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On the Diversification of Nivkh Varieties

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This paper offers a brief survey of the external and internal developments that underlie the history of the Nivkh (Gilyak, Ghilyak) language, which is currently spoken by no more than 50 speakers in the lower reaches of Amur River and on the Island of Sakhalin in the Russian Far East. According to the proposed scenario, the ancestral form of Nivkh was diversified into several varieties as a result of language expansion, interaction with local substrate languages and the adstratal influence of the neighboring Tungusic languages. The discussion is supported by various illustrative examples from Nivkh lexicon, phonology and morphosyntax.

Nivkh people, as a population, are considered to be direct descendants of the Neolithic inhabitants of the lower Amur and northern Sakhalin. Prior to the expansion of the Tungusic languages, the whole region was presumably inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups who spoke a number of currently unidentified languages, of which the Nivkh language is the last vestige. However, even Nivkh is apparently a relatively recent newcomer to the area, though the exact geographical location of its original homeland is still a debatable question. According to (Janhunen 1996), approximately 2000 years ago Nivkh started moving from its homeland, which was located between the Sungari and Ussuri river valleys, along the Amur towards its estuary and further to Sakhalin, gradually replacing earlier local languages. At the same time, the Nivkh-speaking territory was shrinking under the pressure of the expanding Tungusic languages, which starting from the 10th century were pushing Nivkh from the south further to the north.

The last group of the former Nivkh-speaking indigenous populations on the Amur who gave up the Nivkh language, were obviously the Ulcha, the immediate current southern neighbors of the Nivkh on the Lower Amur. The Ulcha now speak a Tungusic language which is very close to that of their own southern neighbors the Nanai. The language shift took place possibly in connection with the Santan trade, which was conducted in the Edo period (1603–1868) via Sakhalin and the Amur (Sasaki 1999).

The southernmost point of the Nivkh territory is currently considered to be the settlement *Uxtr* ‘Cliff’ on the left bank of the Amur, beyond which the Ulcha territory begins, cf. e.g. (Otaina 1977: 72). However, Shternberg (1933: 393–395) and Taksami (1975: 196) state that the historical Nivkh territory extended even further south, down to Lake Kizi and Chikhachev Bay of the Tartar Strait, where the Nivkh lived in mixed

settlements together with Ainu, Oroch and Neghidal. Lake Kizi is located close to the Nevelskoy Straight / Mamiya Straight, which forms the narrowest (7.3 km) and the shallowest fairway (with a depth of around 7 m) section of the Tartar Strait. The straight is limited on the mainland by the Cape Lazarev (Nivkh *Pilak^hra* ‘Big Cape’¹) and on Sakhalin by the Cape Pogibi (Nivkh *Poyvi*). The straight was an ancient route from continental Manchuria to Sakhalin, and it apparently served as the first gateway for the expanding Nivkh language approximately 1000 years ago. Thus, it was the place where the linguistic diversification of Nivkh into the Amur and Sakhalin varieties began.

The Central Sakhalin variety of Nivkh, which is the most conservative of all, was once spoken on the western coast of Sakhalin in the vicinity of the sources of the Poronai (Nivkh *Plaj* ‘Full River’ or ‘Main River’) and Tym (Nivkh *Tama* ‘Spawning Ground’) rivers between the settlements of Agnevo (Nivkh *Arjivo* ‘Male Settlement’) and Pilavo (Nivkh *Pilavo* ‘Big Settlement’), which are located south of the Nevelskoy Straight / Mamiya Straight (Kreinovich 1979: 296).

This area can be seen as the homeland of the Sakhalin Nivkh, from where the language continued to expand by river routes towards south and north. The southern route of expansion went along Poronai River, and it is possible that the language spread south very soon after it had arrived on Sakhalin. Such a scenario finds support in the local place names, many of which are obviously of a Nivkh origin (Taksami 1975: 199). However, under the pressure of the Ainu, who arrived from Hokkaido on Sakhalin around the 14th–15th centuries, these local groups were forced to leave their settlements and fishing grounds and move again to the north.

The South Sakhalin variety of Nivkh, which was spoken in several settlements in the estuary of the Poronai and on the islands of the Gulf of Patience by ca. 100 people at the beginning of the 20th century, was a more recent newcomer to the area. Basing on the information from (Kreinovich 1973: 63; Taksami 1975: 199), one may conclude that the migrants of the new wave were also speakers of the Central Sakhalin variety. The migration took place relatively recently and without interference with other languages, which is confirmed by the close similarity between the Central Sakhalin and South Sakhalin varieties of Nivkh.

The northern route of expansion from the Sakhalin Nivkh homeland on the western coast of the island laid along the river Tym to the northwest. Due to the gradual nature of this expansion, there is a regular variation between all the local varieties of Nivkh spoken in the Tym area. The result of this language spread is today represented by the East Sakhalin variety, which is spoken on the eastern coast of Sakhalin around the estuary of Tym, and which differs linguistically from the Central Sakhalin variety. From the Tym mouth region, the East Sakhalin variety has further expanded along the seashore both

¹ For more details on Nivkh toponymics see (Gruzdeva & Temina 2020).

northwards and southwards.

In the meantime, in the Amur basin, Nivkh continued its expansion along the Amur down to its estuary (Amur Liman), which is called in Nivkh *Mackerq* ‘Small Sea’ in contrast to the Sea of Okhotsk, which is called *Pilagerq* ‘Big Sea’. The northwesternmost border of the Nivkh area is usually placed, basing on (Middendorff 1860: 526), on the river Uda. To the east of the Uda Bay there is the archipelago of Shantar Islands, which is known to have been a place of Nivkh maritime hunting.

The evolution of the Amur variety continued due to the substratal influence of the receding local languages and the adstrate influence from the surrounding Tungusic languages. After the language had reached the Amur estuary, a new wave of Nivkh expansion to the Sakhalin Island began via the Nevelskoy Straight / Mamiya Straight, which in this case was approached from the north, and directly from Cape Prongi (Nivkh *P^hrongi* ‘Small Smelt’), which is located on the right bank of the Amur Liman. The speakers of the newly formed Amur estuary variety started to settle on the northwestern coast of Sakhalin. Over time they have mixed with some speakers of the East Sakhalin variety, and as a result, the West Sakhalin variety has arisen.

The North Sakhalin variety, which was spoken on the Schmidt Peninsula (Nivkh *Mifcoŋř* ‘Land’s Head’), contains features of the Amur, West Sakhalin, Central Sakhalin, and East Sakhalin varieties, but it also has idiosyncratic features of its own, cf. (Panfilov 1968). It seems that the Nivkh language was brought to the peninsula both from the east and the west by sea and was met by one or more earlier local languages, whose traces survive in the rather specific pronunciation and lexicon of the North Sakhalin variety.

Synchronically, variation between the Nivkh varieties is present in all areas of grammar and lexicon but it is most prominent in the phonology. In the following, I will show several features that distinguish the different varieties of Nivkh from each other, with the focus on phonology and lexicon.

The Leipzig-Jakarta list of lexical items (Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009), applied to the Nivkh data, demonstrates that the difference between the basic vocabulary of the East Sakhalin and Amur varieties is 84%. The split between these varieties is confirmed by 16 distinct items of 100-word list, see Table 1². Basing on this evidence, one can postulate that the East Sakhalin and Amur varieties may in fact be treated as separate languages.

² The data was collected from the speakers of different varieties in 2018–2020, partly online. I would like to thank my consultants for their help.

Table 1. 16 words from Leipzig-Jakarta list distinct in ES and A

ES	NS	WS	A	
<i>ux</i>	<i>ux</i>	<i>vix, ux</i>	<i>vix</i>	‘nose’
<i>amx</i>	<i>əmx</i>	<i>əŋg</i>	<i>əŋg</i>	‘mouth’
<i>c^hoχ</i>	<i>ŋar</i>	<i>ŋař</i>	<i>ŋar</i>	‘blood’
<i>hiřk</i>	<i>tas, amřk</i>	<i>amřk</i>	<i>tar, amrak</i>	‘louse’
<i>(e)m^la</i>	<i>nos</i>	<i>nos</i>	<i>nos</i>	‘ear’
<i>ŋar</i>	<i>ŋar</i>	<i>aŋ</i>	<i>aŋ</i>	‘who?’
<i>jaŋ</i>	<i>i, jaŋ</i>	<i>if</i>	<i>if</i>	‘s/he’
<i>nud</i>	<i>řut</i>	<i>si^j</i>	<i>si^j</i>	‘what?’
<i>cird</i>	<i>cuzk</i>	<i>cuz^j</i>	<i>cuz^j</i>	‘new’
<i>qomř</i>	<i>maχ</i>	<i>maχ</i>	<i>maχ</i>	‘sand’
<i>eβŋavt, χo^jŋavt</i>	<i>hava(n)t</i>	<i>hava^j</i>	<i>hava^j</i>	‘laugh’
<i>ximud</i>	<i>ləv(n)t</i>	<i>ləv^j</i>	<i>ləv^j</i>	‘hide’
<i>c^hχař</i>	<i>ci^yr</i>	<i>ci^yř</i>	<i>ci:r</i>	‘wood’
<i>k^hlojd, t^hlojd</i>	<i>qama(n)t</i>	<i>qama^j</i>	<i>qama^j</i>	‘run’
<i>q^hamx, hilmř, p^hləŋg³</i>	<i>hims</i>	<i>p^hləŋg</i>	<i>p^hləŋg</i>	‘ash’
<i>qaβjod</i>	<i>to(n)t</i>	<i>to^j</i>	<i>to^j</i>	‘cry’

As can be seen from the Table 1, the lexicon of the North Sakhalin variety largely coincides with that of the Amur and West-Sakhalin varieties, which confirms the conclusion made by Shiraishi (2006: 11–12) that all three varieties are closely related to each other. One notable counterexample, which occurs in the data presented in the Table 1, is the interrogative pronoun *řut* ‘what?’ which is attested only in the North Sakhalin variety, cf. the corresponding pronouns ES *nud* and A/WS *si^j*.

The West Sakhalin and Amur varieties are lexically almost identical, however, there is a certain variation in the use of some lexical items in the West Sakhalin variety, which can be attributed to the influence of other Sakhalin idioms. Thus, for the word ‘nose’ my consultant used both A *vix* and *ux* ES/NS.

One of the most prominent phonological features that differentiates Nivkh varieties is the regular correspondence between the vowel *a* in the East Sakhalin, Central Sakhalin and South Sakhalin varieties vs. the vowel *ə* in the Amur, West Sakhalin and North Sakhalin varieties, see examples in Table 2. The reasons for the raising of *a* in the latter varieties still remains unexplained. One of the hypotheses indirectly suggested by Kreinovich (1979: 299) attributes this process to the shift of stress from the non-initial syllable to the initial syllable in these idioms. This would mean that in the polysynthetic complexes the stress shifts from the head noun to the attribute, as a result of which the

³ The word *p^hləŋg* is known to my ES consultant only passively.

vowels of the head noun undergo reduction resulting in the raising of *a*.

Table 2. Examples of the correspondence between *a* and *ə*.

ES/CS/SS	A/WS/NS	
<i>ayu-</i>	<i>əyi-</i>	‘do not want’
<i>-ak</i>	<i>-ək</i>	comparative suffix
<i>hajm-</i>	<i>həjm-</i>	‘be old’
<i>haljř</i>	<i>həljř</i>	‘platform for processing fish’
<i>jaly-</i>	<i>jəly-</i>	‘open sth’
<i>lavji</i>	<i>ləvji</i>	‘whirlpool’
<i>ŋavi</i>	<i>ŋəvi</i>	‘nest’
<i>tamk</i>	<i>təmk</i>	‘hand’
<i>vav-</i>	<i>vəv-</i>	‘crush sth, bite sb’

Another phonological feature, which distinguishes the Amur variety and to a less degree the West Sakhalin variety from the other Nivkh idioms, is the loss of the voiced fricatives *ɣ* and *ʁ*, as well as the trill *r*, in postvocalic position before a consonant. The loss of fricatives is typically compensated in the corresponding words by lengthening of preceding vowel: *haks* > *ha:s* ‘clothes’, *ŋəys* > *ŋə:s* ‘teeth’, *uys* > *u:s* ‘button’. Although historically there was no contrast between long and short vowels in Nivkh, the long vowels *a:*, *u:*, *i:*, and *o:* may now, due to this compensatory lengthening, contrast phonemically with the short vowels *a*, *u*, *i*, and *o*, respectively, in the Amur and West Sakhalin varieties, as in the following minimal pairs: *ayri* > *a:ri* ‘spittle’ vs. *ari* ‘northern wind’, *oyr* > *o:r* ‘salmon’s colon’ vs. *or* ‘part of clothes’, *t^hayr* > *t^ha:r* ‘chipmunk’ vs. *t^har* ‘water space near the shore’. This is not typical of the other varieties, including the North Sakhalin one.

Due to the general diachronic process of nasal loss, the non-stable nasals *n* and *ŋ* have disappeared in the final and medial segments of some words and morphemes. This process has largely affected the Amur and West Sakhalin varieties, and, to a certain degree, the North Sakhalin variety. In the other Sakhalin varieties, the nasals have been retained, cf. ES *k^huvaŋ* > A *k^huva* ‘thread’, ES *murŋ* > A *mur* ‘cow’, ES *ŋirŋ* > A *ŋir* ‘cup, dish’. In some cases, the loss of final *ŋ* was accompanied by the creation of word-final clusters and resulted in the devoicing of final fricatives cf. **t^hoyəzəŋ* > ES *t^hoyzŋ* > A *t^hoyz* ‘cone, nut’.

The final nasal *n* has been also deleted in bound morphemes. This process touched upon the Amur and West Sakhalin varieties, but it did not influence the North Sakhalin and other Sakhalin varieties. The affected morphemes include the plural suffix *-Kun* > *-Ku*, the singular comitative suffix *-Kin* > *-Ke*, and the plural comitative suffix *-Kon* >

-*Ko*, cf. ES *azmc-yun* – NS *utkun-gun* – A/WS *utku-gu*, all meaning ‘men’. Note that the noun ‘man’ has similar forms in the North Sakhalin (*utkun*) and in the Amur and West Sakhalin (*utku*) varieties, whereas in the East Sakhalin variety another lexeme *azmc* is used. On the other hand, in the North Sakhalin variety, the shape of the plural suffix *-Kun*, which retains the final nasal, coincides with the one used in the Central Sakhalin and East Sakhalin varieties. The North Sakhalin variety, therefore, displays a mixed behaviour, which will be further confirmed by other facts.

Other historical phonological processes include spirantization of final *ř* in the Amur and West Sakhalin varieties, de-rhotacization of initial *ř* and the devoicing of plosives in the North Sakhalin varieties, the voicing of fricatives in intervocalic position in all varieties except the Central and South Sakhalin ones, and many others.

With respect to nominal and verbal morphology, all Nivkh varieties behave basically in a similar way, though in each area some differences can be found. Thus, several distinct forms can be found in the set of personal pronouns, most obviously in the third person singular and plural, see Table 3.

Table 3. Personal pronouns

	ES / CS / SS	NS	WS	A
1sg	<i>ji</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>ji</i>
1du	<i>meŋ</i>	<i>memak</i>	<i>meki, meke</i>	<i>megi, mege</i>
1pl inclusive	<i>mirn, miřn, min</i>	<i>mer, mir</i>	<i>mer, mir</i>	<i>mer, mir</i>
1pl exclusive	<i>jin</i>	<i>jaŋ</i>	<i>jaŋ</i>	<i>jaŋ</i>
2sg	<i>c^hi</i>	<i>c^hi</i>	<i>c^hi</i>	<i>c^hi</i>
2pl	<i>c^hin</i>	<i>c^hin</i>	<i>c^haŋ</i>	<i>c^haŋ</i>
3sg	<i>jaŋ</i>	<i>i, jaŋ</i>	<i>if</i>	<i>if</i>
3pl	<i>iřn, in</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>imŋ</i>	<i>imŋ, imx, ivŋ</i>

An interesting example is represented by the qualitative demonstrative pronouns in the Table 4, which besides lexical differences also demonstrate several diachronic phonological processes. All pronouns in question are historically nominalizations which are derived from three different sets of demonstrative roots. The final segments of the pronouns demonstrate the evolution of the shape of the nominalizer, which is synchronically also used as the marker of indicative verb forms. The protoform of this suffix was probably **nti*⁴. In the Amur and West Sakhalin varieties the plosive has, first, undergone palatalization **nti* > **nci*. Then, the final vowel *i* was lost, the plosive became voiced in the post-nasal context, after which the nasal was elided: **nci* > **j*. This suffix was not affected by palatalization in the other Sakhalin varieties, including the North

⁴ The nasal *n* can alternatively be seen as a stem-final element.

Sakhalin one, but it has also lost the final vowel *i*: **nti* > **nt*. Under the influence of the nasal *n*, the plosive has been voiced only in the East Sakhalin variety **nt* > **nd*, after which the nasal was elided **nd* > *d*. The plosive remained unvoiced in the other varieties, where the nominalizer has the form *nt*. In the North Sakhalin variety there is a variation in the use of the nasal *n*, which is lost in the speech of some speakers.

Table 4. Qualitative demonstrative pronouns

CS	ES	NS	A/WS	
<i>təmjint</i>	<i>təmjid</i>	<i>tapra(n)t</i>	<i>тоҕај</i>	‘be like this’
<i>həmjint</i>	<i>həmjid</i>	<i>hapra(n)t</i>	<i>һоҕај</i>	‘be like that’

There is also a whole range of syntactic differences between the different varieties, which can best be illustrated with the example of standard negative constructions. In the Central Sakhalin and East Sakhalin varieties, the basic negative synthetic forms are derived by compounding two verbal elements. The resulting complex verb behaves like a regular verb and may undergo subsequent inflection. The first element is the nominalized form of the negated lexical verb, which historically ends in the nominalizer *-ŋ*. According to the general tendency described above, this non-stable nasal has been lost in the East Sakhalin variety but has been preserved in the Central Sakhalin variety. The nasal (either retained or lost) determines the quality of the initial consonant of the following verbal element, namely, the root of the negative verb *ɤavr-* ‘not exist’. The bound form of this verb, which is used in the synthetic form, has the shape *-qavr-* in the Central Sakhalin variety and *-gavr-* in the East Sakhalin variety, cf. CS *poci-ŋ-qavr-nt* <be_alike-NMLZ-NEG-IND> and ES *poci-gavr-d* <be_alike-NEG-IND> ‘sb/sth does not look like sb/sth’ and example (1):

- (1) ES *tʰlaŋi* *murŋ + boci-gavr-d*
 reindeer horse + be_alike-NEG-IND
 ‘Reindeer does not look like a horse.’

In the Amur and West Sakhalin varieties, standard negation is typically expressed by an analytical construction which comprises a synchronically zero-nominalized lexical verb, which historically ended in a nasal and is marked by the dative suffix *-Toχ*⁵. Morphophonological rules define *-doχ* as the correct allomorph in this context. The resulting form is immediately followed by the negative verb *qʰaw-* ‘not exist’, cf. example (2):

⁵ In the speech of modern speakers this suffix is pronounced as *-To* or even *-Ta*.

- (2) A *cʰolʲi* *mur + ʲala-doχ* *qʰaw-d*
 reindeer horse + be_alike-DAT NEG-IND
 ‘Reindeer does not look like a horse.’

As for the North Sakhalin variety, interestingly, it makes use of the Central Sakhalin and East Sakhalin synthetic construction but fills it with Amur/West Sakhalin lexicon, cf. example (3). This is in line with the morphological behaviour of the North Sakhalin variety and gives one more reason to consider it as a mixed idiom⁶.

- (3) NS *cʰolʲi* *mur + ʲala-qavř-t*
 reindeer horse + be_alike-NEG-IND
 ‘Reindeer does not look like a horse.’

According to the classification proposed by Leopold von Schrenck (1883), the Nivkh language belongs to the category of “Paleoasiatic” languages, within which it is today usually classified as an isolate. However, as has been shown in the present paper, the language is actually characterized by rather strong internal variation and represents a linguistic continuum that can be subdivided into two groups. Basing on lexical and other linguistic evidence, these groups can be treated as two separate languages: (i) Nivkh (proper) which includes the Amur, West Sakhalin, and North Sakhalin varieties, and (ii) Nivhng, which can be divided into the East Sakhalin, Central Sakhalin and South Sakhalin varieties (Gruzdeva & Janhunen 2020: 2). The underlying small family has been called “Amuric” in (Janhunen 1996: 73–74), and this term is gradually becoming established in language taxonomy.

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⁶ More information on this variety can be found in (Panfilov 1968, Kreinovich 1980).

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