

## LINGUISTICS

**Some thoughts on the disappearance of some varieties of Samoyedic***Peler G.Y.*

**Abstract.** Disappearance of some Southern Samoyedic varieties in the course of history has been attributed by some Russian and Western scholars to the assimilation of their speakers to Turkic peoples. It is a historical fact that the last speakers of some Southern Samoyedic varieties lived and died among Turkic peoples. However, the statements of these scholars seem to be superficial as they are failing to notice the historical developments, which had occurred prior to the eventual assimilation of these Samoyedic groups. This study aimed to re-evaluate these judgements in the light of historical events, which had taken place from the 17th century to the 19th century. The examination of historical records of what happened in the course of these centuries has been attributed to contagious diseases, external and internal confrontations, migrations, alcoholism etc. had inflicted no recoverable blows to Siberian populations bringing Samoyedic groups to an irreversible point. Depredated Samoyedic populations became vulnerable and exposed to language loss and assimilation. Consequently, the last speakers of Southern Samoyedic varieties had been absorbed by their Turkic neighbours. Therefore, assimilation should be regarded as the lattermost among the factors, which caused the disappearance of Southern Samoyedic peoples and varieties.

**Keywords:** Samoyedic, Southern Samoyeds, assimilation, language loss, Turkicization, social dislocation, migration.

**For citation:** Peler G.Y. Some thoughts on the disappearance of some varieties of Samoyedic // Siberian Research. 2019. 1 (1). P. 116 – 121. <http://doi.org/10.33384/26587270.2019.01.006e>

*Received February 6, 2019, accepted for publication February 24, 2019, published April 1, 2019.*

**Introduction**

The speakers of contemporary Samoyedic varieties are ranked among “The Small Peoples of the North”, which is an ethnographic classification including people speaking more than twenty varieties of tongues. These linguistic varieties and their speakers are dispersed over a vast area including the northern territories of the continents of Asia, Europe and Northern America encircling the Arctic regions. These regions are classified in international scholarly literature under the name of “The North”, which constitutes a geographical and ethno-cultural phenomenon. The linguistic varieties spoken by The Small Peoples of the North are classified under six linguistic families, which namely are Eskimo-Aleut, Atabasqan-Eyaq-

Tilingit, Tsimshianic, Paleo-Asiatic, Uralic and Altaic.

Contemporary Samoyedic, together with Finno-Ugric, is one of the two main branches of the Uralic phylum. Samoyedic varieties are mostly spoken by populations inhabiting the regions east of the Ural Mountains constituting the easternmost segment of the Uralic languages. It is put forth that the progenitors of the speakers of Samoyedic varieties sprung up partly as a result of eastward migration of speakers of Uralic varieties and partly that of linguistic diffusion. Presumably the independent linguistic development of these communities from the main body of the Proto-Uralic speakers resulted in the emergence of first Samoyedic variety [1, 2, 3]. This course of events is thought to have taken place in Southern Siberia, in the territories between the

middle course of the Ob and Yenisei Rivers, which is situated in the east of the Ural Mountains. Thus Samoyedic became the first language to break off from the Uralic protolanguage [1, 3, 4] and estimations made in the light of linguistic and archaeological evidence suggest that this breakaway took place around 8000 B.C. [1, 5]. These first speakers of the Samoyedic protolanguage are thought to be fishing and hunting communities [6].

J. Janhunen [4] locates the timeframe, when the Samoyedic protolanguage had split into dialects, to the period shortly before the birth of Christ. It is argued that this breakup of the language had occurred as a result of northwards and southwards spread of its speakers along the Ob and Yenisei basins and towards the Altai and Sayan Mountains respectively. On the other hand, L.N. Gumilev [7] attributes the northwards expansion of the Samoyeds to a great drought and dates it to 3rd century A.D. However, P. Hajdu's [6] suggestions on the emergence of the first Samoyedic protolanguage and its speakers along with the following breakup of the language into dialects are completely different. P. Hajdu dates the departing of the progenitors of the contemporary Samoyeds from the main Finno-Ugric populace around 3000 B.C. and argues that they maintained their contact with this main mass for a while. He dates the dialectical breakup of the language around the beginnings of the 1st century A.D., when the Samoyeds started to spread to the northern regions of Siberia. As a consequence, the ancestors of the contemporary Northern Samoyeds broke off from the Southern Samoyeds during the preliminary centuries after Christ. P. Hajdu also states that the Southern Samoyeds stayed static for a while before a group of them migrated to the Middle Ob basin in the northwest and the rest moved towards the Sayan Mountains, the former group forming the ancestors of the present day Selkups. The modern Samoyeds are partly a result of this diffusion and partly a result of their amalgam with sub-Arctic and Turkic peoples. The first foreign people to be encountered by the Samoyeds during this expansion are thought to be Turks as records are present in Chinese sources that some Turkic groups had pressed upon Europe as a result of social unrest among Turkic tribes in the cen-

turies preceding the birth of Christ. A number of Samoyedic words copied from Turkic suggest that this initial encounter between Samoyedic and Turkic peoples had been peaceful and commercial relations. Some words present in modern Samoyedic languages with Yeniseic origin prove that Yeniseic peoples also were among the peoples, which the ancestors of contemporary Samoyeds had encountered in the Altai – Sayan Mountains region in the course of their eastwards expansion in Southern Siberia during the centuries before Christ.

The contemporary Samoyedic peoples, which are thought to be a result of the chain of events mentioned in the previous paragraph, are classified under three main groups: the Tundra Samoyeds, the Taiga Samoyeds and the Mountain Samoyeds. There is no need to express that this classification is based on the geographical distribution of the people. The Nganasans, the Nenets and the Enets, which populate the polar tundra regions of European Russia and Western Siberia, form the Tundra Samoyeds. The Selkups, which populate the sylvan regions of Western Siberia, constitute the Taiga Samoyeds. This area is thought to approximately coincide with the primordial Samoyed homeland. The Kamas and the Mators, which used to populate the mountainous woodlands of Southern Siberia, used to form the Mountain Samoyeds [4]. On the other hand, M. Castren, who had visited Siberia twice in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, classified the Samoyedic peoples in three large groups and two small groups. He placed the Yuraks, the Tavgis and the Ostiak Samoyeds under the larger groups and the Yeniseic Samoyeds and the Kamasins under the small groups [8]. It stands out that the Mators (i.e. the Taigi or the Karagas) are missing from his classification.

The language of the Tundra Samoyeds, i.e. the varieties spoken by the Enets, the Nenets and the Nganasan, constitute Northern Samoyedic. On the other hand the languages of Taiga and Mountain Samoyeds, i.e. the varieties spoken by the Kamas, the Mator and the Selkup, used to constitute Southern Samoyedic [6, 9]. If the Samoyedic varieties are aligned from south to north they would appear as Mator (or Motor aka Taigi or Karagas Samoyedic), Kamas (aka Koibal Samoyedic), Selkup (aka Ostiak

Samoyedic), Nenets (aka Yurak), Enets (aka Yenisei Samoyedic) and Nganasan (aka Tavgi). Furthermore a transition variety between Nenets and Enets named Yurat and a transition variety between Kamas and Mator named Abakan Samoyedic are stated to exist in the past [2, 4]. It is known that the last Mator and Kamas speakers were assimilated by Turkic peoples and the last Yurat speakers by the Nenets [2, 10]. After all the surviving Samoyedic varieties are Nenets, Enets, Nganasan and Selkup.

### Methodology

Many Russian and Western scholars (see below) attribute the disappearance of Southern Samoyedic peoples and varieties to their absorption by Turkic peoples. However, the preceding historical events to the eventual assimilation of these peoples are often omitted. In this study the statements of these scholars are re-evaluated in light of historical events which took place during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The aim is to examine whether their absorption by Turkic peoples is the only reason behind their disappearance or whether there were other reasons. The actual reasons behind the vanishing of these peoples and some others similar to them could only be defined by commenting on their eventual assimilation in light of the assessment of preceding historical events. Commenting on the last stage of social development without taking the previous stages into consideration would be misleading.

### Result and Discussion

It was mentioned above that it was claimed that some varieties of Samoyedic had disappeared as their speakers were assimilated by Turkic peoples. Some scholars started Turkicization of Samoyedic peoples from the 9<sup>th</sup> century on, whereas some confine themselves to stating that the Turkicization intensified from the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. For instance I.A. Lopatin [11] claimed that the Beltir, the Koibal, and the Kamassintzy of the Yeniseysk province; the Karagas of the Nijni Udinsk district of the Irkustk province and the Soyot of the Tomsk and Yeniseysk provinces are turkicized Samoyeds. Likewise K.H. Menges [12, 13, 14] in his series of

articles on the Turkic varieties of Southern Siberia, he puts forth that the Koibal, the Motor (Madur), the Tuba and the Soyon all spoke Southern Samoyedic varieties in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries but all of them later Turkicized. Menges also claims that the Dolgans are Yakutized Samoyeds (Tavgi i.e. Nganasan), who were Turkicized after the Yakuts were pushed into the Samoyed territories. In fact K.H. Menges starts the Turkicization of Samoyedic peoples with a much earlier date. He asserts that the Yenisei Kirghiz were originally Samoyedized Yeniseians, who became Turkicized in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. L.P. Potapov [15] records that Pallas, who had visited the Koibal steppes in the 1770`s, expressed that the Koibals, the Mators, the Karagas and the Kamasins could still speak Samoyedic at the time. On the other hand E.D. Prokof'yeva [16] puts forth that only the Kamasins from these groups maintained the Samoyedic language at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Mators (Koibals), the Karagas (Tofa Samoyeds) and the rest of the Samoyedic groups had replaced their original languages with Turkic. S.A. Wurm [17] referring to P. Jyrkänkallio almost repeats I.A. Lopatin and K.H. Menges by stating that the Koibal and the Kachin of the Xakas group and the Tofa (aka Tofalar or Karagas), the Tuva (aka Soyon) and the Tuba of the Altay group Turks were formerly Samoyedic-speaking. On the other hand, J. Forsyth [18] claims that the Samoyedic varieties were spoken in the Sayan mountains and the Upper Ob valley in the past, but the only surviving one of these varieties is Selkup, as southern Samoyed tribes were driven out or assimilated by Turkic tribes, by the Yenisei Kirghiz in particular, who dominated the Altai – Sayan region from the 9<sup>th</sup> century on. Killi Yilmaz [19] repeats the role of Samoyedic agent in the formation of Dolgan ethnicity. However, she points to Nenets and Enets rather than the Nganasans together with some Tungusic and Russian groups. She also refers to Kettic peoples and the Sayan Samoyeds for the emergence of the Tofa. D. Abondolo [2] concludes with stating that Mator Samoyedic was replaced by Turkic in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the last speaker of Kamas died in 1989. D. Abondolo`s statement is repeated by J. Janhunen [4] in the same volume as him. Perhaps the most interesting of all

claims is that of C. Schönig [20], who states that use of ethnonyms like *Altay kiji*, *Tuba kiji* or *Shor kiji* for self-designation by Siberian Turkic peoples rather than the traditional “Turk” is a Samoyedic model and should be taken as a proof for the Samoyedic origins of these peoples. Perhaps the most bizarre of all allegations is that of D.M. Nasilov [21], who claims that all of the Siberian Turkic peoples and varieties have emerged as a result of the Turkicization of ancient Siberian peoples like the Ugors, the Samoyeds, the Kets and etc.

There is no doubt that some Samoyedic peoples and consequently Samoyedic varieties had disappeared as a result of assimilation among Turkic peoples. For instance, the regions dominated by the Yenisei Kirghiz of the 9<sup>th</sup> century were governed by four khanates in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the Mator were situated in the east together with the Koibals [19]. Apparently these Samoyeds were absorbed by the Koibals during the following two centuries. Indeed Castren, who had visited the Turkic Koibals in 1847, expresses that out of the thirteen tribes of the Koibals at the time, five had Samoyedic origins and three Yenisei Ostiak (i.e. Kettic) origins and still could recall some Samoyedic and Kettic words [22]. However, some points in the statements mentioned in the previous paragraph still need clarity and some need to be scrutinized. First of all it should be said that the Soyot mentioned by I.A. Lopatin and the Soyon mentioned by K.H. Menges are the same people, i.e. the Turkic Tuva people. On the other hand, the Koibal are the same people as the Kamas whereas the Mator are the same as the Karagas. Therefore, there is some confusion in the statements of I.A. Lopatin, L.P. Potapov and E.D. Prokof'yeva. I.A. Lopatin treats the Koibal and the Kamas as two separate peoples, L.P. Potapov repeats this confusion and adds the Mator and the Karagas on top of this as two separate peoples. On the other hand, E.D. Prokof'yeva takes the Mator and the Karagas as two separate peoples and the Mator and the Koibal as the same people. It is obvious that L.P. Potapov is repeating a confusion produced by P.S. Pallas. However, this together with the intricacy put forward by I.A. Lopatin and E.D. Prokof'yeva clouds the credibility of the information provided by these scholars. Linguistic material interpret-

ed by K.H. Menges leaves no doubt that there has been contact between the Samoyedic peoples and the Turkic ones in the Altai – Sayan region before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is hard to tell whether this contact had been in the form of language contact or linguistic expansion and assimilation. On the other hand, the fact that the last speaker of Kamas died among a Turkic speaking population also confirms that some Samoyedic varieties indeed disappeared as a result of absorption of their speakers by Turkic peoples in recorded history. However, still there is no base for claiming that any of the Siberian Turkic peoples have emerged as a result of Turkicization. For instance, the Koibal and Karagas Turks can be put under the scope as Samoyedic speaking groups with the same name existed in the past and the last speakers of these Samoyedic varieties with the same name indeed died in these Turkic groups. The point that should not go unnoticed here is the fact that the ethnonyms ‘Koibal’ and ‘Karagas’ have geographical bases. Therefore in spite of the fact that some Samoyedic peoples Turkicized among the Koibals and the Karagas is unquestionable, it would be against the truth to claim that these Turkic groups emerged as a whole in consequence of Turkicization since it is clear that the Koibal and Karagas Turks, like their Samoyedic speaking neighbours, received their appellations on a geographical basis. D.M. Nasilov’s allegation that all of the Siberian Turkic peoples and varieties had emerged as a result of Turkicization of Ugric, Samoyedic, Kettic peoples and etc. contains logical error in itself. A very large Turkic population would be needed for the Turkicization of such a great number of groups of peoples and the size of this Turkic population would grow further with the addition of the Turkicized population. However, on the contrary Siberian Turkic peoples are very small ones with the exception of the Yakuts. Interestingly enough it is these small peoples that are commonly being alleged to be Turkicized.

The small number of the Siberian Turkic peoples lay bare the explanation of the extinction of the Southern Samoyeds and consequently Samoyedic varieties only by their absorption by Turkic and other neighbouring peoples is not adequate. The issue needs further addressing. There are historical

records that many Southern Samoyeds had vanished in consequence of epidemics transmitted by European hunters, traders and settlers. Additionally many southern Samoyeds had migrated to more northerly regions in order to escape these disasters decimating the numbers of the southern Samoyed population further [9]. For example, during the years 1630-31 the Samoyed population together with that of the other Western Siberian peoples such as the Khanties, Mansies and Kets was decimated as a result of smallpox epidemics. Another fatal smallpox outbreak in the 1660's struck a blow to the Ket and Samoyedic Selkup population. In the 1830's smallpox epidemics and other inflammatory diseases at that time cost half of the population of the Samoyedic Nganasans. Other factors, which affected the Southern Samoyed population adversely, are wars among themselves and with neighbouring other peoples. Prolonged combat of the Tundra Samoyeds in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the east of the Urals ended up with the migration of the Selkups to more northerly Polar Regions. The pressure put on them by the Khanties and the Evenks had a great role in this migration. In a similar manner it provoked the exodus of the Nenets to more remote areas. Some of them verged to the tundra regions of the Yamal Peninsula in the north while others retreated to the west of the Ural Mountains. A third group migrated towards the east skirmishing with the Enets, another Samoyedic people, in the Yenisei region and pushed them to the east of the Yenisei River [23, 24].

It is unambiguously seen that the Southern Samoyedic population was decimated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as result of clashes, internal strife, epidemic illnesses and migrations. Thus, the social structures of

these Southern Samoyedic groups became subverted exposing them to language loss and assimilation.

### Conclusions

First of all it is obvious that the Turkic and Samoyedic peoples had a long history of symbiotic existence and this symbiosis probably dates back to ancient times, when the primordial Samoyeds emerged as an entity. There is no doubt that this overextended share of environment resulted in linguistic as well as ethnic amalgamation. However, it is not easy to designate the nature of this encounter in prehistoric and unrecorded times. However, it is precisely seen that time in recorded history did not work in favour of Samoyedic peoples in Southern Siberia.

Diseases, trade and wars brought along by the new comers had catastrophic impacts on South Siberian Samoyedic populations together with that of other native peoples. Contagious diseases unfamiliar to the Siberian immune system destroyed many native Siberian populaces as a whole. The Southern Samoyeds received their share from these sanitary calamities, which occurred repeatedly between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The inordinate fall in the Southern Samoyed population as a result of the aforementioned calamities, which unfolded in the form of epidemics, wars, migrations and socio-economic routs, brought the Samoyed societies to an irreversible point. Waned and dislocated Samoyed groups became vulnerable and exposed to language loss and assimilation. Eventually these wretched and scattered Southern Samoyed groups were absorbed by their Turkic neighbours.

### REFERENCES

1. Abondolo D. ed., *The Uralic languages*. London and New York: Routledge; 2006. 619 p.
2. Ackerman F, Salminen T. Nenets. In: Brown K, editor. *Encyclopedia of language & linguistics*, second edition, v. 8. Oxford: Elsevier; 2006. p. 577-579.
3. Janhunen J. Samoyedic. In: Abondolo D, editor. *The Uralic languages*. London and New York: Routledge; 2006. p. 457-479.
4. Suihkonen P, *The Uralic languages*. Fennia. 2002; 180(1-2): 165-176.
5. Janhunen J. *Uralic Languages*. In: Bright W, editor. *International encyclopedia of linguistics*, v. 4. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1992. p. 205-210.

6. Hajdu P. The Samoyed peoples and languages. Bloomington: Indiana University Publications; 1963. 114 p.
7. Gumilev L. N. (2003). Hazar çevresinde bin yıl. (trans. A. Batur). Istanbul: Selenge Yayınları; 2003. 420 p.
8. Schiefner A. ed., M. Alexander Castren's Grammatik der Samojedischen Sprachen. St. Petersburg: Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften; 1854. 608 p.
9. Wixman R. The peoples of the USSR. An ethnographic handbook. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. Armonk, N.Y.; 1988. 230 p.
10. Krauss M. The indigenous languages of the North: A report on their present state. Northern minority languages: Problems of survival – Senri ethnological studies, 1997; 44: 1-34.
11. Lopatin IA. The extinct and near-extinct tribes of Northeastern Asia as compared with the American Indian. American antiquity. 1940; 5(3): 202-208.
12. Menges KH. The South-Siberian Turkic languages I – General characteristics of their phonology. Central Asiatic journal. 1955; 1: 107-136.
13. Menges KH. The South-Siberian Turkic languages II – Notes on the Samojed substratum". Central Asiatic journal. 1956; 2: 161-175.
14. Menges KH. Die türkischen Sprachen Süd-Sibiriens III: Tuba (Soyon und Karagas), 1. Central Asiatic journal. 1959; 4: 90-129.
15. Potapov LP. The origin and ethnic composition of the Koybals. In: Michael HN, editor. Studies in Siberian ethnogenesis. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1962. p. 144-168.
16. Prokof'yeva ED. The Nentsy. In: Levin MG, Potapov LP, editors. The peoples of Siberia. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press; 1964. p. 547-570.
17. Wurm, SA. Siberia: 1650-1950 ethnic and linguistic changes. In: Wurm SA, Mühlhäuser P, Tryon D, editors. Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia and the Americas. New York – Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter; 1996. p. 969-974.
18. Forsyth J. The peoples of Siberia. In: Doekermach G, editor. The forgotten peoples of Siberia. Zurich – Berlin – New York: Scalo Publishers; 1993. p. 193-202.
19. Killi Yılmaz G. Kuzey ve Güneydoğu Sibirya Türklerinin dil durumu. Ankara: KÖKSAV; 2010. 260 p.
20. Schönig C. Güney Sibirya Türkçesi nasıl gelişmiştir? In: Gürsoy-Naskali E, editor. Sibirya araştırmaları. Istanbul: Simurg; 1997. p. 47-50.
21. Nasilov DM. Sibirya Türk hakları (etnik azınlıklar) ve dilleri. In: Gürsoy-Naskali E, editor. Sibirya araştırmaları. Istanbul: Simurg; 1997. p. 51-55.
22. Orkun HN. Türk dünyası. Istanbul: Muallim Ahmet Halit Kitaphanesi; 1932. 80 p.
23. Gürsoy-Naskali E. Sibirya deyince. In: Gürsoy-Naskali E, editor. Sibirya araştırmaları. Istanbul: Simurg; 1997b. p. 11-16.
24. Forsyth J. A history of the peoples of Siberia - Russia's North Asian colony 1581-1990. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2000. 455 p.

### About author

**PELER Gökçe Yükselen**, Erciesy University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Contemporary Turkic Languages and Literatures, Head of Department, Assoc. Prof., 38280, Kayseri, Talas, Ahmet El Biruni Caddesi No: 91, Turkey, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9604-5101>, e-mail: [gokceyukselen@gmail.com](mailto:gokceyukselen@gmail.com).