

# Planning for Failure: The Niche of Standard Chukchi

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This paper examines the effects of language standardization and orthography design on the Chukchi linguistic ecology. The process of standardisation has not taken into consideration the gender-based sociolects of colloquial Chukchi and is based on a grammatical description which does not reflect actual Chukchi use; as a result standard Chukchi has not gained a place in the Chukchi language ecology. The Cyrillic orthography developed for Chukchi is also problematic as it is based on features of Russian phonology, rather than on Chukchi itself: this has meant that a knowledge of written Chukchi is dependent on a knowledge of the principles of Russian orthography. The aspects of language planning have had a large impact on the pre-existing Chukchi language ecology which has contributed to the obsolescence of the colloquial language.

## Introduction

The Chukchi language, the speakers of which are situated on the north-eastern tip of the Eurasian continent, is one of the more populous of the indigenous languages of the Russian Far North. However, like most other minority languages in this area, the prospects for Chukchi are bleak. In the last two or three generations the language has undergone a catastrophic break in continuity of acquisition, so that while Chukchi speakers are plentiful amongst ethnic Chukchis born before the 1960s, amongst Chukchis born from the 1970s any appreciable level of native language competence is rare. The reasons for the break in the chain of acquisition are complex, but closely linked to cultural dislocation caused by the radical transition from independent nomadic lifestyles to sedentary lifestyles within Soviet state structures over this period. There are a number of general works pertaining to language shift amongst Russian minority languages (Fishman, 1985; Kibrik, 1991; Vakhtin, 1992, 1993); and while there is a great deal more to be understood about the issue, this paper has the more modest aim of examining the effects of just one element of language policy – language standardisation and orthography design, on Chukchi linguistic ecology. This case study will show how the process of standardising grammar and orthography without reference to the linguistic ecology in which Chukchi is located has contributed to the failure of standardised Chukchi to become a viable language, and has contributed to the obsolescence of the colloquial language.

## Historical Sketch

The province of Chukotka is geographically the most isolated province of the Russian Federation. As an ethnos, Chukchis emerged in their current form only four or five hundred years ago, when their ancestors exchanged a hunter-gath-

erer mode of subsistence for nomadic reindeer herding. From the seventeenth century, they rapidly expanded their territory to approximately the current boundaries of Chukotka (Dikov, 1989). Contact with Europeans was minimal until the late nineteenth century, when Russian, Japanese and American trade and whaling stations were established in the area. However, traditional nomadic life continued substantially unchanged until well into the twentieth century. Soviet power became effective relatively late in Chukotka (Forsyth, 1992), and it was only the policies of collectivisation which forced the settlement of the nomadic population and the end of the family-based herding.

From the early years of the Soviet period, roving schools visited the herders' encampments, but it is unclear how widespread this was. The Lenin Library in Moscow preserves Chukchi language publications on public education topics from this time, including pamphlets about tuberculosis and other health issues. During the early 1930s, Latinized writing systems were devised for many languages of the Soviet Union, including Chukchi, but in 1937 these were all changed to Cyrillic-based systems and many of the creators of the Latinized alphabet were arrested as enemies of the people (Vakhtin, 1992). This changeover reflected a general change in Soviet policy towards minorities; internationalism was abandoned and more-or-less overt campaigns of Russification began.<sup>2</sup> Soviet industrial expansion into Chukotka intensified in the years prior to the Second World War, and virtually all reindeer herding was concentrated in collective and state farms.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, government policy concentrated on building a unified Soviet culture, at the expense of minority languages and cultures (Kibrik, 1991). School was taught for the first three years in Chukchi, after which schooling was in Russian. An institute was set up in Leningrad at which indigenous students could get specialised postgraduate degrees in a number of professions. Courses were (and still are) being taught about Chukchi, but there were never any courses which actually used Chukchi as a medium of instruction. Chukchi was used for communicative purposes in education during the first three classes of school, where it was used as a means of teaching Russian. It was expected that by the end of those three years students would already know enough Russian to be able to carry on the rest of their education.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this period, and until *perestroika*, Soviet minority language policy in Chukotka seemed confused and contradictory. Chukchi continued to be given a place in the school curriculum, and in Leningrad the Institute of the North was expanded. There were several hours each week of Chukchi language radio and television. Chukchi language publications included newspapers, books (both originals by Chukchi authors and translations) as well as informational materials (health manuals, political tracts and speeches). Many official buildings carried signs in both Russian and Chukchi.

At the same time, indigenous children were taken from their parents to live in boarding schools (*internaty*). This was overtly done so that children could live in town and attend school while their parents worked the distant herds; however there were cases where children had to walk past their parents' home to get from the boarding house to the classroom. In the boarding schools it was forbidden to speak Chukchi. Chukchi food and clothing was also banned. After their school years, many children had lost active command of their native language, and

would answer their parents' Chukchi with Russian. The current generation of Chukchi children (the children of people who had boarding school education) are mostly monolingual Russian speakers. Chukchi has ceased to be used as a means of communication in schools at any level, although in most places it continues as a subject taught through the medium of Russian for a few hours per week. These classes are in the form of introductory level, second-language teaching, and the rare child coming to school already knowing some Chukchi language is taught together with those beginning from zero.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed closely by the economic collapse of the province of Chukotka. The state farms, which were the economic mainstay of Chukchi villages were 'privatised', most of their assets disappeared and many have ceased to function at all. Chukchis are far from being a majority in the province, although proportionally their share of the population is increasing due to the accelerating out-migration of non-indigenous people. Very little institutional support for the Chukchi language exists, and what remains is most often a much reduced legacy of former times. The Chukchi language newspaper was closed down in 1995, and now exists as an occasional insert in the provincial Russian language newspaper. Two small but committed teams battle repeated threats of closure to produce weekly programmes in Chukchi for the local television and radio stations. The teachers' institute still requires its graduates to do a course on Chukchi. These media and education professionals are the only people who use standard Chukchi on a regular basis, although, like other Chukchis, they speak Russian to their children. A rare positive development has occurred in the Research Centre 'Chukotka', which is mostly involved in geological and agricultural research, but which from 1994 has begun employing indigenous scholars to carry on native language and culture related research.

### Chukchi Language Standardization

The standardisation of Chukchi is the result of Soviet-era language planning. The Chukchi standard variety is primarily derived from a form of northern Chukchi, although the standard variety has significant points of difference from all colloquial varieties, and, as will be discussed in the following sections, has not been adopted by any speech community as a language of wider communication. In other words, standard Chukchi has not found a place in the local language ecology. The failure of standard Chukchi appears to be, at least in part, the result of the planning process itself.

One significant issue for standard Chukchi is that the variety does not take into consideration the gender-based sociolects which are a central feature of all other Chukchi varieties. In Chukchi there is an important linguistic distinction between the variety of the language spoken by women and the variety spoken by men. These varieties are mutually intelligible, but the correspondences between some word forms are synchronically unpredictable. There are three 'cognate sets' involving two phonemes:

- (1) men's /r/ :: women's /r/, e.g. *retem* :: *retem* 'roof'
- (2) men's /r/ :: women's /c/, e.g. *reqokalyən* :: *ceqokalyən* 'polar fox'
- (3) men's /č/ :: women's /c/, e.g. *čeyəl* :: *ceyəl* 'box'

When hearing a word for the first time from a male speaker, it is impossible to know whether the man's /r/ will correspond to a woman's /r/ or a woman's /c/. Another difference is that where men pronounce [č], women pronounce [c]. Likewise, from a female speaker it cannot be predicted whether a woman's /c/ will be /r/ or /č/ in the men's variety. These correspondences have to be learned. The source of the phonological differences in men's and women's Chukchi is examined in Dunn (2000). For reasons never overtly addressed, during the standardisation of Chukchi it was decided that the standard language would be based entirely on the men's language. This decision separated standard Chukchi from the social environment in which Chukchi had traditionally been used. Although it is not commonly recognised, this policy was extremely detrimental to the success of the standard, as will be discussed later.

A second issue for standard Chukchi is the nature of the standard grammar itself. Although it is apparently not official Chukchi language policy, the de facto standard grammar of Chukchi is codified in Skorik (1961–1977). This grammar is highly respected, to the extent that it is treated as a normative-prescriptive grammar for educational purposes. As a work of grammatical description it is quite faulty; it is organised by Indo-European linguistic categories, it over-generalises some phenomena and ignores others (see Dunn, 1999: 19–20). The result is that the prescribed standard grammar of Chukchi bears little relationship to the language as it is used. However, this grammar has taken on the aura of authority which written grammars have over spoken usage, and, as a result, many educated Chukchi speakers are of the opinion that their own colloquial Chukchi is incorrect, and proper Chukchi is only to be found in Skorik's grammar. This shows the ecological impact that the production of a standard grammar can have on people's perceptions of their own variety of the language (cf. Liddicoat, this volume). Colloquial varieties become marginalised, and even where the standard grammar is inaccurate, the inconsistencies between the standard and actual use are viewed as problems of use, not problems of the grammar. A flawed published grammar can therefore lead to rejection of existing spoken grammatical language rather than rejection of flawed written rules.

The process of standardisation has had a major impact: a Chukchi variety has been developed which does not reflect the actual use of Chukchi in its speech community in terms of the social contexts of use or of the actual syntactic features of the language. Colloquial Chukchi, therefore, has no place in the officially prescribed language ecology, while at the same time, standard Chukchi is isolated from the ecology in which other Chukchi varieties are used.

### Orthography

The development of a standardised orthography for Chukchi likewise represents language planning without consideration of the ecology of the variety being planned. The current Chukchi orthography is a Cyrillic system, which dates back to the late 1930s when the previous Latin system was abolished. The Cyrillic system is heavily based on Russian orthographic principles, and so the following discussion will also have to address aspects of Russian phonology and its written representation.<sup>4</sup>

The Chukchi consonant inventory is as follows:

stop	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>q</i>
nasal	<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ŋ</i>	
approximant	<i>w</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>ɣ</i>
fricative/affricate		<i>č/c</i>	<i>ʧ</i>	

There is also a glottal stop, which is a syllable prosody; the syllable in Chukchi has a (C)V(C) structure, but glottal stops do not count as Cs, and are inserted additionally before the vowel. Thus, the maximum expansion of a syllable is CʔVC.

The following Chukchi consonants have a one-to-one correspondence with graphemes; upper and lower case letters exist, but (as in Cyrillic) differ only in size. Russian phonemes are also given for comparison.

Chukchi Phoneme	Grapheme	(Russian Phoneme)
/p/	П	/p/
/t/	Т	/t/
/k/	К	/k/
/q/	К'	no equivalent
/m/	М	/m/
/n/	Н	/n/
/ŋ/	Н'	no equivalent
/ʧ/	Ч	/ʧ/
/w/	В	/v/
/r/	Р	/r/
/ɣ/	Г	/g/

The graphemes К' and Н' are more properly written with the special characters К<sub>2</sub> and Н<sub>2</sub>, but this poses typographical problems and is rarely used in newer texts.

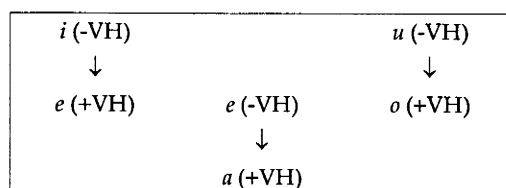
The standard dialect allomorphs of the phoneme /č/ are written separately:

Chukchi	Grapheme	(Russian)
/č/	С (before К')	/s/
	Ч (elsewhere)	/č/

Chukchi has six phonetic (or 'surface') vowels [i, e, a, o, u] and [ə]. Of these, the vowels [i, e, a, o, u] are realizations of the three underlying vowels plus a vowel harmony (VH) prosody. They are arranged into the following three pairs, with [e] appearing twice:

[i ~ e], [e ~ a], [u ~ o]

The higher members of these pairs (i.e. [i, e, u]) are neutral for vowel harmony, and could be considered the underlying vowels of the system. If any morpheme of the word has a non-neutral (or 'dominant') value for vowel harmony, then all vowels in the word are taken from the lower members of the pair, thus:



For example, when the stem *jara-* 'house' is combined with the inessive suffix *-cəku* the resulting word 'inside the house' is *jaracəko*, as the positive/dominant value for the vowel harmony prosody of the stem *jara-* causes the alternation of the harmonically neutral vowel *u* in the suffix *-cəku*. With very few exceptions, the vowel *ə* is epenthetic, generated by the syllabification process.

The vowel graphemes in the Cyrillic orthography represent the surface forms rather than the phonemes. At the same time, the orthography follows Russian spelling conventions, which increases to ten the number of symbols needed to represent these six phones. Only schwa and /i/ have a one-to-one relationship between phones and graphemes:

Chukchi	Grapheme	(Russian)
[ə]	Ы	/i/
[i]	И	/i/

The other four Chukchi vowels are represented by two graphemes each. This division of the phonemes into two series of graphemes represents the inclusion in Chukchi orthography of a feature of Russian phonology not found in Chukchi. Modern Russian has a series of palatal consonants which are written using the symbol for the corresponding non-palatal consonant, with difference between palatal and non-palatal consonants being indicated by the choice of the following vowel. For example /t/ + /a/ is written 'ТА', whereas /tʲ/ + /a/ is written 'ТЯ'.<sup>5</sup> While Chukchi does not have a contrasting series of palatal and non-palatal consonants, the same convention is used. In the standard orthography, the consonant Л is considered palatal, and all the others are non-palatal.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there is a redundant doubling of vowel symbols:

Chukchi	Grapheme	(Russian)
[a]	Я (after Л) А (elsewhere)	/a/
[e]	Е (after Л and Ч <sup>6</sup> ) Э (elsewhere)	/e/
[u]	Ю (after Л) У (elsewhere)	/u/
[o]	Ё (after Л) О (elsewhere)	/o/

The vowel symbols which in Russian follow palatal consonants are known as the 'jotated' vowels, as their second function is to represent /j/ + vowel sequences. These sequences occur word-initially, or following a consonant marked by a 'soft sign' Ь or 'hard sign' Ъ.<sup>7</sup> For example, non-palatal /t/ + /j/ + /a/ is written 'ТЪЯ', palatal /tʲ/ + /j/ + /a/ is written 'ТЪЯ'. This spelling rule has also been imported into the Chukchi orthography. As /i/ and /ə/ don't have corresponding jotated symbols, when a /j/ precedes these it is written using the Cyrillic character Й. Thus Chukchi has the following alternations in spelling:

Phoneme sequence	Orthography
# /j/ + /a/	Я
/t/ + /a/	ТА
/t/ + /j/ + /a/	ТЪЯ
/tʲ/ + /a/	ЛЯ
/tʲ/ + /j/ + /a/	ЛЪЯ
# /j/ + /i/	ЙИ
/t/ + /j/ + /i/	ТЙИ
/tʲ/ + /j/ + /i/	ЛЙИ

Lastly, the Chukchi glottal stop, which has no direct Russian counterpart, is written in a number of different ways. Word-initially it is written by an apostrophe following the next letter (in Chukchi phonotactics, always a vowel). After a consonant it is written using the 'soft sign' or 'hard sign' (for the so-called 'soft' and 'hard' consonants respectively) followed by the non-jotated vowel.

Chukchi	Orthography
# /ʔ/ + /a/	А'
/t/ + /ʔ/ + /a/	ТЪА
/tʲ/ + /ʔ/ + /a/	ЛЪА

Thus, the soft sign and hard sign each have two functions; preceding the jotated series of vowels they indicate jotation, and preceding the unjotated series they indicate glottalisation.

The result of importing Russian orthographic rules, which represent specifically Russian phonological features, into Chukchi, which does not have these features, creates an unnecessary complexity in the orthography. Like other aspects of the standardisation process, the development of a Cyrillic orthography over-complicates the actual situation in Chukchi in preference for a 'Russianising' approach to language planning.

In 1996, the Chukotka Education Department published a school textbook (Emel'janova & Nutekeu, 1996) which introduced a new typographic convention, using a grapheme Л̣ in place of Л for the phoneme /tʲ/. According to Chukchi teachers (Aleksandr Kerek, Elena Nutekeu p.c.) this replacement was made to aid students in differentiating Chukchi /tʲ/ from Russian /l/, /lʲ/.<sup>8</sup> The wholesale addition of a diacritic mark to the character Л is redundant within the orthographic system, and the motivation for this orthographic innovation is

apparently that children (whether ethnic Chukchi or not) are generally expected to enter classes without an appreciable level of Chukchi language ability. However, despite the apparent redundancy of this change, it may prove to be a move of considerable foresight. A special marking on the *JI* makes it possible to rationalise away the five redundant 'palatalising' vowel graphemes which are employed with *JI* because it has been regarded as a palatal consonant; if this was achieved, this would be a major break with the Slavic bias of the writing system, and would render the Chukchi orthography both simpler and more internally coherent. It is not clear whether the authors of this orthographic change have this in mind or not.

The Chukchi orthography is constructed to follow Russian spelling rules as closely as possible. The planning represents an imposition of the orthographic system of the dominant language on a subordinate language without reference to the orthographic needs of the subordinate language. As a result, the introduction of literacy into the Chukchi language ecology bears with it the strong imprint of the Russifying ideology of the Soviet government.

The introduction of a Russian-based orthography was done to aid Chukchis in learning Russian, which is a worthwhile goal in itself. However, the difficulty of matching a spelling system optimised for Russian to a language like Chukchi has resulted in an inversion of these desired aims. The Chukchi orthographic system is such that it is very difficult to master Chukchi literacy skills without already being literate in Russian. The orthographic variations are dependent on an understanding of Russian phonological processes which are foreign to Chukchi phonology. It is unheard of for a Chukchi to have higher levels of native language literacy than Russian literacy. The introduction of literacy into the Chukchi language ecology was done in such a way that the place of Chukchi within the ecology was weakened.<sup>9</sup> The nature of the orthographic system has meant that Chukchi literacy has become dependent on Russian literacy. Thus written Chukchi has no sustainable place within the new language ecology, except perhaps as a secondary literacy after literacy in the dominant language is established. This in turn reinforces the position of Russian in the current language ecology in which Chukchi is located.

### Standard Chukchi and Colloquial Chukchi

The only Chukchis who use standard Chukchi in their daily life are native language education and media professionals (who have tertiary degrees done in a Russian language medium). The 'Chukchi language professionals' are separated from the mainstream of the Chukchi community by very different educational and employment backgrounds, and their use of standard Chukchi only distances them further from the community. Most media workers and almost all Chukchi language teachers are women, and yet they are required to speak men's rather than women's language. Outside this small community of language professionals, women's language continues to be used by women and has been unaffected by the standard language's failure to incorporate it. Thus home language experience of and female speakers is inapplicable at school, and the Chukchi heard by children at school does not relate to female speech heard elsewhere. The current situation has the grim irony that shorter average life-spans

and higher rates of language shift among men has meant that women's Chukchi is overwhelmingly the most common variety of Chukchi spoken in the community.

In summary, the standard variety of Chukchi interferes with acquisition by children of the colloquial variety without having attained independent viability. The standard is non-viable because it does not have a defined place in the local language ecology. It does not have a sufficiently broad social role: it has never been adopted by Chukchis for any other functions apart from those directly under governmental supervision. Policymakers, in the push to support the standard, have promulgated a view of colloquial Chukchi as unsuitable for serious consideration as a language. Speakers of colloquial Chukchi who do not know the standard often accept this view, and prefer to leave Chukchi language teaching (of children or linguistic fieldworkers alike) to the professionals. To quote one elderly lady, 'Don't talk to us, we don't speak the language properly'.

### Conclusion and Prospect

Would Chukchi be disappearing anyway, even without the problematic issue of a standard language? Viewing the system ecologically, the question does not really make sense, since interacting elements of a complex system cannot be isolated in this way. It is difficult to imagine a vital, communicative approach to language education and a language policy supportive of the Chukchi language community while keeping all the other elements of Chukchis' post-colonial experience unchanged. The failure of the standard cannot be made entirely responsible for the current state of the Chukchi language – on the other hand, it is certainly implicated. The planning of the standard itself is a reflection of the Chukchi experience under the Soviet Union and the ways in which Chukchi culture and identity were treated by the central government.

Chukchi language planning in the future is another matter. While schooling may not always be highly relevant to attempts to reverse language shift (Fishman, 1991), a more enlightened approach to Chukchi language education could provide a seed for wider changes of Chukchi attitudes towards their mother tongue. The current political situation in Russia is such that the Russian majority, and particularly the leadership, are extremely suspicious of non-ethnically-Russian nationalism. Encouragement of awareness of and pride in ethnic identity – despite the social advantages for the members of minority ethnic groups – is seen as divisive, and essentially a negative phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Real and effective support of the Chukchi language will have to overcome these prejudices.

### Notes

1. Thanks to Angela Terrill and Tony Liddicoat for advice and comments during the preparation of this paper.
2. The legacy of these policies in the 1960s and 1970s included domestic living classes for Chukchi women, in which they were taught how to launder and iron bed-linen, make European clothing, and cook Russian food. In 1995 veterans of these classes related to the author how once a week they would be inspected, on which day all the women of the settlement would hide their fur clothing, get into cotton frocks and peasant-woman headscarves, make up beds with ironed sheets and blankets, and put potatoes on to boil.

3. Even during the years when education was notionally in Chukchi, academic achievement was apparently measured by Russian ability. Several of my Chukchi language consultants had to repeat one or more of these years of early schooling due to insufficient knowledge of Russian; at least in some of these cases the reason being that the teacher did not speak any Chukchi.
4. A considerable amount of this description of the orthography is adapted from Dunn (1999).
5. Word-final palatalisation is indicated by a 'silent letter' Ь, which is called the 'soft sign'.
6. This is also from Russian. The Russian phoneme represented by 'Ч' does not have a palatal-non-palatal alternation, and is written with back vowels from the set which does not indicate palatalisation, and with front vowels from the set which does.
7. The latter is another 'silent' letter, used in this context when the consonant is not palatal – the 'soft sign' is used with palatal consonants.
8. Note that while it was considered necessary to take these steps to rectify the pronunciation of /ʃ/, no similar measures were taken to draw attention to the mismatch between Russian and Chukchi pronunciation of the Cyrillic Г (Russian /g/, Chukchi /ɣ/) or Ъ (Russian /i/, Chukchi /ə/).
9. Mühlhäusler (1996a; this volume) has also observed that the introduction of literacy can have a negative impact on language maintenance, but the cases he examines in the Pacific seem to result from a different set of processes.
10. Note that language is not always inseparable from ethnic identity (see e.g. Dimmendaal, 1989). Woodbury (1998) documents a radical language shift over a background of considerable cultural continuity. With respect to the desirability of preserving indigenous languages and cultures for wider Russian society, the (typically ecological) rhetoric of 'strength through diversity' is not acknowledged as applicable to the social domain. This is a highly ideological point, and the superiority of one point of view over another has not been (and perhaps cannot be) conclusively proven.

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