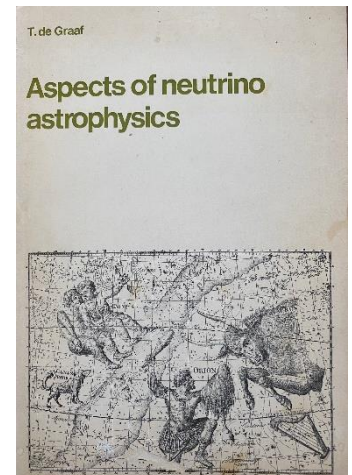


## Tjeerd de Graaf, a physicist who became a language rediscoverer

Interview by Camiel Hamans

### From the stars to the tundra

'My interest in languages started as early as my high school days. In addition, I grew up in Fryslân, the Dutch province where, apart from Dutch, Frisian, my mother tongue, is spoken. Frisian is now an officially accepted regional language. In Frisian, my name is written as *Tseard*. However, there was little room for me to study languages, as the secondary school programme that I followed was focused on math and science. That's why I enrolled in Physics at the nearest university, the University of Groningen. In 1969 I defended my PhD thesis on the role of neutrinos in the cosmos.'



'When I was a sophomore in 1957, the university employed a Russian language teacher. I was intrigued and decided to take Russian as a minor subject. In 1960, after I had obtained my Bachelor's degree, the Polish government offered a scholarship. Nobody wanted to go to this *terra incognita*, this supposedly barren land behind the Iron Curtain, but I dared to accept the challenge and went to Kraków for six months. After I returned, I decided to study Slavic languages in addition to my Physics studies. My professor of Slavic linguistics was André van Holk, who succeeded in making Slavic a major subject. He was interested in the combination of studies that I had chosen, and I wrote a thesis for him about machine translation. Unfortunately, I only managed to get my BA in Slavic languages and literature because I had to finish my doctoral dissertation and had to take care of a family. Immediately after my PhD in Theoretical Physics in 1969 I was awarded a British Council Fellowship and spent two years in Cambridge, where I was lucky enough to have met Stephen Hawking. My interest then shifted more and more towards astronomy, so when I came back to Groningen I was asked to become a kind of contact person between physics and astronomy. However, the work also involved other tasks that didn't interest me, and around 1974 I started to look for another job.'

### Phonetics

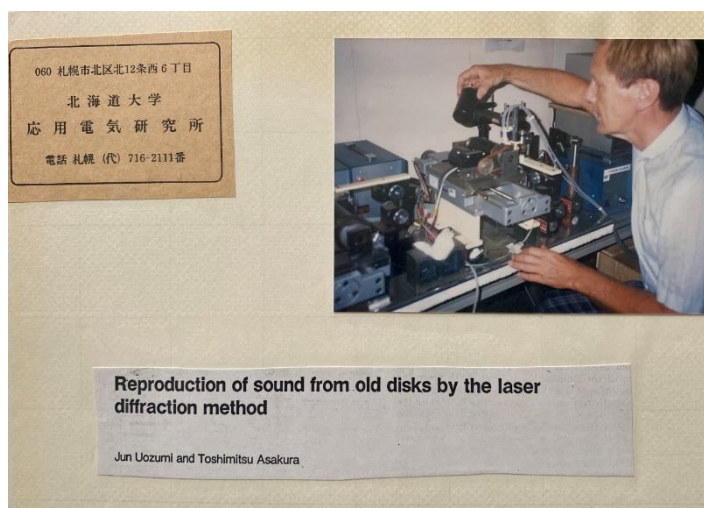
'In 1972 the University of Groningen established a Department of Phonetics, and Don Graham Stuart became its first professor. I knew him already, since he was also interested in machine translation. Moreover, he was a specialist in Asian languages and – amongst other things – taught Japanese classes. Later, Groningen University launched its Center for Japanese Studies, where I also lectured until 2005. My background in Physics and my interest in languages made me a welcome professional partner for Graham Stuart. I was Associate Professor of Phonetics from 1975 until my retirement in 2003. In Groningen we closely cooperated with the Phonetics Institute of the University of Amsterdam, which at the time was led by Hein Mol, a physical engineer. In his laboratory, Mol's associate Gerrit Meinsma and I found old Edison wax rolls of sound recordings made by Louise Kaiser, the first Dutch phonetician and the first to hold the Chair in Phonetics at the University of Amsterdam. The challenge that we were faced with was how to save and preserve those wax rolls, and especially the recordings of Dutch dialects, so that they could be used for future consultation and research.'



## Ainu

'Since 1985 I have increasingly focused on sound archives. I became interested in a technique that aimed to reconstruct them with laser beams. It turned out that there was a colleague in Sapporo, Japan, who used a similar approach. We were first introduced in 1986, and in 1988 Asakura Sensei invited me to Hokkaido University, for three months, where Japanese colleagues and I continued to work on techniques to save old sound recordings. The rest is history, and the step from endangered archives to endangered languages proved to be a small one. Quite a few of these sound recordings contain language material from unknown, endangered and sometimes even extinct languages. And so my interest in endangered languages grew, as did my interest in less endangered indigenous languages. In 1990 I went on my first six-week Japanese fieldwork expedition to record and describe the endangered languages of Sakhalin and to look for the remnants of Ainu. Ainu is a language that is now only spoken on Hokkaido, where it is moribund. Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Ainu, which genetically speaking is unrelated to any other language and must therefore be described as isolated, was also spoken on Sakhalin and the Kuril islands, an island chain in the Russian Far East. The last speaker of Sakhalin Ainu passed away in Japan in the early 1990s. On Sakhalin we did not find any more Ainu speakers, but we started projects on the endangered Nivkh language, about which my student Hidetoshi Shiraishi defended his thesis at Groningen University in 2006. In the same period I also developed excellent relations with colleagues in Saint Petersburg, especially with the people of the Phonogram Archive in the House of Russian Literature, also known as the Pushkin House. The museum has a wonderful collection of old wax rolls with sound recordings of numerous indigenous Arctic languages. I was able to turn the preservation of this collection into an

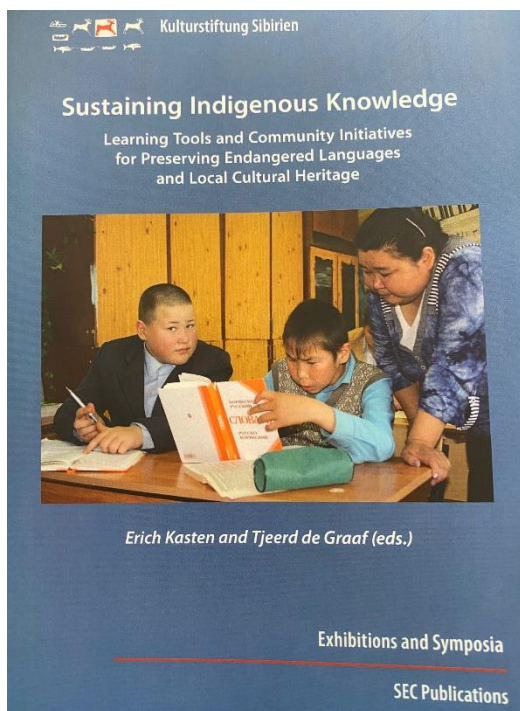
international project, for which the European INTAS organisation and the Dutch science foundation NWO were willing to grant funding. With their funds, I was able to employ Russian scholars. Other collaborating partners were the Vienna Phonogram Archive and the BBC. A later, similar project was supported by the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library. In 1998, I was awarded an honorary doctorate in St. Petersburg because of my work for the preservation of the archive of the Pushkin House.'



## Piłsudski

'My goal was not only to technically preserve the sound and language data, but also to describe them in terms of their content. In the years that followed, I therefore repeatedly went on expeditions to make recordings and record language data in Eastern Eurasia. Wherever possible, my colleagues and I also tried to help indigenous communities to revitalize their language. Amongst many other things, I did fieldwork on the Arctic languages of Siberia (Voices of the Tundra), on the languages spoken on Sakhalin, on Russian dialects, on Balto-Finnic languages, on Yiddish (Voices of the Shtetl) and on Plautdietsch (the language of the Siberian Mennonites).

Via the orientalist Alfred Majewicz from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, whom I met in 1985, I learned about the archives of Bronisław Piłsudski, the older brother of Józef, the later Polish strongman. The Polish-speaking brothers Piłsudski grew up in Lithuania, then part of the czarist empire. Bronisław and Józef studied in Saint Petersburg, where together with Lenin's older brother Alexander they became involved in a socialist plot to assassinate the Czar in 1887. Alexander was hanged, but Bronisław Piłsudski was only sentenced to 15 years of forced labour on Sakhalin, thanks



to the influence of his father. On Sakhalin, Bronisław became interested in the Ainu people, married an Ainu wife, kept a Sakhalin journal and made numerous recordings, which we deciphered with our laser technology and which were studied by Majewicz. Piłsudski's historical material proved to be an enormous addition to our knowledge of the Ainu and their language.'

### Plautdietsch

'In 1992, on my way back from Japan to the Netherlands, I was invited to attend a conference in Novosibirsk, where I was approached by a lady who claimed to be of Dutch offspring. Her great-great parents were Mennonites, a protestant sect from the eastern part of the Netherlands and Westphalia where they were seriously persecuted in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, they migrated to the East, the Gdańsk region, later to the Ukraine and subsequently to Siberia after further persecutions and splits. The Mennonites kept their original language Plautdietsch, a language which resembles the dialects still

spoken in the province of Groningen. I was introduced to a region near the border with Kazakhstan, where many native speakers of Plautdietsch were living. Since the language is vulnerable, to say the least, I decided to start a project to record and describe it. The result was the magnificent doctoral dissertation written by my student Rogier Nieuweboer. Following this path, I also realized that Yiddish is on the verge of disappearing in Central and Eastern Europe. We started a small Yiddish reading group in Groningen and a similar group in Saint-Petersburg. All these different activities spread my fame in the world of minority languages, and so I was invited to become a member of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, which is how I came into contact with CIPL. CIPL is one of the founders of UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger.'

### Frisian Academy

'When I worked in the Phonetics Department of Groningen University, I was also a Board member of the Frisian Academy in Ljouwert/Leeuwarden. This academy was founded to protect and stimulate the Frisian language and Frisian culture. It is also the academic centre for research on Frisian language, literature and history. Connected to the Frisian Academy is the Mercator European Centre for Multilingualism and Language Learning, partly sponsored by European funds and led by Cor van der Meer. After my retirement from Groningen University I was invited to become a senior research associate at the Academy and the Centre, a position I still hold today. I have co-authored publications and encouraged colleagues to produce several articles and reports on endangered languages and on the linguistic situation in a number of European countries, recently also in Siberia. I also joined the Board of the UK-based Foundation of Endangered Languages, and I accepted a visiting professorship of St. Petersburg University and a guest researcher post at the Linguistic Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg. I also became a fellow at the Centre for Russian Studies of Groningen University and the Kulturstiftung Sibirien in Germany.'

### Witsen

'In 2010 I joined the Witsen project group initiated by Bruno Naarden. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Nicolaas Witsen was mayor of Amsterdam and a friend of Czar Peter the Great. He visited Russia and wrote about it, he was an arch collector, and he had a very wide scope of interest. He asked travellers to bring him exotic products, plants, seeds, animals and even humans from all over the world. He was also interested in languages and in 1692 published a voluminous work about the languages and cultures of what he called North and East Tartary (Siberia and surrounding territories). Following

editions appeared in 1705 and 1785, all written in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch. In his book, Witsen presents amongst other things the first lists of words in the Yakut language and in other Siberian languages, highly interesting information for linguists. The book was translated into Russian by an interdisciplinary team of specialists, and we prepared an edition on the languages. This was published in 2018 by Pegasus Publishers in Amsterdam.

I am currently taking part in a new project started by Nicoline van der Sijs, who wants to make a digital edition of Peter Simon Pallas' *Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparativa* (1786-1789, second enlarged edition 1790-1791). In this dictionary, commissioned by Czarina Catherine the Great, Pallas collected terms for 285 concepts in 224 languages. I am also working on a few reports on smaller languages in Russia, to be published by the Mercator Centre in due course.'

## Info

<https://www.fryske-akademy.nl/en/about-us/employees/0/news/detail/tdegraaf/>

Mercator European Research Center ([www.mercator-research.eu](http://www.mercator-research.eu))

Foundation for Endangered Languages, UK ([www.ogmios.org](http://www.ogmios.org))

Foundation for Siberian Cultures, Germany ([www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de](http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de))

Centre for Russian Studies at Groningen University ([centreforrussianstudies.ub.rug.nl](http://centreforrussianstudies.ub.rug.nl))