

## **Language change in the Arctic**

### Workshop proposal for SLE 2023

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This workshop addresses the contributions of Arctic languages to our understanding of the processes of language change and linguistic contact. At the same time, it also aims to profile the role of linguistics in reconstructing human history and migrations. We examine the structural outcomes of language contact along with the social circumstances which produce them, as well as the implications of these linguistic histories for broader studies of changes and movements in speaker populations.

The circumpolar Arctic, understood here quite broadly, including also some Subarctic areas, is home to many indigenous languages. Historically and today, there is movement across the region, leading to contact among indigenous groups and in the last centuries also with speakers of colonial languages (primarily English, Russian, and the Nordic languages). The migrations could not help but leave their traces on the linguistic structures of the Indigenous languages. Besides, if the Arctic might not constitute a language area in terms of structural features, it definitely is a sociolinguistic area. One of its striking features is shared experience of certain kinds of contact ecologies, due to the specifics of Arctic life. Speakers of Arctic languages have traditionally had much in common: they have been (semi-)nomadic, they have lived in sparsely populated areas, they have had to adapt to the same harsh environmental conditions. To this day they engage in subsistence activities, hunting, herding and fishing, they share a cultural code of how interactions happen, etc. Linguistically, this is mirrored, for example, in language continua observed across most Arctic language families, stable for centuries and displaying numerous secondary convergences and spread of innovations regardless earlier splits (e.g., Unangan-Inuit-Yupit (Berge 2018), Athabaskan (Krauss & Golla 1981), Saamic (Aikio 2017), Samoyedic (Khanina 2022), Tungusic (Pakendorf & Aralova 2020)).

This workshop examines the differing kinds of language change in Arctic communities, focusing on the linguistic, social, and wider historical factors. It includes studies from across the Arctic, including Greenland, Scandinavia, Russia, and Alaska. Complex descriptions of particular Arctic language ecologies, their change through history, and their reflection in linguistic structures are still in minority in the ever-growing body of literature on language change. The contributions cluster into several thematic groups, although the boundaries between them are not absolute as the topics are interrelated.

The first group addresses questions of the reconstruction of historic population movements through a study of contact and change. The papers show how linguistic data can be used to complement analyses of human history based on archaeological information and DNA. They consider deep reconstructions of Uralic movements, going through the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, of more recent northward movements of Tungusic over the last centuries, as well as of complex interplay between inheritance and internal contacts within the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family. A related question is the causal role of the geophysical environment in the geographic distribution of languages. Mapping these movements and dialect mapping are tasks of their own: modern techniques aim to move beyond traditional dialect mapping and to take into account contact effects and nomadic lifestyle of the Arctic speakers.

Second, the contributions to this workshop study pre-colonial language contacts in the Arctic. They show that some northern communities, in particular that of the Lower Kolyma River and the Chukotka peninsula, were characterized by small-scale multilingualism with a

general lack of hierarchical organization, and that the sociolinguistic settings are reflected in contact-induced changes in morphology and syntax of their languages. Whether such small-scale multilingualism existed in the Taimyr Region where Sakha speakers were in contact with Evenki, Nganasan and Tundra Russians, is a question for our categorization, but Dolgan differential object marking, resulting from the contact between Sakha and Evenki that led to the emergence of the Dolgan language itself, is quite definitely an example of structural transfer. Extensive language contacts have also left their structural traces in the Selkup branch of Samoyedic languages: this is true for both their external and internal contacts. However, some other parts of the Arctic were also home to language communities with extreme hostility to contacts: the Athabaskan languages are well-known for their disinclination to borrowing, with cultural-specific reasons for keeping their language as intact from external influences as possible.

The third set of issues focuses on contacts with colonizing languages, which involve social hierarchies that have often had an impact on the direction of change, and sometimes in the nature of change as well. A clear case is that of Aleut, where we can see varying effects of Russian versus English on its two areal variants. The case of borrowing of debitive marking into Evenki mirrors in many ways the Dolgan differential object marking, although arguably two sources are involved, Russian and Sakha. Early records are useful in reconstruction: texts collected in the 1900s-1910s document an early influence of Russian onto an Evenki dialect. The power of colonizing languages can be seen not only in changes induced by them in the Indigenous languages, but also in the construction of the divergent orthographies of Kalaallisut (Greenlandic), which systematically reflect differences in the native language of the creator (Danish, English) of the system. We can also examine what happens when two colonizing languages are in contact in Alaska, with changes in social hierarchies as the territory shifts from the hands of one colonizing power (Russia) to another (the USA). Finally, contact effects are not confined to historical times but are taking place today. Urbanization, modern migrations, and nation-building language ideologies all play a role in ongoing linguistic change in Arctic languages.

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