

# **Towards a holistic understanding of the linguistic past: the Northern Samoyedic case**

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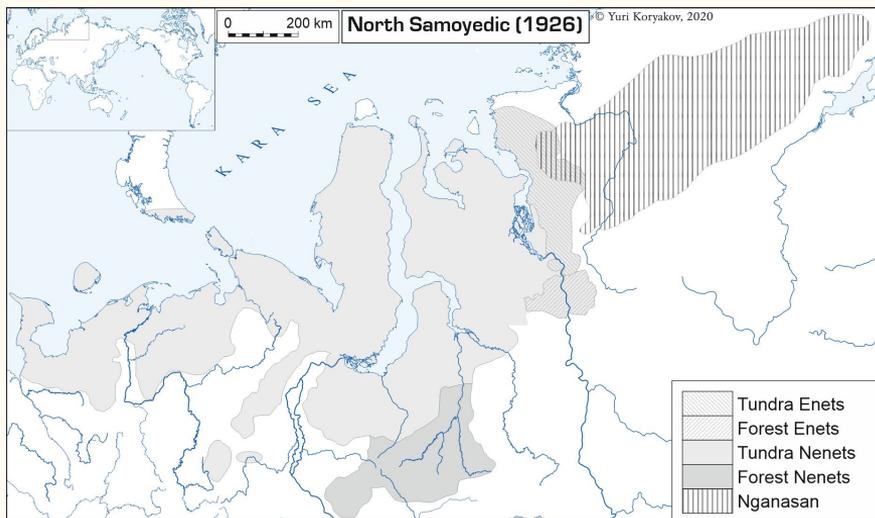
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a move

from a static view of idealized languages  
to intertwined histories of  
dynamic communities and their changing  
languages

# Northern Samoyedic

1. Uralic > Samoyedic > Northern S.
2. Split from Proto-Samoyedic ca. 1500-2000 years ago
3. Small groups: several hundreds of speakers; Tundra Nenets as the biggest with 25 000 speakers today
4. Arctic conditions, very low population density, nomadic lifestyle, hunting and fishing, (transport) reindeer herding



# Integrating different perspectives

- ❖ Analysis of written sources for the last 300 y.:
  - migration events, more variation than today
- ❖ A study of isoglosses disregarding the tree-like family structure:
  - contact-induced changes and wave-like innovations in the dialect continuum
- ❖ A study of multilingualism (1900s-1930s):
  - the sociolinguistic context of the linguistic changes

# The written sources

## Non-linguistic

- narratives (1930s, by Dolgikh),
- tribute collection forms (17th-19th cent.),
- census records (1897, 1926),
- ethnographic records (1920-1960s)

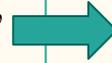


- migration events,
- disappearance of clans or their parts,
- distribution of patterns of material culture,
- marriage patterns (clan exogamy),
- language shifts by clans or by their parts,
- language ideologies: relational (=indexal) identities,
- social categorization reflected in ethnonyms

Khanina et al. 2018, Khanina 2021

## Linguistic

- wordlists (Müller 18th cent., Castrén 19th cent.),
- grammatical notes (Castrén 19th cent.),



- more (un)named language varieties,
- more variation within individual languages
  - part of the variation mirroring neighboring languages

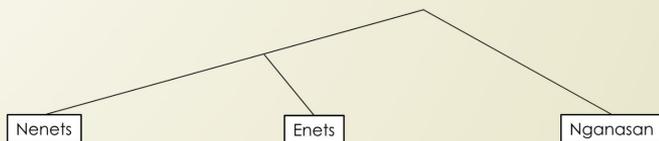
Khanina Forth., Gusev Forth.

That was quite a mess!

Constant migrations, a lot of variation,  
languages changing places and disappearing.

# The isoglosses

- A clear tree-like structure for modern languages, based on innovations in lexicon, phonology, and grammar,
- though adding extinct languages and language varieties is less straightforward.



Forest Nenets   Yenisei Tundra Nenets   Yurak   Tundra Nenets   Forest Enets   Tundra Enets   Tidiris, Pyasida Samoyed   Nganasan

**At the same time:**

Numerous centers of wave-like innovations:

- (1) in the south, e.g. past Interrogative
- (2) in the center, e.g. intervocalic *\*m*, derivation of personal pronouns
- (3) on the periphery, e.g. *\*ŋ* before vowels
- (4) in the west, e.g. *\*w- > b-* word-initially
- (5) in the north, e.g. numerals 11-19
- (6) south vs. north, unclear scenario, e.g. Demonstrative/Interrogative pronouns
- (7) east vs. north, different sources of borrowing, e.g. ‘bread’

...

# The isoglosses: centers of wave-like innovations

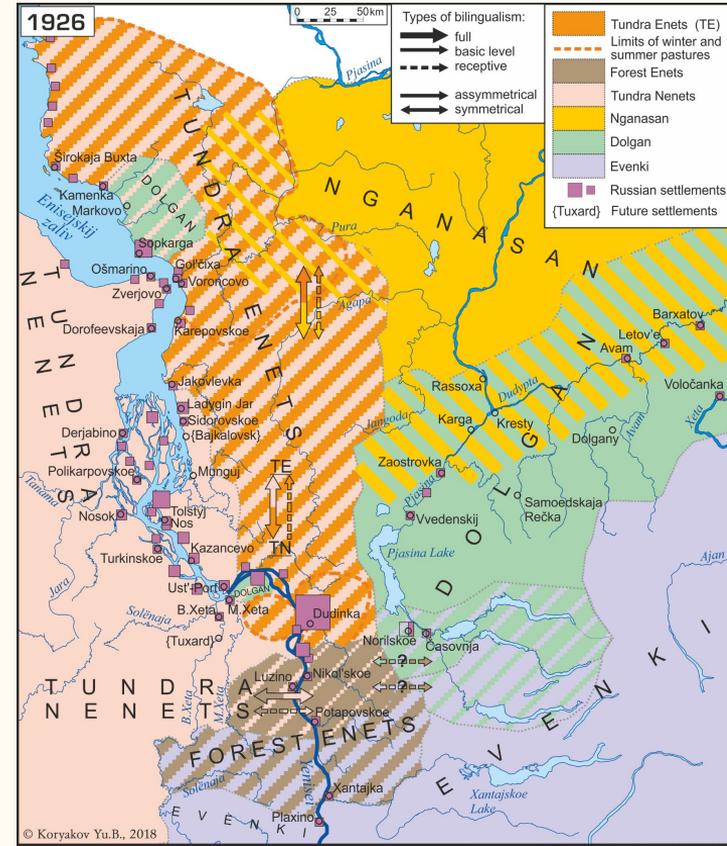
- (1) in the south, e.g. past Interrogative:  
FN, TN, FE *-sa* vs. TE, Ng *-ba*
- (2) in the center, e.g. intervocalic \*m, derivation of personal pronouns:  
FN & Ng *-m-* vs. TN, FE, FN *-w-* (> *-b-* > *0*)
- (3) on the periphery, e.g. \* $\eta$  before vowels:  
FN, Ng, partly TN, partly FE \* $\eta$  before vowels vs. none in TE
- (4) in the west, e.g. \**w-* > *b-* word-initially:  
FN, TN *w-* vs. FE, TE, Ng *b-*
- (5) In the north, e.g. numerals 11-19:  
FN, TN, FE “10-ABL extra 1”, “1 extra” and other complex structures vs. TE, Ng “10-1”
- (6) south vs. north, unclear scenario, e.g. Demonstrative/Interrogative pronouns:  
FN, TN, FE \**tə-rsä* vs. TE, Ng \**tə-räjä* ‘that’
- (7) west vs. east, different sources of borrowing, e.g. ‘bread’:  
FN, TN *ńań(ə)* (< Komi) vs. both words in FE vs. TE, Ng *kir(i)ba* (< Turkic < Russian)

A dialect/language continuum where wave-like innovations were propagated irrespective of the original splits.

# The multilingualism (Lower Yenisei, 1900-1930s)

- retrospective sociolinguistic interviews in 2017 with the elders about their parents and other elder relatives,
- narratives (1930s, by Dolgikh)

Khanina 2019, Khanina & Meyerhoff 2018

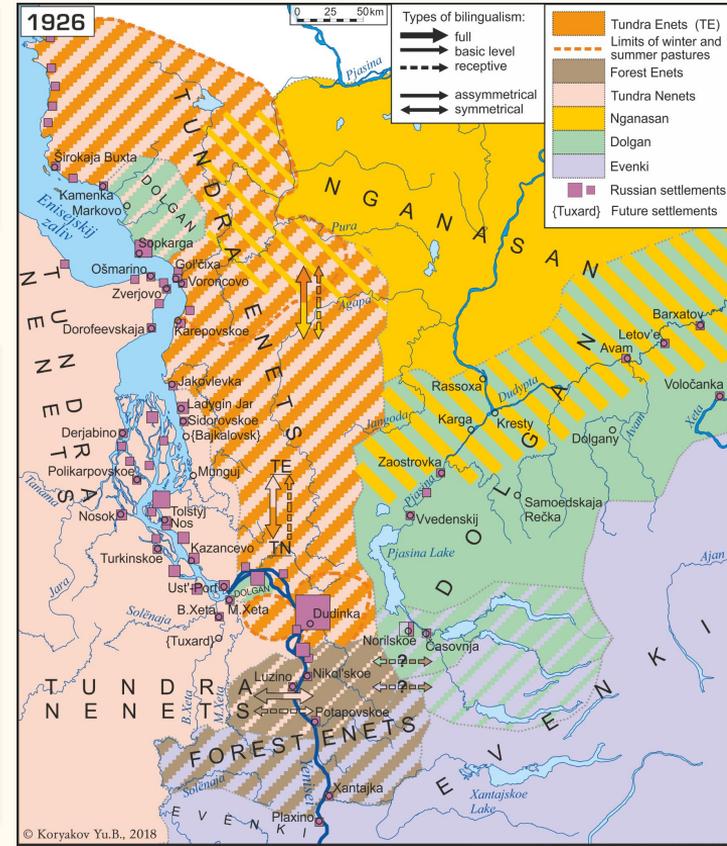


# The multilingualism (Lower Yenisei, 1900-1930s)

- The physical distance between individuals was only a weak correlate of the social distance between them, and networks were supported rather by marriages and regular visits than by direct geographic proximity.

## Social and sociolinguistic patterns:

- shared cultural knowledge and principles of interactions irrespective of particular codes,
- absence of hierarchical and one-to-one relationships between social units and languages + numerous diachronic changes,
- relational identities:  
= linguistic indexing of identity relied more on local social networks than on ancestry, e.g. choosing the language to use with their children, parents valued neighborhood above kinship.



The reconstructed social reality is largely compatible with the cultural and linguistic reconstructions:

‘little reification and low language loyalty’ match well with ‘the dialect continuum with constant migrations’.

NB: more research is need on typology of language contact between nomadic/mobile groups.

Cf. (Burenhult 2021: 187) on Malay languages:  
“The mobile lifestyle od Semang, manifested in their system of intermarriage between individuals of widely dispersed bands, as well as in their pattern of group disintegration and regrouping into new constellations in response to changing subsistence conditions, is linked to particular patterns of individual language use.”

# Synopsis

- A succession of northbound migrations from a more southern location (Proto-Samoyedic or Proto-Northern-Samoyedic).
- The original waves of migrations: the main subgroups ('branches': Nganasan, Enets, Nenets).
- Subsequent weakening of the original social affiliations.
- Numerous local migrations: messing up the 'final destinations' of the original subgroups.
- Contact influences and wave-like innovations spread among the multilingual nomads with relational identities based on proximity, not ancestry.
- Modern languages as accidental fragments of the former continuum rather than perpetuation of separate distinct histories.

# Yet further perspectives (to be studied)

- Why the northbound migrations?
  - ◆ advances in reindeer herding, conditioned, among other things, by climate changes
- What about the original population of the current Northern Samoyedic area?
  - ◆ substrate language(s)
  - ◆ human population genetics
- Interactions with the eastern Tungusic neighbours?
  - ◆ human population genetics

