



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Long Journey of Walrus : a Linguistic Survey
Author(s)	Tsumagari, Toshiro; 津曲, 敏郎
Citation	北方人文研究, 3, 45-57
Issue Date	2010-03-31
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/42938
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	JCNH3_004.pdf



Long Journey of Walrus: a Linguistic Survey*

Toshiro TSUMAGARI

Graduate School of Letters, Hokkaido University

Abstract: In the historical sites of the Okhotsk culture in Hokkaido, some artifacts made of walrus tusk have been found. The fact tells us that there was the walrus tusk trade between Chukchi-Kamchatka and southern area including Sakhalin and Hokkaido. Actually, the trade extended to China, and continued from the Middle Ages until the early 20th century. The present paper is an attempt to trace the route of the journey of walrus linguistically. As a tentative result, a Chukchi word for ‘walrus’ was borrowed by Even with changing the meaning into ‘tusk’, and then it spread to most of the Tungusic languages. The Uilta word for ‘walrus’, which may be a doublet of the word for ‘tusk’, was possibly introduced into Nivkh and Sakhalin Ainu. Then the Nivkh form for ‘walrus’ was brought into other Amur Tungusic. Though much more evidence is needed for our discussion, it may hopefully exemplify that linguistic data, as well as archeological materials, may serve as a powerful tool to trace the spread of culture.

1. Introduction

My topic here was inspired by a series of papers by an archaeologist (Kikuchi 2003, 2004, 2005), which pointed out the presence of the trade route of walrus tusk. Where there is a transmission of a new material or culture, there is naturally a transmission of the word concerned. This is an attempt to trace the route of walrus journey back to its homeland in terms of linguistic borrowing.

Let us begin with observing the artifacts of walrus tusk excavated from the Okhotsk culture sites in Hokkaido. I will additionally mention some early records on walrus in Japan.

* This is a revised version of my paper which was read at the *International Workshop on Hunter-Gatherer Archaeology in Northern Pacific Rim* (Hokkaido University, Jan. 10-11, 2009) organized by the Center for Northern Humanities, Graduate School of Letters, Hokkaido University. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Hirofumi Kato, who planned and conducted the workshop, and other participants who gave me valuable comments. The main points of the present paper are included in Tsumagari (2009) and an enlarged Japanese version will appear in *Hokutoo Aji no rekishi to bunka (History and culture in northeast Asia)* edited by Toshihiko Kikuchi (in preparation).

Then I will show the linguistic situation in northeast Asia with special reference to the Sakhalin island, where we can find many cases of linguistic contact among indigenous peoples. Naturally, one of the Chukchi-Kamchatkan languages is justifiably regarded as the donor of the word 'walrus'. The Tungusic languages possibly relay the word to the Sakhalin-Amur region. We will examine the words for 'walrus' and 'tusk' in the languages concerned. These results lead to a tentative conclusion about the journey of walrus. Finally, I would like to call general attention to the problem of the language endangerment of our world.

2. Artifacts of walrus tusk from the Okhotsk culture sites

Fig. 1 shows woman statues from the Okhotsk culture sites. Nos. 1-2 are walrus tusk artifacts found in the Rebun island, northernmost part of Hokkaido. No. 3 was found in Moyoro site in Abashiri, but it is arguable whether the material is walrus tusk or whale bone.

In Fig. 2, there are animal statues found in Rebun (no. 1) and Yubetsu (nos. 2-4), a town on the Okhotsk coast near the city Abashiri. In no. 3, the seal (sea lion or killer whale?) is represented by making use of the natural line of walrus tusk.

Map 1 shows the geographical location of the sites where such walrus tusk artifacts were found, including above-mentioned Rebun (nos. 1-4), Yubetsu (no. 5) and Abashiri (no. 6). In his papers (Kikuchi 2003, 2004, 2005), Toshihiko Kikuchi (a Professor Emeritus of Hokkaido University) discusses the presence of trade route of walrus tusk. Needless to say, walrus didn't and doesn't live around Hokkaido: the southern limit of walrus home is the middle part of the Kamchatkan peninsula. Based on the location of these sites, he supposed two trade routes: one is the route along the coast of the Okhotsk sea; another route is via the Kuril Islands.

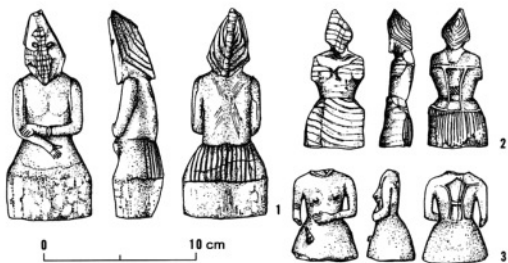


Fig. 1 Woman statues
(Kikuchi 2003 [2004: 118])

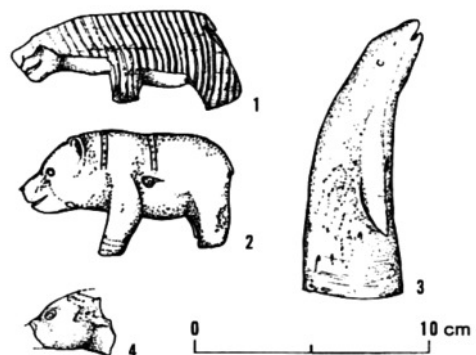
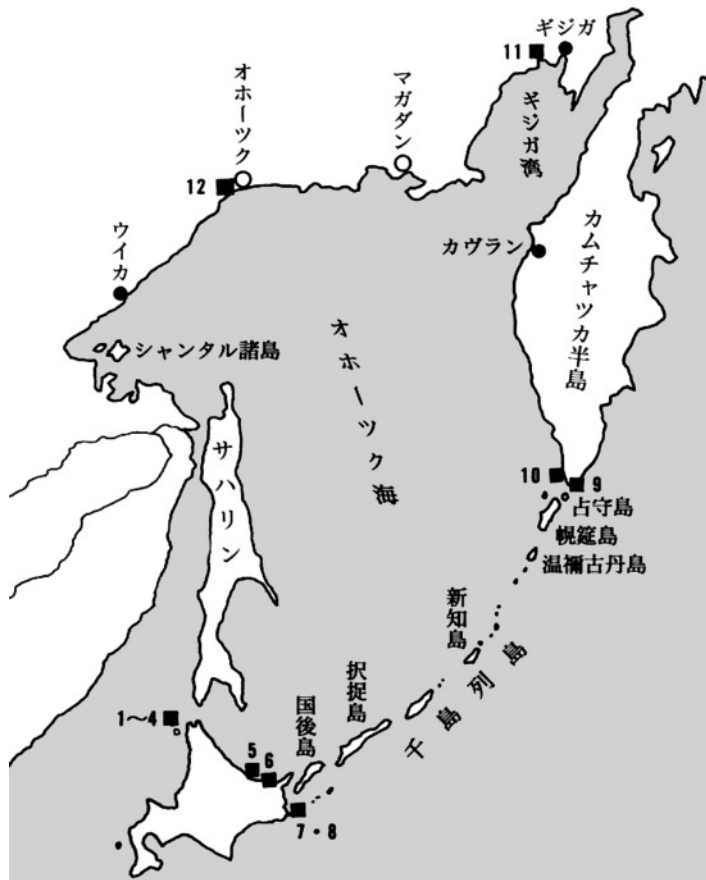


Fig. 2 Animal statues
(Kikuchi 2003 [2004: 119])



Map 1 Sites of walrus tusks and artifacts (Kikuchi 2003 [2004: 122])

3. Early records on walrus in Japan

The sketches (Figs. 3-5) are drawn by 19th century Japanese. Fig. 3 is perhaps the earliest record of walrus in Japan. The information was brought by shipwrecked returnees (Otsuki/Otomo 1972 [1807]). On that occasion, the Japanese word *seiuchi* for 'walrus' was first introduced into Japan from Russian word *sivuch* 'sea lion'. They report that the walrus tusk was processed into precious goods. Fig. 4 represents a walrus drifting ashore on the southern

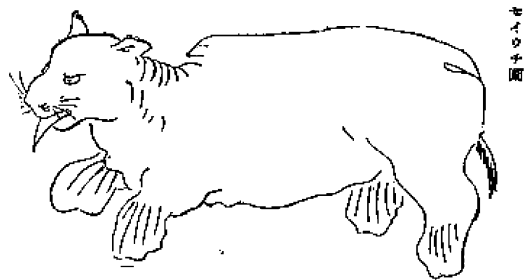


Fig. 3 A sketch of walrus in Kankai-ibun (Otsuki/Otomo ed. 1972: 141)

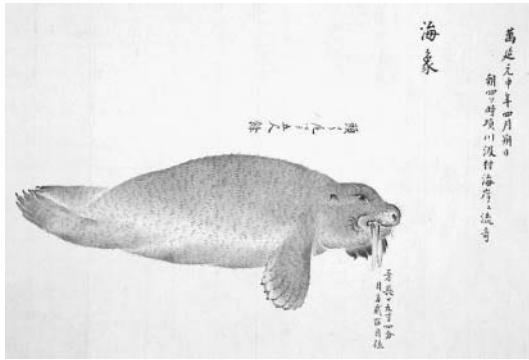


Fig. 4 A sketch of walrus in *Shasei Butsuruihinzu* (from: <http://www.ndl.go.jp/nature/cha3/index.html>)

Hokkaido in 1860. Fig. 5 is cited from an illustrated encyclopedia (*Hakubutsuzo Kyoojuhoo* 1876-77). Its explanation reads; “*Seiuchi* ‘walrus’ lives in the far north from Sakhalin province. The large and white tusk is similar to ivory, carved by craftsmen in substitute for ivory and called ‘water ivory’”. This information also suggests that walrus tusk was highly appreciated as important trade goods.

4. Linguistic contacts in Sakhalin

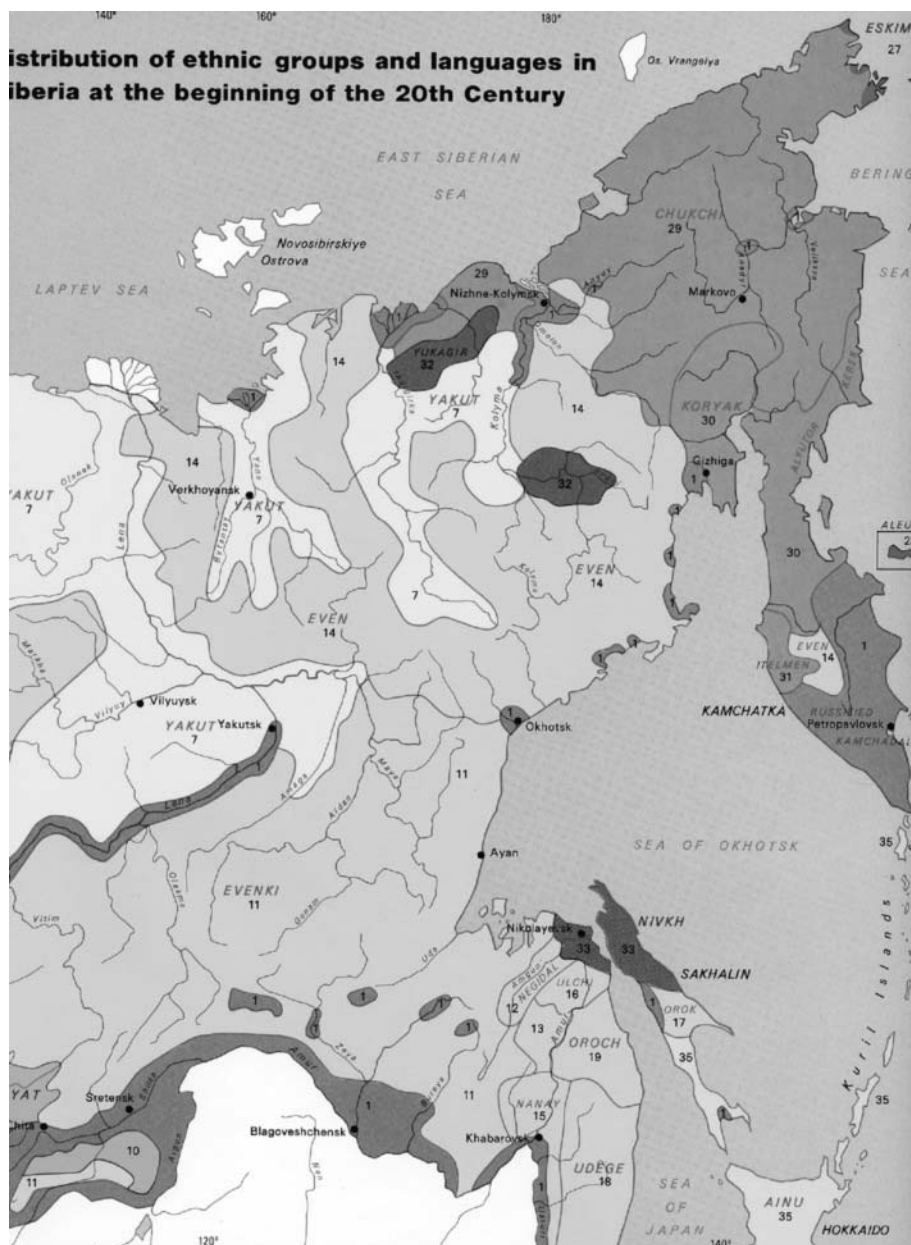
Before going into the discussion of language contact, we have to observe the linguistic distribution in northeast Asia. Map 2 shows the indigenous languages of the area in the early 20th century. These languages are roughly divided into two groups: Paleoasiatic and Altaic. The former group includes Chukchi-Kamchatkan family of languages (Chukchi, Koryak, Alyutor and Itelmen) and other genetically isolated languages (Yukaghir and Nivkh). Among the latter group, the Tungusic languages are widely distributed from the area adjacent to Chukchi-Kamchatkan down to the Amur-Sakhalin region. Another Altaic member in this area is Sakha (Yakut, a Turkic language).

Map 3 is an enlargement focused on the Amur-Sakhalin region, where we can find individual members of Tungusic, as well as Nivkh and Ainu. Until recently, on the Sakhalin island three genetically distinguished languages were spoken and mutually influenced: Uilta (a Tungusic), Nivkh and Ainu. Nowadays, Ainu is no longer spoken in Sakhalin, and other two languages are seriously endangered.

We find many words common to these three indigenous languages in Sakhalin, namely Ainu, Uilta, and Nivkh. Let us see some examples, which were discussed by Jiro Ikegami, a



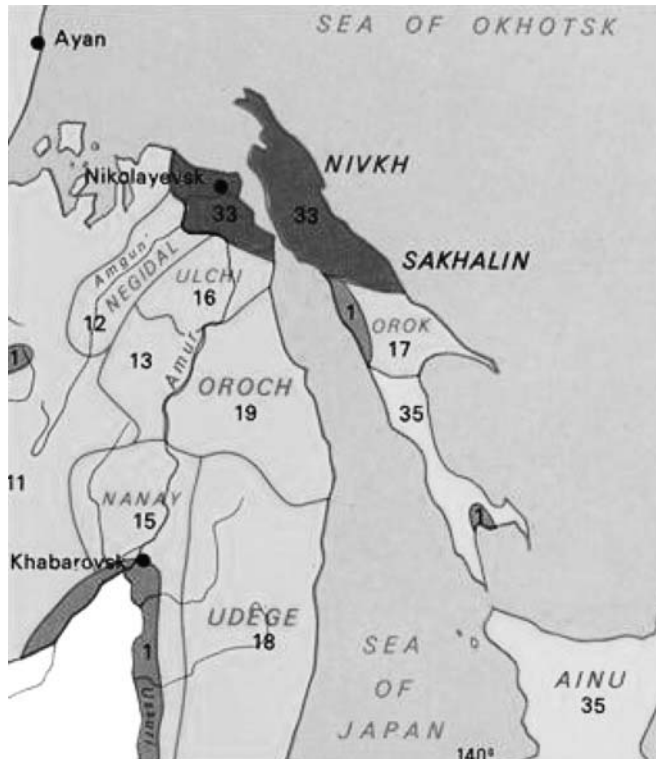
Fig. 5 A sketch with an explanation of walrus in *Hakubutsuzo Kyoojuhoo* (from: http://kindai.ndl.go.jp/Bllm-gFrame.php?JP_NUM=40040468&VOL_NUM=00002&KOMA=4&ITYPE=0)



Map 2 Linguistic distribution in northeast Asia (Wurm et al. eds. 1996: Map 107)

Professor Emeritus of Hokkaido University and a specialist of the Uilta language.

- (1) **Ain.** *inaw* 'ritual wooden staff'/**Uil.** *illau* 'id.' (**Orc.** *ilau* 'id.'; **Man.** *ila-* 'to bloom')/**Niv.** *inau, nau* 'id.' (Ikegami 1980) [**Tun.** > (?>) **Ain.** > **Niv.**]
- (2) **Ain.** *kotan* 'village'/**Uil.** *xotto(n-)* 'town' (also in other Amur-Tungusic)/**Niv.** *xota, xotaj* 'town'; cf. **Mon.** *xota(n)* 'town'/**Tur.** *kotan* 'shed for animals, fence' (Ikegami 1980)



Map 3 Languages of Amur-Sakhalin region (enlarged from Map 2)

[(Tur., Mon.) > Tun. >]

- (3) **Ain.** *tonkori* 'musical instrument with five strings'/**Uil.** *takkəərə* 'id. with one string'
(Man. *tənggəri* 'id. with three strings')/**Niv.** *t'yŋr* 'id. with one string' (Ikegami 1988)
 [Tun. >]
- (4) **Ain.** *sintoko* 'wooden container'/**Uil.** *sitto* 'barrel' (**Orc.** *sindongo*)/**Niv.** *s'intyŋ* 'id.'
 (Ikegami 1980) [Jap.? > Ain. >]

In the first example, Ikegami pointed out that the Ainu word *inaw* 'ritual wooden staff' has a Tungusic origin. The sound alternation between *l* and *n* suggests that the Tungusic form is original, because Ainu has no *l* sound and replaced it with *n*. If we start from the Ainu form, there is no reason why Tungusic has changed *n* into *l*, while Tungusic has both sounds. By the same reason, the Nivkh form was perhaps borrowed from Ainu. The second Ainu word *kotan* 'village' has its cognates not only in Tungusic, but also in continental Altaic, namely Mongolic and Turkic. Such a wider distribution suggests its Altaic origin. The third word is for a musical instrument, which was also introduced into Sakhalin from the continent. On the contrary, the next Ainu word *sintoko* 'wooden container' was presumably first borrowed from Japanese, and then spread to other Sakhalin languages and partially to Amur Tungusic.

5. 'Walrus' and 'tusk' in Tungusic

Now, let us examine the words for walrus and tusk first in the Sakhalin languages.

- (5) **SakAin.** *soh* 'walrus'; *kita* 'tusk' (Hattori 1981 [1964])
 (6) **Uil.** *suixə* 'sea animal (walrus); its tusk is a lucky gift'; *sutta* 'tusk (of sea lion or bear) (Ikegami 1997); *sukkə(n)* 'gift from the gods' (Magata 1981) (/su/ = [ʃu])
 (7) **Niv.** *č'uy*, *č'urɲyx* 'walrus'; *č'ov*, *č'urɲyx č'ov* 'walrus tusk'; *č'ov* 'tusk' (Savel'eva & Taksami 1965, 1970); *tfugɲux* 'walrus' (Hattori 2000: 100); *tfurɲa* 'walrus' (collected by the author in 2007)

Sakhalin Ainu has a word for walrus, but Hokkaido Ainu has no special word for it. In Uilta, walrus is called *suixə*, and tusk *sutta*. It is worth attention that, among the Uilta people, walrus tusk was regarded as a lucky gift, and we have another word *sukkə* for 'a gift from the gods' with somewhat similar sounds with walrus and tusk. In Nivkh, we have such words as *č'uy* or *č'urɲyx* for walrus, and *č'ov* for tusk. A Japanese linguist Takeshi Hattori, a specialist for the Nivkh language, remarks: "walrus tusk decorated with carving was regarded as a treasure until recently" (Hattori id.). I myself had an opportunity to hear the word for walrus from a Sakhalin dialect speaker. The form *tfurɲa* seems to be a compound with *ɲa* 'animal'.

From a comparison of these words, we find at first sight the resemblance between Sakhalin Ainu *soh* 'walrus' and Nivkh *č'ov* 'tusk'. As for the word-initial sounds, we have more examples of the correspondence between Ainu/Uilta *s-* and Nivkh *č'-*, as in (9)–(11).

- (8) **SakAin.** *soh* 'walrus'/**Niv.** *č'ov* 'tusk' (cf. **Uil.** *suixə* 'walrus', *sutta* 'tusk', *sukkə* 'gift')
 (9) **Ain.** *san* 'shelf'/**Uil.** *saan* 'shelf for drying fish' (also in **Ulc.**, **Nan.**, **Neg.**)/**Niv.** *č'ay* 'id.' (Ikegami 1994; Krejnovich 1955: 153)
 (10) **SakAin.** *sahka* (Hattori 1981[1964]) 'chopstick'/**Uil.** *sabuu*, **Man.** *sabka* (also in **Nan.**, **Ulc.** etc.)/**Niv.** *č'afq* (Ikegami 1994; Krejnovich 1955: 139–140, 163)
 (11) **Uil.** *sama(n)* 'shaman' (also in **Tun.**)/**Niv.** *č'amɲ*, *č'am* 'id.' (Krejnovich 1955: 139–140, 163)

These words are mostly regarded as borrowings from Tungusic or Ainu into Nivkh, because the consonant *s-* rarely occurs word-initially in original Nivkh nouns: it occurs mostly as an alternated sound for initial *č'-* under certain phonemic and syntactic conditions. The correspondence Tungusic *s-* and Nivkh *č'-* also leads to the possible relation between the Uilta words for walrus or tusk and those in Nivkh

Now, we will examine other Tungusic forms for walrus and tusk according to the comparative dictionary of Tungusic (Tsintsius et al. eds. I 1975, II 1977).

- (12) **Ulc.** *čujəxə* 'walrus; tusk of walrus or seal', **Nan.** *čujəxə*, **Orc.** *čuixə~čujəxə*, **Udh.** *čuhio* 'walrus'; cf. **Niv.** *č'urɲyx* 'walrus' (II 410)
 (13) **Uil.** *sujəxə* 'walrus' (II 121; **Uil.** only)

- (14) **Evn.** *urka*~*hurka*~*hurko*, **Evk.** *surka*~*hurka*~*turka*, **Neg.** *sojka*, **Orc.** *sokka*, **Udh.** *suka*, **Ulc.** *suča*, **Uil.** *sutta*, **Nan.** *soika*~*sojka* ‘tusk, incisor (of walrus)’, **Man.** *sučun wəixə* ‘fore-tooth, incisor’ (II 130)

The Amur Tungusic forms for walrus seem to suggest their Nivkh origin. The Uilta form is isolated and therefore regarded as having a different origin from other Tungusic. As for tusk, all the Tungusic members share the same cognates, in which the above-mentioned Uilta word *sutta* is also included.

6. From Chukchi-Kamchatkan ‘walrus’ to Tungusic ‘tusk’

Now, we will visit the homeland of walrus. We find cognate words for walrus and tusk among Chukchi, Koryak, and Alyutor.

- (15) **Chk.** *rərka*~*rərka*/**Kor.** *jəjka*/**Alt.** *tətka* ‘walrus’ (Mudrak 2000: 204, Zhukova & Kurebito 2001: 94, Fortescue 2005: 63)
 (16) **Chk. Kor. Alt.** *waŋqət* ‘walrus tusk’ (Fortescue 2005: 324)

The sound correspondence observed in (15) (**Chk.** *r*/**Kor.** *j*/**Alt.** *t*) is typical among these languages. Though the Chukchi-Kamchatkan word for tusk obviously has no relation with Tungusic, the Chukchi form for walrus may possibly be related to the Even word for tusk as shown in (17).

- (17) **Chk.** *rərka* ‘walrus’ > ?**Evn.** *urka* ‘tusk (of walrus)’ (>**Evn.** *hurka* > **Evk.** *surka* > **Amur Tun.**)

Note that Even is the nearest neighbor of the Chukchi-Kamchatkan people. Let us compare these two words. It is a well-known fact that Tungusic, as well as Altaic in general, avoids the initial *r*- sound. To borrow a foreign word beginning with *r*-, some strategies are generally employed: (a) to replace the sound with other permissible consonants, usually *l* or *n*, (b) to add an epenthetic vowel initially, and in less cases (c) to simply drop the *r*- sound. If the third strategy is applied here, the Chukchi form *rərka* may well produce the Even form *urka*. Note also that the vowel harmony rule in Even may have had an effect to change the initial vowel. An initial consonant *h*- or *s*- in other dialects and Evenki can be regarded as a later development. The change of meaning from ‘walrus’ into ‘tusk’ seems to be natural, if we take into account the fact that the Tungusic people were more concerned about the tusk rather than the walrus itself.

7. A tentative conclusion: where did walrus come from?

We can summarize the discussion so far.

- (i) The Chukchi word for ‘walrus’ was borrowed by Even with changing the meaning into

‘tusk’, and then it spread to most of the Tungusic languages.

(18) **Chk.** *rərka* ‘walrus’ > **Evn.** *urka*~*hurka* ‘tusk’ > **Evk.** *surka* > **Neg. Nan.** *sojka*, **Ulc.** *suča*, **Uil.** *sutta*, **Orc.** *sokka*, **Udh.** *suka* ‘tusk’

(ii) The Sakhalin Ainu form for walrus, which may be a borrowing from some above-mentioned Tungusic cognate, was introduced into Nivkh with changing the meaning again.

(19) ((18)? >) **SakAin.** *soh* ‘walrus’ > **Niv.** *č’oŋ* ‘tusk’

(iii) The Uilta word for ‘walrus’, which may be a doublet of the word for ‘tusk’, was possibly introduced into Nivkh. Then the Nivkh form for ‘walrus’ was brought into Amur Tungusic.

(20) ((18)? >) **Uil.** *suixə* ‘walrus’ >? **Niv.** *č’uŋ*, *č’uŋnyx* ‘walrus’ > **Ulc.** *čujəxə* ‘walrus; tusk of walrus or seal’, **Nan.** *čujəxə*, **Orc.** *čuixə*~*čujəxə*, **Udh.** *čuhio* ‘walrus’

(iv) The Uilta word for ‘a gift from the gods’ may be another doublet of the word for ‘tusk’.

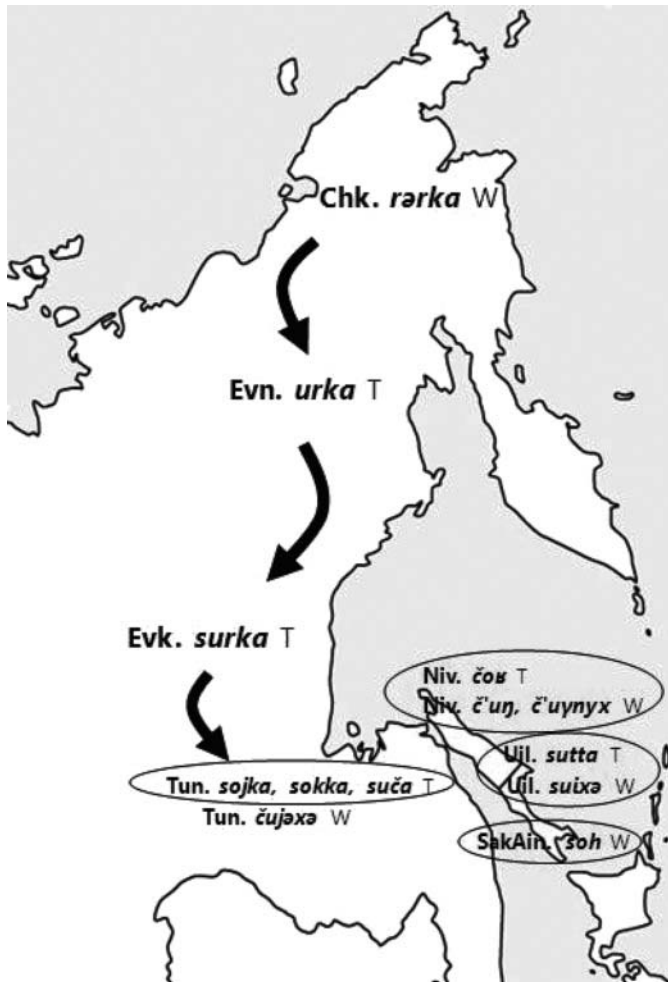
(21) ((18)? >) **Uil.** *sukkə* ‘gift from the gods’

The main points above are represented on the **Map 4**. The route along the coast of the Okhotsk sea may be justifiable from a linguistic viewpoint. I am aware that much more evidence is needed for my discussion above. Anyway, the Tungusic people played an important role as a mediator in walrus tusk trade, and Sakhalin was a crossroad of many cultures.

8. Additional remarks on language endangerment

Last but not least, I would like to mention the fact that the world languages are now rapidly diminishing the number. The number of world languages is estimated at some 6000, but half of them are minor languages with less than ten thousand speakers each (Yamamoto 2000: 4). The languages with more than one million speakers count only about 4% of the total number of languages (Krauss 1994: 253, Yamamoto 2000: 3). Incidentally, 96% of the world population speak one of these major languages (Miyaoaka 2002: 12). According to the estimation by Professor Michael Krauss, the number of world languages will reduce by half by the end of the 21st century. This is the best scenario and if things go worse, he warns, only 5–10% of the existing languages will survive into the next century (Krauss 1994: 255). This is a serious situation that deserves much attention. The situation mentioned above is schematically shown in **Fig. 6**.

Archaeologists may dig out the past materials from underground, but a language once lost without any documentation cannot be regained forever. It means a loss of human intellectual heritage and diversity, as well as a loss of the keys to our history.



Map 4 The distribution and route of the words for 'walrus' (W) and 'tusk' (T)

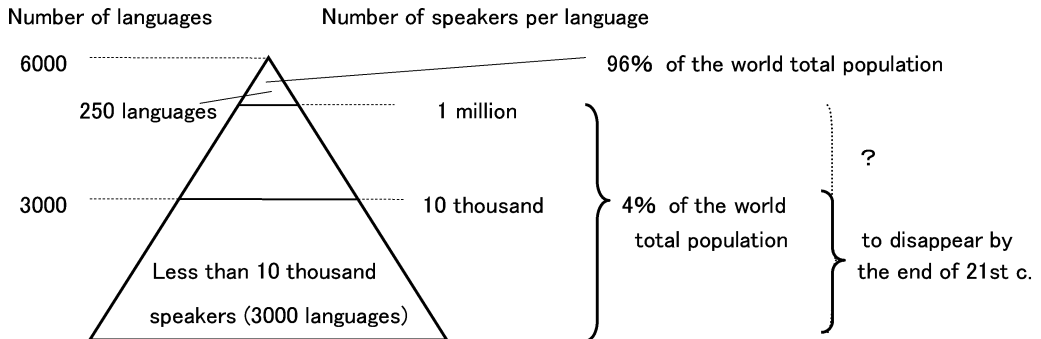


Fig. 6 World languages viewed from the number of speakers

Abbreviations for languages

Ain. Ainu, **Alt.** Alyutor, **Chk.** Chukchi, **Evk.** Evenki, **Evn.** Even, **Jap.** Japanese, **Kor.** Koryak, **Man.** Manchu, **Mon.** Mongolic, **Nan.** Nanay, **Neg.** Negidal, **Niv.** Nivkh, **Orc.** Orochi, **SakAin.** Sakhalin Ainu, **Tun.** Tungusic, **Tur.** Turkic, **Udh.** Udehe, **Ulc.** Ulcha

References

[In Japanese]

Hattori, Shiro (ed.)

1981 [1964] *An Ainu dialect dictionary*. Iwanami Shoten.

Hattori, Takeshi

2000 *A collected works on Gilyak by Takeshi Hattori*. Hokkaido Shuppan Kikaku Sentaa.

Ikegami, Jiro

1980 Remarks on the origin of the Ainu word *inaw*: with reference to the etymology of the Uilta word *illau*. *Minzokugaku Kenkyuu* 44/4: 393-402 [also in Ikegami 2004: 204-220].

1988 Northeast Asia and Japan viewed from the linguistic standpoint. *Hokkaido no Bunka* 59: 34-44, Hokkaido Bunkazai Hogokyoikai [also in Ikegami 2004: 259-271].

1990 Word borrowing among Japanese and neighboring languages in the north. *Hokkaido Hoogen Kenkyuukai Kaihoo* 30: 2-11, Hokkaido Hoogen Kenkyuukai [also in Ikegami 2004: 272-285].

1994 Continental Tungus language elements in Ainu. In Hoppoogengo Kenkyuusha Kyoogikai (ed.) *Ainugo no tsudo*: 159-169, Hokkaido Shuppan Kikaku Sentaa [also in Ikegami 2004: 221-231].

1997 *A dictionary of the Uilta language spoken on Sakhalin*. Hokkaido Daigaku Tosho Kankookai.

2004 *Essays on languages of northeast Asia*. Hokkaido Daigaku Tosho Kankookai.

Katsuragawa, Hoshu/T. Kamei (ed.)

1990 *Hokusabunryaku*. Iwanami Shoten.

Kikuchi, Toshihiko

2003 The walrus tusk trade in Okhotsk rim. In K. Otsuka (ed.) *Kitataiheiyo no senjuminkooeki to kooge*: 134-138, Shibunkaku Shuppan [also in the same book with Kikuchi 2004: 117-125].

2004 The trade in Okhotsk rim viewed from Chinese materials. In T. Kikuchi *Kan-Ohootsukukai kodaibunka no kenkyuu*: 127-162. Hokkaido Daigaku Tosho Kankookai.

2005 The *guduo-jiao* and its trade with coastal areas of the Sea of Okhotsk in *Tang* period. *Shihoo* 38: 1-21, Hokkaido Daigaku Tooyooshi-danwakai.

Krauss, Michael/F. Sasama (tr.)

1994 Language endangerment. In Hoppoogengo Kenkyuusha Kyoogikai (ed.) *Ainugo no tsudo*: 249-263, Hokkaido Shuppan Kikaku Sentaa.

Magata, Hisaharu

1981 *A dictionary of the Uilta language*. Abashirishi Hoppooinzokubunka Hozonkyoikai.

Miyaoka, Osahito

2002 Endangered languages: collapsing linguistic and cultural ecosystem. In O. Miyaoka and O. Sakiyama (eds.) *Endangered languages of the world: to preserve the linguistic and cultural diversity*: 8-53, Akashi Shoten.

Otsuki, Gentaku/K. Otomo (ed.)

1972 *Kankai-ibun*. Kokusho Kankookai.

Tsumagari, Toshiro

2009 The linguistic world of Sakhalin: viewed from lexical borrowing. In T. Tsumagari (ed.) *Linguistic world of Sakhalin: Proceedings of the symposium, September 6, 2008*: 1-10. Center for Northern Humanities, Graduate School of Letters, Hokkaido University.

Yamamoto, Akira

2000 Endangered languages research: what is expected of us? In *Lectures on endangered languages* (ELPR Publication Series C-1): 3-31, Faculty of Informatics, Osaka Gakuin University.

[In Western languages]

Fortescue, M. D.

2005 *Comparative Chukotko-Kamchatkan dictionary*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Krejnovich, E. A.

1955 Giljatsko-tunguso-man'chzhurskie jazykovye paralleli. *Doklady i Soobshchenija Instituta Jazykoznanija AN SSSR* 8: 135-167.

Mudrak, O. A.

2000 *Etimologicheskij slovar' chukotsko-kamchatskikh jazykov*. Moskva: Jazyki russkoj kul'tury.

Panfirov, V. Z.

1962 *Grammatika nivkhskogo jazyka* 1. M/L: Nauka.

Savel'eva, V. N. & Ch. M. Taksami

1965 *Russko-nivkhszkij slovar'*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Sovetskaja Entsiklopedija.

1970 *Nivkhsko-russkij slovar'*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Sovetskaja Entsiklopedija.

Tsintsius, V. I. et al. (eds.)

1975, 1977 *Sravnitel'nyj slovar' tunguso-man'chzhurskikh jazykov*, Tom. 1-2. Leningrad: Nauka.

Wurm, S. A. et al. (eds.)

1996 *Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*. Vol. 1, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Zhkova, A. N. & T. Kurebito

2001 *A basic topical dictionary of the Koryak-Chukchi languages*. ILCAA, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

セイウチの長い旅：言語学的考察

津 曲 敏 郎

北海道大学大学院文学研究科

北海道のオホーツク文化の遺跡からセイウチの牙製とみられる彫像が出土しているが、このことからセイウチの棲息地であるチュクチ・カムチャツカ地域との間に、かつてセイウチの牙の交易ルートがあったことが想定されている。人とモノの流れがあったところに、ことばの行き来もまたあったはずである。特にセイウチのような棲息域の限られた動物であれば、交易品として珍重されたその牙とともに、セイウチや牙を表わす単語もまた北から南へと伝えられたに違いない。本稿はセイウチの旅を言語学的に跡付ける試みである。

出発点としてチュクチ語の「セイウチ」をあらわす語が、隣接するエウエン語に「牙」の意味で取り入れられたことを想定する。この語はエウエンキー語を経て、アムール流域のツングース諸語に広がった。これがサハリンのウイルタ語に再び「セイウチ」を表わす語として入り、そこからニブフ語とサハリン・アイヌ語にも伝わったと考えられる。ニブフ語の「セイウチ」はさらにアムール流域のツングース諸語の「セイウチ」の直接の語源となっている。このように、特にサハリン・アムール地域の言語間の関係はなかなか複雑であり、これをもってセイウチをめぐる語の借用関係が解明されたとは言えない。本稿では、文化の伝播を考える上で言語的データが重要な意味をもつことを例証し、あわせてそうした言語が失われつつある現実にも注意を喚起する。