

NOTES AND REVIEWS

THE CONCEPT OF WORK IN YUPIK ESKIMO SOCIETY BEFORE AND AFTER THE RUSSIAN INFLUX: A LINGUIST'S PERSPECTIVE

How people's attitude to work changed with time, place, and circumstances [...] – our knowledge of it is fragmentary, uncertain and disconnected (Febvre 2009 [1948]: 364).

INTRODUCTION

The Yupik language, like probably most languages of the world, has a stem meaning 'work' – *qepgha(gh)-*. In Yupik, verbal and nominal derivation is very well developed: the language is considered a prototypical polysynthetic language (see de Reuse 2006). Consequently, the stem *qepgha(gh)-* is broadly used for word formation, for example *qepgha-q* 'work' (noun), *qepghagh-tuq* 'he works', *qepghagh-ta* 'worker', *qepghagh-yugunga* 'I wanted to work', *qypgha-qiisek* 'one having nothing to do, bored person' (see Jacobson 2008: 408).

This stem and its derivatives were and are widely used in Yupik speech; however, the scope of meaning of these derivatives has changed drastically after the Russians came to Chukotka to stay in 1930s. The present paper* describes this change.

I will first very briefly describe the group of speakers and the contact situation of the language, list the methodology and the sources of the research, and then show first the pre-contact, and then the post-contact usages and meanings of the derivatives. I will show that, although the phrases containing *qepgha(gh)-* derivatives in today's Yupik remain syntactically and morphologically Yupik, semantically they are a replica of Russian. I will conclude with some analysis of what this fact can mean for the understanding the transformation of Yupik society over the last 60–70 years.

THE GROUP AND THE PERIODS OF CONTACT

Siberian Yupik (Eskimo) is a highly endangered language of the Bering Strait area,¹ currently spoken by not more than 200 people on the Chukotka peninsula (the extreme north-east of the Russian Federation), primarily in the villages of Novo-Chaplino and Sireniki and in the towns of Providenia and Anadyr, and by approximately 1,000 people on St. Lawrence Island (the extreme west

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of the USA) in the villages of Gambell and Savoonga (see Badten et al. 1987; Jacobson 1990; 2001; de Reuse 1994; Vakhtin 1997 for details). This paper deals exclusively with the data from the Russian side of the area.

Briefly, there were the following periods of language contact in Chukotka: (a) the pre-contact period (that is, prior to contact with the incoming ‘white’ population: contact with the neighbouring Chukchi people and their language was always present); (b) the late 18th and early 19th century: first contact with Russian merchants and Cossacks; (c) mid-late 19th century: contact with American merchants and whalers; (d) 1930s: increasing influence of the Russian language through

school education, administration, new jobs, etc.; (e) from the late 1950s onwards: intensive contact with the Russian language when the policy of ‘industrial development of the North’ was created by the central government in Moscow and thousands of Russian-speaking ‘newcomers’ poured onto Chukotka. The economic crisis of early 1990s caused many Russian newcomers to leave Chukotka, decreasing the total population drastically and consequently increasing the proportion of the indigenous population. Table 1 illustrates the demographic changes in the area (for more details, see Menovshchikov 1965; Vakhtin and Lyarskaya 2004).

Table 1. Yupik Eskimo Population in Chukotka: Percentage of the Total Population.

Census Year	Total Population of Chukotka	Of which, Yupik Eskimo	Yupik Eskimo, %
1926	13,500	1,293	9.58%
1939	21,456	1,300	6.06%
1959	46,689	1,118	2.39%
1970	101,184	1,265	1.25%
1979	132,859	1,510	1.14%
1989	157,528	1,704	1.08%
2002	53,137	1,750	3.29%
2010	50,526	1,736	3.44%

Adapted from IWGIA 1991: 13; Etnicheskoye 1987: 67, 101; Census 2002 and 2010.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

My sources belong to two different epochs: (a) Yupik Eskimo texts recorded by Yekaterina Rubtsova in the 1940s (Rubtsova forthcoming), that is, in the pre-(intensive) contact period, and (b) a modern Russian-Yupik dictionary compiled by Natal’ya Radunovich (2014), a teacher of Yupik Eskimo in the Anadyr college, published three generations later. I also use some data

from another Eskimo language – Sirineq – recorded in the 1940s by Rubtsova, and in late 1950s and 1960s by Georgiy Menovshchikov.²

Comparing word meanings and usages from those two bodies of data allows one to see the difference that can be interpreted as a result of the language change under heavy pressure of Russian, the dominant language since late 1950s.

'PRE-CONTACT' MEANING
AND USAGE

For the pre-(intensive)contact times, we have texts of three types. In **folklore texts**, the stem *qepgha(gh)-* is used to convey three types of meaning:

a) *qepgha(gh)-* 'house work'. Examples: *aghnaq siinumi qepghaamalghi neqméng* 'the woman in the storeroom began **to cook** meat'; *naanga kingúnganéng uglávniqáqelghi, allághhiinaq qepghághaqéhkanga* 'his mother after him [after he returns from hunting] becomes busy, various **work she does**';

b) *qepgha(gh)-* 'processing the carcass of a killed animal'. Examples: *kaasaghtúghyaqenni angyálghun aghvéghteng kangllúluuku qepghághaqéftat* 'when he came closer [he saw that] a group of skin boats surrounded the whale and **are processing it**'; [...] *aghvéngelghím paniiga tamaani qepgháyuhtáqeftuq neghílimikun alíghluni* '[...] daughter of [the man who] killed the whale, it appeared, **was working** [=cutting the meat] pulling one arm out through the neck of her overalls';

c) *qepgha(gh)-* 'workman, help'. Examples: *llaaghanhwá aghnaaghaq alígnaghnilukú umélgughtésqumákanga puuruu umiillkuvínghaq qepghághhtengúghlluni* 'and so he took the girl for a shaman and made her the head [of the village], and the former head **became her workman**'.

These three kinds of usage exhaust the scope of the stem meaning. In **narratives**, however, the number of meanings and usages increases, and *qepgha(gh)-* acquires new meanings. In following example, the narrator is referring to his work for an American whaling boat. These boats used to hire Yupik men who were experienced whale hunters: [...] *anglíyalghiinga qepghqáyuhtaanga amáarakáni* '[...] when I grew up **I began to work** for the Americans'. Clearly, in this sentence the stem already means something different.

Next example is a telling sentence – *llaaghanhwá maaten qepghánemtá akílegh-túnghinkút maníngemtá – llangáqa whangkúta faktuuri sanqútut* 'and so now **when we work** when we are paid, we are given money – as if there are our goods in the trading post'. The narrator apparently had just discovered the meaning of money and was expressing his surprise: lo and behold, with money we can go to the trading post and take whatever we want as if it were ours!

The third text type where we encounter the stem *qepgha(gh)-* is *ad hoc* **songs**. This genre was widespread among the Yupik people, especially younger people: these were short, two-to-three line songs containing meaningless chants (vocalisations like *a-ia-ia-ia-ia* or *a-nga-nga-nga-*, etc.) as well as some meaningful words. The singer (usually a man, but not necessarily) sang what he saw, felt, or wished to express; sometimes the song was mocking. To give the reader an idea of this song type, here are English translations of a couple of songs: "What a nuisance this man is who sings non-stop, why are you singing all the time?" A song may be an expression of one's emotions: "Oh, I suffer, oh they offend me, oh they offend me, oh I suffer, I suffer because of my life." Sometimes the song borders on shamanic incantation: "Why do they say that you don't trust me? I will walk you around the tent, will spin you, why do they say you don't sing songs smiling, laughing?" Some resemble Japanese *tanka*: "I am getting bored here in Mainyrak because of a long spell of bad weather and a north-easterly wind".

In the 1940s, new topics appear in these *ad hoc* songs (I will skip the Eskimo line and provide just the translation): "Members of the kolkhoz, sing your song, remember **the work we have to do**, it should result in fulfilling the plan with the help of our girls by the New Year." Evidently, the content of this song is evoked by Soviet administrative reform: collectivisation, which began

in Chukotka in around 1930 (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013: 237–238). The meaning of the stem *qepgha(gh)-* here differs considerably from the traditional one.

Another *ad hoc* song goes as follows: “Listen [when I sing] about my **work** with apostrophes, which is done swiftly and smoothly.” This song was sung by Rubtsova’s informant, a man who helped her transcribe Yupik folk stories – she recorded the song and added it to the collection.

So far, all examples have come from the same source: Rubtsova’s Siberian Yupik texts. In a related language, Old Sirineq (*uqeghllistun*) (see Vakhtin 2000), a language now practically extinct, the situation with the stem meaning ‘work’ in the texts recorded (also by Rubtsova) in the 1940s and early 1950s is similar. There are two stems used in traditional texts that are translated into Russian as ‘work’: *afta-* ‘cut, butcher’ (Yupik *afta-* has the same meaning), and *utseme-* ‘work’ (cp. Yupik *ulima-* ‘make, build’). In 460 pages of text, there are eight occurrences of both stems. The contexts and meanings of *afta-* are the same as in Yupik Eskimo: ‘process the carcass’. In one case, judging by the context, the stem means ‘to erect a tent’; and in two cases ‘to work in the house, to keep house’.

The stem *utseme-* occurs twice, meaning ‘(unspecified) work near the house’ in the first case and ‘to plain (a piece of wood)’ in the second.

POST-CONTACT MEANING AND USAGE

Let us start this section with examples of the Old Sirineq language. When looking at narratives (accounts of everyday events) recorded by Menovshchikov in the late 1950s and 1960s (also published in Vakhtin 2000), we see a drastic change in both usage and meaning. In just three short Sirineq nar-

ratives (five and half pages of Eskimo text), there are 16 occurrences of *afta-* (compared, let me reiterate, to 8 occurrences of both stems out of 460 pages of folklore texts!). The meaning is different from that of folk tales (compare to the examples presented above under folklore texts, section b): ‘now we behave well and we really **want to go to work**’; ‘**If we don’t work**, we won’t eat; **if we do work**, we will eat’, and ‘You have finished **working**; now you will do whatever easy **work** you wish’.

Some more meanings include ‘we must **work harder**’, ‘the head [of the Kolkhoz] doesn’t **give work** to me’ [=doesn’t tell me what I must do; hardly possible before the kolkhozes]; ‘people began to **work together**’ (as if they didn’t before); ‘**instruments of work** [mechanisms] appeared and it became easier to work’, etc.

To explain modern Yupik usage, I use as the source the Russian-Yupik dictionary compiled by Rodionova (2014). There are literally hundreds of contexts for the stem *qepgha(gh)-* ‘to work’; all usages and meanings of the word fully copy the Russian model.

Compare: to work = to have a job

<i>aqhnam</i>	<i>kayusiminkut</i>	<i>qayughllak</i>
woman	helped us	because
<i>alghighluku</i>	<i>qepghalghi</i>	<i>lagermi</i>
already	she worked	in camp

‘The woman helped us because she had already **worked** in the camp.’ Syntactically, this is a Russian sentence, but all the slots are filled with Yupik words.

to work = to be open, to be functioning

<i>amik</i>	<i>qellpalnguq</i>	<i>awilleqa</i>
door	is open	this means
<i>akillpegaghvik</i>	<i>salin</i>	<i>qepghaghaquq</i>
store	still	works

‘The door is open this means the store is still **working**.’ In this sentence, the stem

qepgha(gh)- 'to work' has an inanimate agent, which was impossible in the previous period: only humans could work, not a shop or a tractor.

to work = to do any kind of work

<i>naka</i>	<i>qepghaghaquq</i>
my mother	works
<i>atunekilluni</i>	<i>atammun</i>
same as	my father

'Mother works in a line with father.'

to work = to work as, to have a profession

qepghaghaqunga mumihstistengulunga
 'I work as a translator.'

to work = to do homework at school

qepghaghaqanka slleqsaghqanka maalghuk uzi-ivellghek
 'I usually work on my homework [for] two hours.'

The number of examples could easily be increased; it is clear, however, that the meaning of the stem *qepgha(gh)*- changed considerably between the 1940s and 1960s.

ANALYSIS

We see that already in the late 1950s in everyday Sirinek-language narratives not only is the meaning of the stem changed but the frequency of its occurrence also became much higher: unlike in the earlier period, people seem to be talking about work much more. In pre-contact times, people almost never mentioned work; it was natural, they just worked; later, they started reflecting on the new content of the concept 'work', and started talking about it.

The meaning of the concept changed perceptibly: 'work' was no longer something done voluntarily by every healthy member of the community; 'work' turned into a

(wage) job, into something where the goals, the length, and the expected results were determined not by the person who worked but by somebody else: by a superior. Consequently, the meaning of the words 'to work' was expanded to cover the new concept. The new meanings were borrowed from Russian. Not only the semantics, but also the syntactic contexts of the word became a replica of Russian: the word acquired new dependent NPs, like evaluative adverbs and adjectives, as well as inanimate agents.

This new language apparently reflected the new world where 'work' acquired new qualities: one could now work little or much, hard, willingly, much better, for a good salary or for free, etc. Compare some further examples (only English translations are given): my friends both **work**, so they live affluently; I **work a lot** but I am getting a good salary for it; he **works hard**; he **works gladly**; finally he was **fed up to the back teeth with working**; he began to **work better**; a teacher's **work is important**, it is **the best**, although it is **hard**. 'Work' can now be useless, uninteresting, collective or individual. 'Work' turns into an object that one can have or not have, can get or lose, that can be permanent or temporary. The dictionary (Rodionova 2014) gives Eskimo equivalents: to temporarily have no job; to leave somebody without a job; to find a job; to lose a job. Note that, in order to convey this new meaning, one has to use a different English translation for the above example: 'job', not 'work'.

'Work' now has limits in time – within a day (work starts at half past seven; we finished working and went home) or within a lifetime (I do not work, I am a pensioner). The dictionary gives 13 expressions containing the stem *qepgha(gh)*-, of which, not one single occurrence corresponds with the old meaning: there is no 'cutting the meat' and no 'work in the house'. There is only

abstract 'work' – a job, something people do for money. The alienation of the worker from the work³ is complete.

CONCLUSION

When a new object, artefact, or concept appears, human language has only three mechanisms to create a word for it: to borrow the term from another language, to invent a new word, or to extend the meaning of an existing term to cover the new territory. Like any other language, Yupik has used all three techniques in the past: it borrowed a lot, first from Chukchi, later from American English, and in the recent decades extensively from Russian (de Reuse 1994; Golovatskaya 2008). It created new words to name phenomena like hospital, school, or book. In the case analysed in this article, Yupik chose the third way: extending the meaning of *qepgha(gh)-*, which used to mean 'housework, etc.' to cover the vast territory of the wage job.

For the traditional Yupik society,⁴ work was an inalienable part of everyday life: people lived because they worked; people worked in order to be able to exist; work was life, life was work. During the early Soviet

period, this understanding of work was first complemented and later substituted by a new concept, work as something opposed to leisure or free time; now people worked in order to earn free time during which they could afford not to work.

This change in the concept of 'work' reflects the serious social changes that took place in the Yupik world as a result of the modernisation process of the 1950s and 1960s. It is a sign of the deep transformation that Yupik society underwent under Russian (Soviet) influence. This case can be regarded as a tiny speck in the global mosaic of "the great transformation" (Polanyi 2001 [1944]).

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1 According to the 2010 census, 39.3% of the Yupik population claimed Yupik to be their 'native language' (compare 84.0% in 1959); however, as a source of information about actual language competence the census figures are understandably extremely inaccurate, one of the reasons for this being the unclear and ambiguous meaning of the term 'native language'.

2 The present author has studied and documented the Yupik Eskimo language since 1974, when his first fieldwork period in Novo-Chapline, Chukotka, took place. Between 2009 and 2013, he prepared the above-mentioned Yupik texts, collected by Rubtsova, for publication (Rubtsova forthcoming). He also has a connection to the other source, Natalia Rodionova's dictionary, as he was one of the reviewers of the dictionary.

3 The *alienation* of the worker from his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him (Marx 1844).

4 Not only Yupik, of course. Similar processes, in all probability, were taking place all over Siberia and the North in the mid-20th century. An interesting parallel can be found in a recent book (Mikhaylova 2015) about the life of Varvara Kuznetsova with the Chukchi. The author describes awkward social position in which Kuznetsova found herself: she was an ethnographer who spent three years (1948–1951) with a nomadic Chukchi family. From the point of view of the Chukchi, the only justification for her lengthy stay could be her 'work' as one of the women in the tent. Kuznetsova, on the other hand, regarded her role in the tent in a totally different way: she was a researcher and a *Kulturträger*, and could not and would not 'work' with skins or cook. This collision of two different understandings of 'work' is convincingly described in Mikhaylova 2015: 127–131.

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