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Tundra Nenets: A Heritage Language in Its Own Land? Linguistic Identity and Language Loss

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Abstract: Through fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Arkhangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Krasnoye, and Saint Petersburg, this paper investigates the endangered status of Tundra Nenets, an underrepresented and understudied Samoyedic minority language in northern Russia. Criteria for assessing language endangerment are applied to Tundra Nenets while also taking into consideration the interplay between language identity, reactive ethnicity, negative attitudes, and state politics. The personal story of NC, a Tundra Nenets woman, serves as a case study and exemplifies the impact of decades of marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination on the cultural and linguistic identity. NC's narrative illustrates how negative attitudes are exacerbating the decline of Tundra Nenets, further threatening its survival. Because of its absence from schools and institutions, Tundra Nenets seems to be turning into a heritage language in its own homeland. This paper studies the complex interplay between identity, language, and societal pressures, illustrating the broader challenges faced by the Tundra Nenets and other minority communities in maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage. While the situation remains dire and political action is called for, efforts in boosting language awareness, documentation, and revitalization offer potential pathways for the preservation of Tundra Nenets, drawing on successful examples from other endangered language communities.

Keywords: Tundra Nenets; Samoyedic; language loss; language endangerment; fieldwork; ethnographic method; reactive ethnicity; language preservation; language documentation; Russian–Nenets bilingualism; heritage language



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1. Introduction

The Tundra Nenets (henceforth, TN) people belong to the so-called *korennyye malochislennyye narody Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* (abbreviated as KMNS; Engl. indigenous minority peoples of the north, Siberia, and the far east of Russia), a small-numbered indigenous people of the north. The TN people constitute the largest group amongst the KMNS. According to Eberhard et al.'s (2024) *Ethnologue*, their population consists of 24,500 speakers (2020 census), though their ethnic population is much higher overall, at 49,600 (2020 census). Despite being the largest KMNS language in Russia, TN is classified as being threatened. The language use can be described as follows:

“In Siberia most young people are still fluent in the language. On the European side, very few children learn it; young people tend to prefer Russian [...] and most speakers are middle-aged or older (Salminen 2007). Some young people, all adults, a few to half of children speak Nenets. Positive attitudes [...]” (Eberhard et al. 2024 via Salminen on language use)

In my fieldwork on TN in Arkhangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Krasnoye and Saint Petersburg between the years 2014 and 2016 a rather bleak picture emerged. I worked with a total of 20 speakers in this period. The speakers originated from the Kanin Peninsula, the Kolguev island, from the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO), as well as from the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YaNAO). The “positive attitudes” towards their own identity

and language could only be detected in young students of the Saint Petersburg Herzen University who were from YaNAO, i.e., the Siberian side. In Naryan-Mar and Krasnoye, where all of my consultants were elderly or middle aged, the threatened status of the language was palpable. Though de jure both TN and Russian are the official languages in NAO and while the Russian Constitution has been translated into TN, politicians and officials de facto rarely speak the language even if they are of TN origin.

After introducing some key concepts relevant for the paper in Section 2 and elaborating on TN as an endangered language in Section 3, I will focus on one personal story as a case study in Section 4. This story was told in the native Tundra Nenets language by one of my consultants (anonymized as NC). The narrative could, in some respects, be taken as exemplary. It shows which effects years of marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination have on an individual's cultural and linguistic identity. As TN is an endangered language, as illustrated in Section 3, the negative attitudes of its own speakers are catastrophic for the future of the language and the TN community as a whole.

The research questions this article strives to answer are as follows: How do the criteria of endangerment (Kibrik 1991) apply to TN? What role does "reactive ethnicity" (Schnell 1990; Weilenmann 2000; Diehl and Schnell 2006) play in the construction of language identity of the Tundra Nenets speakers? What is the effect of negative attitudes on language status and how can this effect be alleviated? And, finally, what is the role of language policy in this process?

2. Setting the Stage

Language is commonly considered a central aspect of people's identity and has been closely linked with the concept of personal power (Beck et al. 2019). Te Huia (2015) cites Kāretu (1993), a revered Māori language expert and advocate. Kāretu explains: "...for me language is essential to my mana [power]. Without it, could I still claim to be Māori? I do not think so, for it is the language which has given me what mana I have and it is the only thing which differentiates me from anyone else." (Kāretu via Te Huia 2015: 19). This example illustrates that people create their identities with the help of their language or, in a multilingual setting, languages. This means that, by losing their language, people could also lose their culture and their sense of identity. Negative attitudes towards one's own language and culture are found in minorities (see, for instance, the paper on Udmurt by Edygarova 2024 in this special issue) with negative attitudes being more prevalent among the elder generation who were born and raised during the Soviet era (Protassova et al. 2014). This stigmatization seems to be a widespread problem in Russian society as a whole, as other indigenous people have also expressed grievances about being marginalized and discriminated against (Nikitina 1992 for Udmurt; Rasuleva 2024 for Tatar; or Neseine 2024 for Nenets, to name but a few). It will become clear in Section 3 how Soviet and current policies in Russia influence the linguistic and cultural identity of the Nenets consultants I worked with. As linguists, we can help to preserve languages by raising language awareness and by documenting and reviving languages. Many linguists all over the world who do fieldwork combine their efforts to preserve languages with their research. Written materials and appropriate infrastructure (e.g., kindergartens and schools where the (endangered) language is spoken, and teacher training) help to preserve languages (cf. e.g., the DoBeS or Wōpanâak Language Reclamation Project, mentioned in Section 5). However, these efforts are not sufficient without favoring language politics, which will be discussed in Section 5.

A concept which will also become important in NC's story in Section 4 is that of "reactive ethnicity" (Schnell 1990; Weilenmann 2000; Diehl and Schnell 2006 a.m.o.). This refers to the phenomenon in which members of an ethnic group strengthen their ethnic identity in response to perceived threats or discrimination from the dominant culture or other groups. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) assert that a common response of young Europeans to their minority status is to alleviate tensions by means of assimilation. A second strategy "may lead to the rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness" (2001: 152).

Reactive ethnicity often arises as an identity defense mechanism when individuals feel that their ethnic identity is under threat. This threat can be real or perceived and often stems from the experience of marginalization, discrimination or cultural erosion. Cultural reaffirmation is also a common characteristic, where, in the face of external pressures, groups may place a greater emphasis on preserving and promoting their cultural practices, languages and traditions.

3. Tundra Nenets and Its Status

TN belongs to the Samoyedic group of the Uralic language family, which further includes the Forest Nenets, Tundra Enets, Forest Enets, Nganasan and Selkup. Other Samoyedic languages, such as Mator, Kamassian and Koibal, are extinct. According to [Nikolaeva \(2014\)](#), the territory of the Tundra Nenets has been expanding in the past millennium, both in the east and the west. The traditional way of life has been based on hunting and reindeer herding. Nikolaeva characterizes the administrative TN territory as including the Nenets District of the Arkhangelsk Province, parts of the northernmost regions in the Komi Republic, several regions of the YaNAO in Tyumen Province, and most of the Ust-Yeniseisk region of the Taimyr District in the Krasnoyarsk Region. In the west, the territory includes the Kanin Peninsula and the tundra of Malaya Zemlya. In the east, the TN area reaches the Yamal peninsula and the delta of the Yenisei River. [Salminen \(1998\)](#) notes the recession of the territories on the European side because of the extremely strong Russian influence, but also because of the prevalence of the Izhma Komi who have immigrated to the Nenets area. In addition, because of nuclear experiments beginning in the 1950s, the inhabitants of Novaya Zemlya were resettled to urban areas. This led to the loss of the TN language and traditional culture in these areas. Salminen concludes that “many if not all forms of European Nenets must be regarded as moribund” ([Salminen 1998: 518](#)).

3.1. Fieldwork on Tundra Nenets

Between 2014 and 2016, I worked with a total of 20 language consultants who spoke different subdialects¹ of TN: the Kolguyev, the Kanin, the Yamal as well as the subdialects of Malaya and Bol'shaya Zemlya. These subdialects are mutually intelligible and exhibit relatively little diversity according to [Salminen \(1998\)](#). However, there is still some variation, especially in the phonology and the lexicon. Eighteen of the consultants were female, two were male. The age of the participants ranged between 19 and 77 years at the time of the interviews. The median was 45 years. All participants were bilingual Nenets-Russian speakers. We used Russian as our language of communication. Some of the consultants, especially those who were reindeer herders and had led a nomadic lifestyle until schooling, were exposed to Russian only after the age of six or seven. Some of these consultants were children of reindeer herders who were taken from the tundra to attend boarding schools in bigger cities (which was, and still is, a common practice for nomadic indigenous peoples in Russia). The young student consultants from Saint Petersburg were mainly representatives of the Yamal subdialect, the older consultants in Naryan Mar and Arkhangelsk spoke the subdialects of Bol'shaya Zemlya, Malaya Zemlya, the Kolguyev and Kanin. The following map ([Figure 1](#)) shows the areas in which TN is spoken (the shaded orange areas) and the locations marked by stars indicate the loci of my fieldwork. The story that will be presented in [Section 4](#) was recorded during the first of my two trips to Naryan-Mar, the capital of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.



Figure 1. Fieldwork locations.

3.2. Tundra Nenets Status as an Endangered Language

According to UNESCO’s *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010), at least 43% of an estimated 6000 languages are in danger. At the same time, only 23 languages account for more than half the world’s population. Eberhard et al. (2024) have given a higher number of existing languages overall—indicating that there are currently 7164 languages in the world. However, this number is constantly changing as we learn more about these languages. Furthermore, many languages are endangered and are disappearing at a very quick pace. According to *Ethnologue*, the absolute numbers look as follows: 3170 languages are endangered (or about 44%, similar to the UNESCO numbers in 2010). In Figure 2, each known endangered language is represented as a pin in its primary location.



Figure 2. Endangered languages (Source: <https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages-endangered/>) (accessed on 12 November 2024).

It is estimated that half of the world's languages will die out within the coming one or two generations. The full extent of the loss that we are experiencing today becomes clear in the words of Yaron Matras: "...a full and comprehensive documentation of today's languages, living and moribund, offers a sample of linguistic diversity on a scale which, as a result of the ongoing massive decline of languages, we shall never be able to witness again" (Matras 2005: 226). It is evident that the preservation and documentation of living languages is of high importance not just in the scientific, but also in the political, social and personal domains.

As stated in the introduction, the number of TN speakers is 24,500 according to *Ethnologue's* 2020 census. Crystal (1993) reports similar numbers, namely around 25,000 speakers (Crystal 1993: 304). In absolute numbers, and at first glance, the situation looks quite positive. TN is the largest language of the KMNS group. This might make one wonder why Tundra Nenets is still considered to be a threatened language. However, the overall speaker numbers are dramatically declining, as will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.3. This state is not unique to TN, but also applies to other KMNS languages and to other minority languages in Russia. In a recent paper, Pakendorf (2024) describes the KMNS as comprising languages that are in danger of being lost by the end of the century. She attributes this state of endangerment to the Russian colonization of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and, most importantly, to the impact of Sovietization, citing Sablin and Savelyeva (2011) and Grenoble (2024).

In order to obtain a more profound understanding of the degree of endangerment of TN, and to be able to understand the personal story in Section 4 in a broader political, historical and socio-linguistic context, I will apply Kibrik's (1991) criteria for language endangerment to TN.

3.3. Applying Kibrik's Criteria for Language Endangerment to TN

According to Kibrik (1991), the criteria for endangerment include the following. (a) *The size of the ethnic group and the number of speakers in that group.* It is clear that the smaller the number of speakers, the greater the threat of the respective language's extinction. (b) *The age groups of speakers.* If there are speakers from every age group, then the language is more likely to survive. (c) *The ethnic character of marriages.* Kibrik establishes that it is most favorable for the preservation of a language if there are marriages between members of the same language community, while mixed marriages often lead to a switch towards the more socially prestigious language. (d) *Upbringing of preschool-aged children:* If children are brought up within the family, this is assumed to facilitate the use of the ethnic language. However, if children are brought up outside the family, the loss of the origin language becomes more likely. (e) *Location of the ethnic group.* Kibrik has emphasized that living in an ethnic group's native homeland is important for preserving its language (even if, as in the paper on Udmurt by Edygarova 2024, a higher educational level can help preserve the native language among the diaspora outside of the homeland). (f) *Language contacts of the ethnic group.* Clearly, the more contact there is with other cultures and languages, the worse it is for the viability of the endangered language to survive. If the ethnic group lives in close proximity to speakers of more prestigious languages, the preservation of their language is more compromised. (g) *National self-consciousness.* A strong sense of national identity may block the consequences of many negative factors. (h) *Instruction in the language at school.* Quite clearly, a necessary tool in preserving the language is to teach it at school. (i) *State language policy.* Depending on the current policy of the state, a language might have more or less chances of surviving.

In summary, a low absolute number of speakers, language contacts, the disruption of intergenerational language transmission and state language policy are all criteria for endangerment. In line with this, Eberhard et al. (2024) state that a language becomes endangered when its users begin to teach and speak a more dominant language to the children in the community.

Let us analyze these criteria for TN. This analysis will also help us contextualize and understand the personal story that will be recounted in Section 4.

- (a) *The size of the ethnic group and the number of speakers in that group.* Burkova (2016) reports growing numbers of the Tundra Nenets ethnic group with 32,190 in 1989, 39,302 in 2002 and 42,640 in 2010 (Burkova 2016: 316). However, the number of those with mastery of the native language is receding. While in 1989 approximately 78% spoke Tundra Nenets, the number decreased to 68% in 2010 and to only 44% in 2010. In absolute numbers, approximately 27,000 were speaking TN as a first or second language in 2002, while only 18,597 are reported to speak the language in 2010 (Burkova 2016: 317–18). The Russian legislation attests to the status of the Nenets as an indigenous people². Though, as already mentioned, Nenets is the strongest of all the Samoyedic languages, and though it enjoys the status of an indigenous language, it is endangered and experiences a constant decline.
- (b) *The age groups of speakers.* There is a difference in this respect between the European and the Siberian sides—in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region, many young people are still fluent in the language, while, sadly, on the European side, e.g., in the NAO, very few children learn it, even while it is taught at schools, albeit only as an elective. According to Salminen (1998), most speakers on the European side are middle aged or older. During my work in Naryan-Mar and the settlement Krasnoye, I was only able to find proficient middle aged and elderly speakers. The young speakers I worked with in Saint Petersburg’s Herzen University were all from the YaNAO i.e., the Siberian side.
- (c) *The ethnic character of marriages.* Of the twenty consultants I worked with, five were or are married to Nenets spouses. Six of the consultants did not have a partner or a spouse yet (mostly since they were still students and too young at the time of my fieldwork). Even those married to Nenets spouses did not live monolingually with Nenets as their sole language of communication. Most of them spoke either Russian or used code-mixing and code-switching between Russian and Nenets in home communication. When asked about their family language use, several consultants repeatedly remarked that it was forbidden to speak Nenets during Soviet times. With my consultants, the switch to the more prestigious language can be observed even in marriages of members of the same community. This prohibition was so internalized that it has permeated even the private milieu, i.e., the family and the marital domain. My other consultants were in mixed marriages with either Russians or Komi.
- (d) *Upbringing of preschool-aged children.* In this respect, the location and way of life of my consultants played a huge role. The kids who pursued a nomadic lifestyle growing up in the families of reindeer herders all spoke Nenets and had spoken almost exclusively Nenets until they had reached school age. Those who grew up in urban areas with more contact with Russian were not taught TN, even within their own families, especially during Soviet times when use of the TN language was stigmatized and forbidden. What is particularly striking is that even the most proficient speakers among my consultants, and my primary consultant herself, who is an important advocate for the Tundra Nenets language in the community, did not teach their children their native tongue. When asked the reasons for this, they responded that one was mocked or excluded for speaking Nenets in public and that this would not be advantageous for their children growing up.
- (e) *Location of the ethnic group.* According to Salminen (1998), the TN area has lately been receding on the European side. Because of nuclear experiments since the 1950s, but also because of proximity to central Russia, a longer period of co-existence with Russians nearby, earlier industrial exploration of the territory, more urban centers, etc., the inhabitants on the European side were relocated to urban settlements on the continent, which effectively led to the loss of native language command among the Nenets population. This gloomy picture of the European side can be confirmed by the situation of my consultants during my fieldwork. One of my consultants

reclaimed her homelands at Varandey after spending several decades in Naryan-Mar and other parts of NAO. The settlement Varandey was founded in the first half of the 1930s as a settling base for reindeer herders. In the 1990s, she and her family were resettled from “Staryj Varandey” (“Old Varandey”) which used to be a Nenets settlement. There, Nenets people lived their traditional lifestyle engaged in reindeer herding, fishing, collecting cloudberries, etc. The Russian government subsequently moved the inhabitants to “Novyj Varandey” (“New Varandey”), apparently because the Barents Sea had begun to flood the lands. As a result, people from Old Varandey were resettled to New Varandey. After losing their homes, many of the inhabitants decided to leave for good in hopes of a better life. Soon after, an oil platform, the “Varandeykiy terminal”, was built close to Old Varandey. This type of resettlement has happened repeatedly to Russian minorities. [Sablin and Savelyeva \(2011\)](#) write about how the destruction of reindeer pasture and river pollution as a consequence of oil and natural gas production and transportation affects the Nenets people and also the Khantys and Mansis peoples. This makes these regions unsuitable for the traditional activities of the indigenous people. The resettlements lead to a disruption of the original way of life and ultimately to a gradual loss of culture and language. [Helimski \(1997\)](#) calls these “endocentric activities of the colonisers”, which force the native population to move away. This destroys traditional “ecological niches”, i.e., the archaic way of life of the minority. Sadly, this amounts to a rather subtle invasion into the lives of the indigenous people, one which gradually but systematically leads to the decline of their traditional culture and language.

- (f) *Language contacts of the ethnic group.* Russian is the most influential presence in terms of language contacts in all Nenets areas. The Russian language and culture are dominant in most spheres of life, in particular in the professional, institutional and educational spheres. Again, this influence is more pervasive on the European than on the Siberian side. [Salminen \(1998\)](#) points out that immigration of the Izhma Komi to the Nenets areas leads to their dominance in economic spheres. Salminen’s “survival forecast” for the Siberian side is much brighter. There, a wide-spread multilingualism has traditionally been favored over the domination of a single language. In the Ob’ area, the indigenous Tundra Nenets and Northern Khanty communities live together with Komi, Tatar and Russian immigrant groups. Tundra Nenets has even been used as a lingua franca in the more eastern areas, gradually supplanting other vernaculars. Nevertheless, the TN language can be seen as compromised, as the pervasiveness and omni-presence of the Russian language is so powerful.
- (g) *National self-consciousness.* Much of the Nenets’s national self-consciousness must have been weakened if not destroyed during the Soviet era. According to Salminen, Russification policies and the massive influx of Russian-speaking colonizers nearly eliminated both the multilingual tradition and the interethnic use of Tundra Nenets, leaving room for the native language only in home communication and as part of the traditional economy based on nomadic reindeer breeding. The deliberate alienation of children from their native language and culture through the Soviet schooling system is also deeply felt among the Siberian Nenets, so that Nenets homes could not avoid Russification. These politics have led to a decline in language use which has also contributed to the destruction of the national sense of identity. The differences in rights and privileges between “titular” ethnicities, i.e., the Russians, on the one hand, and minorities on the other, also leads to a decline in the reputation of the Nenets identity and creates an “artificial hierarchy” ([Sablin and Savelyeva 2011](#)). The hierarchy is artificial in the sense that, if the rights between “titular” ethnicities and minorities were distributed in a fair and equal way, this hierarchy would not even exist. [Helimski \(1997\)](#) even goes as far as to say that “exocentric” activities, which are often disguised as a way to raise the social prestige of indigenous minorities, such as “indigenization” of the administrative staff, are in reality aimed deliberately at transforming the native societies and cultural traditions. All of these factors, of course,

erode the Nenets national identity and contribute to negative self-identification with one's own minority culture.

- (h) *Instruction in the language at school.* During Soviet times, Russian was elevated to the status of a “unifying Soviet language” (Pakendorf 2024) which led to the Russification of the education system. Pakendorf also writes about the school reform of 1958, which effectively put an end to the use of languages other than Russian as a language of instruction. Today, TN is used in a very limited manner, i.e., only as an auxiliary tool in preparatory and first grades, and often in cases where there are children in the class who have a poor command of Russian (Burkova 2016). On the Siberian side, even in YaNAO, the Tundra Nenets language is only taught as an elective, with significant cuts made to the number of hours and number of teachers in recent years. This has led to a constant decline in the formal instruction of Nenets at schools, as less and less children are interested in learning the language. Some of my student consultants from Herzen University were studying Nenets to become language teachers in their native language. However, several of them did not pursue the profession back home due to a lack of positions at schools and few opportunities for career advancement. One of my female student consultants founded a nursery for Nenets children back in her tundra to try and teach small children their native culture and language. These initiatives are laudable and important but will hardly have a strong impact on the overall state of the language. In NAO, on the European side, where I also worked with a language teacher of Tundra Nenets as my consultant, recent cuts in the teaching of the language as an elective also do not leave much hope for a better future of formal instruction of the language at schools. With the gradual disappearance of TN from schools, young TN speakers will soon become heritage speakers of the language in their own homelands. TN will then become a language that can only be acquired in the family milieu. It will be hard for these heritage speakers to transmit their language to generations to come.
- (i) *State language policy.* Though the Nenets people nominally live in their regions, such as the NAO or the YaNAO, the Russification of the education system during Soviet times, the establishment of boarding schools and kindergartens where Russian was spoken, the forced relocations, and other factors already mentioned, led to a decline in language use. I want to emphasize the detrimental role of boarding schools, where most Nenets children were sent during Soviet times and where they were forbidden to speak their native language. This was also the experience of the older participants of my fieldwork. Though the constitution and other legal documents are translated into Nenets, what is the use if fewer and fewer Nenets people can understand or speak the language? As a whole, the language policies of the Soviet Union and of the current Russian government have not contributed to the preservation and revitalization of TN and other minority languages. Resettlements due to the installation of oil or hydropower stations have triggered a decline and further endangerment of the minority languages. Neseine (2024) summarizes this as follows: “It is so strange for me that these companies [Russian gas and oil companies], on the one hand, destroy the conditions in which the people’s lives are possible, and on the other hand, sponsor the programs of restoring and reviving what they are destroying.” This seems a rather subtle and hypocritical tactic, one which cannot be easily discerned and understood, but which contributes to the decline of the Tundra Nenets culture and language.

4. Materials and Methods: Personal Story

In this section, I will first describe the ethnographic method that I used in my fieldwork in Section 4.1. before presenting the case study in the form of the personal story of my consultant, NC, in Section 4.2.

4.1. *The Ethnographic Method*

The bulk of my fieldwork on Tundra Nenets was conducted in formal semantics. For my semantic fieldwork, I used the gold standard of elicitation techniques for linguistic fieldwork (cf. [Matthewson 2004](#), [[2005](#)] [2011](#); [Chelliah and de Reuse 2011](#); [Bowerman 2015 a.m.o.](#)), i.e., corpus examples, translation tasks, truth value judgment and acceptability judgment tasks. However, during my fieldwork trips, I quickly noticed the politically, socially and linguistically precarious situation of my consultants. Their stories and lived experiences touched me profoundly. I found that the sociolinguistic situation merited particular attention and started using the ethnographic method ([Gold 1997](#); [Dutta 2016](#); [Okely 2020](#)) in addition to my purely linguistic work. As I recorded most of the interviews with my consultants, I gathered abundant material that contains many conversations between me and my consultants, or between the consultants in group sessions. [Gold \(1997\)](#) discusses the main phases of ethnographic study, including gaining access to the field, building trust with participants, and collecting data in natural environments. The ethnographic method centers on understanding social phenomena through immersive observation and direct interaction with subjects, aiming to capture the nuances of social interactions and cultural patterns within communities. The ethnographic method enables researchers to study communities and society from the point of view of their members. Ethnographers become deeply acquainted with the experiences and views of their project participants, which helps them not to rely on preconceived framework data gathering and analysis. It is through the interaction with the participants that the ethnographer creates an analytical framework for understanding the subject matter of his/her study ([Okely 2020](#)). According to [Dutta \(2016\)](#), the ethnographic method creates space for voices that are systematically silenced or subjugated, which makes it particularly suitable for the situation of the Nenets people.

More concretely, as part of the ethnographic method, I used the form of semi-structured interviews ([Karatsareas 2022](#)), in which I was guided mostly by linguistic questions. I would prepare a questionnaire or questions in advance and would then record my session with the consultant. During the session, conversations on different topics (sometimes evoked by the linguistic material provided) would emerge. This led to conversations on topics that developed around questions of family background; the personal, political, and linguistic situation of the consultants; and their hobbies and culture. I asked open-ended questions that prompted participants to develop their thoughts and ideas and to express their views on the subject matter from their individual perspective. The interview data collected in this way were then transcribed and analyzed, just as in the following case study in the next subsection.

4.2. *A Case Study: The Hard Route to Education of a Nenets Girl During Soviet Times*

For the story presented here, I first recorded the audio precisely while the consultant, NC, told her story in her native Tundra Nenets language. Next, using the recording, I wrote the story down on a step-by-step basis with the help of the consultant, already starting to translate it into Russian. As a last step, the story was transcribed and fully translated. The original story in Tundra Nenets can be found in [Appendix A](#). Information on NC's biography that goes beyond that found in the [Appendix A](#) was collected during other semi-structured interviews and conversations with the consultant.

I will give some background information on NC, her origins and her life. NC was born in 1937 in the "malozemeljskaya tundra", i.e., tundra in Malaya Zemlya close to Nel'min Nos. She also lived in Naryan-Mar, the capital of NAO, where I met her and worked with her for approximately three weeks. Her native language was TN, with both her parents being Nenets. NC described herself as having been mischievous and rowdy as a child, which placed her in much trouble with her parents. She was raised monolingually in Nenets until the age of seven. She contracted tuberculosis in her youth, but survived it. Unfortunately, she did not completely recover from the illness, some effects of tuberculosis on her health were never overcome and she coughed a lot during our sessions. She became

a zootechnician. NC was married to a Russian citizen of German origin, i.e., she was part of a mixed marriage. During Soviet times, she held an important position as the head of a *kolkhoz*,³ in which she apparently took pride. We spoke Russian with each other. Interestingly, the prosody of her speech in Russian sounded rather Nenets, which indicates the dominance of Nenets in her language use. NC was active within the Nenets community in Naryan-Mar and founded a folklore group, where she especially welcomed young people. Unfortunately, NC passed away not long after our first and last encounter making these data even more valuable to me.

As a child, and like many other Tundra Nenets kids, NC attended a boarding school away from her family. After finishing six grades there, she became sick, probably contracting tuberculosis. The boarding school issued a document prohibiting her from attending classes due to the disease. She then returned to the tundra, where her mother lived. Her mother was apparently very pleased, as NC had matured and she wanted NC to return home and marry (at age 14). This made NC think about leaving her tundra and continuing her education somewhere else. She asked a friend of hers to join her and suggested going to Salekhard⁴. NC wanted to become a medical doctor. She dreamed of treating and curing people.

The obstacles that the girls encountered on their trip were immediate. First, the director of her boarding school refused to give NC her transcript of grades. After a teacher intervened and they saw that NC had good grades during her six years of boarding school (achieving fours and fives, with five being the best grade in the Soviet system), they finally took pity and issued NC her transcript. As the steamboat left for the desired destination only once a week, on Saturdays, the girls had to wait for a couple of days until they were able to leave. They stayed in a flat belonging to a Russian lady. At some point, they realized that their money had been stolen from the flat while they were away in the village and had left all their belongings, including the money, in the flat. When NC asked her friend “what shall we do now?” in response she heard: “go back home”. However, NC would not give up. She checked the newspaper *Naryana Vynder* (‘Red Tundra Dweller’) for job postings and found a posting for chopping and carrying wood. Though NC suggested that they could carry the chopped wood to a designated place instead of chopping, they were laughed at by Russian wood workers for wanting to do the job in the first place and for being too thin and allegedly not physically strong enough to chop wood. The resourcefulness of our protagonist did not subside and she checked the newspaper for postings yet again finding one for a job stacking wood in an orphanage. At their destination, they met a Russian woman who worked in the orphanage. As the wood would not arrive for another week, the woman decided to help the girls by asking her boss to offer them a knitting job, where they worked for a week and ultimately earned 25 Rubles each. At the time, this was enough money to reach Salekhard, which both girls finally managed to do. Upon arrival, NC’s friend went directly to the so-called *техникум* (Rus. *technicum*, i.e., ‘technical college’), while NC headed to the *медучилище* (Rus. *meduchilizhe*, i.e., ‘nursing school’). She headed to the director and asked to be enrolled as a student. The answer was negative as, by then, she had missed two out of the four obligatory exams that applicants had to pass in order to be admitted to the studies. This effectively killed NC’s dream. Even then, however, she did not give up and went to the director of the same technical college that her friend went to. They were both admitted and provided with accommodation. As a result, NC graduated from that technical college and became a zootechnician.

Turning to the analysis of NC’s story, it becomes painfully apparent that her dream of becoming a doctor crashed, to a major extent, because of external circumstances, but also apparently because of her Nenets origin. In order to obtain the education she wanted, NC had to leave her tundra. The disconnect from her original way of life is palpable here, even if it started much earlier, for instance when NC was sent off to the boarding school in the first place. As the girls did not have any connections, such as family or friends in the village, they needed to find a place to stay. This led to an unfortunate chain of events. If NC’s money had not been stolen from the flat at which she stayed with her friend, they

could have arrived in Salekhard on time for the exams. Unfortunately, without proper resources, support of their families and finances, both girls were at the mercy of the good will of strangers, which finally determined their fate. NC never had a chance to fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor even though, according to her, some of her ancestors were rich and had a reputable background. Specifically, NC told me about one of her ancestors on her mother's side who was kicked out of his "chum" (a type of yurt used by nomadic Uralic reindeer herders) by his stepmother and managed to survive in the cold thanks to the frozen berries he picked. He was then taken in by a rich family who treated him as his own offspring. On the mother's side, there was another ancestor, a Russian orphan from the village Khoskovo carrying the name Khoskov. He was NC's grandfather on the paternal side. This means that NC's father's name, her own maiden name, was Russian. NC's grandmother, however, despised this family name, as it was Russian and any connection to Russians was considered shameful. She did not want anyone in the family to even mention that Russian family name and called it "nenezkiy ozor" (Nenets disgrace). The stigmatizing within the Nenets community appears to have been quite strong. When people wanted to harm or hurt the grandmother, they would say to her "haven't you forgotten, *babka* (Russian for 'old woman'), what the name of your son-in-law is!" Interestingly, this exclusion of the *other* and the demarcation of one's own ethnicity might be important for the preservation of a minority's own identity. Negative attitudes towards Russians and identification through language is also what Neseine (2024) thematizes in her article. She reports that, among the members of the Nenets community, she is not considered "fully Nenets" and is sometimes even called "Lutsa", which means Russian. In her search for the answer to the question of why Nenets people considered her Russian despite her being Nenets, she came to the conclusion that one reason would be her lack of knowledge of the Nenets language. She muses that "Lutsa" must be a term that includes the following connotations: "[Lutsa are] those who bear the imperial code: they understand Russian language and absorb Russian laws and traditions, those who are able to adapt to living outside the tundra but would not survive in a nomadic camp." Neseine thus recognizes language as a strong identification factor. She writes "in my childhood, I didn't think Nenets language would be useful in real life. But when I grew up I discovered why I felt so strange during reunions with my tundra's relatives. It turned out, they communicate to each other and to my mum in the native language and my brain apparently rejected this fact due to the hostility towards Nenets that was spread in the village." It is clear that negative attitudes are present both on the Nenets and on the Russian side with respect to each other and within the community of the minority language itself.

NC has surely adopted at least parts of the Nenets identity, where being Nenets also meant speaking Nenets. However, NC's Nenets identity must have been compromised and attacked during the Soviet era, especially when she was placed in a Soviet boarding school. As already mentioned, NC was the chairwoman of a *kolkhoz*, which shows that she managed to attain a respectable social status during Soviet times. This stands in stark contrast with her Nenets identity, as the same Soviet system that allowed her to somewhat climb the social ladder also repressed her community of origin. On several occasions, she explicitly stated that it was forbidden to talk Nenets in her boarding school and that if she persisted she was derided and humiliated for it. She also said "we Nenets people were always considered to be *люди второго сорта* (Rus. *lyudi vtorogo sorta*, i.e., 'second rank people'). This was especially true during Soviet times. In line with these personal experiences, Pakendorf (2024) emphasizes the detrimental effect of the boarding school system, where children from northern minorities were taken away from their families and placed in boarding schools in which the medium of instruction was Russian and where students were forbidden to speak their home languages.

A painful incident, which must not have been a unique instance in NC's life, occurred when NC, another consultant and I were walking the streets of Naryan-Mar. On our way, we encountered a couple of young Nenets boys. Apparently, they used to be members of NC's folklore group. NC greeted them in a friendly manner in Nenets by saying

“Лакамбой!” (*Lakamboy*, meaning “Good day!”). They ignored the greeting and just walked past us. It occurred to me that they were ashamed of answering in Nenets in front of a foreigner (me) and chose to ignore NC. To receive this type of pushback, especially within her own community, into which she had invested so much of herself with the folklore group, must have been devastating and detrimental to NC’s identity as a Nenets woman. NC’s initiative in creating a folklore group can be seen as part of her reactive identity (cf. Schnell 1990, Weilenmann 2000, Diehl and Schnell 2006 from Section 2). NC made an effort to strengthen the community and reaffirm cultural values despite decades of marginalization and discrimination. However, incidents like this must have persistently eroded her reactive identity. The fact that the Nenets adolescents did not respond to NC’s greeting also ties back to Kibrik’s criteria for endangerment of a language. If young people do not speak or refuse to speak the language, it naturally cannot be transmitted to future generations and is thus in danger of extinction.

Considering this conflicted and stigmatized identity, my last encounter with NC and her words will not seem so surprising anymore: After working together for some time, we met up in the local library to finish writing down her story. I also brought the reimbursement for the sessions⁵, as NC wished to be paid at the end and not after every individual session. After finishing our fieldwork session, NC was about to leave. When she almost reached the door of the library hall, she turned around to me and suddenly said “Why are you actually doing all of this? Why bother with Nenets? All of this is of no use! Our language will die and we as a people will also die anyways!” On a personal level, I was rather stunned, sad and offended to hear her say this after the valuable work we had undertaken together on her native language. I responded that I cared about the Nenets language and culture and, though I was primarily investigating the grammar and semantics of Tundra Nenets, it was apparent to me that my work also had an element of documentation and some corpus building (such as the very story that was told in this section). On a more objective and analytical level, however, NC’s reaction can be explained as follows: after being treated the way she was throughout her life, i.e., being marginalized, looked down upon, not receiving the education she had wished, etc., the bleak outlook she had for the future of her people is not surprising. As we have seen in Section 3, Nenets is clearly an endangered language, but so is the ethnic identity and the whole existence of the Nenets people.

5. Discussion

I will now return to the research questions raised in the beginning of this paper. Kibrik’s criteria of endangerment were discussed in detail in Section 3.3. These were subsequently applied to TN, making it apparent that TN is an endangered language. Despite being the strongest KMNS language in terms of numbers, TN is endangered. The reasons are manifold, ranging from school instruction where TN is not mandatory to Soviet-era language policies which resulted in the stigmatization of TN and its exclusion even from the family milieu. A divide can be observed between younger speakers in Siberia’s regions, such as the YaNAO, and speakers on the European side (e.g., in the NAO) — there are more young speakers of TN on the Siberian than on the European side. While the upbringing of children is still traditional in nomadic settings, children in urban areas often do not learn the language within their family anymore in all regions. TN is only taught as an elective in schools, with decreasing interest among students leading to further language decline. In terms of language contacts, Russian clearly dominates in all spheres of life, affecting and minimizing TN usage. I consider the current and Soviet state policy to be the strongest reason for the rather deplorable language state; environmental damage by oil and natural gas platforms, forced relocations and educational Russification greatly disrupted the life of the community, thereby forever changing the traditional way of life, and weakening the ethnic self-consciousness. This has resulted in assimilation with Russian society. Climate change, which leads to the mass death of reindeer due to global warming, along with globalization and digitalization, are also sure to be contributing factors. A detailed study

of these circumstances, however, was not the focus of this article and must be left for future research. Overall, the discussed factors collectively endanger the Tundra Nenets language, culture and identity.

NC's biography can be taken as an example of how language identity is formed and changed throughout life. We can see how being marginalized influences not only the personal biography, but also the language identity and further transmission of the language to future generations. Despite her resourcefulness and determination, NC faced numerous obstacles, including being denied education opportunities and experiencing discrimination. Her experience highlights the challenges of maintaining Nenets identity and language. NC's efforts to strengthen her community through cultural activities like forming a folklore group reflect her reactive identity, a response to decades of marginalization. However, the lack of support from younger generations and the internalized stigma contributed to her pessimistic outlook on the future of the Nenets language and people. This narrative illustrates the complex dynamics of language identity among Nenets speakers.

Finally, let us turn to the research question regarding the effect of negative attitudes on the language status and which measures can be taken to alleviate this effect. Negative attitudes towards the Nenets language have profoundly detrimental effects on its status and vitality. The stigma attached to speaking Nenets discourages elder speakers from passing it on to younger generations. However, the older speakers are crucial for language transmission. This reluctance directly undermines the key factors for language vitality identified by Kibrik, such as ethnic self-consciousness and transmission of the native language to Nenets children, all of which are vital for the survival of minority languages. The decline in language use among young people, particularly in the European regions, signals an impending risk of language extinction. While there is some hope that the language might survive longer in Siberian regions, the centralistic language policies in Russia and the long-lasting damage inflicted during the Soviet era continue to pose significant threats. To alleviate these effects, it is essential to promote positive attitudes towards the Nenets language, encourage intergenerational language transmission, and implement supportive language policies at both regional and national levels.

What are, then, the possibilities and chances of preserving and revitalizing TN? [Beck et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that, as a field, linguistics can promote (i) language awareness, (ii) language documentation and language preservation, and finally (iii) language revitalization.

(i) In terms of language awareness, linguistics can communicate to society what language is and what it does for society. Every language is its own miracle, full of different structures and possibilities. This applies equally to creoles, Kiezdeutsch⁶, "exotic" languages, and minority languages as much as it does to any other language. Supporting bilingualism and multilingualism is one of the ways to aid endangered and minority languages. Ideally, this should start in early childhood, as speaking more than one language is also an advantage linguistically, cognitively and socially ([Lee 1996](#); [Sanz 2000](#); [Marian and Shook 2012](#), and many others). Given that Russian is the dominant language in the Russian Federation, TN has a better chance to survive if Nenets–Russian bilingualism is promoted. [Helimski \(1997\)](#), on the other hand, points out that bilingualism is only favorable for Nenets if (a) there is a nucleus of monolinguals and (b) if both languages in question have the same social prestige. As Russian is always dominant, this kind of bilingualism is almost exclusively unilateral. This brings TN into the situation I addressed before, where it is in the state of becoming a heritage language in its own country. This further underscores the idea that a positive view on bilingualism could prompt more parents to raise their children with TN and Russian. As discussed in detail above, language identity plays a huge role in the process of language loss; people create their identities with the help of their language(s). This, however, does not imply that there cannot be a lingua franca. Two or more languages can be maintained at the same time, and multilingualism can be put to much greater use. Promoting language skills offers a chance for a more stable social identity, a factor that would strengthen TN.

(ii) Language documentation and preservation are also important for endangered languages. An example is the Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen/Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS), a central archive of language data, photos, audio and video recordings which documents languages and cultures. It has over 60 language documentation projects on endangered languages, including Enets and Forest Nenets. It provides long-term accessibility of materials and availability to researchers and the public. Another resource is NorthEuraLex (Dellert et al. 2020). This is a large-scale lexicostatistical database within the EVOLAEMP project. The current version, 0.9, includes a list of 1016 concepts spanning 107 languages of northern Eurasia, with an emphasis on Uralic and Indo-European languages. This database also includes TN and therefore serves as another source of documentation. Another current initiative regarding TN is an online dictionary which the Northern Arctic Federal University and the Nenets People's Association, "Yasavey", have been developing since 2023, with support from the administration of NAO. More information can be found on the website of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON). Moreover, the newspaper *Naryana Vynder* which has figured in NC's story, offers a page in the Nenets language which gives journalists and the Nenets public an opportunity to promote their language and contribute topics of relevance to their people. In YaNAO, the newspaper *Naryana Ngerm* ('Red North'), the only newspaper entirely written in TN, is published once a week. It is important to emphasize that the resources provided here are by no means exhaustive. The interested reader is directed to the website <https://minlang.iling-ran.ru/en/node/150> (accessed on 23 October 2024) and Burkova (2016) for further resources.

(iii) Though TN is still a living language, there is no doubt that all vitalization efforts are extremely valuable in order to maintain and improve its situation and avoid its extinction. According to the website of the Russian Academy of Sciences on Minority languages of Russia (<https://minlang.iling-ran.ru/en/node/150> accessed on 23 October 2024), there are only few online resources in TN so far. However, work is underway to create the electronic encyclopedia Wikipedia in the TN language: https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/yrk/Main_Page (accessed on 23 October 2024). Furthermore, there are several communication groups on the social media platform VKontakte and Drugvokrug.ru. The YouTube channel "Etnograficheskaya Ekspedizija Nastoyazhije Ljudi" ('Ethnographic Expedition Real People') promotes language learning and documents the lifestyle, culture and traditions of indigenous communities in Russia. For other languages, examples of successful (re)vitalization efforts include the Wôpanâak language (Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project with Jessie Little Doe Baird and Norvin Richards) and Mohegan (Mohegan Language Program, with grammar by Stephanie Fielding), where the creation of lessons, dictionaries, online learning materials and grammar have played a major role in the revitalization process. These are all measures that are, and can be, taken in order to alleviate the effect of the endangerment of languages at risk, such as TN.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by the Tundra Nenets language and its speakers illustrate the complex interplay between identity, language use, and external pressures, such as historical marginalization and ongoing cultural assimilation. The case of NC highlights the impact of negative attitudes on language vitality and the difficulties of maintaining a minority language in the face of dominant linguistic and cultural forces. However, the promotion of TN through language awareness, documentation, and bilingualism offers a path forward. The future of TN rests not only on such efforts but also on fostering a sense of pride and value in the language among younger generations. Promoting positive attitudes, encouraging intergenerational language transmission, and implementing supportive language policies at both regional and national levels have been identified as crucial strategies for preserving TN. Of course, all of these (linguistic) efforts will not bear fruit without addressing a bigger societal problem reflected by Soviet and now Russian language policies; namely the lack of respect and marginalization of minorities and indigenous communities in general. This problem should be first recognized and then addressed by societal actors so that the Tundra Nenets and many other communities have a chance of survival. In this

way, the hope is that, many centuries from now, we will still be able to witness the wealth of linguistic, cultural and ethnic variety in Russia.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical approval was not required for the study, since my fieldwork did not involve any invasive methods. I used linguistic fieldwork methodology and the ethnographic method conducting interviews with native speakers of Tundra Nenets. Each consultant provided informed consent by completing a consent form prior to participating in the interviews. As the nature of the work did not involve any procedures that could affect the participants' well-being, it was exempt from ethical review. The fieldwork was approved and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), ensuring that all procedures adhered to the standards of professionalism and oversight in place at the time of the research (2014–2016), which may differ from today's requirements.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Appendix A

Recording made on: 19 April 2014 in Naryan Mar

Language consultant: NC

Left side *in italics* for object language: TN original text

Right side after dash: English translation

1. Мань школа интернатхан тоходанамазь.—I studied at a boarding school.
2. Тикы школахана мат' класс ёльцем, нараняна едернам.—I finished six grades at this school; I got sick in the spring.
3. Падартув та" таяна пады нерня нин тоходаңгу.—They gave me a paper which said that I could not continue (school).
4. Ҳацеки тоходанвась хэбто мань хаим, небяңан хаим.—When the other kids left, I stayed with my mother.
5. Тас по" хойхана небяңан илем.—For a whole year, I lived in the tundra with my mother.
6. Мань лэв ңаркарка небяв маймби.—My mom was happy, since I matured (lit. got taller).
7. “Ҳяна саванё”: Хойхана хаин!—“How good that you stayed in the tundra!”
8. “Хойхана иляңгун сит хойпа митам”.—“You are going to live in the tundra and I will get you married.”

9. Мань тикена вадамда намдба'н сит хайпа митам.—I heard the words then that I will be married.
10. Иб ядэрңга мам няна" вэванё": Хаян еримдам".—In my mind I thought that this was really bad: I am going to get stuck in the tundra.
11. Ихнян мам: эрёняна җацеки" тоходанванзъ ханта.—In my mind I thought: In autumn, the children will go back to school.
12. Мань ханяхава" тоходанванзъ хэба"н тара.—I have to leave and go somewhere to study.
13. Сянако неб хом.—I went to a friend of mine.
14. Нянда мам: тоходанван" нинхарва?—I said to my friend: "Do you want to study?"
15. Пыда ма: ханя хантани?—She said: "Where will we go?"
16. Мазён мам: "Салехардан хэбцунь."—I respond: "Let's maybe go to Salekhard."
17. "Мань Салехардана медикҗе тоходам, хибяри савумдамдаҗэ тоходам."—"In Salekhard, I will study to become a medic and will learn to treat people."
18. "Пыдар ңгани" хуня" хантанда"?—"And where will you go to?"
19. "Мань техникуман хантам."—"I will go to technical school."
20. Ти мани" март хаянь.—And so we left for the town.
21. Март тонь, мань школахан директорт' хаям.—After our arrival in the town [most probably the town where NC's boarding school was], we went to the director.
22. Пыда ма' н'ив: „җамгэ?".—He said to me: "What's the matter?"
23. "Мань тоходанвазъ Салехардан' хэван харвам."—"I just want to study in Salekhard."
24. "Валкада табльм" (си"ив класе ңиңга).—"I only don't have my transcript (There are no 7 grades)."
25. Мат' класс си"вимдей классда пеля.—I finished six classes and half of the seventh.
26. Си"ив класс ңэбта тара, мань янгу.—I need seven classes, but don't have them.
27. Мань авнанда пилибт' сававна тоходансетым.—I actually always studied well.
28. Тет та самлянг ңесъты.—I had 4 s and 5 s as grades. [with 5 being the best grade in the Russian school system and 1 being the worst]
29. Манэц тара журнал тюхуҗа.—The director had to look it up, he opened the journal with the records.
30. "Эйя манэць тара! Нянэвна сававна тоходанвэн."—"All right, I have to look it up! In fact, you studied well."
31. Тохолкодав ңямды.—My teacher was sitting there.
32. Пыда ма: "Табель тамда серта хани."—She said: "Let's issue her a transcript."
33. Тад тикехед хэванзъ мэнесь.—After this, we were planning to leave [for Salekhard]."
34. Квартирахана илень хабенихана.—We lived in a flat of a Russian woman.
35. Паракход неделяхана ңопой лэва хан"ңга.—The steamboat only left town once a week.
36. Март ядэрмазъ хэсьтынь.—We went to the town to take a walk.
37. Субботам ңатень.—We were waiting for Saturday.
38. Җамгэ' ринь патерана хавсятынь.—We left our things in the flat.
39. Таяна есянь" хаянь".—We left our money there.
40. Пэвсюмб ңямгэринь маңэ" ңань, есянь яңгувы". Талевыдо.—In the evening, we checked our things, the money was not there. It was stolen.
41. Няхан мам" теда" хырканы ңэгунь.—I asked my friend what we should do now.
42. Пыда ма: "Пуня" мяканы хэхэнь."—She answered: "Go back home."
43. Мань газетам' Нарьяна Вындер там.—I brought the newspaper Naryana Vynder.
44. Санаторий школа хэвхана пи пилембада" манзара.—Close to the sanatorium school, there are woodworkers.
45. Пям пилемби" онтабидо.—They are chopping and stacking the wood.
46. Тая хэхэнь мазравась.—We were going to go and work there.
47. Пям онтмба тара.—One has to chop the wood.
48. Тая" хаянь, луца" писиңга.—We went there, the Russians laughed.
49. Мани" м: "Атгэ тара?"—They are asking: "What do you want?"

50. Луца" ёльце писиңга.—The Russians laughed very much.
51. Аркадь нидиңга, саць тырабэдь, ханцер мазравуди".—"Such petite and very thin girls, how are you going to work?"
52. "Пям пэць я"амгуди".—"You won't be able to chop wood."
53. Мань мам: "Лядпэй пи онатамбгунь."—I respond: "We will stack the chopped wood."
54. Аркатадо ма: "Сид" ди нива" маэңгу." , тикихэна ных' тара."—The supervisor said: „I won't hire you, male power is needed here."
55. Хаянь", мазьями яңгу.—We left with no work.
56. Няхан мам: "Пуня" хэхэнь, почтан туюхонь."—I said: "Let's go back to the post office."
57. Почтахана газетам мэм.—At the post office, I took another newspaper.
58. Таяна пады: Качьгортхана евако һацеки харад тана.—The following was written there: In Kachgort, there is an orphanage.
59. Евако һацеки харадхана газетыхана объявления тани.—There was an announcement in the newspaper about this orphanage.
60. Пилебэй пи һонатась тара.—Chopped wood had to be stacked.
61. Сидя хибяри тара. Тая хэхэнь.—They needed two people for the job. We went there.
62. Һацеки харадан тэвынь, пикуна хабени халатана ядарһа.—When we arrived at the orphanage, a Russian woman was walking around the street in a dressing gown.
63. Мань ихинян мам: "Техничка Завхоз һэдаки, таяна хаень."—I thought in my mind: "It is probably the head housekeeper, let's go address her."
64. Мань мам: "Мазьядами шорһань."—I said: „We are looking for a job."
65. Газетам манэлабтам", туюкона пады: пи һгонэтамбда тара.—I showed her the newspaper where it was written that there were looking for workers to stack wood.
66. Пыда ма: "Амгэ манзараван харвадь?"—She asked: "Why do you want to work?"
67. Мань" : "Салехардан' тоходанавазь хэван харвань, есядами" тара, есянь" квартираханань' талевы."—We responded: "We are planning to go to Salekhard to study, but our money was stolen from the flat."
68. Ма"нив: "Неделя" пятада ни та."—She responded: "The wood will not be delivered for another week."
69. Хэвадь мэнизь, хабени манив: "Ервхан хантам, пыда ха" мэлись."—We wanted to leave, but the woman said: "I'll go to my boss and will see what she says."
70. Ерванда ня" сидтэ тарпяха.—The woman came out together with her boss.
71. Сидни хаңгаха.—They called us to them.
72. Ервада ма': "Неделя" манзрагуди". Һацеки һямгэри сэдурпаңгуди."—The boss said: "You will be working here for a week. You will mend children's clothes."
73. "Саванё, седура пир" һгани."—"Good, we can sew."
74. Недели ямбан мазрани. Хуб хасую часан', товсьтынь.—We worked for a whole week. We came at nine every morning.
75. Сидни' хув һоласьты', яле һоласьты', пэвсюмб һоласьты'.—We were fed in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening.
76. Неделя ваерана, һаркта сидни' хаңга.—The week went by and the boss called us.
77. Ма"нив: "Теда есядамди' татам. То" ни" сидяю' самлянг севкой ня"мани."—She said to us: "I will now give you your money. Each one gets 25 Rubles."
78. Тамальги пона сидяю самлянг еся саць һока.—Back in those days, 25 Rubles was a lot.
79. Ти субботахана хаянь. Салехардан хаянь.—That Saturday we left. We left for Salekhard.
80. Салехардан тэвынь, тэвмахадань нявх техникуман хая, мань медучилищен хаян.—When we arrived in Salekhard, my friend headed to the technical college, while I went to the medical college.

81. Директорт хаям. Мам: “Тюкона тоходанван харвам. Медичкам нэван харвам.”—I went to the director and said: “I want to study here. I want to be a medic.”
82. “Тюкохона т’ет’ экзамен’ мипа тара. Пыдар сидя экзаменан’ опоздаян.”—Here, you have to pass four exams. You are late for two of the exams.”
83. “Тики экзаменад’ мить я” амгуд. Џадебянда сит нива маэргу.”—“You won’t be able to pass these exams. This is why I cannot accept you.”
84. Ихинян мам: “Хуркавам нэбцум?”—I replied: “Well, what can I do now?”
85. Техникуман хаям. Няв техникуман тоходанвась мэвэдо, иле нигдамда ми”мы.—I went to the technical college. My friend had been accepted there, they gave her accommodation as well.
86. Мань директорт хаям. Директор ма’нив: “Сит тоходанвась маэгува.”—I went to the director. The director told me: “We will accept you to study here.”
87. Подготовительное отделения хаям.—I joined the preparatory program.

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- Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project: <https://www.wlrp.org> (accessed on 23 October 2024)
- Mohegan Language Program: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100424001255/http://www.moheganlanguage.com/> (accessed on 7 November 2024)
- Information and Resources on Tundra Nenets: <https://minlang.iling-ran.ru/lang/neneckiy-yazyk> (accessed on 23 October 2024)
- Social media sites with TN groups: <https://drugvokrug.ru/> and <https://vk.ru/> (VKontakte), YouTube channel “Ethnographic expedition Real people”: <https://youtube.com/channel/UC0qXBbQObzxi1Sw-1-O8aA?si=JjoqDcJClF5Yo2i1> (accessed on 23 October 2024)

Notes

- ¹ For clarification, I distinguish the two dialects of Nenets: the dialect of Tundra Nenets and the dialect of Forest Nenets. Within the Tundra Nenets dialect, there are different subdialects (Rus. ‘govor’) which I am describing here.
- ² In Russia, only languages with numbers lower than 50,000 are granted the status of an indigenous language. The criteria for inclusion in the group of indigenous people in Russia are small population size, specificities of the traditional culture, and a traditional lifestyle of nomadic or semi-nomadic reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing (*Severnaja Enciklopedija* 2004: 421).
- ³ During Soviet times, a колхоз (/kolkhoz/) was a collective farm.
- ⁴ The city of Salekhard is located in the Yamalo–Nenets Autonomous Okrug. This is approximately 700 km away by air from Naryan-Mar, which would become the starting point of the trip for both girls.
- ⁵ As it is common to pay consultants for fieldwork just as if they were participants in an experiment in Germany, I wanted to uphold this and reimbursed my Nenets consultants with the hourly rate of those times.
- ⁶ Kiezdeutsch is a variety of German which is spoken primarily by young people in urban areas like Berlin. A high percentage of the youth speaking Kiezdeutsch are multilingual and have an immigration background. It is regarded to be a multiethnic language. In 2006, the term was used in an essay by Heike Wiese and subsequently became established.

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