

## Teaching and Learning Indigenous Languages of the Russian Federation

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### 1. Preface (Tetyana Dzyadevych)

On March 20, 2021, one of my students sent a message through his college network: “Happy New Year! Happy *Naýryz!* *Наурыз құтты болсын!* *Naýryz qutty bolsyn!* *S Vesennim prazdnikom Nauryz!* ... Remember to celebrate with friends and family (family meaning chosen, adoptive, or biological, etc.)!” This student grew up in a Spanish-speaking foster family and recently, after a DNA test, discovered his ancestral roots in Bashkiria, Tatarstan, and Kazakhstan. He now wants to learn more about his origins, and he is looking for sources to learn about non-Russian languages and cultures in the Russian Federation (RF) and former USSR. To do so, he enrolled in our university’s Russian program. In his situation, and the situation of many other North Americans who may be interested in learning Indigenous languages of the RF for personal or professional purposes, Russian is the only available gateway language. In turn, one responsibility of Russian-language instructors is to empower students to use that language as a gateway toward Indigenous languages.

Unfortunately, many still hear “Russia” and assume that such a huge territory can be ethnically and culturally homogeneous. Russia is home to over one hundred languages, thirty of which have official status in different regions (Alekseev 2004).<sup>1</sup> These vary in both status and number of speakers. From languages like Tatar, which is spoken in national republics and supported by local infrastructures, to critically endangered languages that are nearing extinction, such as Yukaghir, there is a deep but vulnerable diversity of languages. March 7, 2021, for instance, was a tragic day for a Bering dialect of the Aleut language. The last native speaker of

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term INDIGENOUS provisionally to refer to languages autochthonous to the territory of the Russian state, regardless of the number of speakers. The term INDIGENOUS and its parallel *коренной* have specific connotations in Russian law and everyday use. See Lenore Grenoble’s contribution to this forum for a discussion of these nuances.

this dialect, Vera Timoshenko, passed away in Russia's Far East region of Kamchatka (RFE/RL 2021). According to data from the Alaska Native Language Center, only two hundred members of the Aleut group remain in Russia, and there are only five living speakers of the language (Krauss 2007, 408). Following the Russian State Duma's July 2018 decision to make all Indigenous language study strictly voluntary nationwide, language activists have lost an important tool for addressing this vulnerability ("Priniat zakon ob izuchenii rodnykh iazykov" 2018).

Our forum does not aim to explain the causes of the difficult situation facing Indigenous languages in the Russian Federation (RF). It does not aim to interfere in or displace current revitalization efforts in these language communities. The aim of our work is to highlight opportunities for teaching and learning Indigenous languages of the RF in the context of US and Canadian academia, raising awareness of the importance of these languages by increasing student engagement with them. Our target audiences include Russian language educators and their students, scholars working in the field, and heritage speakers whose academic connections with their home languages must often emerge through Russocentric institutions. We believe many students would be interested in learning languages other than Russian, particularly students whose own language practices face marginalization in universities. Likewise, we believe it is imperative for all Russian learners to be aware of the huge linguistic diversity of the RF. Finally, we see our work as a first step toward increased overseas contributions to Indigenous-language efforts.

Promoting the visibility of the RF's Indigenous languages outside Russia in the short term can lay a foundation for more ethical long-term resource distribution in the Russian Studies field. As instructors use the ideas presented below in their classrooms and share this forum with interested students, centering language diversity in our field, it will become increasingly feasible for scholars in the US and Canada to place the time and power of their academic institutions at the disposal of revitalization movements in Russia. To all of these ends, this forum offers examples of how to include introductory Indigenous language materials in Russian-language lessons to increase the interest of our learners in the cultural and linguistic diversity of Russia. We also provide examples of how individuals can start learning languages independently using

available online sources through the mediation of Russian and, where possible, English.

Our thinking draws on models from many contexts, all of which can transform Russian Studies pedagogy. These include the US-based abolitionist model of channeling resources away from exclusive institutions to movements outside them,<sup>2</sup> international efforts in information sciences to respect existing community education infrastructures rather than prioritizing direct university branding and involvement (Sangwand 2018), writings like Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze's that recenter academic disciplines around Indigenous languages (Eze 2013), and translation projects like Joshua Freeman's work connecting Uighur writers with Anglophone platforms (Freeman 2020). The application of the resources we provide below requires a grounding in academic solidarity projects such as these; without such ethical contexts, readers who do not come from Indigenous-language communities themselves risk infringing on the wishes and resources of community members. For students and scholars who wish to use their training in specific disciplines to support broader language revitalization efforts directly, contributions to *The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization* may be useful starting points, particularly those on "new speakers" of minority languages (by Bernadette O'Rourke) and on the complex relationship between language revitalization and formal education (by Nancy Hornberger and Haley De Korne) (Hinton, Huss, and Roche 2018).

With these broader approaches in mind, this forum's contributors address Russia's key multiethnic regions: the Caucasus (Hilah Kohen), the Volga region (Irina Sadovina), Siberia (Rossina Soyán, Anna Gomboeva, Lenore Grenoble), and the Far East (Jessica Kantarovich, Dylan Charter). The pieces by Soyán, Sadovina, and Gomboeva focus on official languages of national republics, while Grenoble, Kantarovich, Kohen, and Charter write about languages that are spoken in smaller communities. Finally, the contributors engage with different motivations, and accompanying challenges, for studying these languages in their US and Canadian contexts: Soyán and Sadovina share teaching strategies; Gomboeva, Kohen, and Charter describe the resources available to learners; and Grenoble and Kantarovich offer broader reflections on the situation of

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Elizabeth Hinton, and Garrett Felber have exemplified this approach in their activism.

the languages they work with, pointing to both challenges and signs of revitalization.

Despite the variety of languages we work with and the multiplicity of our reasons for studying them, we have many common questions and points for discussion. A shared feature of these languages is the dearth of both English-language materials and digital resources (such as smartphone apps); the latter would be of tremendous value not only for foreign-language learners but also for younger community members to engage with their heritage in a familiar way. On the eve of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–32), it is our hope that this forum will initiate a conversation and create a network of people who are interested in learning and teaching Indigenous languages in our field and in creating the resources necessary to do so (UNESCO 2020).

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## **2. Teaching Mari in a Russian language classroom (Irina Sadovina)**

The average North American student of Russian may not seek proficiency in Mari or Buryat, but all Russian Studies students can nevertheless benefit from learning about non-Russian language communities in Russia. Activities designed for this purpose offer many advantages, including helping students gain greater proficiency in Russian as well as plurilingual and intercultural competence. In this section, I argue for the benefits of these activities and share my own experience developing them.

In my hometown of Yoshkar-Ola, you can hear Mari at scholarly lectures, at poetry readings, and on the radio. But if you walk down the main boulevard, you are less likely to hear the language spoken than you are to see awkwardly Google-translated Mari phrases on storefronts, halfhearted attempts at government-promoted bilingualism. When it comes to language preservation, Mari shares its ambivalent position with other official languages of Russia's national republics. The language is still used in contexts both informal and institutional, and it has many loving caretakers: activists, scholars, and journalists. But the statistics are dire: the 2010 Russian census records the number of speakers at around 380,000 (Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki 2010), and UNESCO lists the two main variants of Mari as "definitely endangered" (Meadow Mari) and "severely endangered" (Hill Mari) (Moseley 2010). To supplement the statistics, I can offer anecdotal evidence of the vulnerability of Mari. Growing up in an urban household, I learned it as a child but lost fluency in elementary school, where Mari had little prestige. I have since worked on my Mari intermittently, through independent study and language classes. For now, I have made my peace with partial competence, encouraged by

Sergei Svechnikov's recent argument that language revitalization depends on native speakers welcoming partial and potential speakers into the Mari language community (Svechnikov 2019, 5).

For Svechnikov and other Mari speakers, partial competence matters because it contributes to language revitalization in a specific community. However, partial competence also has value in broader educational contexts. The Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) identifies it as a key category for building plurilingual and intercultural competence (Council of Europe 2001), which is defined as "the ability to use a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with other people, and enrich that repertoire while doing so" (Beacco et al. 2016, 10).

This framework of plurilingual and intercultural competence is also relevant in Canadian and US Russian language classrooms. First, studying Russian calls for a plurilingual and intercultural approach which reflects the real-life context of language use (Byford, Doak, and Hutchings 2019). Second, an emphasis on plurilingual and intercultural competence allows students to pursue World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, especially Connections and Comparisons (ACTFL 2014). Third, normalizing partial competence frames language learning as a "lifelong task" (Council of Europe 2001, 5) and may help students develop a growth mindset, which supports language learning (Lou and Noels 2019). Finally, emphasizing plurilingual and intercultural competence is especially important given the increasing diversity of North American student populations.

Even limited amounts of Indigenous language instruction can help teachers of Russian promote such plurilingual and intercultural competence. At the University of Toronto and at the University of Missouri, I taught short lessons on Indigenous languages and cultures within courses on Russian language and culture. I have also taught stand-alone thirty- to fifty-minute lessons on Mari language and culture as a guest instructor in courses taught by colleagues.

A Novice language classroom offers many opportunities to introduce students to Russia's linguistic diversity through assignments that allow them to use simple structures in a meaningful way. For example, when teaching the prepositional case, I invite every student to research different ethnic communities and give one-slide presentations

with images and maps, sharing some basic information with their peers (e.g., “Here are the Bashkirs. They live in Bashkiria. They speak Bashkir.”).

In second- and third-year classrooms, students can expand the range of topics they can discuss and practice engaging in more extended and flexible discourse through activities built around authentic materials from plurilingual contexts within Russia. For example, my second-year students studied the website of a Tatar theatre, noting that the names of the cast and crew did not sound stereotypically Russian. This led to a discussion of Russia’s Muslim cultures and prepared the students for a listening task about the city of Kazan on their exam.

My final example is a stand-alone lesson on Mari culture and language for Russian learners, taught in Russian and easily adaptable to different levels of proficiency. I begin by asking students to compare two Cyrillic alphabets: Russian and Mari, pointing out “false friend” letters and introducing new ones. I then teach students selected Mari phrases, using each one to discuss an aspect of Mari or Eurasian culture: for example, the Turkic influence revealed in the Mari greeting *салам* (*salam*). This lesson develops into a discussion (in Russian) of issues of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Instructors interested in including some Mari in their Russian language classrooms have many resources at their disposal, including online courses (Riese et al. 2017; Chemyshev et al. 2019), the Mari Wikipedia (“Tüng Lashtyk” 2021), the Mari electronic library (Mari-Lab 2021) and news videos from local TV channels (GTRK Marii El 2021; TV METR 2021).

The activities I designed have been met with student interest and have resulted in high levels of classroom engagement. While most students will not seek out further instruction in Mari or other Indigenous languages of Russia, all students will benefit from diverse authentic materials and complex discussions offered by modules focused on Indigenous languages.

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### 3. Materials development for Tuvan as a foreign language (Rossina Soyán)

This piece shares my experience creating online language-learning materials for Tuvan as a foreign language with English as a medium of explanation. Tuvan is a Turkic language spoken primarily in Tuva, Russia. It is classified as a vulnerable language, which means that Tuvan is learned in childhood in Tuva, but its usage in various domains is decreasing (Chevalier 2010; Sereedar 2018). For example, in the early 2000s, I took Tuvan language and literature classes until the end of high school. Twenty years later, however, my nieces have decided to stop taking Tuvan language classes after grade 5; that is, they have developed conversational skills but not academic language proficiency in Tuvan. At the same time, my preschool nephews speak only in Russian, even when addressed in Tuvan, and it is possible that they will not even develop conversational skills in Tuvan.

Tuvan society is going through the same language shift processes that happen all over the world when local languages come into contact with more prestigious languages (Thomason 2015). Nevertheless, offering a comprehensive set of measures for reversing language shift in Tuva is beyond the goals of this piece. As a Tuvan speaker, a linguist, and a language instructor, I decided to contribute my expertise to language maintenance by developing learning materials for Tuvan as a foreign language. The audience I had in mind while creating the materials was composed of adults who already know English and are interested in learning Tuvan. This is my effort to increase the prestige and visibility of Tuvan beyond Tuva, since I firmly believe that Tuvan is worth learning not only for Tuvans themselves, but also for anybody who wants to interact with Tuvan people, Tuvan history, or Tuvan culture.

As a first step, I explored existing resources, including *Учебник тувинского языка 'Textbook of the Tuvan Language'* by Salzynmaa (1980) for Russian speakers and several textbooks for Japanese speakers, such as *トウヴァ語会話集 (tuva go kaiwa shū) 'Tuvan Conversation'* by Dambaa and Takashima (2008). These findings show that if one wants to learn Tuvan, they need to know Russian or Japanese first. The only up-to-date resource for English speakers learning Tuvan is one dialogue available through the Mango Languages website (<https://mangolanguages.com/available-languages/learn-tuvan/>).

Next, I conducted a learner needs analysis by identifying and surveying a community of possible learners of Tuvan, reaching out through personal contacts and Facebook (Soyan 2020). The study participants were mostly interested in the Tuvan language and culture due to throat singing, a special technique of sound-making. Therefore, I chose throat-singing songs as the foundation on which to develop learning materials. Since the respondents identified themselves either as beginners or as people who have never tried learning Tuvan, I decided to create materials for absolute beginners.

Having gauged current resources and needs, I selected a pedagogical framework—content-based instruction (CBI)—to guide the development of new materials. CBI is an instructional approach that integrates “language teaching aims with content instruction” (Snow 2014, 439). Within CBI, I chose Lyster’s proactive, counterbalanced approach (2017), since it is supported by empirical studies and is also suitable for beginner-level materials development. Lyster’s approach has four phases which bring together a focus on two goals: language (grammar and vocabulary) and content (meaning).

Finally, I applied Lyster’s approach when creating the *Tuvan through Songs* website (<https://sites.google.com/view/tuvan-through-songs/home>). Currently, the website contains four sets. Each set has its own distinct learning objectives. The first set teaches the Tuvan alphabet, since mastering the alphabet promotes learner autonomy. The other three sets analyze three songs which were chosen based on two factors: whether there were repeating sentences and structures, and whether key vocabulary and sentences were suitable for beginners. Song one is used to teach how to count in Tuvan from one to one hundred; song two, how to ask simple “where” questions; and song 3, how to name family members and occupations. Each set can be divided into four parts following Lyster’s (2017) approach: the noticing phase—analysis of the translated lyrics, the awareness phase—grammar and/or vocabulary introduction, the guided practice phase—eight to ten practice exercises, and the autonomous phase—interpretation of the meaning of the song and usage of sentences from the song in a new context.

The materials are aimed at producing Novice-level speakers. According to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012), Novice-level speakers can use “isolated words and phrases that have been encountered,

memorized, and recalled” (9). Learners will not be able to speak Tuvan after the completion of the four sets, but they will be able to decode the Tuvan alphabet, produce their own simple sentences in Tuvan, and even transfer their knowledge to analyzing other songs in Tuvan.

I have shared the website with the original study participants, my L2 Russian students, and now with *RLJ*'s readers. However, I have not piloted the website and thus cannot provide data as to the effectiveness of the materials. Nevertheless, I believe the steps described above—analyzing existing resources, conducting a learner needs analysis, choosing a pedagogical framework for materials design, and creating the materials—can be taken by teachers of any Indigenous language to overcome resource scarcity.

I would like to encourage even early language learners who are not fully fluent in an Indigenous language to get involved in materials development. As Dr. Onowa McIvor (2021) emphasizes, Indigenous language maintenance is the responsibility not only of Indigenous communities, but of humanity in general. Most likely, readers of this article are occupying the territories of Indigenous people, be it in Canada, the US, or Russia, and we can give back by investing our time and energy into learning Indigenous languages. Knowing a few phrases and facts may be not enough in the long term, but it is still better than ignoring the Indigenous communities altogether and erasing them from the past, present, and future.

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#### **4. Learning Even and Evenki in the Northern linguistic landscape (Lenore A. Grenoble)**

Indigenous peoples of Russia's Far North are of particular interest to researchers and external scholars, including linguists, anthropologists, and climate scientists, who have interests in the languages and cultures of Northern and Arctic Indigenous peoples that are now threatened by rapid climate change and massive cultural upheaval. Two such representative groups are the Even and Evenki, both traditionally reindeer herders and hunters, who form part of a pan-Arctic consortium of Indigenous peoples. Both groups are face assimilatory pressures, and there is a massive shift to monolingual Russian usage; each language has fewer than five thousand speakers. The lives and stories of Even and Evenki community members capture the imagination of outsiders. A concrete example is *Sacha*, a visual documentation of the story of an Even reindeer herder who grapples with maintaining a traditional Even lifestyle in a rapidly changing environment (Pazoumian 2020).

The minority Indigenous peoples of the Russian North are officially represented by RAIPON, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (<http://raipon.info/>). RAIPON is one of six permanent

participants of the Arctic Council, giving RAIPON official international status. Within and beyond Russian borders, there is a strong sense of pan-Arctic identity, collaboration, and even comradeship that brings people together to face the modern challenges of strengthening minority language and cultural vitality in the North. Part of this strengthening involves sharing best practices and discussing strategies that have been less successful. There is an emphasis on language vitality and sustainability, and a movement away from language endangerment and loss (Grenoble 2013; Grenoble and Olsen 2014).

Learning either Even and Evenki as a second language is logistically challenging, both for ethnic Even and Evenki and for external (outsider) linguists and other researchers. By and large, both languages are used today only in a few local communities, in particular by people who are engaged in more traditional activities of hunting and herding, where children acquire the language naturally in the home and in the community at large.

Within Russia, language instruction is generally aimed at the ethnic population for each language. In cities, language classes are nonexistent; in villages where people live in high density, classes in the local public elementary and high schools are limited to a few hours weekly at most, with the language treated as a secondary subject. Adult L2 learners are largely left to learn on their own, unless they are lucky enough to be able to take classes at one of the few institutions of higher education where Even or Evenki are taught (such as the Herzen State Pedagogical Institute in St. Petersburg or local Northern universities like North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk). Some younger Even and Evenki are currently attending such universities and have made an active commitment to learning their ancestral language. Language activists are working hard to promote use of the languages in festivals, in media, and in daily life.

Both insiders and outsiders aiming to learn these languages face considerable challenges in terms of resources. It is virtually impossible to access language materials and learn Even or Evenki without some knowledge of Russian, even though there are some reference materials for both published in English (including a lengthy reference grammar of Evenki [Nedjalkov 1997] and a sketch grammar of Even [Malchukov 1995]). But access to most of the descriptive and pedagogical materials requires knowledge of Russian, which is the primary meta-language

used. For example, *Evenkiteka* (<http://www.evenkiteka.ru/>), a Russian-language digital library, houses digital copies of a range of Evenki materials. Digital and print resources for Even are more limited, but there are some Even and Evenki introductory language lessons available online for both languages. (Such resources are aimed at potential learners living outside of Even- and Evenki-dominant villages, where Internet access is not available.)

There is a clear need for better pedagogical materials aimed at L2 learners whose first language is Russian. Many existing textbooks are aimed at fluent, monolingual speakers of Even or Evenki, and they are increasingly hard to find. Published reference resources are scarce and aimed primarily at linguists, not language learners. The result is that learning either language will be easiest for a well-trained linguist who is highly proficient in Russian. In addition, existing audio and video recordings, with a few notable exceptions, are not primarily aimed at language learners. All this indicates the need for improved, accessible, and available language reference and pedagogical materials. Given community needs for such materials, it is hard to advocate that they also be created in English, as there are few serious language learners of either language who are neither community members nor linguists. But there are ample materials to give North American Russian students a glimpse into the life of Northern Indigenous groups and their languages.

A major challenge for all L2 learners of Even or Evenki is finding opportunities to practice their language skills. Travel to villages is difficult and impossible in certain times of the year, and living in small villages (even finding housing) is challenging for outsiders. We need to find creative ways to think of new domains of language usage, especially in urban settings, where smaller Indigenous populations become integrated into existing neighborhoods, losing opportunities for daily, face-to-face, casual contact. The creation of new digital spaces on social media or YouTube is one solution for those who have Internet access. Thanks to their affiliation with RAIPON and the Arctic Council, Even and Evenki community members can potentially learn best practices from other Arctic and Northern Indigenous groups. In Alaska, for example, a wealth of digital materials have been created for Native languages, including apps, language games, lesson and curricular plans, video and audio materials, posters, and vocabulary cards (Sealaska Heritage 2016). Having such

materials online would be a tremendous benefit to learners and teachers outside of the communities who could access them readily.

To study Even, Evenki, or any minority Indigenous language of the Russian Federation, one really needs high-level proficiency in Russian. This is in and of itself a prime motivation for Russian language classes. Motivation cuts both ways: introducing even small bits of information about minority languages and peoples in Russian language classes and general linguistics classes alike can inspire students to learn more about the languages and to study the regions and their peoples that are less known outside of Russia. My own experience has shown that students are inspired to work with such languages once they learn more about them and are highly motivated to help build capacity in the communities.

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## 5. Chukchi: Its history and reasons to learn it (Jessica Kantarovich)

Many Arctic languages find themselves in a particularly precarious position in the modern era. Among these vulnerable languages is Chukchi, the largest member of the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family, predominantly spoken in the Russian Far (North) East. Until relatively

recently, Chukchi was learned as a first language by the nomadic Chukchi people (autonymically, *Ləgʹorawetlʹat*, or ‘the true people’). It was once the lingua franca in the Russian Far East: the Chukchi famously refused to learn other groups’ languages in conducting trade, instead preferring to speak a simplified Chukchi jargon with all foreign interlocutors (Vakhtin 1998). There is evidence of these linguistic practices and the local dominance of Chukchi well into the nineteenth century. The Chukchi were also able to resist the effects of Russian contact and colonization for longer than other Indigenous groups due to the harsh tundra climate, which was difficult for tsarist emissaries and settlers to navigate.

Policies and programs implemented throughout the Russian North in the mid-twentieth century disrupted Chukchi language transmission and rapidly accelerated linguistic shift to Russian. The Chukchi were forcibly settled, their children sent to boarding schools where the use of the Chukchi language was strictly prohibited. It is perhaps Chukchi’s one-time regional dominance that has obscured the truly dire present situation of the language. Sources generally underestimate the extent of Chukchi language endangerment, often by pointing to the most recent Russian census data (from 2010, which lists 5,095 speakers). The linguistic encyclopedia *Ethnologue* lists Chukchi as “Threatened,” meaning “the language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.” Regardless of this perception, there is no doubt that Chukchi is moribund. Linguists who are presently working within Chukchi communities estimate that there are less than one thousand remaining speakers of any proficiency (Pupynina and Koryakov 2019). Chukchi is virtually not spoken by anyone under the age of fifty, and transmission to children has ceased entirely. Even in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Chukchi is only learned as a second language by dedicated ethnic Chukchi who want to reconnect with their heritage. In public schools, Chukchi is offered as a second language for only a couple of hours a week, with teachers reporting that they are unable to cover more than cultural terminology and basic phrases in this time.

This context is one of many reasons why it is critical for anyone with an interest in language to undertake the study of Chukchi. Languages which are undervalued economically, culturally, or politically are more likely to be lost—Chukchi faces staunch competition from Russian and English in all three domains. As such, any interest in the language, even from those



outside the community, bolsters its value in the eyes of the speakers. While some speakers feel ambivalent about the interest in Chukchi on the part of Russian linguists, given the fraught history between the two groups, the speakers I have met expressed unequivocal enthusiasm at the prospect of Chukchi being studied abroad. An interest in the Chukchi language among speakers of English—who have considerable cultural prestige in Siberia—could go a long way toward promoting the status of Chukchi among younger speakers.

There are other reasons to study Chukchi: for those with an anthropological interest in lifeways of the North, traditional knowledge is most faithfully expressed in a group's ancestral language. Chukchi has a wealth of terminology about reindeer husbandry and life in the tundra that is more revealing when knowledge of the internal structure of the terms is taken into account: for example, although the most basic term for a reindeer is *qoraŋə*, there are numerous other specific terms for reindeer that do not directly refer to them at all (e.g., *agtatjo* 'reindeer being herded to slaughter or reindeer that is not yet domesticated,' literally 'the one who is driven'). Chukchi is also unique in terms of its linguistic structure: it is a polysynthetic language, meaning it often expresses full clauses using a single word, making it very different from both Russian and English but quite similar to other Indigenous languages of North America.

It may not be reasonable to expect the average foreigner to become proficient in Chukchi, especially given a dearth of settings in which to practice speaking, but we need not set Chukchi fluency as our goal in promoting language learning and revitalization. For example, the younger members of the community may not use the language among themselves, but they are actively involved in creative domains of language use through translation, poetry, and musical composition.

For an interested learner, some degree of Russian knowledge (and certainly of Cyrillic orthography) is critical for engaging with most published materials (such as textbooks, dictionaries, phrase books, and the comprehensive grammars of Pjotr Skorik). Participation in online language groups would also require some Russian proficiency, since Chukchi conversations or discussion are typically framed in Russian (and there is considerable code-switching with Russian). Thus, Chukchi, along with the other languages discussed in this forum, is a prime example of a

culture that can be spotlighted via the study of the Russian language. An appreciation for the languages, cultures, and traditional knowledges of Russia's numerous ethnic groups is not typically emphasized by Russian degree programs, but it should be.

Still, for those without any Russian knowledge, more linguistically focused materials do exist, including an early grammar and dictionary written in English by Waldemar Bogoras (1922) and a more terminologically up-to-date grammar by Michael Dunn (1999). While the lack of pedagogical materials and learning opportunities presents challenges for English speakers looking to actually be able to speak Chukchi, the available materials are nevertheless of enormous value to Anglophone individuals looking to engage with Chukchi history and culture or to draw connections between the North American and Russian Arctic Indigenous contexts.

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## 6. Self-studying the Sakha (Yakut) language (Anna Gomboeva)

The Russian language is a difficult one to learn, but even a mere familiarity with the Cyrillic alphabet opens opportunities to learn some of the non-Slavic languages that utilize this alphabet. Even without advanced Russian, it is possible to study the Indigenous languages of Siberia. Here I will share resources for the self-study of the Sakha (Yakut) language and discuss problems that a learner of this language might encounter.

*Саха Тыла* 'Sakha Tyla' belongs to the Turkic family of languages and is the language of the Yakut people of Northeastern Siberia. According to the latest Russian census, there are approximately 450,000 speakers of this language, the majority of whom live in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiia) (Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki 2010). Although the number of speakers is quite large in a Siberian context, Sakha is still considered a vulnerable language because the percentage of fluent speakers has declined over the last fifty years (Moseley 2010).

Why learn the Sakha language? Besides the opportunity to watch critically acclaimed contemporary Sakha cinema without subtitles, learners can access the rich and understudied literary history of this nation. Sakha literature includes ancient epic tales such as *Олонkho* 'Olonkho,' as well as contemporary novels, poems, and tales reflecting on Sakha life under Russian or Soviet rule. Many of these literary works have never been translated into Russian or English. Learning more about Sakha culture can help diversify our knowledge of Russia and the Soviet Union.

Sakha language textbooks for self-study are rare, but it is still possible to find them online. Perhaps the most well-known and extensive Sakha language textbook for Russian speakers is *Самоучитель якутского языка*, 'A Guide for Self-Study of the Yakut Language' by L. N. Kharitonov (1987). Because this is a Soviet textbook, it includes terms related to life in a kolkhoz, political concepts, titles of administrative positions, and other period-specific vocabulary. This textbook might not be a good source of contemporary vocabulary, but its exercises are very useful for those who want to learn grammar.

The more recent Sakha textbook *Поговорим по-якутски: Самоучитель языка Саха*, 'Let's Speak Yakut: A Guide for Self-Study of the Sakha Language' by D'iachkovskii et al. (2018) has been reprinted several times since 2002. More of a learner's guide than a textbook, it does not include exercises but provides a review of contemporary grammar and phonology as well as a glossary. Even in the latest editions, the book includes some Soviet-era vocabulary such as *товарищ* 'comrade' and *эксплуатация* 'exploitation.' The glossary also includes administrative positions in the regional government and agricultural terms. Both textbooks use phonetic examples from Russian, English, and German to illustrate the pronunciation of seven Sakha-specific letters.

Although having a good command of Russian is very useful when learning Sakha, it is not a prerequisite for self-study. English speakers or linguists interested in the Turkic family of languages can study Sakha using John R. Krueger's *Yakut Manual* (1997). The manual includes a brief history of the Sakha people and their language, an extensive grammar overview, reading exercises, and a very extensive Sakha-English glossary.

As for dictionaries, SakhaTyla.Ru is an online Sakha-Russian dictionary and a great electronic self-study resource ("Sakha-Russian Online Dictionary" 2021). A SakhaTyla.Ru app is available for Android and Apple phones as well. Besides an online dictionary, it provides full electronic versions of Kharitonov's (1987) and D'iachkovskii's (2018) textbooks, as well as several other textbooks. The online dictionary, unlike most Soviet glossaries and textbooks, shows that learners can use loan words or foreign words both in their Russian spelling and in the current Sakha spelling. For example, when translating the word telephone from Russian into Sakha, the dictionary allows users to choose if they want to spell *телефон* in Russian or use the Sakha spelling *түлүпүөн*.

As for complementary learning materials, YouTube provides plenty of resources. A Sakha-speaking YouTuber known as Yakut Voice (2021) translates popular American YouTube videos and scenes from Hollywood movies and makes voiceovers in the Sakha language. Those who are interested in local cinema would enjoy award-winning psychological dramas such as *Костёр на ветру* 'The Bonfire' (2016) and *Пугало* 'Scarecrow' (2020), World War II dramas such as *Снайпер Саха* 'Sakha Sniper' (2010), or even the low-budget zombie horror film *Республика Z* 'Republic Z' (2018). There are also many Sakha-speaking communities on VK.com and TikTok, as well as popular Sakha-speaking musicians such as Күһнэй ('Kunnei'). Although a Sakha as a Second Language curriculum is hard to come by, this diversity of resources presents opportunities for students to create their own curriculum and perhaps enjoy the freedom of creative self-study of one of the Indigenous languages of Russia.

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### 7. Finding connections on the Juhuri Internet (Hilah Kohen)

Poet, pedagogue, and social worker Batsion Abramova describes the Juhuri language (*zuhun çuhuri*) in ecological terms. In her lyric "*Zuhun dadaji*," or 'Mother Tongue,' Juhuri is *səs zym-zymə biloqhoji* 'the quickening voice of the springs' in the Caucasus Mountains, or *ixtilothoj budoqhoji* 'the conversations of the branches.' These branches stem from Jewish textual roots: Juhuri is *tufon Nyvəh* 'Noah's deluge' or Moses's gift of *əz sər ən sənq dəh kəlmə* 'ten phrases carved in stone.' Ultimately, though, the Juhuri community moves beyond its land-based heritage in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, and Azerbaijan; it withstands cultural assimilation in Moscow, Brooklyn, and Israel through a new identity based on contemporary language use. In Abramova's poem, the cultural mothers and foremothers (*dadajho*) who imbued Juhuri with their words call on a new generation to learn those words and contribute their own (Qəlbınur 2012, 6–7).<sup>3</sup>

Across generations, today's contributions tend to happen online. While Juhuri activists do interface with the Russian Federation's (RF) programs for Indigenous languages, their communities are spread across a multicontinental diaspora (Gavrilov 1990; Bram 2008; Borjian and Kaufman 2015). For this reason, not every Juhur (Kavkazi Jew) can learn Juhuri from a nearby family member or a community school. Print

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<sup>3</sup> Bəsti Qəlbınur is the pen name of Batsion Abramova. Juhuri has used orthographic systems based on Ancient Hebrew, Azerbaijani Latinized, Azerbaijani Cyrillic, and Russian Cyrillic scripts. Rather than adapting existing English transliteration systems for these languages, I transcribe all Juhuri text into the Juhuri Latinized alphabet developed by Iakov (Jəhəqy) Agaronov.

resources are scarce; in English, they are practically nonexistent. This brief introduction to the range of online resources now available for Juhuri language study can therefore serve as a gateway for English-speaking Juhurho and their present or future allies to begin building fluency – not in isolated self-study but in connection with cultural leaders. Meanwhile, for Russian language instructors, this piece points to engaging authentic materials that may particularly benefit students interested in Jewish identity. The combination of resources available on WhatsApp, Skype, YouTube, and the media portal STMEGI (led by German Zakharyaev and David Mordekhaev) has made it possible within the last five years to learn and teach Juhuri across and outside the diaspora (STMEGI 2021b). Drawing on my studies with Batsion Abramova and theater director Eva (Joršo) Shalver-Abramova (no relation), I will offer information that was previously unavailable in English about these new platforms dedicated to “the quickening voice of the springs.”

In 2014, the STMEGI Foundation established a library in Moscow, at Bol’shoi Spasoglinishchevskii pereulok 8/8. By 2017, civil servant Danil Danilov had led a successful effort to digitize that library, uploading hundreds of PDFs and audiobooks (STMEGI 2021a). At the time of this writing, STMEGI’s interface is available only in Russian, but a basic grasp of Russian is sufficient for Anglophone students to browse book covers, use illustrated dictionaries, and listen to bilingual Russian-Juhuri audiobooks (see Ifraimov 1991; Izgijajəva 1995; and Mikhailova 2021). The STMEGI-sponsored Facebook page *Академия языка джуури* ‘Juhuri Language Academy’ (<https://www.facebook.com/akademijahuri>) offers yet another resource: there, the young linguist Gennady Bogdanov and his team post vocabulary in English, Hebrew, and Russian. Russian readers can also use STMEGI’s library and Bogdanov’s 2019–20 textbook *Учебник языка горских евреев джуури* ‘Textbook of the Mountain Jewish Language Juhuri’ to pursue advanced proficiency. This two-volume set is the first resource of its kind for beginning Juhuri learners.<sup>4</sup> Bogdanov has also led the creation of a dictionary app, *Джуури Переводчик* ‘Juhuri Translator,’ with versions for the web and for mobile devices (STMEGI 2021c).

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<sup>4</sup> Bəsti Qəlbinur is the pen name of Batsion Abramova. Juhuri has used orthographic systems based on Ancient Hebrew, Azerbaijani Latinized, Azerbaijani Cyrillic, and Russian Cyrillic scripts. Rather than adapting existing English transliteration systems for these languages, I transcribe all Juhuri text into the Juhuri Latinized alphabet developed by Iakov (Jəhəqy) Agarovov.

STMEGI's journalistic and educational platforms are the most well-resourced media available for Juhuri language study, but they cannot be used in isolation from social communities, nor do they represent the entirety of today's digital revival. The WhatsApp group chat *Zuhun dadaji* 'Mother Tongue,' with eighty members and counting, holds weekly language lessons centered on translation and poetry. Its members frequently publish the results of this work through STMEGI and the Israel-based community center Sholumi. The Facebook group "Kavkazi Jewish History and Culture" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1906826196269634>), administered by Valeriya Nakshun, has become an online hub for English-speaking Juhurho. On TikTok, Narkis Rabaev (@narkis1987) posts comedy sketches, while on Instagram, Abram Yusufov's (2020) @savejuhuri project creates dubbed parodies of films like *Twilight* (Edward decides to marry Bella because she cooks her stuffed cabbage in the Shirvani style). Basic language lessons and popular Juhuri songs can be found on YouTube, as can English-subtitled oral histories from the Endangered Language Alliance. It is this incredible range of digital projects that enables present and future Juhuri speakers to locate themselves in contemporary communities, finding like-minded students to teach or teachers to learn from.

For me, a non-Juhuri graduate student in the US, the Juhuri Internet is where translation skills and literary scholarship take on a broad community impact. Online, I can reach out to teachers and writers, facilitating ties across the many languages used in the Juhuri diaspora. Meanwhile, Batsion Abramova has said that online classes and publishing forums can be a way to "plant a seed" both among today's Juhuri experts and among those who will carry the language forward (Abramova 2020). Her lessons on Skype, *Zuhun dadaji*'s 'Mother Tongue's' lessons on WhatsApp, and Gennady Bogdanov's transition from recent Juhuri learner to Juhuri educator all demonstrate that concerted engagement with online resources can facilitate advanced language education.<sup>5</sup> Much as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research has allowed online and in-person Yiddish revitalization efforts to supplement one another, and

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<sup>5</sup> This textbook can be purchased through the messaging function on the *Академия языка джуури* Facebook page, and a preliminary version is available at <https://stmegi.com/library/books/uchebnik-yazyka-gorskikh-evreev-dzhuuri/>

much as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) has combined online language materials with university partnerships, anyone who uses the resources described here to improve their own language skills can use that engagement to take part in long-term, communal efforts. For many English-speaking Juhurho, the JuNet promises connections with large communities overseas, including intellectual and creative circles that are constantly expanding the Juhuri language. For Russian language instructors and their students, Juhuri resources demonstrate how varied Jewish culture can be in the former Soviet space while contributing to the broader view of non-Russian cultures that this forum conveys.

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### **8. Learning Nivkh as an undergraduate (Dylan Charter)**

While learning or studying an Indigenous language of the Russian Federation (RF) as an undergraduate in the United States seems daunting, it is eminently possible. To gain access to language-learning resources and opportunities, students must set specific goals early on and work actively to create connections with the languages they want to study, as well as with knowledgeable academics and study-abroad or other programs. Professors also have a responsibility to support students' interests however they can.

Going into college, I knew I was interested in the languages of Siberia and the Far East. I also knew that English-language resources for learning these languages are unfortunately very limited, meaning that I would first have to learn Russian. One thing I knew little about was financial aid and study abroad opportunities at the schools I was applying to. However, I had the privilege and good fortune of ending up at a school with access to some of the best Russian instruction in the country, as well as generous funding for study on campus and abroad. Starting my study of Russian straightaway provided me with the best possible foundation for my eventual study of Nivkh, a severely endangered language isolate spoken on Sakhalin and in Khabarovsk Krai. Similar opportunities for accelerated language study and research are available across the US, from Wisconsin's Pushkin Summer Institute for high schoolers to the nationwide Undergraduate Think Tank to Advance DEI in REEES.

I committed during my first year in college to the Russian Flagship program, which provides funding for accelerated and long-term Russian study, from an immersive domestic summer program to a semester abroad in St. Petersburg and finally a capstone year in Almaty. These opportunities to rapidly improve my Russian further enabled my engagement with Nivkh, opening opportunities for immersive study in both languages.

Most schools don't have programs like Flagship, so it's important for any interested undergraduate to be aware of study opportunities both internal and external to their program. Such opportunities can include intensive summer programs like Arizona's Critical Languages Institute and Indiana's Language Workshop.

Cultivating relationships with professors and students with similar interests is also crucial. Most (liberal arts) institutions have professors of Russian, linguistics, anthropology, and other fields who can nurture a student's interests in the less commonly studied languages of Russia and help the student connect with online resources, additional study opportunities, and helpful colleagues. Just at my small college, I have been able to make invaluable connections with a Russian folklorist and translator; a Turkologist, phonetician, and computational linguist; a phonologist who works in West Papua; and a specialist in Tuvan who does language advocacy the world over. They have supported my academic ambitions; introduced me to conferences and other opportunities; taught me about linguistics and Russian; and spoken with me about language revitalization, the politics of language in Russia, how to teach linguistics, what work needs to be done to support endangered languages, and much else.

Linguistics courses are among the best ways to start working closely with undertaught languages. I first studied Nivkh in a computational linguistics course, in which I helped create a machine translator and morphological transducer for the language. This got me acquainted with the language itself—the structure, vocabulary, orthography, dialects, sociolinguistic situation—and with the scholars who have worked with Nivkh in the past. This was a very rewarding experience in itself, but it also set me up to take a Nivkh class at the Institute of the Peoples of the North when I was studying abroad in St. Petersburg.

In order to learn Nivkh during my time abroad, I had to start planning very early by determining at least a year in advance if the study abroad program would even allow it and then by reminding the coordinators several times throughout the application process and beyond that I wanted to take a class at the Institute (which is affiliated with but separate from the school where the program took place). When I got to St. Petersburg, a meeting was eventually set up with the Institute's Nivkh professor, and thanks to my genuine interest in and past experience

with the language, she agreed that I could take weekly classes with her through the end of the semester. These classes, the books she gave me, and the professional relationship we developed have been priceless in my continued studies of Nivkh.

Undergraduates in the United States have opportunities to learn Indigenous languages of the Russian Federation, and educators have a responsibility to support them. Students—especially non-Indigenous students—in turn have a responsibility to work with and for the Indigenous communities whose knowledge they have been given access to. Being persistent with professors and programs can pay off for interested students as well as for Indigenous communities.

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