



STATE OF ALASKA
OFFICE OF THE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR
ANCHORAGE

MEMORANDUM

TO: Lieutenant Governor Mead Treadwell

FROM: Esther Woo

Cc:

DATE: August 15, 2011

RE: **Cursory Survey of Language Preservation and Revitalization Efforts in Alaska**

At your request, and as a background for the State Committee on Research, the Alaska Historical Commission, and the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, this memo is a report on our office's efforts to identify examples of language revitalization and preservation activities taking place in Alaska.

Executive Summary

Half of the world's languages are not being taught to children, meaning that 3,500 of the 7,000 languages are set to disappear within a generation. Specifically in the United States, only 201 of the 400 indigenous languages were being spoken in the year 2006; it is predicted that only 20 will be spoken in year 2050. In the state of Alaska, where there are 20 indigenous languages, one is already extinct, meaning there are no remaining native speakers. The remaining 19 are considered endangered.

In this light, this memo will provide a cursory view on why this issue deserves attention as well as action as well as examples of different efforts targeting education and documentation. It will also provide an overview of government related efforts assisting these activities. Finally, there will be several recommendations regarding actions the commissions may take to further support existing efforts.

The Importance of Preservation

Losing a language not only deprives the world of the language itself, but also the richness of culture, history, and knowledge carried within the language. As Wade Davis¹ says, "Language is a flash of the human spirit. It's a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into a material world. Every language is an old-grown forest of the mind, a watershed of thoughts, an ecosystem of possibilities."

Language loss is an indicator of cultural loss because according to Linda Belarde,² Curriculum Specialist in the Sealaska Heritage Institute, "Language carries a people's way of looking at the world." For example, the terms for "nephew" and "niece" in Tlingit are "kaalk'w," her brother's child, and "keik," his sister's child. This means that his sister's child is in the same clan while her brother's child is in the opposite moiety, indicating that it is the clan of the kin, and not his or her gender (as it is in English), that is taken in account. These Tlingit kinship terms thus serve to reflect the matriarchal structure of Tlingit society.

Native languages also carry scientific knowledge. For instance, some native terms complement knowledge on walrus anatomy and snowflakes. Furthermore, the extinction of a language will also bury history and cultural tradition, because many of these indigenous languages have been passed down orally for centuries. Despite existing writing systems for all Alaskan indigenous languages today, significant loss of such knowledge would be inevitable in the face of language loss. Thus, in the words of Davis, "We're living through a time when half of humanity's intellectual, social, and spiritual legacy is being lost."

Revitalization through Education

It is thus clear that subsequent generations will to some degree face irreparable gaps in culture and knowledge. However, there have been efforts across the state of Alaska, with the support of government related agencies as well as state and federal legislation, to reverse the trend of such loss. At the heart of these efforts is the education of the young, a vital approach in passing down language to the next generation.

One successful model of language education is the Ayaprun Elitnaurvik Yup'ik Immersion School in the Lower Kuskokwim School District. The immersion school is a K-6 charter school located in Bethel, with around 175 students each year. Efforts to implement an immersion program began in the 1980s when concerned parents petitioned for a stronger and more extensive Yup'ik program. Today, the school's mission statement is to provide a high quality education to meet the state standards and strengthen Yup'ik language and culture, while promoting an

¹ Wade Davis is an anthropologist, ethnobotanist, author, and photographer who has been researching and exploring worldwide indigenous cultures. Davis is an advocate for the protection of the "ethnosphere," a term he coined that describes the sphere of all of humanity's cultures and beliefs. His books *Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey Through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures* (2001) and *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* (2009) focus on such issues. Davis is an Explore-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society.

² Linda Belarde, Curriculum Specialist at the Sealaska Heritage Center: (907)586-9187

The Alaska Native Language Program offers major and minor degrees in Central Yup'ik and Inupiaq Eskimo. The classes are taught by members of the Alaska Native Language Center staff, who are working to further develop the bachelor's degree program by implementing more Yup'ik literature. The UAF also runs a teacher training program as a partnership with the Kuskokwim campus of UAF in Bethel. In 2010, the program graduated its first cohort of Alaska native teachers with a specialization in second language acquisition and teacher education: there were 15 graduates with master's degrees and 3 graduates with doctorate's degrees. This teacher training program is closely linked to the UAF's partnerships with school districts; according to Patrick Marlow,⁶ Associate Professor at the University, most of the training programs' graduates are now working as teachers or administrators in districts such as the Lower Kuskokwim school district, where teachers continue to go through training to learn good teaching methods as well as language learning instructional methods. Furthermore, several teachers in Bethel are partnering with the university to develop curriculum. The UAF is thus a vital source of human resources for language education programs.

Another challenge to revitalization is the loss of a natural language environment caused by rapidly decreasing speaker populations. The Sealaska Heritage Institute, which was founded for the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people of Southeast Alaska and in 1997 adopted language preservation as its foremost priority, strives to create language environments to support effective learning by designing units for language curriculum, providing educational tools, and hosting workshops for teachers. One example of the institute's educational resources is the recently introduced set of flash cards and audio CDs to complement Tlingit alphabet learning. Public school teachers throughout the region as well as community programs such as afterschool or summer school programs make use of the resources provided by the institute. The Sealaska Heritage Institute also has partnerships with the Juneau School District and the Hoonah School District.

The Sealaska Heritage Institute's biennial Celebration further encourages this language environment, as all of the songs in the Celebration dances are in native languages. Depending on the year, the Celebration includes lectures and lessons in the language. In conjunction with providing these resources and opportunity for educators and the community, the institute has programs such as the Latseen Hoops Camps, an annual summer camp with an all-Tlingit coaching staff that exposes Tlingit to students by integrating native language instruction with basketball.⁷

The Goldbelt Heritage Foundation, formed in 2007, is also dedicated to offering tools and materials for people wishing to learn the language. For example, Fred White, Tlingit Language Specialist and also the youngest fluent speaker of Tlingit, has made audio recordings for teachers throughout the region. In addition, the foundation is developing a Tlingit verb database that

⁶ Patrick Marlow, Associate Professor at UAF: (907)474-7446

⁷ For more information on SHI efforts contact Linda Belarde mentioned in footnote two.

includes conjugations, a project originally started by Richard and Nora Marks Dauenhauer in the 1990s and now headed by Keri Edwards.⁸

Furthermore, the Bilingual Multicultural Education Equity Conference (BMEEC) is an annual conference supported by the Alaska Department of Education and the Alaska Association for Bilingual Education. Agendas for the conference include workshops and discussions on the topic of multicultural education. The keynote speakers in 2011 (Misty Adoniou and Mary Macken-Horarik) presented foundations for an approach to teaching literacy.

Preservation through Documentation

Besides efforts centered on education, there are numerous groups across the state working to document native languages. Three examples of such efforts are from the Alaska Native Language Center of UAF, Sealaska Heritage Institute, and the Alutiiq Museum.

The archive in the University is the largest repository of Native American languages and related languages in the world: it houses more than 10,000 items of written documents that include copies or originals of all material in or about all of Alaska's native languages, which in many cases are held nowhere else. In addition to these collections, there are collections of related languages such as the Eskimo languages of Russia and the Athabaskan languages of Canada. The archive also houses a recording collection of about 7,000 recordings, although Gary Holton,⁹ Professor of Linguistics at the University, calls this "the tip of the iceberg." To extend this audio collection, the language center has formed partnerships with regional organizations, such as the Alutiiq Museum and the Ahtna Heritage Foundation. The foundation does the outreach in the community to locate tapes to preserve and digitize, while the language center archive provides infrastructure backup. In addition to the archive, the language center staff document native languages and provide resources. For instance, Lawrence Kaplan, Professor of Linguistics at the University and Director of the Alaska Native Language Center, is working on dictionaries of the Inupiaq language as well as texts and grammatical explanations for the language. Holton has led a project developing a new edition of the Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska Map originally produced by Michael Krauss in 1974.

The Sealaska Heritage Institute has also published books and videos relating to cultures, languages, and history, including language dictionaries, phrase books, and Tlingit narratives. The institute also strives to document the history, culture, heritage, art, and language of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people of the Northwest Coast by housing a collection of books, historical photographs, audiovisual recordings, manuscript materials, and ethnographic objects.

The Alutiiq Museum has the Qik'rtarmiut Alutiit (Alutiiq People of the Island) language program that focuses on documenting and revitalizing the Alutiiq Language of the Kodiak Archipelago. The Alutiiq Living Words Project, funded by the National Science Foundation's Documenting Endangered Languages Program, involves semi-fluent speakers and elders who worked together

⁸ For more information on the Goldbelt Heritage Foundation contact Fred White or Keri Edwards: (907)790-1424

⁹ Gary Holton, Professor of Linguists at UAF: (907)474-6585

to document Alutiiq speech, vocabulary, and cultural traditions in audio and video form, which were indexed and archived. Selected recordings are made available online through the Alutiiq Language Web Portal. The project also involves the New Words Council, which consists of elders and semi-fluent associate members who develop native words for contemporary terms such as "computer," "elevator," and "linguist." Besides these documentation efforts, the Alutiiq Museum's Alutiiq Word of the Week program, now in its fourteenth year, produces weekly cultural lessons for weekly broadcast on the radio, the Kodiak Daily Mirror, and email broadcast. The Alutiiq Museum hosts the Alutiiq Language Club, which meets weekly to talk in the language or have elders tell stories in the language.¹⁰

Supporting Organizations

In addition to language education programs, efforts to provide human resources and education resources, and documentation works, there are also supporting organizations which are not necessarily directly involved in language revitalization and preservation, but are vital to the state-wide effort as a whole. Such supporting groups include the Alaska Native Heritage Center and the Alaska Humanities Forum.

The Alaska Native Heritage Center, which focuses on expanding the public's knowledge of Alaska Native cultures, has been directly and indirectly involved in Dena'ina language preservation and revitalization. The ANHC is currently closing out a National Science Foundation grant for a project involving a partnership with a tribe to research rites of passage through studying and transcribing traditional stories. Though the ANHC currently does not offer language classes as it did in the past, the heritage center provides language lesson podcasts for online use as well as internship programs and afterschool programs designed to expose students to language environments through native dance and song. Annette Evans Smith,¹¹ Interim President and CEO of the Alaska Native Heritage Center, envisions partnering with some of the regions that have immersion programs to create a language nest, such as a camp for young children that would fuse childcare and language immersion: "Immersion is the best way to learn a language," says Evans Smith.

The Alaska Humanities Forum acts as a convener and supporter of other groups, mainly through awarding grants as part of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Recipients of these grants include the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, which is working to preserve and promote native language and philosophy, as well as a program for preserving Eyak. A native language preservation program that has worked with representatives from villages in the Kotzebue area and been headed by Tom Okleasik also received funding. The AHF has supported the Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program, which in partnership with the NANA Regional Corporation designed two Inupiaq language CDs. has designed a program for learning Inupiaq. Greg Kimura,¹² CEO and President of the Alaska Humanities Forum, commented that there are

¹⁰ For more information on the language program in the Alutiiq Museum contact April Counciller, Language Manager at the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository: (907)486-7004

¹¹ Annette Evans Smith, Interim CEO and President of the Alaska Native Heritage Center: (907)330-8059.

¹² Greg Kimura, CEO and President of the Alaska Humanities Forum: (907)272-5308.

not enough resources to cover the needs of various groups. However, he expressed that the Forum “wants to be around to be supportive and helpful of the different groups around the state who are part of preservation and revitalization efforts.”

Government-related Support

Assisting these many layers of efforts are federal agencies; the National Science Foundation, the Administration for Native Americans,¹³ the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Endowment for the Humanities have provided funding for many of these efforts. The U.S. Department of Education in particular, in the words of Patrick Marlow, “has been absolutely fantastic in terms of its commitment to teacher training.” The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition provides funding for professional development for K-12 teachers, and the Office of Alaska Native Education provides grants for Alaskan efforts that focus on developing strong language programs for K-12. According to Marlow, both of these offices have been vital to establishing and maintaining teacher education programs in the University. Despite this, April Counciller of the Alutiiq Museum and Marlow both expressed concern for the growing difficulty in not only receiving grants but also maintaining funding for established programs.

In addition, both the federal and state governments have introduced legislations that may assist revitalization efforts. The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006 was passed by Congress and signed by President Bush as an amendment to the Native American Programs Act of 1974. The amendment strengthened the act by providing for the revitalization of Native American languages through immersion programs. In Alaska, Senator Donald Olson has introduced Senate Bill 130, which recognizes native language preservation as “vital in maintaining traditional knowledge and understanding” and calls for the establishment of the Alaska Native Language Preservation Council in the Office of the Governor “for the purpose of recommending the establishment or reorganization of programs to support the preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native languages.”¹⁴

Furthermore, an Executive Order on Native American Language Preservation¹⁵ was drafted in 2010 between senior White House Staff and representatives from Native American communities across the United States. If approved by the President of the United States, this Executive Order would strengthen the Native American Languages Act of 1974 and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006 mentioned above by creating an Interagency Working Group on Native American Language Revitalization, mobilizing the coordination of federal resources for language revitalization, and appointing a Presidential Board of Advisers on Native American Languages. According to Gary Holton, “It would be recognition that this is something we believe in, that we make a commitment... If you go back to people who have had

¹³ Federal agency established through the Native American Programs Act of 1974.

¹⁴ Link to text of Senate Bill No. 130: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/53125928/SB-130-SB0130A-The-Alaska-State-Legislature-via-MyGov365-com>.

¹⁵ Link to Executive Order on Native American Language Preservation:
<http://www.lsadc.org/info/documents/2011/resolutions/executive-order-draft.pdf>.

decades of language suppression, that means something.” As of July 2011, the National Congress of the American Indian as well as other language rights and American Indian rights groups are pressuring President Obama to sign this order.

Recommendations for the Commissions

There are several ways in which the commissions you participate in as Lt. Governor may assist the statewide revitalization and preservation effort. First, the Alaska State Historical commission can support efforts to officially recognize the natives by establishing native place names. In Hawaii for example, Hawaiian can be seen in signs in the airports and on the streets. According to Holton, this has the effect of increasing appreciation for native languages among both natives and non-natives. Representatives from the Alaska State Historical Commission attending the Council of Geographic Names Authority in October should identify other ways to establish more Alaska Native place names.

Second, there is a lack of coordination of all revitalization and preservation efforts on a state level. Although the Alaska Native Language Center advises new groups starting revitalization projects and provides information about existing efforts, there may be a need for a higher level of coordination. One problem with the lack of such coordination is that it is difficult to get a broad picture of efforts across the state, which causes another problem: according to Holton, “What we see across the state are grass root projects that are reinventing the wheel,” which results in wasted time, resources, and effort. In addition, a higher level of coordination may allow native language revitalization efforts a higher level of recognition. The Alaska State Historical Commission may consider either asking Governor Parnell to establish a state-level coordination of language revitalization and preservation efforts, or offer to take on that responsibility under existing mandates of the Commission.

Third, students attending immersion or bilingual schools may need alternative testing to required standardized tests in English. In cases where students are in academic settings involving two languages, this requirement may drive parents, afraid that their children will perform badly on the test, to pull back on the language programs in place. School districts such as the Lower Kuskokwim district has requested a waiver and offered alternative tests in Yup’ik, but the state, in turn, has not requested such a waiver although it has the option to do so.¹⁶ According to Marlow, research has indicated that these students may at first lag behind in terms of academic achievement, but later tend to catch up to, if not surpass, monolingual students. Therefore it is recommended that the Alaska State Historical Commission work with the Department of Education to assist efforts to provide alternative assessments within immersion or bilingual programs in order for such programs to maintain and strengthen support of multicultural education among parents and community members.

Fourth, as emphasized by Linda Belarde of the Sealaska Institute, in many regions there is no natural language learning environment, rendering language learners to become dependent on structured classroom settings, which according to Belarde, “makes it very different from learning

¹⁶ For more information on the waiver contact Patrick Marlow mentioned above in footnote six

our languages naturally as our first languages." Furthermore, it is important for native languages to appeal to young people: as Kaplan comments, "One of the worst things that could happen is for people to see these as languages of old people." To prevent this, Kaplan is working on a grant proposal for a project that would document and encourage text messaging in native languages. Thus, it is recommended that in order to assist efforts in creating a more effective language environment such as those of the Sealaska Heritage Institute and the Alutiiq Museum, the commission support efforts to increase native language use through the media, such as in music, television shows, movies, and radio.

Lastly, the commission should work with the State Committee on Research and the U.S. Arctic Research Commission to support further research on successful language revitalization models and current needs in language education, as educating the next generations may be the most effective way to ensure the survival of Alaska's indigenous languages. There have been successful language revitalization efforts in New Zealand and Hawaii that may be referred to as models for future efforts in Alaska. In New Zealand, where in the 1980s fewer than 20% of the Maori were considered native speakers, the Kohanga reo movement was founded in 1982. Primary schools and secondary schools were established, where students were primarily taught in the Maori language. Furthermore, Hawaii adopted this model through the Punana Leo (translated as "language nest"), which are essentially Hawaiian immersion. Later, K-12 Hawaiian immersion programs as well as higher level education programs were developed. These models have already inspired Alaskans, such as trustees of the Sealaska Heritage Institute, who after visiting Hawaii and learning about its language restoration programs, decided to adopt language revitalization as the foremost priority of the institute.

In this light, one possible area of research may be regarding human resource deficiencies, an issue that the Alaska Native Language Center has been addressing. A possible way to support such efforts may be to strengthen cooperation between Greenland and Alaska through native language teacher exchanges: some natives in Greenland and some natives in Alaska share common languages such as Inupiaq with differences in dialect. Because the problem in many villages is that native speakers are too elderly to teach younger children, an exchange where teachers from Greenland could work in villages and language programs would not only bolster current language education efforts, but also establish a connection between the Greenlandic and Alaskan language revitalization efforts.¹⁷

Success through Community Involvement

Ultimately, it is most important to emphasize that the primary efforts must come from the community: "We're the support staff; they call us up and we do our best to help by producing materials and documenting the languages, but as far as the real spark to get people learning and revitalizing the language, I'd say that has to come from within the community. You can't make somebody do that," says Kaplan. Greg Kimura likewise stressed, "One thing is absolutely clear: that we are not going to be able to accomplish the preservation, let alone the propagation of some

¹⁷ The idea of the Greenland-Alaska teacher exchange idea was communicated between the office of Lt. Governor Treadwell and between Lt. Governor Treadwell and

of these threatened languages unless that whole effort is led by the communities; they're the ones who have to be the primary morale force for this, and also the voice for language preservation."