Chapter 1

Consequences of Russian Linguistic Hegemony in (Post-)Soviet Colonial Space

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Introduction

Siberia – the very name can evoke a shudder. Why? True, it is the coldest inhabited part of the earth so a shiver, yes, but why a shudder? This is due to the fact that Siberia is known around the world and in Russia itself, where it constitutes the vast majority of the land mass of that giant nation,¹ as a frozen wall-less prison. To be sure, Siberia served as a penal colony for the Tsarist Imperial Russian leaders and this tradition was institutionalized with murderous zeal by their successor Soviet hegemons. But this is only part of the sad story of the consequences of Russian/Soviet colonialism on the diverse native populations of Siberia. For the purposes of the present study I focus only on the linguistic consequences of Russian imperialism and hegemony on the Native Siberian peoples.

I start with a brief overview of the diverse Native Siberian groups as they stood at the time of the initial colonialist expansion and exploitation in the 16th century in section 1. I turn in section 2 to an introduction to various pre-Soviet phases of Russian colonialism and hegemony over Native Siberian populations. In section 3, using post-Soviet census data, I discuss the issues of language shift and ethnic shame that move ever forward among the Native Siberian population groups in the post-Soviet colonial space. Finally in section 4 I present some structural linguistic consequences of Russian linguistic hegemony on the grammatical structures of the dwindling and receding languages of the vast Siberian territory.

¹ Indeed we should say the entire Asian portion of Russia in a traditional, non-administrative understanding of the term Siberia.
Native Siberia at the Time of Russian Contact

Siberia at the time of contact was home to several dozen languages belonging to a range of different language families. Moving west to east we find various northern Samoyedic (Nenets, Enets, Nganasan) and Ob-Ugric (Khanty, Mansi) speaking peoples in the western edge of Siberia between the Urals and the Ob-Irtysh River complex. These people mainly pursued reindeer breeding in the north and hunting and fishing economies in the southern parts of this region. To their east were found a range of Siberian Turkic groups (Tuvan, several Altai and Xakas groups, Shor, Chulym Turks, the Tofa and Siberian Tatars groups) in the southern regions and southern Samoyedic (Selkup, Kamasian, etc.) and Yeniseic groups, today represented only by the Ket and Yugh. The Turkic speakers were largely pastoral nomads, but this mixed with hunting/fishing or reindeer breeding in the northern mountainous and swampy regions where these economic pursuits were more viable, while the Samoyedic and Yeniseic peoples originally pursued hunter/fishing economies with some limited reindeer-based economies, for example among the northern Selkup. The Tungusic speaking groups occupied a vast territory stretching eastward from central Siberia all the way to Sakhalin in the south, Kamchatka in the east, and the Russian Arctic Far East in the north. These include such languages as Evenki, Even, Negidal, Nanai, Udihe, Ulcha, Oroch and Orok. Tungusic peoples were engaged in either hunting pursuits or reindeer economies, depending on the environmental conditions. In the southern part of the western half of this territory, Tungusic speakers were in contact with the pastoralist Buriat, speakers of a Mongolic language, and their now extinct linguistic cousins the Soyot. On Sakhalin and in the Amur river area, Tungusic speakers were in contact with Nivkh (Gikyak) a riverine fishing-oriented people who speak a language isolate. In the southern and central part of Kamchatka, Itelmen-speaking people were found, and in the north Koryak who speak a Chukotko-Kamchatkan language. In the northern part of the Tungus-speaking area were found to the east the reindeer-breeding Yukaghiric-speaking peoples like the Odul, Wadul, Chuwan and Omok, the latter two now extinct linguistically, and the Omok ethnically as well too. To the east of the Yukaghiric peoples were the reindeer-herding Chukchi, also of the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family (which also includes Chukchi’s sister languages Kerek and Al'utor), while in the coastal parts of Chukotka, Chukchi-speaking people pursued sea-mammal hunting oriented economies similar to the local Eskimoic-speaking populations, the Sireniki, Naukan and Siberian Yupik. In short, Native Siberia at the time of Russian contact was home to a vast array of different peoples