

Siberian Life: Language and Culture in the Great North

Book of Abstracts



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Yukaghir/Nganasan contacts: pro et contra

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In this talk, we introduce an ongoing research on the comparison of a certain part of the cultural lexicon of Nganasan and Yukaghir. The study was inspired by an observation expressed by I. Gurvich after two continuous anthropological ('etnograficheskaya') expeditions to the Lower Kolyma area. Collecting material about a peculiar multinational Lower Kolyma community, he noted that Yukaghir culture was severely influenced by the local Even majority. However, the old people recalled that reindeer breeding was not that important before as it is now, with reindeer hunting having previously been the leading role in the economy. Gurvich also notes that the "ancient economy of Tundra Yukaghir resembles the one of Tawgi (Nganasan). The common features are not only the reindeer hunting complex, but some features of dwelling and clothes" (Gurvich 1959). Previous historical studies showed that in the 18th century Yukaghir and Nganasan camps were situated significantly closer than currently, see reconstruction map (Dolgikh 1952: 81) and comment (Dolgikh 1952: 77).

We are in the process of compiling a number of Nganasan and Tundra Yukaghir cultural lexicon comparison lists. Three lists reflect the cultural/economy domains mentioned by Gurvich: **hunting** (including fishing); **dwelling**; **clothes**. The items of the fourth list describe the **reindeer herding** as currently important economy type. The lists are compiled by manual search in the dictionaries (Kurilov 2001 and Helinski Ms.). The Yukaghir lists are complete; the pilot expert examination has not proved the existence of similar lexemes in the studied semantic groups, except for the probably common word for 'harness, reins' proposed by Piispanen 2015. If they are not found when the Nganasan lists will be completed, it will mean that this kind of linguistic examination does not prove the anthropological hypotheses of Yukaghir/Nganasan contacts, supposing that the search should be continued in other semantic/cultural domains.

We suppose that the hypothetical absence of similarities in the lists is not less informative than the presence of ones. We would have to subsequently suppose that, unexpectedly, the areal proximity and cultural similarities did not correlate to any kind of long trade, marital, or labour contacts which typically accompany lexicon exchange. An alternative explanation would be that the cultural similarities arose from an unknown substrate that was common for both Yukaghirs and Nganasans.

At the presentation, the controversial data of other disciplines such as archaeology and folklore studies would be provided, to contribute to the enigmatic Nganasan/Yukaghir contact problem.

References:

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