

Dialectal variation and population genetics in Siberia

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Several of the ethnolinguistic groups of Siberia are settled over large territories with restricted possibilities of communication and interaction between individual settlements, resulting in large-scale dialectal diversification. Among the territorially most widespread and dialectally most fragmented groups are the North Tungusic Evens, who are settled over northeastern Siberia, from the Lena-Jana watershed in the west to the Chukotka and Kamchatka Peninsulas in the east. This geographical spread has resulted in substantial linguistic fragmentation, with Burykin (2004: 85) distinguishing 13 dialects and up to 24 subdialects (dialekt and govor, respectively, in Russian); mutual intelligibility is severely restricted between the peripheral dialects. In contrast, the Turkic language Sakha (Yakut) is relatively homogenous, notwithstanding the fact that it, too, is spoken by people who are settled over a vast territory. This holds even when Dolgan - classified as a separate language mainly on sociopolitical grounds - is included in the survey. Thus, territorial dispersal alone cannot account for strong dialectal diversification; rather, other factors such as the duration of the dispersal as well as contact influence must also play a role.

The factors that lead to increased dialectal variation, namely restricted communication within the speech group and contact with outside groups, are also expected to increase genetic variability among the speakers of such dialects. This should therefore result in a correlation between dialectal diversity and genetic diversity. In order to better understand the factors at play in processes of dialectal diversification, this hypothesized correlation will here be explored using both linguistic data from different dialects and molecular genetic data from their speakers and contrasting Even with Sakha and Dolgan.