

The Use of Historical Material for the Safeguarding of Endangered Languages

For the study of severely endangered and even extinct languages it is important to have access to data which have been recorded in the past. We discuss several projects about the reconstruction of these data, which can be used for the safeguarding of endangered languages and cultures.

During a stay in Siberia, local linguists told us about the history of the Yakut language. They mentioned the fact that the first written information on this language could be found in the book *North and East Tartary*, published in 1692 by the Dutch author Nicolaas Witsen. In 2010, a Russian translation of this book appeared, whereas in 2018, a team of scholars prepared a separate volume devoted to the study of all 26 language samples in Witsen's book, entitled *The Fascination with Inner-Eurasian Languages in the 17th Century*. The volume contains articles on these languages, such as Crimean-Tatar, Mordva, Manchu and Yukaghir.

In later times expeditions were sent to Eastern territories, where not only written reports, but also sound recordings were collected. Since 1995 many of these recordings form the basic collections in our collaboration projects with colleagues in Saint-Petersburg. In the programme *Voices of Tundra and Taiga* we combined the data from old sound recordings with the results of modern fieldwork, in order to describe the languages and cultures of ethnic groups in Russia. This information can be used for the preparation of text books on certain languages, collections of folklore, data on ethnomusicology and for the study of language contact, language change and migration movements.

The *Foundation for Siberian Cultures* has as one of its objectives the preservation of the indigenous languages of the Russian Federation and the ecological knowledge expressed in them. Scholars have travelled to Russia's Far East since the 18th century. Their descriptions republished in a digital library are still considered among the most important ethnographic documentations of the local indigenous peoples. These publications respond to the pressing need of local communities to sustain their cultural heritage. They provide useful materials for anthropological and linguistic research.

On the initiative of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great, the German researcher Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811) compiled a program and a questionnaire for collecting language material of the languages of the peoples of Russia and the whole world. He published a comparative dictionary in two parts (1787-1789), which later was followed by an augmented and amended version with 273 concepts in about 300 languages. The *Pallas Project* is a project which realized the digitizing of this comparative dictionary with more than 60.000 items. The material is still important for comparative linguistics and historical linguistics and it can answer all kinds of new linguistic and historical research questions. The items are sorted on concepts, words and languages and research is initiated about the various languages, the comparison with the modern languages, the origin of the material and other topics.

Paterswolde, 29 March 2021
489 words

Dr Tjeerd de Graaf

tdegraaf@fryske-akademy.nl

Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning

Foundation for Endangered Languages, UK (www.ogmios.org)

Foundation for Siberian Cultures, Germany (www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de)

Centre for Russian Studies at Groningen University (centreforrussianstudies.ub.rug.nl)