

RUSSIAN AS A POSTCOLONIAL INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE



Linguistic forum 2019:
Indigenous languages of
Russia and beyond

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Alaskan Russian (AR)

- Variety of Russian that developed in Alaska at the time of Russian America
- Different from any variety of Continental Russian (CR)
- Main source of evidence: Ninilchik Russian (NR)
- NR = variant of AR that has been preserved in the speech of descendants of the Ninilchik village (Kenai peninsula, Alaska)
- Contribution to a typology of indigenous languages

AR locations as mentioned in the various sources



Juha Janhunen, April 5, 2019, Moscow

The parameters of “indigenous”

- Non-national
- Stateless
- 4th world
- Non-official
- Locally established – since 150 years?

- **But: national and official languages can also be indigenous, unless they are colonial**

'Indigenous languages': two approaches

- 1. To separate the most obvious cases of **non-indigenous** languages /ethnic groups and to consider all the others **indigenous** to an extent.
- 2. To separate the most obvious cases of **indigenous** languages /ethnic groups and to consider all the others **non-indigenous** to an extent.
- Or, there is yet another perspective

'Indigenous languages' and 'native speakers' are controversial terms

- European context - usage: often in connection with World Englishes (Crystal 2000)
 - European languages are not called indigenous:
 - politically incorrect towards the languages of the recent non-European immigrants
 - Even in the Basque case the term is avoided by some
 - Native vs. Home/Community language
 - Concept of 'native speaker' as a discrete entity is idealistic
 - From majority/minority languages to the languages of mainstream communication

Meaningful parameters

- Language vs. Ethnic group
- Indigenous vs. Native (Bühmann and Trudell 2008)
 - Temporal-spatial axes
 - 1st or 2nd generation of immigrants
 - Russian(s) in central Russia
- Indigenous vs. Language of majority
 - Dominance-oppression axis
 - Icelanders are not referred to as indigenous
- Indigenous vs. Colonial
 - Two maximally distant poles: what is colonial?
 - Last five centuries of deliberate colonization
 - Newly dominant in new territories

Colonial, postcolonial, neo-colonial

- Colonial language: Language of the metropole
 - Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, Russian
- Neo-colonial language: an instrument of cultural imperialism in the postcolonial world
 - English in Africa, India,
 - BUT not Portuguese in Brazil
- Postcolonial:
 - Postcolonial (activity) = neo-colonial
 - Postcolonial (discourse) ~ postmodernist
 - Postcolonial language: **An erstwhile colonial language that lost its dominance to a newer colonial language**
 - Alaskan Russian

Alaskan Russian history context: Important dates

- 1740s - first visits of Russians to Alaska
- 1799 - establishment of Russian American Company, a mixed governmental-entrepreneurial formation
- 1847 - Ninilchik settlement for RAC retirees is established
- 1867 - Alaska sold to the US
- ca. 1917 - Russian school in Ninilchik is closed down
- 1910s - start of the American school

AR history context: A narrative

- From Loren Leman's introduction to the *Silver Archer* award ceremony:
- "Our childhood home is Ninilchik on the Kenai Peninsula. Its first permanent settling was in 1847 when our ancestor Grigorii Kvasnikoff and his wife Mavra, moved their 12 children from Kodiak. They were joined shortly after that by two Oskolkoff brothers who came from Sitka.
- Ninilchik was established originally as a retirement community for employees of the Russian-American Company who had met their contractual work obligations, but chose not to return to Russia, often because they had married Alaska Native women and had children who wanted to live in Alaska."

Loren Leman's narrative (contd.)

- "Just 20 years later Russia sold its interests in Alaska to the U.S. but to large extent because of its relative isolation from much of the outside world, even 50 years later when my father was born, the first language learned and spoken by children was Russian.
- By that time a Territorial School had been started by the U.S. government and the children learned English. Many from that generation became truly bi-lingual.
- Now, 151 years after the transfer, there are by our count eight living elders who are fluent speakers of the unique dialect we call Ninilchik Russian. They range in age from 86 to 99. "

Our first and most competent consultant - Louie Kvasnikoff (†2009)



Joseph Leman, 99 - the eldest speaker



Ninilchik Russian is a moribund language

- No speakers under 80
- Barely functioning as a means of communication
- Very limited competence in younger speakers/rememberers
- Code switching and code mixing
 - Two periods: colonial and postcolonial
- Strong individual variation

Stages of Alaskan and Ninilchik Russian

Beginning from	Mid-18 th cent.	Late 18 th cent.	1840s	1920s	WWII
Stage / variety	Common AR	Alutiiq-influenced variety of AR	Established NR	Endangered NR	Obsolescent NR
Processes	Aleut-Russian bilingualism	Alutiiq-Russian bilingualism	Russian monolingualism	Russian-English bilingualism	Dominance of English, gradual decay of NR

Alaskan Russian is a special variety of Russian

- It emerged as a result of contact, but it is not a contact language
- It was a language of Creoles, but not a creole language
- It's vocabulary includes many dialectal words, but it is not a Russian dialect, it is not one of the Siberian dialects
- It has features of the **postcolonial idiom**:
 - a unique blend of various external influences during the colonial and postcolonial periods upon the Russian base

Lexical evidence of the contacts in the Ninilchik Russian Dictionary

■ Colonial period:

- Aleut

■ *ishkát* 'basket'

- Alutiiq (Eskimo)

■ *mamáy* 'razor clam', *ukúd'ik* 'bumble bee', *n'ún'ik* 'porcupine'

- Dena'ina (Athabaskan)

■ *kazná* 'lynx', *táyshi* - a kind of dried fish, *k'inkáshl'a* - a kind of berry

■ Postcolonial period:

- English

Alaskan Russian as postcolonial

- A result of the loss of connection with the metropole after 1867 and the new English dominance.
 - Preserved archaic features of the 19th century Russian, having evanesced from CR during the 20th century;
 - Independent local innovations, not found anywhere in CR;
 - English influences acquired by the modern speakers, born in 1920s and 1930, who were growing in the situation of Russian-English bilingualism.

Standard Russian of the 19th century

■ Vocabulary:

- *chihótka* 'tuberculosis', *d'íwna* 'good', *láfka* 'store', *namédn'i* 'a day before, recently', *pára* 'suit', *pl'esh* 'bald spot'

■ More than one sociolect:

– *bába* 'woman', *chuhn'á* 'Finn', *nag'ishkóm* 'naked'

– *w'íshka* 'second floor'

Local Ninilchik innovations (sporadic English influence)

■ Lexicon

- English-based innovations
 - *gaza'ín* 'motor boat'
 - *rababútsi* 'rubber boots'
 - *béyb'ichka* 'baby, little kid'
- Cf. Russian-based innovations
 - *halódn'ik* 'refrigerator'
 - *marózn'ik* 'freezer'
 - *sabáka* 'dog salmon', CR *keta*
 - *kóshichiy práznik* 'Halloween'

Language obsolescence: Massive English influence

■ Full bilingualism

■ Calques

- *zhir* 'fat, oil', including 'mineral oil, petrol'; CR *neft*'
- *Iwónay mat' wes' noch* {television} *karaúlil*
 - 'His mother was watching TV all night' (Daly 1985)
 - *gl'id'et* 'look' }
 - *karaúlit* 'guard' } watch

■ Loan words vs. code-mixing

- *utamab'íl* ~ {automobile}

■ Discourse markers

- {you know }

How much is Russian linguistic and cultural heritage alive?

- The main question to answer for a postcolonial language to be considered at least to some extent 'indigenous'
- Russian cultural and linguistic heritage in Alaska is visible in:
 - Orthodox Christianity
 - Russian names and place names
 - Russian language
 - Oral history
- Who does it belong to?

Native and Creole groups' Narratives

- Points of the Creole story:
 - Hardships of the American period
 - Internalization of Russian culture and language as 'local, original culture'
 - Conscious and forced choices and troubled memories
- Points of the Native story
 - 19th century - adopting new religion and material culture
 - Early 20th century - frictions with Creoles; hardships at the start of the American period and later
 - Late 20th century - retaining identity (religion) and reviving culture as source of identity search
- As of today, the term 'Creole' is not used and avoided
- Russian heritage is considered part of the indigenous culture as opposed to the non-indigenous - mainstream American from the 'lower 48'.

Transformation of Alaskan Russian from colonial into **postcolonial indigenous** language

Period	Mid-18 th to mid-19 th cent.	1867 to the end of 19 th cent.	First half of 20 th century	Second half of 20 th cent. present time
Stage / variety	Colonial Russian	Alaskan Russian loses the status of the colonial language	AR as postcolonial indigenous language	Obsolescent AR
Processes	Continental Russian in contact with the local languages => emergence of Alaskan Russian	Russian linguistic and cultural heritage is internalized as local	Russian-English bilingualism; traumatic experiences	Claiming native culture back Language -??

Other postcolonial indigenous languages

- Afrikaans in the Republic of South Africa
- Cajun French
 - More complicated story
 - Louisiana/Cajun French ~ Louisiana Creole
 - Resemblance to the Alaskan case
 - Creoles: WC, CC, and BC (Dubois, Melançon 2000)
 - Purchase by the US, American school
 - Differences
 - Population size, timing, political issues
- Outcome for the 'postcolonial language'
 - Two language varieties in Louisiana
 - Fate of Alaskan Russian as evidenced in NR

From Loren Lemman's introduction to the *Silver Archer* award ceremony

- "Imagine a language that came from Russia 200 years ago, stayed somewhat locked in time, with influences from Alaska Native and English languages. And add to that the fact that language transmission was entirely oral—there was no written instruction or reading and none of these speakers knows how to read Russian in the Cyrillic alphabet."
- A testimony to the fact that AR became indigenous to Alaskan Natives
- As such, AR shared in full the fate of other indigenous languages in Alaska

Thank you for your attention!



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