Actual problems of Ainu language revitalization

Alexander Akulov
independent scholar; St.Petersburg, Russia; e-mail: aynu@inbox.ru

Tresi Nonno
independent scholar; Chiba, Japan; e-mail: tresi_nonno@hotmail.com

Abstract

It was supposed that social networks and virtual worlds could be good platforms for Ainu language revitalization. Also it was supposed that the conception of native tongue should be thrown as well as conception of 'native' gender. Anybody who can produce spontaneous utterances in a language should be considered as its speaker. However, it has appeared that it's not easy to create a platform for revitalization. Second Life has appeared to be nothing else, but just a huge mall where any activity except stereotyped isn't welcomed. Facebook has appeared to be a 'ghetto' of so called UN 'hippies' who mostly want to see indigenous cultures as enigmatic exotics only. Funds also provide little support for real activists of revitalization.

Keywords: Ainu language; language revitalization; virtualization

1. Problem introduction

In contemporary world projects of revitalization of so called endangered languages are usually welcomed, however, true revitalization often meets certain obstacles. True revitalization of an endangered language usually is accompanied by a set of weird stereotypes that seriously disturb it.

It was supposed that virtual worlds and social networks could become convenient platforms of language use since in real life it's hard to find a sufficient field of language use and in virtual worlds it would be easier to eliminate negative factors, for instance: influence of so called 'traditional culture' (Akulov, Nonno 2016; Nonno 2015). However, reality has appeared to be slightly more complicated and virtualization has met some problems, and in current paper we discuss main negative issues.

2. Main problem is wrong understanding of what is a speaker of a language

In everyday life people usually have rather adequate notion of what is speaking in a language. However, when people get in touch with so called endangered languages their normal understanding of speaking often disappears.

To speak means "to produce spontaneous utterances", i.e.: recitation of texts got by heart evidently isn't speaking. For instance, a person who remember whole text of Shakespeare's Hamlet, but can't say or write anything in English can't be considered as speaker while, for instance, a person who enters in a shop and says the following phrase: "I milk two" actually is speaker, despite the phrase has serious grammatical and pragmatic mistakes, but it can be understood by the speakers and the person finally can get desirable items.

In the case of Ainu most scholars consider as speakers not those who can produce spontaneous utterances, but those who learned Ainu from their parents/grandparents and used to speak Ainu in distant past in childhood. Such people usually didn't use Ainu language during most of their

life anyhow, they can recite some narratives, they can remember some phrases, but they evidently should not be considered as speakers.

For instance, when we read in a report about contemporary condition of Ainu language that there are only five aged women who can speak Ainu I can only say that it's simply wrong since authors of such reports have completely wrong understanding of what is to speak a language. Aged women can be informants about old life of Ainu people or about certain folklore narratives, however, they hardly can be considered as those who can speak since their ability to communicate in Ainu has been lost.

3. Mythology of so called native speakers/native tongue

This problem is closely connected with issue described in previous part. Scholars and Ainu themselves (people who identify themselves as Ainu) usually seriously think that speakers of Ainu can be only those who learned language from their parents in childhood. As it has been shown above people who learned Ainu in their childhood could forget it well (and usually they did).

If we accept the myth of native speakers then there probably are very few people who can speak Ainu, but if we pay attention to communicative ability only and don't care about ways of learning the language then we can see that there are more people who are actually Ainu speakers. We suppose that conception of native speaker/native tongue should be thrown as well as concept of 'native' gender. People don't hesitate to change their own nature so they should not hesitate to change issues which are much simpler than human body. In contemporary world many people are bilingual/trilingual; and we suppose that any person can chose what language is more preferable for him/her as main language. Anybody who can produce spontaneous utterances in Ainu should be considered as speaker, i.e.: there should be no idée fixe of native since ethnicity/culture is determined by language, but not by genetics not genetics.

4. Second Life as a false mirror of real life

At first sight Second Life seem to be very convenient and useful platform for Ainu language revitalization since in Second Life anybody can create anything, however, really in Second Life it's almost impossible to create something that is outside of stereotyped issues. For instance: in Second Life evidently there are some people who learned Japanese history in universities, but for some unknown cause all sims devoted to Japanese history are about Edo period only, i.e.: there are no sims about Yayoi, Kofun, Heian or Meiji. It's unpleasantly surprising since it's not prohibited to create new buildings/new outfits. It's not prohibited to create, but there are very little attempts to create something new. Actually anybody can create anything, but any sims devoted to certain original/new themes are usually extremely unpopular and it's very hard to advertise new themes. All this makes us conclude that Second Life is against any creativity except stereotyped. Second Life is actually nothing else, but just a huge mall, and it is based on the most stereotyped views only.

5. Facebook as a ghetto of UN 'hippies'

Facebook is generally considered as a very nice and convenient place for any activities connected with languages and cultures, however, really Facebook is much alike Second Life.

Target audience of Facebook can be named 'hippies'of United Nations (or simply UN 'hippies'). UN 'hippies' is a special term used to denote people who usually club around different UN commissions and committees devoted to indigenous cultures/languages. (It's possible to say that UN 'hippies' are just a subgroup of so called social justice warriors.) Their main activity is to

travel from one congress devoted to indigenous cultures/languages to another and to post pictures with different 'wise thoughts' in Facebook.

UN 'hippies' have very peculiar interest toward indigenous culture: they like only so called 'traditional cultures' which actually are artificial sets of exotic items (actually interest toward so called traditional cultures is merely escapism from boring routine of everyday life).

UN hippies like speak about creating different new identities when the discourse is about them; however, they decline to recognize the fact that indigenous cultures also can elaborate new issues and new identities. UN hippies follow the paradigm of social constructivism when the discourse is about them, but they follow social positivism when the discourse is about indigenous people. UN hippies usually follow mythologies of Neo-Luddism/radical environmentalism and so they decline to recognize the fact that indigenous cultures also can elaborate urban trend, and demonstrate little interest in the ideas of virtualization. (Needless to say that most followers of Neo-Luddism live in modern cities and use all latest technologies.)

In December 2016 we met a group of such people in Facebook; they told us that they were interested in Ainu language, and we created a special group for exchanging information, and conversation. Those UN hippies didn't show any interest toward Ainu language: they didn't post about language, they even didn't like posts devoted to different issues of Ainu grammar. Instead of this they endlessly discussed the following topics: whether Ainu people have some connection with Nivkh/Siberian/Tlingit; whether Ainu patterns have some meanings; whether certain person looks like Nivkh or like Ainu and so on; all these topics obviously can be interesting, however, they have no connection with Ainu language revitalization; and also this white noise disturbs positive efforts of revitalization.

Nobody ever seen that UN 'hippies' really revitalized even a single endangered language. Usually they have very little knowledge about any indigenous languages and very naïve and idealized image of indigenous cultures, and most of their activity disturbs true revitalization.

6. Funds follow the policy of double standards

Funds were created specially to help activists of language revitalization. That's why obstacles created by funds usually cause special wonderment.

For instance a fund can say literally the following: "a language which has no native speakers can't be revived" or "the proposed project is reclamation, but not revitalization". We suppose that in the case of such languages as Ainu there should be no such strict distinctions between reclamation and revitalization.

Another negative point is the fact that funds always require that those who apply for a program should demonstrate certain connection with corresponding indigenous community. We don't suppose that such practice is good. From the one hand we all know well that indigenous communities often can be very sluggish and inactive and demonstrate very little interest in corresponding language. From the other hand language activists can have no connection with indigenous communities while their activity can be much more helpful than any indigenous events.

References

Akulov A., Nonno T. 2016. Virtualization as a mean of endangered languages revitalization. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics*, Vol 2, № 1; pp.: 46 – 49

Nonno T. 2015. Second Life as possible platform for endangered languages revitalization (the case of Ainu language in particular): problems and perspectives. *Cultural Anthropology and Ethnosemiotics* , Vol. 1, № 1; pp.: 53 – 59