Thematic Section

Introduction: Language Sustainability in the Circumpolar North

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Abstract: This introduction serves to situate this special theme within the broader fields of language sustainability and language revitalisation and maintenance. It aims to highlight both the unique aspects of linguistic situations in the Circumpolar North as well as to present the under-theorised and practical concerns that speakers of Indigenous and minority languages in this broad region share with each other and speakers in similar linguistic ecologies worldwide.

Keywords: Circumpolar North, language sustainability, communicative practice, language maintenance, language endangerment, language ideologies

Résumé : Cette introduction vise à situer les contributions de ce volume dans le champ de la durabilité linguistique, de la revitalisation et de la préservation des langues. Il s'agira de mettre en évidence les aspects uniques des contextes linguistiques du nord circumpolaire, ainsi que de présenter les préoccupations théoriques et pratiques, jusqu'à présent peu décrites, que partagent les locuteurs des langues autochtones et minoritaires de cette vaste région et d'écologies linguistiques similaires de par le monde.

Mots-clés : Nord circumpolaire; durabilité linguistique; pratiques de communication; préservation des langues; langues en voie de disparition; idéologies linguistiques.

In the popular imagination, and even within more specialised academic circles, the Arctic and subarctic regions of the world continue to be perceived as spaces of sparse population density and, following this, with very little cultural or linguistic diversity. While not heavily populated relative to most other areas of the world, the circumpolar regions of North America and Eurasia still remain home to speakers of numerous diverse Indigenous languages, despite long histories of colonisation by external groups, thus making these regions a critical space for examining how processes of language endangerment, shift, or revitalisation play out.

We maintain a focus on the North as an area of endangerment in the sincere hope that the case studies presented in this collection prompt further discussions and possible comparative work on these challenges and conceptualisations of language sustainability. Northern areas are all currently facing demographic, cultural, social, economic, and political transitions, and these shifts all show some striking similarities in terms of the experiences of minority or Indigenous language speakers, despite the geographically disparate settings. Similar processes of early exploration and colonisation in the northern regions of all three countries mentioned here (Russia, the United States, and Canada) have likewise led to speakers of the languages discussed having analogous experiences under ruling powers, despite the particularities of their histories. However, many of these dynamics, including the micro-level (local) responses to macro-level national or international processes, policies, and influences, have remained insufficiently elucidated.

While not an exhaustive or complete survey of the Circumpolar North, three of our authors write solely about three different areas of the Russian Federation (the Republic of Karelia along with the Leningrad and Vologda oblasts; Udmurtia and neighbouring Tatarstan; and Sakhalin Island), one focuses on subarctic North America, and one bridges the two broader regions with work in Arctic Chukotka and Alaska. Languages discussed include

members of the Finno-Ugric, Tungusic, Eskimo-Aleut, and Athabaskan language families as well as language isolates (Nivkh), highlighting northern linguistic diversity. With the global North often conceived of in the popular imagination as remote or isolated, and cut off from the flows of globalisation, the articles here reveal not only the historic and ongoing interconnectedness of these regions (see Daria Schwalbe in this issue) but also the impact of migration (see Nadezhda Mamontova in this issue) and the development of diasporas in nearby regions (see Eva Toulouze in this issue) along with the possibilities afforded by new communication technologies (see Daria Boltokova and Laura Siragusa, both in this issue).

Relying on long-term fieldwork, our authors aim to reveal some of these more hidden and often ignored social dynamics to fully grasp their relevance when dealing with language sustainability. Therefore, we introduce ethnographic descriptions where the "invisible," the "minute," and the "everyday" offer multiple ways of tackling broader questions of endangerment and sustainability. In this sense, we do not attach our analysis to a more static approach to language sustainability as a policy or planning response to a worldwide discourse of language endangerment and loss. Rather, we are looking for moments of individual and collective negotiation with the diverse situated challenges that speakers face.

The main questions we aim to address in this collection are "what is language sustainability?" and "how do we conceive of it?" Instead of framing language sustainability within an approach to language which models it as a wholly bounded system whose "existence" can be threatened by external forces, we aim to appreciate how people negotiate their presence within their linguistic ecology while simultaneously engaging in ways of speaking (or writing). Perhaps our approach might be better phrased as: "what does language sustainability look like within communicative practice?" We, like many others, stress the fact that no language exists as a hermetic entity; all languages are part of a dynamic linguistic ecology, in that speakers are often multilingual and interact with speakers of other languages (see, among others, Bastardas-Boada 2002, 2007; Mühlhäusler 1996, 2000; Stanford and Whaley 2010). Albert Bastardas-Boada (2007, 139) has written, in calling for "a sociocognitive holistic approach" to language sustainability, that "the basic unit is not language, but the language-in-its-context." Many recent articles, such as those cited above, call for a "language sustainability" model for the maintenance of Indigenous and minority languages and tend to focus on policy and planning measures and best practices when discussing the approach. Here, we attempt to

discuss what it might look like when focusing on the communicative practices of speakers – the culmination of ideology, activity, and form (Hanks 1995).

Inspired by eco-linguistics and heavily relying on an understanding of language as a dynamic and situated phenomenon (Garner 2004; Mühlhäusler 1996, 2000; Siragusa 2015), we aim to understand how language choices made at the personal or collective level are dictated by continuous negotiations with the main social forces present at the time of performative speech (or writing) acts. These forces may include language ideologies and hierarchies, power relations, the economic situation, national and international policies, and so on. We aim to pay attention to these negotiations so as to better comprehend how they bear agency on efforts of revitalisation and, more broadly, on language sustainability. Therefore, we target those moments and social dynamics that reveal what happens to the speaker (or writer) at both a personal and intimate level and collectively with others when engaging in ways of speaking (or writing). We then seek to analyse whether or not these experiences match the revival goals established by language activists and language policy-makers (who may be situated at varying distances from the communities themselves). In our collection, language sustainability means appreciating what goes on among speakers/writers and the broader linguistic ecology through the examination of quotidian interactions in order to guarantee or sustain those multiple ways of speaking/writing. We attempt here to capture what Bernard Perley (2011) refers to as "emergent vitalities," the framings and practices that promote communication and actual use of a language rather than just the assessment or documentation of its endangerment.

To begin, Daria Boltokova's contribution approaches sustainability by investigating the role of youth who are not considered fluent speakers of a minority Indigenous language; what role do so-called semi-speakers play in sustaining their language? Here, she discusses the situation of the semi-speakers of Dene Dháh in the Dene Tha community of Chateh, Alberta, Canada, to reassess both standard enumeration practices used by outside researchers and institutions in determining language vitality as well as the role of these oft-overlooked speakers in maintaining a community's language. She re-examines Nancy Dorian's (1977) concerns that including semi-speakers in a speaker count could lead to a false sense of security for the ongoing sustainability of the language in question as well as misrepresenting the language. Other concerns also surface frequently in newer publications on language sustainability, such as Bastardas-Boada's (2007, 155) observation of the "tendency to create mixed

varieties," which makes establishing situations of linguistic sustainability "really difficult." By implying that such ways of speaking are unfavourable, semi-speakers and code-mixing practices may become further stigmatised.

Boltokova reveals a host of ways in which the practices of school-aged Dene Dháh speakers, who conceive of themselves as "real speakers" even if they are not what might be considered fluent, use the language in their daily lives. Often, like her interviewee Laura, these youth connect the language with their cultural and moral identities: "If I speak Dene Dháh, then I am a good Dene Tha." While most "fluent" adult speakers do not always judge the linguistic skills of youth favourably and tend to prefer to use English with them, Boltokova shows that this does not preclude youth from attaching their own prestige to the language and using it with others in their age group, engaging with it on their own terms – listening to broadcasts in the language on their iPods and using mobile apps. Boltokova's work highlights the need to consider youth agency in language socialisation and transmission among northern minority language speakers as well as new, heterolinguistic practices when examining the ongoing sustainability of a language (see also Ferguson 2015 on Sakha; Wyman 2012 on Alaskan Yup'ik). The piece reminds us that even so-called "endangered" languages are dynamic, and, as she writes, "recognising young semi-speakers as 'real speakers' of a heritage language also forces us to recognise their cultural appropriations and mixed vocabularies as, potentially, positive instances of a younger generation actually owning and expanding this language."

Next, in her piece on Yupik language spanning two continents, Daria Morgounova Schwalbe looks at differing conceptions of sustainability and language ideologies in Novoe Chaplino, Russia, and in Gambell on St. Lawrence Island in Alaska. Related Yupik speakers have been living on both sides of the Bering Strait, experiencing varying degrees of integration into the Russian and American states; in Russia, many Yupiks are now predominantly Russian speakers, whereas on the American side, St. Lawrence Island has remained a region where intergenerational transmission of Yupik is stronger. Engaging with everyday talk to examine what she calls sustainability "on the ground" or "from within," Schwalbe looks at the ways these micro-interactional settings engage with macro-institutions and how speakers are influenced by – but also challenge – ideologies of linguistic purity to sustain Yupik language practices. She also charts each Yupik group's orientation to their nation-state and to each other and how this affects language ideologies and, ultimately, Yupik language practices.

Like Boltokova, she calls for an understanding of language as being more fluid, with attention paid to bilingual language practices. Even on the Russian side, where many perceive the level of Russification to be high and the number of fluent speakers low, Schwalbe reveals that Yupik is still spoken. As one young person told her, "but of course we speak Yupik, we use Yupik words all the time." These words, as she notes, help to "mark their loyalties and group belonging," even if the speakers are not considered fluent. On the American side, there is more hesitation expressed toward code-mixing, but this purism seems to have helped maintain Yupik where it is already more vital. These contrasting approaches to code-mixing have each led to supporting language sustainability in the two different communities, revealing how local histories and ensuing ideologies and attitudes deeply shape what sustainability looks like for the same language in each case.

Moving to the Russian Federation, Nadezhda Mamontova focuses on Sakhalin in northern Russia's Far East, which is traditionally a region where Nivkh, Uilta, Evenki, and Nanai live. Colonisation by Russia and Japan and immigration from Korea has added to the historically complex ethno-linguistic situation on the island. Hired as a consulting anthropologist by an energy company seeking to provide support for language sustainability in the form of funded programs, Mamontova's task was to provide recommendations for the maintenance of these languages. As she explains, however, models of linguistic communities that ignore diversity as well as local ways of understanding (ethno-linguistic) identity are not likely to produce positive sustainability results for their speakers.

Critiquing both ethnic identity models as well as top-down development programs circulated or enacted by the Russian state, Mamontova presents interviews with Sakhalin islanders that highlight their fluid identities that do not map easily along ethnic or linguistic lines, even within the same family, and challenge outside ideologies and definitions of authenticity and Indigeneity. She highlights the issues that reveal how the top-down outsider views of sustainability often bear little resemblance to those produced by the communities themselves, calling attention to new ways for attending to superdiversity (Blommaert 2010, 2013; Blommaert and Rampton 2011) in a peripheral region, showing that this phenomenon is not restricted to urban metropolises. This piece highlights the importance of understanding languages as interacting within a dynamic eco-linguistic system; in many cases, you must plan for language(s) not by considering a single language and its speakers as a singular phenomenon or group but, rather, by constantly attending to the ways in which languages and speakers are always in contact in each other.

Next, Eva Toulouze discusses the situation of Udmurt, a Finno-Ugric language spoken in northern Russia to

the west of the Ural mountains in the Republic of Udmurtia as well as in the surrounding regions of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Subject to marginalisation, just as other minority languages have been, the standard language, which was developed in the 1920s, was taught in schools but disappeared from public life over the duration of the Soviet period. However, as in many regions of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, ideologies concerning the connection of ethnicity and language flourished in the early 1990s in Udmurtia, with language taking on what Toulouze calls "existential value in a person's self-definition" ("*une valeur existentielle dans l'autodéfinition d'une personne*"). She details the language revitalisation movements that began at that time, discussing intervening factors such as rurality and urbanity as well as interventionist language policy. Her discussion of the latter reveals how top-down state and educational policies may not always have an impact on maintenance if the prevailing ideologies among speakers do not also work to support revitalisation from the bottom up.

Toulouze also attempts to account for how and why the Udmurt language is sustained outside the Udmurt Republic more strongly than within it; in the neighbouring southeastern region of Bashkortostan, where those claiming Udmurt identity are only a small minority living in a few villages but where the language, especially the oral form, remains vital. She illuminates how, as mentioned in an interview with I. Reshetnikova, the choice of the language spoken in the family depends less on state policy than on where that person lives. In the diasporic villages outside the Udmurt Republic, Udmurt may still remain strong due to geographical and communal coherence; the compact settlements with steady rural economies provides speakers with a fruitful environment in which to speak the language. Examining both policy and the communicative practices of speakers, she highlights the importance of the broader "environmental" factors that are needed to sustain a language. With the 2014 sale of a collective farm and increasing numbers of young people moving to Russian-dominant cities (for example, Ekaterinburg), these sustainability factors are placed in a precarious situation. Finally, Tatar and Bashkir cultures, she also notes, seem to view multilingualism as being more acceptable than does the Russian culture that dominates in the Republic of Udmurtia. This, too, may account for its relative strength.

Finally, Laura Siragusa's article examines another Finno-Ugric minority language in the Russian Federation – Vepsian, which is spoken in the Republic of Karelia and in the Vologda and Leningrad oblasts in the far northwestern part of the country. She takes an approach to sustainability by looking at the Veps' conceptions of secrecy, and how this factor helps to maintain the language. In doing so, she also works from the perspective of a system of language ecology and "view[s] language use as the result of mutual relations with the main forces present in a place at a specific time." Many Veps are bilingual, speaking Russian and Vepsian, and their code-switching practices within this ecology are often used to encode information that is meant to be kept secret. These concealment practices, she argues, play a role in language maintenance and sustainability, just as they do in the Chukotkan Yupik case that Schwalbe describes. As in the Udmurt case discussed by Toulouze, urban-rural divides can be seen both in linguistic ideologies and in the language practices themselves. Many Veps, especially those in the rural spaces, are not entirely onboard with maintenance efforts that derive from the city or the top-down educational or other governmental policy measures. Siragusa also reveals that one's specific linguistic ecology affects how a speaker either embraces or rejects what language activists prescribe.

Thus, what those language-sustaining practices look like can differ. During the Soviet period, Vepsian was spoken secretly so as not to draw unwanted attention to oneself as being less than the ideal Soviet citizen, which could lead to deportation or other negative consequences. However, as Siragusa notes, secrecy functions in another way within this linguistic ecology – as a strategy of maintenance; Vepsian is now an "open" secret. Siragusa details avoidance registers and other verbal practices by which village Vepsian speakers use the oral language to protect others from both physical and psychological harm, as well as the ways in which young literate Veps use the language as a way of managing group boundaries and containing secret information in public spaces online.

In this issue, we hope to bring forward aspects of social life and highlight moments that are often considered irrelevant but which demonstrate that, in fact, they are of crucial importance when trying to comprehend the complexities that language sustainability comprises. As mentioned, these include, but are not limited to, the agency of youth speakers; creative processes when using new technologies; the role of so-called semi-speakers; concealment practices and social boundaries; superdiversity; the connections and disjunctures between language and identity; and ideologies concerning language purity. By doing so, we challenge more traditional approaches to language sustainability that count on a discourse of endangerment and language death (see

Siragusa 2015), that focus solely on a policy-making aspect rather than also examining speakers' responses to the planning, or that heavily rely on statistics (see Boltokova in this issue). Rather, we attempt to home in on the relational and creative processes involved in language use, in attempts to illustrate what northern language sustainability looks like within everyday communicative practice, as a response to the broader social forces at work. Each of the authors in this issue are thus interested in what Bernard Perley (2011) calls "emergent vitalities" and, thus, the concomitant social relationships that sustain fluid, dynamic forms of communicative practice.

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