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Eva Toulouze (Tartu)

## **The Forest Nenets as a double language minority**

The Forest Nenets are a small community living in Western Siberia, which has not been as thoroughly studied as the other native people in the same region. In spite of living in the first Siberian region to be colonised by the Russians as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Forest Nenets have been identified as a specific group only in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is true that, according to G. Verbov (1936 : 57), a group mentioned as “kunnaya samoyad” in a source dated 1602 may refer to Forest Nenets. Nevertheless, this group is but one between several other groups of “samoyads” (old Russian name for the Nenets) and is not directly opposed to the Tundra Nenets. The first scholar to have recognised the Forest Nenets as a specific group in dual opposition to the Tundra Nenets is the Finnish linguist M.A. Castrén, who collected language and ethnographic data by the Forest Nenets in the 1840-ies. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Forest Nenets are newly discovered in Russia as a people called “nyah-samar-yah” which was considered to be unconnected to any other people of the region (Bartenev<sup>1</sup> 1998 : 145-146). The confusion is cleared at the beginning of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the works of Patkanov (1911) and Zhitkov (1913 : 249-251); more reliable data about the Forest Nenets are due to the Finnish scholar Toivo Lehtisalo, who visited the Forest Nenets in 1914. The first comprehensive article about Forest Nenets culture as a whole is the abovementioned study published by Verbov in 1936. Afterwards there has been some systematic research about Forest Nenets language (grammatical sketches by Verbov 1957, Sammallahti 1974 and Pusztay 1984); there has also been occasional research by Russian ethnographers, who have been dealing with problems of ethnical history and some questions of material and spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor Bartenev (1864-1921) was a democratic Russian activist, who spent 4 years in exile in the North of the Tobolsk region. His book was written in 1896.

culture. Because of the scarceness of data about Forest Nenets, I shall start my paper with a general presentation of this people, and only afterwards concentrate on the linguistic issue.

Two main reasons may explain the Forest Nenets marginality.

First of all, they occupy the remotest areas in Central Western Siberia, the rivers' high streams, between lakes and bogs, the most difficult to reach, so the Forest Nenets have succeeded to remain isolated until the last decades (Gemuyev 1987 : 32, Golovnyev 1995 : 56). Toivo Lehtisalo, who visited the Lyamin region in 1914, reports suggestively how complicated it was to reach their centres (Lehtisalo 1959 : 139-141). Even nowadays some Forest Nenets groups, for example those living in the vicinity of lake Num-To, are connected to the rest of the world only by a helicopter flight once a week. For centuries the only contact of Russians with the Forest Nenets was the latter yearly visit to the local fairs (in Obdorsk or Surgut), where they brought reindeer skins for exchange in order to get the "Russian" products they needed. But even these contacts have not led for a long time to their identification as a distinct group. The fact is the Forest Nenets are very closely connected to another Nenets group, the Tundra Nenets, that occupy huge territories from the Kola to the Taymyr Peninsulas both European zones and in Siberia. They were the first people of the North the Russians met in their earlier expansion eastwards. So confusion with the Tundra Nenets has been the second reason explaining the Forest Nenets late discovery: all the Nenets were treated indifferently and called Samoyeds.

Still, besides some common points, there are some peculiar Forest Nenets features in language as well as culture overall. Although linguistic analysis shows clearly the closeness of Tundra and Forest Nenets languages – that have been treated as two dialects of the same language by Lehtisalo in his extensive dictionary (Lehtisalo 1956) – this closeness is not evident for the speakers themselves, for divergent phonetic evolution has led to a situation where there can be no real mutual understanding between the two groups. Therefore linguists as Johanna Laakso (<http://www.helsinki.fi/hum/sugl/oppimat/sgrjohd/sip.htm>) and

Tapani Salminen (<http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/ling.html>) use to present Forest and Tundra Nenets as two separate languages. Moreover, the difference in ecological context – taiga versus tundra – explains that the husbandry model of both groups is significantly different. Thus we are justified in treating Forest Nenets as a distinct community. But this is still not a generalised approach. Presently the Forest Nenets live in two administrative units, the Yamalo-Nenets and the Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous regions. If in the 1920-ies administrative authorities referred to the Forest Nenets in statistics – there were in 1926 1129 Forest Nenets (Homich 1995 : 23) – nowadays they do not distinguish them anymore from the Tundra Nenets. This means that nobody knows assertively the size of the Forest Nenets population: some groups live in contact areas with Tundra Nenets, and both populations are treated as a single people. There can be therefore only approximate data about the number of Forest Nenets nowadays: scholars mention figures between 1000<sup>2</sup> and 2000<sup>3</sup>. The only reliable statistic data we have are the figures for Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous region, for practically all the Nenets living in this region are Forest Nenets:

1970	1979	1989
940	1003	1144

(Homich 1995 : 22-23, data from the last official census in USSR).

The Forest Nenets occupy nowadays three main regions in Western Siberia: the higher flow of the Kazym River, the area of the Num-to sacred lake<sup>4</sup>, the higher flow of the Agan River (a northern tributary of the Ob) with its

<sup>2</sup> 1300, according to [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=YRK](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=YRK), about 1000 for Golovnyev (1995 : 71).

<sup>3</sup> This last figure is given by <http://www.suri.ee/uralic.html> as well as by the UNESCO (<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~bergmann/russia/languages/nenets.htm#number>).

<sup>4</sup> We know that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Forest Nenets occupied also the high stream of the Lyamin and its tributaries. According to oral information, after the village of Darko-Gorshkovski was closed in the 1960-ies, many Forest Nenets from the Lyamin migrated to the Num-To area. In 1972, there were on the Lyamin river 16 Nenets families (45 persons) (Vasiljev 1985 : 81-82). There are certainly still some isolated Forest Nenets in the forest tundra of this basin.

tributaries Amputa and Vatyogan and the higher stream of the Pur, which is divided into two branches whose names refer to Forest Nenets clans: the Pyakopur and the Ayvasedapur. My observations are based on my fieldwork in the Agan area, where I spent five months between 1999 and 2000. From the linguistic point of view, the Agan Nenets are in a specific position, very different from what Kaur Mägi has experienced in Num-To<sup>5</sup> (2001) and Tapani Salminen in the Pur region (1998<sup>6</sup>), as I will show further on. In order to understand the linguistic situation in that region, I must present first the ethnical situation in the Agan region and the Nenets' ethnical contacts.

### **The Agan Nenets' ethnical contacts**

The actual Nenets population of the Agan Nenets is mixed: one branch, the Ayvaseda and the Yusi clans<sup>7</sup>, may be considered as early inhabitants of the Agan basin. The other clans represented in this group nowadays, the Tyot and the Vella clans, are known to have migrated to the high streams of the Vatyogan and Amputa Rivers in the 1930 from the northern areas around the village of Khalesovoy and perhaps from the region of Num-To<sup>8</sup>. This late migration is still present in the Nenets' consciousness for all the newcomers were registered by soviet authorities under the surname of Ayvaseda<sup>9</sup>, although the people themselves perfectly know that they actually belong to the Tyot or to the Vella clans.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. [www.forestnenets.info](http://www.forestnenets.info).

<sup>6</sup> Oral information.

<sup>7</sup> The main social institution of the Forest Nenets until the soviet era, and even in its first decades (Obshchestvennyi 1970 : 203) was the exogamic clan, which has been loosing pertinence as main organiser of social life, but is still very much present in the conscience of the people: surnames are still clan names, and if not in discourse, in practice exogamy is still very much practiced.

<sup>8</sup> Oral information by Yuri Vella.

<sup>9</sup> The reason of this error are not entirely elucidated: according to Ogryzko, the rich Ayvaseda presented the poorer newcomers as their kins in order to dissimulate the fact they used their labour force (Ogryzko 1998 : 171). According to Yuri Vella's oral information, the Vellas migrated from Num-To in order to avoid the repression following the Kazym uprising (Leete 2002).

As I have mentioned, during the tsarist period the Nenets had but occasional contacts with the Russian administration and the town's population. Because of their living far from the centres, most of the administrative relations of the Forest Nenets were dealt through mediators. The main mediators belonged usually to another Siberian people living in the same areas, the Khanty<sup>10</sup>. The eastern branch of the Agan Khantys used to live on the river's medium and lower stream; they had thus more contacts with the Russian administration, more people among them spoke Russian. We can thus argue that until the first decades of the Soviet period, the Forest Nenets had but very rare, occasional contacts with the Russians. In 1936 G. Verbov, who visited among others also the Agan Nenets, asserts that he has met no Forest Nenets speaking Russian (Verbov 1936 : 66). But the contacts with the Surgut Khantys were already most developed, both southwards, with the Agan Khantys (the families of Sardakov, Aypin, Kazamkin) and westwards, with the Khantys living in the basin of the Tromyogan, and occupying the higher flows of this river and its tributaries. These early contacts are proved both by linguistic influence and by the fact that tradition has fixed marriage rules between the Nenets and the Khanty clans, establishing a kind of interethnic exogamy, which was still active at the end of the 1930 (Verbov 1936 : 68-69).

The Soviet period changed radically the context of the Forest Nenets' life. If during the first decades the ruler's concerns were to strengthen their own positions, from the 1930-ies on their ambition was to rule effectively the whole territory and to have a general system implemented everywhere (Toulouze 1998 : 154). This is the period where the first schools were opened and the collectivisation launched. Surely in these remote regions this process could not be so rapidly achieved as in Central Russia, and it took some decades to ensure a total control of the population in different types of collective farms. But the creation of these unities and the general trends in Soviet policy led to the

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<sup>10</sup> This function of mediators is well illustrated – although this example concerns another river, the Lyamin – by Toivo Lehtisalo's experience in 1914: as he was looking for the Nenets, he had to rely on the help of Khanty guides, who led him up to the Nenets camps (Lehtisalo 1959 : 138-140).

concentration of all the natives into villages: in the Agan region, the new centre was Varyogan, where since 1937 there was a boarding school for the natives. If men were usually working for the collective farm in the taiga (as hunters or reindeer herders), women and children lived most of their lives in the village. As a matter of fact, Varyogan was a mixed village, where most of the population was either Nenets or Khanty. Surely the new way of life has encouraged mixed marriages, bringing Khantys and Nenets ever more together.

Last but not least, the main difference between the Agan Nenets and the other groups of Forest Nenets is due to the peculiar economical developments in this area in the last few decades. The Agan Nenets occupy territories where since the mid-1960s huge oilfields have been discovered, whose exploitation has given Russia its main oil production and therefore currency resources. Oil industry has done what neither the tsarist colonisation nor the Soviet power had been able to do: to really occupy the Siberian taiga and hold it under thorough control. Oil industry has induced also an extensive migration of oil workers coming from all over the former Soviet Union. The demographic balance has thus been altered, and the native peoples have been reduced to a very small percentage of the overall population. New cities have been founded on former reindeer pastures to accommodate the newcomers. This group is far from being ethnically homogenous, but I shall overlook here its inner ethnical subdivision: the immigrants' attitude in regard to the native people does not differ in essentials, they have all left their home region for a precise goal – the improving of their material life – and they all have Russian as a common tongue interfacing with the rest of the world. This new element is a key factor in the native's life as well as in language issues.

### **The Agan Nenets between the Khantys and the Russians**

I come now to the linguistic issues, which are most directly connected with the demographic factor. The fact is that the Forest Nenets – although we have no

precise data about how much they actually are, are clearly a minority both in regard to the newcomers as in regard to the Khantys. This numerical dimension was certainly of secondary importance when people lived scattered in the taiga. But it is very clearly felt when they form a community gathered in the village, and even more since the development of oil industry, for the foundation of new towns, as Radužnyj in 1984 on the middle stream, right on the pastures of the Kazamkin clan's reindeers, has chased Khanty families from their lands and led them to settle in Varyogan, increasing thus the number of Khantys.

This minority position has led to a clear domination of Khanty among the native tongues. It is interesting to notice that this seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon: in 1985, Vasilyev, according to whom the Agan Nenets were 45 families (150 persons) and the Khantys represented 51 families (250 persons), maintains that "the local Khanty know Nenets in a minor degree", and that "both ethnic groups have preserved the main features of their traditional culture, the consciousness of their identity and their mother tongue" (Vasilyev 1985 : 82). Nowadays, anyhow, the situation has radically changed. Two factors prove this subordinate position of Forest Nenets compared to Khanty: on one hand the fact that there is no Khanty speaking or understanding well Nenets (the last, an old man called Mihail Sardakov<sup>11</sup>, died during our last expedition in September 2000); on the other hand, if a native language is preserved in mixed marriages, it is as a rule Khanty. All the Nenets who still know their mother tongue are also skilled in Khanty<sup>12</sup>.

This stronger position of Khanty compared to Nenets appears clearly in the resistance to russification. The domination of Russian is a corollary to the domination of the Russians. It has been a direct consequence of the people's gathering into villages, with school and other institutions functioning in Russian. Certainly, at the beginning, native languages were also supposed to be used, but Russian soon became dominant: although for the responsables of education

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<sup>11</sup> Mihail Sardakov, according to our experience, had a good understanding of Nenets – as we could notice by his way of following and commenting a Nenets tale told by an old Nenets – but did not use to speak it: in intercourse with his Nenets friends, he too used Khanty.

<sup>12</sup> This fact was already noticed half a century ago by N. Tereshchenko (Tereshchenko 1959 : 100)



policy in the first decade of soviet rule school had to be based on native languages, the lack of teachers did not allow its actual application (Toulouze 1999 : 64). All the dimensions of modern life, both with its material and mental aspects, have been conceptualised through Russian. Other languages spoken by Russia's more numerous nationalities have tried to develop their means to express modernity, but these attempts have been cruelly repressed since the early 1930-ies<sup>13</sup>; the languages of the peoples of the North were very far from being adapted, and no attempt at all was made to achieve this adaptation: actually written languages started to spread only since 1934, when the political climate was more and more tense, more and more totalitarian. Thus all the contacts with the outer world were and are made through Russian. The knowledge of Russian is a compulsory element to get along with the world.

As in all the Soviet Union, there has been external pressure by the State's policy to make the nationalities adopt Russian as everyday language in substitution to the vernacular starting from the late 1950-ies, when native languages ceased to be taught at school. There has also been an objective pressure in favour of Russian due to the inaptitude of the actual idioms to express modernity, as new notions were much easier to be mentioned in Russian. And in addition there has been a subjective acceptation of these trends in the private sphere: the families have given up speaking their own language to their children. In the case of mixed marriages, the choice of Russian was even more evident, because of the above mentioned situation: both parents did not know both languages, and usually they preferred to guarantee their children an easier future by adopting Russian since the beginning. There has thus been a generation gap in the transmission of the language, for the Nenets between 40 and 60 years of age have omitted to transmit it to their children, who have nothing to transmit to theirs.

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<sup>13</sup> As by the Finno-Ugric peoples of Central Russia, whose attempt to develop their own languages according to their own internal rules and using their own lexical bases were considered since 1932 as the expression of anti-soviet and nationalist positions and severely repressed.

Thus, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no child in the Agan region has Nenets as family tongue; no child begins school speaking Nenets – so that the lessons in “mother tongue”, reincluded since the 1980-ies in the programs as one of the subjects, are led as a matter of fact as lessons in a “foreign tongue”. But if English as a foreign language benefits of high prestige, Nenets is felt by the younger pupils to be of no use at all, which complicates considerably the teacher’s task from the psychological point of view. The youngest Nenets native speaker in the Agan region is a reindeer herder aged 27, who lives mostly in the tundra. The Khanty have resisted better: most of Khanty children starting school speak both Khanty and Russian. There has been no generation gap in Khanty language transmission.

As we see, there is in the Agan region a three-degree hierarchy in spoken languages: on the higher step, Russian, spoken by everybody; on the middle step, Khanty, not spoken by Russians and by younger Nenets generations, but spoken par the Khantys and by the elder Nenets; and on the lower step Nenets, known only by the elder Nenets generation<sup>14</sup>.

### **The language issue in the life and self-image of the Agan’s Nenets**

How do the people themselves refer to their language and the position of their language? I would characterise the Nenets’ attitude towards the linguistic double minority issue as conscious and indifferent.

The Nenets are conscious of the linguistic trends they have been submitted to. They are perfectly aware of what has been lost and they are able to explain how and why. During our fieldwork with the Estonian linguist Kaur Mägi, we recorded Nenets speech from ten persons among whom the younger was 45 years old. Some of our informants were very assured about the preciseness of the information they provided: these were people whose life was mainly

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<sup>14</sup> It is true that 1989 figures for the whole Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous region indicate that 647 Nenets (out of 1144) consider Nenets as their mother tongue (Homich 1995 : 311). But this statistic includes the Num-To region, where Nenets is actually the main communication language, and does not take into account the younger generations.

connected with the taiga and with traditional skills. I may mention a couple that lives at the moment in the taiga. The man (49) is half Nenets half Khanty, but clearly his Nenets father's influence predominated, as his mother, a Khanty, suffered of a mental disease and died when her son was still a kid. Our informant's father has always lived with reindeer in the taiga; he has a good knowledge of Nenets oral tradition that he has transmitted to his son; after having lived for some years mainly in Varyogan, our informant went back in the last decade to live at some kilometers' distance from his father's camp. His wife is a pure Nenets, whose father quitted in the early 1950-ies the collective farm and has not been seen in Varyogan afterwards. His friends have built him a hut, but he still prefers to live in a conic tent. Often her husband refers to her as an authority in Nenets. Nevertheless, although these persons speak Nenets among them, they have not transmitted the knowledge of the language to their daughter, who is at the moment 21 years old.

Still most of our informants were dubitative about their own language skills and proposed us to turn to the one person "knowing well Nenets" – considered as an authority on these questions, the only educated Nenets from the village, the reindeer herder and poet Yuri Vella, our main informant. They consider that except Yuri Vella, all the Nenets in Varyogan have forgotten their language. This is clearly an exaggeration, for most of them still remember songs or tales and are able to talk to one another in Nenets. Nevertheless they considered the language they used as poor and limited, perhaps even erroneous, probably compared to what their remembrances may have been.

On this topic I had a significant conversation with Yuri Vella. When I asked him how a Nenets proverb quoted by him in Russian would sound in Nenets, he answered me after a small pause: "I can't find it now. Since Auli's death I haven't spoken Nenets". Auli was his elder neighbour and friend, a good singer and storyteller. I observed to Yuri that he had just spoken by phone in Nenets with his mother. But Yuri rejected this assertion: "This was not real Nenets. It was a commonplace language, which has nothing to do with our rich and expressive

poetical tongue”<sup>15</sup>. This reaction illustrates the attitude nowadays Nenets have towards their language: what they possess is not a value, for they have lost the essentials, the core of what the language should be. What they know seems to be but a shadow of what Nenets has been.

Still the Nenets are in some way proud of their language. Both Khantys and Nenets in Varyogan are positive in asserting that Nenets is much more difficult than Khanty. One Nenets informant even doubted of our capacity – of anybody’s capacity - of learning Nenets. The assurance of having an exclusive language is comforting, for it gives psychological value to what they still have and to their culture as a whole, and is a practical means to explain the fact that practically no Khanty knows this language. Still there are also other reasons to this phenomenon. The most important is that Nenets has no practical function in social life. When I asked Yuri Vella’s wife, a Khanty, whether she didn’t find necessary to know her husbands mother tongue, she answered, “Wherefore?” True enough, her husband speaks good Khanty, so when they want to share private information they may use her language. This practical attitude is clearly inspired from the pattern dominating the whole society, for in the Soviet Union Russians did usually not make any effort to learn the languages of the regions they lived in, considering that Russian was enough to ensure communication. So the Russian attitude towards local languages is reproduced by Khantys, who expect Nenets to know their language<sup>16</sup>, but do not make any effort for reciprocity.

This kind of attitude has led to a sort of allover indifference towards the language, which is shared by the Nenets themselves. They have not tried to react to the general trend. In some way, the Agan Nenets have clearly sacrificed their spiritual culture as far as it is connected with language. Storytelling, which is

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<sup>15</sup> He has expressed this same idea in the preface to one of his collections of poems: “We, the Forest Nenets, we used to sing many stories, tales, laments and songs, we performed them with a popular melody or as intonational recited poetry (as for instance conversations with gods). The colloquial language is used in everyday life, it is poor, it has no colour, no taste, no smell, you don’t feel either colder either warmer. You cannot tell a tale or sing a song in the colloquial language, and a common conversation about wood, food or money pollutes the artistic language” (Vella 1996 : 5).

<sup>16</sup> When 19 years old Yuri addressed his wife’s mother to ask her daughter’s hand, the old Khanty woman obliged him to do this in Khanty, pretending not to understand any other language.

an interactive activity, requiring comments, questions, exclamations, has lost ground, for it seldom happens in that region that only Nenets would gather without the presence of Khantys. The latter automatically will induce the use of Khanty or Russian as a language of communication. Riddles remain very much alive, and they are popular among the children, but they are nowadays mostly told in Russian. The loss of the language affects even more radically the musical culture, for Nenets do not know instrumental music and their singing is most thoroughly connected to the language (Ojamaa 2002). The gap between Nenets traditional music and European music is so deep, that it is difficult to imagine traditional songs sung in Russian. Moreover, the spiritual side of Nenets worldview is deeply affected: prayers during sacrifices are performed in Nenets by the elder generation, but the younger shall not be able to continue this tradition.

We could have the impression that indifference towards the language means indifference towards the survival of Nenets' identity in the Agan region. Nevertheless it is not so. The fact is that language does not, in the Nenets' understanding, play a key role in the community's survival. The fact is that the Russians' presence in the heart of the taiga affects the possibilities for the group to survive even physically.

When we examine the place of language in the demands of the Associations defending the peoples of the North, we are surprised to observe that it is practically absent. The priorities are elsewhere: they are in the preservation of land, in the possibility of living in the traditional way.

The main concern of the Varyogan Nenets is a material one: how to live in villages where there are no jobs (or no jobs for them), and where alcoholism is rapidly degrading the health of younger and elder people? But how to live in the taiga – where pollution has spoiled the rivers and the fish, the presence of human beings has chased away the game and the pastures have been occupied by oil industry? This is the concern of most Nenets. In the last decade, some of them

have chosen, as legislation has given them the opportunity<sup>17</sup>, to live most of their time in their traditional kinship territories, and to try to save reindeer herding. Others have sold their rights to oil industry in order to get compensations allowing them to live in Varyogan without having to look for work. The most conscious of the Nenets are terrified by this encouragement to idleness and parasitism, and feel that this is the real murder of their people. Some Nenets are tragically divided between the desire of preserving nature and the need for money. There is no place for the language concern, when the main issue is physical survival: thinking of it is a luxury the Agan Nenets have given up long ago.

Yuri Vella shares this deep feeling. He tried in the early 1990-ies, to use language as an instrument for revitalising his people and he published a periodical paper in Nenets. The initiative, as a matter of fact, was not his, but his uncle's, Leonid (Lyahu) Ayvaseda, but Yuri continued it after his uncle's death and produced 8 numbers of *Tilhivsama* (Our life). He was the unique author writing in the paper, making the page sample and drawing manually the special Nenets letters. Thus, he invented an orthograph for Forest Nenets and even introduced a "reform" in this orthograph by introducing some new letters. He tried to diversify the texts presented: news from the Nenets community, poems, riddles, translations and linguistic explanations. But this experience did not last long: Yuri discovered that only very few persons readed his paper, and gave up any attempt connected to the language. Nevertheless at the end of the 1990, probably under the influence of his foreign contacts<sup>18</sup>, and discovering that foreigners had not the same contempt for the Nenets language that he was used to at home, he took over again the language issue. In his last collection of poems<sup>19</sup> there are three poems presented in Nenets and the titles of the

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<sup>17</sup> In 1992, the local parliament of the autonomous region inhabited by the Agan Forest Nenets (Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous region) has given the natives the use of their traditional lands, providing that the subsoil resources remain property of the State.

<sup>18</sup> Yuri Vella is well known as a poet and a fighter for the right of his people in Russia as well as abroad: he has personal contacts with German, Estonian, French and Finnish researchers, has been invited to Budapest, Helsinki, San Francisco and Tartu.

<sup>19</sup> This is a bilingual collection with Russian texts and their French translation by myself. The three Nenets poems are presented without any translation.

illustrations are also given in Nenets (Vella 2001). I have participated myself at a writers' meeting, where Yuri Vella chose to read his Nenets poems to an audience where there was no other Forest Nenets. But his new concern for the language is thoroughly integrated to his other, more political tasks. Yuri Vella's present project is to write a toponymic dictionary of the Agan basin. He intends to show how places considered to be inhabited and empty have always been integrated to the native's life, have names and have been used as pastures or hunting areas by specific clans. He hopes to give thus factual information that may be used in future by natives in order to prove their rights to land property. This attempt to reconstruct a kind of geography of the native's life is meant in three languages: Russian, Khanty and Nenets. Yuri wants to introduce the three possible names of rivers, lakes, bogs and places in general, commenting each one in the original language, without translation into the other idioms. This dictionary is at the moment but a project, only some pages have been written. But I consider the linguistic approach very interesting. The information Yuri wants to deliver is not for curiosity and language is not put there for the sake of mere symbolical proclamation, but as a means of communication inside the ethnic group, to be used by it and by all those who are ready to make the effort to learn it. Yuri Vella thinks that by presenting his language (as well as Khanty) as self-sufficient, he may give an impulse to reality and help evolutions on this way.

Still he is quite alone on this mental position. The most active of the Nenets seem to think that if they succeed in maintaining alive some kind of life in the taiga, if they succeed in saving reindeer herding as a main form of traditional husbandry in their region, the main goal is achieved. The Agan Nenets have lost their language and do not see any means of getting it back. In half a century, nobody will speak it any more. But this does not mean that they have abandoned their values and their identity: they are only preparing to express them in a different way.

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