

Before language shift: Reconstructing and interpreting morphosyntactic variation in Chukchi

Reconstructing morphosyntactic variation (historical and contemporary) is a particularly difficult task for an endangered language, due to the low number of available consultants and a tendency to document the most conservative speakers. This has certainly been the case for Chukchi: researchers have generally prioritized the identification of entrenched contact effects (Fortescue 1997, Pupynina 2009) or have sought to provide a uniform grammatical description, with most sources acknowledging lexical and phonological variation but downplaying morphosyntactic differences. In this paper, I am interested in the reconstruction of variation that existed prior to heavy contact with Russian: both internally-motivated and driven by contact with other autochthonous languages of north-eastern Siberia. How can we distinguish variation that has been conditioned by the shift setting from modern variation that predates it, and has survived from the period of language maintenance?

Towards this end, I consider grammatical descriptions of Chukchi from different periods (e.g., Bogoras 1922, Skorik 1977, Dunn 1999), recent documentary materials covering a range of regions where Chukchi is spoken (Pupynina 2018, chukdict.com, and the Amguema Chukchi research project), as well as the results of my own experimental fieldwork with Chukchi speakers in 2018 and 2019.

It is tempting to explain all of the grammatical variation among shifting speakers as due to the instability of the language (disrupted acquisition, attrition), yet we know that variation is the norm and need not have contact as the source, even in endangered languages (Nagy 2017; Kasstan 2017). Indeed, I have encountered considerable morphosyntactic variation among older speakers that cannot be explained by shift-induced dysfluency. Furthermore, although the normative grammars do not explicitly document variation at a given point in time, there are differences in the descriptions of several phenomena (particularly noun incorporation, antipassivization, and other derivational morphology) that warrant evaluation: can these differences be explained as variation across time, observational variation (stemming from the documenter and the methodologies he used), or genuine synchronic variation?

I consider variation across the following domains and consider whether they can be reconstructed to variation that predates heavy language shift: (1) inflectional suffixes in the verb; (2) the productivity of noun incorporation; (3) use of the antipassive; and (4) frequency and regularity of code-mixing with Russian.