

Athabaskans must preserve language

By Stan Jones

What does a Doyon shareholder from Fort Yukon have in common with a Chiricahua Apache from Arizona? They're both Athabaskans.

With 170,000 speaking the language, Athabaskan is the largest Native language family in North America. It's also one of the most extensive, spreading south from Alaska's Interior nearly to Puget Sound, then east to the shore of Hudson's Bay, with a large island of speakers in the southwest U.S. and tiny pockets along the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington.

Although there are dozens of dialects, the similarities among them are strong enough that linguists consider them all branches of the same tree.

Despite its large usage, there are fears among Athabaskans and scholars that the language will not survive new influences such as television, the arrival of more and more non-speakers in Athabaskan country and economic development.

In hopes of keeping the tongue alive, some 175 Athabaskan speakers and linguists from Alaska, the Lower 48 and Canada are gathered in Fairbanks this week at an Athabaskan Languages Conference sponsored by the University of Alaska.

"It's wonderful that we can get together," said Apache Edgar Perry as he addressed the conference's opening session on Wednesday. "God made us one family. We're getting together to learn about each other. We can take ideas back and use them to mold our kids to continue in their culture."

Perry is director of the White Mountain Apache Cultural Center in Arizona.

"This is a dream come true, to see Athabaskans at a real Athabaskan language meeting," said Dr. Michael Krauss, director of the university's Alaska's Native Language Center. "I hope it will be the be-

ginning of a whole movement, of the development of Athabaskan unity in language work and in the sense of people's identities."

Daniel Johnson, an Athabaskan from Whitehorse, said that when he was young, Indian children were punished for speaking their own language in the schools.

"As a result, a lot of Native people my age don't speak our language, but it's not their fault," Johnson said. "The residential school system has done a lot to eradicate Native languages."

According to Krauss, the language as a whole is relatively healthy today, with more speakers than ever before. "But the danger is very great, because the pressures are mounting on all sides," he warned in an interview after the opening

session.

In Alaska, the situation is particularly perilous. There are 10,000 to 12,000 Athabaskans in the state, but only a minority speak the language.

"It's clearly on the decline in Alaska," Krauss said.

Krauss advocates teaching Native languages in the school and the use of broadcast media — particularly television — to cover Native subject matter in Native tongues as two meas-

ures that would help slow the decline he sees.

Why is it important to preserve Athabaskan and other Native languages? Krauss lists three reasons.

"Because it's there, and it's their (the speakers') right to have it," he said.

"And because they are, like all human languages, the result of thousands of years of cultural development and evolution," he continued. "No

language is any better than any other on the face of the earth. All are equally complex and marvelous achievements."

The final reason, Krauss said, is because of any language's importance to the people who speak it.

"I seriously question whether any people can survive as a nation, as an entity, if they lose their language," Krauss said.

Daily News-Miner