

## The diffusion of Chukchi “magic words” in Chukotkan and St. Lawrence Island Yupik folklore texts

## La diffusion de formules magiques tchouktches dans les textes folkloriques en yupik de la Tchoukotka et de l’île Saint-Laurent

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### Article abstract

The languages of the Siberian Yupik region, including Chukotka in the Russian Far East and St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, have been heavily influenced by Chukchi, a genetically unrelated language. In this paper, I focus on Chukchi influences on Yupik folklore. Apparently meaningless “magic words” or formulae used in Yupik tales often appear to be of Chukchi origin. In Chukotka, their Chukchi origin is sometimes recognized by speakers of Yupik, but on St. Lawrence Island, the origin and meaning of the “magic words” is not recognized. The existence of “magic words” provides us with information about the sociolinguistic relationship between Siberian Yupik speakers and Chukchi. The Chukchi were in a position of power with respect to the Siberian Yupik since they were more numerous, and since the Yupik depended on them for trade. As a result, the Yupik saw their Chukchi neighbours and their language as threatening and mysterious, and expressed this feeling by having the foreign protagonists of their tales talk in this strange language.

# The diffusion of Chukchi “magic words” in Chukotkan and St. Lawrence Island Yupik folklore texts

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Willem J. de Reuse\*

**Résumé:** La diffusion de formules magiques tchouktches dans les textes folkloriques en yupik de la Tchoukotka et de l'île Saint-Laurent

Les langues de la région sibérienne yupik, incluant la Tchoukotka de l'Extrême-Orient russe et l'île Saint-Laurent en Alaska, ont subi l'influence du tchouktche, une langue qui ne leur est pas génétiquement apparentée. Dans cet article, on traite des influences tchouktches sur le folklore yupik. Certaines formules magiques utilisées dans des contes yupik semblent à première vue être sans signification, mais en réalité sont souvent d'origine tchouktche. Dans la Tchoukotka, leur origine tchouktche est parfois reconnue par les locuteurs du yupik, mais sur l'île Saint-Laurent, l'origine et la signification des formules magiques sont considérées obscures. L'existence de ces formules magiques est révélatrice des rapports sociolinguistiques entre les Yupiget sibériens et les Tchouktches. Les Tchouktches détenaient une position de suprématie vis-à-vis des Yupiget parce qu'ils étaient plus nombreux qu'eux et parce que les Yupiget étaient économiquement dépendants des Tchouktches. Il s'ensuivit une situation dans laquelle les Yupiget regardaient les Tchouktches comme des voisins quelque peu menaçants et mystérieux. Les Yupiget exprimaient ce sentiment dans leurs contes en faisant parler les protagonistes étrangers dans la langue étrange des Tchouktches.

**Abstract:** The diffusion of Chukchi “magic words” in Chukotkan and St. Lawrence Island Yupik folklore texts

The languages of the Siberian Yupik region, including Chukotka in the Russian Far East and St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, have been heavily influenced by Chukchi, a genetically unrelated language. In this paper, I focus on Chukchi influences on Yupik folklore. Apparently meaningless “magic words” or formulae used in Yupik tales often appear to be of Chukchi origin. In Chukotka, their Chukchi origin is sometimes recognized by speakers of Yupik, but on St. Lawrence Island, the origin and meaning of the “magic words” is not recognized. The existence of “magic words” provides us with information about the sociolinguistic relationship

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between Siberian Yupik speakers and Chukchi. The Chukchi were in a position of power with respect to the Siberian Yupiget since they were more numerous, and since the Yupiget depended on them for trade. As a result, the Yupiget saw their Chukchi neighbours and their language as threatening and mysterious, and expressed this feeling by having the foreign protagonists of their tales talk in this strange language.

## Introduction

The Siberian Yupik region of the Arctic, including Chukotka in the Russian Far East and St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, is unusual in that all four of the Eskimo languages of the region (Central Siberian Yupik, henceforth CSY, spoken in Chukotka and St. Lawrence Island; Naukanski, spoken near East Cape, Chukotka, both of the Yupik subgroup of Eskimo-Aleut; the nearly extinct Imaklikski or Big Diomed Island Inupiaq, of the Inuit subgroup of Eskimo-Aleut; and the extinct Sireniksi, spoken around Sireniki, Chukotka) underwent more or less extensive influence from the non-Eskimo indigenous language Chukchi, spoken by reindeer herders on Chukotka<sup>1</sup>.

De Reuse (1994: 295-455) contains a detailed account of the sociolinguistic history of the Siberian Yupik area, with particular emphasis on the pervasive Chukchi grammatical and lexical evidence on CSY, the Eskimo language of the area which has been most extensively studied, and de Reuse (1996) discusses the contact languages or jargons which developed in the region. In this paper, I turn to a closer examination of Chukchi influence on CSY folklore, *i.e.* the way the Chukchi language had an impact on storytelling beyond that of grammatical or lexical influence.

## “Magic words” in CSY folklore from Chukotka

In some CSY *ungipaghaatet* (singular *ungipaghaan*) or traditional tales, one comes across strange magic formulas, songs or lines uttered by animals or mythical beings. One must distinguish CSY tales from Chukotka from CSY tales from St. Lawrence Island; I will discuss the Chukotka situation first.

In texts from Chukotka, it appears that some of such lines are in the Chukchi language. This may indicate that the stories themselves had been borrowed from the

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<sup>1</sup> Chukchi and the very closely related Koryak, Kerek and Alutor, form the Chukotian subfamily, which together with the more distantly related Itelmen (or Kamchadal) constitutes the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family (Fortescue 2005: 1-2), not demonstrably related to the Eskimo-Aleut family.

Chukchi; and it is true that in many cases the story is also known to the Chukchi<sup>2</sup>. The Chukchi lines might have been pronounced with a marked Yupik accent, but since in Chukotka, many Yupiget were bilingual in Chukchi and Yupik, no important and potentially humorous information was lost. I have also found versions of the same stories with the relevant lines in plain Yupik.

An example of Chukchi lines is given in (1), an extract from a tale recorded by Menovshchikov (1976: 32), with translation below. In this tale, a fish was teasing a reindeer and in response, the reindeer scooped it out of the water. Then the fish cries out to the reindeer<sup>3</sup>:

- (1) **Qēnyuánpə̀lqāw qēnyuánpə̀lqāw**  
**Yəkə̀rgən kəkátgu pəkə̀tkən kəkátgu!**<sup>4</sup>

‘Throw me in the water, throw me in the water,  
 (my) mouth is drying out, (my) tail is drying out!’

Although Menovshchikov does not give a full morphological analysis of these lines, it is clear that some sort of Chukchi is intended. For the first word, Menovshchikov suggests Chukchi equivalent *kinənpə̀lqew*, an inflected and derived form of *pə̀lqetək* ‘to fall into water’ (Moll and Inénlikěj 1957: 102). The first word on the second line is the absolutive Chukchi noun *yəkə̀rgən* ‘mouth’ (Fortescue 2005: 265). For the second word on the second line, Menovshchikov suggests *kəkwat’y’e*<sup>5</sup>, a form of *kəkwatək* ‘to wither, dry out’ (Moll and Inénlikěj 1957: 55). The third word on the second line appears to contain an approximation to the Chukchi form *paqarelyən*, singulative *peqerit* ‘flipper, fishtail’ (Moll and Inénlikěj 1957: 98, 104).

Another version of this tale, available in Rubtsova (1954: 104), has the corresponding lines in CSY, given under (2); the translation is mine:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (2) <b>Papasquqa tukrugtaa,</b><br><b>metengtanka tukrugtii,</b><br><b>uvinka tukrugtaa,</b><br><b>qaanqa tukrugtaa</b> | ‘My tail is drying out’ <sup>6</sup> ,<br>my dorsal fins are drying out,<br>my trunk is drying out,<br>my mouth is drying out.’ |
|---|---|

Another *ungipaghaan* is the story of five little girls captured by a giant; the giant puts the five little girls in a parka, and ties the parka at the end of a tall pole; the giant uses magic formulae, henceforth called “magic words,” to bend down and straighten the pole. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus on this *ungipaghaan*, because it has

<sup>2</sup> The similarities between Northwestern American and Northeast Asian folklore have been noted by Bogoras (1902).

<sup>3</sup> An English translation of a Chukchi version of this tale is in Dolitsky and Michael (1996: 115).

<sup>4</sup> The spelling is a transliteration of the original source.

<sup>5</sup> In the Chukchi spelling, the apostrophe stands for a glottal stop.

<sup>6</sup> The spelling of CSY is in the standard St. Lawrence Island system as used in Badten et al. (1987).

been recorded several times in Chukotka, on St. Lawrence Island, and even beyond the Siberian Eskimo region, thus allowing for illuminating comparisons of many versions<sup>7</sup>.

Versions of the “magic words” from Chukotka sometimes contain two different lines, where the first one is used by the giant for bending the pole down, in order to attach the parka full of little girls to it, and the second one for straightening it again. This is the case in (3) and (4). The version in (5) only has the first line, which is used both for bending and straightening the pole. Another very short CSY version of this tale was recorded by Bogoras (1901: 62-64, 1949: 159-160) and unfortunately does not contain any “magic words.”

- (3) **Unaqegkanga, unaqegkanga!** (or:)  
**Unaqegkangat, unaqegkangat!**  
(...)  
**Villaqegkanga, villaqegkanga!** (Menovshchikov 1947: 32, 34)<sup>8</sup>

- (4) **Unaaqekanga, unaaqekanga!** (or:)  
**Unaaqekanga, unaaqekanga!**  
(...)  
**Taklakekanga, taklakekanga!** (Rubtsova 1954: 114-115)<sup>9</sup>

- (5) **Unaqekaa!** (Koonooka 2003: 109, transcribed from Menovshchikov 1988)

The lines in (3) and (5), and the first line of (4) are meaningless to present-day St. Lawrence Island speakers. Koonooka, a native speaker of CSY from St. Lawrence Island comments on (5): “Magic word” (2003: 111). I am confident that they are meaningless to modern speakers of CSY from Chukotka as well. But in view of the existence of Chukchi lines in Yupik tales of Chukotka, one can assume that they actually are Chukchi, and I will explore that possibility at the end of the next section. In the second line of version (4) there is a recognizable Eskimo root in one word, since it contains the postural root *taklagh-* ‘spread out; stretched out’ (Badten et al. 1987: 221); the morphology following it is unclear. It is possible that the final element ...*kanga* is a verb inflectional ending (transitive participial 3rd person sg. subject and 3rd person sg. object). Similarly, in the variant *unaqegkangat* in version (3), the ending ...*kangat* can be interpreted as a transitive participial 3rd person pl. subject and 3rd person sg. object. In any case, the fact that a portion of the “magic words” was given in CSY maybe points to the possibility that a CSY speaker understood the non-Yupik lines in (3) as Chukchi, and was able to translate them into CSY.

<sup>7</sup> This particular tale has also been recorded in two Alaskan Inupiaq dialects, thus belonging to the Inuit branch of Eskimo-Aleut: King Island Inupiaq, narrated by Frank Ellanna (Fienup-Riordan and Kaplan 2007: 184-185; Fortescue 1983: 94) and in Kobuk River Inupiaq, narrated by Paaniikaaluk Nora Norton (Zibell 1970: 13-20). Unfortunately, these versions do not contain “magic words” referring to the bending or straightening up of a pole.

<sup>8</sup> Vowel length is not indicated in this source.

<sup>9</sup> An English translation of this version is available in Dolitsky and Michael (2000: 95-98).

It is interesting, but apparently coincidental, that the Chukotkan version in (5), transliterated by Koonooka, looks the most like the lines occurring in the St. Lawrence Island versions. Koonooka would have no reason to change the form of the magic words<sup>10</sup>. I now turn to the St. Lawrence Island versions of this *ungipaghaan*.

### “Magic words” in CSY folklore from St. Lawrence Island

A chronological list of the “magic words” in the St. Lawrence Island sources is given in (6) through (11). The lines are followed, if published, by the reference, and, if unpublished, by the name of the storyteller and the year of recording in brackets.

- (6) **Uunnaaqikaa, uunnaaqikaa, uunnaaqugutkun.** (Rookok [n.d.])
- (7) **Unaa, qekanga, unaa qugetwha!** (Slwooko 1979: 8)
- (8) **Unaa qukaa-aa, unaa qugetwhaa.** (Gologergen [1985])
- (9) **Unaqekaa, unaqekaa, una qugetgen.** (Seppilu [1985])
- (10) **Unaqeka, unaqeka, una qugetgaq** (variants: **qugetgen, qugetga**)  
(Toolie [1985])
- (11) **Uunaaqeka, uunaaqekanga.** (Wongittilin [1985])

In contrast to the Chukotka versions (3) and (4), but like Chukotka version (5), a single line of “magic words” is used both for bending the pole down, and for straightening it up. This is evidence that they are not understood. These “magic words” are indeed quite meaningless to St. Lawrence Island speakers. Since no modern speaker of CSY knows Chukchi, and most of them have little intuition about which word is a loan from Chukchi, and which is etymologically Yupik, there is no point in asking St. Lawrence Island speakers whether these words have any Chukchi connection.

I now attempt to analyze the “magic words.” I have been unable to find convincing Chukchi cognates of the forms starting in *u(u)na(a)qeka-* (versions 3-11) or *village-* (version 3). The forms *qugetga(q)*, *qugetgen* (versions 9 and 10), *qugetwha(a)* (versions 7 and 8), and *-qugutkun* (version 6) appear to contain the Chukchi stem *wety-* ‘straight,’ occurring in the verb *wetyatək* ‘to become straight’ (Moll and Inénlikéj 1957: 28), the Chukchi transitive 2nd person singular subject and 3rd person singular object imperative circumfix *q- ...-yən* (Krause 1980: 196). This form presumably means ‘straighten it up!’ It is to be noted that this form, for some reason, does not occur in (3-5), the versions from Chukotka.

<sup>10</sup> The version in (5) was recorded by Menovshchikov in 1954, from Asuya Olga Mumigtekaq (1930-2001) an Ungazighmii from Ungaziq (Koonooka 2003: xx).

## The evidence in Chukotian and Itelmen folklore

It would be useful to find Chukotian versions of the same tale, since one would expect the lines corresponding to “magic words” to be fully analyzable in these. Versions of this tale with such lines in Chukchi and the other Chukotian languages (*i.e.* Kerek, Alutor and Koryak) might well have been recorded. I have found one very short Chukchi version of this tale in Bogoras (1901: 62-64, 1949: 159-60), which is a word for word translation of the CSY version above it, and like this CSY version, it does not contain the lines corresponding to “magic words”; I have not found any versions of it in a search of Bogoras’s collections of Chukchi texts (Borogas 1900, 1910, 1928) and Koryak texts (Bogoras 1917). Two Koryak versions of this tale are given in Jochelson (1908: 181-182, 212-216), but in English translation only. In these, the lines are given as “Cross-beam, get up still higher. In return I will give you mouse-fat,” and “Cross-beam, bend down to the ground, I will give you some mouse-fat” (*ibid.*: 181), or “Bend down your head!” (*ibid.*: 213).

However, while looking at the folklore of Itelmen (formerly called Kamchadal), a language distantly related to Chukotian, and originally spoken on the tip of Kamchatka Peninsula, south of the Koryak area, I found two versions of this tale, originally collected by Waldemar Jochelson in 1910-1911, and published in Worth (1961). The lines corresponding to CSY “magic words” for each version are given in (12) and (13), with translations underneath:

(12) **Ūe, qnałxc.**<sup>11</sup>

‘Tree, bend down.’

(...)

**Ūé, qwétwatge.**

‘Tree, straighten up.’ (Worth 1961: 195)

(13) **Ué, ué, qanálxc.**<sup>12</sup>

‘Tree, tree, bend down.’

(...)

**Ué, ué, qwétwawc.**

‘Tree, tree, become straight.’ (Worth 1961: 228)

These lines appear to contain words borrowed from Koryak. In Worth’s (1969) Itelmen dictionary, largely based on Jochelson’s texts, the lexical items of Koryak origin are unfortunately not distinguished from original Itelmen words. The form *ué* ‘wood’, *ūi* and *ūe* in Worth (1969: 270), is Itelmen *u* ‘tree trunk, log’, related to Koryak *uttəut* ‘wood’ (Worth 1962: 585, Fortescue 2005: 310). The form *qanálxc* contains the stem *-nal-* ‘bend down’ (Worth 1969: 169), which occurs in Itelmen only (Fortescue 2005: 192). The form *qwétwatge* or *qwétwawc*, contains the stem *wetw-* ‘straight’ (Worth 1969: 277), and is from Koryak *vety-* ‘straight’ (Bogoras 1917: 122, Fortescue 2005: 305), cognate to the Chukchi stem given in the preceding section.

<sup>11</sup> Jochelson’s spelling is retained here.

<sup>12</sup> Later in the text, this word is repeated as *knałxc* (three times) and *knálxc* (Worth 1961: 228-229).



Since Itelmen was known to have undergone extensive lexical and grammatical influence from Koryak by Jochelson's time (Bogoras 1922: 641), it is likely that these lines should be considered Itelmen with lexical items borrowed from Koryak, and there is no evidence that the whole line was directly borrowed<sup>13</sup>. Certainly, these lines were readily understood by Itelmen speakers, owing to the fact that all Itelmen also spoke Koryak. Because they were understood, there is no evidence that these lines were considered to be "magic words" in Itelmen folklore. The parallel lines in Itelmen (and Koryak) can only be used as additional evidence that the lines found in the Yupik versions are widespread in Siberian folklore, but not that they are "magical" in Chukotian or Itelmen folklore.

## Discussion

I have argued for at least one case of Chukotian "magic words" that have diffused through folklore from Chukotka to St. Lawrence Island. In Chukotka, the words might still be recognized as Chukchi, and therefore translatable into CSY. On St. Lawrence Island, the words are no longer recognized as Chukchi, but are nevertheless sufficiently well preserved phonetically to ascertain a Chukchi origin.

It should be noted that the existence of Chukotian "magic words" does not imply that the tales are of Chukotian origin, and were borrowed by the Yupiget neighbours of the Chukotian speakers, and that somehow, in the process of borrowing, they omitted to translate the "magic words." Because of the Siberian rather than eastern Yupik distribution of this tale, it is likely that the tale originated in Siberia, but our discussion does not permit us to decide whether this tale is originally Yupik, or originally Chukotian (or whether it might even come from farther west in Siberia).

Now we come to the question of why Yupik groups would take over Chukchi words for "magic words" in their folklore. The existence of such lines of "magic words," or songs in CSY can provide us with some information about the sociolinguistic relationship between CSY speakers (and other Siberian Yupiget) and Chukchi. As discussed in de Reuse (1994: 295-397), the Chukchi were in a position of power with respect to the Siberian Yupiget, since they were more numerous, and since the Yupiget depended on them for trade. As a result of this, the Yupiget of the Siberian region probably saw their Chukchi neighbours and their language as threatening and somewhat mysterious, and might have expressed this feeling by having the stranger or more ridiculous protagonists of their tales, such as some animals, monsters, or people with shamanistic powers, talk in this strange language.

Finally, it is interesting to consider whether the usage of Chukchi words described in this article can be connected with other usages of abnormal or unintelligible language in myth or folklore. One example would be the distorted speech used for certain mythological characters among the Nootka of the Northwest coast of North America (Sapir 1963 [1915]: 192); this phenomenon is similar functionally, in that it is

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<sup>13</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.



often used to make the character look ridiculous, but it is dissimilar in that the abnormal speech remains comprehensible. Another example would be unintelligible speech in shamanistic ritual. Here, the similarities are that languages of “the other” are indeed often used in shamanistic ritual. For example, the Chukchi shamanistic songs in Bogoras (1900) often contain Yupik words (Weinstein 2004: 299-300). There is a general tendency for the language of “the other” to be considered more spiritually powerful than one’s own<sup>14</sup>. However, dissimilarities between the “magic words” discussed here and shamanistic speech can easily be found. Chukchi shamanistic speech can contain words which are not traceable to any human language (*ibid.*). By definition shamanistic speech has a religious aspect, and there is no evidence that the usage of “magic words” in Yupik tales can be connected to the realm of religion.

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