TITLE: MINORITY LANGUAGE, CULTURAL REVIVAL AND NATIVE RIGHTS IN RUSSIA: The Itel'man Language as a Case Study

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Summary

In context after context one hears the disparaging comment that the Itel’men people no longer speak their language. Behind the negative, sometimes insulting, sometimes empathetic tone of such comments lies a firmly rooted social theory and deeply embedded political history that has significant consequences for the minority peoples of the former Soviet Union. Ethnic identity is directly tied to rights of indigenous peoples. To deny the existence of a group of people is to deprive them of constitutionally guaranteed rights to natural resources and government support programs. This brief paper examines not only the current state of the Itel’men language, but the social and political significance of language loss. Russians frequently express a commonly-held theory that it is "natural" when cultural groups of vastly unequal size come into contact that the culture of the smaller will be overwhelmed by the culture of the larger. This theory legitimates for many Russians the gradual disappearance that they see of the less populous minority peoples and serves rhetorically to hinder the possibility for political redress. This paper describes the status of the Itel’men language today and the social processes associated with its decline. The prospects for its preservation are grim, and with them the Itel’men claim for ethnic political recognition and the native rights which go along with native status in the Russian Federation.

The Language as a Symbol of Decline

Many Russians who know the Itel’men people of Kamchatka feel that they empathize with and understand their situation of cultural disintegration. One Russian couple, for example, Slava and Sonya, spent a good part of their lives living near the Itel’men village of Moroshko. Slava graduated from a technical institute that teaches hunting and fur preparation. Sonya was trained as a teacher and in addition to teaching full time sews furs in her spare time (to make cash for the family). They, more than most Russians in Kamchatka, feel that they know how to work with their hands and live off the land in Kamchatka as the Itel’men people did and do. Thus, when commenting on the Itel’men plight, they sympathize with what the Itel’men people have lost. Nevertheless, their tone is defensive. In speaking of the Itel’men people in general
they say, "ah, but they are almost entirely Russian anyway. Only a few old people speak the language, they all speak Russian and they live like Russians." Their statements come as if to counter an as yet unformulated and, for the most part, still politically untenable argument that the Itel’men people have rights to restitution as native inheritors of the land. They lament the passing of the Itel’men language and the rapid disintegration of Itel’men culture. Yet, for them, what they state is an inevitable fact of history; the negative political implications for Itel’men native rights is an unavoidable consequence of that history.

Such views are true of many with whom we discussed the issue of the Itel’men plight. Many sympathize with the Itel’mens’ position and many see the loss of the language as the greatest sign of Itel’men subsumption under Russian culture. A neighbor and policeman (militsia), Nikolai, when asking about the progress of my research was always interested and eager to confirm his assumption that no one but a few "inactive old people" speak the language. Whether there are just a few speakers or none at all, from his point of view the language is already lost or will be gone in the near future and that signifies the end of authentic Itel’men culture. For him, the loss of the language is part of a pattern of degradation, the most visible sign of which is drinking. Mention the idea of cultural revival, and he argues that there is no hope of revival because the Itel’men people drink too much. Rhetorically, loss of the language is a mark of weakness and degradation and taken as one with the scourge of drinking.

The state of the language.

In truth, the status of the language is dire. Volodin in 1976 estimated the number of speakers at about 200 (Itel’menski iazyk, Leningrad). As of April 1994, that number has been cut by about two thirds, with less than 80 people remaining who speak or spoke Itel’men with native or near-native proficiency. They are distributed geographically roughly as in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southern Dialect</th>
<th>Northern Dialect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tigil</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedanka</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kovran</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verxnyj Khayriuzovo</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other, Koryak.Aut.Obl.</td>
<td>6?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petrovlovsk &amp; env.</td>
<td>5?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>off Kamchatka</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Anadyr, Vladivostok, others?)</td>
<td>1(Cheboksari)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The youngest native speakers of the language are from Ossedlaya Sedanka, both born in the forties. The oldest living speaker was born in 1906 in Tigil. As many as half of the 70-80 listed here can no longer be called "fluent" speakers and for only a very few (perhaps 5) is Itel’men today a primary language of communication. While they spoke the language as children in the home (often with one, but not both parents), many have only rarely spoken their native language over the past twenty to forty years. For all, knowledge of their native language has eroded and for many significantly. On the other hand, the table does not include many people, perhaps another 100-150, who spoke Itel’men with their grandparents, or were spoken to in Itel’men, responding in Russian, and retain a substantial passive knowledge of the language, understanding recorded texts, or questions posed to them by elders. The figures in the table, then, represent those people for whom Itel’men was through childhood a/the primary language of communication in the home.

The loss of the Itel’men language has taken place over the last 300 years and over much of Kamchatka the damage had been done before the advent of the Soviet government. At the time Waldemar Jochelson visited with the Ryabushinsky expedition (1910-1911), only the Western language remained, and that was spoken only in eight villages. Jochelson was pessimistic about the future of the Itel’men language: "[T]he time is not distant when both dialects will become extinct, since the younger Kamchadal generation learning Russian in the schools will soon use the Russian language exclusively." (Jochelson manuscripts, NY Public Library, p.32).

The last generation to speak Itel’men as their native language was born in the late 30s and early 40s in two villages on the Western shore of the peninsula. In the North of the Tigil region, in Ossedlaya Sedanka it was still the primary language of communication until the village closed in 1952-4. Speakers in their 50s and older from Ossedlaya and Staraya Sedanka remember that their parents couldn’t speak Russian, or spoke it poorly. The situation was similar in Moroshechnoe, where the southern dialect was spoken. Until its closing in 1958, there were few non-Itel’men families and Itel’men was the primary language in the home. Pre-school age children generally did not speak Russian. In the other villages of Jochelson’s eight, the language ceased to be the everyday language of communication a generation or even two earlier than in Moroshechnoe and Ossedlaya Sedanka.

Some of the reasons for the decline of the language in the years between the wars are obvious. After a brief flirt with textbooks and language teaching in the thirties (the work of Orlova, see below), the Soviet government, like colonial governments elsewhere, began actively to discourage native languages. Teachers punished Itel’men children for speaking Itel’men in schools. Fearing retribution, parents encouraged children to speak Russian on the
street and at home. Older children who were sent away to study in boarding schools [internaty] were stigmatized for their accents and often chastised or harassed by other pupils for speaking Itel’men. With the importation of workers and administrators, as the government began to construct Soviet-style villages, the populations of many towns became less homogeneously Itel’men. Russian-speaking administrators constituted the leadership of the village and speaking Russian was necessary for any form of social or political advancement within the village structure.

**Literacy, Formal Teaching of the Language, and Prospects for Preservation**

There is no evidence that the Itel’mens used any written form of their language before the 20th century. Word lists of varying sizes and accuracy were collected by Georg Steller [1774], S. P. Krashenninikov [1754], Benedikt Dybowskii [1892] and W. Jochelson 1910-11. On the 1910-11 expedition, Jochelson worked in Verxnij Khairiuzovo with an Itel’men named A. M. Danilov. Danilov had founded a school in Verxnij Khairiuzovo in 1903 and may have been the first Itel’men to read and write his native language. The "Narrative of A. M. Danilov on our trip to the village Tigil'" in Jochelson's collected material (Worth 1961 K:2.3) ends with the line "[W]e lived in Verxnij Khairiuzovo and I wrote down the Itel’men speech."

Interest in Itel’men "traditional" language and culture was renewed in the early 1970's when N. K. Moilokha began teaching an elective course on Itel’men culture in Kovran’s middle school. Having grown up in Russian-speaking Sopochnoe, Itel’men for her is a (self-taught) second language. Nevertheless, working with the linguist Volodin, she drafted and published a dictionary, primers, and developed class outlines for the beginning classes.

Moilokha began teaching the Itel’men language in the school in the village of Kovran in 1982, though originally only to the youngest classes, and by 1990-1991, with a new teacher trained by Volodin in Leningrad (V. N. Chevilko), the language was taught in grades one through three.

In the summer of 1991, Chevilko left for Sedanka and the language was not taught in Kovran for two years. Teaching resumed in 1993-94 under I. I. Aan, a native speaker without formal training, and is now taught through the 7th grade, though for the senior classes it is an elective with as little as one hour a week of instruction in 7th grade. In Verxnij Khairiuzovo, it was taught from 1988-89 to 1991-92, in grades one through four.

The future of Itel’men language in the schools is uncertain. There are few trained language teachers, and there is very little in the way of teaching materials. The school in Sedanka is currently the only one to teach more than an elective to the senior classes and it is not certain that this will continue in 1994-95. A proposal to teach Itel’men in the day care in Tigil’ has run aground and may not resurface in September 1994.
The Micropolitics of Language Preservation

The recognition by Moilokha and the linguist, Volodin, of the importance of the preservation of the language, never became a basis for effective language rescue. Moilokha’s work was hampered by internal political difficulties. She found many elder speakers resistant to her attempts to concretize the language in written form. It was not that they were against writing the language but that they disagreed with her interpretations of the ways in which individual words should be written. Moilokha found elders constantly critical of her work and unwilling to work with her cooperatively. She was particularly hard hit by the intense critique of an Itel’men ethnographer who was a native speaker.

The language itself was part of the problem. Dialectal and individual differences in speech are magnified in importance because of the small numbers of speakers. One person can say, "we never said that" or "you can’t say it that way in Itel’men." That person might represent 50% of the speakers who remember saying something in one particular way. Another person may disagree and may be the only speaker of the language who does. Disputes about the language have exacerbated the sense among non-Itel’men speakers that the language has deteriorated or been lost. A literate bias also contributes to this sense of linguistic disarray. It has proved extremely difficult just to establish an orthography that can reasonably well represent the language. There are several orthographies in existence but no native speakers, except the ones who created the orthographies can read the language fluently.

The "impracticality" of the language constitutes also a very powerful social and political dynamic working against preservation, particularly among those who do not speak Itel’men. Two English teachers, for example, who both invested much of their time in learning to speak and teach English, feel that the future non-Russian language should not be Itel’men. They see no practical use for it. One of them. Marina, from the village of Vorovskoj grew up thinking of herself as a "kamchadalka" (‘kamchadal woman’). Earlier in this century, though there were no non-Kamchadals in her village, the inhabitants all spoke Russian. These Kamchadals, of Itel’men descent, distinguished themselves from the Itel’men who lived farther to the north, whom they called "davnaiki," (’ancients’). The northern group was distinguished by the fact that they spoke their "own" language. For Marina and other descendants of these Russian speakers, the Itel’men language is already an artifact of the past; it can’t be significant to their identity because they already saw it as characteristic of another group. Yet at the same time, she feels that she is politically Kamchadal, distinctly native Kamchatkan and non-Russian.

Macropolitics of the Language

Internal disagreements about the value of preserving the language have significantly impeded this aspect of the cultural revival movement. Politically, the demise of the language
contributes to the erosion of native political rights. In northern Kamchatka this has a powerful interethnic dimension. The Itel'men people live in what is known as the Koryak Autonomous Region. Itel'mens who live in the capital of the region, Palana, report that they have difficulty getting housing designated for native peoples. Their complaints are often ignored. The comment, "you don't even speak your language" was made in at least two reported cases of Itel'mens contending over housing, and is implicit in many more. It is not official policy to deny native rights on the basis of language proficiency. Rather, language is a key symbol of ethnic identity that sways arguments for rights toward those who speak the language of their ancestors.

Conclusion

The prospects for the preservation of the Itel'men language as a mode of communication and conversation are grim. The opportunity for that passed almost a generation ago. The language nevertheless remains an important focus of Itel'men identity and the struggle for cultural revival. Both internal and external political pressures work against the preservation of even an archival form of Itel'men speech, although stories and remembrances may lead to isolated and idiosyncratic forms of preservation. Disagreements could further weaken the Itel'men claim for ethnic political recognition and the rights that go along with native status within the Russian Federation.