

Studies in Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan, a language of interior Alaska

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1. Genealogical and geographical information

Na-dene (=Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit)

Tlingit

Eyak-Athabaskan

Eyak

Athabaskan (about 40 languages)

Northern: Slavy, Chipewyan, Upper Kuskokwim and other Alaskan...

Pacific: Hupa, Tolowa...

Southern (Apachean): Navajo, Western Apache...

2. Studies of Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan (henceforth: UKA)

Prior linguistic work on UKA: Ray Collins and Betty Petruska and others

Kibrik's fieldwork in Nikolai: about 4 months in 1997

about 4 months in 2001

Kibrik's projects:

- Sociolinguistic survey
- Phonetics and tonology
- Dialectology
- Grammatical research (the largest and most complex project)
- Limited lexicological work
- Collection of natural discourse
- I worked with 25 informants altogether, including 6 primary and 9 important informants

3. The scene

Bits of history of the Upper Uuskokwim people

- 1830s – beginning of the Russian cultural influence
- Mid-19th century – conversion to the Russian Orthodox religion
- Turn of the 19th /20th centuries – the original village of Nikolai was founded
- 1948 – launching of a school in Nikolai by American missionaries; abrupt transition from the nomadic to the settled lifestyle
- 1960s – beginning of language shift from UKA to English

Sociocultural setting

- The population of UKA descent can be estimated as 200, about a half of them resides in the village of Nikolai on the South Fork of Kuskokwim, and the other half in Telida (3 persons), McGrath, Anchorage, Fairbanks, and elsewhere
- The majority of the permanent population of Nikolai (about 100) is of UKA origin, but there are several white American men married to local women
- The community is Russian Orthodox, and resisted the attempt to convert them to other versions of Christianity
- Russian Orthodox religion is by far the most visible element of traditional culture

- Church services are conducted in English but most hymns are sung in Old Church Slavonic, even though the Upper Kuskokwim people never spoke any Russian
- There are six main UKA family names in Nikolai that etymologically are Russian names or nicknames (Nikolai, Dennis, Esai, Gregory, Petruska, Alexia)

Sociolinguistic situation

- The UKA language is spoken by a few dozen people, almost exclusively over 50 years old
- UKA is the main means of communication only in two households, and there is a couple of dozen more where it is an “entertainment code”
- There are just several people, all older than 60 and most older than 80 for whom UKA can be considered the preferred code
- UKA has been taught in the Nikolai school since early 1970s; this period of time essentially coincided with the time when the shift to English was completed

4. The sociolinguistic survey

of about 60% of the overall population of Nikolai was conducted in 1997, with the assistance of Mira Bergelson.

Number of questionnaires distributed — **63**

Number of questionnaires returned — **55**, including:

adults — 42

high and middle school students — 8

elementary school students — 5

Some conclusions drawn from the survey

- 1) People essentially quit speaking UKA as the first language to their children in 1960s
- 2) 38% of the respondents (as well as independent research) link that attitude of young parents in 1960s with the influence of the missionary school started in Nikolai in 1948; concept of shame associated with it
- 3) UKA is used on a regular basis by every fifth respondent (10 people altogether in absolute numbers)
- 4) There are 20 to 30 full-fledged speakers of UKA in Nikolai (tested by means of a specially designed series of linguistic diagnostics), only two of which are under 50, and there are two or three households where UKA is still used between spouses on the daily basis
- 5) Nevertheless, 74% of respondents consider UKA their "native" language, 84% value the preservation efforts, and 91% would like their children to speak UKA.
- 6) Language competence of the people is far higher than the actual use of the language; that is, giving use to the language would largely depend on a conscious decision to do so.
- 7) Among younger adults (those in their 30s and 40s), there is a fair number of "latent speakers" who do not practice speaking the language but probably could do so without too much effort; they could also teach children more Athabaskan than they do now.
- 8) Absolutely all schoolchildren expressed keen interest in studying the language, and many of them, especially in elementary school, showed more knowledge of Athabaskan than one could expect. This means they are interested in learning the language and the bilingual program at school is potentially important.
- 9) If the current trends of language use remain as they are now, after a number of years the language will be completely lost
- 10) Some powerful factors that forced the shift to English in the 1960s do not exist anymore, school system now encourages the use of the native language, and it may be a good time now for language revival efforts; the main obstacle for that is the lack of energy and determination in the community

- There must have been some individuals after whom the standardized language was modeled
- The most likely candidates for that role are the people of the Dennis family, because they lived originally around the present-day Nikolai area
- Indeed Nick Dennis (1928) is the oldest person who has the standard system or at least is very close to it; his sister Dora Esai (1934) also has a close system
- It is a historical accident that none of the older generation people having either the fully distinctive system or the “standard” system survived

6. Possessiveness

(1) Primary possession

- | | | | |
|----|------------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| a. | hwsh | ‘root’ | • absolute vs. possessed form |
| b. | mi-ghwy-aʔ | ‘its root’ | • possessor prefixes |
| | 3.Poss-root-Poss | | • root initial voicing |
| c. | ts’ima | ghwy-aʔ | • possessive suffix |
| | spruce | root-Poss | • root final voicing |

(2) Semantic range of “possessiveness”:

- possession in the literal sense, such as “my sled”
- kin relationships (“my nephew”)
- spatial relations (“top of the mountain”)
- part-whole relations (“my hand”, “branches of the tree”, “belt of a gun”)
- social relationships (“my friend”)
- relation between a referent and its attribute (“my name”)
- relation between a referent and its activity (“my work”)
- relation between an object and the material it is made of (“the metal of the axe”)
- relation between an object and its origin (see example 3 below), etc.

- | | | | |
|-----|---------|------------|--|
| (3) | yunan | jija-ʔ | ‘non-native fruit’ (such as apples, oranges, etc.) |
| | outside | berry-Poss | |
| (4) | mesruk | ye | mega ‘sack of flour’ |
| | sack | in | flour |

(5) Formal types of UKA nouns in respect to primary possession

<i>Type</i>	<i>Label of the type</i>	<i>Patterns used</i>	<i>Typical representatives</i>	<i>Example</i>
A*	Obligatorily possessed I	“Possessor – STEM” only	Most kin terms Spatial terms Animal shelters Some part terms Attributes	-onh ‘mother’ -nedr ‘middle’ -t’wh ‘nest’ -zo ‘mouth’ -t’i ‘pocket’
B*	Obligatorily possessed II	“Possessor – STEM- <i>aʔ</i> ” only	Most part terms Few kin terms	-lo- ‘hand’ -dzadza-

			Products/attributes	'younger sister' -ta- 'broth'
C*	Optionally possessed I II	"STEM" or "Possessor – STEM- a?"	Belongings Frequently detached parts Social relations Cultural terms	ts'och 'plate' dił 'blood' gina 'friend' hwzosh 'story'
D	Optionally possessed II	"STEM" or "Possessor – STEM"	<i>various</i>	ts'u 'milk' tin 'trail'
E*	Typically unpossessed	"STEM" or, marginally , "Possessor – STEM-a?"	Natural phenomena	gwh 'rabbit'
F	Unpossessible	"STEM" only	<i>various</i>	chela 'boy(s)' ?in? a 'mom'

*The asterisk marks the major noun types

(6) Secondary possession:

- si-ch'i---dineje ~ si-y'---dineje 'my moose'
1Sg.Poss-Indef.Poss-moose
- (7) a. si-zit' 'my liver' (part of my body)
1Sg.Poss-liver
- b. ch'i-zit' 'something's (some animal's) liver'
Indef.Poss-liver
- c. si-ch'i---ch'i-zit' 'my liver', lit. 'my someone's liver' (animal liver I own)
1Sg.Poss-Indef.Poss---Indef.Poss-liver
- d. si-ch'i---dineje---zit' 'my moose liver'
1Sg.Poss-Indef.Poss---moose---liver

(8) The range of secondary possession

- natural phenomena dinach'imina? 'our lake'
- animal body parts sich'ich'it'o? 'my wing'
- some less typical belongings sich'isinmol 'my gun cleaning rod'
- food siy'duyuk 'my salt'
- human titles dinach'idoyona? 'our chief'

(9) Secondary possession is systematically used in code mixing, to integrate English nouns in UKA discourse.
"Lunch"

ND nidogh nenwhthonh ywh -ch'i---BOAT
 where you guys put your Indf.---boat?

7. Verb structure

"Standard average Athabaskan" verb template (D[erivation], I[nflection], Q[uasi-inflection])

Q/D 18 proclitic
I 17 (b) Oblique +

Q/D		(a) preverb
D	16	various derivational
I	15	reflexive Accusative pronoun
Q	14	iterative
Q	13	distributive
D	12	incorporate
Q	11	number
I	10	Accusative pronoun
I	9	non-1/2 person Nominative pronoun
Q	8	transitivity decrease
D	7	qualifier
Q/D	6	inceptive
D	5	qualifier
I	4	conjugation
I	3	mode
I	2	1/2 person Nominative pronoun
I/D	1	transitivity indicator
	0	root
I&D?	+1	mode/aspect suffix
Q	+2	enclitic

8. Typologically unusual and even unique grammatical properties of the verb

- ★ high polysynthesis and morphological complexity
- ★ almost exclusive prefixation, combined with postpositions and verb-final word order
- ★ poor correspondence between semantic categories and template positions
 - one semantic category in more than one alternative position
 - one semantic category simultaneously in more than one position
 - multiple cases of obviously inexplicable homophony and allomorphy in gramm. morphemes
- ★ affix ordering is not governed by semantic scope
- ★ extreme concern for expressing aspectual meanings
- ★ rich system of transitivity marking
- ★ referent classification in verbal semantics
- ★ bizarre morphophonemics

9. Locative/directional adverbs

(10) Three elements necessary for explaining locative/directional adverbs:

- trajector
- location (landmark)
- viewer (often coincides with the speaker)

(11) The relative positions of the viewer and location are established at any moment, and the position/movement of trajector is defined in respect to that relative position

(12) UKA locative/directional adverbs

<i>Location in relation to the viewer</i>	<i>Position at a larger area</i>	<i>Movements towards a location</i>	<i>Position at a specific place</i>	<i>Movement from location towards viewer</i>
Upriver/downriver axis				
downriver	yodogh	yodo [?] →	yonet	yodots'
upriver	yonwgh	yona [?] →		yonets'
upriver nearby/ in an open area	yi [?] ogh →	yo [?] in →		yi [?] ots'
Higher/lower axis				
higher up, away from the river	yongw	yongi	yongwt	yonwhts'e [?]
high up, at an elevation	yodigw	yodigi	yoygit	yodwhts'e [?]
lower, closer to the river	yotswgh	yotsin		yotsets'
lower		yoygi		
Orientation in respect to a body of water				
closer to the center of a body of water	yonswgh →	yonsi(t')	yonsit'~yonsit	yonsits'
across a space (body of water, trail)	yonots'wgh	yonan	yonots'in	yonots'

10. Gaps – non-existent lexical groups

- interjections -- such as 'ouch', oops
- ideophones, such as 'bang'
- partitives, such as 'two of my dogs'
- debitives and obligation
- ordinal numerals 'first', 'second'
- negative pronouns, such as 'nothing', 'nobody', 'nowhere'