



Finnisch-Ugrische Mitteilungen

FINNISCH-UGRISCHE MITTEILUNGEN



Begründet von István Futaky

Band 44

Herausgegeben von
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HELMUT BUSKE VERLAG
HAMBURG

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Anschrift des Verlages:

Helmut Buske Verlag GmbH
Richardstr. 47
22081 Hamburg
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Fax: (040) 299 36 14
www.buske.de/FUM

Finnisch-Ugrische Mitteilungen

44. Jahrgang 2020
ISSN 0341-7816
ISBN 978-3-96769-053-8
ISBN eBook 978-3-96769-054-5

Cardinal directions in Selkup

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Abstract

The paper deals with the denotations of the main cardinal points in Selkup, taking all three main dialect groups (Northern, Central and Southern) into account.

The naming of cardinal points is not well studied for Selkup, there is a lack of analysis of the underlying semantic structure of the denominations – this study aims at closing that research gap and giving some insights in environmental and cultural factors playing a role in expressing cardinal points.

The paper has the following structure: after a brief introduction, the current state of research is presented as well as the data used in the study, the main section deals with the analysis of the underlying structures in denoting south/north and east/west. The findings are summarized in the final section.

Key words: Selkup, cardinal points, spatial cognition

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe the semantic structures of the main cardinal point denotations in Selkup and to analyse the elements, by which the Selkup orient themselves in space.

In the past two decades, writings on relations between culture, language and cognition have progressively increased (cf. Levinson 2003, Thiering 2018). Within this framework of cognitive science, spatial perception is investigated to examine whether and how language reflects thinking and experiencing (cf. Pick – Acredolo 1983, Evans – Green 2007). Spatial perception is the acquisition, organisation and use of knowledge about spatial environments (Levinson 2003), and it is obvious, that the environment in which a person has grown up or lives has an influence on the language used, as this is the means by which one expresses spatially experienced things.

As the research of the British anthropologist Levinson has shown, there are three basic spatial frames of reference (cf. Levinson 2003: 55):

- (1) **Intrinsic:** Observation starting from the object
- (2) **Relative:** Observation starting from the observer
- (3) **Absolute:** Viewing from the environment, independent of the observer and object

An example for an absolute frame of reference are the cardinal points. The present article seeks to examine the Selkup designations for the four main cardinal points¹ north, south, east and west and thus contributes to an understanding of the linguistic representation of cognitive perception of a representative of the Samoyed branch of the Uralic language family. The analysis is based on a data set, extracted from ethnographic and lexicographic works as well as two Selkup language corpora.

The Selkup live between the rivers Ob and Yenisey in Western Siberia – according to the 2010 census there are 3,649 people, of whom 1,024 (28.04%) speak Selkup as their mother tongue.² The Selkup language is divided into three major dialect areas – Northern, Central and Southern Selkup with further dialects, which are presented in the following table:

Table 1: Dialects of Selkup (following Glushkov et al. 2011: 52)

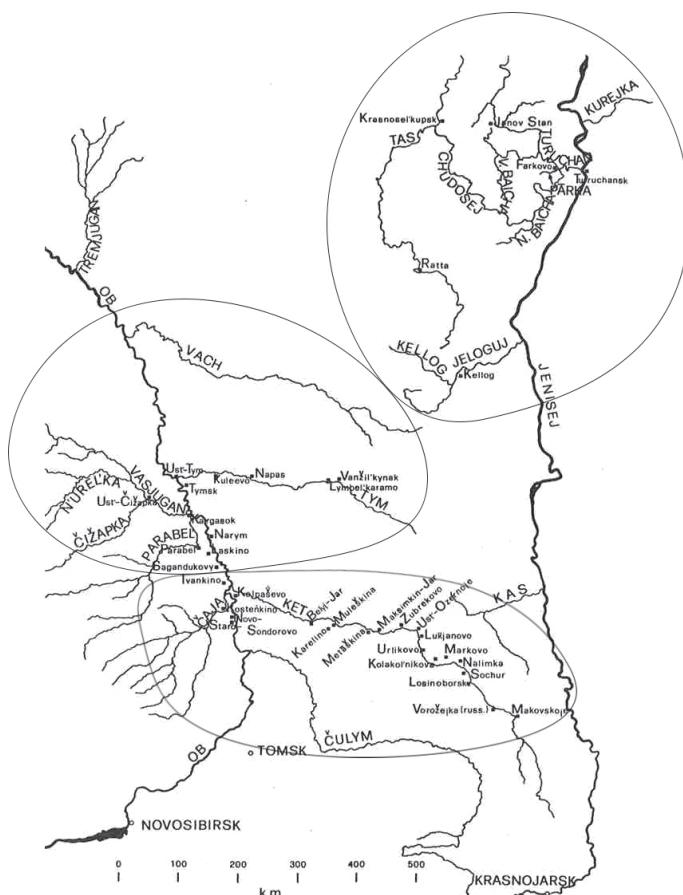
Northern	Central	Southern
Taz	Vakh	Middle Ob
Laryak	Tym	Chaya
Karasino	Vasyugan	Ket
Turukhan	Narym	Upper Ob (†)
Baikha		Chulym (†)
Eloguj		

Traditionally the Selkup live by hunting and fishing (cf. e.g. Tuchkova et al. 2012), furthermore the northern settlement groups are engaged in reindeer husbandry on a small scale (Khomich et al. 2002: 46–57). These forms of economy suggest that forests and rivers as well as the tundra with its typical landscape are central environmental elements, which can influence the spatial perception of the Selkup. Map (1) below shows on the one hand the dialect areas of the Selkup language, on the other hand the fact, that most of the Selkup settlements are located near the rivers Ob and Yenisey and their tributaries.

¹ Subordinated cardinal points are not taken into account, as there is no evidence of use in Selkup in general.

² https://rosstat.gov.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm (last access on 24.08.2020)

Map 1: Dialects and settlements (Katz 1979: 233, own marking)



The present paper has four main sections: section 2 describes the current state of research, section 3 deals with the examined language material, section 4 presents the analysis of the semantic structures of the designations for north/south and east/west and section 5 summarizes the results.

2. State of research

Up to now, only a few works deal with the topic of spatial perception in Uralic languages and cultures (see e.g. Hajdú 1951, Sipőcz 2006 and Islamov 2006). Although the work of Polyakova (2006) focuses on the concept of “space” in Selkup, cardinal points are not taken into account. Beőthy (1967) has examined the Cardinal points only for the Finno-Ugric languages. She has compiled evidence from a variety of sources for all languages, which she then has examined for the semantic structures underlying them and has classified them in terms of their motivation for naming. Based on the work of Tallqvist (1928), she has differentiated four main orientation models, whereupon the solar orientation is the most frequent one used in the Finno-Ugric languages (Beőthy 1967: 206–207):

- (1) Geographical orientation (upriver/downriver; mountains/lowlands; waterside/landside; localities; countries; meteorological conditions; seasons; wind directions; direction of flight of birds; housing)
- (2) Qibla orientation (one cardinal direction is set as the main direction and the others are grouped according to this direction)
- (3) Solar orientation (position of the sun)
- (4) Polar orientation (position of the stars)

So far, little attention has been paid to analyse the names for cardinal points in the Samoyedic languages. Kuz'mina (1977) has discussed some Selkup designations for the main cardinal points in a short article, in which she states:

The Selkup of the old generation do not know the names of the cardinal points north, west, south and east. Their most important orientation is the direction where the sun rises and sets [...] and where the mornings and evenings are.

(Kuz'mina 1977: 73; translation U.K.)

Some examples from various dialects follow this statement, but only occasionally Kuz'mina analyses the semantic structures of the terms she has cited in more detail (see the example *n'ärnä* ‘northward’ (Kuz'mina 1977: 73).

Furthermore, some general works on language and culture of the Selkup have also listed examples for this lexical field (see Khomich et al. 2002; Kuznetsova et al. 1980; Tuchkova 2014), but they lack an exact analysis of the semantic structures and a comparison between the Selkup dialects.

However, a systematic investigation of these designations with regard to dialectal differences, the semantic structures underlying it and the cognitive processes behind it, is still a desideratum. The present work intends to fill this

scientific gap and thus hopes to contribute to the understanding of the spatial perception of the Selkup.

3. Language data under investigation

The data set examined in this article comes from the ethnographic and linguistic works mentioned above. In addition, the common dictionaries of Selkup (Erdélyi 1969, Alatalo 2004, Bykonya et al. 2005, Kazakevich – Budyskaya 2010) were a source for researching further terminology. Additionally, two Selkup language corpora were checked for the expression of cardinal points. Both corpora display all three main dialect groups, having a total of 408 texts, 17,009 sentences and 97,021 tokens. For more details about the corpora, see Brykina et al. 2018 and Budzisch et al. 2019.

The corpora were searched in different ways: as a first step, the cardinal points were searched in the English and Russian glosses, secondly, the free translations were checked for the mentioning of north, south, east and west; lastly the corpora were also checked manually. When examples are taken from the corpora, we give the reference presented in the corpus, hence all examples can be clearly identified, the naming indicates the speaker, the year of the recording, a short given title and the genre. Both corpora use the same transcription system (see Orlova et al. 2018 and Budzisch 2018), the findings from the other above mentioned sources were adapted to that system to keep the data comparable.

Altogether, we found 26 semantic structures for the four main cardinal points. They are distributed as follows: north (6), south (7), east (6) and west (7).

4. Semantic structures in the designation of cardinal directions

A look at the collected language data (cf. Appendix) shows that there are only a few single words to designate the four main cardinal points. Most terms are descriptive – they have the following word structure: adjective + noun. In many cases the descriptive terms are based on the element *peläk* ‘half, part, side’, which is used to designate paired things (see Kuznetsova et al. 1980: 168), indicating that north and south as well as west and east are conceived as paired, i.e. inseparably connected units.

In our analysis, we have to be alert to the fact, that in some dialects a designation does not have always the same meaning. Kuz’mina (1977: 73) has already pointed this out in her article, but she has not given any examples.

In the following presentation of our research results, we do not cite all dialectical forms for one designation – these are given in the appendix at the end of the article.