

Seals and sea ice: the (possible) climatic background of Amuric influence on Ainu
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Amuric is a small language family historically and presently spoken on the Lower Amur and Sakhalin Island by the Nivkh people. Since the thirteenth century at least, the language family has shared Sakhalin with the local variety of Ainu (Janhunen 2022a). While this variety extensively borrowed from Amuric (Shiraishi and Tangiku 2022), there is also Amuric linguistic material in Proto-Ainu, the ancestor to the modern Ainu varieties, which implies their interaction predates the arrival of Ainu to Sakhalin. For contact to occur, two languages must have been present in the same location. The most likely location appears to be Hokkaidō, which therefore suggests an early Amuric presence there (Vovin 1993; 2016).

Before Amuric spread to Hokkaidō or even Sakhalin, it was most likely spoken in the southern section of the Amur Basin, near the Ussuri and Sungari, as recent research suggests (cf. Janhunen 2022b; Knapen, in press). The trajectory of its expansion mirrors that of the Okhotsk culture, an archaeological culture that has its origins on the Amur and was present on northern Hokkaidō from 550 AD to 1200 AD. It was characterised by heavy reliance on marine resources and was noticeably distinct from its contemporary neighbours on Hokkaidō, the Epi-Jomon (100BC-550 AD) and Satsumon (600-1200 AD) cultures, the predecessors of later Ainu culture (Hudson 2004). The impetus for the migration of the Okhotsk culture to Hokkaidō may have been a cold period that lasted from 150 AD to 650 AD, which resulted in increased sea ice on the Sea of Okhotsk and with that improved conditions for hunting pinnipeds (Abe et al. 2016). As the bearers of the Okhotsk culture are often suggested to be related to the Nivkh (but also various other modern Northeast Asian ethnic groups) (Zgusta 2015), these climatic conditions could also be tied to the spread of the Amuric language family to Hokkaidō. The main indeterminate here is whether Amuric may be regarded as the language spoken by the bearers of the Okhotsk culture. This problem is approached from the perspective of linguistic palaeontology (Heggarty 2014): by reconstructing terminology suggestive of familiarity with a particular way of life, the homeland of a particular proto-language is inferred. The vocabulary in this case will be delimited to items referring to local marine fauna and the exploitation of such resources. The procedure follows Janhunen's (2016) approach, by not just considering Amuric internal data (cf. Fortescue 2016), but also external data, primarily from the Tungusic languages. To avoid circularity, Ainu data is not included. Additionally, the evidence of Amuric-Ainu contact proposed by Vovin (1993; 2016) is evaluated as well as further connections. This evidence is then set against other hypotheses on the linguistic identity of the Okhotsk culture. Aside from advancing the line of inquiry started by Vovin (1993; 2016), this paper will provide further clarification to the (linguistic) prehistory of northeast Asia and its indigenous peoples, for which written records are scarce, as well as the possibility of climatic factors influencing language dispersal.

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