

Language Contact and Survival in Remote and Urban Eskaleut Communities

Throughout Alaska, the Eskaleut languages have been subject to steady declines in usage and health during the American period (from 1867, although especially after World War II). The problems in maintaining the indigenous languages, especially those with very small speaker populations, are well known. They include an initial enforced shift to the dominant language English, declining speaker populations, a lack of opportunities beyond the community to use the language, lack of language materials in all media types, and a lack of understanding of language decline and death, such that for the first 25 years or more of language maintenance efforts, there was an almost exclusive focus on teaching children at the same time that adults were speaking the language less and less (Berge 2010). Today, all of the Eskaleut languages of Alaska face endangerment to varying degrees. Some communities of speakers in each language group have fared better than others, with a critical number of speakers up to several generations after the languages were lost elsewhere. However, even these are losing ground rapidly today.

In comparing the language status of the Aleutians vs. the Pribilof Islands for Unangam Tunuu (Aleut, Berge 2011); Kodiak Island vs. Nanwalek on the Kenai Peninsula for Alutiiq (Counciller 2012); Bethel vs. the lower Kuskokwim/Nelson Island for Central Alaskan Yup'ik (Krauss 1997, Alexie et al. 2009, Wyman et al. 2010), Chaplinski vs. St. Lawrence Island for Central Siberian Yupik (Morgounova 2007 and Schwartz 2019), and the Point Barrow vs. surrounding North Slope villages for Iñupiaq (Kaplan 2019), a pattern emerges fairly rapidly. In the recent historical period, that is to say post WWII, places that are population centers tend to be subject to overwhelming population encroachment or replacement and influence from a dominant language and culture; and they have undergone rapid language loss. Places that have been more isolated and have a degree of indigenous autonomy have maintained the language at least a generation longer than elsewhere. However, even they are subject to language replacement, despite intensive efforts to reverse language shift. Ironically, it is precisely in the larger centers, where the languages are most endangered, that the most resources are available for language revitalization, but these efforts only accelerated after the language became endangered. This suggests that there is a mismatch between language maintenance efforts and the places where they should be fostered.

This picture is complicated by both the prehistoric linguistic vitality in a region of almost constant language contact between language groups (Berge forthcoming) and initial successful experiences of language maintenance and bilingualism, e.g. in the Aleutians (and Greenland), as a result of schooling in the native language, continued opportunities to use the language in multiple contexts, and continued value accorded the language. There is no a priori reason for indigenous languages, no matter how remote, to become endangered through contact; and they can undergo the modernization necessary for successful language maintenance. However, these efforts must involve more than formal education within a school system (Berge 2019, McCarty et al., 2014, Reo et al. 2019).

In this presentation, I examine 1) the effects of prehistoric and early historic language contact on Eskaleut languages of Alaska; 2) the factors that led to their language loss in the 20th century; 3) the factors that have led to such different experiences of language loss and language retention, and 4) the necessary factors for successful language maintenance and/or revitalization in Alaska.

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