

# THE KET LANGUAGE: FROM DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS TO INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Abstract

For centuries, linguists have been interested in the possibility of a genetic relationship between Siberian and Native American languages. In 1968 in his fundamental work “The Ket Language”, A.P. Dulzon wrote: “The Ket language being the most studied in the group of Yeniseian languages has a very complicated and peculiar verb morphology system. This system has many typological correspondences in its main features with the verb morphology system of Basque, Burushaski, many Caucasian languages and Native American’s languages” [Dulzon 1968].

This report focuses on common problems connected with the extinction of the Ket language and the current sociolinguistic situation in areas where Kets currently reside. Work on recording, processing and digitalizing archived language data performed at the Department for Indigenous Siberian People’s languages of Tomsk State Pedagogical University is also described below. The report concludes with a linguist’s point of view on the hypothesis of Dene-Yeniseian relationship and also a lay-person’s point of view on it.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Sociolinguistic situation in the places of the Ket residence

Before discussing these issues let us examine the state of Ket as it is spoken natively by populations living on the lower and central Yenisei tributaries, from the Mountain Tunguska to the Kureika River. In the *UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* the Ket language is marked as “severely endangered” [UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger]. Different sources give the number of ethnic Kets as varying between 800 to 1500 persons [All-Russian National Census 2002, Kazakevič 2005, Krivonogov 2003].

In the Summary Table “Peoples and Languages of Russian Federation” [All-Russian National Census 2002] the number of Kets is 1494, of which only 485 are native speakers. Not only the optimistic second figure, but even the first figure is rather doubtful. More trustworthy are the results of V.P. Krivonogov’s (Krasnoyarsk ethnographer) fieldwork in 2001, during which he performed a questionnaire survey of the entire Ket population. According to his data the Ket population numbers 885 persons [Krivonogov 2003: 7].

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<sup>1</sup> The research was supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research № 11-06-00371-a.

<sup>2</sup> I thank Pavel Glazunov, Dr. Alexandra A. Maloney for translating this text into English and Dr. Edward Vajda for editing the final English version.

As for the Ket native speakers, they number no more than 150 persons, including semi-speakers with different levels of competence (according to comments to the table added by O.A. Kazakevich).

It should be pointed out that the degree of extinction of Ket varies from dialect to dialect. There are three main dialects of modern Ket: Southern (settlements Sumarokovo, Sulomai, Bor, Bakhta, Verkhneimbatsk, Kellog), Central (settlements Surgutikha, Vereshchagino, Baklanikha, Farkovo, Turukhansk) and Northern (settlements Maduika, Sovrechka, Igarka, Goroshikha)<sup>3</sup>.

As a result of nine ethno-linguistic expeditions to the Krasnoyarsk Region (settlements Baklanikha, Vereshchagino, Kellog, Surgutikha, Maduika, Verkhneimbatsk) and Evenki Autonomous Area (settlement Sulomai) performed by the staff of Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages, there were identified not more than 70 Ket full and semi-speakers, who know Ket adequately enough to recite a text with the help of its Russian variant or without. These Kets speakers all belong to elder generation. Therefore, there are 4 North Ket speakers, about 10 Middle Ket speakers and about 50 South Kets speakers.

The Ket native speakers include trilingual people, such as Selkups who speak Selkup and Ket equally well, e.g. in Kellog (M.M. Irikova), in Surgutikha (J.I. Dorozhkin and his daughter Albina). These people are also good narrators and storytellers.

Nowadays Kets are not attached to certain locations where their ancestors lived. Their dialect can be properly attributed with their parents' family names and the place of their parents' residence.

Thus Valentina Mikhailovna Serkova resides with her daughter in the settlement Verkhneimbatsk, situated at the border of the Middle and the Southern dialects. However the Russian last name *Serkov* is typical for the representatives of the Northern Ket dialect, the Ket clan *Ol'git* ('water man')

Ket is taught on a regular basis only in Kellog. The children learning it study in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades of primary school. In the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>d</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades special textbooks by G.K. Werner are used; later the teacher must make use of literature on Ket culture published in Russian. In 2009-2010 the Ket language will be taught in Surgutikha. In addition in the settlement of Bor teachers perform extra-curriculum studies of Ket spiritual and material culture. Alongside the lack of training literature, all the teachers note the small number of class hours: only 1 hour per week for each class. As a mode of communication among ethnics the Ket language (specifically, the Southern dialect) is currently used only in Kellog.

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<sup>3</sup> All settlements are indicated in spite of presence of native speakers in them.

### **3. The work on documentation and preservation of the Ket language**

Nowadays, when maintenance of diversity of languages is encouraged, the status of a national language becomes more prestigious. Interest in Ket mother tongue and culture is evidenced by the holding seminars for teachers of Ket which took place in the linguistic laboratory (Turukhansk, Krasnoyarsk region) in 2008 and 2011, at the Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages of Tomsk State Pedagogical University in Tomsk, 2009, at school in Kellog (Turukhansk, Krasnoyarsk region) in 2010.

For two years the staff of the Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages cooperatively with the Association of Indigenous Northern Peoples “Our Land” (Turukhansk, Krasnoyarsk region) and with the financial support of the Agency of the North Affairs and Support of Indigenous Peoples of Krasnoyarsk Region have been working on the problems of linguistic education (native languages) with teachers of Ket.

In 2008 the seminars were organized by the Linguistic Laboratory under the Department of Education of Turukhansk District Administration. The executive head was Z.V. Maksunova, Candidate of Science. The first part of the seminars attended teachers and native speakers of only Ket. The assistant professor of the Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages, E.A. Kryukova went to Turukhansk to give lectures and practical training for Ket teachers. The teachers took active part in work, shared their experience, and demonstrated motivation techniques. Great interest was paid to the employment of modern audio and video equipment and computers in Ket studies.

In 2009 the preparation and teaching were performed by the Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages. The title of the program was “Training of native language specialists in the context of education development”. The teachers of Ket and Selkup came from the settlements of Farkovo, Surgutikha, Kellog, Baklanikha (Turukhansk district, Krasnoyarsk region). Within the bounds of the program teachers got acquainted with the rich library and archives of Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages, received the needed for classes material, listened to educational lectures on languages and folklore of Siberian peoples, took part in practical trainings in teaching native languages in primary school. They were very interested in introduction of the Internet resources and software to be used for teaching Ket and Selkup. The public lectures on Ket language and culture were performed in Kellog in 2010. The training of the local teachers included the methods of teaching and comprehension of the Ket verbal system at the Elementary level.

In 2011, besides the planned training the Ket teachers had an opportunity to attend sessions at the 26<sup>th</sup> Dulzon Conference. The major problem discussed at the conference was the documentation of endangered languages of Siberia. These languages include Ket as well.

The Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages is engaged in training and consulting teachers, as well as providing teaching materials for the local Ket schools. Parallel to this work the digitalizing of language materials is performed. This project includes not only the Ket language but also other Siberian languages.

One of the fundamental goals of this project is the creation of a linguistic corpus in Ket, Khanty, Selkup and Chulym-Turkic languages. The Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages has the necessary materials, and the work on those corpuses is in progress. There are 98 Ket field volumes in the archive: 83 old ones, compiled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the 83<sup>th</sup> volume dates back to 1985) and 15 new volumes, beginning with the year of 2000. The recorded data consist of vocabularies, questionnaires, lists of sentences, verb paradigms, folklore and household texts, dialogues, and other linguistic and ethnographic material. The Ket folklore and household texts represent a body of writing collected by different researchers of Ket during a century. A.P. Dulzon and his followers altogether managed to collect more than 100 Ket fairy-tales apart from household texts and other stories. From 2000 the staff of Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages have recorded about 50 household text and dialogues.

The task of creating a corpus is performed in two ways: continuation of recording data in Kets' residences and digitalization of analogue and paper materials of the archive. The priority task of fieldwork is collecting Ket texts to reach a balance in content of the corpus concerning dialects and periods of recording (20-21<sup>st</sup> centuries).

To fulfill this task the two ethno-linguistic expeditions to places of Kets' habitation in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011<sup>4</sup> were performed. Logging of the texts is made in two ways: either the texts are traditionally written into field papers, or using modern technology digital (audio and video) recordings are made and the text is typed with the help of computer text editors.

Unfortunately, the process of language shift is accelerating; in a limited number of Ket families there is still a natural transmission of the language from grandparents to parents. Further language transfer to the younger generation of children is discontinued, as a rule. That is why it is extremely necessary to make all efforts now and in the immediate future to collect as many texts as possible.

Today the interpretation of collected field data also has its peculiarities. Lack of constant communication in native language among Kets and their uncodified language has created idiolects that can differ strongly. That is why it is necessary to recheck some places in recorded texts with language assistants or their relatives.

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<sup>4</sup> Financial support of RHF within the framework of the research projects № 08-04-18023e, № 09-04-64760e/T, № 10-04-64760e/T, № 11-14-70601e/T.

During recent years Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages works on bringing the Ket field records into digital forms. A computer lexical database ToolBox for Ket is being created, a selection of all lexical units (except verbs) from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> field volumes have been made. Currently the lexical database contains more than 6000 units, moreover, some texts from field volumes have been digitalized: the content is more than 9000 words. Several texts have been evaluated in multimedia database ELAN format.

Within the bounds of pilot project of Department of Siberian Indigenous Languages on making the corpus of annotated texts of Ob-Yenisei language area the Ket folklore text “Bal’na” has been analyzed and glossed with standard requirements for all the languages of the project. The full version of the text is represented in three variants. The native text is first typed in Cyrillic letters, then comes the Russian translation of the text, and finally an English translation is made.

After that each sentence is written in seven lines. The first line is a sentence in the IPA transcription, the second one is the sentence in the IPA with morphemic division, the third one is the subscription of the glosses in English, the fourth one is the subscription of the glosses in Russian, the fifth one is the sentence in the native language in Cyrillic symbols, the sixth one is the translation of it into English and the last line is the Russian translation.

Below is a sample of an annotated text (1):

(1) *tu'nil' o'ŋonen na bis'epdat* [Annotirovannye ... 2010: 200]

<i>tu'nil' o'ŋ-on-(d)en</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>bis'ep-dat</i>
then 3PL-PST-go	3PL.POSS	brother-BEN.M
потом 3PL-PST-PST-идти	3PL.POSS	брат-BEN.M

*ту'нил' о'ŋо:нен нă бис'еп да 'а:т.*

‘then they came to help the brother’

‘потом они пошли выручать брата’ (букв. Потом пошли за своим братом)

Certainly, compiling a corpus of Ket and other indigenous languages without writing traditions presents some specific challenges. The first involves the limited amount of texts in an endangered language. In the case of Ket we possess a sufficient amount of material, including the texts published by different scholars: K. Donner, N.K. Karger, E.A. Kreinovich. It would be ideal to cover 100% of the Ket texts, which is theoretically possible given their finite number. The second serious problem is the absence of a unified orthography that could be used both by the Ket native speakers and linguists. A.P. Dulzon and his followers used the phonetic script with Cyrillic symbols, while today linguists prefer IPA transcription.

In the 1990s G.K. Werner developed the alphabet and writing in Cyrillic symbols for Ket textbooks in accordance with phonematic and morphematic principles. During the Ket seminars it was found out that the native speakers are hardly able to understand text in this orthography, even practicing teachers reproduce unknown texts with some difficulties. It is possible that problems for perception are caused by notation of the syllabic tones in monosyllabic words and by using iotized Russian letters to mark palatalization of previous consonants. This should be taken into account when elaborating Cyrillic elements for the Ket corpus.

One more problem appears in working with old field volumes. This is the existence of units which are absent in vocabularies and the exact meanings are impossible to check: contemporary speakers of correspondent dialects do not identify lexemes (2).

(2) *taŋes'in qotka qa'n-en koŋetn, bene ba:ŋen ka'ron...* [Annotirovannye ... 2010: 192]

<i>taŋes'in</i>	<i>qot-ka</i>	<i>qa'n-en</i>	<i>koŋ-e-tn...</i>
<b>carefully</b>	way-LOC	IMP.PART-PL	2PL-EP-go
<b>осторожно</b>	дорога-LOC	IMP-PART-PL	2PL-EP-идти

“**таңес’ин** кот’ка ка’нен гоңетн...”

“go through the way **carefully**...”

“**осторожно** дорогой идите...”

Some difficulties are caused by glossing verb forms. For example, texts recorded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century often contain verb forms no longer in use by current speakers, complicating efforts to provide morpheme glossing (3).

(3) *as' qibdaŋta bara deda*

<i>as'</i>	<i>qib-daŋta</i>	<i>bara</i>	<i>deda</i> <sup>5</sup> [Annotirovannye ... 2010: 189]
which	month-ADSS.M	3M.SG.say	3SG.say
какой	месяц-ADSS.M	3M.SG.говорить	3SG.говорить

ас' кыбдаңта барä **дадди**.

‘which month (he’d come) he said’

‘в каком месяце придет он сказал’

It is easier to perform the morphemic verbal analyses of Khanty, Selkup and Chulym-Turkic languages than of the Ket language. In spite of long-term contacts with these languages in Central Siberia the Ket language is distinguished by its complexity.

<sup>5</sup> The form *deda* can be found in materials by H. Findeisen, more particular in Werner H. Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der Jenissej-Sprachen. - Band 1. – Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002 (1). S. 169.

#### **4. On Dene-Yeniseian Hypothesis.**

In spite of publications on Proto-Yeniseian and Proto-Athabaskan reconstructions, Russian linguists and historians are still skeptical that the idea that Dene-Yeniseian relationship is proved. The Russian linguists S.A. Starostin and S.L. Nikolayev brought to light the idea of possible relationship between Sino-Caucasian and Na-Dene. G.S. Starostin reported in his paper at the Athabaskan/Dene Languages Conference 2009 (Berkeley, California): “a binary connection should rather be sought between Yeniseian and Burushaski” and Dene-Yeniseian relationship is not possible outside of Dene-Caucasian hypothesis. He also pointed out that “grammatical systems of Dene-Caucasian branches can serve as “primary” evidence only to a very limited extent, and should be treated very cautiously”.

Skepticism of Russian scholars concerning the proof of Dene-Yeniseian relationship proposed in the Symposium in 2008 by Dr. Vajda (Vajda 2010) came probably from the notion that this proof was based on typological criteria rather than on classical comparative historical method that is broadly applied after establishment of the relationship of Indo-European language family.

The hypothesis of Dene-Yeniseian connection is known in Siberia from newspapers, TV and Internet. There are also publications of genetic researchers supporting the idea of the connection between Siberia and America.

The representatives of the Ket ethnic group are welcoming the idea of relationship with the indigenous people of America. They are aware of similar physical anthropological features that they observe in documentary films on TV. The Ket people identify themselves as distinct from other Siberian ethnic groups.

Information on Yeniseian languages is available through libraries and through contacts with the linguists and anthropologists that are doing fieldwork in the regions of the Ket habitation. Publications on Na-Dene are hard to find in Russia and they are not available for the Ket population in Siberia. For this paper the Internet resources were used: UAF [<http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/dy/>] and project “The Tower of Babel” [<http://starling.rinet.ru>].

Summing up this paper I would like to stress the importance of the proof of Dene-Yeniseian connection because it opens up a broad perspective for areal linguistics especially for comparative study of languages in Ob and Yenisei basins. Comparative study of Ket, Uralic, Turkic and Slavic languages with Dene languages will contribute to identification of original Yeniseian features and elements acquired through long-term contacts.

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#### **Abbreviations in glosses**

2 = second person, 3 = third person, ADSS = addessive, BEN = benefative, EP = epenthetic vowel/consonant, IMP = imperative, LOC = locative, M = masculine, PART = particle, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PST = past, SG = singular.