

A Siberian River Runs Through It: Specific expressions of spatial relations/orientation in the Uralic languages of Western Siberian river valleys¹

1. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to analyze the cultural and cognitive background of a unique spatial orientation system found in some Uralic languages spoken in Western Siberia. This paper is partly based on prior research (Csepregi 2009; Honti 2006; Ivanova 2013; Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011; Bíró et al. 2019), but our main aim is to present new data from speakers and recently compiled language corpora. Furthermore, we attempt to identify a similar phenomenon from other languages of the area (Paleosiberian and Manchu-Tungusic languages), which will be analyzed also from areal and cultural perspective. The areal and cultural factors of linguistic studies play an important role in the work of Johanna Laakso, and with our choice of topic and research method we wanted to connect to these areas of linguistics in honor of her.

2. Languages and data

In this paper we focus on three Uralic languages: Selkup, Khanty, and Mansi. These three Uralic languages have a special spatial system (see Section 4). All of them are highly endangered languages, the number of speakers of each is a few thousands or a few hundreds. The communities use mainly Russian, their Uralic language is generally restricted in use to the family domain. Table 1 demonstrates the radical decrease of the number of speakers.

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	1989		2002		2010	
	Pop.	Speakers	Pop.	Speakers	Pop.	Speakers
Khanty	22,283	~14,000 (60.5 %)	28,678	13,658 (47 %)	30,943	9,584 (31 %)
Mansi	8,279	~3,000 (38 %)	11,432	2,746 (24 %)	12,269	938 (7.6 %)
Selkup	3,564	1,696 (47.6 %)	4,249	1,614 (38 %)	3,649	1,023 (28 %)

Table 1. Demographic data from the 1989, 2002 & 2010 Soviet/Russian censuses

Following the conventional classification, Khanty and Mansi are in the Ob-Ugric group within the Uralic language family, their closest relative is Hungarian. Selkup belongs to the Samoyedic group and is the only South Samoyedic language still spoken. Its closest relatives are the Northern Samoyedic languages: Nenets, Enets, and Nganasan.

Khanty, Mansi, and Selkup are geographically neighboring languages; they are spoken along the river Ob and its tributaries (Map 1).



Map 1. The Uralic languages²

² Based on [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uralic_languages#/media/File:Uralic_languages_\(ALL_LANGUAGES\).png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uralic_languages#/media/File:Uralic_languages_(ALL_LANGUAGES).png)

Despite the low number of speakers, these languages have several regional dialects, and even the speakers of the same dialect are divided into several groups based on their culture and way of life (e.g., there are both reindeer herders and hunting-fishing groups among the Ob-Ugric people speaking the northern dialects). Very often mutual intelligibility between the speakers of different dialects is missing. Some of the dialects are extinct or are on the verge of extinction. Typically, the northernmost dialects of the languages have the most speakers. Traditionally, Selkup is divided into three dialectal groups (and several subgroups): Northern, Central and Southern. The Ket dialect³ of Selkup is usually considered to be the member of the Southern dialectal group or as a separate dialectal group. Mansi has four main dialects: Northern Mansi, Western Mansi, Eastern Mansi, and Southern Mansi. As late as at the beginning of the 20th century all dialects of Mansi were still spoken but today practically only the northern dialect is used. Traditionally, three dialect groups of Khanty are distinguished, and each of them is divided into further subdialects: Southern, Eastern and Northern Khanty dialects.

3. The corpora

The data for our examination were on the one hand collected from dictionaries (Selkup: Erdélyi 1969, Alatalo 2004, Kazakevich & Budyanskaya 2010; Khanty: DEWOS; Mansi: Munkácsi & Kálmán 1986, Rombandeeva & Kuzakova 1982), and on the other hand from written sources (Selkup Language Corpus – Budzisch et al. 2019, Lüimā Sēripōs, Kálmán 1976), studies on this topic (Csepregi 1998, Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011) and from two Mansi native speakers.

4. The spatial system

The investigated unique spatial system used in the Selkup and Ob-Ugric languages is a pair of adverbs and verbal prefixes (preverbs)⁴ which basi-

³ The name Ket is used for both a dialect of Selkup and for a Yeniseian language.

⁴ In addition to local affixes and postpositions, local adverbs and preverbs have spatial function in the investigated languages. Some adverbs and preverbs coincide, since many adverbs are grammaticalized as preverbs, e.g., Mansi *kon* 'out of the house' – *kon kwāl-* 'go out'. In our paper we do not analyse the

cally have the same meanings and the same functions in all three languages. In the semantics of these adverbs/preverbs the role of the river is dominant.

One member of the examined adverb/preverb pairs is Khanty *NIK*, Mansi *NĀLUW*, and Selkup *KARRĀ*⁵ which have the following meanings:

A ‘down to the river’; ‘from the riverbank to the river’; ‘from the port to the boat’; ‘from the tributary to the main river/lake/sea’; ‘down on the river/downstream’; ‘down from the hill’; ‘from a closed place to an open place, to the river, to the lake, to the swamp’; ‘from the forest to the tundra’;

Selkup (Central, Vasyugan)

- (1) *Tabe-γ* **kare** *to-nde* *tö-mba-γ*,
 s/he-DU to.the.river lake-ILL come-PST.REP-3DU
onže *pire-m-de* *mulžt-gu*
 himself oneself-ACC-PX3SG wash-INF
 They went to the river to wash themselves.’
 (ChDN_1983_Nikita_flk.045)

Khanty (Eastern, Surgut)

- (2) *Jăwən* *kânəŋ-a* **nik** *mən*
 river shore-LAT down.to.the.river go.PRT.3SG
 ‘He/She went down to the riverbank.’
 (Csepregi 2009: 148; Csepregi 1998: 64)

Mansi (Northern)

- (3) *Xuń* *sāliŋ* *māχum* *tēli* *ńōr-nəl*
 when with.reindeers people winter hill-ABL
nāluw *wāyl-ēγət...*
 down.from.the.hill descend-3PL
 ‘When the reindeer breeders come down from the hill in winter ...’
 (LS 2017/12: 11)

adverbial or preverb status of the morpheme, since it is not relevant regarding the topic of this study.

⁵ All adverbs/preverbs have different dialectal and other kinds of variants: Khanty *nik*, *niγ*, *ńik*, Mansi *nal*, *nāl*, *nalu*, *naluw*, *nāluw*, *nālma*, *nālwal*, *nālwäl*, Selkup *kare*, *qare*, *karrā* etc., as well as Khanty *utɜ*, *utə*, *uta*, *ütä*, *wut-*, *wit*, *wüt*, *wüti*, *wuti*, *vit*, Mansi *pā*, *pāγ*, *pāyl'e*, and Selkup *konne:*, *kənnə*, *konnä*, *qonne*, *qonnä* etc. For the sake of simplicity and transparency, in this paper we mark these variants with the single words *NIK*, *NĀLUW*, *KARRĀ* as well as *UTE*, *PĀGH*, *KONNĀ*.

B ‘from the inner part of the house/room to the door’;

Mansi (Northern)

- (4) *Sasiy-t'e-m* *kol-t* *ńāl* *pāyl'e* *liy-əm*,
 uncle-DIM-PX1SG house-LOC arrow inward shoot-1SG
nas *lūratāl-i*, ***nālwal'*** *liy-ləm*,
 just twang-3SG outward shoot-SG.1SG
nas *lūratāl-i*
 just twang-3SG

‘In my uncle’s house if I shoot an arrow inward it just twangs, if I shoot it outwards it also just twangs.’ (Kálmán 1976: 66)

Khanty (Northern, Synya)

- (5) *Nē-lal-n* ***nik*** *ńaremə-s-a*,
 woman-PXPL.3PL-LOC out.of.the.house drag-PST-PASS.3SG
χon *pate-l* *kāwrəm* *ńoχij-n*
 belly base-PX3SG hot meat-LOC
χot-s-a *ān* *jukana*
 scoop-PST-PASS.3SG plate as

‘The women dragged him to the front (of the house), they laid hot meat on his belly, not on a plate.’

(Steinitz 1975: 89, cited by Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011: 535)

C ‘(put something) on the fire, on the stove’; ‘to cook, to fry’

Mansi (Northern)

- (6) *Mōś-ne* *āyi-jiγ* *piγ-iγ* *ōs* ***nāluw*** *pājti-jayuw*
 Moś-woman daughter-DU son-DU too to.the.fire cook-DU.1PL
 ‘We are going to cook the Moś-woman’s daughter and son, too.’
 (Kálmán 1976: 60)

Selkup (Northern, Taz)

- (7) *Ni:ni* *rāki* *či-nti* ***karrä*** *pot-te:ŋi-ti*
 then big.stove copper-ILL on.the.fire put-IPFV-AOR-3SG
 ‘Then he put the big pot on the fire.’
 (KMP_1971_Ichkyta_flk.044)

The other member of the examined adverb/preverb pairs is the Khanty UTE, Mansi PĀGH and Selkup KONNĀ, with the following meanings:

A ‘from the water/river/boat to the riverbank’; ‘from the riverbank to the inner part of the land’; ‘up the hill’; ‘from the river (situated on the riverbank) to the inner part of the land’; ‘into the forest’

Mansi (Northern)

- (8) *Moš-ne* *āyi-kwe* *pāy* *kwāl-əs*
 Moš-woman daughter-DIM to.the.riverbank go-PST.3SG
 ‘The Moš-woman’s daughter stepped on the land (from the wa-
 ter).’ (Kálmán 1976: 62)

Selkup (Central, Narym)

- (9) *Kībače* *udo-un-d* *ora-l-ba-t* *tabi-p,*
 boy hand-PROL-3SG hold-INCH-PST.REP-3SG.0 s/he-ACC

konne *čanči-mba-q*
 uphill go.out-PST.REP-3DU
 ‘The boy took her by the hand, they went uphill.’
 (MNS_1984_BrotherSister_flk.059)

B ‘(from the door) to the back part of the house, towards the room (where the sacred place is situated)’;

Khanty (Northern, Sherkaly)

- (10) *Mil-tat* *pɔs-ta* *antəp-tat*
 cap-PXPL.3PL glove-PXPL.3PL belt-PXPL.3PL

wut *norij-a* *āt* *iχət-t-ətte!*
 inner.part beam-LAT ADH hang-PRS-3SG.0
 ‘Let him hang his cap, his gloves, and his belt on the beam (in the
 part of the house meant for guests).’⁶ (Steinitz 1975: 292, cited by
 Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011: 534)

⁶ The place for guests is situated at the back part of the house.

Mansi (Northern)

- (11) *Śalt-en* *śalt-en,* *jij-en,*
 step.inside-IMP.2SG step.inside-IMP.2SG come-IMP.2SG
jij-en, ***pāγ*** *jij-en!*
 come-IMP.2SG into.the.house come-IMP.2SG
 ‘Step inside, step inside, come, come, come into the house!’
 (LS 2015/14: 14)

Selkup (Northern, Taz)

- (12) *Qäli* *ira* ***konnät,***
 Nenets old.man upwards
qäli *ira* *qonni-mpa* *mɔ:t-qin.*
 Nenets old.man sleep-PST.NAR.3SG tent-LOC
 ‘The old Nenets man was sleeping up there, in the tent.’
 (NEP_196X_NenetsAndWhiteBear2_flk.171)⁷

C ‘(away) from the fire, from the stove’; ‘take something from the fire/stove’.

Khanty (Eastern, Surgut)

- (13) *tī* *put-ət* ***utə*** *wəj-ilən!*
 this cauldron-PL up.from.the.fire take-IMP.PL.2PL
 ‘Take these cauldrons from the fire!’
 (Csepregi 2009: 149; Paasonen & Vértes 2001: 72)

Selkup (Southern, Ket)

- (14) *qwäldi* *mūs-sa-η* ***qonnä*** *i:-γət*
 kettle cook-PST-3SG.S up.from.the.fire take-AOR-3SG
 ‘The pot was boiling, he picked it up (= took it off).’
 (KNI_1964_ItjaCapeOfWorms_flk.031)

It must be noted, though, that not all above-mentioned meanings are present equally in all three languages and all dialects. For example, the Selkup words have an additional meaning, namely, ‘to a visible place’ vs. ‘to a non-visible place’. Not identical but similar meanings (‘to the forest from the riverbank’ vs. ‘to the riverbank from the forest’) have also been observed in Ob-Ugric languages (see Section 7). On the whole, the spatial

⁷ The sentence is from Brykina et al. 2020.

system and logic is, however, basically the same in all the examined languages.

5. Contemporary language use

Regarding the use of these adverbs/preverbs, it seems that in the folklore texts all above-mentioned meanings are represented. Concerning the present-day language use, we examined the Mansi data more thoroughly on the basis of the Mansi newspaper *Lūimā Sēripōs*⁸ and consultations with two Mansi native speakers. We found that in the newspaper mainly meanings related to the outside world were represented. Based on 20 issues of the newspaper, we created a database in which the following data were found: 23 occurrences of the examined morphemes appeared, of which 12 were NĀLUW and 11 were PĀGH. In the case of NĀLUW, the form *nālmi wāta-* ‘riverbank’ was used with different local suffixes (e.g., *nālmi wāta-n* ‘to the water, waterfront’), *nālwal’* expressed the lative direction and *nāluw* appeared with 4 occurrences, in each case, it marked the descent of reindeer herder Mansis from the Ural Mountains. As for PĀGH, it appeared in the meaning ‘on the river shore’, but in several cases it was related to the mooring of a boat or boats. In one fairy tale, the intended meaning was ‘(entering) into the house’ (cf. Example 11).

We also had the opportunity to consult with Mansi native speakers. They had to explain situations and translate expressions containing the examined morphemes from Mansi to Russian and from Russian to

⁸ *Lūimā Sēripōs* is a regular Mansi publication which comes out every two weeks. It is the only active Mansi publication channel. Writers of *Lūimā Sēripōs* belong to the urban Mansi intelligentsia. It has existed since 1989, at first each issue spanned 2 pages, later 4 pages, and nowadays 16 pages. Today the paper is also published online. A typical *Lūimā Sēripōs* issue contains articles of local interest on political or public life on the front pages; the rest of the paper contains articles on local holidays and events as well as interviews, mostly with “respectable” Ob-Ugric people. In the past the paper regularly published stories, riddles, accounts of hunting adventures and, rarely, stories of mythological characters which were not written by journalists but were instead recorded discourses from “everyday” Mansi people. Often readers submitted such texts themselves. Nowadays, there are more current news articles and reports pertaining to the everyday lives of the residents of the region. The issues used for the database are: 2014/6, 16; 2015/3, 9, 14, 24; 2016/13; 2017/8, 20; 2018/1, 12; 2020/1, 2, 3, 4; 2021/1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

Mansi. Data collected from speakers show that they were basically only familiar with meanings related to the river. It is especially noteworthy that even in the case of example (11), where from the context PĀGH clearly has the meaning ‘into the house,’ the informants translated it as ‘to the riverbank.’ Also, when NĀLUW was combined with the verb ‘to cook’ (the intended meaning being ‘to cook (completely),’ example (15)), our informants still translated it as ‘to cook on the riverbank’.

- (15) *nāluw* *pajti*
 to.the.fire cook-3SG

Finally, it is noteworthy that our Mansi consultants also mentioned further meanings of the examined words, namely: NĀLUW ‘to the outer side of the bed’/PĀGH ‘to the side of the bed closer to the wall’. These meanings are absent from the written sources. Thus, it seems that in contemporary Mansi language use mainly the meanings related to the river/riverbank have remained, while in folklore texts these elements are used in various meanings discussed above.

6. Etymology

We will not go into detail about the etymology of these words, but it can be stated that the investigated lexemes are mostly not etymologically related. The Ob-Ugric words, Mansi PĀGH and Khanty UTE, have uncertain etymologies, while NĀLUW and NIK may historically be cognates, cf. **nām* ‘here, right here’ (‘hierher, in die Nähe; hier, in der Nähe’, cf. Honti 2006) > *nä* ‘the place right here’ (‘Nähe’).

Regarding Selkup, the etymologies are also uncertain. There might have been an unattested Proto-Selkup stem **ḱarä* ‘bis auf eine Fläche: ins Wasser etc.’ (Alatalo 2004: 323/2224) from which the word KARRÄ might have originated. In contemporary Selkup there is no such word as **kar* with the meaning ‘bank’ or ‘riverbank’, thus the basic interpretation of KARRÄ is related to the river, not to the riverbank or to the hill.

7. Explanation

The question is how these correlations can be explained. There have already been some attempts in the literature. The first to raise the issue was Prokofjev (1937: 122–123), who suggested that the meanings are connected via the archaic cave dwellings of Selkups, the *karamo* dwellings. *Karamo* is a special – but not the only – dwelling type of the Selkup people, which is built on steep riverbanks in the ground. Its definition is “dug-out earthen hut,” or, more precisely, “a frame-type self-supporting prism sunk into the ground” (Napolskih et al. 2007: 18). As can be seen in Figure 1, a *karamo* has one door facing the river – this is the lowest point of the building. The other parts, such as the fireplace, can be found on the left or right side at the door or in the centre of the *karamo* (Tuchkova 2012: 131). Thus, when Selkup people put a pot on the fire, they had to take it DOWN. This schematic figure illustrates the location of a *karamo* on a steep riverbank:

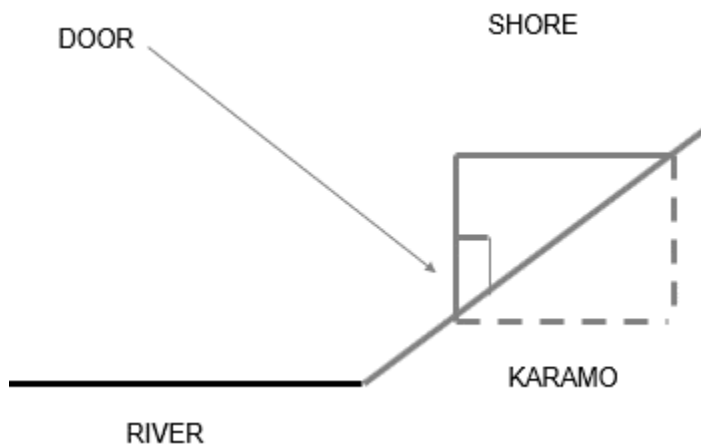


Figure 1. A typical riverbank with a *karamo*

Csepregi (2009) accepts Prokofjev’s explanation and adds that, according to ethnographic research (Sokolova 1998; Tuchkova 2012), Ob-Ugric and Selkup architecture has several similar characteristics. Based on this concept, the meanings of the spatial lexemes under investigation originally indicated the direction of movement within the dwelling, and when *karamo* dwellings were no longer used, the lexemes came to be used for indicating directions from the river up to the riverbank and from the

riverbank down to the river. The basically conservative characteristics of language explain the fact that in the case of movement inside the dwelling, the use of these lexemes remained the same even in horizontally situated dwellings. Due to their contacts and similar way of life (including the dwelling types), Ob-Ugric people, much like the Selkups, also have a similar spatial system in their languages, using their own linguistic elements. This could explain the near identical meanings of the lexemes in spite of their distinct etymologies.

Pevnov and Urmanchieva (2011) reject this explanation. In their study, they investigated several Siberian languages in addition to Khanty and Selkup, discovering in them the same lexical phenomenon, which they call isopolysemy.⁹ They explain its recurrence in various languages with areal contact and ascribe its development to different scenarios. They believe that the two directions constitute two values: one of them is the safer zone, the direction of water, believed to be more positive, whereas the other one is its opposite, pointing towards the forest, which was considered dangerous. The analogy of the outer world was repeated inside the house: the fireplace, which is usually found in the middle of the house, is analogous to the river of the outer world. This is the safe zone; going towards the wall from it is analogous to going from the river to the forest. The back wall of the house is a forbidden zone for several Siberian peoples as that is where they store sacred objects (see below). Thus, the direction pointing to the fireplace is indicated with the lexeme originally used for the direction of the water, whereas the direction away from the fireplace is indicated with the lexeme originally used to indicate the direction of the riverbank and the forest from the water (Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011: 526–527). In all three Uralic languages under investigation dictionaries list meanings which can support this explanation, cf. in the outer world: Selkup KONNÄ ‘from the settlement to the forest’, ‘to a non-visible place’ / KARRA ‘from the forest to the dwelling’, ‘to a visible place’; Khanty UTE ‘vom (am Ufer gelegenen) Dorf her landeinwärts’ / NIK ‘zu einem freien Platz hin’ (DEWOS 210, 984–985), Mansi PĀGH ‘hinein in den Wald’ (Kálmán 1976: 280) – inside the house: Khanty UTE ‘nach dem hinteren Teil des Hauses, der Stube hin’ (DEWOS 210), Mansi PĀGH ‘gegen

⁹ Isopolysemy is untrivial lexical polysemy recurring in several languages, thus it is an isomorphism of semantic structures (Pevnov & Urmanchieva, 2011, p. 519).

die Tür' (Kálmán 1976: 280) *nāluw* 'von der Wand zum Inneren der Stube' (Munkácsi & Kálmán 1986: 326).)

Pevnov and Urmanchieva (2011) presuppose the opposition "one's own" vs. "not one's own" to be at the basis of the dichotomy: in the outer world, the direction from the forest (the "not one's own" sphere) goes to the river, its bank and down to the water and one's boat, which is truly "one's own". Within the house, the same direction goes from the wall to the fireplace and the pot on it (Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011: 542).

Independently of the above authors, Ivanova (2013) uses similar features in her analysis of these lexemes in Mansi. Being a native speaker of the language, she connects a value system to the words, connecting this value system to the traditional lifestyle and worldview of the Mansi people. In this worldview, the world is divided into three vertical spheres: the middle one is inhabited by humans, the upper one by gods, and the lower one by the dead and by evil beings. In the horizontal divisions of the middle sphere the river has an important role. For the Mansi, who lived in settlements by rivers, the forested parts farther away from the river were connected to the lower sphere, for instance, PĀGH: *pāg pat-'die*' (Rombandeeva & Kuzakova 1982: 86). In this worldview, the river indicates the livelihood, the future, and the positive pole. For those living in forested areas in the vicinity of the Ural Mountains, all of this is the other way around: the forested area provides the pasture, the animals, and thus, the livelihood, whereas the water and the river are associated with the lower world. For those living by the river, NĀLUW is the positive sphere, and PĀGH is the negative one, while for those living in the forested mountains, it is the other way around: PĀGH indicates the positive and NĀLUW the negative direction. Ivanova (2013) describes but does not explain relations inside the house: PĀGH indicates the direction from the door to the interior part of the house as well as to the sacred place at the back of the house. Here (*puji*¹⁰ *kol sam* 'back part of the house') is where

¹⁰ Regarding PUJI and PĀGH, Munkácsi and Kálmán's dictionary (1986) also refers to the etymological connection between the two lexemes. The meanings of PUJI show definite parallelism with the meanings of PĀGH, and according to Ivanova's paper (2013) Mansi speakers also see a connection between these words, cf. *puji-pal* 'the offshore side, the side farther from the fire', *pujin* 'far from the river, up' (Munkácsi & Kálmán 1986: 472). The following example demonstrates the synonymous use of PĀGH and PUJI nicely:

the sacred objects such as the idols are kept and where only clean people in the sacral sense can enter (young women cannot enter here at all). The part of the house next to the entrance (*nalwal olne kol sam* ‘frontal part of the house’) is the opposite: this is where, for instance, women can hang the objects they use. According to Ivanova (2008), the back part of the house is associated with the upper sphere, that of the gods. In harmony with Pevnov and Urmanchieva’s (2011) ideas discussed above, this is the part of the house which is least “one’s own”.

8. Areal parallels

In the previous sections we have concentrated on the three Uralic languages in which this system of orientation is present. Now we proceed to discuss whether this system can be regarded as an areal feature, that is, whether there are non-Uralic languages in Siberia with similar systems, and, if so, how this ties in with the explanations provided above.

The Finno-Ugric linguistic literature (see references above) avoided areal investigations into our topic for a long time, but Pevnov and Urmanchieva (2011) published a longer paper about it. In their work, they demonstrated through a great amount of linguistic data that this phenomenon is more widespread than had been thought before. They examined the languages of two smaller regions and one extended geographical area from a contact linguistic point of view (see Map 2). One of the smaller regions is the Ostyak¹¹ region of Western Siberia where the Ob-Ugric languages Khanty and Mansi, Samoyedic Selkup, and Yenisseian Ket are spoken (2 on the Map 2). These languages were in direct contact with one another. It is important to note that, of the Uralic languages, Pevnov and Urmanchieva (2011) mention only Khanty and Selkup and exclude Mansi – incorrectly, since Mansi has the same system, as we have demonstrated above. The other area they examine is the Far East, primar-

ań *ka'ter* ***pāy-pūxti***, *pussən* ***pūjin-t*** *xūl'-aw-et...*
 PTCL ship to.the shore-moor-3SG, everybody on.the.shore-LOC leave-PASS-3PL
 ‘...the ship moors on the shore, everybody stays on the shore ...’ (LS 2015/13: 6)

¹¹ It is no coincidence that the speakers of three languages – Khanty, Ket, Selkup – were called Ostyaks for a long time by the Russian colonizers coming from the west. The reason for this is the similar lifestyle of these peoples as well as their similar anthropological and ethnological characteristics.

ily through Nivkh and Manchu-Tungusic languages (3 on the Map 2). Finally, a third, extended area needs to be established, which includes the Evenki and Even languages (1 on the Map 2). The latter have been in contact with both other areas; this would explain how similar systems of orientation have developed at the two opposite ends of a vast region.



Map 2. The three relevant areas of Siberia¹²

For Ket (a Yeniseian language, isolated) the following meanings are mentioned (Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011: 539–541):

1. in relation with water:
 ‘from the water to the riverbank/land’, ‘from the water along the riverbank to the forest (upward)’, ‘into the forest’, ‘upstream’
 \leftrightarrow
 ‘to the water from the riverbank’, ‘to the water along the riverbank from the forest (downward)’, ‘downstream’
2. in relation to the fire/stove, ‘at the fire/stove’, ‘above the fire/stove’, ‘into the pot above the fire/stove’
3. ‘at the dwelling, at people’ \leftrightarrow ‘in the forest, in the taiga’

The third group of meanings would be especially interesting; however, it is mentioned only very tentatively. At the same time, it is clear that relations regarding water and the fireplace are the same as the systems in

¹² Based on commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18179627

Uralic languages discussed above. The situation is the same in the case of Manchu-Tungusic languages:

Manchu-Tungusic languages (Pevnov & Urmanchieva 2011: 523–524):

Evenki, Even

‘downhill’, ‘down to the riverbank to the water’, ‘from the land to the water’, ‘to the fire/stove’

←→

‘into the forest’, ‘up to the riverbank from the water’, ‘from the water to the land’, ‘from the fire/stove’

Udeghe

‘down to the riverbank to the water’, ‘to the fire/stove’

←→

‘up to the riverbank from the water’, ‘from the fire/stove’

Negidal, Oroch, Ulchi

‘downhill’, ‘down to the riverbank to the water’

←→

‘uphill’, ‘up to the riverbank from the water’

In the Manchu-Tungusic languages of the Far East (e.g., Nanai, Oroch) and in the Nivkh language (isolated) some similar features can be detected: there are verbs with the meaning ‘to dock (a boat); to pull something from the water to the riverbank, to take from the fire/stove (a pot)’.

The explanation based on the ancient language contact effect, however, is somewhat weakened by Fortescue’s (2011) findings. He distinguishes several orientation systems when examining the languages of the North Pacific. He devotes a separate chapter to terms related to water and fire and refers to Pevnov and Urmanchieva’s study (2011) as he also mentions languages from the region in which fire and water play a role in the construction of the orientation system (Fortescue 2011: 98–107). Such languages are for example Tlingit, Haida, and Northern Wakasa (among other languages, see Fortescue 2011). Since these languages are spoken in North America, an explanation based on language contact cannot be seriously suggested. (Although it should be noted that the Tlingit

and Haida languages belong to the Na-Dene language family, whose very distant kinship with the Yenisei languages has been postulated recently, cf. e.g., Karri 2011.) Fortescue cannot provide an exact explanation either, but he does not exclude – citing Nichols (1992: 260) – the possibility of the imprint of very ancient genetic and/or areal relationships, as the specific orientation system related to fire and water cannot be explained by the influence of a similar geographical environment only.

According to Fortescue (2011), peoples using such an orientation system distinguish two spheres which are represented also in the language. These spheres are the space/relations inside the house (microcosm) and the space/relations outside the house (macrocosm). The similarly constructed residential buildings may also have played a role in the development of this system. Concerning the parallels between Nivkh, Tlingit, and Haida, Fortescue (2011) mentions the same type of residence: a rectangular-based coastal building with only one entrance (the entrance not always facing the shore).

Overall, we can state the following: the orientation system presented above is essentially missing from the Arctic tundra languages. It cannot be found in the Northern Samoyedic branch of the Uralic languages (i.e., Nenets, Enets, and Nganasan) or in Paleosiberian languages of the tundra (Chukchi-Kamchatkan languages, Yukaghir, and the Eskimo-Aleut languages) on the other hand. It seems quite clear that life along the river is less relevant to these peoples. An orientation system related to fire and water is found in a much larger area and in more languages than previously thought, but at the same time these peoples are connected not only by a similar geographical environment but also by very old or still existing areal or linguistic genealogical relationships. Thus we may never fully know the “starting point”.

9. Conclusion

Although the stems used in the orientation systems under investigation are not generally etymologically connected, the systems still show striking similarities to one another. The reason for their parallel development could be language contact on the one hand – since certain groups of these languages have been in contact with each other for centuries – and the

individual geographical conditions of the given peoples on the other: namely that they all live (or traditionally lived) on steep riverbanks. The lexemes with the same meanings developed in parallel in each language; their etymologies are generally not connected. Nevertheless, the structure of the orientation system is still almost completely identical. It is connected with the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia. The basic conception of the system can be associated with rivers and residential buildings such as the *karamo*, the archaic cave dwelling of Selkups. Similar buildings with a rectangular base can be found in the Far East and in North America as well; similar orientation systems are used in languages of cultures living in these. This fact also shows that the development of the system is a more complex process than previously thought. It reflects not only the effect of the immediate environment but also a special worldview. At the same time, the examined orientation system is an areal feature. This claim is also supported by the fact that this system is completely absent in the closest linguistic relatives of Selkup, the Northern Samoyedic languages (Nenets, Enets, and Nganasan). This fact is connected with the completely different traditional lifestyle of the Northern Samoyeds: it is subarctic, nomadic or half-nomadic, and based on reindeer husbandry. Meanwhile the speakers of the languages examined in this study lead a subarctic, fishing-hunting lifestyle and live in the forests and along the rivers of the taiga.

It can be furthermore stated that due to the disappearance of the traditional culture and the process of language loss, simplification and decomposition of the examined orientation system can be observed in the given languages.

Abbreviations

ABL	ablative	INF	infinitive
ACC	accusative	IPFV	imperfective derivation
ADH	adhortative particle	LAT	lative
AOR	aorist	LOC	locative
DIM	diminutive	NAR	narrative
DU	dual	O	objective conjugation
ILL	illative	PASS	passive
IMP	imperative	PROL	prolative
INCH	inchoative	PRS	present

PRT	participle	REP	reportative
PTCL	particle	S	subjective conjugation
PL	plural	SG	singular
PX	possessive suffix		

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