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Lessons in Itelmen

By Julia Phillips

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"Sitlhxpk'el," notes Jonathan David Bobalijk, a University of Connecticut linguistics professor providing examples of some particularities in the Itelmen language. "QsXaj."

These words bear not only the meanings of "embers" and "dog" but also the honor of existing in a language both tantalizingly rich and worryingly rare. Itelmen is a highly endangered tongue.

Spoken by an ethnic group indigenous to the Kamchatka peninsula, the language is now carried only by a few dozen people. Along with a multinational research team, Bobalijk is committed to documenting and understanding the language for as long as it's still around.

Bobalijk first arrived in Kamchatka in 1993 as a linguistic research assistant for Professor David Koester. He remembers that assistantship as "an incredible opportunity," introducing him to a language that had barely been investigated and a region only opened to foreign visitors two years before. Over the next year, he adjusted to life in the remote Kamchatkan settlements of Kovran and Tigil. That first extended trip to recently post-Soviet Kamchatka,

where salmon was abundant but electricity scarce, started him off on a lifetime's work of investigating Itelmen.

"The study of linguistics has uncovered that beneath a lot of surface diversity there is a rich, underlying commonality to languages — structures that are shared across the globe," Bobalijk said. "All languages draw on a common set of building blocks, but what makes every language unique is the particular way in which it combines these blocks."

By documenting the details of as many languages as possible, linguists come to understand which elements are fundamental to all. "It's especially important to test and refine our hypotheses against languages like Itelmen that are remote, both geographically and historically, from the more well-studied of the world's languages," Bobalijk explained.

Allowing a unique, remote, and endangered language like Itelmen to disappear without investigation would only hurt our chances of understanding what is universal in our linguistic experience. In appreciating the underlying structures in speech, we come closer to grasping what it is we all share.

The ethnic Itelmen community now consists of about 3,000 members, most of whom did not grow up speaking the language. Over the past 20 years, Bobalijk's research team has worked to contribute as much as possible to the Itelmen community. While endeavoring to document the language of the older generation, they facilitate youth language learning by providing teaching materials and compiling an audio-video dictionary.

Their research follows in the footsteps of Itelmen linguistic leaders like K. N. Khaloimova, who has been developing pedagogical materials since the 1980s, and empowers new local activists to pursue their language's revitalization.

One member of Bobalijk's research team is Tatiana Degai, an ethnic Itelmen woman working on her doctorate in the language's revitalization. Degai and other language leaders in her community continue tirelessly transmitting Itelmen to a new generation.

"The Itelmen language and culture is surprisingly tenacious," Bobalijk said. "Researchers have been predicting the imminent demise of Itelmen since the first Russian contact with Kamchatka. Stepan Krasheninnikov, writing in 1755, noted that Itelmen assimilation into Russian culture was already well underway — yet more than 250 years later there are still native speakers of Itelmen and a vibrant group of young people engaged in preserving and revitalizing their culture."

In Itelmen communities around the peninsula, in Kovran, Tigil, and elsewhere, this language from Kamchatka's prehistory can be heard.

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