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Itelmen Language and Culture

(Russian Federation)

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Brief description:

The Itelmen Language and Culture project, located in Russia (Siberia), centres on the development of teaching materials such as textbooks and CD-ROMs for the Itelmen language, with a special focus on incorporating local culture and indigenous knowledge to enhance motivation and intergenerational language transmission.

Itelmen is a Southern Chukotko-Kamchatkan language spoken in Siberia (Kamchatka peninsula). It is severely endangered, as the youngest native speakers were born in the 1940s and 1950s. The current population of the Itelmen ethnic group is approximately 3,000.

The goals of the project are the preservation and documentation of the Itelmen language in combination with safeguarding of local culture and indigenous knowledge (e.g. knowledge about the surrounding ecology). A particular concern of the project is that the materials produced comprise culturally adapted content that is highly relevant to the local community and reflects its experience (e.g. fishing techniques, hunting tools, crafts, traditional songs). An illustrated textbook has been published, geared towards very young children and intended to facilitate intergenerational transmission via home use. Further, a multimedia CD-ROM as well as methodological recommendations for Itelmen language teachers have been published. At the request of the communities, different local variants of the language were incorporated into these materials. The textbook and the CD-ROM are very popular in the community even outside the school context, and have thus helped to enhance language competencies among all age groups.

Reader's guide:

This project provides an example of how to develop various forms of language instruction materials that are sensitive to the embedding culture. Publishing an illustrated textbook that can be used by grandparents to teach and entertain very small children is useful in facilitating intergenerational language transmission, as is the production of a CD-ROM with multimedia language materials catering to adolescents and adults alike. The project is a spin-off from an anthropological research project, exemplifying cooperation and synergy between academic work and community-oriented safeguarding efforts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background: current situation in the language community:

At the start of the fieldwork project on the west coast of the Kamchatka peninsula in Russia in 1993, the native language of the Itelmen was hardly used anymore in everyday practice. It was recalled only occasionally when older people came together, or in fragmentary form during ceremonial occasions such as at the annual festival Alkhalalalai. The youngest speakers known to have grown up with Itelmen as their mother tongue were born in the 1940s or early 1950s.

Today, all speakers of Itelmen are bilingual, with Russian as the dominant language of daily use both in the community and at home. Furthermore, economic pressures have drawn many Itelmen away from their traditional communities in the southern Tigilski Rayon and into the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where they form an extremely small minority.

At the beginning of the project, the Itelmen language was part of the regular school curriculum in the communities of Kovran and Sedanka, and in Verkhnee Khairuzovo. The Itelmen language was also taught in special courses in Tigil', by initiative of a community elder.

For smaller groups of Itelmen who live outside the traditional communities in the southern Tigilski region, Itelmen was also taught by Valentina Uspenskaia at the Kamchatka State Pedagogical University in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski until her death in 2004. Her efforts drew circles of interested adults and children of Itelmen ethnicity to work together on language learning. Itelmen is also taught by Tatiana Zueva at the Advanced Teachers Training Institute in Palana.

A set of Itelmen language schoolbooks, authored by A.P. Volodin and K.N. Khaloimova, was in use.

One of the domains in which people were most motivated to keep up the language and where the use of Itelmen (or fragments of it) has been encouraged are ceremonial settings and traditional feasts, i.e. activities and occasions that centre on the expression or celebration of Itelmen ethnic identity, of which the native language is a central element. Furthermore, performing arts such as traditional Itelmen songs and dances, with their respective staged performances, appear to be a domain of continued use of the Itelmen language. Fragments of Itelmen speech are also preserved in greetings and some general chatting, although code switching sets in as soon as terminology becomes more specific, in which case people use Russian more comfortably.

Impetus for the project:

At a local community conference in Kovran in 1993, Klavdiia Nikolaevna Khaloimova and others urged social and cultural anthropologist Erich Kasten and his team to implement special measures for the preservation of the Itelmen language, although such an initiative was not part of the team's original research program in the area. The prime concern of community members was to preserve local speech variants of the Itelmen language and the corresponding specific local knowledge. For native speakers, these elements were not sufficiently reflected in the standardized teaching materials that had been launched in the 1980s and were used to teach Itelmen in the schools. In most parts of the Soviet Union, school materials were produced since the 1980s to preserve native languages.

Problems identified:

At the start of the project, Itelmen language education (such as native language education in other parts of Kamchatka and presumably in the rest of Russia) was mostly geared towards (and restricted to) the regular school curriculum in terms of topics, content, and methodology. Further, although this education was meant to begin at pre-school age, the ongoing language loss indicated that this was already too late.

Another problem identified was that the existing teaching materials employed certain standards for the Itelmen language that did not always reflect local language variants still spoken by older generations. Therefore, many of the elders were critical of these schoolbooks. (The same occurred in other places, for example with similarly standardized teaching materials for the Even language spoken in central Kamchatka, where it became difficult for older people to understand their grandchildren because the latter learned a 'different' standardized language in school.)

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project sites:

The main project area is the southern part of the Tigilski Region of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug on the west coast of Kamchatka, in the easternmost part of Russia, where Itelmens still make up a large part (between one and two thirds) of the population in the smaller villages.

The project area also includes the district centre Palana, where many Itelmen from the southern parts of the Okrug now live, and where students from Itelmen areas farther south continue with their higher education or professional training. Klavdiia Khaloimova, the main local project partner, is based in Palana at the Institute for Advanced Teachers' Training, where Tatiana Zaeva, the institute's current director, is now in charge of the Itelmen language program. (The main task of this Institute is to provide teaching materials for the regular native language school curriculum developed in the 1980s.)

The project's main goals and scope:

The main goal of the project is to preserve the Itelmen language in connection with local culture, i.e. specific natural environments, traditional worldviews and spatial boundaries among communities as expressed in the Itelmen language and in specific local variants of it. This corresponds to the project team's philosophy that presenting language data in connection with local culture can most effectively stimulate interest and contribute to the preservation of endangered languages.

Project priorities were determined based on extensive consultation with local residents. Thus, the project team learned that the preservation (if not full revitalization) of the Itelmen language or even parts of it would help many people to maintain their particular and local identities, and provide them with broader access to other forms of traditional – e.g. ecological – knowledge. The project team thus directed particular attention to quite specific aspects of language preservation and designed specific activities of the project accordingly.

The project's strategies and activities:

The main strategy of the project has been to produce and disseminate new language learning tools in addition to complementing existing ones. Importantly, these new materials now pick up local contents, i.e. themes and environments that local people can more easily identify with, in order to tie language and cultural learning together, to make language learning more meaningful and thus to increase the learners' personal motivation and investment.

The first product resulting from the project was an Itelmen language learning textbook (with Russian translations): *Istoriko-etnograficheskoe uchebnoe posobie po itel'menskomu iazyku (1996) [Historical-ethnographical teaching materials for the Itelmen language]* (see 'Further resources' at the end of this report for links). The book addresses relevant Itelmen cultural themes and refers to local social and natural environments, thus stimulating native language maintenance in combination with preserving the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge and practices of the Itelmen people. The book is set up according to thematic modules taken from daily life in the local communities (e.g. fishing techniques, hunting tools, crafts, traditional song). The thematic sections focus mostly on vocabulary and its use in simple expressions/sentences. There are no grammar lessons in this book, since a separate, simple grammar book (in similar style) is currently in its planning stage.

As mentioned above, the project team recognized that for the Itelmen language to be passed on to younger generations, language learning would have to start at the youngest possible age. Thus, the new materials produced are particularly geared towards facilitating learning situations where elders (grandparents) can explain their local environment and culture to very young children (even at pre-kindergarten age), with the help of the illustrations and by using Itelmen words contained in the new textbook. Such language learning situations have proved

most effective and rewarding for both 'teacher' and 'learner'; and this way the very young can be provided at least occasionally with a native language environment at this crucial age for language acquisition – one moreover that is in their home environment, where otherwise the Itelmen language is no longer being used. The illustrations of local scenes in the book furthermore serve to trigger memories on the part of the elders who explain these situations to the young. Identification with local content was also seen as a key towards providing incentives and motivation for learning the language and thus for using the book.

The illustrations of the textbook relate directly to local culture and traditions; the scenery shown depicts real surrounding locations so that the children become immediately engaged in remembering and identifying them ('...on this street I walk to school every morning... here I go fishing with my father ...'). This constitutes a significant difference from previous native language textbooks dating from the Soviet era whose illustrations portray such items as astronauts or the Red Square.

Local language variation is an important challenge for the production of any language teaching materials. As mentioned above, the existing materials employed certain standards for the Itelmen language that did not always reflect local variants still spoken by older generations. The new textbook therefore includes three variants of Itelmen language instead of just one 'standardized' version: in addition to the established or 'standardized' variant originally spoken in Sopochnoe (and by project partner K.N. Khaloimova), a second variant is the one spoken in the north in Moroshechnoe, place of origin of one of the most competent remaining native speakers, Georgi 'Gosha' Zaporotski; and as a third variant, certain expressions from the particular Kamchadal vernacular were included. To highlight the differences visually and to avoid confusion, the 'non-standard' varieties were reproduced in green colour and with green background highlighting, respectively.

The textbook was presented to the public in a special ceremony during the Alkhalalalai festival in Kovran in 1997, in the presence of educators from nearby villages and district centres. Most of the one thousand copies of the textbook were distributed directly from the publisher to school and village administrations within the Kamchatski Oblast' and the Tigilski Region.

A multimedia CD-ROM Itelmen Language and Culture followed the textbook publication in 2001 (see 'Further Resources' at the end of this report for links). The project team recognized that electronic learning tools (like a CD for computer use) add prestige to the project materials in the eyes of the youth, who were particularly targeted in the preservation effort, and that these tools make it more attractive for young people to devote energy to the endeavour. Also, identification with local and well-known Itelmen customs, personalities and traditional activities could be enhanced by enabling students to listen to actual speakers and to watch the activities in video clips.

The CD-ROM is based on the textbook, but in addition it is also aimed towards adult user groups, providing information such as scientific terms of local plant and animal species. The CD follows the same thematic structure as the textbook and can be used together with it. On the CD, all vocabulary and sentences of the book can be heard in the form of sound files, and many of them by various speakers. As a new feature, the listener can now choose from up to eight different variants of the Itelmen language, such as that once spoken in his/her particular ancestral home village, a feature that has become very popular. To provide such a great number of variants of local pronunciations of a certain

expression would have been quite confusing in the printed textbook, where in the electronic edition of the CD this was easily accomplished. For such reasons, the project team will mainly focus in the future on the production of electronic learning tools.

The CD also contains recordings and texts of some Itelmen stories and songs. Their number is rather small, since at the time of recording the formerly rich Itelmen oral tradition was only mastered by about two or three individuals). Further, the CD contains children's art works, collected for an exhibition project in Germany, that further illustrate the language data in their given contexts; and it provides short video clips on relevant local activities such as dancing and staged ceremonies at the Alkhalalalai festival, setting up a fish weir, digging roots in the tundra with a special tool, etc. (Faced with the limitation of 700MB storage on CD, preference was given to extensive audio data, which could be accommodated more easily than video.)

Besides Russian translations, an English version was added to the CD, as some of the content was considered of interest for other Native peoples of the circumpolar North outside Russia and for linguists and other scholars who are not in full command of the Russian language. (In particular, this concerns the natural environments and related harvesting/procurement activities, which are very similar all across the circumpolar north.)

The official presentation of the CD Itelmen Language and Culture took place in 2002 at the Institute for Advanced Teachers' Training in Palana. Two hundred copies were distributed via the UNESCO Moscow office in Kamchatka, which sponsored the CD's production; fifty copies were personally distributed by project manager Erich Kasten to local educators and project partners. A printed version of the CD content is available on the web (see 'Further resources' below).

In addition to the above-mentioned publications that were jointly produced by the project team, Klavdiia Khaloimova published the book *Metodicheskie rekomendatsii (materialy) uchiteliu itel'menskogo jazyka [Methodical recommendations (materials) for teachers of the Itelmen language]*. This book is directed mainly towards future Itelmen teachers and is considered a particularly useful teaching tool at the Institute for Advanced Teachers' Training in Palana. The book is a guide for teachers on how to systematically explain the rather intricate Itelmen grammar to schoolchildren of different levels with the help of short examples. This had also been neglected so far in the textbooks of the 1980s. (An electronic edition of this book is available on the web – see again 'Further resources' below for links.)

Further, a summer workshop ('Deti severa / Children of the North') was held in 2000, where scientists, local community school teachers and other native educators discussed new concepts of 'bicultural education' and prospects and first experiences of its implementation in local communities.

Overall, in the data compilation process for the Itelmen project, extensive consultations with local people were carried out to identify and utilize such local content as they considered important from their own point of view. For example, the topic of toponyms (place names) was given considerable attention, as it was obviously an important issue for local residents to keep memories alive of those places from which they had been relocated against their will into central settlements in the 1960s (it would probably not have been 'politically correct' to include such an issue in schoolbooks during the Soviet period).

Furthermore, in the course of the project, Itelmen people (and those who felt their roots to lie in Itelmen culture) who live in the central parts of the Kamchatka peninsula (Milkovo district) – they are also known as Kamchadals – and some Itelmen residing in the main capital Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski also started to actively take part in the effort. This led, among other things, to the inclusion of the particular Kamchadal vernacular and vocabulary into the teaching materials produced.

Mobilization of resources:

The Itelmen Language and Culture project does not have an official budget; rather, its existence vitally depends on the voluntary initiative of the persons involved. The project originated as a previously unplanned spin-off from an academic research project on ethnic processes in post-Soviet Russia, funded by the German Research Council and conducted between in 1993 and 1997 in Kamchatka. Anthropologist Erich Kasten and his team were thus working in the area to collect data for the purposes of this (and similar) academic fieldwork, accumulating as a side benefit a great amount of language data. In fact, many of the recordings captured rare local dialects spoken only by a few older people of whom many are no longer alive today.

The production of the 1996 textbook, then, was largely based on the language materials collected in this way. The book was produced by Erich Kasten, Michael Dürr and Sergei Longinov from the German project team and their collaborator and local language expert Klavdiia Nikolaevna Khaloimova, on their own private initiative. The printing costs (around \$7,000) were covered by a local sponsor, the fishing company 'Ilianin Kutkh' from Ust' Khairiuzovo / Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, by initiative of the local government. The printing costs of the 2001 Itelmen Language and Culture CD-ROM (around \$1,000) were covered by the UNESCO Moscow office.

Besides the core project team members, many local experts also collaborated actively and contributed greatly to the outcomes of the project. Local and regional authorities provided substantial logistic and moral support (e.g. transportation, promotion of the project at official occasions, press coverage), even when they were not able to contribute financially.

The project also benefited from competence-sharing with a similar project conducted by linguist Jonathan Bobaljik and anthropologist David Koester, who began their fieldwork at the same time in other Itelmen communities (see <http://www.faculty.uaf.edu/ffdck/KEEE93-94.html>). Both project teams formed a competence cluster, focusing particular emphasis on certain tasks with complementary outcomes. In this way, Bobaljik and Koester's team produced a set of word lists, topical grammar teaching materials and a computer game for learning body parts. These were smaller-scale and more specifically linguistic in their scope than the 1996 textbook by Kasten et al., which placed more emphasis on culturally-oriented language learning. The set of materials produced by Bobaljik and Koester's team was particularly helpful in providing an immediate solution to the shortage of materials and in keeping motivation stimulated, while the 1996 textbook was still in progress. As a continuation of their teaching materials project, Bobaljik developed a short series of Itelmen grammar lessons together with the late Itelmen teacher V.I. Uspenskaia for use in language courses in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski.

3. OUTCOMES

Achievements and positive results:

The materials produced in this project have proven to be quite successful and are widely used in the communities. Most importantly, the 1996 textbook, as intended by its authors, is in use even in extra-curricular contexts such as in village homes, in special courses at kindergarten level in the regional centre Tigil and in courses arranged by the head of the local library in Milkovo. Thus, it is used in places where the Itelmen language is not part of a regular school curriculum and where people can choose materials based on what is most appealing to them. The same is true in the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where both the textbook and the CD have been extensively used; even in the very efficient courses that had been conducted there by the late Valentina Uspenskaia, this new set of learning tools in combination with the materials produced by Bobaljik's team (see above) has been given clear preference over the old materials.

In this way, an important goal has been achieved: the introduction of appealing language materials, particularly in those areas where Itelmen people would otherwise have had little interest or involvement in revitalizing their language with existing conventional school textbooks.

Many local residents have voiced their satisfaction to the project team, indicating that the project materials have made a substantial contribution to their lives by increasing interest and helping to preserve the Itelmen language at all different levels. This was most evident with the CD, which gave Itelmen activists of the younger or middle generation (those between twenty and fifty years old) the chance to revitalize (parts) of their language. For them it would have been more difficult and outright boring to learn from already existing schoolbooks whose methodologies had been designed for school classes and for children between ages seven and twelve.

The CD has also become quite popular in the urban Itelmen community in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, where it has helped Itelmens to restore and substantiate their revitalized identity by strengthening their native language competence.

'Lessons' learned:

(1) Multimedia formats:

Experience from the Itelmen project and more recent similar project work on Koryak and Even language preservation has shown that the DVD format provides better technical possibilities for language learning tools than CD-ROM, especially because of the limited capacity of CDs for saving video formats.

Language data can be presented on DVD in video films with full subtitles of spoken text and optional Russian/English translation, and with sufficient interactive navigation. In many cases, spoken text can be more realistically presented if it includes body language, i.e. gestures. Furthermore, the listener/viewer can better identify with the speaker as a local community member, whose contribution in turn is more fully acknowledged and recognized. The DVD films also provide better quality for presenting language in visual connection with concrete activities specific to the given culture.

DVD technology can furthermore be better applied in local communities, being more manageable and cost-effective than CDs: TVs exist almost everywhere in private homes and in public/community facilities and DVD players are far less

expensive than computers. Also, DVD players are used with TV sets similarly to VHS video-players, which are already widely used in Kamchatka for larger groups of children or students. Small villages do not always have sufficient computer support, expertise or the means to upgrade and maintain the software of computer installations. On the other hand, if computers are available, DVDs can also be used.

(2) Local linguistic variation:

A second issue relates directly to the production of texts to be used as teaching materials. In particular, this involves the degree to which standards introduced during the Soviet period concerning transcription methods and grammar presentation, to which the younger generation became accustomed in the meantime, should be revised or modified.

Creating new teaching tools that on the one hand contain local or situation-specific language variants and on the other hand remain compatible with already established standards for grammar and orthography that have been in use for over 20 years (despite differences in original speech patterns of the elder generation) was one of the main challenges faced in the Itelmen project. Later, discrepancies between standardized 'school book' language and 'originally spoken' language became even more evident in the projects for the revitalization of Even and Koryak, where proper transcriptions of how the people in the recorded texts actually spoke had to be added to account for the subtleties, and correspondingly, for the subtitles used in the DVDs produced.

This leads to the fundamental question of whether the issue of language preservation might be better served if, in contrast to conventional schoolbooks, new learning tools and methodologies can place stronger emphasis on actually performed original oral traditions and their local variants. New audiovisual teaching materials based on recorded texts and local contents are nowadays well fit to address this issue. As mentioned above, the Itelmen CD-Rom can present, for instance, up to eight local variants of one single expression, in an ongoing effort to address the challenge of recording and preserving the language with its local variations. This can also help to increase learner motivation.

(3) Native language pedagogy:

Learning Itelmen as a first language at school and using the same methodology as is used for learning 'foreign' languages (such as English) seems to be not so effective: among other elements, it requires particular justification to the question of motivation: 'what for?' – especially when other options such as English classes provide young Itelmen with the prospect of better professional career opportunities. Unless a specific native language pedagogy along with a philosophy and viable approach that indicates the importance of preserving the language is used, the motivation of students is usually low. The insufficient outcomes such as those in the Soviet native language programs in the 1980s using the schoolbooks introduced at that time are a clear example of this. In the Itelmen context, the coupling of cultural knowledge with language acquisition in textbooks was one way in which the project team attempted to counter this effect.

Attempts to encourage Itelmen language training beyond the regular school curriculum (and to provide learning tools for that) also led the project team to conceptualize the CD Itelmen Language and Culture in a very culture-specific way, addressing adults who are concerned about revitalizing their Itelmen language competence and identity.

In short, native language learning tools require a specific methodology together with accompanying efforts beyond the regular school curriculum – a combination that had been neglected in the past.

Most valuable experience gained:

It is important to make extensive use of local cultural content and original local speech variants when creating language learning tools, in order to generate greater motivation in the native population to preserve their language. Language can best be preserved if presented or transmitted together with the specific cultural knowledge traditionally connected to it.

Recommendations to people carrying out similar projects:

Local people should be consulted first regarding the specific purpose for which they would like to preserve their language, for example, to preserve local identities, as a general means of communication, etc. Specific contents and methodologies for language learning tools should be designed on that basis.

Further, if possible, it is desirable to make digital video recordings (instead of only audio recordings) from the start. Body language and gestures can be extremely informative for general purposes, not simply in story-telling. In addition, body language and gestures should not be treated separately from language data, as is often done in 'purely' linguistic research, but integrated as part of the entire language learning process. Finally and most importantly, audio data used in connection with video format provides better teaching methodologies and learning tools that come closer to the traditional ways of transmitting knowledge and language competence. This allows for better and more natural individual identification with the material by the learner.

Ideally, culturally-oriented teaching materials, in particular those with ecological content, should be used in combination with summer school ecological tours at nature sites outside the village (for example fishing camps), where people practice traditional harvesting activities and where these can be demonstrated by elders. For Itelmen, a pilot project consisting of ecological tours under the guidance of elders has been designed for the purpose of strengthening knowledge of their contextual terminology. This was organized by Itelmen educator Nina Tolman in 2000 with the support of the Franckesche Stiftungen in Halle, Germany. Unfortunately, this had to be discontinued due to lack of funding.

In conclusion, specific methodologies should be developed simultaneously, with the purpose of using materials produced not only in the classroom but also beyond the classroom context. In this case, materials should be adapted to traditional ways of local knowledge transmission.

Future prospects:

(1) Another project publication is currently in its final stage: a new edition of Itelmen texts collected by Vladimir Jochelson at the beginning of the 20th century. This edition will for the first time be presented in contemporary Cyrillic-based Itelmen script, whereas the original script was based on Latin. This latter script with certain specially designed characters was difficult for native speakers, as they were not accustomed to reading Latin characters. With a Cyrillic-based orthography, these texts can be more widely used by the Itelmen community as educational tools. The texts provide examples and demonstrations of earlier narrative forms that were specific and familiar to the peoples of the area. These texts, thus, are of considerable significance to the local communities who are

concerned with preserving their cultural heritage. They capture not only the language itself, but direct attention to specific styles and narrative variation that changed over time according to changing social and political contexts.

(2) A future project consists of a plan to publish an Itelmen grammar in collaboration with linguist Jonathan Bobaljik and his team.

(3) Drawing from the experience gained in the Itelmen project, using data collected in academic fieldwork, the project team is now involved in creating programs to preserve Koryak as well as Even language and culture (see <http://lingsib.iea.ras.ru/en/projects/research/kasten.shtml>).

4. FURTHER RESOURCES

See <http://www.siberian-studies.org/index.html> for a list of publications and further resources.

See in particular the links to the Itelmen language learning tools:

<http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/itelmenLC.html>

http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/itelmenLC_ru.html

This project was selected in the framework of UNESCO's work for the safeguarding of endangered languages and intangible cultural heritage.

Web: www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages

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