

Linguistic diversity and language contacts on Sakhalin

Ekaterina Gruzdeva
University of Helsinki

Sakhalin Island, which is located in the North Pacific, is the largest island of Russia with a population of about half a million people. Since the Stone Age, Sakhalin has been inhabited by several indigenous ethnic groups. The Nivkh who used to live in the north-western and north-eastern parts of the island were traditionally fishermen and sea mammal hunters. The Ainu, who occupied the southern part of Sakhalin, are known to have been hunters, gatherers and fishermen, whereas the Uilta and Ewenki were reindeer herders, who regularly moved around the island, especially in its central part. During various historical periods Sakhalin and its indigenous groups were under dominance of Manchuria, Mongolia, Japan and Russia.

Though it is obvious that the historical indigenous peoples communicated both with each other and with any newcomers to the island, little is known about the history and character of these contacts. Possible information on the topic can be found in research papers, memoirs of European and Japanese explorers of Sakhalin, indigenous legends and stories, as well as language biographies of the contemporary (heritage) speakers. Contact situation on Sakhalin can also be compared with the corresponding situations in other parts of the world, especially the African continent and Papua New Guinea, both of which demonstrate the traditional models of multilingualism.

The paper argues that Sakhalin has had several contact zones with various levels of multilingualism. This claim is addressed from various perspectives. Historically, the linguistic diversity of Sakhalin can be seen as a result of the expansion and interaction of languages — an ongoing process currently leading to the gradual loss of all Sakhalin indigenous languages. The political perspective helps to shed light on the hierarchy of peoples and languages and offers hypotheses concerning the time span and direction of contacts between them. The social perspective gives clues to understanding how the clan structure and marriage patterns led to intermarriages between different ethnic groups, which facilitated bilingualism within the family. The existence of areas with mixed population and presumably with active language contacts can be also explained from the geographical perspective. Thus, the mouths of the Tym and the Poronai — the two biggest Sakhalin rivers — have always been attractive to various indigenous groups due to their convenient location and richness in bioresources. Finally, the economic perspective emphasizes the role of various economic activities, especially trading, in the developing and maintaining multilingualism along trading routes and especially near trading points.