

Northward spread of Samoyedic: linguistic evidence

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This is the first talk in the series where we join evidence and perspectives from three disciplines, linguistics (this abstract), archaeology (abstract by A.Idimeshev), and paleoecology (abstract by N.Rudaya), to reconstruct the northward spread of Samoyedic languages.

To begin with, Proto-Samoyedic (PS) was spoken much to the south of the current Northern Samoyedic (NS) area, as based on several types of linguistic evidence. First, Proto-Uralic (PU) was most probably spoken in southern Siberia, as corroborated by the reconstructed lexicon related to the environment, by present locations of the Uralic languages, and by loanwords from Indo-Iranian (II) (cf. a summary of the hypothesis in Grünthal et al. (2022); there is some debate about exact location of PU along the east-west axis, but no one doubts its southern location in respect to the modern NS languages). Second, PS flora and fauna lexicon, as analysed by Helimski (2000), point to southern Siberian taiga, not to the Arctic environment. Finally, many terms for the Arctic environment differ in the NS languages, as shown by Gusev (In prep.); this implies that they were not inherited from a common protolanguage but developed independently. This also indicates that these languages came to the Arctic areas separately, e.g. in several northward spurts from the PS homeland, *contra* Helimski 2000: 23 (or from the Proto-NS homeland: if such a protolanguage existed, it was neither spoken in the Arctic given the variation in the lexicon). Gusev & Khanina (Subm.) provide non-lexical (phonological and morphological) evidence that NS languages diversified first, but were in secondary contacts later, and thus indirectly support the hypothesis that joint inhabitation of the Arctic by NS speakers is incidental and not evidence for their protolanguage being spoken here. Besides, the cognacy of the NS names for the Yenisei river (Helimski 2000, Janhunen 2012), or for a ‘big river/sea’ for modern groups unfamiliar with the river itself, may indicate that the NS speakers did not withdraw from the Yenisei area during diversification of their languages.

As for the time frame of the northward spread, linguistics suggests the following. First, clear II borrowings are absent from PS but are attested in abundance in all other Uralic branches, with earliest layers dated 4000 BP (Holopainen 2019). Grünthal et al. (2022) suggest that the split of Samoyedic from PU had to happen earlier, but not much earlier, given the good preservation of the PU morphology and regular phonological evolution of PU vocabulary in PS. Samoyedic languages share numerous phonological and morphological innovations, and so it is quite probable that at least another millennium passed before diversification of PS. If northward spreads of Samoyedic languages were accompanied by cultural spreads – and it is hard to imagine it differently, given the dramatic influence of Samoyedic onto linguistic map

of Western Siberia – archaeological evidence for such spreads starting 3000 BP can be consulted to fine-tune the time frame. After 3000 BP, the first northward movement of a cultural tradition are the latest stages of the northward dissemination of Andronoid and Post-Andronoid cultures to steppe, forest-steppe, and southern taiga zones of Western Siberia (3400-2800 BP), (Shun'kov 2022: 456-481). Since Andronovo is associated with II speakers, the lack of visible II influence in PS suggests that PS was not yet spoken in the area, and so its spread to the area happened later. The next noticeable northward spread of a cultural tradition is Kulai dated 2300 BP, and we take it then as the earliest possible time for the linguistic spread. Finally, by 1100 BP the middle Ob' area saw influx of numerous socially dominant groups speaking individual Turkic languages (Chindina 1991). Since no Common Turkic influence onto PS can be seen (Helimski 2000: 17-18), in contrast to numerous later contacts between individual Turkic and Samoyedic languages, disintegration of PS had to happen before that. Thus, the northward spread of Samoyedic most probably happened at some point between 2300 and 1100 BP.

So linguistic evidence points to a northward spread of Samoyedic languages from Southern/Central Yenisei to the Yeniseian Arctic. The spread took place between 2300-1100 BP and happened in several waves or spurts. Hence, a question to archaeology can be formulated: Are there any known archaeological cultures that are attested both in the south (earlier) and in the north (later) of the vast Yenisei-Ob' area? If one or several material traditions that relocated in the similar directions at the similar time frame can be discovered, linguistic and cultural migrations could be linked as concomitant.

Besides, Khanina (2022), based on an overview of earlier research, suggested that (a) the northward spread of Samoyedic could be connected to emergence of reindeer herding, (b) another northward spread of some NS languages took place in the end of the 17th cent.

Archaeological evidence for the former and climatic drivers for the latter can be checked out.

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