

# There's no 'correct' village English

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KOTZEBUE — Webster's dictionary defines "pidgin" as a form of speech that consists of a simplified and limited, though mixed, vocabulary, used principally for intergroup communication.

In other words, pidgin is a form of communication that mixes English with other ethnic languages. "Village English," a common form of speech in Alaska villages, is a variety of pidgin English.

Here in Northwest Alaska, pidgin English or village English is spoken in most of the communities.

Before Western contact, the people spoke the Inupiaq language in this region. But when the early explorers arrived, they not only brought goods to trade, but they came with their language as well.

The English language then took hold among the Inupiat.

After contact, the early missionaries and teachers fanned out through this region. The *naluagmiu* (white man) established schools and churches with whatever materials were available and in doing so created permanent villages.

Until then, clans of people had lived spread throughout the region at their winter or summer camps.

Unfortunately, when the Inupiat were taught English in the new schools, they got punished for speaking their original Native language.

As a result, the Inupiat learned English with much difficulty.

Today, English is the predominant language in the region, yet Inupiaq still is spoken by a majority of older people.

It is rare to hear a child speak fluent Inupiaq today. A few people in their 20s and 30s speak some Inupiaq, but mainly English or village English.

Today, it is common to hear a speaking blend of English and Inupiaq. If they are not fluent in Inupiaq, they tend to mix English with incomplete Inupiaq words or vice versa.

In Northwest Alaska, people have gotten used to blending the two languages and have adapted to speaking pidgin English or village English.

For instance, in the office environment, I speak standard English to non-Natives every day, yet I run into situations where I have difficulty explaining typical Native processes, such as how to make a half-dried salmon.

Also, I can carry on a conversation in Inupiaq, especially if I'm comfortable talking to a person.

Yet, if I were to explain the process of making a half-dried salmon to a tough guy like Charles Bronson, you would see my mouth open without a single word coming out!

In any case, I can explain or describe a situation to any local person in three different languages: English, village English and Inupiaq.



I am likely to speak Inupiaq to an elder because it is necessary, but I will use village English if someone asks me for instance, "When you come?" I can quickly switch between village English and standard English.

I do not use proper English with those who speak to me in village English because it may intimidate them or make them feel uncomfortable.

For those of us who speak village English, it is best to speak this language only to those who understand it.

Pidgin English or village English exists in me and in many people who live in the communities in Northwest Alaska.

Because of my Inupiaq background, I must admit English is harder to master in speeches and on paper.

Although village English may sound

"funny" — meaning "bad" — to English instructors, it has its own beauty to my ears. There's no such thing as "correct" village English. I structure my sentences anyway I desire. Rules don't limit village English as long as the listener understands.

Village English is truly a spoken language. It is a form of communication used by the Inupiat people of this region, young and old. The Inupiaq generally enjoy the humorous side of

life, so they speak village English with a sense of humor. Pidgin English is infectious once you've spent time in the village.

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