

M.B. Bergelson, A.A. Kibrik

**THE NINILCHIK VARIETY OF RUSSIAN: LINGUISTIC
HERITAGE OF ALASKA¹**

Территория Аляски находилась под российским контролем во второй половине XVIII и в XIX вв., однако влияние России чувствуется до сих пор – в языках, в культуре, в религии, в топонимике. В статье рассматриваются языковые особенности нинильчикского варианта русского языка, до сих пор сохраняющегося на Аляске. Материал данной работы был собран в ходе полевого исследования.

1. Russian in Alaska

The territory that is now the state of Alaska was under the control of Russia, through the Russian-American Company, during the second half of the 18th century and the first two thirds of the 19th century. In 1867 Russian America was turned over to the United States, and the political influence of Russia in this region ended. However, the Russian influence in Alaska was extensive enough, and even nowadays there still exist many signs of Russian impact. This impact is of various kinds – geographical, cultural, religious. And, not the least, linguistic.

Relying partly on the ideas of Michael Krauss (1996; personal communication), the following kinds of linguistic Russian influence visible in modern Alaska can be identified.

1. Influence related to the period of Russian America:

- (a) A variety of the Russian language was formed during the Russian American period, and speakers of Alaskan Russian are still found in some pockets in Alaska, most notably in the village of Ninilchik.
- (b) There are many hundreds of Russian borrowings in native Alaskan languages, including Aleut, Eskimo, Athabaskan, and Tlingit, see Krauss 1996; Kibrik 2008 on the borrowings in Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan.
- (c) There are numerous Russian place names in Alaska, such as Baranof Island, the village of Ouzinkie in the Kodiak island, or the village Nikolski in the Aleutians.
- (d) Not exactly Russian, but the Russian variant of Old Church Slavonic is used in liturgy in many Orthodox parishes in Alaska. Of the particular interest is the fact that native people in some places remember many Slavonic prayers and hymns by heart and perform them on appropriate occasions, even though they never understood Slavonic.

2. Influence unrelated to the period of Russian America:

- (a) During the 1960s and 1970s there was a significant immigration of Russian speaking Old Believers into Alaska, arriving from Oregon but stemming originally from Old Believers groups in the Russian Far East and in Turkey. The largest Old Believers' village in Alaska is Nikolaevsk on the Kenai Peninsula.
- (b) There is a large number of recent Russian speaking immigrants into Alaska who arrived from various places in Russia during the last couple of decades.

This entire gamut of linguistic Russian presence in Alaska is interesting and worth close examination. This paper, however, concentrates on aspect (1a) – the Alaskan Russian dialect, as spoken by the people of the village of Ninilchik on the Kenai Peninsula. It reflects various stages of

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our work on Ninilchik Russian. The paper is structured as follows: a brief sketch of the origins of Alaskan Russian (section 1), history of the Ninilchik settlement (section 2) and of Ninilchik Russian studies (section 3) followed by a description of the noun dictionary project (section 4). The discussion of Ninilchik Russian phonetic features in section 5 concentrates on the regular processes that have shaped the pronunciation of Russian words and deals with the issues of transcription. The grammar-related issues, such as the system of gender and its decay in Ninilchik Russian, are discussed in section 6. Discussion of the relationship between Ninilchik Russian and all other varieties of Russian spoken in Alaska in the time of Russian America and later, as well as directions for future research, are presented in section 7. Section 8 concludes the paper.

2. Russian America and Ninilchik

The history of Russian America was rather short but dramatic (see e.g. Болховитинов (ред.) 1997-1999). The right to represent the Russian government in America was granted in 1799 to the Russian-American Company (RAC) founded as a commercial enterprise. It was established at the end of the 18th century by Russian merchants and trappers (*promyshlenniki*) and later was handed over to the Navy with the Governor being appointed by the tsar. The RAC enjoyed a monopoly over all the territory of Russian America for all commercial operations related to trapping and fur trade. Promoting Russian cultural and religious values among the local populations was also the responsibility of the RAC, assisted by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The number of ethnic Russians in Russian America never exceeded one thousand at any given moment. Many Russians among the RAC officials and staff married Aleut, Alutiiq, Tlingit and Athabaskan women. As a result a special mixed origin group of people emerged. They were called Creoles and their social status was intermediate between those of Russians and the aboriginal population.

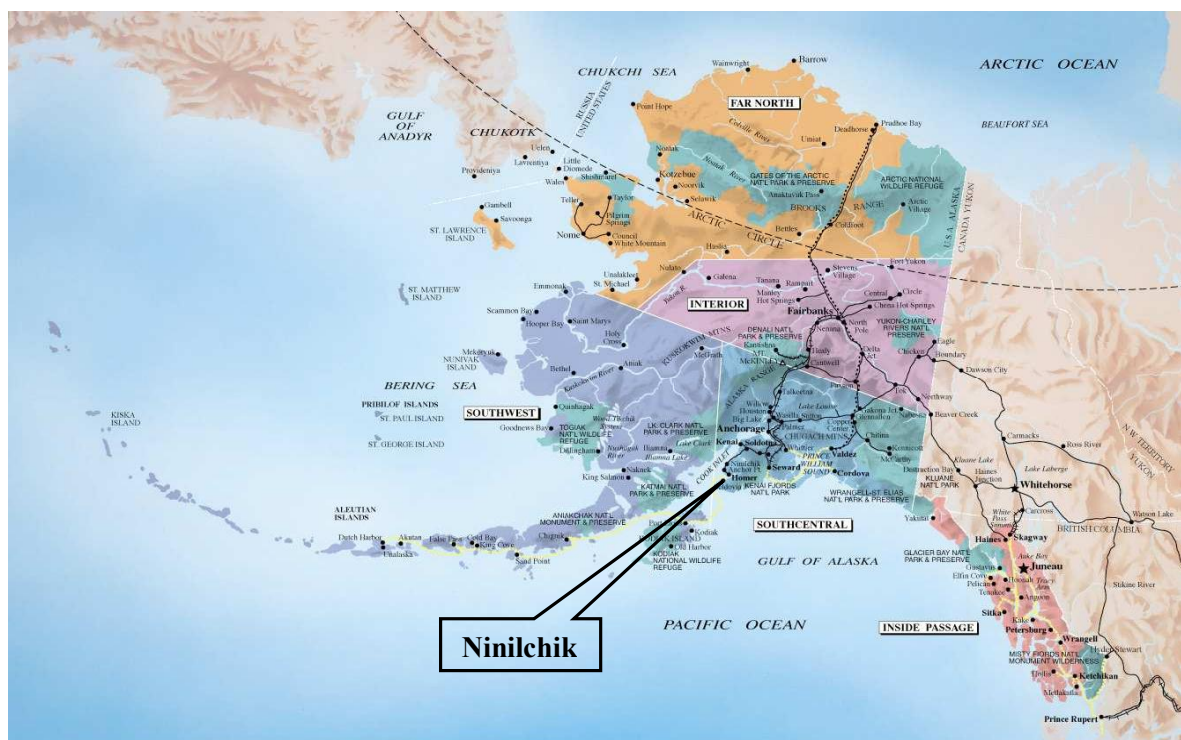
In the mid-19th century it became clear that some of the RAC pensioners could not or would not want to retire to Russia. It is for these RAC retirees and their families that the settlement, later called Ninilchik, was established at the mouth of the Ninilchik River, on the coast of Cook Inlet on the Kenai Peninsula; see Map. The Kenai Peninsula was one of the primary areas of colonization in Russian America, located not too far from the first Russian capital in Kodiak.

Ninilchik was established in the 1840s and five families resided there initially. The two main ones were the Kvasnikoff and Oskolkoff families. Even today their numerous descendants live in and outside the area. Male pioneers of Ninilchik were in most cases ethnic Russians, whereas their wives were Alutiiq or Creoles from Kodiak (Arndt 1996). The territory around Ninilchik was inhabited by Dena'ina Athabaskans, but contacts with them seem not to have played a decisive role in shaping the unique Ninilchik community. The settlers subsisted on hunting, fishing and farming. The population grew fast and reached 81 persons by 1890. At that time, and some decades thereafter, Ninilchik was apparently a fully Russian-speaking community.

In 1867 Russia sold its American lands and Alaska became part of the United States. For several decades after that Ninilchik residents were relatively isolated. Still, up to 1917 a connection to Russia was upheld by the Russian Orthodox Church: priests were coming from Russia, and a Russian school was also operated by the church.

In the 1930s Americans started settling in the area. An English-language school was opened in Ninilchik. Use of the Russian language was not welcome in the school, to say the least. That led to an abrupt sociolinguistic shift: children ceased to acquire Russian as their first language. In 1950 the Sterling Highway going through all the Kenai Peninsula, including Ninilchik, was constructed, and the whole area became available for tourists. The unique Rus-

sian culture of Ninilchik started to fade away rapidly. Nevertheless, even now one can still feel the Russian cultural and spiritual heritage around Ninilchik and elsewhere in Alaska.



A map of Alaska (from the web page www.moreforlesstours.com/images/alaskamap.jpg)

3. Studies of Ninilchik Russian

Ninilchik Russian (henceforth NR) is a remnant dialect spoken by the descendants of Russian settlers of Alaska who intermarried with the native population of the area.

In the 1980s the Irish Slavist Conor Daly, then a student at the University of California Berkeley, did the first study of Ninilchik Russian and wrote a few engaging papers (Daly 1985, 1986) which, unfortunately, remain unpublished. In his papers Daly wrote about Alaskan Russian as a moribund language and described some of its peculiarities, in particular, the loss of grammatical gender; one of his papers is called *Евонай мать весь ночь television караулил* (which in standard Russian would be *Его мать всю ночь смотрела телевизор*).

Probably the second instance of linguistic documentation of Ninilchik Russian was undertaken in 1997 by the present authors through the encouragement of Michael Krauss of the Alaska Native Language Center (Fairbanks). Early in 1997, we learned about the linguist Wayne Leman, a student of the Cheyenne language of the Algonquian language family and a descendant of one of the Ninilchik families. Wayne grew up in Ninilchik, listening to his relatives speak NR, and turned out to be a great patriot of Ninilchik, its history and culture, including the local variety of Russian. Since the 1980s he has been involved in preparing and publishing a collection of biographies of Ninilchik families, putting together their life stories. This publication is called *Agrafena's children* (first edition – see Leman (ed.) 1994). Agrafena was an Alutiiq woman from whom all the existing Ninilchik families descend.

Wayne referred us to his cousin Bobbie Oskolkoff, another enthusiastic student of local history and traditions. Unlike Wayne Leman she lives in Alaska in the town of Kenai, not far from Ninilchik. We owe a lot to her motivation and resourcefulness. She introduced us to most of our consultants and took care of much of the logistics involved with our fieldwork.

At the time of our fieldwork in 1997 there were between twenty and thirty elders from Ninilchik who were native speakers of the local variety of Russian. By the time that this paper

is written (2010) their number has decreased. Ninilchik Russian can be clearly characterized as a moribund language, having no speakers under 70, almost not functioning as a current means of communication, characterized by abundant Russian-English code switching on any attempted communication using Russian. Our goal in 1997 was to document the language to the extent possible. Our consultants in this enterprise were Ninilchik residents Louie Kwasnikoff, brothers Nick and Harry Leman, their sister Betty Porter, brothers Larry and Arnie Oskolkoff, their sister Alice Bouwens, Mae and Cecil Demidoff, Leo Steik, and brothers Walter, Edward and George Jackinsky.

The results we obtained in 1997 included the following. First, we described the system of phonemes found in NR that proved to differ from that of standard Russian. Second, we developed a Roman-based practical orthography that was later adopted by interested members of the community. Third, we collected a rather comprehensive noun vocabulary. Fourth, we produced a sketch of grammatical peculiarities. Finally, we collected a corpus of audio recordings, including vocabulary, stories, and conversation. See Кибрик 1998, and also below, for a partial account of these results.

As our work demonstrated, Ninilchik Russian is a distinct and unique variety of the Russian language. It has its own phonetic and grammatical system and well preserved vocabulary. It bears traits of different Russian dialects and even neighboring Slavic languages, such as Ukrainian and Belorussian. Also it incorporated influences of Eskimo-Aleut and Athabaskan origin. But first and foremost, it is the Russian language, and there is full intelligibility between the speakers of Ninilchik Russian and standard Russian. As for ethnic identity, in private conversations people of Ninilchik descent unequivocally consider themselves Russian rather than Alaskan native.

Subsequent studies of Ninilchik Russian were undertaken by Wayne Leman in 2009 and by Evgeny Golovko, also in 2009; see Golovko 2010. An interested reader can consult web resources, containing information on Ninilchik history and NR, in particular <http://webpace.webring.com/people/fa/agrafena/agrafena.htm>. Note especially the poem *Haunting Memories* written in English by Bobbie Oskolkoff (<http://webpace.webring.com/people/fa/agrafena/haunting.htm>), with the use of many NR words spelled in the orthography we designed in 1997.

4. The noun dictionary project

This project was chosen as the primary goal of our fieldwork in Ninilchik partly due to the “social demand” expressed by the community and made known to us by Wayne Leman and Bobbie Oskolkoff. They represented the generation whose first language was English, but who still kept very warm childhood memories of certain words, expressions and phrases in NR. They were mostly interested in the vocabulary for the realities of the old Ninilchik lifestyle, so the noun dictionary was the most logical response to satisfy this demand. Another important reason for choosing this primary topic for our fieldwork was that it could have been done consistently and could have led to obvious and rather comprehensive results.

We used the Dictionary of the Dena’ina Athabaskan language by James Kari (Kari 1994) as a starting point, on the assumption that Ninilchik Russian would have words for objects, artifacts, concepts, animals and other categories that were also represented in the language of the people living next to them, in the same environment and with a similar lifestyle. We collected about 1100 lexical entries for our noun dictionary. Further research demonstrated that this set of nouns was quite comprehensive and it would be rather difficult to double the number of entries.

In the first version of the noun dictionary, we collected the basic noun vocabulary. Nouns are grouped into thematic categories. The full list of these categories includes: mammals, birds, fish, insects, plants, berries, water (terms related to forms of water), nature (terms relat-

ed to inanimate nature), body parts (terms related to human body parts and body functions), relatives (terms of relationship and general categories of humans), peoples (names of ethnic groups and nations), roles (wastebasket file containing all words related to humans, their categories, social roles, and some miscellaneous human-related concepts), household (various terms of household items and artifacts), clothes (terms of clothing), ships (terms related to boats), buildings (terms denoting buildings and parts of buildings), food, measures (terms of measurements), calendar (day and month names), fun (words related to games and other kinds of pastime), slang (rude and obscene words), abstract concepts. We kept audio recordings of all the work sessions.

In 2009 Wayne Leman “resuscitated” this dictionary project. He started gathering not only nouns, but words of various word classes (including verbs, adverbs, and particles, as well as word combinations, etc.) and adding them to our database. Our combined work is reflected in a preliminary (draft) version of the dictionary being prepared for publication – see Bergelson, Kibrik and Leman 2009. Sound files for most of the entries and most of the examples are included in the draft dictionary, building partly on the digitized recordings of our 1997 field materials.

Our vocabulary project demonstrated that, from the lexical point of view, NR is indeed the Alaskan version of Russian, and nothing like a pidgin or a mixed language. 78% of lexical entries are identical to standard Russian, notwithstanding regular phonetic changes (see section 5 below). This majority of lexical entries are marked as **R** in the dictionary. Several other categories are identified: words from various Russian dialects (**RD**), words that were common in 19th century Russian (**R19**), Russian words with modified form (**Rmf**) or meaning (**Rmm**), words borrowed from English (**E**), and words of Athabaskan Dena’ina (**Ath**) or Alutiiq (**Alu**) origin. Some words were derived within Ninilchik Russian itself (**Ni**) based on Russian or other-language roots. Finally, there are a few words of mixed or unidentified origin (**Oth**). Examples of all of these categories are provided in (1).

- (1) 1. **R** (78%) – mainstream Russian
af’itsér ‘officer’, *agarót* ‘vegetable garden’, *but’ilka* ‘bottle’
2. **RD** (4%) – Russian dialects
táska ‘backpack, packboard’, *lápka* ‘snowshoe’, *shiksha* ‘crowberry’
3. **Rmm** (4%) – mainstream Russian, modified meaning
bashká ‘skull’, *d’ósna* ‘jaw’, *pop* ‘Pope’, *krupá* ‘rice’
4. **Rmf** (4%) – mainstream Russian, modified form
wómarak ‘faint’, *póbr’ik* ‘cellar’, *gr’imón’chik* ‘harmonica’
5. **R19** (3%) – Russian, 19th century
strush ‘carpenter’s plane’, *chuhn’á* ‘Finn’, *chihótka* ‘tuberculosis’
6. **E** (2%) – English
inw’ilóp ‘envelope’, *sent* ‘cent’, *rababútsi* ‘rubber boots’
7. **Ath** (0.5%) – Athabaskan
kazná ‘lynx’, *táyshi* ‘dried fish’, *k’inkáshl’a* ‘a kind of berry’
8. **Alu** (0.5%) – Alutiiq
mamáy ‘clam’, *kál’uk* ‘chamber pot’, *ukúid’ik* ‘bumble bee’, *n’ún’ik* ‘porcupine’
9. **Ni** (3%) – Ninilchik innovations
béyb’ichka ‘child’, *núshk’i* ‘breasts’, *gazn’ik* ‘gas can’
10. **Oth** (1%) – Mixed or unidentified
pramushn’ik ‘hunter, promyshlennik’, *labadátka* ‘bowl’, *makúla* ‘homebrew’.

5. Phonetic peculiarities of Ninilchik Russian

For the purposes and in the process of our dictionary project we developed a system of notation (transcription) based on the Roman alphabet. In its essence it is a phonemic transcription

with some concessions to practical orthography. The latter was done in the interests of the younger generation of the potential users of the dictionary. We wanted them to be able to read the words easily. This also precluded us from using the Cyrillic alphabet, unknown to modern Ninilchik people. All phonemes in the charts and examples below are indicated in our practical transcription.

5.1. Vowel phonemes

i	u
e	o
a	

In NR, as much as in standard Russian, there is a crucial difference between vowels under stress and vowels in unstressed syllables. Stress is the differentiating ("strong") position: all vowels are distinguished under stress. The general impression (that we have not checked instrumentally) is that the difference in articulatory prominence between stressed and unstressed syllables is not as great in NR as in standard Russian; that is, quantitative reduction in the unstressed syllables is not as substantial in NR. Informally speaking, the Ninilchik way of talking feels to a speaker of standard Russian as a bit of a syllable-by-syllable pronunciation (по слогам), even though the stressed syllable is still clearly identifiable.

The qualitative phonetic realization of vowels in NR, both in the stressed and in the unstressed positions, is roughly identical to that in standard Russian. The phonemes /e/ and /o/ generally do not appear in unstressed syllables. Some comments however are necessary regarding realizations in unstressed syllables.

Generally, in the unstressed position it is hard to distinguish /a/ from /i/ on purely segmental grounds. They are primarily distinguished on the basis of plus or minus palatalization of the preceding consonant, see subsection 5.3. However, the contrast is quite clear in the word-final position, especially when it is a nominal or verbal ending. Even after consonants that do not distinguish palatalization, this difference is easy to hear, e.g. *l'is'itsa* 'fox' VS *l'is'itsi* 'foxes'.

In some speakers unstressed [o] may be heard, at least in certain positions in certain words. It occurs in positions next to labializing consonants, especially *w* and *l*. In this case, it is pronounced as stressed /o/ but a bit shorter, very close to /u/ e.g. *chulowék* ~ *chalowék* ~ *chilawék* 'man'. There are a few words in some idiolects with optional non-positional unstressed [o]: *sas'ót* OR *sos'ót* (could also be spelled as *sus'ót*) 'it is sucking', *mál'in'kay* OR *mál'in'koy* (could also be spelled as *mál'in'kuy*) 'little, small'. One possible explanation for this variability is that of initial dialectal variation in the native Russian speakers in the 19th century. (In particular, it is known that two ethnic Poles married and settled in Ninilchik in the early 1900s.) There are independent indications that in Russian America there were Russian speakers with both "akan'e" and "okan'e"; as was pointed out by Krauss (1996: 1211), Russian loanwords in Aleut suggest the predominance of Russian with "okan'e", and in Alutiiq with "akan'e" – cf. loanwords for 'suspenders', from Russian *подтяжки* [pat't'áshk'i]: Aleut *puchaskix* VS Alutiiq *patiaskaaq*.

5.2. Consonant phonemes

Parentheses in the table below mark those phonemes that are expected to be present in the language system, but were not attested in our data. Most of the consonant phonemes are pronounced in NR quite similarly to the standard Russian pronunciation. Significant differences, however, are found in three pairs of consonants: /w/ and /w'/, /r/ and /r'/ and /h/ and /h'/. These consonants not only are realized differently from standard Russian, but also display substantial variation across speakers. In the rest of this subsection the hard version of a consonant stands for the pair "hard – soft"; that is we write "/w/" instead of "/w/ and /w'/".

			Labials	Dentals	Alveolars	Gutturals
OBSTRUENTS	Stops	Voiced	b b'	d d'		g (g')
		Unvoiced	p p'	t t'		k k'
	Affricates			ts	ch	
	Fricatives	Voiced	w w'	z z'	zh	
Unvoiced		f (f')	s s'	sh		h (h')
SONORANTS	Nasals		m m'	n n'		
	Approximants				r r'	y
	Laterals			l l'		

The phoneme /w/ is most often pronounced bilabially: [w]. That is, the word for ‘water’ is pronounced [wadá]. However, the labio-dental pronunciation [v] is also occasionally found in various words, depending on speaker and perhaps context. What could be the reason for this variation? The sound [w] is foreign to most Russian dialects, but it is found in English. However, suggesting that this could be a result of English influence is highly unlikely, as English has a phonemic contrast between /w/ and /v/. Moreover, it is known that there is a certain “Ninilchik accent” in English, in which [w] is pronounced instead of /v/ in English words, which means the confusion of two English phonemes. A joking title once used for the local newspaper was *Willage News*.

Therefore, another hypothesis on the rise of the [w]-articulation is in order. We do not have a definitive answer to this question yet, but this could be influence of one of the native languages that were spoken by the 19th century Creoles, particularly Aleut and Alutiiq. In certain dialects of both of these languages there is only the phoneme /w/ and no /v/.

The pronunciation of the phoneme /r/ varies between the English retroflex [ɻ] and a rolling (trill) sound closer to Russian [r]. The /h/ phoneme varies between the pharyngeal-laryngeal fricative [ħ] and the guttural Russian [x]-type sound. In each case, these pairs are in a free variation with the first variant being more frequent than the second. With these phonemes, ascribing deviation from standard Russian to English influence is logically plausible. However, strong interference from English appears unlikely as the sole factor, because the period of active Russian-English bilingualism was very short in Ninilchik. Again, other languages that might have influenced the phonetic system of Ninilchik Russian include Alutiiq and Aleut. The rise of the phonetic phenomena associated with /w/, /r/ and /h/ requires further study.

5.3. Palatalization of consonants

The most visible peculiarities of the NR phonemic system as opposed to standard Russian lie in the area of palatalization ("softness") – one of the focal features of the Russian consonant system. Sorting out the NR-specific palatalization system, especially with the existing variation across idiolects, was most important while working out transcription rules. We will describe this system as a series of consecutive rules, of which only a few are shared by standard Russian.

1. The following consonants are not differentiated in terms of softness, and hence are never followed by the apostrophe in transcription:

/ts/, /ch/, /sh/, /zh/, /y/

All other consonants can appear as two variants: hard and soft.

In some speakers, /r/ is always hard, but we use as a norm the pronunciation that differentiates hard /r/ and soft /r'/. e.g.: *rak* ‘crab’ VS *r'ápchik* ‘spruce hen’.

2. Preceding the vowels /a/, /o/ and /u/ (so-called back vowels) all consonants except those mentioned in Rule 1 can either be hard or soft, for example:

starúha ‘old woman’ VS *br’úha* ‘belly’
pát ‘valley, canyon’ VS *p’at* ‘five’
brusók ‘whetstone’ VS *s’ómga* ‘steelhead trout’
mátushka ‘priest’s wife’ VS *bát’ushka* ‘priest’
platók ‘scarf’ VS *pl’as* ‘dancing’

3. Before /e/ dental stops, nasals and laterals are always soft: /d’/, /t’/, /n’/, and /l’/; this softness is always marked in our transcription in order to provide a clue to correct pronunciation. All other NR consonants are always hard in front of /e/, and are marked as such (although sometimes there may be some slight palatalization observed). Examples: *d’en* ‘day’ BUT *séna* ‘hay’, *réchka* ‘smaller river’ BUT *l’es* ‘forest’.

This is different from standard Russian and may be explained by the fact that NR has a mixed dialectal basis, so possibly this is a Southern Russian or even Ukranian heritage; in Ukrainian consonants are generally hard in front of /e/. Note that NR has some Ukrainian forms: for the majority of idiolects the past forms for *be* and *remember* will be *bul* and *zabúl*, respectively (as opposed to *был* and *забыл* in standard Russian).

4. Preceding /i/ all consonants are pronounced as soft and are marked as such in transcription. The only (and very important!) exception are the consonants /l/ and /l’/ that can be either hard or soft:

r’iba ‘fish’, *m’ishónak* ‘mouse’, *ad’ishka* ‘short breath’, *puz’ir* ‘bladder’ (all of these words have hard consonants in standard Russian, where a full-fledged contrast in palatalization is observed in front of /i/); but: *balík* ‘smoked salmon’ VS *bal’ít* ‘it hurts’.

5. Word-finally, all labial consonants, all guttural consonants and /r/ are always hard. All other consonants can be either hard or soft:

tsep ‘chain’, *puz’ir* ‘bladder’ (in these words standard Russian has soft consonants);
ládán ‘incense’ VS *ladón* ‘palm’
pol ‘floor’ VS *p’il* ‘dust’

Rules 2–5 are summarized in the following table.

	2. Before /a/, /o/, /u/	3. Before /e/	4. Before /i/	5. Word-final
<i>r~r'</i>	Various	Hard	Soft	Hard
Labials				Various
Dental fricatives		Soft	Various	
Dental stops and <i>n</i>				
<i>l~l'</i>				

Table 1. Plus or minus palatalization of consonants in various phonological contexts.

6. Preceding other consonants, those consonants in general can be either hard or soft, and this distinction needs to be listened to very carefully. In front of /y/ consonants tend to be always soft, but that is not completely clear. For example:

kar’yó ‘bark’ BUT probably *s’imyá* ‘family’

Idiolectal rules:

7. Some speakers pronounce all final consonants, except possibly /l’/, as hard, but we treat this pronunciation as a deviation from the norm.

8. Soft labial consonants /b’/, /p’/, /w’/, /f’/ and /m’/ are pronounced by some speakers as a combination of the hard consonants with /y/: [by], [py], etc. Other soft consonants cannot be in any way reduced to hard consonants and are pronounced in a very different way.

9. In some speakers, there is automatic palatalization of the dental consonants /d/, /t/, /n/ and /r/ in front of /u/, for example:

núzhnik OR *n'úzhnik* 'outhouse'
starúha OR *star'úha* 'old lady'

This process is not general, and we list variants with hard consonants as the normative ones. Of course, this has nothing to do with the inherently (for all speakers) soft /d'/, /t'/, /n'/, /r'/, as in *n'uhat* 'to smell'.

6. Gender

6.1. As was shown in Daly 1986, gender as a grammatical category has decayed in NR. If we had had any doubts on this issue they were resolved during the first day of our fieldwork with Arnie Oskolkoff: looking out of the window and seeing an approaching car he said, broodingly, *moy doch pr'ishol* – cf. standard Russian *моя дочь пришла*.

According to Daly 1986 the decay of gender started in NR in the first generation after the pioneers' settlement in Ninilchik. These were children whose mothers didn't speak Russian. Also, Daly suggests in the same paper that the decay of gender is a natural and progressing process accompanying the general tendency of language degradation and language death which is directly related to the Russian-English bilingualism in Ninilchik. We propose a slightly different model. Grammatical gender in NR has undergone significant changes, but most probably this process started before Ninilchik was founded or about the time of its founding and, moreover, this grammatical category had acquired its present condition long before the first contact with English.

Further in this section we will describe the NR gender system. We will look into a single syntactic context – agreement within the attributive construction. Focus on this syntactic context is motivated by two reasons. First, the majority of the data we have is exactly in this context, and second, all other contexts – predicative agreement (both verbal and adjectival) and third person pronouns – all have retained more gender distinctions, thus having a greater similarity to the standard Russian prototype. Consider, for example, the sentence in (2):

- (2) *náshiy* *láyda* *haróshaya* 'Our beach is nice'
 our.M beach(F) nice.F

In (2) the attributive construction does not display gender agreement: the masculine (=unmarked) form of the possessive pronoun is used with the noun belonging to the feminine gender². Still the prototypical agreement pattern holds for the predicative adjective.

In subsection 6.4 and 6.5 below we describe the gender system in NR as it is functioning now in the idiolects of the best speakers; this description is preceded in 6.2 and 6.3 by two arguments supporting the hypothesis that the gender system in Alaskan Russian had been undergoing changes for a long time, that it was a common feature of Alaskan Russian dialects (and not just characteristic of NR) and that this process is not necessarily a marker of language death.

6.2. In the indigenous languages of Alaska there are numerous lexical borrowings from Russian. These borrowed words reflect a variety of Russian that was spoken by RAC personnel in the 19th century. Many of the Russian loanwords in the Alaskan languages come from Russian dialects (for example, the above-mentioned word *laida* in Dena'ina, see Kari 1994) or are archaic from the modern standard Russian point of view. The latter can be demonstrated by the expression *naabeetsge* 'on the second floor' in the Athabaskan language Koyukon (Krauss 2000: 826), coming from the archaic Russian expression *на вышке*. Certain words can hardly be directly traced back to any form of Russian outside of Alaska; this is the case with the NR

² The subject of this sentence, *láyda* 'beach', originates from a northern Russian dialect and ultimately from the Finnish word *laida*. Since it ends in *-a*, by default it gets the feminine gender in Russian. In glosses we use (F) or (M) as a classificatory gender feature and .F or .M as an agreement feature.

word *strush* ‘carpenter’s plane’ which was borrowed by a number of Eskimo and Athabaskan languages, e.g. Koyukon (*sdeloos*, see Krauss 2000: 827). In 19th century Russian a generic word for various types of planes (scrub plane, jack plane, smooth plane, try plane et al.) was *стръз* – see Даль 1956-IV, 340. The form *стръж* is not documented by Даль. Still, the data from the Alaskan languages testifies to the fact that Russians in Alaska were pronouncing the latter variant – *strush*.

Using this method one can reconstruct not only lexical items, but also certain elements of grammar as they were reflected in collocations of the Alaskan Russian dialect in the 19th century. Luckily, we have an isolated but rather telling example demonstrating that as early as in the 19th century some words of the feminine gender were used in Alaskan Russian in the masculine.

In the Koyukon language spoken in the Yukon River basin, at least 500 miles north of Ninilchik, there is a collocation *belgee sol* borrowed from Russian at the time of Russian America and meaning ‘a sort of salt’ – see Krauss 2000: 825. Obviously, this is a reflection of the Alaskan Russian phrase *mélk’iy sol’*, and the rendering of Russian phonemes in the Koyukon phrase follows standard rules for this language. It is impossible to trace *belgee sol* to the standard Russian phrase *мелкая соль*: while the Koyukon *ee* [i:] in Russian borrowings can easily render *-iy*, the feminine inflection would be reflected differently and most probably with two syllables. This implies that in the 19th century a variety of the Russian language spoken on the Yukon River treated the noun *sol’* as a masculine. It is very likely that this variety of Russian spread throughout Alaska, including the Yukon River basin and the Kenai Peninsula, and the decay of gender is characteristic of Alaskan Russian in general rather than of Ninilchik Russian alone.

6.3. The noun dictionary of NR contains a number of terms that are stable attributive collocations of the type Adjective + Noun. Quite a few terms for animals are built according to this pattern. The name of the common American bird ‘robin’ is rendered in NR as *krásnaya br’úshka*, lit. ‘red tummy’. From the purely phonetic point of view it could be both neuter and feminine gender, but since there is no neuter gender in NR (cf. subsection 6.4 below) this collocation must be ascribed to the feminine gender. On the other hand, ‘ray fish’ is metaphorically called in NR *marskóy cháyka*, lit. ‘sea seagull’, where the masculine form of the adjective (*marskóy*) demonstrates the loss of gender agreement with the noun *cháyka* (feminine in standard Russian).

This discrepancy must reflect differences in the routes these terms took to find their way into NR. In Siberian Russian, there is a term *краснобрюшка* for the bird that Даль (1956-II: 188) calls *кулик*; more exact terms for this bird include *хрустан*, or *глухая ржанка*; Eurasian dotterel; *Charadrius morinellus*. From the point of view of standard Russian intuition, it is easy to imagine a variation of this term such as *красное брюшко*. It is quite likely, furthermore, that the 19th century Russians, moving from Siberia to Alaska, could have applied the familiar bird name to a different American bird species. (American robin, *Turdus migratorius*, does not live in Siberia.) Thus, this term *krásnaya br’úshka* existed in NR more than one hundred years keeping the feminine agreement, and whatever grammatical processes were taking place in the language’s gender system that did not require changes in the agreement pattern, including the speech of modern speakers.

As for the Ninilchik expression *marskóy cháyka*, the Даль’s dictionary has no reference to a similar collocation though one finds there many terms for sea creatures constructed on the basis of the pattern *морской/морская* + name of a terrestrial mammal or bird. Apparently, the name for the ray was created by the speakers of Alaskan Russian after the category of gender had undergone modification. It is natural to believe that making a new term for a fish species took place not at the stage of language death, but when the speakers’ community was adjusting to the local environment, i.e. in the mid-19th century.

These facts again suggest that the modification of the gender system took place in Alaskan Russian at an early stage. Suppose the ray were initially named *marskáya cháyka* and then, in the process of gender fading out of the language, changed to the masculine-type agreement (or, more precisely, non-agreement) pattern. Then one would expect the same type of process to take place for the collocation *krásnaya br'úshka*; but this is not the case.

Another class of stable collocations in the language is place names. Ninilchik place names with feminine nouns may have attributes both with feminine agreement (*stáraya réchka* – name of a slough, lit. ‘old creek’ and without it (*mán'in'koy réchka* – name of a creek, lit. ‘little creek’). This is the same story once and again: various frozen collocations with different patterns of agreement (or lack thereof) were passed from one generation to another. It is quite natural to assume that toponyms were there nearly from the beginning of the Ninilchik settlement, as its pioneers explored and named places near their village. What then would account for the different patterns of agreement? It is well known that among the Ninilchik pioneers there were ethnic Russians and Creoles. Probably differences in place names can be attributed to authorship.

6.4. Let us move on to describing gender agreement as it exists now, represented in the idioms of the best current speakers of NR. Let us start with the neuter gender. Neuter gender, which belongs to the system of standard Russian, has completely disappeared in NR. A similar process is well represented in some Russian dialects (see e.g. Высотский 1948), and the standard Russian neuter gender is relatively weak (cf. Corbett 1991: 317). Moreover, the decay of the gender system in Indo-European languages would normally start with loss of the neuter gender – for example, this has happened in almost all of the Romance languages. It is safe to assert that neuter has merged in NR with the feminine gender, because both had the indiscernible *-a* as the nominative singular ending (unless the ending is stressed, which is infrequent.)

Of course, the neuter gender has much in common with the masculine, too – as is well known, case endings other than the nominative mostly coincide in neuter and masculine nouns. So merging of neuter with feminine could have contributed historically to the process of underdifferentiation between feminine and masculine, see subsection 6.5 below.

We have recorded originally neuter words with attributes both in the feminine and the masculine gender: *t'ésnaya slóva* ‘word of honor’, but *s'iróy m'ása* ‘raw meat’. Even the stressed vowel *-ó* in an originally neuter noun does not preclude variable agreement in adjectival attributes: *pt'ichiy gn'izdó* ‘bird’s nest’, but *varón'ya gn'izdó* ‘raven’s nest’. This variability has the same explanation as for the words of the originally feminine gender, see 6.5.

Interestingly, NR third person pronouns display the three-gender system based on the semantic categories of animacy and sex and independent of grammatical gender. This system is identical to the English pattern, even though not necessarily derived from it. In accordance with this system *on* ‘he’ is used with animate male referents, *aná* ‘she’ – with animate female referents, while in deictic and anaphoric reference towards inanimate objects the originally demonstrative form *éta* ‘it’ is used (standard Russian *это* this.N).

6.5. We mentioned earlier the phrase *moy doch* ‘my daughter’. If you ask a fluent speaker of NR whether it is possible to say *mayá doch* you will hear a confident “Yes”. The noun *doch* belongs to the so-called third declension, somewhat peripheral in Russian morphology. Apparently animate nouns of the third declension display variable attributive behavior. What about the inanimate nouns of the third declension, such as *sol* ‘salt’, *pat* ‘valley, canyon’, or *ladón* ‘palm’? In NR they require masculine-gender attributes.

As for the first (or *a*-) declension words, belonging to the feminine gender, they also have heterogeneous agreement patterns, but of a different kind. Those that refer to people, such as *bába* ‘woman’, require feminine attributes; according to our most fluent consultant (Louie

Kvasnikoff) it is wrong to say **durnóy bába*, the correct variant will be *durnáya bába* ‘stupid woman’. There also exist substantivized adjectives of the feminine gender: *w’ihódnaya* ‘pregnant woman’, *swabódnaya* ‘girlfriend’. Inanimate words of the first declension, on the contrary, allow for variable agreement: we have recorded *r’ib’ichiy uhá* ‘fish soup’ along with *mamáina uhá* ‘clam soup’³. This is not to say that different adjectives prefer different patterns of agreement, masculine or feminine; but that various agreement behaviours have been registered for one and the same head noun. More examples: *moy shápka* ‘my hat’, *zádnyay nagá* ‘hind leg (in animals)’, *pustóy katúshka* ‘empty reel’, but *haróshaya rabóta* ‘good work’, *bánashnaya p’isht’a* ‘canned food’, *shwéynaya mashína* ‘sewing machine’.

Thus, when a particular gender form is selected in NR in a given attributive phrase, two parameters are important: formal and semantic. Feminine gender is guaranteed by the combination of the semantic feature ‘female’ and the formal feature “-a-ending in the nominative singular”. Neither one of these two features is necessary or sufficient for selecting a particular gender form. By way of a typological analogy, numerous examples of such multifaceted rules for ascribing a noun class in the African language Pulaar-Fulfulde (Fula) can be found in Коваль 1997.⁴

Both of the features are binary, so there are four logical combinations that we present in Table 2.

		Female	
		+	–
Ending -a	+	(i) <i>bába</i> : feminine	(ii) <i>uhá</i> : feminine or masculine
	–	(iii) <i>doch</i> : feminine or masculine	(iv) <i>sol’</i> : masculine

Table 2. Assignment to the feminine gender in Ninilchik Russian

In case (i), when both features have positive values, the best NR speakers will definitely use the feminine gender in an attribute to this noun. Variability takes place in cases (ii) and (iii) when only one of the conducive features has a positive value. In case (iv) when both features are negative a word is unanimously assigned to the masculine gender, reflected in an attribute. Actually, case (iv) also embraces the initially masculine words belonging to the second declension.

We must admit that this system accounts for the idiolects of the best, most fluent, speakers of NR. Probably, it has been quite a stable system for a number of generations. Now, at the language death stage semi-speakers tend to use primarily masculine agreement in the intermediate cases (ii) and (iii). They even allow it for case (i), though for them that would not be the primary choice. So, Daly’s observation about the decay of the gender system in NR is correct to a degree. But it is hard to separate at this stage the decay of gender from the general degradation of Russian language competence in semi-speakers.

7. How is Ninilchik Russian related to Alaskan Russian? Directions for further research

When we first started our inquiry into Ninilchik Russian, we considered it an isolated, and quite special, variety in the Russian linguistic ecumene. By all means, it can be described as such, that is, as a peculiar Russian dialect. However, the historical question inevitably emerges: how is it related to what used to be the form of Russian spoken in Alaska at the time of Russian America? Is NR a truly separate phenomenon or rather a surviving island of Alaskan Russian that was spread throughout Russian America?

³ *Mamáí* – razor clams, playing a very important role in the Ninilchik residents’ cuisine.

⁴ Pulaar-Fulfulde actually demonstrates direct analogs to the just cited NR rule. For instance, nouns are assigned to the O-class on the basis of the semantic feature ‘human’ and the formal feature ‘zero class suffix’ which is typical of loanwords.

It is quite obvious that the forms of Russian employed at that time were not homogeneous. As many written documents, particularly those produced by educated people of the RAC and of the church demonstrate, a form of literary standard Russian was in use in Alaska just as much as elsewhere in Russia. At the same time, there are indications that the Creoles might have developed a different local version of Russian – the somewhat hypothetical variety that has been called Alaskan Russian at a number of places above in this article.

Widely known is another creation of the Creoles, the so-called Medny (or Copper) Island Aleut, see e.g. Головки 1997. It is a rather rare example of a mixed language – one of the types of contact languages. It is thought that this unusual code emerged as a kind of a social marker of Creoles, dissociating them from both Russians and Aleuts.

We do not expect to find anything as exotic anywhere in Alaska, but nevertheless it is highly likely that Creoles might have had a special form of Russian in other parts of Russian America as well. This a priori expectation is supported by a number of observations already stated above, such as the bilabial realization of the labial voiced fricative or early change in the gender system, evidenced by borrowings in the native Alaskan languages.

At this time we are not in a position to conclusively answer the question posed in the heading of this section. Nevertheless, it may be useful to mention here several kinds of future research that can be conducted to approach such an answer.

First, an archive search is in order for written documents produced by Creoles in the 19th century and, possibly, in the 20th century. It seems quite likely that some samples of written Alaskan Russian could be found, and comparing them to modern NR could be quite instructive.

Second, a comparison of certain features of NR with those of native Alaskan languages would be useful. A preliminary analysis of NR prosody suggests that it may share certain features with that of Aleut, as described in Taff et al. 2001. Aleuts were the first Alaskan natives contacted by Russians, still in the 18th century, and the social class of Creoles first originated from that early contact. Alaskan Russian could possibly bear certain Aleut features even when spoken by Creoles of non-Aleut blood. As far as we know, there was a significant Alutiiq, but not Aleut, ethnic and genetic component in Ninilchik. If NR can be demonstrated to bear certain Aleut features (not shared by Alutiiq), it would be an indication that the Ninilchik variety of Russian was simply brought there by Creoles, rather than that it emerged there.

Third, the data of another Alaskan Russian variety exist – that of Kodiak, as collected in 1985 by Conor Daly and in 2008-09 by Evgeny Golovko (see Golovko 2010). We have not started comparing these two Russian varieties yet, but such a comparison must shed light on the variation of the Russian language in Alaska. There is a possibility that Alutiiq influence may be more massive in Kodiak than in Ninilchik: in Kodiak Russian speakers had a prolonged and extensive contact with the Eskimo population, while in Ninilchik no influx of Alutiiq persons happened since the early days of this town. A variety of Russian also used to be spoken in Russian Mission on the Yukon River, but today it may be extinct.

A final point to make about the relationship between NR and Alaskan Russian is the following. There is a remarkable individual variation across the modern speakers of NR, including the system of phonemes, phonetic realizations, nominal vocabulary, gender, and other aspects of the linguistic system. It seems quite surprising, as the Ninilchik community was rather secluded for several decades and several generations of locals grew up between the two historical points: separation from the mainland Russian and massive influence of English. Apparently, this variation could not have arisen locally, but could only have been inherited from the differences between the original Russian speakers (with a possible contribution from several later Russian-speaking newcomers to Ninilchik). If NR is the surviving fraction of the once widely spread Alaskan Russian, which we find most likely, that suggests that Alaskan Russian was also highly internally diverse and variable.

8. Conclusion

The Ninilchik variety of Russian occupies a special place in the system of Russian dialects. For over a century it existed without any contacts with standard Russian. Along with many other Russian dialects Ninilchik Russian is moribund, although it has been replaced not by standard Russian, but by English. Ninilchik Russian shows evidence of certain language contact processes that probably took place already at the time of Russian America. It is a surviving fragment of the linguistic and communicative system that emerged in Russian America by the mid-19th century.

Russian America, whose history was short and ended abruptly, made a number of important contributions to the Russian linguistic ecumene. Medny Island Aleut is a highly unusual fragment of the Russian American linguistic gamut, found within the Russian borders. Another contact language based on Russian was the Russian-Chinese pidgin (see Nichols 1980, Перехвальская 2008; the latter work also contains a general survey of contact-induced varieties of Russian), also related to Russian America: it emerged as an instrument of commercial operations at the Kyakhta border trade post, used by Russians for trading Alaskan furs with the Chinese in the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, the Russian dialect of Ninilchik, being a unique consequence of that expansion, complements this rather complex picture.

The history of the Ninilchik dialect embraces four centuries. In the 18th century Russian promyshlenniks first arrived in America. Later they created families, becoming fathers of Creole children. In the 19th century the Creoles formed a distinct social class in Russian America, obviously with their own peculiar variety of Russian. In the 1840s the people of Ninilchik became pioneers in the harsh environment of the Kenai Peninsula. Their descendants managed to maintain their Russian language under the pressure of strong assimilation processes throughout the 20th century which saw many languages perish. The Ninilchik dialect will very soon become a part of history too, but at least it made it to the 21st century, also bringing to us the story of its people and their land.

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