

Time-bounded Fieldwork “Ex-situ” or On Fieldwork Without Unlearning Another Language

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ABSTRACT:

This essay discusses two episodes of temporally bounded consultant work on Tundra Yukaghir (isolate) and Tuvan (Turkic) and attempts to bridge, or at least narrow the gap between reflexive anthropological thinking (e.g., Geertz, 1973, 1988) and reasoning about linguistic fieldwork. In this respect, the essay is a follow-up on Siegl (2018), which analyzed experiences from fieldwork in moribund speech communities. Similar to Siegl (2018), this essay also focuses more on data gathering and (personal) challenges in the field and less on presenting polished research results; therefore, references to literature on linguistic fieldwork are minimized (this literature was covered in detail in Siegl, 2010, 2018). Given that the process of data gathering is usually blended out in research reports, a second aim of this essay is to offer insights on consultant/fieldwork in action so that this process becomes more transparent and can be evaluated by those without primary research interests in this sub-discipline of linguistics.

KEY WORDS

linguistic methodology, fieldwork, language documentation, Tundra Yukaghir (isolate), Tuvan (Turkic), Dolgan (Turkic)

0. LINGUISTIC FIELDWORK AS A BLACK-BOX?!?¹

Since the pioneering work of Bronislaw Malinowski, the role of the researcher in the field during the process of data gathering as well as the immediate context of data gathering have occupied a central position in what has become modern cultural/social anthropology (furthermore referred to as anthropology). Whereas the role of fieldwork in individual Anglo-American and Western European anthropological traditions is far from being uniform and the degree of variation will most likely surprise the practitioner of linguistic fieldwork (e.g., Geertz, 1988; Barth, Gingrich, Parking & Silverman 2005), the reflexive moment in anthropology accompanying the process of transferring fieldwork data into publications continues to separate ethnographic fieldwork from linguistic fieldwork. Whereas the role of fieldwork in anthropology is taken for granted because fieldwork is the preferred means of data gathering and the ultimate “rite of passage”, the role of fieldwork in linguistics remains marginal; after

1 This essay grew out of a presentation at an online workshop on fieldwork organized by the interest group Prague Descriptive Linguistics (PDL) in July 2020. A final draft of this essay was discussed in a later online meeting and I would like to thank all fellow members of PDL for their comments. The usual disclaimers most certainly apply.



all, linguistics can be done without face-to-face contact rather well, even more so in corpus-based approaches. Presumably, therefore, linguistics is blind to the personal dimension underlying the process of data collection during fieldwork; in fact, a significant number of fieldworking linguists even deliberately remain silent concerning the challenges of data gathering. If this process is verbalized at all, it is briefly mentioned in introductory chapters of grammars, text collections or dictionaries. For the outsider, this easily creates the erroneous impression that linguistic data gathering in the field is a procedure without significant obstacles.² Especially from the perspective of anthropological fieldwork, this lack of transparency is problematic, because many of the premises underlying the central goal of documentary linguistics, the creation of a corpus (Himmelmann, 1998, 2006), are not transparent. Especially from the perspective of linguistic fieldwork among speakers of endangered languages³ (one should not forget that the degree of endangerment often goes hand in hand with the marginalization of its speakers in the local society, which interferes with the linguist's work), it is obvious that linguistic data collection beyond native speaker introspection or related instances of armchair linguistics can never be conducted in an antisocial vacuum. Whereas work with an already assembled corpus of a documentation project could perhaps be considered the linguistic pendant of ethnological participant observation, corpus creation is impossible without prolonged face-to-face interaction with at least one native speaker.

0.1. TAKING STRUCTURE SERIOUSLY

To the author, a fieldwork conducting linguist himself, the reluctance of other active fieldworkers concerning data gathering transparency is not unexpected. After all, it is possible to conduct a fair amount of linguistic analysis without taking context into consideration (at least initially). The investigation of form — e.g., phonology, morphology, constituent structure — allows relatively autonomous approaches, regardless of all criticism brought forward in linguistic theorizing by those who stress the importance of function; e.g., stress, vowel harmony, stem distribution or the order of head and dependent are not likely to show much individual variation.⁴ Nevertheless, every fieldworking linguist is confronted with variation very soon, even more so because the degree of autonomy of linguistic subsystems certainly fades above the

2 Whereas the standard handbooks of linguistic fieldwork cover the technical side of fieldwork, the personal component remains shallow and at best anecdotal. Although such accounts exist (several of which were reviewed in Siegl, 2010, 2018), this perspective is certainly marginal. The same was observed by Sapién & Thornes (2017), whose reflexive account is highly relevant, though beyond the scope of this essay.

3 There exist, of course, other constellations, such as monolingual or community members' fieldwork; however, the scenario where an outsider visits a speech community is presumably still the most usual instance of linguistic fieldwork.

4 The discussion of formal vs. functional approaches is a linguistic evergreen. Rauh's (2010) overview on syntactic categorization is a recent comprehensive contribution to this genre.



levels of phonology and morphology.⁵ Although the separation of form from function and performance from competence has its practical value, this separation is idealistic and therefore artificial; variation (e.g., genre, register, idiolect, dialect, generational variation) is often more than simply “lexical” and does affect “more structural” levels of grammar as well (see e.g., Halliday, 1978, pp. 31–35). In a nutshell, although the collection of data for the study of linguistic form is certainly less sensitive to the context of data gathering, the study of function is certainly not. But before data collection and analysis can begin, it should not be overlooked that what can eventually be collected depends on a variety of often trivial preconditions: a) the degree of fluency of the consultant in his native language; b) the context of language use of an individual language at the moment of documentation; c) the fluency of the consultant and linguist in the local vernacular, and d) limitations of time (this list is certainly not exhaustive). Whereas highly complex grammatical categories can hardly be covered in early stages of fieldwork, there is no guarantee that such topics can be covered in later stages.

0.2. OUTLINE

Before the central topic of this essay — a discussion of two instances of time-bound consultant work — can begin, two disclaimers are necessary. First, the author wishes to apologize for the exorbitant use of first person I, which is unusual in linguistic writing, but less so in similar anthropological writing. The second disclaimer is of a terminological kind; learning an unknown language by asking questions requires face-to-face interaction and this technique of data gathering is referred to (interchangeably) by both consultant work and fieldwork in this essay. Although there is an obvious difference between fieldwork “in-situ” and fieldwork “ex-situ”, this difference does not imply different techniques of data gathering. Because insights into the practicalities and restrictions accompanying consultant work are seldom openly reported in linguistic writing (regardless of whether the work is done “in-situ” or “ex-situ”), this essay explicitly discusses such practicalities in order to explain decisions which influence the process of data gathering and explain what kind of data can be gathered.

As for the structure of this essay, Section 1 and Section 2 provide the required background. These sections sketch out the author’s fieldwork experiences derived from prolonged work on Forest Enets, Ume Saami (both Uralic) and Dolgan (Turkic), and show how and why prolonged fieldwork on two moribund languages (Forest Enets and Ume Saami) and one heavily endangered language (Dolgan) have

5 When taking intonation seriously, the idea of an autonomous level of phonology would already be problematic. The same applies for morphology as well. Even though inflectional morphology certainly allows for a structural approach (e.g., stem distribution), the analysis of diminutives or gender cannot exclude semantics. For the sake of argument, I use a rather extreme position of Bloomfieldian structuralism here. Other protagonists of American structuralism, such as Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, were certainly closer to European structuralism (Albrecht, 2007, pp. 93–116).



shaped his concept of fieldwork. In this context, the concept of “unlearning another language”, a crucial personal argument, will be discussed as well. Section 3 will elaborate on consultant work experiences with a speaker of Tundra Yukaghir (isolate) and Tuvan (Turkic) in relation to experiences from long-term fieldwork. Section 4 concludes this essay by stressing that even though contemporary discourse on “linguistic data” and “data gathering” calls for “big data”, the history of linguistics and linguistic fieldwork tells a diametrically opposing story. Fieldwork with one speaker of the type discussed in this essay is far from unusual; on the contrary, a number of grammars which have become “classics” are based on data obtained from few consultants, in several instances as few as one individual. This means that the impact of a single speaker was, is and remains significant — especially in documentary linguistics.

1. SETTING THE SCENE – FIELDWORK AND “UNLEARNING” ANOTHER LANGUAGE

In Siegl (2018) I offered a condensed, highly personal retrospective on my fieldwork in moribund speech communities on the Taimyr Peninsula (2006–2011) and in Swedish Lapland (2011, 2015–2017). So far, I have spent roughly 16 months in the field (about 13 months in Russia and 3 months in Sweden). Because most of my long-term fieldwork focused on moribund languages which have approached their end of life as actively spoken languages (this does apply to Forest Enets and Ume Saami, but not to Dolgan), this has left obvious traces on my perspective on fieldwork. As these experiences have been reported at length in Siegl (2018) already, only the concept of “unlearning” needs to be touched upon.

In the first years of my career as a field linguist, I tried to approach the languages on which I conducted documentary fieldwork in close relation to their more numerous and therefore often much better-covered linguistic relatives in which I had acquired some practical command as well. This approach incorporated a distinctive philological and historical-comparative perspective, which influenced my initial phase in the field, but not necessarily for the better. Constant cross-checking of whether something had turned up in a form known from earlier research and whether such forms would be “historically expected” was a time-consuming filter. Learning to overcome this perspective and accepting “what people really said” was one of the first major lessons in the field. I started on the Taimyr Peninsula in Northern Siberia convinced that Tundra Nenets language skills (theoretical, practical and historical) would be of benefit when working on Forest Enets, but in the end, it really did not matter; the only benefit was the fact that recognizing Tundra Nenets borrowings was not problematic, though those could be recognized even without skills in the language; after all, most Nenets borrowings remained non-nativized and showed aberrant phonemes. Certainly more suspicious, but not entirely free from this perspective, I started engaging with the last rememberers of Ume Saami in Swedish Lapland with skills in North Saami. To cut a long story short, neither the exposure to Tundra Nenets nor the exposure to North Saami turned out to be of any real benefit, though,

at least, it was not harmful.⁶ What really was important (and would have been entirely sufficient) were skills in Russian and Swedish. Another fact uniting both episodes was that working on Forest Enets and Ume Saami triggered the unlearning of the language of their major genealogical neighbors, Tundra Nenets and North Saami, which I had learned to varying degrees before I went to the field. Twice I unlearned a language which was still spoken (Tundra Nenets, North Saami) and replaced it with skills in languages (Forest Enets, Ume Saami) nobody really used unless a linguist was around. A mild form of “unlearning” affected what was left of my prior skills in Turkish when I started working on Dolgan, but again, skills in Russian mattered most. Before closing this section, a final note on the unlearning process is in order. Although I had a chance to spend considerable time working on Tundra Nenets during my last long-term fieldwork on the Taimyr Peninsula in 2011, continuous work on that language did not reverse the “unlearning” process. Whereas I could resurrect quite a bit of structural knowledge (and even expand it), active language skills were gone for good.

2. FRAMING FIELDWORK/CONSULTANT WORK – OR WHY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES ALWAYS MATTER

The two episodes discussed in this essay took place after fieldwork on the Taimyr Peninsula (2006–2011) and before continuous fieldwork on Ume Saami in Northern Sweden (2015–2017). The Tundra Yukaghir episode was a short, yet tremendously intensive experience, spanning several meetings in spring and summer 2013; although from the linguistic perspective almost a failure, this episode significantly altered my perspective on consultant work. Consultant work on Tuvan occupied me in the first months of 2015. Although both episodes cannot compete in length with fieldwork in situ on the Taimyr Peninsula and in Northern Sweden, data gathering for Tuvan was in many ways unusual. Even though I will cover this episode in detail below, a short note is already necessary here. As mentioned in the prior section, my perspective on fieldwork has been shaped by working on moribund languages. Although I was able to work intensively with speakers of two maintained co-territorial languages (Tundra Nenets and Dolgan) during my last fieldtrip to the Taimyr Peninsula in 2011 as well, among them several speakers of Tundra Nenets and Dolgan considerably younger than myself, all central consultants (regardless of language) were considerably older than me, with a clear dominance of elder female speakers, especially in the district capital Dudinka. Concerning Ume Saami, upon entering the field I identified

⁶ My first trips to Arvidsjaur in 2011 without significant practical skills in any Saami language (but a solid background in comparative Saami morphosyntax) were perhaps more favorable, because I simply accepted what I got. During the dedicated project in 2015–2017, which I entered with some practical skills in North Saami, this naivety was certainly gone. In retrospective, the pan-Saami perspective turned out to be relevant when I encountered rudiments of copula cliticization, which had not been reported for that Saami language in print earlier (Siegl, 2019a).



three potential consultants, all of them men and at least 10 years older than my oldest consultants on the Taimyr Peninsula (see Siegl, 2018). Another detail uniting both episodes is the degree of literacy. Most of the Forest Enets and all Ume Saami speakers I have worked with were illiterate in their native language (but fully literate in Russian and Swedish); among my Tundra Nenets and Dolgan consultants, several individuals were literate in their native language, but certainly not all of them.⁷ In this respect, the Tuvan episode was markedly different, because I could work with a speaker of my age, literate in her native language, who came from an area neither geographically nor culturally too distant from Northern Siberia.

Finally, another personal note is in order. Both the Yukaghir and the Tuvan episode took place while I was formally employed as a PostDoc in Finno-Ugric Studies at the University of Helsinki. The Yukaghir episode took place in the first half of my PostDoc period in the year 2013. The Tuvan episode took place in the last months of my employment in Helsinki in early 2015.⁸

3. TWO “UNUSUAL” INSTANCES OF CONSULTANT WORK

This section discusses the Tundra Yukaghir episode (3.1) and the Tuvan episode (3.2), including side notes on data gathering in action in more detail.⁹ Section (3.3) concludes this overview with a short evaluation.

3.1. “ONCE A YUKAGHIR WALKED INTO MY OFFICE...”

In late March 2013, a colleague of mine in the Department of Finno-Ugric studies mentioned that in the following days, an elderly female Yukaghir speaker who was then visiting Inari in Finish Lapland would come to the department on her way back to Russia. She had heard this on social media from another PhD student (who was then living and working in Inari). Although this scenario appears to be unusual at first, not all of its details are so. Due to the successful introduction of a language nest among the Inari Saamis, their experience had received considerable attention

7 This does not mean that I would have lacked experiences with fully literate consultants. In three out of four field methods courses, I could teach students the basics of linguistic fieldwork with literate speakers of maintained languages (Meithei [Sino-Tibetan], Eastern Armenian [Indo-European], Sakha [Turkic]). The fourth class with a speaker of Pite and Lule Saami must be mentioned for the sake of completeness, but remains beyond the scope of this essay. All four courses were formal and pedagogical courses and certainly not prototypical instances of consultant work.

8 I met the Tuvan speaker several months after I was told that my research profile would not fit the local department (which, in disguise, meant the discipline as such) and was urged to start looking for new challenges and job/funding opportunities elsewhere. Taking this suggestion seriously, I spent the last months of my PostDoc period in Finno-Ugric Linguistics working on a Turkic language.

9 Linguistic examples glossed below reflect my current analysis and glossing; acronyms in square brackets refer to unpublished field notes.



in the Russian Federation as well (first among Finno-Ugric people, later among others), which even attracted visitors from Siberia. The unusual detail of this episode was that a speaker of a critically endangered language spoken several thousand kilometers east of Helsinki in the Northern Eurasian periphery with perhaps 50–60 elderly speakers left announced a visit to the department. If I am not mistaken, already the next day, an elderly woman together with a young man (who turned out to be her nephew) appeared in the department. The reason of their visit was the Uralic–Yukaghir hypothesis; the lady wanted to know what researchers in the West thought about the Uralic–Yukaghir relationship and whether her native language is related to Uralic. As I was the only person in the department with research interest in Siberia that afternoon, the guests were quickly sent to me. And so a Yukaghir entered my office...

At such a short notice, there was of course no chance to prepare anything and I simply sat with the guests, drank tea, inquired about the sociolinguistic situation in their village Andruškino and listened to news from Siberia; the elderly lady grew up bilingually, first in Tundra Yukaghir and then, after the early death of her parents, among Chukchi-speaking relatives. She mentioned openly that Yukaghir would not be her preferred language, though she could speak it. Because she was trained as a teacher of Chukchi, she claimed to be literate in Chukchi, but also in Yukaghir, and agreed to be recorded while reading a stretch of a Yukaghir text from a text collection (Kurilov, 2005; further referred to as FJ) I had in my office. She read comparatively well, but slowly. Nevertheless, I was satisfied because I got at least some linguistic data out of this unexpected meeting.¹⁰ After some two or three hours and several cups of tea we exchanged telephone numbers and e-mail addresses with good wishes and I thought that I would never meet her again.

Surprisingly, in late May, the lady called me again from a Finnish telephone number. She claimed to be stuck in Finland and inquired whether I would like to meet her again and whether I would like to learn more about Yukaghir. The only problem was that I would need to come to her, because she was “immobile”. After a quick background inquiry, it became obvious that she and her nephew had applied for political asylum in Finland in the meanwhile and had to stay in an asylum center in Joutseno (Southeastern Finland) waiting for an official decision. This asylum center was a former open prison, located in the middle of nowhere, only reachable by car.¹¹ I agreed to meet them there the next week. Upon arrival, I had to register at the visitor’s desk and had to call the Yukaghir lady on my phone so that she would come to pick me up. This was an official requirement for visitors; according to Finnish Law, I could not be told if a lady by a certain name was living in this facility. I still recall the employee who had to register me. After having made an official note concerning my visit, she

10 Most of the volumes published in this monograph series have been accompanied by vinyl records and later by CDs. The Yukaghir volume differs, because the accompanying CD contains songs, but not narratives.

11 The former prison was not fully defunct. A number of asylum seekers whose applications were rejected and who were waiting for their deportation lived in a different part of this complex, which pretty much still looked like a functioning prison.



mentioned that I was the first linguist who had come to the asylum center in her career. The only visitors to the middle of nowhere were said to be Amnesty International and other NGO representatives, as well as lawyers. I spent three full days with the Yukaghir lady and her nephew in Joutseno and met them once for two days in Helsinki. In August 2013, their application was rejected and soon after they were deported. Unfortunately, I have not heard from them since.

3.1.1. RECLAIMING A “SLEEPING LANGUAGE” IN UNFAVORABLE CONDITIONS

The part of the former open prison where the elderly lady and her nephew (who only spoke Russian but had a Chukchi first name) were living was a former warders’ dormitory; this part of the asylum center was better than the closed part, because it did not immediately resemble a prison; still, it was far from being a cozy place. Although it was supposed to host up to six individuals, the two seemed to live there on their own for their entire stay. In this place we would meet for three full days.¹²

Although Yukaghir was not entirely unknown to me (at least from a structural perspective), I was better informed about the related Kolyma Yukaghir language (Maslova, 2003b) and less so about Tundra Yukaghir (Maslova, 2003a). In prior Soviet research (e.g., Krejnovič, 1958, 1982), both languages were considered dialects and therefore covered together, which made accessing these materials complicated in the initial phase.

Since the speaker was no longer fully fluent in Tundra Yukaghir, the idea of the first meeting was a joint attempt to access and perhaps re-activate more language skills. I was cautious enough to bring along xeroxed copies of the already mentioned folklore collection (Kurilov, 2005), a recent school dictionary (Atlasova, 2001), the academic dictionary by Kurilov (Kurilov, 2001), his grammar (Kurilov, 2006) and his leaflet explaining the principles of Tundra Yukaghir orthography (Kurilov, 1987). These materials I left in Joutseno to offer her a chance to read and rediscover the language of her early childhood days.

Quickly it became obvious that gathering material via elicitation, a technique which has served me well earlier and later, failed; even worse, attempts to let the consultant produce examples of her own proved to be unsatisfying as well, because after a short while, the same examples turned up again and again. The failure of elicitation was indeed surprising. I have always refrained from using sophisticated examples in elicitation not to embarrass consultants because a word or a complicated clause type was forgotten. Instead, I used “basic Siberian vocabulary” covering experiences/observations from the spheres of everyday life, traditional lifestyle, fauna and flora, until the recording and transcription of narratives could begin. Only then (if possible) did I start with the elicitation of more sophisticated constructions, for which I relied on data from spontaneous narratives along the

12 All meetings lasted from about 10:30 to 22:00, after which I had to leave the center. Such long days were certainly tiring for an elderly lady, as they were for me. The asylum center was about a 3-hour one-way car ride away from Helsinki, which meant that after a long trip there and a long working day, a long car ride home awaited me.



following line: consultant A said X in the narrative, how would you say Y. In such instances, elicitation became meaningful for the speaker as well. The reasons why elicitation failed have never become clear, but this was certainly more than just language attrition. Presumably, because I worked with a trained teacher (although not a teacher of Yukaghir), it might have been unpleasant to answer somebody whose questions could not be controlled; after all, she was the educated teacher, and I was the one to be taught. This prevailed in all our meetings. Another reason why elicitation failed must have been connected to the focus conjugation system of Yukaghir, which organizes finite verb morphology along information-structure relevant primitives. In the following, Tundra Yukaghir's essentials will be demonstrated with examples extracted from the aforementioned folklore collection.¹³ In finite predication, Tundra Yukaghir uses five sets of verbal agreement markers. Intransitive verbs have a neutral and a focus set (S-Focus) (1a,b), transitive verbs have a neutral, an object focus (O-focus) and a transitive subject focus set (A-focus) (2a,b,c):

1) Tundra Yukaghir

a. Neutral (intransitive)

met lawje pojuo-ń mol-l'e-ń jalyil
 1SG water be.many-INTR.3SG say-INFER-INTR.3SG lake
 "I have much water" so said the lake.' (FJ, p. 278)

b. S-Focus (intransitive)

imdald'a-n qundietege-k kelu-ńul
 five-ATR driving.reindeer-FOC come-SF
 'Five driving reindeer came.' (FJ, p. 458)

2) Tundra Yukaghir

a. Neutral (transitive)

joyul-da-ya saqserej-m lawje-le
 nose-POSS-LOC pour-TRANS.3SG water-ACC
 'He_i poured water on his_j nose.' (FJ, p. 266)

b. O-Focus (transitive)

met qajčie köl-te-l čenguru-j joqo-d-ile-k
 1SG grandfather come-FUT-SF fly-PTCP Yakut-ATR-reindeer-FOC
keči-te-mle
 bring-FUT-TRANS.3SG:OF
 'My grandfather will come, he will bring flying horses.' (FJ, p. 282)

¹³ The focus system and its research history have been covered in Schmalz (2013). The Tundra Yukaghir system differs from the better-known Kolyma Yukaghir system, because the latter lacks the A-Focus system.



c. A-Focus (transitive)

aruudewresče *ile-da-yane* *wegie-nun*
 marriage.broker reindeer-POSS-LOC lead.on.line-HAB:AF
 'The marriage broker led her reindeer on a rope.' (Kurilov, 2001, p. 429)

3.1.2. WHEN ELICITATION SIMPLY FAILS AND WHY IT PROBABLY HAD TO...

The elicitation of paradigms as such is always tricky and one seldom succeeds immediately. However, this step is obligatory for languages with rich inflectional morphology, which applies to all languages of Northern Eurasia by definition. By the time I encountered the Tundra Yukaghir speaker, I had tackled this challenge successfully with speakers of several Saami languages, Forest Enets, Dolgan and Tundra Nenets. The usual starting point for the elicitation of verbal paradigms I have found to work best are third person forms, e.g. '(The) child is crying', '(The) dogs are barking' or '(The) dog just bit (the) man', and then switching persons, e.g. 'Did you see the dog over there?' and so forth. Now, in a language like Yukaghir, the finite intransitive verb has two sets of focus agreement markers at its disposal and the finite transitive verb has three, which requires the elicitation of five paradigms with six persons (singular vs. plural) resulting in at least 30 questions.¹⁴ Furthermore, the affirmative verb often co-appears with an affirmative clitic *me=*, but not all conjugations necessarily co-appear with it. The translational equivalents of 'My father came ~ has come' are the following:

3) Tundra Yukaghir

- a. *met* *amaa* *kel-ul*
 1SG father come-SF
 'My father has come' [TNB I 13] → S-Focus
- b. *met* *amaa* *me=kel-uj*
 1SG father AFF=COME-INTR.3SG
 'My father has come.' [TNB I 13] → Neutral (intransitive)

As for transitive verbs, three forms are possible. However, my gathered data contains O-Focus and Neutral forms only. A-Focus is absent in my fieldnotes, but this focus-conjugation is infrequent in general:¹⁵

¹⁴ In fact, the system is even more complicated; there exists an interrogative paradigm with separate endings and there is allomorphy in future tense forms, which adds another 18 forms. Apart from this, the imperative has its own agreement markers and so do different-subject dependent predicates.

¹⁵ Several years after this fieldwork experience, I started analyzing and glossing Tundra Yukaghir folklore texts from FJ in order to contrast my consultants' idiolect with that of fully fluent speakers. This corpus currently contains 31 manually glossed Tundra Yukaghir narratives (exceeding 13000 orthographic words).



4) Tundra Yukaghir

a. *met ile-leŋ aji-meŋ*
 1SG reindeer-FOC shoot-1SG:OF
 ‘I shot the reindeer.’ [TNB I 19] → O-Focus

b. *met ile-le mer=aji-ŋ*
 1SG reindeer-ACC AFF=shoot-TRANS.1SG
 ‘I shot the reindeer.’ [TNB I 19] → Neutral

Although I deliberately tried to keep subjects and/or objects indefinite or focused or focus-neutral in elicitation, for the first time in my career I was not able to elicit a simple coherent paradigm. The only way to get paradigms (in later meetings) was to show the paradigm from a grammar (usually Krejnovič, 1958 was used) and let the consultant read them out and comment on them. But of course, these were neither “my” paradigms, nor should this be called elicitation; after all, I elicit forms in clausal contexts only. And for the record, I have never done this before or later again... To this, a second problem has to be added, for which language attrition is probably responsible — plural forms were hard to get. The speaker anticipated these problems and hesitated to offer transitive plural forms whenever possible. In fact, most of them turned out to be ungrammatical, either entirely or forms from other focus conjugations appeared in the wrong context. Example (5a) from elicitation with an incorrect form is contrasted with forms to be expected in this context:

5) Tundra Yukaghir

a. *?tet laame-pul metul me=nere-l’el’-ŋi*
 2SG dog-PL 1SG.ACC AFF=bite-INFER-???
 ‘Your dogs have bitten me.’ [TNB I 59]
 -ŋi → incorrect 3PL neutral intransitive form

b. *tude-γane me=poŋi-ŋa*
 3SG-LOC AFF=leave-TRANS.3PL
 ‘So they left her.’ (FJ, p. 448)
 -ŋa → correct 3PL neutral transitive form

c. *arej equojie-da-γa ile-le tono-ŋumle nime-ŋiŋ*
 PTC day-POSS-LOC reindeer-ACC drive-TRANS.3PL:OF house-DAT
 ‘The next day they drove the reindeer to the house.’ (FJ, p. 450)
 -ŋumle → correct 3PL object focus form

d. *sebuŋieče-lek aq xand’eme semd’i-nun-ŋi*
 decoy.reindeer-INSTR only winter sneak-HAB-INTR.3PL
 ‘Only in the winter do they sneak with decoy reindeer’ (FJ, p. 456)
 -ŋi → correct neutral 3PL intransitive form



In retrospect, it appears that intransitive plural forms were correct more often than transitive forms (though not all intransitive forms were correct). As for the reluctance to produce plural forms, the speaker referred to her linguistic biography; the only person with whom she claimed to have spoken Yukaghir on a regular basis after the sudden death of her parents was her (younger?) brother, with whom she grew up among the Chukchi-speaking relatives. She mentioned numerous times that Yukaghir became their secret language¹⁶ and was used to express what she or her brother felt or did. When talking about others (thereby implying plural reference) or with others, they used Chukchi.¹⁷

3.1.3. PRELIMINARY NOTES ON GRAMMATICAL VARIATION AND ATTRITION

Although I had worked with semi-speakers before (mainly among Forest Enetses and speakers of different Saami languages), in all instances, except Ume Saami, I had a chance to work with reasonably or fully fluent speakers as well. This simplified judgments concerning the degree of attrition and ungrammatical forms, because these could be identified already in the field when diverging forms appeared in the same context. As for Tundra Yukaghir, this had to be postponed for several years until I had a chance to analyze the gathered data in depth.¹⁸ Even though a final judgment is still not possible, some preliminary observations concerning grammatical variation and obvious examples of attrition are included in this section. At this point, it requires mentioning that attrition affected individual parts of grammar, but not the entire grammar. A good example are different-subject converbal forms; example (6a) was given as 1SG form, but in fact is a 3SG form (6b,c). This happened many times and it is likely that the third person singular form replaced first person singular forms or that both forms have collapsed in her idiolect:

6) Tundra Yukaghir

- a. *ooriń-aa-daya qadir waa me=kelu-l'e-ń*
 cry-INCH-DS:??? PTC too AFF=COME-INFER-INTR.3SG
 'While I was crying, he came.' [TNB I 54]

16 It is well-known that Tundra Yukaghir is the least prestigious language in the local indigenous hierarchy. Whereas Tundra Yukaghirs had to learn up to three languages for interethnic communication (Even, Sakha and Russian, occasionally also some Chukchi), Yukaghir was hardly ever learned by speakers of other languages (see Vakhtin, 2001, pp. 143–15). Concerning the speaker's personal linguistic biography, apart from Chukchi, she spoke Russian. In contrast to many other Yukaghirs from the same generation, she had not been exposed to Sakha and had no skills in this language.

17 In this context, one idiosyncratic form requires mentioning. As 3PL pronoun, the speaker used *tit(t)epul* instead of *titte(l)*. This form does not appear in any available data.

18 Due to the absence of a second speaker, I started to analyze and gloss folklore texts in order to approach the grammar of Tundra Yukaghir "on its own". This work resulted in the corpus already mentioned.



- b. *met amaa ew=l'e l'ukuo-ly a jaba-j*
 1SG fater NEG=be.3SG [NEG] be.little-DS:1SG die-INTR.3SG
 'I don't have a father, when I was young he died.' (FJ, p. 196)
- c. *čijič'er-daya emd'e-gi me=kelu-j*
 become.dark-DS:3SG younger.sibling-POSS AFF=COME-INTR.3SG
 'While it became dark, his younger sibling came.' (FJ, p. 204)

Other parts of the grammar proved to be stable. Example (7b,c) shows the two plural markers *-pul* and *-pe*, the latter co-appearing on the argument marked for focus case (7c); in example (7d), plural stacking (which is apparently restricted to kinship terms) appears as mentioned in all prior accounts:

7) Tundra Yukaghir

- a. *ile-leŋ kel-ul*
 reindeer-FOC come-SF
 'The reindeer comes ~ just came.' [TNB I 37]
- b. *ile-pul kelu-ŋi*
 reindeer-PL come-INTR.3PL
 'Reindeer are coming.' [TNB I 37]
- c. *ile-pe-leŋ kelu-ŋul*
 reindeer-PL-FOC come-SF
 'These reindeer are coming.' [TNB I 48]
- d. *paad'eduor-pe-pul ooriñ-aa-ŋi*
 girl-PL-PL cry-INCH-INTR.3SG
 'The girls started to cry.' [TNB I 55]

A standard morphonological alternation, such as *r*-insertion when the affirmative clitic *me=* precedes a vocalic onset (8a), appears as expected (8b):

8) Tundra Yukaghir

- a. *paad'eduo mer=ooriñ-aa-l'e-ń*
 girl AFF=cry-INCH-INFER-INTR.3SG
 'Apparently, the girl started to cry.' [TNB I 55]
- b. *tudel me=kelu-l'e-ń*
 3SG AFF=COME-INFER-INTR.3SG
 'Apparently, he has come.' [TNB I 24]



Also, the two possessive markers *-gi* (absolute possessor) and *-de* (possessor plus case with lexical restrictions)¹⁹ appear as expected:

9) Tundra Yukaghir

- a. *taj laama-gi qad'ir me=kelu-le-ń*
 DEM dog-POSS PTC AFF=COME-INFER-INTR.3SG
 'This dog of his has apparently come.' [TNB I 73]
- b. *tuj joqo-lej tude joqo-d-ile-de-lek*
 DEM Sakha-FOC 3SG Sakha-ATR-reindeer-POSS-INSTR
kelu-l'e-ń
 come-INFER-INTR.3SG
 'That Sakha came with his horse.' [TNB I 37]

As for the lexicon, a remarkable personal detail requires explicit mentioning. Although the speaker had occasional problems remembering words and did consult the dictionaries I had brought along, Tundra Yukaghir and Chukchi vocabulary were never mixed.

Last but not least, the only grammatical category which could no longer be produced at all were numerals. This is not surprising for a number of reasons. First, numeral formation in Yukaghir is morphologically complex and verbal; second, numerals, especially higher numerals, have been replaced with Russian numerals in many indigenous/minority languages of the Russian Federation. Also in this context, the consultant claimed that if she had to count, she did it in Chukchi, but most often already in Russian.²⁰

3.1.4. WHY ELICITATION COULD NOT BE REPLACED WITH STORY-TELLING...

Although elicitation proved to be problematic, it had to serve as the only means of data gathering, because my consultant considered her active language skills too limited to tell stories in Yukaghir. However, once, she indeed surprised me and came

¹⁹ This approximation appears in every grammar of Yukaghir in this form, but has never triggered additional research.

²⁰ As much as the Yukaghir counting system is complex, the Chukchi system is even more so. Chukchi uses a base 20 system, with intervals based on 5. The numeral five is historically based on the word for hand, the numeral twenty related to man (= all fingers and toes). The impracticality of this system for counting in larger numbers has been described by the Chukchi writer Juri Rytchëu (Rytchëu, 2010, pp. 146–149) with great humor. Relevant in this context are Michael Dunn's observations from his fieldwork in Chukotka in the early 1990s: "The numerical system is not well understood by speakers today, who tend to use Russian numerals even when speaking Chukchi. There is a suggestion from some native speakers that counting above twenty may have always been arcane knowledge, beyond the mathematico-linguistic competence of most speakers." (Dunn, 1999, pp. 67)



up with a short story. The narrative was about her childhood dog, which died soon before her parents died. This story was transcribed during our last meeting and it appears to be rather idiomatic, although the degree of morphological and syntactic complexity is not comparable to the language encountered in earlier folklore texts (a detailed morphological analysis is however still pending). Additionally, some further stretches from the folklore collection were read aloud for recording, but only with some hesitation because the attested genres and the rather complex language were considered foreign. A comparatively unproblematic way to gather at least some more data was looking at Tundra Yukaghir examples in prior studies and letting her construct structurally similar examples.

3.1.5. THE YUKAGHIR EPISODE: SUMMARY

As already mentioned above, this episode was not the first instance of working with a speaker whose active skills in his/her language were reduced. What made the Yukaghir episode unique was that in contrast to earlier Forest Enets experiences where other potential consultants were around, there was only this speaker available. Although the speaker belonged to the group of the youngest speakers/rememberers of Tundra Yukaghir, she was nevertheless a member of the grand-parental generation. In principle, this constellation was akin to my prior Taimyrian experiences, even though most of my consultants there were actually even older.

Two features require additional comments. First, our work environment was certainly far from usual and life in an asylum center left obvious traces on her and her nephew's psychological well-being. Second, available possibilities for work were too limited. Financial and familiar restrictions on my side allowed four irregular meetings (once in June, once in July, twice in August) only. Under such circumstances, reactivation of languages skills without regular meetings is unlikely.²¹ At this point I want to emphasize that the speaker was realistic concerning her active skills straight from the beginning when we met in the department in March 2013 and knew that this enterprise was challenging.

As for linguistic results, despite the fact that certain spheres of grammar proved to be beyond her active skills, the meetings resulted in 96 pages of handwritten material (lexical and clausal, the clausal part dominating). About a third of our work could be recorded (resulting in about 8 hours of recordings). These recordings contain her reading stretches of longer texts, her own narrative, but also all lexemes and phrases from the leaflet discussing the principles of Tundra Yukaghir orthography (Kurilov, 1987) and some stretches of elicitation. Although it is still too early for a final judgment because not everything has been transferred into a digital format yet, it appears that ungrammatical forms are less numerous than I had initially expected; since problematic forms appear in certain morphosyntactic contexts, which makes them predictable (often co-appearing with longer pauses,

²¹ At the end of our last meeting in late August (shortly before their deportation), I got all xerox copies back. Whereas grammatical materials did not show signs of reading, the copy of the folklore collection showed signs of use.



changes in intonation and speech manners), their identification in the recordings is comparatively easy.

Summarizing this unique instance of consultant work, it is likely to remain the most unusual experience of its kind in my career (already due to the location) and altered my thinking and understanding of fieldwork challenges significantly. The most prominent lesson was that the central means of data gathering, elicitation, can fail, even though I had certainly learned “how to ask”.²² The second prominent lesson to learn was the role of information structure in predication. Although I was certainly aware of its importance in Samoyedic and Dolgan (e.g., Siegl, 2013, 2015a, 2015b), the Yukaghir system cannot be compared to the aforementioned languages, because it operates on the clausal level and is obligatory.

Although it is unlikely that the limited data contains anything which has been overlooked in prior research, the speaker’s efforts in teaching me what she remembered about the language of her childhood assisted me tremendously in analyzing published materials later on my own.

3.2. “SOMEBODY PRESENTING AT THIS CONFERENCE IS WORKING ON A TURKIC LANGUAGE...”

Turning over to the Tuvan episode, its beginning shows a remarkable parallel with the Tundra Yukaghir episode; again, it was me who was approached, though this time differently. In December 2014, during a workshop accompanying a newly formed study program “Indigenous Studies” at the University of Helsinki, one of the organizers (actually from the same department) came and asked me whether I had worked on a Turkic language as well (apparently she had not been aware of my engagement in Dolgan). In the audience, there was a Tuvan lady who had come to attend this conference because she had learned that somebody among the presenters was working on a Turkic language; the organizer must have asked almost everybody else before she approached me and was glad that she finally found this mysterious individual. During the next coffee break, the organizer introduced us; although I started in Russian, I was answered in English, and we continued in English. Unfortunately, the coffee break ended too quickly and the Tuvan lady said that she had to leave before the conference was supposed to end. Therefore, I asked whether we could meet once more for another cup of coffee somewhere around the university in the following days. Fortunately, she agreed. Although I don’t remember how many coffees we actually had, I vividly remember that we sat together for quite a long time; we talked about Russia, Siberia, her native Republic of Tyva and animal husbandry. Towards the end, the linguist in me took over and asked about her language skills. It appeared that she was roughly my age, which in the Russian Federation does not necessarily

22 Reference to Charles Biggs (Biggs, 1986) is fully intentional. Given that Tundra Yukaghir is spoken north of the polar circle as well, in an environment not too different from that of the Taimyr Peninsula, where I had spent 13 months, this environment (in a broad context including flora, fauna, political and ethnolinguistic history) was certainly not *terra incognita* for me.

mean solid language skills in the native language. Fortunately, this time, my expectations turned out to be wrong. She told me that she was fluent in Tuvan and fully literate, that she had worked as a journalist in the state capital Kyzyl writing news in Tuvan after graduating as a teacher of Russian from the local university and that she raised her kids in Helsinki in Tuvan, not in Russian. I asked her whether she could find some time to teach me a bit of Tuvan by answering questions which I would prepare; she agreed to meet me again for a test run in the following days. This meeting went incredibly well and I even got two full verbal paradigms without any problems in the very first session, a revelation after the Tundra Yukaghir episode. We started meeting regularly in January (once or twice a week depending on our schedules) until late May 2015 when I had to move from Helsinki to Tromsø to start the Ume Saami project (2015–2017). Fortunately, we continued meeting later, too — virtually and in real life.

3.2.1. WORKING WITH A MULTILINGUAL PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE USER

The Tuvan episode remains the most productive instance of data gathering I have experienced in my career so far. Before I shed more light on this episode, a short excursion is necessary. Over the years, I have had the chance to work with a number of typologically different languages and gathering data by asking has become a routine; furthermore, I have learned what I can ask and who I can ask and when (Biggs, 1986). Reflections about what to ask are highly relevant, because *linguèse* ('colorless green ideas sleep furiously') is certainly a problematic discourse genre for the non-linguist. In other words, by blindly using *linguèse* in elicitation, one can quickly ruin one's relationship with a potential consultant if the cultural background is not taken into consideration. For example, while working with speakers of languages from Northern Siberia (even with "new acquaintances") it was never problematic to use the prototypical, yet utterly malevolent transitive verb 'to kill' without much ado; after all, most, if not all consultants were born in the tundra among reindeer herders where such procedures are part of everyday life. When asking for an example with this verb, the only problem was the syntactic object and consultants asked 'what kind of reindeer' one would be talking about (e.g., calf, one year old + sex, two year old + sex, three year old + sex, four year old + sex, bull, cow, domesticated reindeer, wild reindeer and so forth). Although this example as such is certainly not suitable for a newcomer to the field (who will be overwhelmed by the lexical distinctions), the advanced fieldworker cherishes these moments, because quite a number of new lexemes can be gathered in short time. Most important, however, is that neither the verb nor the action trigger bewilderment. For speakers of other languages, the verb is most likely inappropriate, if not offending, and the need for such an example may remain incomprehensible (notwithstanding that there are no reindeer in India or Armenia). Therefore, a different transitive verb has to be used, for which 'to bite' or 'to beat', such as 'The dog bit me' or 'I beat the dog (because he bit me)', would be good starting points, minimizing cultural problems; dogs are often around in villages and may bite unknown passers by, among them visiting linguists. However, the Yukaghir





experience demonstrated that framing questions may fail entirely and that one must take what one can get.²³

As for Tuvan, a Turkic language, significant problems were not to be expected; I had once learned some Turkish and had worked on Dolgan for a while already. Any surprises were therefore restricted to language-specific properties, which will be shown in example (10). In Dolgan, the verb of posture *tur-* ‘to stand’ is, strictly speaking, infrequent as a constructional auxiliary expressing aspectuality. In fact, it took about a month before a speaker produced such a form spontaneously.²⁴ In contrast, the aspectual form popped up already in the very first Tuvan clausal example I elicited (10b):

10)

a. Dolgan

kürej ürd-ü-ger hılak haksıl-a tur-ar
 xorej top-POSS3-DAT flag flap-CON stand-PRS.3SG
 ‘The flag on top of the xorej (= reindeer sled diver’s pole) is flapping.’ [GSV 59]

b. Tuvan

men maŋna-p tur men
 1SG run-CON stand.PTCP.PRS/FUT 1SG
 ‘I am running.’ [VP 2]

As for ‘to give’ and ‘to take’ as constructional auxiliaries expressing subject vs. object oriented benefactivity, my own Dolgan data did not contain a single example. This use is also very rare in the corpus. In Tuvan, this property popped up in the third (11a) and fourth meeting (11b) and became more frequent later when mild *linguise* was replaced with more natural examples:

11) Tuvan

a. *öpija üŋge-i ber-di*
 baby crawl-CON give-PSTII.3SG
 ‘The baby started to crawl.’ [VP 13]

b. *men nom-nu a-p al-dı-m*
 1SG book-ACC take-CON take-PSTII-1SG
 ‘I took the book.’ [VP 21]

²³ This certainly does not imply that every question I have ever asked produced the expected answers. However, failure often revealed new categories or nuances of use which would have remained overlooked. Chance remains one of the best research assistants in the field. Concerning ‘to kill’, I was indeed able to elicit examples from the Yukaghir lady.

²⁴ This observation is backed up by corpus evidence. Prior to the compilation of the Tundra Yukaghir corpus, I created a similar corpus for Dolgan to get supplementary data for morphosyntactic work (e.g., Siegl, 2019b).



Because our first language of communication was English, we continued to use English, which increased work speed on my side. Furthermore, English was a foreign language for both of us and gave us the chance to use it for (linguistic) comparisons with either Tuvan or Russian. Russian, which due to the sociolinguistic history of the USSR was my consultant's second language, was unsuitable, because the late language learner (= me) approaches the language with a degree of abstraction which a speaker who had acquired the language during childhood does not have. However, Russian was not excluded entirely; Russian was inevitable when talking about Siberian flora and fauna for fine-tuning nuances but also when talking about animals or artifacts which lacked a suitable English translation. Another benefit of Russian, especially in combination with her prior studies of Russian pedagogical linguistics, was that some linguistic terminology was passively present and required little explanation. When approaching converbs for the first time, I could rely on the Russian concept *deepričastie* (verbal adverb) and re-use a questionnaire I had once designed for working on the Taimyr Peninsula (12):²⁵

12)

a. Russian

čita-ja knigu, on side-l na narte
 read-CON book.ACC.SG.FEM 3SG.MASC sit-3SG.MASC on sled.LOC.SG.FEM
 'He sat on the sled, reading a book.'

b. Tuvan

ol nom-un nomču-vušaan šanak-tıj kır-in-ga
 3SG book-POSS3.ACC book.read-CON sled-POSS3.GEN top-POSS3-DAT
olur-gan
 sit-PSTI
 'He sat on top of the sled, reading his book.' [VP 58]

Of course, the background in pedagogical linguistics made it easier to work on other topics without lengthy explanations as well, e.g., NP relativization (13a) or causative formation (13b):²⁶

13) Tuvan

a. *nom-nu čorttup-kan-ım kiži bažiŋ-da evez bol-gan*
 book-ACC send-PTCP.PST-POSS1SG man house-LOC not.exist become-PSTI
 'The person to whom I sent the book was not at home.' [VP 55]

²⁵ The possibility to use such existing questionnaires reduced the need to prepare something entirely new for every meeting as well.

²⁶ It has occurred in the past, and it will most likely occur in the future as well, that I had to explain to my consultants why apparent "nonsense questions" have a deeper meaning. At least one of my central Forest Enets consultants and one of my Dolgan consultants started to see the structures behind the questions at one point, but this was indeed an exception. Afterwards, the Enets consultant brought her own copy book to working sessions and took grammar notes for herself.



- b. *ugba-m* *oglu-n* *kadaj-in* *kag-dir-ip-kan*
 sister-POSS1SG son-POSS3.ACC wife-POSS3.ACC leave-CAUS-PERF-PSTI
 ‘My sister made her son leave his wife.’ [VP 29]

However, this does not mean that consultant work only involved plain translation meetings. Even though bilingual consultant work is not possible without translations, translations should be understood as the initial step towards idiomatically well-formed clauses. The following examples present this in more detail. For certain weather verbs, a monovalent realization (X is X-ing) is used (14a,c). Nevertheless, zero-valent clauses (14b,d) are more idiomatic, but these examples only came up after the monovalent clauses, which resulted from the initial translation task:

14) Tuvan

- a. *daštın* *čaʒs* *čaa-p* *tur*
 outside rain rain-CON stand.PTCP.PRS/FUT
 ‘It is raining outside.’ (Lit. Rain is raining outside) [VP 82]
- b. *daštın* *čas-ta-p* *tur*
 outside rain-CAUS-CON stand.PTCP.PRS/FUT
 ‘It is raining outside.’ [VP 82]
- c. *xat* *xad-ip* *tur*
 wind blow-CON stand.PTCP.PRS/FUT
 ‘The wind is blowing (Lit. Wind is winding)’ [VP 82]
- d. *xad-ip* *tur*
 blow-CON stand.PTCP.PRS/FUT
 ‘The wind is blowing.’ [VP 82]

These examples are interesting for at least one more reason. Similar instances of “quasi-incorporation” (lexical noun + causative suffix → ‘to x-do’) had already appeared in earlier sessions and continued showing up later as well:

15) Tuvan

- a. *ol* *xleb* *sad-ip* *al-ır* *deeš* *sadıg-že* *čor-up-kan*
 3SG bread buy-CON take-PTCP.PRS/FUT say.CON shop-ALL go-PERF-PSTI
 ‘He went to the shop to buy bread.’ [VP 93]
- b. *ol* *xleb-te-p* *sadıg-že* *čor-up-kan*
 3SG bread-CAUS-CON shop-ALL go-PERF-PSTI
 ‘He went to the shop to buy bread.’ [VP 93]

In the light of examples (14b,d) and (15b), this morphological operation is certainly not really causativizing, but an instance of denominal verb formation. An interesting property of this process is that it is even capable of deleting the only argument



via verbalization. This, however, popped up by chance. Although the underlying syntactic process is transparent to the linguist, asking a consultant “whether this process could apply to intransitive verbs as well” would work out only with a consultant trained in linguistics (who, then, is probably a linguist as well).

The Tuvan episode contained even more unusual details. On more than one occasion, I could ask something in passing which would have required at least 4–5 consultants on the Taimyr Peninsula (especially concerning complex linguistic constructions). Furthermore, since my consultant and I were both foreigners in Finland and almost of the same age, completely different topics opened up for discussion; gender played a minor role and did not impose significant problems.²⁷ In contrast, on the Taimyr Peninsula and in Swedish Lapland, I was the “professional stranger” (Powdermaker, 1966) and at least one, often two generations younger than my consultants.

Another significant detail was the degree of literacy. Consultant work on Tuvan meant that for the first time, I had the opportunity to work intensively with a speaker of a minority language of Russia who was fully literate in her native language; this meant that when I was unsure about what I heard, I could simply ask how a given word is written; although I had met speakers of minority languages from Russia who were literate in their native tongue before, almost all of them had studied their native language as philology and were massively exposed to language planning; instead of writing how they would speak, such speakers were propagators of an artificial written norm and often felt uneasy using their “own language”.²⁸ Furthermore, working with a speaker of a comparatively large language — it is estimated that Tuvan has more than 200,000 native speakers in Russia, Mongolia and China — and a language functioning as the official language of the Republic of Tyva (next to Russian), new possibilities arose, because Tuvan is used in spheres where the vanishing languages of an indigenous people are hardly ever used. Due to the immense pace at which our work proceeded and the fact that complex topics did not pose problems, I decided to test ready-made questionnaires from the EURO TYP project (the examples below come from Kees Hengeveld’s questionnaire on the internal structure of adverbial clauses).²⁹ Whereas I had used bits and pieces from different questionnaires before, as briefly mentioned above, all of them had to be significantly reshaped/restructured in order

27 Gender certainly played a role when I had the chance to work with a female speaker of Meithei. Everything started with a field-method class with a strong pedagogical component. After the end of this course, I could continue meeting with her until she had to return to India, but the class had introduced tensions and uneven power relations which could not be overcome.

28 Dunn (1999, pp. 35) overtly verbalized similar experiences: “If in elicitation sessions I presented examples from Skorik’s grammar (the authoritative grammar of Chukchi, FS) as my own hypothetical constructs, my consultants, who understood that I was interested in spoken Chukchi, would often reject them. Some speakers became very uncomfortable to discover that the source of data that they rejected as ungrammatical was Skorik’s grammar, and rapidly revised their judgement. Such grammaticality judgements are obviously not very revealing for descriptive purposes.”

29 https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/tools-at-lingboard/questionnaire/eurotyp_description.php (accessed 3.7.2020)



to adapt them to the reality of life (past and present) of indigenous people residing in the tundra and taiga.³⁰ For Tuvan, this was not strictly necessary and most of the examples from the questionnaire could be used immediately without modification:

16) Tuvan

- a. *tavari-lga dugaj-in-da ol čanı-p kel-geš*
 accident-NMLZ about-POSS3-LOC 3SG return-CON come-CON
bil-ip kaan
 know-CON AUX.PSTI
 ‘She found out about the accident when she came home.’ [VP 86]

- b. *šagdaa menden ozal-ondak-tı kör-dü-ŋ*
 police 1SG.ABL road-accident-ACC see-PSTII-2SG
be de-p ajtır-dı
 Q say-CON ask-PSTII.3SG
 ‘The police asked if I had seen the accident.’ [VP 98]

Nevertheless, modification could not be avoided entirely. Hengeveld’s questionnaire suggested the following two examples for the elicitation of an adverbial clause where the (non-intentional) event causes the main clause event.

17) English

- a. *The fuse blew because we had overloaded the circuit.* (different subject)
 b. *The fuse blew because it had become wet.* (same subject)

Although these examples were certainly not “untranslatable”, they would have resulted in the kind of language one would find on many official signs in the non-Slavic territories of the Russian Federation where Russian lexemes are inflected with local morphology. These examples, then, required adaption and became:

18) Tuvan

- a. *ašir čüdür-üp-ken bolgaš mašina üre-li-p kaan*
 by overload-PERF-PTCP.PST because car break-REFL-CON AUX.PSTI
 ‘Because of overloading, the car broke.’ [VP 87]
- b. *erten-den kešee-ge čedir tıstan-main aŋ-tıg čoraan*
 morning-ABL evening-DAT until rest-NEG.CON horse-SOC go.PTCP.PST
bolgaš ol šıla-i ber-gen
 because 3SG be.tired-CON give-PSTI

³⁰ The cultural problems of adaption were splendidly illustrated by Juri Rytchëu, who showed that even conscious non-natives could fail spectacularly when compiling textbooks for native children (Rytchëu, 2010, pp. 146–149).

‘Because he rode from morning to evening on horseback without rest, he got tired.’ [VP 87]

Finally, since Tuvan is used in literature and media (TV, radio, print and social media), the language documentator’s imperative “record natural speech whenever possible” could safely be discarded during consultant work.

3.2.2. LITERACY IN ACTION – CONSULTANT WORK ONLINE

For all of my consultants among the speakers/rememberers of moribund languages (all of them were at least 60 years of age, often much older), continuation of work from a distance was not possible. Apart from the very restricted availability of the internet in Siberia at the time, most consultants did not have access to computers or even know how to use one. Others, who had access to a computer, often did not own one. Although I had attempted sending e-mails with questions in Russian to indigenous consultants living in Dudinka, the results were unsatisfying and created more confusion than benefit. In a nutshell, direct face-to-face consultant work could not be compensated. As for Ume Saami, where the only remaining possibility of data gathering was the joint transcription of old sound recordings (for details, see Siegl, 2018), work without audio context would have been entirely pointless, even though both consultants were literate in Swedish, had their own computers and could even read Schlachter’s (1958) Ume Saami texts without problems (though not the German translation).³¹ Again, the Tuvan experience is markedly different. When our ways parted in May 2015, it did not mean the end, because we could keep up regular contact by e-mail and video chats. This clarified questions about already gathered data, allowed new questions, offered translation and interpretation help on texts I worked on myself and the like. It would probably be accurate to say that data gathering has never stopped. Apart from direct interaction, indirect data gathering has become possible as well. In the meanwhile, my consultant enrolled in a PhD program in Helsinki.³²

31 Ume Saami had remained an oral language and the amount of written (and published) data is low (see Siegl, 2017, 2020). Fortunately, the only voluminous collection of Ume Saami narratives, told by Lars Sjulsson (Schlachter, 1958), was published, contrary to Finnish and Hungarian practicalities of that period, in a practical, phonologically grounded orthography, which can be read by Ume Saamis themselves without any problems. Other Saami languages, among them Ume Saami’s closest neighbor Pite Saami, were less fortunate. The only sizable collection of narratives in Pite Saami was gathered by Eliel Lagercrantz, who published them in different volumes of his Saami folklore collection. Because Lagercrantz used the older version of the Finno-Ugric Transcription, which is overburdened with diacritics, these texts are undecipherable for native speakers without dedicated training and remain as incomprehensible as their accompanying German translation.

32 The topic of reciprocal benefit for the consultant and the researcher cannot be covered in this essay due to restrictions of space. Working on Tundra Yukaghir and Tuvan were both private endeavors for which financial reimbursement was not available. As for my Tuvan consultant, I was able to introduce her to several individuals at the University of Helsinki,



Occasionally, I do get highly interesting data which derive from her own field recordings, comments and/or observation of unusual language use encountered in Tuvan media or copies of articles in Tuvan about Tyva and copies of her own publications.

3.2.3. EVALUATING THE TUVAN EPISODE

Working with a speaker entirely literate in her native language, a professional language user trained in educational linguistics and of similar age, and the choice of English over Russian as the working language made possible things which remained out of reach in other episodes of fieldwork. Furthermore, even though Tuvan is endangered, it is comparatively safe, especially in direct comparison with any of the languages I have conducted fieldwork on in-situ. Therefore, the urgency factor accompanying my work on Forest Enets and later on Ume Saami never played a role. As for the data I was able to collect, it is grammatically certainly more complex than the data I have been able to collect among speakers of any other language so far. In 16 meetings of about 1,5h–2h length each, I gathered 112 pages of densely handwritten material consisting almost entirely of clausal examples; all sessions could be recorded as well. For the sake of comparison, this is about the same amount of elicitation data I was able to gather during 2,5 months of almost daily fieldwork (about 1,5–2h a workday) on Dolgan in 2011. Although I worked with more speakers and had more meetings, work had to be conducted entirely in Russian; additionally, almost all consultants were significantly older, which reduced working speed. The only meaningful difference between the Dolgan and the Tuvan episode is that I could record narratives and longer conversations in Dolgan as well; about 30 minutes of these recordings were transcribed in the field with assistants. Narratives in Tuvan were not recorded in 2015, but my consultant let me record her reading two short texts. As mentioned above, another crucial difference lies in the fact that contact could be upheld after the end of regular linguistic work; although direct data gathering has certainly decreased, this has been partly compensated by generous data donation from her own (field) work and the chance to get answers for a question, often within a couple of minutes.

3.3. SUMMARY

In this section, I have discussed two instances of temporally bounded fieldwork, both of which I have to consider “unusual”. I wish to emphasize once more that “unusual” must be understood from my biased perspective, which is a direct result of prolonged fieldwork among the last speakers/rememberers of Forest Enets and Ume Saami; although experiences from Dolgan have certainly softened my perspective, it is work on heavily endangered languages which has dominated my long-term fieldwork. As the evaluations of both episodes have shown, a comparison without taking experiences from the Taimyr Peninsula as the point of comparison would be meaningless.

which opened the way for her to tackle the required paperwork and finally enroll in a PhD program. Fortunately, I did not lose a consultant in 2015, but got a colleague.

If this essay had been restricted to purely formal observations, the fact that neither of the consultants nor me were “at home in Finland” (after all, Finland was nobody’s original home and did not become home for the Yukaghir lady, nor for me) and that consultant work was conducted *ex-situ* and not *in-situ* would have remained uninformative and therefore would certainly not require a lengthy discussion. Also, the question of the working language — consultant work on Yukaghir was conducted in Russian, work on Tuvan in English — is irrelevant. After all, what could be documented depended mostly on the language skills of the consultant and the amount of time available. Although the Yukaghir fieldnotes fill 96 A4 pages and the Tuvan 112 A4 pages, their difference is of a qualitative nature. The Yukaghir data is syntactically not very complex and contains numerous repetitions; furthermore, it contains a significant amount of lexical material, especially in the beginning when one had to get acquainted with phonetics and phonology of a language for which sound examples were not readily available then. This step was not necessary for Tuvan. Apart from glottalization, Tuvan’s sound structure contained few additional surprises, and I was able to move from isolated words to clausal examples almost instantly.

Summing up these experiences, both the Yukaghir and the Tuvan episode were, after all, instances of fieldwork whose practicalities were not too different from those I had encountered on the Taimyr Peninsula. This means that the rather extreme settings characteristic of the Ume Saami project, where two rememberers and a linguist succeeded in transcribing close to 4 hours of narratives recorded at least half a century ago, remain a unique experience of their own. However, in one central concern, the two episodes “*ex-situ*” differ — neither episode triggered the unlearning of another language.

4. WHY WORKING WITH ONE SPEAKER IS NOT WORKING ON A “PRIVATE LANGUAGE” — INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Although the concept of fieldwork *ex-situ*, which often coincides with the availability of one isolated speaker, is far from being the ideal setting for data gathering, the importance of this kind of consultant work is often downplayed. However, a look into linguistics’ history quickly reveals that this is far from being unusual. Prominent examples beyond Franz Boas and Edward Sapir’s work are Bloomfield’s monographs on Tagalog and Eastern Ojibwa (Bloomfield, 1917, 1958), both conducted *ex-situ*, or Haas’ work *in-situ* on Tunica (e.g., Haas, 1941), all of which were based on the speech of one speaker only. Schlachter’s work based on his fieldwork on Ume Saami *in-situ* represents and analyzes the idiolect of one speaker as well (Schlachter, 1958, 1991). The crucial difference between these four examples lies in their later role. Whereas Tagalog received numerous grammars later, this is less true of Ojibwa, which is nevertheless fortunate to have received a massive reference grammar of 1080 pages in length (Valentine, 2001). Ume Saami is still heavily dependent on Schlachter’s materials, especially concerning texts (Siegl, 2017, 2020). Haas’ materials on Tunica remain the only reliable materials available. Other widely quoted grammars, e.g., Dixon’s early grammars (Dixon, 1972, 1977), are based on the language of very few individuals as well.





Also, the grammar of Forest Enets compiled by me (Siegl, 2013) is based on the language of about half a dozen of consultants only. What these monographs and other similar studies reveal is that even in circumstances where few or only one speaker is available, linguistic work is certainly possible, including the collection of narratives. And for the sake of argument, an idiolect, even one of a fluent last speaker of an endangered language, is never a Wittgensteinian “private language”, because an idiolect has a lexicon which was shared by at least two speakers who have acquired a comparatively similar set of rules and a lexicon and who could access “what the other side refers to and intends to mean”. When having a second speaker around, the questions of idiolectal versus dialectal variation, as well as registers, become a topic. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that such questions can be approached as well when working with one speaker only.

Even though quantitative and computational approaches become more and more dominating in linguistics and in fieldwork-based linguistics, fieldwork and consultant work can still be and will be conducted with a few speakers only. In fact, as few as one speaker is necessary. This means that working with one speaker only is far from being unusual. Whether fieldwork requires the “unlearning of another language” is a different question and as such independent of the number of consultants available.

GLOSSING

1SG	freestanding pronoun	LOC	locative
1SG.ACC	inflected pronoun	MASC	masculine gender
3SG	verbal agreement marker	NEG	negative
ABL	ablative	NMLZ	nominalization
ACC	accusative	OF	object focus
AF	agent focus	PERF	perfective
AFF	affirmative	PL	plural
ALL	allative	POSS	possessive
ATR	attributive	PRS	present tense
CAUS	causative	PST	past tense
CON	converb	PSTI	immediate past
DAT	dative	PSTII	distant past tense
DS	different subject	PTC	particle
FEM	feminine gender	PTCP	participle
FOC	focus (case)	Q	question particle
FUT	future	REFL	reflexive
HAB	habitual aspect	SF	subject focus
INCH	inchoative aspect	SG	singular
INFER	inferential (evidential)	SOC	sociative
INSTR	instrumental case	TRANS	transitive
INTR	intransitive		

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