



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	The Power of Ancestral Language : Exploring Language, Trauma and Empowerment in the Ainu Context [an abstract of dissertation and a summary of dissertation review]
Author(s)	Tsahelnik, Tatsiana
Degree Grantor	北海道大学
Degree Name	博士(教育学)
Dissertation Number	甲第16314号
Issue Date	2025-03-25
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/95444
Rights(URL)	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Type	doctoral thesis
File Information	TSAHELNIK_Tatsiana_review.pdf, 審査の要旨



学位論文審査の要旨

博士の専攻分野の名称：博士（教育学） 氏名： Tatsiana Tsagelnik

主査 教 授 Jeffry Gayman

審査委員 副査 准教授 伊藤 崇

副査 教 授 Svetlana Paichadze（メディア・コミュニケーション研究院）

副査 教 授 Patrick Heinrich（ベネチア大学）

学位論文題名

The Power of Ancestral Language:

Exploring Language, Trauma and Empowerment in the Ainu Context

（先祖の言語の力

ーアイヌの文脈における言語、トラウマ、エンパワーメントの探求ー）

Academic work in the field of Ainu Studies has tended to be limited to such disciplines as history, archaeology and museum studies, which rely upon secondary sources for their data. One reason for this is a barrier existing between the Ainu people and Wajin settlers due to an unreconciled history of colonization, alongside a history of exploitative research by Wajin researchers “on” the Ainu that sometimes supported arguments for Wajin racial superiority. This history makes fieldwork in Ainu communities difficult if not impossible for people of Wajin ethnicity.

Meanwhile, as of 2009, the Ainu language has been classified as “severely endangered”, by the United Nations Education Society and Culture Organization, meaning that the youngest speakers are in the great-grandparent’s generation. Without immediate intense and concerted intervention to raise new generations of speakers, the Ainu language stands in danger of never being revived. Against this background, this dissertation examines the potential for empowerment of Ainu language speakers, approaching the topic through collaborative action research on Ainu language reclamation carried out together with Ainu families by the author, herself a speaker of an endangered, minoritized language, Belarusian, spouse to an Ainu man and mother of an Ainu child.

After an overview of the situation, an explanation of the theory and the author’s own autobiographic account in Chapters One~Three, Chapter Four of the dissertation explains in depth various reasons for the historical decline in vitality of the Ainu language, including discriminatory assimilation policies, poverty as a result of colonization, marginalization and devaluation of Ainu language and culture, and continuing structural discrimination. Chapter Five portrays how this has lead to a situation of “colonial trauma” amongst the Ainu people in regard to their feelings on the daily practice of their language and culture.

The dissertation problematizes the fact that, despite grassroots efforts by Ainu language activists, policy support for the Ainu language remains bounded within a “folklorist” discourse which treats the Ainu language only as one component of Ainu “culture”, while disregarding continuing conditions of marginalization and discrimination that prevent Ainu people from engaging with their ancestral heritage. While admitting the importance of contributions by non-Ainu linguists, the dissertation argues the need for “safe spaces” in which the Ainu can freely discuss their concerns with one another while engaging in speaking their language and practicing their culture.

Simultaneously, the author calls into question current top-down, state-led measures that do not take into account the lessons from language revitalization efforts in other places in the world, which point to the family as the only realistic possible medium of language revitalization. She argues further that in the current case of the Ainu language it is the motivation and efforts of the “middle-generation”, mothers and fathers such as the author and her research collaborators, that will decide the fate of the vitality of the Ainu language.

Against the above background, this dissertation can be praised in regard to the following points. Firstly, it is grounded in the author’s own experiences and language activism as a speaker of an endangered language, Belarusian, and as spouse to an Ainu man and mother to a child of Belarusian and Ainu descent. The author has single-handedly raised her nine-year-old daughter to be a fluent speaker of Belarusian, who is “proud of her identity as Belarussian and Ainu”. Framed against this background, the dissertation constitutes a broad sociolinguistic comparison, from historical and personal angles, of the language situation of two endangered colonized languages, Belarussian and Ainu.

Secondly, the research is grounded in the rapport developed over eleven years of ethnographic fieldwork with the Ainu people, stretching from the author’s Master’s Thesis research in the Kanto region beginning in 2014 to the present. Moreover, from 2018, the author has joined forces with three other Ainu families from the Tokapci region of Hokkaido from which her husband hails, to create and engage in the action-research Tokapci Itak Parent-Child Study Group, qualitative interviews with twelve members of which constitute the core of the primary data for the dissertation. In this way, the research has been carefully designed, through adopting a personalized and collaborative approach to working with Ainu families, to overcome the researcher-subject dichotomy which has plagued research on Indigenous peoples in general, and the Ainu in particular.

Thirdly, the dissertation seeks to counterbalance the historic and ongoing harmful effects of colonization of the Ainu people by introducing a research perspective which will allow for the healing and empowerment of Ainu individuals and communities, that of colonial trauma, making it the first dissertation on Ainu in history to incorporate this notion. Chapter Two conducts an in-depth review of the English-language literature on this theory, importantly distinguishing it from the similar notion of historical trauma, before going on to investigate the psychological and physical manifestations of this

phenomena in the Ainu case in Chapter Six.

Fourthly, the dissertation provides important new theoretical frameworks to the field of Ainu language research that counterbalance the current Japanese discursal phenomenon of folklorization, or, treating of the Ainu language only as a manifestation of culture devoid of sociopolitical or economic components, by adopting a decolonizing research methodology. In other words, the text centers narratives of Ainu research collaborators, the Ainu language is framed as an “ancestral language” rather than “heritage language”, and the discourses and approaches of language revitalization that characterize current Ainu policy measures are replaced by the notion of Ainu language reclamation which encompasses power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous society and places Indigenous speakers at the center of language policy planning.

Fifthly, the thesis succeeds in demonstrating through interview quotes and ethnographic description, how the Ainu language indeed empowers its Ainu speakers, functioning, as the title indicates, as their ancestral language. This angle is one which distinguishes this work from other heritage language research in the country of Japan and will be of interest to international researchers. For the above reasons, the committee considers that it will be important that this work is translated into and published in Japanese in the near future.

The committee considers that the dissertation’s limitation is the degree to which the notion of historical trauma has been examined in the Ainu context. Additionally, the dissertation’s impact could be deepened by more thorough ethnographic description and analysis of the author’s field data. Nonetheless, as the first ethnographic work to focus on an Ainu language movement, the first to introduce the notion of colonial trauma to the Ainu case, and the first to document contemporary examples of Ainu empowerment via the Ainu language, this work has groundbreaking historical value. The committee thereby deems the author worthy of conferral of the Doctorate of Philosophy in Education from the Graduate School of Education, Hokkaido University.