



Islands in the tundra – language documentation among the last speakers of Forest Enets



A peninsula disguised as an island

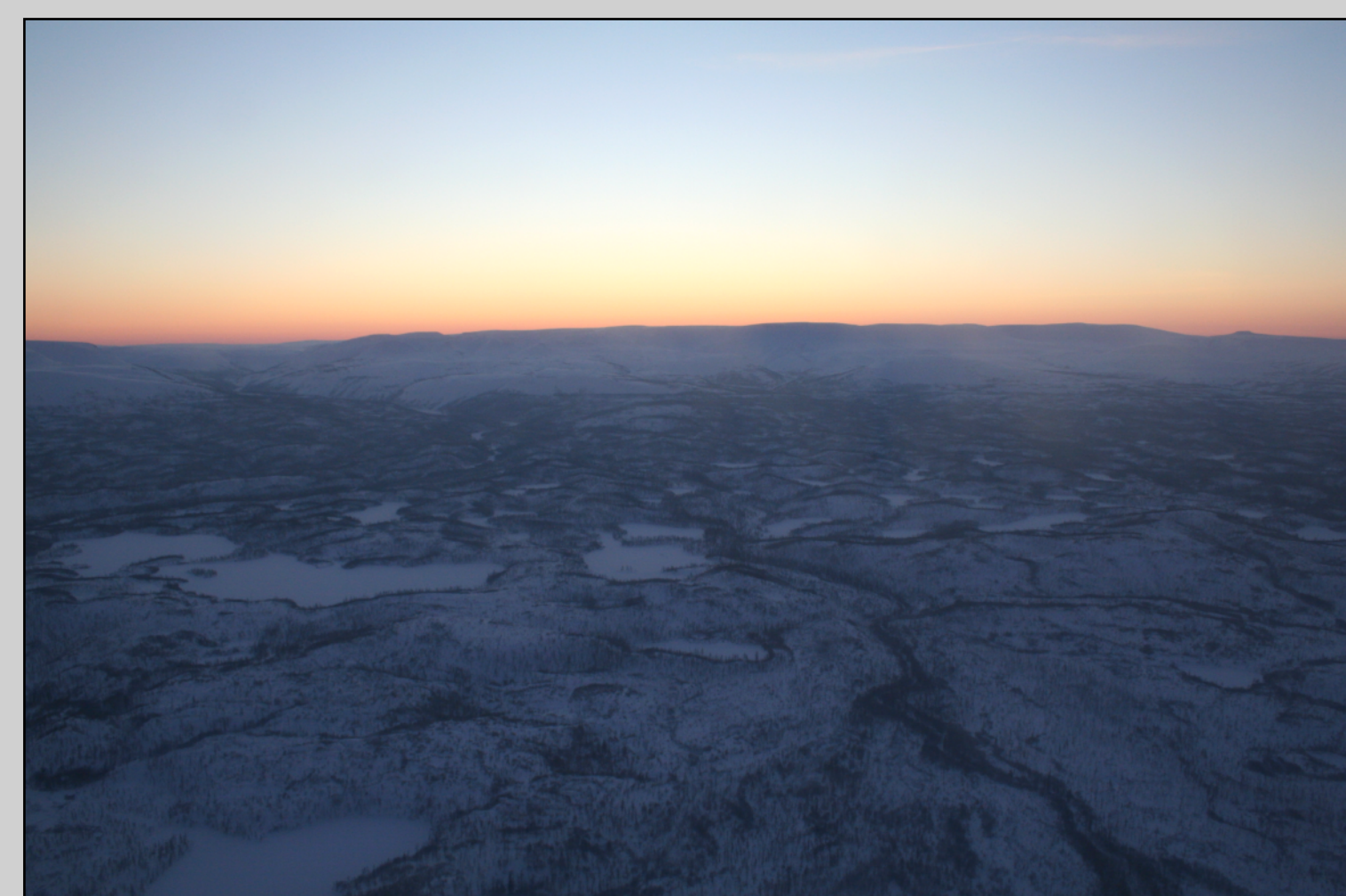
Although geographically a peninsula, the Taimyr Peninsula is an island, as there are no land based connections with other areas of Siberia. If one intends to travel to the Taimyr Peninsula, one has to take an aircraft to the local airport Noril'sk-Alykel, located in the tundra along the only road on the Taimyr Peninsula connecting Dudinka and Noril'sk. 'Island hopping' continues from either of the two locations by helicopters or small aircrafts, e. g. to the village Potapovo, where the Enets people live. Only in the short arctic summer can several locations also be reached by boats.



The Forest Enets language

Forest Enets is a critically endangered and moribund Samoyedic language belonging to the Uralic language family. It is remembered and spoken in two locations on the Taimyr Peninsula, the district capital Dudinka and the village Potapovo. Documentation was conducted by Florian Siegl in both locations, in 2006-2007 and 2008. 37 potential and active language users are still alive today, although unfortunately only a dozen of them still use the language periodically. After some initial hesitations, almost all remaining speakers wished to support the docu-

mentation progress and became involved. Over time, most participants perceived it as a personal task to guarantee that future generations will be able to learn that a language called *onai bada* 'the real language' was once spoken on the Taimyr Peninsula.



An audio documentation

Life in a restricted access area with a long history of state surveillance imposes unwritten restrictions on the documentation process. Whereas the Forest Enetses had no objections being recorded, they did not want to be filmed. This did however not hinder them from talking in length about their lives during the Soviet Period. Most of the documented stories are personal stories about events in their everyday life, a genre which is hardly visible in the only comprehensive text collection published in Russia. As the Taimyr Peninsula was very well known in the Soviet Gulag system, stories about imprisoned relatives, encounters with shamans fleeing from Soviet authorities, and encountering of escapees from the Gulag in Noril'sk were told without any hesitations.



Experiences with the hardship that the northern periphery experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union was also a re-occurring topic in narratives. Nevertheless, stories reporting funny instances during hunting trips or encounters with seemingly unexplainable supernatural forces were also seen as worthwhile to document. During the documentation period, the concept of telling a "good story" became one of the most important concerns; as people in the future should learn what the last speakers had on their minds and how they were living, not every story was deemed reasonably interesting and worthwhile to record. This explains why the speakers did not retell stories of the traditional genres which had been documented earlier.

Post-DOBES Period

In June 2011 a grammatical description of Forest Enets based on materials collected during the DOBES funding period was submitted and defended as a PhD thesis. Shortly after, the first Post-DOBES fieldtrip to the Taimyr Peninsula began. The central aim was to finish transliteration and translation of the remaining narratives for the archive, and to record new "good stories". During this trip, a short presentation of the first scientific results was given at the local museum in Dudinka.

The presentation was followed by a rather unexpected invitation; I was approached by the Dolgan Diaspora who uttered the wish



that their language (a member of the Turkic language family) would be in need of a similar description as the one I have compiled for Forest Enets. Instead of recording and transliterating good stories only in *onai bada*, the language of the smallest indigenous people, I ended up also doing the same in *dolgan-haka tyla*, the language of the largest indigenous people of the Taimyr Peninsula. A language documentation never ends, but a new one may begin much quicker than one anticipates.

CONTACT ADDRESS

Florian Siegl
Department of Finno-Ugrian Studies
University of Helsinki

florian.siegl@helsinki.fi