

The linguistic (pre-)history of Northern Asia

This talk aims to provide an overview of the prehistoric and historical events that have shaped the languages of Northern Asia. This region is home to eight language families and one isolate (Pakendorf 2020: 670), which are sometimes grouped into two broad categories, the typologically relatively homogenous “Ural-Altai” languages and the heterogenous group of “Paleosiberian” languages. This latter term is applied to the languages spoken by peoples who are assumed to be the descendants of the original inhabitants of the region, thus representing remnants of the richer linguistic diversity that would have been found in the past (Comrie 1981: 238-239). However, population expansions from the south replaced the earlier inhabitants of Northern Asia during the Holocene (Pugach et al. 2016, Kılınç et al. 2021), and only the speakers of Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages show genetic affinities to the Mesolithic population that resettled Northern Asia after the Last Glacial Maximum (Sikora et al. 2019, Kılınç et al. 2021). Population expansions and migrations not only brought peoples and languages into Northern Asia, but also carried them from Northern Asia to Europe, as in the case of the Uralic languages (Tambets et al. 2018, Grünthal et al. 2022).

The region is characterized by extremely harsh climatic conditions, with low temperatures and levels of sunlight and concomitant low primary productivity (Churkina & Running 1998). These severely limit food production, and most of the indigenous peoples of North Asia were nomadic hunters and fishers or reindeer herders, whose small, fragmented communities were dispersed over vast territories. Nevertheless, in spite of the low population density, several cases of contact-induced change have been documented, leading Anderson (2006) to propose Siberia as a linguistic area. Particularly striking are the restructured system of sibling terms in the Turkic language Dolgan following the Tungusic pattern found in Evenki (Stapert 2013: 136-144), and the verbal paradigms that were copied from the Turkic language Sakha into the Lamunkhin dialect of Even, a sister language of Evenki (Pakendorf 2009, 2019).

Such structural changes are indicative of long-term bilingualism, and situations of small-scale multilingualism are indeed historically known from the Taimyr Peninsula in the Far North (Khanina & Meyerhof 2018, Khanina 2021), the Lower Kolyma region (Vaxtin 2001: 142-146, Pupynina & Aralova 2021), Chukotka (de Reuse 1994: 306), and the Lower Amur area (Zgusta 2015, Starcev 2014). Close interactions between the indigenous peoples of Northern Asia are also reflected in molecular anthropological studies, which show high levels of admixture in general, and close affinities between Nivkh and the Tungusic-speaking groups of the Lower Amur in particular (Pugach et al. 2016, Jeong et al. 2019). It is thus clear from both linguistic and genetic investigations that language contact will have played an important role in shaping the languages of North Asia.

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