

One state, 21 languages

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A bill has been proposed this legislative session that would make Alaska Native languages the official languages of the state. This is in addition to English, which is already on record as the official language of the state because of a 1998 bill that many interpret as English-only legislation. Looking back on those times, we find quotes like this one, “most Natives, even in villages, speak English. Why all of a sudden, now, are they going to go backwards? Some of their languages weren’t even written. If we want to have all the Native people stay in the villages the rest of their lives, that’s fine, but times have changed” (“In the Battle Over English, Two Sides Enter Swinging” by Cynthia Deike-Sims on <http://alaskool.org>. That was Susan Fischetti, the official spokesperson of Alaskans for a Common Language, a group that sponsored the bill.

Times have indeed changed. The notion that English is progress and Alaska Native is backwards or barbaric is outdated and rooted in false beliefs in cultural and racial superiority. Still, these ideas sometimes surface in comments like, “don’t forget about English,” and “our children need to be ready for the real/modern world.” These are ideas we should be talking about more, with the idea that we can become a better place, we can become better people, and we can actually fix a lot of things that our shared history have wrecked.

Many elders have told me stories about times when they were shamed and beaten for speaking their languages. They were abused and ridiculed by teachers, public officers, supervisors, religious leaders, and even their own people. The past two hundred years have seen an incredibly successful assault on languages and cultures worldwide, but instead of looking at fixing the world we can look locally and see incredible results.

Many linguists have come to a consensus that of the estimated that “at least half of the world’s 6,000–7,000 languages will disappear (or be on the verge of disappearing) over the next century,” and in order for that to happen a language will have to die every two weeks (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, p. 1). Sometimes this leads us to discussions about ancient languages that became other languages, like Latin to Italian, Spanish, French. We enter a discussion of evolution, which leads us back to some of the fundamental beliefs that allowed entire groups of people to kill off other groups of people without feeling too awful about the whole thing.

When we talk about genocide in the world we often look far across the globe or back in time and think about how awful those places or times must have been. Rarely do we think about our role in genocide right now, and how plans to eliminate entire cultures and languages are coming to fruition on our watch.

It’s tricky business. The way out of the forest, so you can see the trees, is to stop what you are doing and think this thought: what can I do to help? What am I doing that keeps the process going. When we look at indigenous languages and colonization, we are not looking at an example of evolution. We are, in fact, looking at the outcome of unimaginable inhumanity. The irony of the human rights movement in the world is that it came after tremendous crimes had been committed right in our own homeland.

But why all this negativity? Because there is a twist towards hope, and that twist is about self-determination, awareness, compassion, and a place where languages, people, cultures, and knowledge live with one another. This is a push towards revitalization. By saying that I am not stating that languages are dead or dying; I am saying that we can keep them from dying, and we can do this together.

If you have a favorite movie where the underdog wins, despite all odds, then prepare to have that feeling in reality and not just imagination. The history leads us to a place where the highest suicide rates, dropout rates, and rates of violence mirror what is happening with our languages. We can stand up as a people and say, “abusing children while killing their languages is wrong.”

Oftentimes we may feel helpless in the face of human history. But it was only people who did this, and we are people just like them. This is a time of incredible awareness when it comes to Alaska Native languages. The revitalization movement begins with you. Call a member of your state legislature and let them know that you support equality, that you in fact demand it.

One of the things I hear repeatedly is that there is not enough resources to allocate towards language revitalization. This always leaves me confused. We can extract millions and billions from the land, but we cannot look to fix something that grew here with the land over tens of thousands of years. We can look back and see federal employees, state employees, and religious leaders who all played the pivotal roles in walking these languages to the brink of death, yet no one is fiscally responsible.

It is time to stand united for our collective future. If Alaska Native languages continue to die, then our children will continue to die. If we want healthy communities, then we need healthy languages. Within these languages are the keys to good living for the people that have been born out of them. Within these languages are is knowledge of the land, cures for illnesses, pieces of knowledge that cannot be recorded in books because it actually flows through your blood.

I am blessed to work with elders and language advocates, but I know a bill like this would not seem as obviously beneficial to others as it does to me. It seems like a home run, a no-brainer, but I am sure doubts will emerge. Some may think that English is somehow threatened, even though it is killing hundreds of languages as we speak in North America. Some will think that we will be causing harm to our children or holding them back, when we will actually be teaching them how to be culturally diverse, enriched, and responsible human beings.

I don't know what other arguments are out there, but I do know this: times have changed, and they have changed for the better. Racism is powerful and can hide very well in discussions about what language we should be speaking. This is Tlingit country. We have names for everything here and we still know them. The door to learning this language with us is wide open, and it will make your life better.

If you are on the hill with a vote, then you should know that you have a place in history. There are two sides here: help languages survive and thrive, or continue the movement that tries to rise to the top by killing everything around it. We are better. We are hopeful. We are on the verge of a revolution of languages and thought, and our future generations are going to thank us for stepping out of the centuries of policies, habits, and behaviors, that violate the basic rules of humanity: love and respect one another, help those who need it, and protect that which is sacred.

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