

LANGUAGE CONTACT IN THE NORTH: BUILDING A TYPOLOGY¹

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This paper employs common methodology to describe several contact areas in the north, three in Siberia and two in Alaska. Through an analysis of parallels between respective sociolinguistic histories and contact phenomena for each of the areas, we are building a tentative typology of language contact in the Arctic. The main driving question of this study is whether Arctic language contact has any specifics atypical for other parts of the world.

The most evident feature of the north are large distances between members of any speech community, complemented by constant migrations of population. As a result, communication within a speech community can be not much more regular than outside the speech community, i.e. with speakers of another language migrating in an adjacent area. We have hypothesized that such sociocultural settings can lead to particular linguistic outcomes:

(a) if languages are related, there can be a continuum of related lects with no sharp boundaries,

(b) if languages are not related, there can be a continuum of converging lects, again with no sharp boundaries.

The selected case studies provide examples both for (a) and (b).

First, language contact between related languages was described for the Lower Yenisei area in central Siberia (Uralic, Northern Samoyedic) and for the Upper Kuskokwim area in central Alaska (Na-Dene, Athabaskan). Following our hypothesis, we have seen a continuum in each case, with (at least) receptive bilingualism and metalinguistic awareness by the speakers (phoneme recalculation for borrowings from related languages). The Northern Samoyedic case provides also evidence for the problematic status of a traditional tree-like genealogical structure: each pair of adjacent Northern Samoyedic languages shares some features, and it is often hard to say whether these are shared innovations or shared retentions. In the Athabaskan case, there is also a strong opposition towards contacts with unrelated groups/languages. In the both areas with related languages, we have discovered common cases of morphosyntactic convergence after an earlier split reflected in phonology.

Second, language contact between unrelated languages was described for the Lower Kolyma area in eastern Siberia (Even, Yukaghir, Chukchi, Yakut) and for the Middle Ob'-Taz-Yenisei area in central Siberia (Selkup, Evenki, Ket, Khanty). Contrary to our hypothesis, we do not see any erosion of linguistic boundaries, but we have discovered an erosion of ethnic boundaries in the both cases: numerous intermarriages lead to erosion of 'pure' ethnic identities. As for linguistic outcomes, multilingualism and subsequent language shifts have been documented. While in the Lower Kolyma local ideologies favored multilingual practices that could be supported for several generations, in the Middle Ob'-Taz-Yenisei area bilingualism was replaced by a shift in a more dynamic way. Both areas provide examples of shifts in all directions, whoever was more numerous in a given location; though The Lower Kolyma case features also the Chukchis that never switched to any languages (a parallel to the Athabaskans). Finally, in the both areas, we could spot contact-induced changes in target languages of the shift.

Besides, we have also studied the contact-induced changes in the colonial/dominant language, Russian. Comparing Alaskan Russian to Siberian Russian, we see that varying sociolinguistic settings, the end of presence of Russian in Alaska vs. the continuous presence of Russian in Siberia, lead to a contrast in the regularity of changes. While similar Russian features are particularly prone to changes, they are only incipient and rather chaotic in Siberia, but forming a new system in Alaska.

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