

Kjaloz'a'n Ujeret'i'n Detelkila'n – Keepers of the Native Hearth: The Social Life of the Itelmen Language – Documentation and Revitalization

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Abstract

This chapter describes a long-term collaboration among linguists, Indigenous scholars, anthropologists, cultural consultants and community members concerned with the fate of the Itelmen language in Kamchatka, Russia. Itelmen has been the object of systematic inquiry by scholars for nearly 300 years. For over 100 years visitors and linguistic researchers have predicted it would soon no longer be spoken. Yet, though there are few speakers today, the language *is still* spoken, and conservation and revitalization efforts have intensified since the late 1980s. We briefly review the history of language documentation, especially recent decades of collaborative efforts of the authors with Itelmen scholars and enthusiasts. In addition to field research by Ono and Bobaljik, a Gathering of speakers and cultural knowledge bearers from across Kamchatka was organized in 2012. These efforts, combined with recent language revitalization work of Degai and earlier work by colleagues Erich Kasten, Michael Dürr, and Klavdiia Khaloimova have created a rich body of materials for revitalization of the language, ranging from traditional classroom teaching materials to Karaoke CDs, computer resources and most recently a comprehensive Itelmen dictionary. The chapter describes our long-term collaborations, fieldwork, gatherings, speakers' efforts and dedication, and resulting documentation.

Introduction

As the field of language documentation has evolved to become ever more inclusive of social and cultural linkages to language and speech, Himmelmann (1998) proposed to recognize documentary linguistics as a distinctive field of linguistic inquiry. This approach records not only traditional aspects of linguistic description: lexicon, grammar and phonology, but also a full range of social and cultural aspects of language use. It implies a comprehensive and holistic approach to the study of any given language. Its foci include such important aspects as prosody, poetics, turn-taking and dialogic obligation, registers, formation of “folk” taxonomies, humor, and the entire layer of metalinguistic knowledge.

In this chapter we present how a group of researchers and community members collaborated in using fundamental principles of language documentation and developed tools and materials to contribute to an urgent community language revitalization effort. Decades of work of linguists, anthropologists, first language speakers, language activists, and language teachers converged with language revitalization efforts through an international, interdisciplinary and community-engaged partnership. The goal of this collective effort has been and continues to be to

document and revitalize the highly endangered Itelmen language spoken on Kamchatka peninsula on the Pacific coast of Russia.

In practice, our efforts have aligned with the vision of fieldwork suggested by Nathan & Csató (2006):

- Fieldwork *on* a language;
- Fieldwork *for* the language community;
- Fieldwork *with* the speakers of the language community;
- Fieldwork *by* speakers of the language community;
- Fieldwork delivered *to* a language community.

The Dictionary and Audio-Visual Projects

Project Goals

The long-term collaboration among linguists, anthropologists, and community members has been built over the course of multiple fieldwork projects, in different time periods (1960s, 1990s, 2000s), with diverse groups of Itelmen knowledge holders. With a feeling that the language is being lost, the community and especially language speakers have been open and responsive to the researchers expressing the need for more documentation. While language documentation was the core of the project, the research team wanted to approach this task in a holistic manner that would allow collecting comprehensive data with the broad potential to serve language revitalization purposes.

The primary goal of our partnership was to compile multimedia (audio and video) documentation support in conjunction with the production of a comprehensive dictionary of all Itelmen languages and dialects that were recorded throughout the written history of Itelmens. The project also aimed at recording as many materials as possible with the remaining speakers, supplementing small existing collections, and making annotated audio and video recordings available for future learners of Itelmen with digital archives in both Russia and the U.S. Itelmen has many rare typological features, which make these recordings of interest to linguistic scholarship, both narrowly (shedding light on the structure and history of the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family), and broadly, to the field of linguistics as a whole (especially in the areas of morphology, phonology and typology), as well as related areas such as linguistic anthropology.

To achieve this goal an interdisciplinary team of scholars and experts decided to join forces in this project: linguists Chikako Ono (Chiba University/now Hokkaido, Japan), Alexandr P. Volodin (Institute of Linguistic Research, St. Petersburg), Jonathan David Bobaljik (University of Connecticut/now Harvard), Victor Ryzhkov (a teacher of the Itelmen language, Kamchatka), cultural anthropologists David Koester (University of Alaska Fairbanks, USA), Victoria Petrasheva (community liaison, Kamchatka Branch of the Pacific Institute of Geography, Kamchatka), Tatiana Degai (community liaison, University of Arizona, USA/now University of Victoria, B.C., Canada); visual anthropologist Liivo Niglas (University of Tartu, Estonia). In addition to these primary researchers there were many more specialists who were and continue to help this project, providing their expertise on questions of technology, design of the dictionary web-page and dictionary smartphone application, logistics of organizing the Gathering of Itelmen speakers, and many other questions that have arisen as the project has developed.

Project Objectives

Above all, the primary objectives were to gather and work with the known materials documenting the Itelmen language, including texts and audio and visual recordings. The aim was to engage the collective expertise of speakers in interpreting and understanding texts and recordings, document features of the language, including dialects, lexical and grammatical subtleties. These efforts have, at the same time contributed to the compilation and collaborative editing of a comprehensive dictionary of the Itelmen language. All of this to create a “[l]asting multipurpose record of a language” (Himmelman, 2006, p.1).

Project activities included working with the speakers to assess existing word lists recorded by the scholars of the 18-20th century, and to refine and elaborate the extended word card archive of Dr. Volodin, and to create audio recordings to supplement the written documentation. The project also included a Gathering of Speakers of Itelmen to give speakers of the language the opportunity to converse with a variety of other speakers, and to document conversational speech, as well as an opportunity to listen to historical recordings and the reading of early texts. Targeted sessions also included a variety of topical discussions, such as fish, plants, dialects; inter-dialectal conversations, infant-directed speech. These activities contributed in addition to a project to compile a comprehensive digital dictionary of all recorded Itelmen languages and dialects with links to audio-visual examples and texts. Last but not least, the project fostered discussions with the community of the expected outcomes that could be most useful for language revitalization and where possible provide needed tools for language revitalization initiatives.

Methods and Ethics

Language revitalization and documentation efforts are typically faced with a lack of audio-visual materials. In contexts in which the language is not being taught in the home, such materials are crucial for providing a holistic multidimensional introduction to the language. In outlining the project, the research team considered what actual, effective outputs would have a meaningful impact on Itelmen language learning. The team’s diverse academic and community backgrounds led to the deployment of a combination of linguistic, ethnographic, and Indigenous research methodologies, including recording informal speech, recording in formally structured situations, transcribing spoken data, document analysis, building corpora, semi-structured interviews, life histories, talking circles, storytelling, preparation and carrying out of traditional celebrations, and participant observation.

The ethics of this research interconnects with a range of responsibilities of the researchers to the language speakers and the community, to the discipline, and to the general body of knowledge. While language documentation is more about language and less about people who speak it, we tried to merge the two together and avoid treating the language community -- as Macri has warned against -- “as if it were a commodity” (Macri, 2010, p.40). As elders are for many Indigenous peoples, Itelmen elders are important knowledge holders, and they were therefore the main authority during project development and the Gathering. At the same time, passive speakers of the language, learners and activists were invited to join our initiative as active members of the organizing committee of the project.

The Itelmen Language

The Itelmen language (formerly also known as Kamchadal) constitutes the Kamchatkan branch of the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family, once spoken by perhaps as many as 25,000 people over the Kamchatka peninsula and the northern Kuril Islands. The Itelmen language is

especially distinctive, when compared with more widely known languages, in its phonological and morphological complexity. For example, words in Itelmen (in sharp distinction to the other Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages) often contain intricately complex clusters of consonants, as in the following:

- (1) čkpəč ‘spoon’
 tʰsčŋin ‘you are carrying it’
 kʰqzʉkneʔn ‘they were’
 mskčēʔn ‘I will make them’
 sitʰxpkʰel ‘with embers’
 kʰənsʰxč ‘boil it!’

One noteworthy aspect of Itelmen’s morphological complexity is the system of verbal agreement, largely cognate with that of the other Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages. To a first approximation, verbs show a prefix that expresses the person and number of the subject, regardless of transitivity, while the suffixes express the person and number of the subject of an intransitive verb, but the object of a transitive verb. The examples below illustrate: (2a) vs (2c) are transitive verbs differing only in the person of the subject, and thus only the prefix changes, while (2c) vs. (2d) show that only the suffix changes with the person of the object. The pair in (3) shows the alternation in an intransitive verb, where both prefix and suffix change with the person and number of the subject.

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|----|-------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------------|-----|
| (2) | a. | kma | tʰ-əlčqu-[ɣ]in | b. | q-əlčqu-βum | kma |
| | | I | 1sg-see-2sg.obj | | 2.irr-see-1sg.obj | me |
| | | “I saw you.” | | “Look at me!” | | |
| | c. | | n-əlčqu-[ɣ]in | d. | n-əlčqu-z-um | |
| | | | 3pl-see-2sg.obj | | 3pl-see-pres-1sg.obj | |
| | | | “They saw you.” | | “They see me.” | |
| (3) | a. | kma | t-kʰoʰ-kičen | b. | q-kʰoʰ-xč | |
| | | I | 1sg-come-1sg.sub | | 2.irr-come-2sg.sub | |
| | | “I came/arrived.” | | “Come!” | | |

While various pieces of this pattern are widely attested across unrelated languages, the particular combination of these pieces results in a system that defines a possibly unique Chukotko-Kamchatkan type. This type is noteworthy on the one hand in terms of the apparent combination of a subject-versus-object contrast in the prefixes with an ‘absolute’ alignment in the suffixes (see Volodin & Vakhtin, 1986 and Bobaljik & Wurmbrand, 2002 for critical discussion). On the other, the analysis of this pattern plays a role in the question of whether the anomalous third person transitive prefix *n-* constitutes a special type of ‘inverse’ marker, unique to these languages (Comrie, 1980, but see Bobaljik, 2019 for a contrasting view).

As the divergent member of a small language family with no known external relations, the Itelmen language provides a wealth of evidence for linguistic typology and comparative linguistics, bearing substantially on questions of the range and limits of linguistic diversity.

We should also note that the relationship of Itelmen to the other Chukotko-Kamchaktan languages, and, thus, of the linguistic prehistory of Itelmen, is itself a matter of some debate. The late Russian linguist and Itelmen expert Alexander Volodin maintained the view that Itelmen was historically an isolate, and acquired the many grammatical features and lexical similarities it shares with Chukotko-Kamchatkan via extended contact (Volodin, 1997). The alternative viewpoint is that the Chukotkan and Kamchatkan languages shared a common ancestor, and that Itelmen diverged, perhaps by intermixture with speakers of some non-Chukotko-Kamchatkan language in Southern Kamchatka, of which no linguistic traces remain except for those that make Itelmen distinct within its family.

Archaeological and ethnographic research has led a number of scholars to conclude that ancestors of present-day Itelmens were the first people in Kamchatka and they inhabited most of the Kamchatka peninsula before Russian contact (Krasheninnikov, 1755[1972]; Dikov, 2003; Orlova, [1927]1999). In the earliest documentation of Itelmen, Krasheninnikov (1755) identified three distinct and mutually unintelligible varieties of Itelmen: Western, Southern, and Eastern. The S and E Itelmen languages did not survive into the 20th Century and were not extensively documented (Jochelson, n.d.). In the 1920s, Russian scholar Elizaveta Orlova further differentiated Western Itelmen into three dialect groups which have survived into the 20th century: Southern (Sopochnoe, Moroshechnoe villages), Northern (Kovran, Utkholok, Napana), and North-Eastern (Sedanka) (Orlova, 1999). These dialects differ significantly from each other. Nevertheless, they are mutually understood.

Currently, the majority of those who speak or comprehend Itelmen live on the Western coast of Kamchatka in the villages of Kovran and Tigil. There are also a number of Itelmens who moved from these villages into Kamchatka's capital city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski. Some are taking active part in language learning and revitalization. When Kamchatka was first opened to foreign researchers and international collaborations began, Koester & Bobaljic (1994) reported approximately 80 speakers of Itelmen, of varying degrees of fluency. When the current project started in 2011, there were approximately 8 fluent speakers and approximately 10-15 middle-aged Itelmens who grew up hearing the language and, therefore, were passive language holders. They did not consider themselves as speakers.

Table 1. Speakers of Itelmen in Different Periods

Brief History of Documentation of Itelmen and its Relevance to the Project

There is a long history of Itelmen language documentation by visiting scholars and explorers going back to the early 18th century. Ethnographic writers Stepan Krasheninnikov and Georg Wilhelm Steller gathered lexical materials and short example texts, including songs. Subsequent documentation by explorers and particularly doctors (Benedikt Dybowski and V. N. Tiushov) added to lexical data gathered before the end of the 19th century. Vladimir Bogoras did a brief but intensive round of fieldwork gathering lexical materials and grammatical information at the end of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1903), incorporated primarily as contrastive commentary in his seminal grammatical sketch of Chukchi (Bogoras, 1922). Vladimir Jochelson on the Riabushinsky expedition collected grammatical and lexical data and a body of texts in 1910-11. In the Boasian tradition, he worked with an Itelmen, A. N. Danilov, who learned to write

Itelmen and was probably the first Itelmen to document the Itelmen language himself (Bobaljik & Koester, 1999).

The most comprehensive research was conducted by Aleksandr P. Volodin, a linguist from St Petersburg who began his work in 1960. He conducted extensive fieldwork among the Itelmens of the Western coast and collected lexical data that he transferred to 12,281 word cards. Each card contains information about the word and many contain examples of its use in a sentence or phrase. These cards were safely kept by Volodin in the archives of the Institute of Linguistics Studies in St. Petersburg, and they became the core of the comprehensive dictionary that has been compiled under our project.

In the course of our project it was also critically important to look into the research of Itelmen scholars. Nadezhda Starokova was the first Itelmen ethnographer and Itelmen was her first language. This allowed her to conduct linguistically precise and deeply informed research on the material culture of the Itelmens (Starkova, 1976). Language investigation was not her main focus, but she left some recordings of the language and an unpublished draft of a dictionary and a lexical card file of 11,656 cards. These data were also incorporated into the FLEx database for the dictionary.

Native Itelmen Speaker Klavdiia N. Khaloimova, first as a school teacher and then as a professor of pedagogy, dedicated her life to the revitalization of the Itelmen language. Khaloimova closely worked with Volodin and other linguists on language data, which resulted in developing a Cyrillic alphabet for Itelmen. For a long time Khaloimova was a curriculum development specialist in the Institute of the Improvement of Qualification of Teachers in Kamchatka, where she published textbooks for schools and methodological papers for teachers of the Itelmen language (over 60 publications). Her most prominent work is the Russian-Itelmen, Itelmen-Russian dictionary co-authored with Volodin (Volodin & Khaloimova, 1989). Khaloimova also worked with German ethnographer Erich Kasten, linguist Michael Dürr, and artist Sergei Longinov to produce an exemplary, illustrated *Historical-ethnographic textbook for the Itelmen language* (1997). Khaloimova, Kasten and Dürr also produced a thematic dictionary, and edited and retranscribed the stories gathered by W. Jochelson into the modern, Cyrillic script (2014). Her work with these scholars has contributed greatly to both documentation and revitalization efforts. Most of the material produced with Kasten and Dürr, along with a wealth of other publications, have been made freely available on the website of the Foundation for Siberian Cultures: <https://dh-north.org/themen/kulturstiftung-sibirien/en>.

The Comprehensive Dictionary of Itelmen is based on historical sources from the 18th to the 20th century and the data collected by scholars mentioned above. It is also supplemented by the data collected by the authors of this article during their linguistic and ethnographic field research starting from the 1990s and continuing into the 21st century.

Community Engagement

Despite Itelmen being relatively well documented, with this project it was important to gather more recorded audio and video data of the language, of culturally contextualized informal conversations and everyday activities. We decided to organize a Summer Workshop, a Gathering of Itelmens that would bring together the remaining speakers, language researchers, teachers, learners, and activists. We called it *Khaloz'a'n Ujeret'i'n Detelkila'n* or *Keepers of the Native Hearth 2012*. This Gathering was meant to provide a way to remediate the lack of opportunity to converse in the language (at least for a short period of time) and to record such conversational

interactions. It was an eight-day event the goal of which was to create all-day, continuously present Itelmen language environment and record as many live conversations in Itelmen as possible.

Participants

Speakers – Confident and Passive

Participants were selected by putting together the collective knowledge of the organizers and querying potential participants about who the key knowledgeable people of the language were. In the 1930s to 1950s, when the current generation of speakers were growing up, the Itelmen language was spoken in the villages of Sopochnoe, Moroshechnoe, Belogolovoe, Khairiuzovo, Kovran, Utkholok, Napana, Sedanka Osedlaia, and Tigil. Of those villages only Kovran, Khairiuzovo, and Tigil remain. The Soviet government closed the others and relocated the people. All of the speakers were either in those villages or the former capital of the region, Palana. At the Gathering there were seven more-or-less confident speakers of Itelmen, individuals who were willing to engage in conversation in Itelmen and who felt confident of their ability to construct comprehensible and what they consider to be correct constructions. Of these, three were originally from the village of Moroshechnoe, one was from Sopochnoe, and all spoke the Southern dialect. Three were from the village of Sedanka and spoke the Northern dialect. The Moroshechnoe speakers lived dispersed in Khairiuzovo, Kovran, and Palana. The Sedanka speakers lived in the regional capital Tigil. The possibilities for extended conversation existed only within this group and a small number of somewhat less confident speakers who understood and could speak under the right circumstances.

Map1. Home and Natal Villages of Itelmen Speakers at the Gathering, 2012

In addition to the confident speakers and knowledgeable passive speakers, there were numerous community members who participated as observers and learners. A small group of enthusiasts arrived from the city of Elizovo and stayed for several days. We hosted opening and closing events and many people interested in cultural revitalization came to hear the language spoken and see old friends.

Malki - the Place of Gathering

While preparing for the Gathering, it was important to find a place that would be able to host everyone in the same location, provide quality meals, health services to the elders, be surrounded by nature but at the same time have all the needed conveniences. The Malki resort proved a good option. It is a hot spring resort that offers cozy wooden housing, outdoor thermal water swimming pool, dining services, and room options for gatherings. Malki is famous for its health-giving, naturally carbonated spring water. It is located less than a three-hour drive from the airport and the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, the capital city of Kamchatka, which is home to many relatives of the invited participants. Grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and other family and friends had a chance to come for small family reunions. Malki is also in traditional Itelmen territory that with the arrival of the Cossacks in the 18th century, became the site of a Cossack village. This place became our home for the days of the Gathering.

Structure of the Event

The workshop program began on June 3rd and ended on June 8th. General conversations about the event began well before the start date, when participants flew in advance on scheduled

weekly flights from their remote villages. Once at the gathering site at Malki, the housing units brimmed with the chattering of reunions and revival of Itelmen discussions. It was the first time in a long period when speakers of Itelmen had a chance to meet. Some of them were classmates, some were from the same village, some were in the same boarding school, and some used to be in a relationship. All of these connections started to come to life as the speakers settled in their rooms and became familiar with the surroundings. In everyday life the participants had very little opportunity to speak Itelmen. It was difficult, during the first days of the Gathering, for the elders to adjust to the possibility of conversing only in Itelmen. But after a few days they were comfortably back to Itelmen-only conversations and were able to create a language environment throughout the entire day. After having the consent forms signed, the research team tried to audio and video record every communicative event that we witnessed. We recorded spontaneous conversations during lunch, walks in the forest, swimming in the pool, or in the evenings when the elders met to remember the old times. We also constructed some situations in which the speakers would converse on given topics.

There were numerous interesting exchanges about who should be the authority on the language. Some Itelmen speakers deferred to the linguists (who had historical knowledge from working with elders). The linguists contended that ultimately the speakers (who had native knowledge) were the authorities.

The afternoons and then mornings after the first two days were busy with more focused work. We divided participants into small groups and occasionally conducted individual interviews. The groups worked on projects that included recording dialog in Itelmen, elicitation of environmental terminology, recording of playing with an Itelmen infant, thematic elicitation exercises, some based on suggestions from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics' field manuals and stimulus materials (Bowerman & Pederson, 1992), and work on transcribing and translating songs.

Individually, speakers recorded words for the planned audio dictionary, helped to check words and expressions marked for field follow-up in previous linguistic work. We also interviewed participants about their own lives to have a record of how they came to be among the few remaining speakers and their aspirations for the language. In the evenings we met communally and shared stories, watched films from the villages in the early 1990s and worked on preparations for the festivities of the closing ceremony.

Results

Audio-Visual Documentation

Over the course of the Gathering we recorded 730 words with examples with a total recording time of five and a half hours for three days. Three Itelmen speakers took part in the recording.

Video recording for educational material on Itelmen pronunciation.

Two Itelmen speakers took part in the recording.

Dialogue & Conversation recording

We recorded seven dialogues or conversations in Itelmen. Two of the recordings are in Northern dialect, and three are in Southern dialect. The other two were recorded as mixed-dialect dialogues, with one speaker of the Northern dialect and the other speaking the Southern dialect. The two speakers talked in their own dialect, and we found that they understood each other well.

Lexical work

Dr. Alexander Volodin examined the Itelmen lexicon that he had collected in the 1960s. During the Gathering, he worked diligently with language speakers reviewing the word cards he had written over the course of his study of Itelmen. These included reviewing the meaning of the words, and their use in sentences and conversations.

The Volodin and Khaloimova Itelmen-Russian and Russian-Itelmen Dictionary (2001) was also reviewed by knowledgeable participants. Several speakers were asked to pronounce words from the dictionary and to provide examples of the use of the words in sentences.

“Pokhod” Activity - Going out for Plants

The very first day of the Gathering the elders were invited to go out to the nearby forest to record Itelmen knowledge about plants. This, at the same time, was intended to be an opportunity to record conversation in Itelmen about the plant world, as well as to record specific terminology, plant and environmental lexicon, explanations on how to collect, and use of local flora. Estonian ethnographic filmmaker Liivo Niglas filmed the interactions, while Ono and Koester recorded side conversations. These recordings are included in the audio-visual archive.

BowPed Exercise

To better comprehend and understand the use of the locatives in Itelmen, the elicitation exercise known as “BowPed” was employed (Bowerman & Pederson, 1992). Elders were shown pictures on screen illustrating topological relations and asked to form sentences in Itelmen. (For example: A spider is on the ceiling. The hat is on the head.) The goal of the eliciting linguist was to help the speakers make sentences through asking them questions in Itelmen, such as: What is this? Where is the spider? Where is the hat? Soon after the exercise started we all understood that pictures were not appropriate for the Itelmen language context. Speakers found it difficult to relate images of houses with picket fences and flower gardens, fruit trees, and other commonly known, but foreign, items to their language. Since the Itelmen language has not been developing over the last 60-70 years, the pictures portraying a stamp on an envelope or an apple on a tree proved to be obstacles for speakers attempting to translate what they saw into Itelmen. They knew what an apple was, but apples have never grown on Itelmen lands, therefore there was no reason to translate that into the language. Even though the focus of this exercise was on the morphological structure of the language, it was the lexical semantics that played a crucial role in the success of this task. Nevertheless, the elders in many cases managed to find ways to translate sentences describing contemporary realities. This was an important achievement that suggested ways that Itelmen language can be adapted and applied to the realities of the 21st century.

Lessons in Itelmen

Itelmen language teacher Klavdiya N. Khaloimova offered language lessons for non-speakers who were interested in learning more. Klavdiia Nikolaevna used a standard Soviet method of teaching a second language, which implies long explanations of grammar and words, writing, reading and little practicing. She described Itelmen phonology and color terms. She also gave a little history and explained some of the difficulties they encountered when creating the Cyrillic orthography in the 1980s. Khaloimova admitted that if she had had a chance she would have changed some of the characters that did not fit well for writing in Itelmen.

Photo 1. Klavdiia N. Khaloimova teaching an Itelmen language class

Though Khaloimova taught in Soviet one-way lecture style, the lessons were still priceless to the learners, many of whom heard Itelmen from a live speaker for the first time. Being a native language speaker Khaloimova was also one of the few teachers who could explain details about the use of words that the dictionaries did not include.

Singing and Storytelling

Music and song have been known to be integral to Itelmen life since the earliest ethnographic reports (Steller, 1774, pp. 332-339; Krasheninnikov, 1755, pp. 113-116) and during the Gathering it was important to document singing and storytelling traditions. Some elders were especially interested in having their songs recorded, as well as the poems that they had translated from Russian into Itelmen. One of the elders' favorite exercises was listening to and transcribing songs. The speakers were specifically asked to transcribe and translate the recordings of songs that were collected in the 1960s-80s by Volodin during his fieldwork among the Itelmens.

Although not part of the planned program, every evening the elders would get together and sing the songs they remembered from their childhood or songs they translated themselves from Russian. Singing was followed by dancing and accompanied by jokes, humorous stories, and memories. These were the nights where language documentation and ethnographic fieldwork merged with Indigenous methodologies that appeal to talking/storytelling and singing circles as the main sources of collecting data. It was through these informal ways of communication and gathering data that the linguistic research acquired a more holistic character eliciting the language from diverse situations, angles, and usage contexts.

Listening to Folktales and Jochelson Recordings

Waldemar Jochelson recorded Itelmen narratives and songs on wax cylinders in 1910-1911. They were subsequently rerecorded on magnetic tape and then digitized. The sound quality of the recordings was extremely low and when elderly speakers were asked to listen to, interpret, and transcribe the recordings the task proved too foreign and strange. Fortunately, there was someone with younger ears who could help. Second-language trained Itelmen speaker, Viktor Ryzhkov worked diligently over several years with Itelmen elders to learn the language. He learned it so well that he was able to comprehend and transcribe from the scratchy recordings of century-old Itelmen speech. He then worked with elders who, recognizing what he had comprehended, were able to help with correcting and refining the transcriptions. Ryzhkov is a talented language learner and gifted teacher who now teaches Itelmen language classes in his spare time.

Photo 2. Aleksandr P. Volodin reading stories transcribed by Jochelson

One of the evenings was also dedicated to reading aloud stories transcribed by Jochelson in 1910-1911. That was an interesting exercise for the elders. They had a chance to listen to the Itelmen language of the early 1900s and discuss the stories. Volodin also read from a collection of narratives that he transcribed with Itelmen elders in the 1960s-80s. Volodin published these stories in 2012, just before the Gathering.

Speaking With a Baby - Infant-Directed Speech in Itelmen

One of the objectives of the Gathering was to record live Itelmen language in different situations. It was important to see how the language can be used by contemporary Itelmens in everyday settings and in different life situations. One such situation was ‘motherese’, that is, the style of baby-language used in infant-directed speech in Itelmen. For this exercise three grandmothers, speakers of the Northern dialect, were left with an 11-month old child to play in Itelmen. It turned out to be quite a challenging task. The elders were no longer used to speaking Itelmen with children. It was difficult for them to overcome the idea that Itelmen was the language of the elders and conversations in Itelmen could occur only between fluent speakers. It took the elders a few minutes of being with the baby before they were able to switch into Itelmen-only conversations. The speakers were not able to remember Itelmen lullabies or chants. However, they started to translate common Russian baby songs and poems into Itelmen.

Cultural-Anthropological Documentation

During the Gathering simultaneously with language documentation, we conducted ethnographic work aimed at collecting life histories of the participants. These were memories about life in relocated villages, the role of school and boarding school in the life of the language, the processes that caused language loss in the families of the participants, and their visions of how to move forward with language revitalization. The elders also remembered, and wrote down several family trees. The program also was filled with book presentations and thematic discussions.

Life history

One of the questions, about which we hoped to learn more during the Gathering, was the personal stories of participants’ knowledge and history of using the language. Where did they grow up and did the whole community speak the language or just their family? How big were their families? Was Russian spoken in the community and for what purposes? When was it that they encountered hindrances to speaking the language? Did their whole family speak the language and how far into adulthood were they able to continue speaking regularly? Was there a specific time in their life or life situation when they stopped speaking the language on a regular basis? Do they ever read or write in Itelmen?

Participants’ answers to these questions were illuminating and surprisingly varied. While for most, schooling in Russian was the predominant reason for diminishing or cessation of speaking Itelmen, there were a variety of other contributing factors that gave them opportunities to speak or conspired to make speaking less useful or desirable.

Festival of the First Salmon

The Gathering took place in early June, during the time of the first salmon run. Therefore, it was a great opportunity to remember and celebrate an ancient Itelmen festival dedicated to the greeting of the first salmon of the season. Elders remembered the ritual of meeting the first salmon, which usually occurred at the beginning of the fishing season and was celebrated by each Itelmen family when they caught their first salmon of the year. A scenario for this celebration was written down in Itelmen and the ritual performance was recorded. During preparation for this celebration elders spent time meeting each evening, remembering old songs and stories to prepare for performance during the festival program.

Photo 3. Language speakers and their relatives conduct a ceremony greeting the first salmon

Participants discussed the details of the festival, scenario, and language used. Guests from the city were also invited, and the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky City Administration generously provided a big tourist bus for the people who wanted to come to Malki resort to celebrate this event with the participants of the Gathering. The Petropavlovsk City Association of Indigenous Peoples delivered salmon for native cuisine. This turned into a true celebration of the First Salmon and recognition and remembrance of an Itelmen traditional gathering.

Transforming Language Documentation Data into a User-Friendly Learning Aid

The Comprehensive Itelmen Dictionary and the related online Itelmen Audio-Video Dictionary are the major products of this joint long-term work. The dictionary includes lexical entries from different Itelmen languages, collected by the early researchers of Kamchatka beginning in the 17th century and the remaining two dialects through the 20th and 21st centuries. While this is still a work in progress, recordings and data collected during the Gathering of 2012 provide a platform to create educational materials for the language learning community. Over the last several years a number of resultant publications have been developed and disseminated among the language learning community, teachers, schools, libraries, and language activists.

Ən'č'e'n ansxa'n – Fish Parts

During the Gathering the researchers were responsible for documenting their own sections. A separate section was dedicated to salmon. It is historically recognized as the primary dietary resource for Itelmens, therefore it was important to record salmon-related lexicon. Collecting different words for salmon parts had its own challenges. Each elder remembered different Itelmen words for the parts. As a result of this discussion, a poster of salmon parts in two Itelmen dialects Northern and Southern was published and distributed among the language community. Following this example, based on the template of this poster, it was later published in other Indigenous languages of Kamchatka including Aleut, Koryak, and Even languages.

Photo 4. Poster of salmon parts in two Itelmen dialects

Xalč mənčaqalkiče'n – Let's Sing!

Another practical outcome of the Gathering was the development of a DVD of Itelmen songs with videos with subtitles. This DVD includes songs that were recorded or transcribed during the Gathering. Each song is presented in the form of a short video movie with the introduction of the singer and credits to the transcriber, translator, and editor. Photographers and others are given credit right from the outset to avoid copyright issues in the future. Since there are no video recordings of the singers, the songs are accompanied by scenes of nature from Itelmen lands or archival and contemporary photographs of Itelmen life. These videos also include the lyrics of the songs and translations.

Sometimes this DVD is called Itelmen karaoke. However, it offers more than simple song learning. Many of the singers, whose songs are presented in the DVD, are gone, especially singers of traditional songs called *khodilas*. Nevertheless, through this tool, their descendants gain access to this ancient tradition and an opportunity to learn a form of singing known by their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandmothers. While these songs were retained mostly in the archives of

linguists, they now have become accessible to the wider community not only to hear, but also to learn.

Conclusions

“Our Itelmen language is beautiful. It depicts the sounds of the tundra, sea, wind, birds and animals. It informs us about our environment, our traditions, true way of life.” This, and similar statements were often heard from speakers and learners of Itelmen. Some have little hope in seeing the language revitalized. Some, on the contrary, are trying to reverse the language shift that has taken place and to be proactive even with limited knowledge of the language. In this reality every new piece of educational material, every game, publication, event, or language gathering is highly valued by the community. Our project was meant to be part of this movement and contribute to the language revitalization on the ground.

This research presents a model of effective collaboration between different academic disciplines and the language community that goes beyond language documentation towards strengthening language revitalization spirit and initiatives. It was developed *for* the language community, *with* and *by* the speakers and *delivered to* the language community.

The Gathering of Itelmen speakers of 2012 was the last meeting of its kind. Within just the two following years, half of the speakers -- participants in the Gathering -- passed away. The full range of hoped-for outcomes of this meeting have yet to be realized and much documented data needs to be analyzed. These materials are both a record of living histories of Itelmens in the 20th century and invaluable language resources for language activists.

Looking back over the years of this research, at meetings that occurred along the way, and at priceless moments with the native speakers and knowledge holders it is especially inspiring to see newly evolving language initiatives, and newly engaged language activists who are slowly but surely moving language revitalization forward. While some might say that the Itelmen language is nearly extinct, others strongly believe that the Itelmen language is reviving through their everyday practice and sharing of their newly acquired knowledge.

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