

## From Identity to Language: Interrupted change and remaining uses

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### **Abstract**

For almost a century, the Yupik people of Chukotka have been exposed to a continuing external pressure from the Russians. As a result, they have been losing their aboriginal culture and language becoming tremendously russified, spiritually, culturally and linguistically. The past 15 years however, have dragged the Chukotkan people into a turmoil of political, economic, ideological and cultural changes that have formed and transformed the Yupik Eskimos perception of “self” and their “Yupikness” within a bigger political and socio-cultural context. With language becoming a primary marker of shifting identities, the people’s loyalty towards, and their use of the surrounding languages has been changing as well. Based upon my recent fieldwork in Chukotka, this paper looks at the remaining uses of language in the native Eskimo villages in Chukotka and discusses the question of language shift in relation to the question of ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Chukotka, Central Siberian Yupik

Central Siberian Yupik Eskimos (CSY)<sup>1</sup> are the second largest Yupik-speaking group within the Yupik branch of the Eskimo-Aleut language family. Altogether there are slightly more than 2000 people, all living in the Beringia region. About 1/3 of the Yupik population

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<sup>1</sup> The term Central Siberian Yupik (plural – Yupiks or Yupiget) is commonly used when describing the Yupik population of St. Lawrence Island and Chaplinski Yupik-speaking group in Chukotka. Since the term “Siberian” is not an adequate term for either of the sides, and is often interpreted by the Yupik population as offensive, I would simply use the term Yupik throughout the text. Note that Yupik people should not be confused with Central Alaskan Yup’ik (Yupiit) group that counts over 20,000 people.

(about 800 people) inhabit the Providenski Region of Chukotka Peninsula, the Far East of the Russian Federation, while approximately 2/3 of the Yupik population live in Alaska, USA: ca. 1300 people on St. Lawrence Island, and an additional 200-300 in Nome.

The political separation of the communities took place in 1867, when the Russians sold Alaska to the United States. Yet, the movements of people between the continent and the island continued until the mid 1920's, when the last two families are known to have moved from Chukotka to St. Lawrence Island<sup>2</sup>. In 1948, as a result of the Cold War, the international border between Russia and the USA was closed. This event signalled a period of complete isolation between the Yupik people, which lasted until the reopening of the border in 1988.

The aboriginal language spoken on the island, known as St. Lawrence Island Yupik (CSY SLI) is almost identical to the Chaplinski dialect spoken in Chukotka (CSY Chaplinski). Both groups also share the same pre-national identity of the non-western traditional society, that of a whaling community. Yet, having been separated both geographically and politically for the past century, the Yupik people on different sides of the boarder have developed different identity patterns with different, if not opposed linguistic outcomes. Today in Chukotka, only some of the elderly people (and the death rate of those is very high) are able to speak the native language, while throughout the 1990's St. Lawrence Island Yupik was still claimed to be the only language still spoken by the majority of the population, including children (DE REUSE 1994).

The situation began to change in 1988 with the reestablishment of communication between the two Yupik communities. In Chukotka, the increase of ethnic self-awareness, as I will show, had strengthened the status of the native language and increased its use by the population. Ironically, on St. Lawrence Island, it signalled a period of decline of the native language.

This paper looks exclusively at the language situation in Chukotka, where the shifting attitudes towards ethnic and national identities throughout the past century have influenced language choice and its use by the native population. It argues that the growth of ethnic self-consciousness increases the use of a native language. In the situations where a language is already fully or partially lost, the passing of the remaining traditional knowledge (including language itself) is accomplished by a means of the remaining oral practices, such as code-switching, tokenism and storytelling.

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<sup>2</sup> On Siberian Eskimo contribution to Alaskan population recoveries, see KRUPNIK 1994, especially p.49-80; and KRAUSS 1980: 10-11, 46

## The History of the Contact

The Eskimo<sup>3</sup> population of the Russian Far East has been exposed to a continual external pressure from as early as 4-5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., first, from the Chukchis, then, from the American traders, and finally, from the Russians.

It is difficult to say how much influence there was between the Chukchis and the Eskimos. It is evident though, that in the mid 19 century, Chukchi was the dominant language in the area and that Eskimos have borrowed a part of Chukchi tundra vocabulary as well as some of the Chukchi language's structural elements: sentence adverbs, conjunctions, and interjections<sup>4</sup>. The contact with the American traders was rather short and left some few borrowings on the Russian side (see VAKHTIN 1997: 170).

The Russian influence in the area had been little felt by the Eskimo population until the establishment of the Soviet power in the region in 1923. Yet, this contact had (and is continuing to have) the most profound impact on the indigenous population of the Russian Far North, first through the policies of the Soviet Communist Party, and in recent years through the reign of multi-millionaire Roman Arkadievich Abramovich.

As a result of a very intense contact with the Russian-speaking population during the Soviet times – especially in the second half of the century, when the anti-native policy was pursued by the means of Russification, forceful relocation and a boarding school system – the Eskimos traditional knowledge, including the use of their aboriginal languages has declined tremendously. In exchange, together with and by means of the Russian language, came the Russian culture and the Soviet national ideology. All of this has helped to form a new 'unified' national identity, *the Soviet*, with Russian as the main and the only accepted means of communication.

As a result, the indigenous populations of Chukotka have become tremendously russified (i.e. assimilated to all Russian), culturally, spiritually and linguistically. By the end of the 1980's, Russian was the lingua franca of the whole area. The Yupik language has borrowed more than three hundred Russian words, and almost none (or very few) of the children on the Russian mainland have grown up speaking Yupik (VAKHTIN 1997). The situation in the area could therefore be described in terms of cultural and linguistic assimilation with language shift being (almost) complete.

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<sup>3</sup> The term "Eskimo" is often considered politically incorrect by the Inuit population. However, it is the name most commonly used by the Yupik population on the Russian side and also, the only term that includes both Inuit-Inupiaq and Yupik people and/or languages. Here, the term Eskimo is used to include both Chaplinski Yupik and Naukan Eskimos of Chukotka, or when referred to Inuit and Yupik population altogether.

<sup>4</sup> For the information on contact between Siberian Yupik Eskimo and Chukchi, see DE REUSE 1994.

## Chukotka in the New Millennium

During the past 15-20 years, the Chukotkan people were dragged into a turmoil of political, economic, ideological and cultural changes. Reestablishment of the contact with their American neighbours, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the socio-economic and ideological crisis of the country turned the situation upside-down. Formerly tight bureaucratic control had ceased, while initiated in the 1980s political and economic activism had increased (VAKHTIN & KRUPNIK 1999: 29; GRAY 2005). At the same time, the region suffered tremendous depopulation<sup>5</sup>, extreme poverty with an overall growing cost of living, bankruptcy and unemployment, growing suicide rates, a critical shortage of medical supplies and professional care, and, finally, famine in 1999-2000. The situation was especially critical in the regions farthest from the capital, including the region where the majority of the Eskimo population lives.

For the Eskimos in particular, their relationship to Alaska became extremely significant during this period. The reopening of the Russian-American border in 1988 was followed by various exchange programs and visits between the Yupik population of Chukotka and Alaska throughout the 1990s. For many Eskimos in Chukotka, these relationships as well as several humanitarian programs, initiated in the United States and Canada, became the only possible means of survival. As a result, the Yupik people's sense of ethnic (Inuit) identity has increased tremendously. When I started fieldwork in Chukotka in 2003, the Yupik people I interviewed expressed a strong sense of cultural unity with the Eskimo population in the rest of the world, in particular Yupiget on St. Lawrence Island. The relationship was often explained by a blood bond, as well as by cultural and linguistic similarities of the people: eating the same food, speaking the same language, hunting the same animals. Concurrently, they were distancing themselves from the Russians who were seen by the natives as the 'Significant Other' that first "weaned them of their traditional knowledge, and then left them to the mercy of fate".

Hence, the 1990s had a double meaning (GRAY 2005, KERTTULA 1997): During this period, development of ethnic consciousness among the aboriginal population of the North was fostered, while old Soviet values and existing ethnic boundaries were put into question due to economic bankruptcy and an ideological crisis of the region.

Within the given context, the aboriginal (vs. Russian) language has gained a significant role as a symbol of ethnic identity, both self-identification and identification by others. The native population of the Russian Far North had a necessity to find markers of

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<sup>5</sup> Within fifteen years, the population of Chukotka Autonomous District decreased from 163,934 in 1989 to 51,410 in 2004 (see 1999-2003 *Statisticheskii Sbornik / Statistical Corporuses*).

their belonging to the Inuit world. Due to the historical development, the Eskimos of Chukotka and Alaska have evolved in different ways, and language was one of the most explicit markers of Inuit/Yupik identity. Consequently, even though the majority of the Eskimo population of the Chukotka Peninsula did not speak their native language, the language as a primarily marker of Eskimo identity and a symbol of the struggle for survival, experienced a sudden boom.

According to Vakhtin and Krupnik's research in Chukotka in 1995-96, there was "the growing concern in the survival and continuity of the indigenous tradition" (1999: 28) and the majority of the native population was rather "enthusiastic about studying native languages, history, crafts, and subsistence skills at school" (1999: 34). Moreover, the statistic materials presented in VAKHTIN (2004) show that 82.9% of the Peoples of the North found it necessary to improve the knowledge of their indigenous language and believed that preschool education had to be bilingual, in both native language and the colonial language.

### **Language as marker of identity**

In the spring of 2003, I conducted my first fieldwork in Chukotka, mostly in the village of Novoe Chaplino – one of the two villages in Chukotka where the majority of the population is Yupik.

The majority of the Yupik people that I interviewed during my stay in Chukotka believed that the Yupik language is an essential part of the Yupik culture and inseparably linked to their Yupik identity (i.e. the way of being Yupik). Language was understood as a primordial category, something that was inherited through blood and inseparably linked to the people. The native's attitudes towards native language were very positive: "Speaking the Eskimo language is a matter of pride for every Eskimo in Chukotka" – as stated by one of my informants. Eskimos that did not speak the language were considered less Yupik than those who had a command of the language. Moreover, while the Russian language had a clear connection with the Russian culture and soviet ideology, the Yupik language was used as a symbol of Inuit/Yupik identity. It marked the relation of Siberian Eskimos to the Inuits of the rest of the world, particularly the Yupiget of St. Lawrence Island.

Despite the fact that the majority of the population was monolingual in Russian, the native language was still used to a certain extent, both in homes and on the streets. For the most part, it was restricted to Russian-Yupik code-switching – "the alternative use of two or more languages in the same utterance or conversation... It can include a word, a phrase or a sentence" (GROSJEAN 1982:116, 145-146). An alternation between two languages was especially common among people of forty and above. Those who were not very skilled in Yupik would also try to use Russian roots within Yupik words and sentences

in an attempt to say something in Yupik. Children whose knowledge of Yupik was rudimentary, used token Yupik and simple statements to a certain extent, and often incorporated Yupik words in their Russian speech.

According to the elders, the children's knowledge of Yupik, though very limited (if any), has been expanding, primarily due to the boom of the Eskimo traditional activities in the village(s) and visiting relatives and friends from Alaska, which increased ethnic and political awareness among the native population of the Russian Far North. For instance, several of my informants have claimed to have learned the language due to these visits, and with great pride, would frequently mention how all the children on St. Lawrence Island still speak their native language.

Thus, though the native language use in the village was limited, its use and prestige seemed to be expanding, primarily due to the rise of ethnic self-awareness. In one of his later articles, Vakhtin (2004) writes that there is a sign of growth of prestige of cultural self-identification among strongly assimilated groups and even though the majority of aboriginal people have lost their mother tongues, there is a tendency towards their revitalisation. Thus, while the Russian language had a clear connection with the Soviets, the Yupik language signaled Eskimos solidarity with the Inuits in the rest of the world. Note that in the given circumstances of limited native language knowledge and monolingualism in Russian, it was the code-switching and lexically borrowed words and tokenism that functioned as a Yupik identity marker when the situation required it, *e.g.* when talking to an elder or an islander.

### **A rapid change**

When I returned to the village of Novoe Chaplino in 2005 I found that the situation in the village had changed. While the economy of the village was experiencing some improvement, the social life of the village (the work of the Elderly council, School Council, and Women's Council) as well as traditional activities (dancing, singing, sewing, whale hunting, etc.) was in decline. Traditional skills were almost exclusively used for commercial purposes, as a means of income. Several attempts to arrange traditional dancing during my visit did not have much success, gathering no more than a dozen people, all of which were 40 and above (compared with some 30 or more in 2003, including children and teens).

The Yupik people's ethnic self-ascription has also changed. In 2003 everyone was not only aware of his/her Eskimo identity they were proud of it – that is despite the fact that the majority of population is ethnically mixed. The vast majority of my informants in 2005 considered themselves being more Russian (or Soviet) than Eskimo (the term that has almost become equal with the term 'Americans' in the minds of the Chukotkan natives).

They were now taking distance from the islanders, and returning to their identity as Soviets. It was expressed through phrases like: “We are all Soviet”. “We always said the Russians won’t leave us”. “Of course we are more Russian; we have had a history together”.

At the same time, it was no longer the question of being Russian, Chukchi, or Eskimo that was of peoples’ prime concern. For the elderly population it was often their birth settlement or at least the myths about it, which they were still trying to pass to the young ones through storytelling. For the younger population, it was more the question of being a citizen of Chukotka. Hence, the question of identity was no longer based on ethnic self-ascription, but rather on a feeling of belonging to a particular place. And while for the elders this could be an attempt to reach for a deeper identity within once again changing values, for the younger generation it was most likely related to the privileged status of the region within the Russian Federation, both economically and politically.

The Yupik language, which my informants inseparably linked to the Eskimo identity in 2003, was no longer considered the main marker of the group’s identity. For instance, in 2003, all my informants claimed that the knowledge of the Yupik language determines whether you are a real Eskimo. In 2005, when I asked my informants if the knowledge of the Yupik language was a necessity for being considered an Eskimo, the answer was “no, not really, maybe, I don’t know”. The younger population (the Eskimo and Chukchi youth between 14 and 20 years of age that participated in the questionnaire research) considered the knowledge of their native language to be unnecessary and unpractical in every day life, which resulted in little motivation to learn the language whatsoever. The majority of incomers saw native languages as a sort of joke, and they either expressed sorrow or blamed the aboriginals for loosing their languages and traditions. Russian and now also English were the preferred languages.

In addition, school education in the village(s) was exclusively in Russian, and the amount of Yupik hours has been reduced (cancelled in grades 9-11) in favour of English. The school principle of the village of Novoe Chaplino explained the reduction by the president Putin’s invention of the *Unified State Exam* (Единый Государственный Экзамен), which made English an obligatory subject, to be passed in order to enter a university.

It is not surprising then, that the native language use has noticeably decreased over the past few years. In comparison to 2003, there were very few situations where I observed the use of the native language.

- During the Yupik-speaking evenings. These were initiated a week before my arrival and took place twice a week. The main part of such evenings involved storytelling and singing in Yupik, usually, by an elderly woman. While conversing, the participants really tried to keep it in Yupik, yet it did involve some switching into Russian (the practice closed down in 2006).
- During (phone) conversations. In most cases, it involved topics that people were not very happy to discuss in a presence of an outsider – these were usually shortly followed by switch into Russian.
- During the Eskimo classes/hours at school and in kindergarten – usually in form of stories, songs and short poems. Often, Russian songs and poems were fully translated into Yupik, or the Yupik words were incorporated into the Russian originals.

Storytelling, including Eskimo dance (“the Eskimo dance is a story; each movement is a word”, as explained by a Chukchi hunter), was one of the oral practices remaining in the native language. Interestingly, the majority of Eskimo stories are connected to places; different places have different stories, different songs, and different experiences. Place names are also the most commonly used native words. Thus, when I asked one of my informants, a 20 year old young boy, if he spoke any Yupik, he told me: “But of course we do [speak Yupik]. We use place names only in Yupik”.

This could be linked to the changing identity pattern. As we have seen above, it was no longer based on ethnic self-ascription, but rather on a feeling of belonging to a particular place. Hence, as it was pointed out to me by anthropologist Virginie Vaté “maybe one keeps what one can keep. For language it is probably too late, but a sense of place is a way to promote identity through other means” (personal communication).

## **Conclusion**

It has been claimed that communicative and symbolic functions of language are not necessarily inseparable. A particular language is linked to the group identity through its symbolic function, and thus, in absence of language in the communicative sense it may still possess a symbolic value (EDWARDS 1985). This is true for the Chukotkan case: Yupik was replaced by Russian at the communicative level – all communication was and is performed in Russian, the transmission of the Yupik language to the younger generation has been interrupted and no young people have a functioning knowledge of the Yupik language. Yet, when it was necessary, the Yupik language had gained a great symbolic value, which, in turn, improved the position of the language and peoples’ attitudes towards it.



We should of course keep in mind that there is a gap between attitudes and real practices, but what is interesting is that the growth of the symbolic value of the own-ethnicity-associated language increased the use of the language by the Yupik population. Hence, a growing sense of ethnic identity did not only increase the importance of the language symbolically, but also triggered the rise of the language in the communicative sense. Moreover, as it was pointed out earlier, several of my informants claimed that they have learned the language due to their visits and stays on, or visitors from St. Lawrence Island. We therefore can conclude that language shift is linked to identity (self-identification<sup>6</sup>) and that “the direction of development of minority languages is mainly dependent on the attitude of the bearers of those languages towards them, and how conscious they are about the consequences of language loss” (VAKHTIN 2004: 2, my translation).

By 2005, the importance of ethnic self-identification has decreased. Instead, the native population has allowed a come back of the national (Soviet) identity. This sudden “throw back in time” was, on one hand motivated by the termination of an economic crisis. The economy of Chukotka Autonomous District has greatly improved after the election (later reappointment) of the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich as region’s governor in 2001. On the other hand, it was caused by the overall policy of the Chukotkan administration and Russian government. According to anthropologist P. Grey (2005: 49), the administrative policy of the Chukotka’s previous governor Nazarov – the policy of Russians and indigenous being “in the same boat” – continued, though differently, under Abramovich. This policy was additionally fortified by the President Putin’s “exploitation of nostalgia of Soviet times<sup>7</sup>.”

At the same time, the contact between the native population of Chukotka and Alaska has ceased over the years (or rather it has been taken on by the incomers). The mainlanders and the islanders in turn were starting to develop negative attitudes towards each others differences. As a result, ethnic boundaries of the Yupik communities in Chukotka were shifted back, towards cultural and linguistic affiliation with the Russians.

Consequently, the native population expressed negative attitudes towards their native language, there was no motivation to learn the language among the population and there was a decrease of its use in everyday life, while Russian and English have become the preferred languages. As a result, by 2005, whatever changes that had been going on in Chukotka, were interrupted.

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<sup>6</sup> I have here only considered one part of ethnic identity, that of self-identification. It is however, extremely important to look at the process of categorization or definition by others as well.

<sup>7</sup> *Novaya Gazeta* 27.12.04, see <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2004/95/07.html>

Today, some elderly people (and the death rate of those is very high) still speak the Yupik language fluently, while for the youth, the language seems to be lost forever, at least in its communicative sense. The Russian language is the only language they understand and speak. However, there is a generation in-between those two extremes – those who are 40 and above – who are trying to revive the language, predominantly by a means of oral practices: storytelling, joking, singing, and dancing. These are the remaining uses of the Yupik language in Chukotka today. They constitute a special place in Eskimo identity, and it is on these activities that the passing of the remaining traditional knowledge, including language itself is dependent on today.

*The Polar Eskimos have based their ideas of life on a series of legends and customs which have been handed down by oral tradition for untold generations. Their dead forefathers, they say, enshrined all their wisdom and all their experiences in what they related to those who came after them*

Knud Rasmussen (1908: 99).

Finally, it must be kept in mind that the fate of the Yupik language in Chukotka is unavoidably attached to and dependent on the linguistic situation on St. Lawrence Island, where the language, though declining, is still spoken by the majority of the population.

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