

## Some thoughts on the revitalization of Nanai language

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### Abstract

The paper is devoted to the contemporary sociolinguistic situation of Nanai language (one of Tungusic languages), and ideas about its revitalization. Main problems are the following: low activity of Nanai people, gaps between different groups and institutions, lack of good materials for Nanai language learning. I propose some initial actions for attempt of revitalization of Nanai language; main tasks are located in social sphere: to work with the aged people in order to softer their reaction to language competences of the youth; to work with the youth in order to inspire them to learn Nanai language and to make different interesting projects with Nanai language: like music, discussion clubs et c. One of the main tasks is organizing Nanai language nests.

**Key words:** Tungusic languages; Nanai language; endangered languages revitalization; indigenous languages; sociolinguistics

### 1. General information about Nanai language

Nanai language belong to Southern branch of Tungusic family; Nanai language is spread in Russian Far East (in Khabarovsk Krai and Primorsky Krai) (see pic.1).

Nanai is the biggest Tugusic language of the Amur river and one of the biggest languages of Tungusic family (only Even, Evenki and Xibo languages have more speakers than Nanai). Also in the region are used such languages as: Udeghe, Even (also Tungusic languages), Nivkh, Russian and Chinese.

Nanai language has its own literature (based on Naikhin dialect); orthographic system is based on Cyrillic.

Approximate number of Nanai speakers is about 100 – 200 people; (while total number of Nanai population is about 11 000).

Nanai people live mostly in Russia in Khabarovsk Krai and Primorsky Krai.

Also, there are some Nanai people in China: about 3000 of so called Hezhe (a subgroup of Nanai people), but they speak mostly Chinese and only about 10 of them can speak Kilen<sup>1</sup> (Zhang 2013: 5).

Nanai language divides into some dialects (their actual number depends on particular classification, for instance, sometimes Ulch language is considered as a dialect of Nanai). In a word: there are several dialectal zones starched along the Amur river.

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<sup>1</sup> Kilen is the name of Nanai dialect spoken by Hezhe people.



Pic. 1. Map showing location of settlements mentioned in the text (map has been made after Google maps).

## 2. Contemporary sociolinguistic situation

For a preliminary assessment of contemporary sociolinguistic situation of Nanai language and for planning certain initial steps for revitalization of its revitalization I managed a fieldwork in January 2017 in the Nanai district of Khabarovsk Krai (pic.1) in the villages of Dada, Naikhin, Daerga, Jari, Troitskoe.

Nanai language is used in these villages slightly better than in other places (Gerasimova 2002).

Probably it's due to relatively big number of Nanai people and due to special national status of the district.

In the village of Naikhin about half of its inhabitants belong to Nanai ethnicity, another half is mostly Russian; while in the village of Dada about 90% of habitants are Nanai (Chislennost'...).

Nanai language is used mostly in home sphere and between aged people.

The village of Dada is an optimistic place of Nanai language usage: there are some 50+ years old people who can speak Nanai, some 30+ people who can understand but cannot speak Nanai. Children can say some words due to school course of Nanai.

In the Nanai district Nanai language is studied as second language, however, school program ignores this case and the subject is names: *rodnoi yazyk* "native tongue"<sup>2</sup>.

Nanai language is taught in 16 schools<sup>3</sup> as a subject obligatory for all pupils, from 2 to 6 hours in different schools till 9<sup>th</sup> form<sup>4</sup>.

In the system of secondary school Nanai is studied in the Nikolaevsk-on-Amur Industrial and Humanitarian College; in the system of high education Nanai is studied in the Institute of the Peoples of the North nations<sup>5</sup> in Saint Petersburg, but the number of student is very small.

### 3. The problem of language shift

There is some literature about language shift for Nanai, for example Stolyarov 1997. He discusses Nanai people attitude toward the reforms of their writing system, then he talks about reducing the number of the lessons of Nanai language in school, lack of good dictionaries. Also he says that language should be restored along with 'traditional culture'. This point of view is actually very controversial since so called 'traditional cultures' are usually artificial constructs, and since any language that pretend to be alive in contemporary conditions should not be restricted by any artificially created 'traditional cultures' and should be able to describe any contemporary issues.

Today nobody actually cares about the shift. People in general think, that the acquisition of the language is school task, teachers at school often say, that the problem has another root: people have to speak Nanai at home. Culture centers make some festivals and other cultural events, but only for music, theaters, poetry, and sport and for another "traditional activities". Language for them is overboard.

But people in general want to revitalize Nanai language: about 80% of respondents said that they want to do something for their children can speak Nanai, but they don't know what to do.

There are also several activists who can make so called "Language Nests" and perform other activity with some help (consultations from linguists, some material support and so on).

In general there is something alike gap between linguists, teachers of language, language activists, local cultural organizations, public organizations, youth... and one of the main aim is to connect all these groups.

### 4. The project of Nanai language revitalization

2 It's another problem, that Russian term *rodnoi yazyk* (lit.: "native tongue") is used for "ethnic language" and often people literally say "I don't know my mother language".

3 Information from official website of Khabarovsk Krai education system <https://www.edu27.ru/?id=3249> – accessed March 2017.

4 In Russian schools usually there are 11 forms; program from 1<sup>st</sup> till 9<sup>th</sup> is obligatory, and program from 9<sup>th</sup> till 11<sup>th</sup> is facultative.

5 Its official website: [https://www.herzen.spb.ru/en/About\\_University/1334732901/1335513461/](https://www.herzen.spb.ru/en/About_University/1334732901/1335513461/) –accessed March 2017.

I propose to make some steps in different directions, because language revitalization is a complex of tasks.

#### 4.1. Social sphere

First sphere for work is social direction. Approximate plan is the following:

1) Working with the old people in problems of language shift and revitalization. Often aged people have very specific notions about language shift and language competence of the other people. Aged people want to use only ‘true language’ and any mistakes (or innovations) are unpleasant and often unacceptable for them. They can say to a more young person (for example, somebody who learned language from books and at school, but not as first language): “stop speak your clumsy Nanai language and speak Russian!”

I suppose that after discussion about the problems of language shift those aged people can become a little more tolerable to innovations, to certain changes and to some mistakes of young speakers.

2) Stimulating 30+ aged people to learn and to use Nanai language. They often can say some phrases or understand Nanai conversation, but they don't try to do something for activating language skills.

3) Working with children in social network, support internet communities.<sup>6</sup> Web can be a good platform for discussion of language problems with the youth, since young people often escape discussing these problems in their plain everyday life.

4) Discussing with young parents the project of “Language Nests”.

#### 4.2. Improving the status of Nanai language

Another direction is to improve the status of Nanai language; creating a fashion for it. Possible steps can be the following:

1) Producing some modern music, clips in Nanai language. There are some young people who want to do it together and our task is to help them (inspire them).

2) Translate some popular modern movies into Nanai. It's also not so hard: there are some people have appropriate competence and wish.

3) Support Nanai youtube channel<sup>7</sup> about Nanai language. Now the channel contains some movies in Nanai and about Nanai language.

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6 For example: Nanai heseni (lit.: “Nanai language”) [https://vk.com/nanay\\_heseni](https://vk.com/nanay_heseni) – accessed March 2017; and Nanai heseveni bodyoy naisal hopani (lit.: “Group on studying of Nanai language and culture) <https://ok.ru/nanaykhese> – accessed March 2017.

7 Nanai Xisangovori “To speak Nanai” [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT64e6J1w8gwnFXi1L-nQ\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT64e6J1w8gwnFXi1L-nQ_A) – accessed March 2017.

4) Producing original movies in Nanai. Especially useful can be producing of animated series in Nanai language. Despite it can be quite expensive, but it can give positive effect for Nanai language learning.

#### **4.3. Recommendations about materials for Nanai language learning**

There are also some suggestions about producing of certain materials that would help Nanai language learning:

- 1) a phrasebook for mobile devices;
- 2) a dictionary (with translator) for computers and mobile devices;
- 3) a good self-tutorial book (a pdf file, for example, that would be shared for a very little price or even for free).

#### **4.4. Creating space for the use of the language**

In order to be alive any language needs a space where it can be used, so creating spaces for the use of Nanai also is a matter of high importance. There are some ideas about it:

- 1) In some kindergartens in Naikhin, Dada, Khabarovsk can be organized so called in Nanai language nests. There is all corresponding background: availability of specialists, wishes of Nanai people et c.
- 2) It is possible to organize Nanai speaking leisure clubs in Dada, Naikhin, Jari, Khabarovsk. There is already some positive experience on this direction.
- 3) Organizing summer language camp for teens would help them to learn language since it's for teens it's more useful sometimes to learn language in informal conditions.
- 4) Using Nanai language in social networks (making chats et c.) would help to develop its urban usage that is matter of high importance for any language that pretend to be alive in contemporary condition.

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