Second Life as possible platform for endangered languages revitalization (the case of Ainu language in particular): problems and perspectives

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Abstract

Languages of so called ‘indigenous people’ are often endangered languages. When they start to speak about endangered language revitalization usually appears presupposition that sphere of use of such languages is restricted by ‘traditional cultures’. Actually none of existing languages is restricted by a ‘traditional culture’. Nowadays it’s simply impossible to maintain a traditional culture since environmental conditions have been seriously changed. Best way to save and revitalize a language is to make it develop freely and naturally but not to restrict it by some ‘traditional culture’. In the case of Ainu language we can see it has no real usage in real life. That’s why it can be perspective to create a sphere of use of Ainu language in virtual world, i.e. in Second Life that is the largest virtual world. In first stage role plays/historical reconstructions can attract people to Ainu language. As far as Ainu language gets some usage in virtual world something can be changed in real life.

Key words: language revitalization; Second Life; endangered languages; Ainu language

Projects oriented to preservation/revitalization of endangered languages usually consider sphere of use of such languages as restricted by so called ‘traditional culture’ i.e. when they speak of revitalization they usually presuppose restoration of correspondent ‘traditional culture’. But in contemporary world it is hardly possible to live by some ‘indigenous traditional culture’ (by hunting, gathering and so on) without any contacts with modern civilization and without use of modern technique. Any so called ‘traditional culture’ requires large space of pristine nature that obviously doesn’t exist in our days.

In our times any “traditional culture” is actually nothing but artificially created ethnographic theater for ‘hippies’/followers of New Age’ who are interested in ‘enigmatic indigenous spirituality’ more than in real matter of certain cultures. In the case of Ainu there is even special Japanese expression introduced by famous Ainu artist Bikki Sunazawa: kankō ainu “Ainu who perform rites in order to attract tourists”/ “Ainu of ethnographic theater who don’t care of real functioning of Ainu language and development of Ainu culture”.

If sphere of use of certain language is restricted by ‘traditional culture’ it means the language has no real functioning. A language that is considered to be alive should be able to describe not only ‘traditional items’ but also anything we can see around us, for instance: planes, cars, computers, cell phones and so on. Best way to save and revitalize a language is to make it develop freely and naturally but not to restrict it by some artificially created ‘traditional culture’. Hebrew is good example of a language that was revitalized successfully: it functions normally now because its sphere of use was not restricted by an artificially constructed ‘traditional culture’.
Since endangered languages usually have no normal functioning in real life it could be useful to create field of use for them in virtual worlds where it isn’t obligatory to use colonial languages everywhere and it is possible to set up a space where primary language would be a certain endangered language.

Second Life is the largest virtual world; it is something alike 3D social network; it provides great opportunities for creativity since anyone can set up its own space. I have been living in Second Life since November 2011; I have met in Second Life some people who like me belong to some ‘indigenous people’; most of them don’t consider Second Life as a platform for languages revitalization and even decline to use their indigenous languages in Second Life. Also they usually don’t consider language as something that is important for transfer of culture, for them culture is rites/wearing while language is a periphery; participation in tribal events is considered as a prerequisite to be a representative of certain culture. Only a Basque guy agreed with me that, of course, language is important matter when question is about transfer of culture.

Wearing *attus* “traditional Ainu wear made of inner layers of wooden bark” and participation in bear feast don’t make me to be Ainu; in contemporary world where almost all cultures use same technologies and where anthropological differences between different ethnicities step by step disappear, language actually is the main base for certain culture since through language people acquire the way of world lubricating that exists in certain culture and thus get ability to become members of certain culture (to acquire certain culture world view). Thus, if we speak of revitalization of a language we should care of its normal use in contemporary condition but not of restoration of some artificial ‘traditional culture’; i.e. we should look for those people who want to use Ainu language in everyday life; and there is no need to care about those who are Ainu by blood since in most cases they aren’t interested in their language.

What can make people to learn and to use Ainu? Ainu obviously hardly can be considered as profitable language like English/Mandarin/Japanese; it rather can be placed in niche of, for instance, Quenya/Toki Pona i.e. languages that are learned due to their amazing systems or due to interest to correspondent cultures.

In 2012 I set a sim named Ainu Resort that isn’t historical role play sim but is a normal modern club/resort where Ainu language is considered as official language.

Regular events held in Ainu Resort haven’t given any serious result for Ainu language propaganda since people usually make accent on word *resort* but not on *Ainu*. That’s why I think historical role play can be more helpful in this case.

Despite I have never seen that someone learned a language participating in a thematic historical role play (for instance I have never seen that people performing as samurais or geishas in Edo themed sims could speak Japanese except of some common greetings) I think role play and historical reconstructions actually can be useful in order to attract people to Ainu related themes, i.e. it can be useful if it isn’t just role play but a mean that inspires interest to certain culture and language.

My plan is the following: gather a group of people who would be interested in this role play; propagate Ainu language among them, i.e. use of language inside role play and then step by step wider its sphere of use: for instance use it in Second Life market place in description of items that have no direct and immediate relation to role play and then use it outside Second Life: in social networks, in YouTube, twitter and anywhere else in web. When Ainu language will get some real usage in virtual world and in web then I hope it would be able to get some real usage in real life too.

Below are shown some snapshots of a location that represents a reconstruction of Yamatai settlement made in Second Life (Yamatai is thought to be ancient Ainu state).

![Pic.2 A general view of the location](http://maps.secondlife.com/secondlife/Renzio/56/50/2106) (author snapshot).
Pic. 3 Real life reconstruction of Yayoi epoch settlement (Yoshinogari site) that was used as a base for Second Life reconstruction; (photo source: http://www.greenshinto.com/wp/2012/05/20/yayoi-life-yoshinogari/)

Pic. 4 Map representing Yoshinogari site location (Google maps screenshot modified by the author)
Pic. 5 An everyday life scene of Yamatai: a noblewoman with her gentlewoman/servant (author snapshot).
Below are screenshots demonstrating use of Ainu language in Second Life Marketplace:

Pic. 6 Use of Ainu language in description of an item related to role play (author screenshot)
Pic. 7 Use of Ainu language in description of an item that isn’t related to role play (author screenshot).