

Youth Culture, Language Endangerment and Linguistic Survivance

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Youth Culture, Language Endangerment and Linguistic Survivance

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Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
Overview of the Study	3
A Context of Dramatic Change	4
Placing the Piniq Study in Time and Place	6
Bringing Youth and Bilingualism into the Picture	7
Language Ideologies	9
Language Socialization Trajectories	11
Linguistic Survivance	13
Organization of the Book	15
1 Researching Indigenous Youth Language	17
Getting to Know the ‘Real Speakers’	17
The Uneven Puzzle of Early Language Shift	19
Identifying Cornerstone Peer Groups	20
Building the Comparative Study	22
Getting to Know the ‘Get By’ Group	23
Documenting Family Language Socialization Trajectories	25
Linguistic Survivance and ‘Getting By’	27
Studying Indigenous Youth and Communities	28
Language Use in the Study of Language Shift	30
Vetting the Work Locally and Regionally	33
Notes on Presentation of Data	35
2 Elders and <i>Qanruyutait</i> in Village Life	37
Local Language Ideology	37
Elders as Socializing Agents	39

Language Brokering, Linguistic Survivance and Institutional Power	43
Traditional Council	44
Tribal Court	48
Church	50
Linguistic Survivance and Humorous Commentary	53
Exceptions to Language Allegiance: Literacy and Subtractive Bilingualism	57
Youth Commentary on Elders' Strong Talk, Subsistence and Local Stability	59
Relationships, Responsibilities, Subsistence and Having a <i>Piniq</i> Life	60
Summary	63
3 Educators, Schooling and Language Shift	65
Early School Orientations toward Yup'ik Language Instruction	67
The Boarding School Era	68
The Negotiated Promise of Bilingual Education	72
The New Local High Schools	75
Persistent Questions about Bilingual Education, Yup'ik Literacy and Linguistic Transfer	75
The Decision to Scale Back Bilingual Programming	78
Setting the Course for School Programming	79
Language Shift Begins	81
'It's Not Yup'ik and It's Not English'	82
Working with Children's Eroding Language Competencies	83
Yup'ik in the Broader Sociopolitical Context of Schooling	85
Educational Leaders and Everyday Language Policymaking	89
Experimenting with Programming and Wrestling with Theories	90
Contrasting Policies and Testing Regimes	92
School-Community Talk about Language and Achievement	94
Framing and Facilitating Community Language Program Choices	96
Summary	100
4 The 'Last Real Yup'ik Speakers'	103
'Everybody Spoke Yup'ik'	105
'Every Day a Different Story'	106
'And I Still Don't Know How to Write It'	107

Learning from Unusual Trajectories	110
Migration, Mobility and Linguistic Survivance in a Regional Linguistic Ecology	112
Older Youth Migration and Linguistic Negotiation in Local Peer Culture	116
Yup'ik as an In-Group Code Away from Home	117
Yup'ik in the Local Contact Zone of School	118
The Young <i>Nukalpiat</i>	121
Moving Beyond 'Two Worlds' Views of Yup'ik Youth	124
Media Consumption and Local Alignment	126
English Styleshifting and Schooling	129
Creating Spaces for Bilingualism and Biliteracy with the Real Speakers: The Elders Project	129
Making Sense of Language Endangerment	132
The RS Group's Post-Secondary Trajectories	133
Gender and Work after School	135
Subsistence after School	136
Maintaining and Activating Yup'ik Use in Local Life	139
Linguistic Survivance and Local Work	140
Ideological Crosscurrents and Linguistic 'Resistance' after High School	142
Summary	145
5 Family Language Socialization in a Shifting Context	148
Section I: Diminishing Resources, Emerging Contingencies and Ongoing Choices	149
Strong Yup'ik-speaking families: Sibling and peer language socialization as an 'acid test' for heritage language maintenance	151
Transitional RS and GB families	152
Sibling and peer language socialization within nuclear and extended families	155
Increasing migration	157
Considering unusual language socialization trajectories in light of multiple contingencies	158
Section II: A Closer Look into Family Language Socialization	159
Family 1	160
Family 2	186
Summary	195

6	The 'Get By' Group	199
	Section I: ' <i>Kassauguci-qaal'</i> ('Are You Guys <i>Whites'</i>)	200
	Making sense of language loss and endangerment	201
	'Getting by' and linguistic survivance in the community	204
	'Getting by' with adults in school	205
	Yup'ik literacy and linguistic insecurity	209
	Yup'ik literacy and contradictory expressions	211
	Section II: Negotiating a Bilingual Peer Culture	212
	The seniors: Trajectories of Yup'ik language learning and use	213
	The seventh grade: Negotiating divergent language trajectories	214
	Yup'ik use in local youth culture during language shift	215
	Local style and bilingual resources	219
	Connecting with one another through global media	221
	Connecting to the world wide web	222
	The 'when' and 'how' of Yup'ik language allegiance	224
	Summary	227
7	Subsistence, Gender and Storytelling in a Changing	
	Linguistic Ecology	228
	Section I: Gender Roles and Local Responsibilities in Piniq	229
	Learning subsistence	232
	Gender and going out on the land	234
	Section II: Learning Place, Language and Gender in	
	Everyday Subsistence Stories	236
	Girls and storytelling about gathering	237
	Boys learning to seal hunt	239
	Bird-hunting and land-related adventure stories	241
	Enforcing gender roles through teasing	243
	Gender and local knowledge in collaborative storytelling	244
	'Getting by' in hunting stories	247
	Learning through risk	250
	Subsistence regulation and local alignment	251

Negotiating in- and out-of-school learning trajectories	253
Discourses of survivance and visions of the local future	255
Summary	257
Conclusion	260
Indigenous Youth Practice and Linguistic Survivance	267
Placing Schools in Linguistic Ecologies	269
Learning from Youth Survivance and Looking toward the Future	272
Epilogue: Educational Policies and Yup'ik Linguistic Ecologies a Decade Later	276
References	281
Author Index	295
Subject Index	298

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Introduction

Young people play pivotal roles in shaping the most dramatic sociolinguistic phenomena of our times, including the global consumption and employment of new technologies (Sefton-Green, 2009), the negotiation of language practices in immigration (Dorner *et al.*, 2008; Mendoza-Denton, 2008) and the spread of new cultural forms such as Hip Hop (Alim *et al.*, 2009). In this book, we will consider young people's roles in yet another key worldwide sociolinguistic phenomenon: the increasing endangerment of the large bulk of the world's languages. Scholars predict that 50–90% of the world's languages will no longer be spoken by the end of this century (UNESCO, 2003) and recent decades have seen an upsurge of scholarly concern and discussion over what to make of the phenomenon. Many books and articles discuss the loss of global linguistic diversity and the trend toward language shift and endangerment in specific communities. Researchers are also describing efforts to document, teach and reclaim languages on the brink of disappearing (for recent examples, see Harrison, 2007; Hornberger, 2008). College-level courses, international conferences and websites devoted to related topics, such as the documentation of Indigenous ecological knowledge, have multiplied in recent years. In the burgeoning field, academics have now begun to analyze the very discourses of language endangerment and accompanying arguments for linguistic rights (see, for instance, Duchêne & Heller, 2007; Hill, 2002; May, 2005).

Few studies to date, however, have investigated how youth broker language maintenance, shift, endangerment and/or language revitalization. Unless young people learn heritage languages and grow up to raise new speakers, language shift can progress rapidly within the course of a generation (Fishman, 1991, 2001). Scholars note that young people's individual and collective language decisions can 'ripple through societies to create a tidal wave' of sociolinguistic change (Harrison, 2007: 9), and are beginning to attend to the ways in which youth act as 'everyday language

policymakers', in endangered language communities (McCarty *et al.*, 2009). Still, we have much to learn about how such 'tidal waves' happen, and how young people navigate and transform the sociolinguistic worlds around them.

Once youth under a certain age have uniformly stopped speaking their heritage language, collective changes in patterns of language use may appear to evidence a concise 'choice' on the part of a particular generation to abandon a heritage language. If we see youth speaking mostly English, for instance, we may assume that their parents chose not to pass on a heritage language at home. On the other hand, if we see young people wearing clothes or singing lyrics related to global media flows, we may also – based on the most superficial observations – assume that youth themselves have been lured away from marginalized communities and linguistic practices by the promise or imagination of a flashier, more privileged life elsewhere. Yet these assumptions are problematic. Adding a second language to a community does not mean that a community or even a subgroup of a community will inevitably stop speaking their heritage language. A growing body of research further demonstrates that many Indigenous youth in rapidly shifting communities are not simply abandoning their heritage languages by 'choice', but rather express powerful yearnings to become confident heritage language speakers (discussed in McCarty & Wyman, 2009). As we will see in this book, youth may value and actively attempt to maintain heritage languages with one another, even as their own changing peer practices drive processes of language shift and endangerment. Further, as this book demonstrates, vicious cycles of reduced *resources for* and *increasing doubts* about bilingualism can emerge quickly and become the force behind the 'tidal wave' of change described above *in spite of* young people's, as well as adults', efforts to maintain heritage languages.

To understand how youth, families and communities move along trajectories of language endangerment in such settings, we must examine how language learning and beliefs about languages change over time within complex *linguistic ecologies* – social networks of language use that root within, and extend beyond specific communities and geographical places (Hornberger, 2002; Kramsch, 2002). We must additionally consider how educators and community members look to youth to gauge the prospects for the future of heritage languages, and consciously and subconsciously tailor their practices over time accordingly. Importantly, we must further recognize how youth themselves negotiate challenging positions vis-à-vis their heritage languages, demonstrating what I will call *linguistic survivance* – the use of languaging and/or translanguaging to creatively express, adapt and maintain identities under difficult or hostile circumstances – as they (1) grow up in rapidly

changing sociolinguistic environments and (2) are educated in schools under pressure.

Overview of the Study

Central Alaskan Yup'ik Eskimo, commonly referred to as Yup'ik, was one of only two out of 20 Alaska Native languages still spoken by children in 1980 (Krauss, 1980). Between 1980 and 1995, the number of Yup'ik speakers dropped from 13,000 to 10,000, indicating that Yup'ik was rapidly disappearing. In 1995, children spoke Yup'ik comfortably in only 14 out of 64 Yup'ik villages (Iutzi-Mitchell, 1992; Krauss, 1997). By 2007, veteran Yup'ik educators reported that increasing numbers of children in some of these villages, as well, were beginning to speak mostly English (Wyman *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b).

This book examines a decade in the life of Piniq (pseudonym), a remote Yup'ik village with less than 700 residents located roughly 500 miles off the road system in southwestern Alaska near the Bering Sea. Portrayed within is a community in a rapidly evolving, yet early and uneven stage of language shift. Told here is also the story of two cohorts of youth in Piniq. Youth in the older group spoke mostly Yup'ik with one another in the mid-1990s, and were later described by local Yup'ik teachers as 'the last real speakers' of Yup'ik. The majority of youth in the younger group, in contrast, spoke mostly English with peers *only five years later* in 2000 and 2001, even as they used bilingualism to 'get by', as community members put it, with adults and one another.

Over the course of the book, we will follow individuals and groups in Piniq, witnessing how young people used language as they participated in schooling, moved in and out of village and urban spaces, interacted with teachers, peers and family members, attended church, consumed global forms of media, interpreted village political struggles, took their first jobs and learned gendered subsistence practices. Additionally, we will consider how youth in Piniq responded to strong local messages about the importance of speaking Yup'ik as their own heritage language skills diverged and eroded in a context of ongoing language shift. Examining the changing contours and internal complexities of bilingual peer culture over the course of a decade, we will explore the ways Piniq youth navigated the interstices of global, State, school, community, family and peer practices, brokering both linguistic continuities and language endangerment. Importantly, we will also see how adults and youth used language to mediate broader societal changes, as local youth culture emerged as a driving force of language shift.