

みんなくりポジトリ

国立民族学博物館学術情報リポジトリ National Museum of Ethnology

Ecology and Ethnic Survival among the Nenets

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Salminen, Tapani メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002951

Ecology and Ethnic Survival among the Nenets

TAPANI SALMINEN
University of Helsinki

My contribution is divided into three parts. Firstly, I give a brief account of my personal experience among the Tundra Nenets and their neighbours in Arctic Russia and north-western Siberia. Secondly, I present data, statistical and other, on the current status of the languages in my chosen area, with the emphasis again on Tundra Nenets. Thirdly, I try to demonstrate some of the causes and consequences of the present situation, with suggestions for future tasks for the international academic community. I will not comment on the status of the languages of relative latecomers like the Izhma Komi and the Siberian Tatars who, by definition, do not belong to the Northern peoples. Also excluded will be those Northern peoples marginal to the area, e.g. the Evenki and the Ket, because I do not have enough concrete data about them. The Dolgans will be mentioned, but only for the record. In general, my contribution is more data-oriented than I originally planned. I defend my choice by the need for basic data about the languages under discussion.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The main target of my linguistic inquiry is the Tundra Nenets language, one of the most prominent indigenous languages of the Arctic. With 25,000 speakers, it is third among the languages of the Far North, outnumbered only by West Greenlandic with 40,000 and Northern Sami with 30,000 speakers, and followed by Inuktitut with 18,000, Central Alaskan Yupik with 15,000, and Chukchee with 10,000 speakers. As it happens, the correlation between a relatively high number of speakers and a generally less endangered status of the language is evident, if not striking. There is, however, no actual reason to assume that the correlation is direct, for both facts rather follow from more basic political, ecological and economic conditions.

I owe my first-hand experience of these conditions to three expeditions to north-western Siberia. The first two, in 1990 and 1991, were directed to the Yamal Nenets Autonomous District and lasted about one month each. They were quite successful for my study of the Tundra Nenets language. The third one, a complete failure, ended up in Khanty-Mansiisk, with the original plan to visit the Forest Nenets on the northern border area of the Khanty and Mansi Autonomous District. Since then, I have, at least subconsciously, refused to visit the area again, and for

the moment I do not have any exact plans for future expeditions.

The 1990 expedition (for details, see [SALMINEN 1991]) took place in the summer, and was based in Salekhard, the centre of the Yamal Nenets Autonomous District. From there, visits were paid to two other communities of the District, the township of Aksarka and the village of Laborovaya.

The town of Salekhard, formerly Obdorsk, has a few thousand indigenous Nenets and Khanty among its 30,000 inhabitants. There are also descendants of early Tatar, Russian, and Komi immigrants, but most of the residents have come there recently from various parts of the former Soviet Union. Little is left of the widespread multilingualism involving Tundra Nenets, Northern Khanty, Komi, and Russian that prevailed in the lower Ob' area in pre-modern days. In today's Salekhard, languages other than Russian are mainly used at home, most often by elderly people, and, as usual in urban communities where minority languages are heavily stigmatized, by very few children.

The indigenous population around Aksarka, situated along the Ob' downstream from Salekhard, consists mainly of Khanty. The Northern Khanty language and culture appear relatively strong in the area. People are faithful to their traditions, and spend their summer in small fishing hamlets, where all generations seem to use only Khanty. Many middle-aged and older people are not fluent in Russian.

The village of Laborovaya is a small Russian outpost in the middle of the Baidarata Tundra, extending from the Arctic Ocean to the Ural Mountains on one side and to the Yamal Peninsula on the other. Undoubtedly, the life of the nomadic Nenets inhabitants of the area has changed greatly because of increasing contacts with Russians and related factors like collectivization and compulsory education, and those Nenets who have moved into Russian-made settlements are clearly under way of Russification. Nevertheless, the bulk of the local Nenets have remained nomads who continue to live in conical tents all year through, pasture their reindeer and migrate with them, use the Nenets language actively, and follow their own traditions in both spiritual and material life. These "real people" (a literal translation of the Nenets self-designation) are also able to pass on the native Nenets way of life to the following generations, a situation which is very fortunate and very rare compared to the fate of most of the indigenous peoples even worldwide.

There is no school in Laborovaya, but the children are taken to a boarding school almost two hundred kilometres from their homes. The experience is extremely traumatic for the children, and the culture shock for the youngest is tremendous. There are still plenty of children who speak only or mostly Nenets when they enter school, but unfortunately, school tends to reverse the situation. Nenets rather than Russian is used during the first year at school, but only out of necessity, as long as it is not yet possible to use Russian as the medium of tuition. Later, Russian is used almost exclusively. Times are changing, however, and there

are plans to establish an elementary school in Laborovaya, though I do not know if these plans have been realized so far.

The 1991 expedition, a joint operation of three Finnish scholars, an ethnosociologist, an ethnomusicologist, and an ethnolinguist (the author), also took us to Salekhard, and to Laborovaya, but also further to Yar-Sale, the centre of the Yamal County. Yar-Sale is a township much like Aksarka, but because of the relative prosperity of the local sovkhoz, it gives the impression of wealth and a decent standard of living. I have been told that this is no longer the case, however, for the local economy has suffered severely from the recent politico-economical developments.

Yar-Sale is located in the very heartland of the Tundra Nenets country, and the Nenets language, culture and identity are well and alive there. The native language is used vigorously by all age groups, including school children, and what is remarkable, often by their Nenets teachers, too. The use of Russian is, as can be expected, encouraged by the school and local authorities, but since the number of Russians and other incomers is relatively low, the most common language of the township, and practically the only language of the surrounding tundra, is Tundra Nenets.

Since the Yamal people appear very conscious of the value of their national heritage, the major threat is not the linguistic and cultural assimilation, but the imminent environmental destruction caused by the gas industry and related infrastructure, such as the railway that is being built through the Yamal Peninsula itself despite the resistance of the local population. Another devastating project is the planned enormous nuclear wasteland on Novaya Zemlya. The heart of the problem seems to be that local people have little to say in important decisions concerning their lives. This was expected during the centralized Soviet regime, but the noble promises of subsequent Russian rulers have not yet led to a more reliable pattern of local self-rule and control of natural resources. The ownership of land is a highly disputed matter in the Russian Federation, and the voice of indigenous people has rarely been heard in this context.

Native people have recently founded associations to raise their voice, and it is clear that they have become relatively influential in local decision-making. These associations are closely linked to the local administration, and they are multinational in character, so as such they do little to promote the indigenous languages. However, the very possibility of free civil movement is significant as it may lead to fuller organization of people concerned with their national identity.

As I mentioned above, the 1992 expedition (for details, see [SALMINEN 1992]) did not take me further than Khanty-Mansiisk, but I should think that I learnt something during that trip, too. Firstly, foreign observers are not always welcome to areas where ecological, economic, and ethnic problems are most striking. In this particular case, my target location, the mostly Forest Nenets village of Num-To,

was not only said to be one of the least wealthy places in the whole Siberia, but it had recently been hit by the oil excavators, apparently with destructive consequences. This is, however, mere hearsay, and it would be of utmost importance to get first-hand knowledge of this poorly known area.

In Khanty-Mansiisk, at least one reason for the low level of native language maintenance in the Khanty and Mansi District became rather obvious, namely the attitude of the local authorities. On one hand, the Russian leadership did not pay much attention to the needs of the indigenous peoples during the Soviet times, and even today, the District is seen as a supply of valuable export articles rather than a homeland of various peoples with their linguistic and cultural traditions. On the other hand, the natives involved in administration and education, faithful to the Soviet doctrines, were uninterested in promoting the use of indigenous languages. Even those who would have been genuinely concerned with the future of their national culture were blinded by the official propaganda, and as unbelievable as it seems, many have only recently realized the critical state of their own native languages.

There are clear signs of a national awakening at least among the Khanty, and a new institute was recently founded to support the struggle for survival of all indigenous peoples of the District. Time will show what can be achieved, and what is inevitably lost. Those native people who are active in the struggle are, however, often met with open antipathy from the Russian side, and tragic violent incidents have occurred when activists have raised their voice against the allegedly legitimate interests of the oil companies and other major economic powers.

Even though my visits to the North have been few and limited, I have been fortunate in having the opportunity of meeting many people of the north, Nenets and others, on several other occasions. One institution that should not be left without mention here is the Faculty of the Peoples of the Far North of the *Herzen Pedagogical University* in St. Petersburg, which offered a chance for contact and work with northern peoples during the years when the northern lands remained inaccessible to foreign scholars.

More recently, Helsinki has become a crossing-point for many representatives of northern peoples. For example, native Nenets scholars like the linguist Maria Ya. Barmich, the ethnologist Valentina N. Nyarui, the folklorist Yelena T. Pushkarëva, and the educationalist Yelena G. Susoi have stayed in Helsinki for lengthy periods. I name these four women here because, besides being the cutting edge of the Nenets intelligentsia, they are all engaged with issues of language maintenance. Ms. Barmich is responsible for the training of future Nenets teachers in the Faculty of the Peoples of the Far North, Ms. Nyarui is heading the Nenets sector of a newly founded institute of national issues in Salekhard, Ms. Pushkarëva, while working in the Russian duma, edits readers for Nenets school children, and Ms. Susoi, perhaps more than any one else, has made a personal effort in encouraging the use and well-being of the indigenous language in the Yamal

Nenets District. I will further mention Ms. Anastasia T. Lapsui, a Nenets journalist now living permanently in Finland, who is engaged in making documentary films about the life of the Nenets and other northern peoples.

2. THE LANGUAGES OF NORTH-WESTERN SIBERIA TODAY

The core part of my paper is focussed on concrete data about the languages in an area that comprises the four autonomous districts in Arctic Russia and north-western Siberia, i.e. the Nenets, the Yamal Nenets, the Khanty and Mansi, and the Taimyr, or Dolgan and Nenets, autonomous districts.

Traditionally defined, there are seven Northern peoples included here, viz the Dolgans (linguistically Yakut, but ethnically separate), the (Tundra and Forest) Enets, the Khanty, the Mansi, the (Tundra and Forest) Nenets, the Nganasan, and the (Northern) Selkups. All other Selkups, small groups of Khanty, Mansi, Tundra Nenets and Northern Selkups live across the borders of the four autonomous districts. Naturally, a number of individuals from all the nations concerned have emigrated outside their traditional areas. In general, however, the given figures are representative for the entire ethnic groups mentioned.

Of the seven peoples, the Dolgans do not come into further discussion because their language really is a variety of the Yakut language.

Of the six remaining peoples, only the Nganasan form such a close-knit group that there is no question about the status of their idiom as a single language. Further, if only the Northern Selkups are taken into consideration, their language is reasonably uniform, so there is no doubt about it being one language. All of the Selkup idioms, including those spoken outside the four autonomous districts, are treated below.

The four other peoples, viz the Enets, the Khanty, the Mansi, and the Nenets, all consist of a number of quite separate groups, each with a distinct idiom that should be best defined as a language on its own right, though the traditional way is to call them the (main) dialects of the four languages in question. As indicated above, the Enets and the Nenets are both bifurcated into Tundra and Forest groups, with notable differences in both cases. Distinguishing four groups of Mansi, i.e. Northern, Eastern, Western, and Southern Mansi, is also quite straightforward. The traditional three-way division of the Khanty into Northern, Eastern, and Southern Khanty is also justifiable, though here there remain a few problems, as the resulting three units are neither quite clear-cut nor uniform. This question is dealt with in more detail below, when we try to break up the figures given for the traditionally defined peoples and languages.

1) Before entering more heterogenous groups of idioms, a few words should be said about **Nganasan**. I have been told by Eugene Helimski that the official native language retention figure for Nganasan, which within the Taimyr District is given as 89 per cent, is actually much too high, and an accurate absolute number of speakers

would be approx. 600. This is due to the policy of certain local census officials, who do not always bother to verify the factual language or languages of an individual, but register the native language as the first, even in cases where the person does not know it. There is, thus, all reason to be sceptical about the given figures. Nevertheless, on the one hand, they seem more reliable for most of the other languages concerned, and, on the other hand, we do not usually possess other numerical information.

2) The Enets do not turn out to be a major problem because their overall number is so very small. The number of speakers of **Forest Enets** is said to be a little larger than that of **Tundra Enets**, so if we take the census figure at its face value, we would be left with approx. 20 speakers of Tundra Enets and approx. 30 speakers of Forest Enets in the Taimyr District. However, since quite many Enets, apparently including speakers of Enets, have actually been censused as Nenets, these figures are the absolute minimum rather than the most reliable data. According to a recent survey by an ethnological expedition from Krasnoyarsk, the ethnic Enets in the area number 220, almost a half of whom regard Enets as their first language, and more than a fourth claim knowledge of Enets as a second language. A medium estimate might then be that there remains a little more than 50 speakers of Forest Enets, and less than 50 speakers of Tundra Enets. Both Enets communities are heavily concentrated, the Forest Enets in the village of Potapovo, and the Tundra Enets in Vorontsovo, but in both villages, they form a local minority, and there are few households where Enets is the only or even the main language. In the light of this fact, it is understandable that fully competent speakers are few, if any.

3) The language maintenance situation of the three Khanty groups is crucially dependent on how we demarcate them. The dialect group at stake here is that of the Middle Ob', in the Niz'yam and Sherkal' areas. Following most specialists, I have chosen to take it as the southern end of the **Northern Khanty** dialect chain, with the Kazym dialect group in the middle, and the Berezovo, Shuryskary and Ural (Obdorsk) dialects in the north. Khanty in the Yamal Nenets District speak the latter dialects, and remarkably vigorously, it may be added. By contrast, only a minor part of the Khanty in the Khanty and Mansi District are Northern Khanty speakers. Of the 13,000 total speakers of Khanty, possibly 8,000 can thus be assigned to Northern Khanty. Thanks to its vigorous use in the communities in the Yamal Nenets District, there are plenty of children learning and actively using the language. There are, however, alarming factors even in the north, not to mention the communities in the Khanty and Mansi District where a language shift has in most places advanced far, leaving the future of Northern Khanty anything but secured.

It follows from the preceding discussion that we restrict the area of **Southern Khanty** to the Irtysh dialects proper. In so doing, we find ourselves stating that Southern Khanty is either extinct or almost so. Little information is available,

however, so there remains a hope that somewhere along the tributaries of the Irtysh, Khanty is still remembered.

Eastern Khanty consists of two main dialect groups, the Surgut group and the Vakh-Vas'yugan group, the area of the latter extending outside the borders of the Khanty and Mansi District to the Narym County of the Tomsk Province. The dialect in the Salym area can be included in the Surgut group, though it is also an intermediate dialect to Southern Khanty. In accordance with the above estimate which assigns most of the Khanty speakers in the Khanty and Mansi District to Eastern Khanty, it may have as many as 5,000 speakers. Despite the fact that there is hardly a place on earth that has suffered a more total environmental destruction than the Eastern Khanty country, there are still a few children learning Eastern Khanty, mainly in more remote areas. Its future as a community language is very much at stake though.

4) Almost all of the remaining speakers of Mansi represent **Northern Mansi**, with over 2,500 speakers, almost all of whom live in the western part of the Khanty and Mansi District, with a small number in the Yamal Nenets District and in the Yekaterinburg Province. The number of Mansi-speaking children is, however, extremely low, as the language shift has taken place very rapidly. There must be enough isolated cases to prolong the lifespan of Northern Mansi to the latter half of the 21st century, but as a community language, it seems doomed in a few decades' time.

The only other extant Mansi idiom is **Eastern Mansi**, in the area of the river Konda. It is likely to have tens rather than hundreds of speakers, but I have no direct information except the vague suggestions by the native Eastern Mansi scholar Matryona P. Vakhrusheva. She did, however, long since become a native of St. Petersburg, and throughout her career, was forced to study Northern Mansi rather than her own language.

Western Mansi supposedly became extinct only recently, and there remains the possibility of finding someone with a limited knowledge of it.

Southern Mansi became extinct earlier this century after being slowly absorbed both by Russian and Tatar. Thus, the corpus of this idiom, which once occupied a vast area of both Siberia and European Russia up to the neighbourhood of the Permians and the Bashkirs, is closed.

5) Of the two Nenets groups, the **Forest Nenets** are a lot less numerous than the Tundra Nenets. Almost all of the Nenets in the Khanty and Mansi District are Forest Nenets, so if the census figures are reliable, we would have more than 600 speakers of Forest Nenets out of 1,100 in the ethnic group there alone. An off-hand estimate would be that there are about the same number of ethnic Forest Nenets in the Yamal Nenets District, primarily in the Pur County, but with a reasonably higher language retention rate. That would give us a rough but possibly quite close estimate of approx. 1,500 speakers of Forest Nenets, with an ethnic

population of over 2,000. Like among the Eastern Khanty, many people live in remote areas, so there are a number of children learning the language, but many factors, including the exceptionally poor living conditions of the area, makes its future highly insecure. Forest Nenets has been practically unwritten so far, but now the first primer and practical vocabulary have appeared.

Once in Salekhard, I met a group of people from Tarko-Sale, the centre of the Pur County, and addressed a couple of Forest Nenets children in my admittedly very poor Forest Nenets. They answered that they did understand what I said, but they did so in Russian. When I asked, this time in Russian, why they did not answer in Nenets, they said that this was the way it was, they understood the language but did not speak it. On the other hand, my most brilliant and competent language teacher was a Forest Nenets woman who is now in her mid-twenties, and she told me that all her relatives, who live far from Tarko-Sale, use only the native language in their daily communication.

After the above calculation, we are left with approx. 25,000 speakers of **Tundra Nenets**. The total population figure for the Nenets people, including both Forest and Tundra Nenets, was 34,665 in the 1989 Soviet census, and the corresponding number of first-language speakers among them was 26,730, i.e. 77 per cent. The average percentage of native language proficiency tells little of the real situation, as it varies enormously from one district to another.

Table. The official 1989 census population and native language figures for the four autonomous districts of Arctic Russia and north-western Siberia.

<i>Neneckij avtonomnyj okrug</i>						
	pop.	nat.	%	Nenets	Russian	other
Nenets	6423	2875	45	-	2474	1074
Russians	35489	35458		1	-	30
Komi	5124	2344		2	2775	3
Ukrainians	3728	1989		-	1737	2
Belorussians	1051	435		-	615	1
all	53912	44156		3	8593	1160

<i>Jamalo-Neneckij avtonomnyj okrug</i>						
	pop.	nat.	%	Nenets	Russian	other
Nenets	20917	19713	94	-	999	205
Khanty	7247	5998	83	44	1148	57
Selkups	1530	1265	83	19	233	13
Russians	292808	292500		15	-	293
Ukrainians	85022	57905		11	27026	80
Tatars	26431	19866		2	6514	49
Belorussians	12609	6887		2	5669	51
all	494844	434402		127	58318	1997

Xanty-Mansijskij avtonomnyj okrug

	pop.	nat.	%	Khanty	Mansi	Russian	other	
Khanty	11892	6555	55	-	8	5313	16	
Mansi	6562	2399	37	5	-	4143	15	
Nenets	1144	647	57	>	21	<	342	134
Russians	850297	849704		>	9	<	-	584
Ukrainians	148317	95427		>	5	<	52774	111
Tatars	97689	74797		>	3	<	22754	135
all	1282396	1133917		41	46	143995	4397	

Tajmyrskij (Dolgano-Neneckij) avtonomnyj okrug

	pop.	nat.	%	Yakut	Nenets	Russian	other	
Dolgans	4939	4456	90	-	23	456	4	
Nenets	2446	1990	81	4	-	451	1	
Nganasan	849	754	89	>	8	<	83	4
Enets	103	51	50	>	26	<	26	-
Russians	37438	37403		>	1	<	-	34
Ukrainians	4816	2604		>	1	<	2202	9
all	55803	49793		38	57	5795	120	

Explanations: pop. = the population figure for each nationality; nat. = the number of native language speakers within the population; numbers of speakers of other languages follow; notice that Yakut is the native language of the Dolgans.

The table illustrates graphically how different the local circumstances can be and how the enforcement of government policies may vary in different administrative units. In the Nenets District, a double pressure is felt from the side of both Russian and Komi settlers, and the Nenets have been assimilating to both groups since pre-Soviet times. Sad as it is, this was seen as an inevitable development, and little was done until very recently to stop the constant erosion of the Nenets linguistic and cultural heritage. In the Yamal Nenets District, the strong Nenets community, together with a number of energetic native educationalists and administrators, have contributed to one of the highest native language maintenance levels in the whole Russian Federation, not only for the Nenets, but for the other minority peoples as well. In the Khanty and Mansi District, the implementation of educational and other policies has been far less favourable to the indigenous population, and this is one clear factor behind the poor language maintenance figures. Finally, in the Taimyr District, the figures may be less reliable than elsewhere, but they nevertheless indicate that the local languages, which are many, have been quite low in priority in the school curriculum and other agenda. Many Nenets in the area are relatively rich and expansive people, while the other indigenous peoples have been more thoroughly Sovietized and alienated from their traditional culture.

Another thing that becomes obvious from the table is that the three north-western Siberian districts do not even largely coincide with the territories of the

indigenous peoples. Especially the Northern Khanty are divided between two districts. This is actually a secondary development, since two counties, the Shuryskary County with a predominantly Khanty native population and formerly part of the Khanty and Mansi District, and the Krasnosel'kup County with mostly Selkups, were annexed to the Yamal Nenets District only in the 1940s. It is not clear if this was a deliberate anti-Nenets, and possibly anti-Khanty act, but such a conclusion is perhaps not too far-fetched since both the relative numerical strength of the Nenets within the Yamal Nenets District, and the territorial unity of the Khanty suffered from the change.

For the Yamal Nenets District, I have earlier population figures, though I have copied them from a private source which does not indicate the year of comparison. Nevertheless, it is illuminating to note that during a short span of time, when the population figures of indigenous peoples have remained constantly in approx. 30,000, there are now three and a half times more Russians and others, with a population growth from approx. 130,000 to over 460,000. This is understandably due to massive influx of immigrant workers from all parts of the Soviet Union, and often on temporary contracts, but even so, their impact on the ethnic network and especially the ecological balance has been most damaging. Needless to say, many areas have suffered from this sort of Soviet neocolonialism more than the Yamal Nenets District, but here the consequences have appeared very suddenly and abruptly.

So, despite many positive indications, even the Siberian Tundra Nenets community is still very much threatened, and perhaps more so now that the very heartland of the Nenets country on the Yamal Peninsula is being attacked by unscrupulous oil and gas hunters. The erosive trends, involving the continuing Russian cultural oppression manifested in the educational system and economic exploitation with catastrophic ecological consequences, are obvious. Russian is the only official language throughout the Nenets country, and while the Nenets are in principle free to use their native tongue for all cultural purposes, the cultivation of the Nenets language is in practice marginal. Ultimately, only a wide-scale national awakening, leading to a real ethnic autonomy with a strict control of the native territory, may secure the long-term existence of the Tundra Nenets people and their language. At the moment, it is unfortunately too early to say if anything substantial will be achieved in this fight for survival.

The present status of the Tundra Nenets language can thus be seen as a fragile balance between native language maintenance and functional bilingualism in Russian. In fact, there are quite a few elderly as well as a number of middle-aged people, especially women, who are basically monolingual in Nenets. By contrast, many people in the European Nenets country and in a number of Siberian localities have lost command of Nenets. On the Siberian side, Russian may be the principal language for many of the younger Nenets, but most of them have maintained a fluent knowledge of Nenets as well. The question is, then, how long the bulk of the Tundra Nenets, including the children of Siberian tundra dwellers, will continue to

use their native language vigorously, or, to put it in other words, whether the present functional bilingualism is going to stabilize, or whether Russian becomes even more dominant than it already is, eventually leading to the extinction of the native tongue.

The fact that the traditional culture and the native language are so far maintained on an exceptionally high level at least in large parts of the Nenets area is due to the nature of the economic basis of the Nenets culture, reindeer breeding. Since there exist no viable alternative methods for it, it has been preserved in its traditional form, which requires a nomadic way of life, and it has thus remained perhaps the one and only line of occupation that the Russians have not adopted for themselves. However, the economic infrastructure is firmly in Russian hands, and it is only thanks to the retentive and truly anti-Soviet spirit of the nomads of the tundra that the Nenets as a whole still have some chance of maintaining and reviving their national identity.

6) Finally, the only relatively vigorous Selkup idiom is **Northern Selkup**, whose approx. 1,500 speakers live mainly in the Krasnosel'kup County of the Yamal Nenets District, but also in the adjacent areas in the Krasnoyarsk Region. The vigour is relative, because in recent years, the pace of the language shift has accelerated to the extent that the younger generation is mostly monolingual in Russian. As usual, there are isolated families living far from the villages with children who during their first years speak Selkup but tend to lose its active command after entering school.

The two other (groups of) Selkup idioms, in the Tomsk Province, are the **Central Selkup**, with the subdivisions Narym and Tym' Selkup, and **Southern Selkup**, with the subdivisions Ob' and Ket' Selkup. Central and Southern Selkup differ from both Northern Selkup and each other to the extent that they are separate languages rather than dialects of a single Selkup language. In my opinion, it would be enough to distinguish between these three divisions at this general level, though some colleagues would rather take the above-mentioned subdivisions as the primary units of classification of the Selkup linguistic area. In either case, there appear to be few speakers left of any of the Selkup idioms other than Northern Selkup. In the Ob' area, Selkup is apparently extinct, and it is not remembered by many in the Tym' area either. The situations may be better in the Narym and Ket' areas, but even there it is rare to come across children speakers. The Central and Southern Selkups, lacking even a nominal autonomy, were generally ignored by the authorities and left without the school-books and other materials that were provided for most of the Northern Peoples. It is only very recently that a small number of publications have appeared, and it is not possible to see yet if they are indicative of a real chance for a small-scale language revival.

As a summary, the fifteen idioms dealt with above can be neatly divided into five groups: (i) Southern Mansi is definitely extinct; (ii) Western Mansi and Southern

Khanty are also possibly, if not probably extinct; (iii) Eastern Mansi, Central Selkup, Southern Selkup, Tundra Enets and Forest Enets are spoken by very small numbers of people; (iv) Northern Mansi, Northern Khanty, Eastern Khanty, Northern Selkup, Forest Nenets and Nganasan are spoken by substantial but dwindling numbers of people; (v) Tundra Nenets is spoken by a relatively large number of people, and is vigorously used by most of them.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Today, only one of the languages dealt with above, Tundra Nenets, faces no immediate threat, being still learnt by a substantial number of children, at least in a few areas. The rest of the languages are either seriously endangered or definitely moribund. The most recent extinction in Siberia, that of Kamas in 1989, was due to pre-revolution developments, but the harvest of the Soviet era will be reaped as massive extinction of languages in the decades to come.

I would not hesitate to say that the fate of the Siberian languages is especially sad even on a worldwide scale. During most of the seventy years of Soviet regime, the official policy was that all languages of the Soviet Union developed harmoniously to end in a perfect harmony. Though not explicitly stated, this final stage entailed monolingualism in Russian. Thus, all private efforts to promote native languages were strictly prohibited. Official bodies published primers and dictionaries for most native languages to maintain the illusion of their vigorous use. In fact, the educational system was the single most efficient means of ethnic assimilation in the Soviet Empire.

However, the fatal role of the school appeared more recently than one is likely to guess. Before Khrushchev's so-called school reform in the late 1950s, minority languages, Nenets included, were employed quite extensively in primary schools, i.e. as the medium of instruction for various subjects. Since this notorious reform, however, native languages were, and largely still are, excluded as mediums of instruction, and the children were discouraged from speaking a language other than Russian. The native language was retained in the curriculum as a subject, but it had a mere curiosity value. Even today, as a rule, it is used only during the classes devoted to the native language, and even then the teacher may speak Russian rather than Nenets, if some of the children are no longer competent in their native language.

Even more disastrous than the poor curriculum, is the circumstance that the children are forced to study in large schools of urban settlements, living in dormitories with many nationalities. While in school, then, the children communicate almost exclusively in Russian. At least in the past, teachers not only advised the children to give up their native language in favour of Russian, but it actually happened that children were punished if they did not obey. The parents were similarly advised against speaking the native language to their children.

As we all know, the Soviet Union was by no means the only state where anti-

minority policies were launched, and it must be remembered that during the early years of the Soviet rule, the attitudes towards national minorities and their languages were a lot more tolerant than during the Czarist regime. There is, however, another factor effecting the minority languages and communities, which reached its highest measures in the Soviet Union, namely the total lack of consideration of the natural environment. In other words, when natural resources were exploited in the areas of minority peoples, no attention was paid to the pollution and other countereffects caused by oil and gas drilling or other industrial activities. Unfortunately, such an attitude is largely typical of the modern Russian Federation, too, as the recent news seem to confirm.

The above-mentioned developments took place not only in Siberia, but all over the former Soviet Union. In Siberia, however, with its only one million indigenous people out of a total of 30 million inhabitants, the pressure of the Russian chauvinism and cultural oppression was, and is, felt particularly strongly. Most unfortunately, the concentration of school children in urban settlements effectively alienated them from their own language and culture, let alone their families. Consequently, the indigenous people generally became very passive and apathetic, and many of them gave up the hope of passing their traditions to younger generations. The rates of suicides and alcoholism among the indigenous people are alarming. Local Russians, who usually form a majority everywhere, and who always implement the political power, with rare individual exceptions, regard the indigenous cultures as worthless and feel reluctant to allow, let alone promote, any kind of language revival.

If the future development of the Russian Federation allows free individual activity in the field of language revival, there is certainly a chance for a few languages to survive. Of course, there are no expensive teaching aids available, but I should think that community-based projects could also make progress using more modest methods.

As linguists, we face a two-fold challenge. Firstly, we should be able to encourage and support all activities which promote language use and maintenance. In other words, our work should not be evaluated only by its academic merits, but, most importantly, from the point of view of what benefit the language communities concerned may obtain from it.

From a personal point of view, I am keenly aware of the rather theoretical nature of my own work, but, as I have experienced, many Nenets people take any kind of positive interest in their language as a sign of support. Therefore, on their behalf, they sincerely want to contribute to the success of my studies. As much as I may hope that those studies would finally be of some use to the people themselves, I am afraid that it is often not going to be so in any direct way. There is, however, one field of linguistics generally regarded as very useful even by laymen, namely lexicography. I have plans to publish a number of dictionaries, both theoretical and more practically oriented, based on my computer corpora. These would

include the first comprehensive dictionary of Forest Nenets, and a number of dictionaries of Tundra Nenets, including a practical multilingual one. At the moment, I can only promise that I will *try* to find time and strength to complete these projects.

More importantly perhaps, I have suggested that a Nenets yearbook should be initiated. There are no periodicals in Nenets, so that people who could and would read it have nothing of interest to read. The problem is that while a foreign scholar may suggest such an endeavour and also find positive response among the people, practically all members of the Nenets intelligentsia are already occupied with various literary projects, which, however, usually yield publications in Russian only. Again, only time will show if this or any other form of promoting native literacy will catch on. The same goes with all kinds of language revival projects, despite their absolute necessity. The obstacles are many but there is no other choice but to remain optimistic.

Secondly, we are responsible for the documentation of the endangered languages. Prospects for future work should therefore be urgently studied and priorities stated. Besides the very basic grammatical and lexical studies, the perspectives should be kept wide, the top priorities including related topics such as phonetics, culturally related semantics, toponymy, and folklore in its traditional setting.

In north-western Siberia, there are several languages with very few speakers left, and thus facing extinction. Each of these languages requires a separate project of thorough documentation, and the key words are co-operation of scholars and fruitful interaction with the speakers. For languages with more substantial numbers of speakers, there are usually native scholars and enthusiasts capable and willing to promote the study of their languages, and it should be possible to create communication networks functioning from local to global levels, and bringing together all people concerned. One possibility, though not reaching the remote parts of Siberia at the moment, is the effective use of electronic mail and related means of communication.

In this context, it deserves mentioning that the relationship between representatives of native peoples and scholars who set to study their languages and cultures is rarely without problems. For instance, I should think that one of the reasons why there are so few Russian specialists of Nenets must have something to do with the attitudes of the Nenets towards the Russians, and vice versa. Indigenous people often feel understandable resentment to those who seem to represent the colonial powers, and if a non-native scholar expresses feelings of superiority because of academic merits or the like, the attitudes will remain negative. The key word is, again, co-operation, and if there is a gap between natives and outsiders involved in linguistic and other studies, it has to be overcome.

To put it concretely, there is an urgent need for field-work on all levels among the most peripheral and endangered languages and dialects, yielding large text collections and high quality recordings. A special task is to find those masters still

performing traditional folklore. Native speakers should be encouraged to collect materials such as specialized vocabulary items and toponyms. The old collections still unpublished should be made available to speakers as well as scholars, so that it was clear what sorts of material already exist.

The two tasks, preservation and documentation do not conflict. To the contrary, the one improves the prospects of the other. From a scholarly point of view, documentation may be seen as the most urgent task, but from a wider human point of view, the future of the endangered languages and the corresponding communities should be of primary concern. Since we are first humans, and only then linguists, it should be our priority that our scholarly work and publications would as often as possible contribute to the cause of language preservation and maintenance.

REFERENCES

SALMINEN, Tapani

- 1991 The Nenets of the Ob and the Ural (re)visited. *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 83: 252–255, Helsinki.
- 1992 Kratkaja istorija odnoj nesostojavshejsja èkspedicii. *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 84: 236–239, Helsinki.

