

# **VOICES FROM TUNDRA AND TAIGA**

## **TUNDRA YUKAGIR**

*a nearly extinct Paleo-Asian Isolate in Arctic Russia:  
a Collection on CD/DVD of Linguistic and Folkloristic Materials  
of the Language and Culture of a Siberian People  
for Documentation, Education and Safeguarding for Posterity*



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**Research project  
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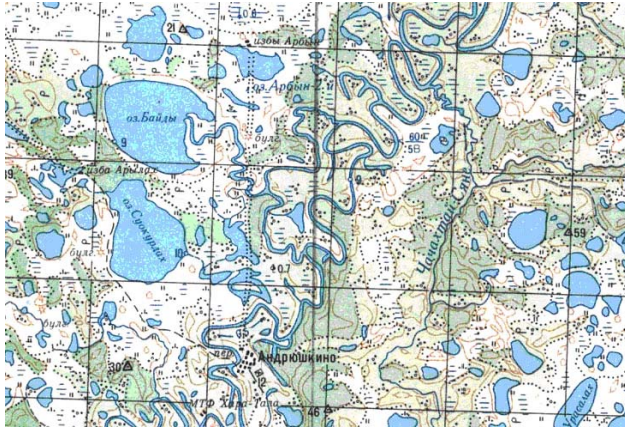
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## Background

Tundra Yukagir (TY) is spoken in the northeast of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia, Russian Federation), between the lower Indigirka and the lower Kolyma. The population is approximately 700, but at present the number of good speakers is dramatically low with some 50 people still speaking their mother tongue properly.

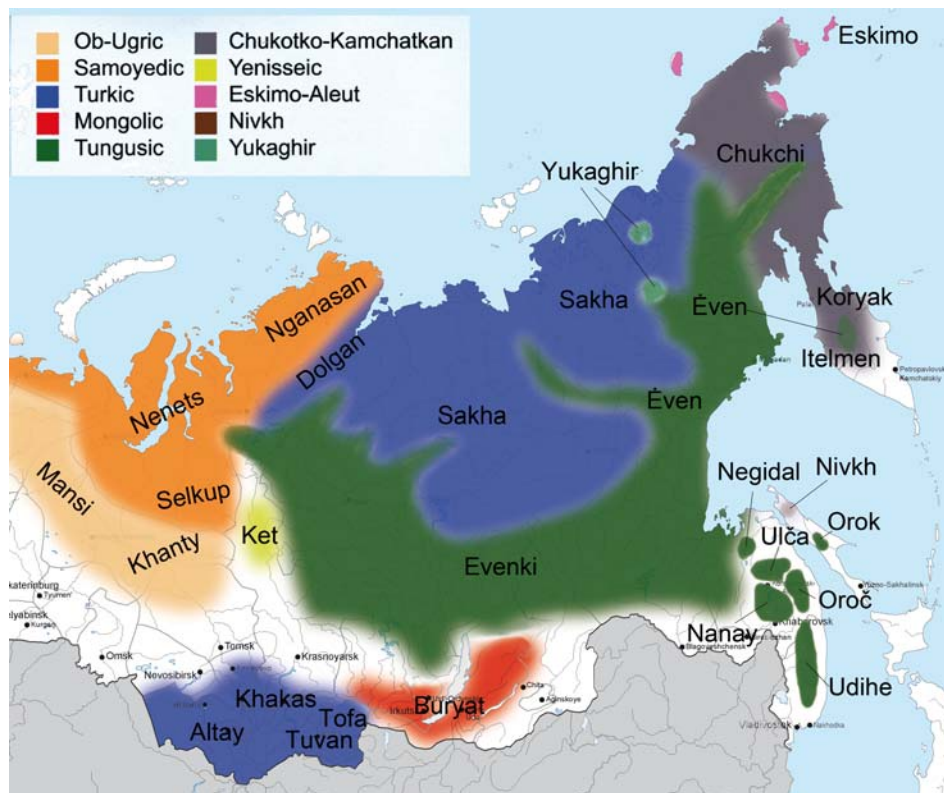


Most TY speakers are fluent in Russian and Yakut, and in at least one of the indigenous languages of the area: Chukchi, Evenki and Even. In the village of Andryushkino where most TY live, the language is hardly spoken anymore, and TY parents and language teachers blame themselves for not passing TY on to their children. In school children learn their native language and about the indigenous cultures of local peoples. Folkloristic

festivals are frequently held in which villagers, young and old, participate. The general attitude is positive towards language revival.

## Language context

The Tundra Yukagir language belongs to the group of Paleo-Asian languages (Nikolaeva & Khelimsky, 1997). Two Yukagir languages exist, southern (Kolyma) and northern (Tundra) Yukagir, that are not mutually intelligible, and probably form an isolated language family. The only available, but incomplete TY grammars are Kreinovich (1958, 1982) and Kurilov (2006), and a sketch with texts by Maslova (2003); a collection of texts with glosses and English translation is Maslova (2001).



Map of the languages of Siberia. By courtesy of the Max Planck Institute, Leipzig. © MPI for Evolutionary Anthropology.



Of special interest in the TY language is the system of morphosyntactic encoding of information structure. Comrie devoted a short study to the “rich system of morphological means for the encoding of the focus in a sentence, where ‘focus’ is understood as the essential new information conveyed by a sentence” (Comrie 1992: 55). A more theoretical approach to the focus system is Maslova (2005). In addition to the system of grammaticalized focus, focus is marked by means of intonation. So far the relationship and interaction between grammatical and prosodic marking of focus has not been studied. This issue is an important part of the research.

TY is an especially unique language as regards prosodic features in traditional storytelling techniques: in narratives, speaking conventionally gradually changes into singing (Ignatieva 1991, Sheikin 2002). This unique strategy in the characteristic art of TY storytelling has never been registered and analysed, and needs to be documented and preserved given its exceptional character.

In TY several more prosodic features at the utterance and word levels have been observed that have never been experimentally verified and described. Native speakers of TY report discrete differences between short and long vowels and long vowels and diphthongs, but these have not been analysed and verified in perception experiments; it is furthermore not clear whether TY has lexical word stress.

In autumn 2009 Cecilia Odé and Mark Schmalz visited Andryushkino for a first linguistic expedition.



### Research methodology

The research methodology is the one common in documentary linguistics (fieldwork, recording, interview, elicitation, transcription and glossing, translation into English and Russian). The research programme consists of three parts:

- 1) Full description of the language, both as regards its morphosyntax and as regards its phonology,
- 2) Documentation of the language through digital audiovisual recordings of narratives and songs, conversation and discourse, and the digital audio recording of the existing dictionary of Kurilov,
- 3) Contribution to the development of courseware.

All three parts of the research will be carried out in close cooperation with linguists in the Russian Federation, in Sakha and elsewhere, and with native speakers during periods of fieldwork. Transcriptions, glosses, translations and analyses will be carefully checked with native speakers in Sakha.

### Knowledge Dissemination

Technical training and workshops in transcribing, glossing and translating texts will be given for an audience of local linguists, students and for native language consultants who have expressed their willingness to participate in the project.



Popular-scientific presentations will also be given for a larger audience. The result of the project will be a synthesis with a multi-media CD/DVD that will also go online. The CD/DVD with video- and audio-recordings of stories and folk tales will be designed in such a way that it can be used by scientists as well as by the local TY community. Publications will be sent to the media in Sakha and in other parts of the Russian Federation. Finally, courseware for TY will be developed and the TY dictionary will be digitally recorded and published on CD.



### Research Team and Partners

University of Amsterdam: Prof Dr. P.C. Hengeveld (Supervisor, Promotor), Dr C. Odé (Senior Researcher), M. Schmalz MA (PhD student).

Northern Institute for Northern Minorities (Russian Academy of Sciences, Siberian Branch), Yakutsk; Arctic State Institute for Culture and Art, Yakutsk; St Petersburg State University, Faculty of Arts; Institute for Linguistic Research, Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg.

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