakut acquired in college or from colleagues

- Discovering speech practices of multilingual individuals (recording natural conversations, participant observation, linguistic biographies)

- Reconstruction of multilingualism of 1920s-1990s:
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Linguistic biographies

Questions about consultants' parents and other elder relatives concerned:

- Year and place of birth

- Ethnicity

- Education

- Languages

- Life biography (with the special accent on migrational histories)

Importance of cross-interviews on the same person

- Methods are similar to Vakhtin's expert evaluation principle
- For each passed-away multilingual individual there are more than one living descendant or acquaintance. It's necessary to collect data on this person from multiple sources

Results so far

- In total – linguistic biographies of 20 people who spoke five languages in 20 century

- A lot of relevant data on ethnocultural history of the region

- Yukaghir and Even multilingual individuals were usually female. They tended to 'speak to each interlocutor his/her language' (с каждым говорила на своем языке)

Other valuable interview data

- Small stories that include quoted speech, e.g.

«Смешной случай произошёл, я пошла за водой. Назад возвращаюсь, а у нас во дворе яранга стояла/ и там семья жили. Муж, жена, старик и старуха, у них маленький ребёнок. И вот, возвращаюсь назад и слышу:

rˀenut ɣənəkə nadaɣərɣən?

'что тебе надо?'

Мол, жена по-русски хочет спросить, что тебе надо? Я заглянула, стоит высокий русский мужик, рыжий-рыжий, а она на него орет «rˀenut ɣənəkə nadaɣərɣən!!» Пока она, видимо, вспоминала, где какие русские слова!»

- Discovering speech practices of multilingual individuals (natural conversations, participant observation, linguistic biographies)

- Reconstruction of multilingualism of 1920s-1990s:
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Factors influencing multilingualism in Lower Kolyma

- 'Melting pot' of Lower Kolyma: mixed ethnic identities
  - Yukaghir
  - Even
  - Chukchi
  - (Yakut)
  - (Russian)

  (some people switch their identity depending on the interlocutor)

Factors influencing multilingualism in Lower Kolyma

- Education: Yakut school in Andrushkino vs. Russian school in Plakhino

Factors influencing multilingualism in Lower Kolyma

- Historical geography: mapping trading posts

Factors influencing multilingualism in Lower Kolyma

- Historical geography: mapping trading posts

Рэкулымн'э нэнавалёмторэ