

The study of old documents of Hokkaido and Kuril Ainu:

Promise and challenges

Tomomi Satō (Hokkaido U) & Anna Bugaeva (Tokyo University of Science/NINJAL)

tomomis@let.hokudai.ac.jp

bugaeva@rs.tus.ac.jp

Ainu is a critically endangered language of unknown genetic affiliation, which shows considerable dialectal variation. The three primary divisions are geographically based, and distinguish between the dialects once spoken on Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands. Originally, Ainu was not a written language, i.e. there are no early written records made by the Ainu themselves. The earliest records of Ainu were made by the Japanese in *kana* and Europeans in the Roman alphabet in the early 17th century but they are few in number.

Extensive documentation of Ainu and its linguistic research started a century ago and has produced a number of comprehensive dictionaries and grammars. Despite this proliferation of descriptive works on Ainu, no grammar of Ainu is historical. And even though there were separate attempts to relate Ainu to Indo-European (Batchelor 1889, Naert 1958, Lindquist 1960), Austronesian (Gjerdman 1926, Murayama 1992, 1993), Koreo-Japonic within Altaic (Patrie 1982), Japonic (Hattori 1959), and Nivkh (Austerlitz 1976) or reconstruct Proto-Ainu of 1000 CE (Vovin 1993), due to the scarcity of written records or methodological problems none of them have been verified. As a result, there is a general lack of historical perspective on Ainu, which is a major impediment to the further progress of Ainu research.

This paper suggests that the study of unpublished old written records made by foreigners in the Roman/Cyrillic alphabets can compensate for the lack of documentation of some under-described Ainu dialects, provide telling clues about earlier stages of Ainu, advance understanding of the history of Ainu and possibly contribute to our understanding of the prehistory of Northeast Asia.

Focusing on the cross-dialectal comparison is important for its role in clarifying transitions between different synchronic states of a language, and for the insights it provides for reconstructing earlier phases of the language, particularly important in the case of isolate languages like Ainu which lack outside comparisons.

Unfortunately, the Kuril dialect of Ainu, which is absolutely indispensable for the internal reconstruction, disappeared in the late 19th century and all we are left with now is just a few old documents, i.e. 700 items by R. Torii (1903), 1900 items by Dybowski (1892), 372 items by Steller (1743; published as “Klaproth (1823)” according to Murayama (1971)), and about items 297 by Krashennikov (1755). However, there are several other unpublished documents on Kuril Ainu, particularly the one called *Kuril'skie Slova* [Kurile Words] (1843) which is a list of 1609 word/phrases recorded in Cyrillic in the archive of I.G. Voznesenskij (stored in St Petersburg Archive SPF ARAN). Only one third of this document's material is to some extent used in Vovin (1993), the rest has never been published. Based on our new data we are going to revise and complement Murayama's (1971) overview of Kuril Ainu and pursue historical research on a number of issues.

Though Murayama (1971) notes that Kuril Ainu is extremely important for Ainu dialectology and history of Ainu, he does not give any concrete examples of how it can actually be used for this purpose. This paper suggests that Kuril Ainu old documents can reveal a lot only when compared with old documents of other dialects, i.e. Hokkaido and Sakhalin Ainu.

We have shown that, despite the access and deciphering challenges, studying old Ainu documents in different dialects is very promising because it is quite possible to find some new vocabulary items (e.g. a swear word *unatará* which appears in KA and HA old records but is not attested in any published Ainu dictionary), identify original meanings of words (e.g. *okkay* ‘young man’ in KA and HA old records, cf. ‘man’ in modern Ainu dialects), and even attempt to recover Proto-Ainu through internal reconstruction (e.g. *CVHC syllable structure in PA based on words for ‘good’ and ‘dark’ in KA, HA, and SA old records).