NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

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BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: LINGUISTICS
WP BRP 55/LNG/2017

This Working Paper is an output of a research project implemented at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.

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The paper describes the ongoing research project on Ninilchik Russian as a unique variety of the Russian language. We believe it is a remnant of Alaskan Russian – a language that emerged at the end of the 18th century as a result of Russian colonial presence in Alaska and served as a means of communication in Russian America until the end of the Russian period in 1867. By that time Alaskan Russian became the native language for the people of mixed Russian/Native origin residing in various parts of Alaska. Ninilchik was one such place and, due to many factors combined, became a major location where this linguistic variety kept developing and serving as a means of communication, creating and maintaining cultural identity, and holding together the community of brave, persistent, and self-sustained people. Thanks to the people of Ninilchik, Alaskan Russian is still alive in the 21st century. The paper deals with two aspects of this multifaceted linguistic phenomenon. One is a theoretical problem of the "archaeological approach" to the language data which reflects a rather short but diverse history of Alaskan Russian and involves contact studies. Another is the Ninilchik Russian Dictionary project that allows to record both items and concepts, s well as the sociocultural narratives together making up the special story of the linguistic and cultural community.

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Alaskan Russian, Russian cultural and linguistic influence, language contact, community oriented dictionary

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[3] Research underlying this paper was supported by Russian Science Foundation grant # 17-18-01649. The article was prepared within the framework of the Academic Fund Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2017 (grant № 117-02-0011) and by the Russian Academic Excellence Project "5-100".

Introduction

Ninilchik is just one of the places where Russian language has been spoken in Alaska. Besides geographical variation, the following kinds of linguistic Russian presence are visible in modern Alaska. They can be identified as the following forms and formats.

Influence related to the Russian American period:

A variety of the Russian language formed during the Russian American period, and speakers of Alaskan Russian remain in some pockets in Alaska, most notably in the village of Ninilchik. Other places include Kodiak Island and, until recently, Nanwalek and Port Graham.

Native Alaskan languages, including Aleut, Eskimo, Athabaskan, and Tlingit, have many hundreds of Russian borrowings (Krauss 1996; Kibrik 2008). Numerous place names in Alaska, such as Baranof Island, the village of Ouzinkie in the Kodiak area, or the village Nikolski in the Aleutians, are Russian.

It is highly probable that speakers of Dena'ina commonly knew Russian due to contacts with Russian speakers in the Kenai area. (The word for Dena'ina people in Ninilchik Russian is *k'ináytsi*.)

Not exactly Russian, but the Russian variant of Old Church Slavonic is used in liturgy in many orthodox parishes in Alaska. Of particular interest is the fact that Native people in some places memorize many Slavonic prayers and hymns and perform them on appropriate occasions, even though they never understood Slavonic.

Influence unrelated to the period of Russian America:

During the 1960s and 1970s a significant immigration of Russian-speaking Old Believers came into Alaska, arriving via Oregon but stemming originally from Old Believer groups in the Russian Far East and in Turkey. The Old Believers' largest village in Alaska is Nikolaevsk on the Kenai Peninsula.

Alaska also is home to a large number of recent Russian-speaking immigrants who arrived from various places in Russia during the last couple of decades.

This entire array of linguistic Russian presence in Alaska is interesting and worth close examination. This paper, however, concentrates on the first aspect – the Alaskan Russian, as spoken by the people of the village of Ninilchik on the Kenai Peninsula.

"Archaeological approach" in the studies of Alaskan Russian

Any speaker of modern Russian who happens to learn about the language spoken in Ninilchik will ask, "How different is this language variety from the so-called 'standard Russian'?" The next question will logically be, "Why so? Is it a result of attrition or language contact, and if this contact led to creolization, when and how did it happen?" It is obvious that in Russian colonial times some forms of Russian were spoken in every place where Russian presence was noticeable. What is not obvious and demands special research is proving that at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century there existed a *lingua franca* which emerged as a result of contact between Russian and the indigenous languages of Alaska. We believe that this *lingua franca* was a specific variety of the Russian language of that time. We, at the beginning of the 21st century, can only glimpse that variety by the 'iceberg tip' in the form of the speech of representatives of the Ninilchik community. This situation is like what archaeologists face when they reconstruct a culture from the presently available remnants. Attribution in time plays a crucial role in this process.

To claim that phenomenon 'P' existed at time 'T' we need positive evidence of that.

Often 'P' could have existed before 'T,' but if there is no positive evidence, 'P' should not be attributed to a time earlier than 'T.' Language is a constantly changing phenomenon. An archaeological approach to language investigation pays special attention to attributing changes to a certain period in the life of the language. This, necessarily, involves questions of what caused the change, whether it was gradual or rather abrupt. The field of contact linguistics deals with such questions very cautiously.

> "It has often been said that the types of change observable in an obsolescent language do not differ from those occurring in other kinds of contact settings. … Both language contact and language obsolescence may promote structural changes, but specific criteria have not yet been established to distinguish between changes that can be seen as signs of obsolescence in process and changes that might occur under language contact or multilingual settings. … The view that contact-induced changes and the consequences of language decay have to be distinguished is relatively unusual among specialists in the field" (Chamoreau, Léglise 2012:13).

We believe that differences between these two situations may, in some cases, be detected through fine-grained "archaeological" work. We also believe that postulating the existence of Alaskan Russian using the evidence from Ninilchik Russian and other available resources demands this kind of work.

One of the first steps in this work is building a timeline for the changes that took place and thus determining the stages/varieties of Alaskan (Ninilchik) Russian. This is represented in Table 1.

Table 1
Timeline for changes in Alaskan Russian (AR) and Ninilchik Russian (NR)

Beginning from:	Stage / variety	Processes
Mid 18th century	Common AR	Aleut-Russian bilingualism
Late 18th century	Alutiiq-influenced variety of AR	Alutiiq-Russian bilingualism
1840s	Established NR	Russian monolingualism
1920s	Endangered NR	Russian-English bilingualism
WWII	Obsolescent NR	Dominance of English, decay of NR

Thorough documentation of the Ninilchik Russian lexicon is our main tool for 'uncovering' Alaskan Russian.

Ninilchik Russian Dictionary Project

The dictionary (Bergelson et al. 2017) reflects various stages of our work on Ninilchik Russian and a variety of tasks we undertook. Of course, documenting Ninilchik Russian has always been our main priority. Compiling a noun dictionary serves this purpose best. Nouns designate objects, concepts, and artifacts that make up the linguistic universe of people speaking this language. Thus our primary targets were nouns.

Later, with more word forms filling up the dictionary, the project expanded, especially when we started adding verbs that have a rather complicated system of inflectional categories in Russian. The peculiarities of the Ninilchik/Alaskan Russian grammar drew our attention. These include individual differences characteristic of an isolated language variety at the brink of extinction and other broader issues of contact linguistics.

The Ninilchik Russian Dictionary (NRD) project began in 1997 when the activists of the Ninilchik community invited the authors to help document their native language and thus preserve it for the succeeding generations. That work built upon prior linguistic studies by the Irish linguist Conor Daly (Daly, 1986), as well as genealogical research by Wayne Leman, the American linguist, a descendant of Ninilchik families (Leman 1994). We took as our starting point the dictionary of Dena'ina James Kari put together (Kari 2007). Later, in 2008-2009, Leman joined the Bergelson

and Kibrik dictionary project. We did three field trips in 2012, 2014, and 2017. Marina Raskladkina also took part, and we collected much additional information.

From the very beginning, this project aimed to document as much as possible the unique linguistic and cultural heritage of Ninilchik in a form consistent with general principles of academic work, basic linguistic and lexicographic conventions, and traditions of Russian lexicography. At the same time we strived to make the dictionary available to the Ninilchik people, and hope they will use this product as a valuable resource.

The end result of our ongoing project will be a multimedia product with three parts: a dictionary *per se*, a grammar sketch, and a cultural commentary. So far we have finished the paper variant of the dictionary that will be further supplemented with audio illustrations (Bergelson et al. 2017).

Using the Dictionary

To render the Ninilchik Russian sounds we had to choose between using the official Continental Russian Cyrillic writing system and some kind of transcription based on the Roman alphabet. The people of Ninilchik, the most important readership of the dictionary, are mostly unfamiliar with Cyrillic and standard Russian. These descendants of Ninilchik Russian speakers are Americans who speak English and write using the Roman letters. That is why we developed a practical Roman-based orthography adequately representing Ninilchik Russian sounds and pronunciation. That system was previously described in our publications (Bergelson, Kibrik 2010; Bergelson, Kibrik 2013). Most of the letters (and letter combinations) used in this transcription represent sounds similar to the corresponding English sounds. In, for example, the Ninilchik Russian word *chem* (which means 'with what') the first sound is almost the same as in the English word *chair*, the second as in *bed*, and the third as in *map*.

But there are a few important differences.

Most consonants in Ninilchik Russian and in Continental Russian exist in two variants: regular (or "hard") and palatalized ("soft"). The soft consonants are marked by an apostrophe ('), for example *n'et* 'no' or *p'at'* 'five.' For an American ear it sounds as if the consonant were followed by a [y] sound. The sounds [ts], [ch], [sh], [zh] (like the 's' in *measure*), and [y] don't have soft variants.

Continental Russian and Ninilchik Russian vowels differ from the way they are pronounced in English. We give examples from Ninilchik Russian where the pronunciation is the least different:

- [a] under stress is pronounced somewhere in between the vowel in *father*, and in *mother*. Without stress it resembles the first and the last vowels in *American*;
- [e] resembles the sound in *let*;
- [i] resembles *beet* or *bit* depending on stress;
- [o] – *daughter*;
- [u] – is somewhere between *rude* and *book*
- [o] and [e] sounds only occur under stress.

The Dictionary includes lexical entries of five types:

- nouns (*n*), including proper names (*pn*)
- verbs of the imperfective and perfective aspects (*v ipfv, v pfv*),
- adjectives/participles, numerals, and adverbs (*adj, num, adv*),
- prepositions, conjunctions, particles (*prep, conj, prt*),
- exclamations, discourse markers, set phrases, and expressions (*phr*).

The distinction between the perfective (*pfv*) and imperfective (*ipfv*) verbs is extremely important in Russian. It tells how an event was performed. Very roughly it corresponds to a completed event as opposed to simply describing an event, without focusing on its end or result. That is why we pay such attention to marking this distinction in the entries for the verbs included in the dictionary.

Each type of entry must include a set of fields in the dictionary database. At most, a dictionary entry may include fields such as sound file, part of speech, translation into English, literal meanings, examples, and their translations, pictures, cross-references, types of usage, etc. The cross-reference, or *See* field, gives readers an opportunity to check other words that are semantically interrelated. The field where phonetic variants are cited allows one to see words pronounced slightly differently by different speakers. Of course, the current paper version of the dictionary does not include sound files.

Guiding principles

In our work on the dictionary, our team (Mira Bergelson, Andrej Kibrik, Wayne Leman, and Marina Raskladkina) was guided by certain principles. We wanted to balance the following aspects, described below.

Lexicon~Grammar~Culture.

Language, as seen by modern linguistic approaches, is a multifaceted object belonging to the three realms of human existence: biological, psychological, and social. If we want to understand how language functions, we need to view it not as an object, but as an activity. The activity that brings together all three constituents is *communication*. The central concept in studying communication is 'context,' as most if not all features of the communication process are determined by various contexts in which it occurs. To construct and reconstruct meanings (including specific cultural meanings in communication), to describe the language as means of this communication process, we need to be able to fill out all the contextual gaps: *who did what, when, where, why or what for,* and *how*.

To satisfy this condition, the dictionary includes not only regular entries, but also proper names as a separate word class. These proper names include place names for locations that were important for the Ninilchik community and personal names of the Ninilchik elders. Proper names as a separate category of words is characteristic of Ninilchik Russian as the language of a specific, rather small, community. Names and nicknames of individuals, as well as place names, tell the story of the Ninilchik community. These entries will play a special role in the cultural commentary. They demonstrate how culture and physical context (history and geography of the region) may shape the resulting linguistic form. In the current version of the dictionary they are placed in an appendix. Excerpts from songs, kids' rhymes, games, collocations, set expressions and the like are also presented as an appendix to the main body of lexical entries. These expressions are crucial for interpreting cultural meanings salient in the Ninilchik community. Examples of two lexical entries for the proper names are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Examples of proper name entries

field		
\lx	Antóshk'ina Kám'in'	Gnáshka
\ps	pn	Pn
\sf		knashka.mp3
\ge	Antone's Rock	Nickname for Ignatius
\ee	big brown rock which used to be an important landmark on the beach about 3 miles north of Ninilchik River; named for Antone Olsen	
\sd	locations	names

The grammar sketch includes information on phonology, phonetics, noun and verb forms, on how adjectives and participles are derived, a description of the pronominal system, specifics of verb phrases, main syntactic, and discourse structures. We avoid giving grammatical information in the

lexical entry itself. What we have there are the examples of the word usage in context, which allows linguists to extract the grammatical features if needed but still doesn't impose it on the regular user. This fits very well with our next issue, which is balancing …

Academic rigor and accessibility to non-specialists.

The paper version of the dictionary is primarily for the traditional Ninilchik community, descendants of the old families, and people interested in learning more about the Russian linguistic and cultural heritage. To keep, add, and retrieve data for more sophisticated dictionary outputs and to do research on the Ninilchik Russian grammar and discourse, we use the LexiquePro data management system. This software allows us to keep various types of information as a record under one lexical entry. The data then can be searched and sorted according to various parameters: parts of speech, phonetic variants, phrasal examples and their translation, encyclopedic and cultural comments, usage by various speakers, or reference to the semantically related dictionary items. This information allows us to organize records in the database and structure them based on the research issues.

Our main interests in studying Ninilchik Russian include both the theory of contact linguistics and practical issues of language description. The latter include nominal and verbal paradigms and the most prominent categories of the Russian grammar: the aspect of the verbs and the gender of the nouns. And how these grammatical issues are studied depends on yet another choice of balance.

Full coverage of the available data and specifics of Ninilchik Russian as opposed to Continental Russian.

We describe Ninilchik Russian as a language variety in its own right. It is considered a common rule in Russian dialectology to describe every separate dialect, or language variety, as a system of its own. Still, typological and comparative language studies will inevitably need some basis for comparison when describing specific grammar patterns or lexicons. In the case of the Alaskan Russian studies there are two ways to do it. One can compare Ninilchik Russian to the standard, so-called 'Moscow Russian' or instead to the whole variety of all available Russian dialects. We chose the latter and call this conglomerate Continental Russian (CR) as opposed to the one and only overseas Russian variety, namely – Alaskan Russian.

There are at least two good reasons for such a decision. First, it is well known that the so-called 'Russian' population of Russian America represented many regional, social, and ethnic groups, which influenced the development of Alaskan Russian, its resulting form, and its significant variation among families and individuals. Second, is a less discussed, but probably even more important fact that Alaskan Russian has always existed as an oral language. For a number of years crucial to its development Ninilchik Russian did not experience any influences of any kind from the written languages: it was a monolingual community where the overwhelming majority was illiterate. Thus, Ninilchik Russian syntax had no interference from the syntax of a written language. This is well demonstrated by fragmentation, or a lack of hierarchical recursive structures, in its discourse.

We first registered discourse excerpts mostly as examples for the dictionary lexical entries, but later focused on them as objects of special study. The very special evolution of Ninilchik Russian from the written to oral language as opposed to what took places in many languages of the world, including Continental Russian, that developed written forms, makes it possible to study Russian discourse not 'spoiled' by the written tradition. It is extremely valuable for modern linguistics where, eventually, the primacy of the oral form of language over the written ones became recognized even if not yet well researched. Another most important consequence of the oral tradition of Ninilchik Russian is that it sheds light on the status of the Alaskan Russian. Many specific features of Ninilchik Russian, as opposed to Continental Russian, were described as the result of its being an endangered, moribund, and creolized language form. In fact, we may need to

revise this because these unique features may be as well, or better, described as characteristic of its unusual oral status.

Acknowledgements

Both as linguists and as native speakers of Russian, we feel privileged to be able to assist the Ninilchik people in preserving the words and expressions, the sounds and the meaning of their language, thus keeping alive their unique cultural heritage and their ongoing story. This research could have never taken place without the generous help and patience of our consultants, the speakers of Ninilchik Russian. Their love for their language and their determination to help has been very important. We dedicate these and all future results of our work to them and want to list all of them here:

Louie Kvasnikoff, Selma Oskolkoff Leman, Betty Leman Porter, Nick Cooper, Paul Oskolkoff, Harry Leman, Nick Leman, Joe Leman, George Jackinsky, Edward Jackinsky, Walter Jackinsky, Cecil Demidoff, Mae Demidoff, Doris Steik Kelly, Alice Oskolkoff Bouwens, Arnie Oskolkoff, Larry Oskolkoff Jr., Nancy Oskolkoff Ahlrich, Fr. Simeon Oskolkoff, Sophie Cooper Prosser, Edna Matson Steik, Leo Steik, and Mike Steik.

We would also like to express our gratitude to those representatives of the 'younger generation' who do not speak Ninilchik Russian but whose interest in the cultural and linguistic heritage of their parents became the initial stimulus for this project. They are cultural activists who helped us in many ways with their moral, physical, and practical support during these years and whose friendship is invaluable for us. Thank you, Bobbie Oskolkoff, Daryl White, Joann Jackinsky, Joe Linden, Loren and Caroline Leman, Greg Encelewski, Cynthia Baganov, and Tiffany Stonecipher.

Website

The 2017 version of the *Dictionary of Ninilchik Russian* can be viewed online at http://iling-ran.ru/circumpolar/library/nrd.pdf. This is a work in progress, with future updates planned.

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