

Kamchatka Ainu dialect revitalization perspectives

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Abstract

Since 2008 in Russian media appears information about Ainu community in Kamchatka. Despite some members of the community were marked as Ainu in last census that took place in 2010, the community has not been officially recognized as indigenous. The root of problem is that members of community demonstrate lack of identity: they demonstrate little interest in their own native language, while it is ability to speak in corresponding language that is used as marker of identity by officials. That's why revitalization of Kamchatka Ainu dialect is matter of high importance. Kamchatka Ainu is among badly described Ainu dialects; however, its proximity to Hokkaido dialects allows making extrapolation of Hokkaido forms in doubtful cases. Also important point is that for successful revitalization sphere of language use should not be restricted by so called 'traditional culture'; use of the language in web and in urban sphere should be widely developed.

Key words: Kamchatka Ainu dialect; Northern Kuril Ainu dialect; language revitalization

1. Problem introduction. Historical background

In 2008 in Russian mass media appeared information that there is a community of Ainu people in Kamchatka peninsula. In last Russian census, that took place in 2010, 94 people identified themselves as Ainu. According to Alexei Nakamura (leader of Kamchatka Ainu community) there are about 250 people of Ainu origin in Kamchatka.

It was rather surprising since no Kamchatka Ainu were mentioned in census took place in Soviet period and in census of 2002.

Scholars who managed field works in Kamchatka during Soviet period never mentioned about Ainu, while they openly wrote about other indigenous ethnic groups living in Kamchatka: Even, Itelmen, Kerek and Koryak. Common point of view was that Kamchatka Ainu completely assimilated into Kamchadal¹.

(After the end of WWII some Ainu lived in the island of Sakhalin, but in 1979 Ainu were recognized as extinct ethnic group since those Ainu had died by that time; and we see no mentions of Kamchatka Ainu.)

On the other hand data of archaeology that Ainu lived in Kamchatka since late Jōmon epoch² (Dikova 1983).

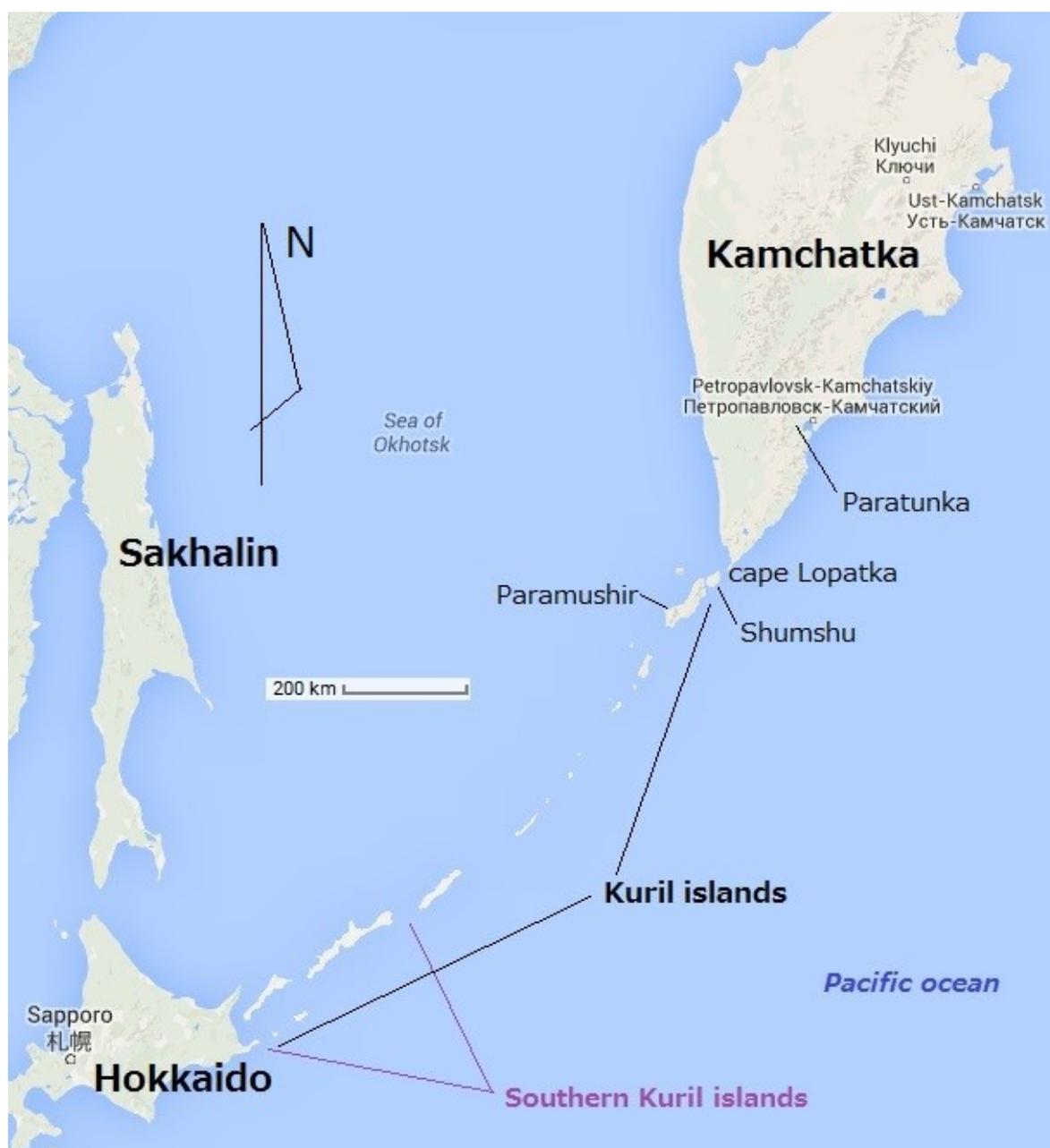
Toponyms of Ainu origin also corroborate the fact of long presence of Ainu in Kamchatka. For example: Paratunka (name of a river and a village upon the river) is a compound of three Ainu

¹ Initially (in 18th century) word Kamchadal was used as synonym of word Itelmen, but by the end of 19th century it became name of Russian – Itelmen creoles, i.e.: a special subgroup of Russian.

² About 1500 – 300 BC

morphemes: *para* – “be wide”/ “be broad”, *tun* – “valley”/ “space”, *ka* – “place”. Lopatka (name of southernmost cape of Kamchatka) can be represented as compound of the following morphemes: *ru/tru* “way” + *o* “to rule” + *pa/pake* “head” + *ka* “place”, so initially it was *Truopakka* – “cape that shows the way”. Also Kamchatka itself seems to be a word of Ainu origin, it consists of the following morphemes: *kam* “to stretch” + *cak* “to blast” + *ka* “place”, so initially it seemed to be *Kamcakka* “Stretched place [with] blasts”.

Benedykt Dybowski who travelled to Kamchatka in 1877 – 1883 (Kuczyński 1989: 207) compiled a dictionary of Kamchatka Ainu dialect (Dybowski 1891). Dybowski’s dictionary represents not some broken Ainu or an Ainu based pidgin but a fairly understandable normal Ainu dialect. It means that Ainu language was language of everyday use in Kamchatka in last quarter of 19th century; and also it means that Ainu society normally maintained its way of life in that epoch.



Pic. 1. Map representing locations mentioned in the text (made after Google map screenshot)

Despite Kamchatka Ainu have been marked in last census they were not officially recognized as indigenous group and they were denied to get preferential quotas for fishing.

Doubt of Russian officials about validity of contemporary Kamchatka Ainu claims to be officially recognized as an indigenous group is actually rather reasonable since there are no notes about Kamchatka Ainu in Soviet census and other official documents, while other indigenous groups of Kamchatka have been marked in official documents of Soviet period.

Another important cause of doubt is the fact that those Kamchatka Ainu community doesn't speak Ainu language and unfortunately seems to demonstrate little interest in it, while in court proof of belonging to an indigenous community is ability to produce spontaneous utterances in corresponding language.

We suppose that little interest in native language from indigenous people is actually lack of identity.

Revitalization of language should be matter of highest importance for such community. And the fact that Ainu language was spoken in Kamchatka in last quarter of 19th century (i.e.: not very long ago) means that there are actually rather good perspectives of revitalization.

2. Why language is the key point for revitalization and maintaining culture?

Main problem of any language revitalization is that in many cases indigenous people don't understand its importance for maintaining of their indigenous culture and demonstrate low interest in language, and have little motivation.

However, in contemporary conditions when globalization increases, when differences between different anthropological types step by step disappear, when almost all cultures use the same technologies, what can be the basis for identification a person as a member of certain culture? What can be the root, the backbone of certain cultural tradition? Culture is not things, is not wearing: just wearing *attus* (traditional Ainu wear made of inner layers of wooden bark) and participation in bear feast don't make anyone be Ainu as well as wearing kimono and participating in *matsuri* (local shrine festivals) don't make anyone be Japanese.

Culture is a way of thinking, way of behavior. Since way of thinking and way of behavior are expressed in language, so language is the root of any culture especially when material side of culture changes rather fast like in contemporary conditions (Akulov 2015; Nonno 2015).

This point is especially important since, according to Alexei Nakamura, members of Kamchatka Ainu community are mixed, but not pureblooded Ainu and some of them have originated from other places but not Kamchatka³, and also they obviously don't know much of Ainu rituals, so use of Ainu language could be the marker of Ainuhood.

3. Why sphere of language use should not be restricted by 'traditional culture'?

Projects oriented to preservation/revitalization of endangered languages usually consider sphere of use of such languages as restricted by so called '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. 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.

³ According to Alexei Nakamura his family originated from Southern Kuril island, after the end of WWII his father was moved to Sakhalin and there

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’. (Nonno 2015).

As far as in real life there Kamchatka Ainu has no normal functioning, it can be useful to create field of use for them in web/virtual worlds where it is possible to set up a space where Kamchatka Ainu would be primary language.

4. What can be done first of all?

Right now main task is to reconstruct grammar of Kamchatka Ainu. Kamchatka Ainu dialect that was described the worst way. There are some dictionaries/word lists and there are almost no description of its grammar except of some phrases.

Kamchatka Ainu dialect is closest relative of Northern Kuril Ainu dialect. It is more correct to speak about Northern Kuril – Kamchatka dialect.

This dialect, as we can see, is quite closely connected with Eastern Hokkaido dialects: grammar that can be seen in some little examples demonstrate almost no difference with Hokkaido dialects; the most serious differences with Hokkaido dialects are in lexis since some lexis; some lexis seems to be of Itelmen/Russian origin.

Since description of this dialect are very poor so in doubtful cases if there is a form which is a common Ainu form – the same form also can be reconstructed for Kamchatka Ainu dialect.

5. Available materials on Kamchatka Ainu

Main materials on North Kuril – Kamchatka Ainu dialect are the following:

- 1) Short word list and some basic phrases represented in description of Kamchatka written by S. P. Krasheninnikov. This material is especially important since it represents language when it was in completely normal everyday usage yet.
- 2) Dictionary compiled by above mentioned Dybowski. It is also very important since it represents language of the time very close to contemporaneity.
- 3) Dictionary of Northern Kuril dialect compiled by Murayama Shichirō.
- 4) Examples of Kuril dialect in dictionary of Ainu dialects compiled by Hattori Shirō.

6. Conclusion

As far as language is far more than just endangered, i.e.: it is required a complete reconstruction of grammar so material of closely related dialects (Hokkaido) should be widely used.

Sphere of language use should not be restricted by so called ‘traditional culture’. Use of the language in web, in virtual worlds and in urban sphere should be widely developed.

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