

Native languages: Is cup half full, or half empty?

by James Kari

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I want to make some observations about the AP article in the February 19 *Fairbanks News Miner* entitled "Linguistic Diversity Dying." I have worked as linguist for the Alaska Native Language Center since 1973 as a specialist in the Alaskan Athabaskan languages. I work and interact with speakers of several Alaskan Native languages and their families and friends on a daily basis.

In the past two or three years, there has been a large amount of publicity in the national and international media on the issue of the loss of small minority languages. In Alaska, we have become accustomed to sermons

on this subject by my colleague at ANLC, Dr. Michael Krauss. Every few months or so, in the press or in speeches, he reminds the public about the loss of the Alaskan Native languages. He has made a personal crusade out of counting the speakers, and making statements about the loss of culture, identity, and spirit.

I have found from my field experiences in Alaskan communities, that the publicity on vanishing Alaskan languages is negative and counter-productive. First of all, this publicity stigmatizes the members of the community of that language and makes them feel deficient and that the only work that remains to be done is academic. People resent being put on an extinction list whether it be in a fish

bowl or on the ANLC language map.

Second, to make substantive contributions to the languages and their speakers, one has to have technical skills, employment opportunities, and some years of experience. However, there has been little program and job development in the field of Native languages in Alaska. My question then is, what is the point of having heightened awareness on imperiled languages when in fact there are very few opportunities to do anything?

Dr. Krauss uses phrasing and metaphors in his writings and speeches that are deliberately intended to shock people. While he may be trying to provoke people into awareness, many of his statements are

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extremely emotional and confrontational. In the February 19th article, he is quoted as saying, the world's smaller languages "are beyond endangerment.... They are the living dead." This statement can only serve to discourage and demoralize persons in the Alaskan Native communities.

I know from being in the audience that several statements Dr. Krauss made in 1981 address to the statewide Bilingual-Multicultural Education Conference were deeply offensive to

many people. He began a half-hour long luncheon speech by proclaiming that he is a "prophet." He said, "The people are doing it to themselves, and this is not language genocide, or language-cultural genocide, but it is language and cultural suicide." (This is quoted from a written transcript of the speech.) Toward the conclusion, he state, "If you lose your language, can you survive as a people? ... I think the answer is 'No.' I think people here understand that the essence of the soul is the basis of your

culture. Your essence, your soul, your nation has no future. I think that is why we are here today. I will not apologize for anything that may have been unpleasant I mentioned. I stand to take the flack anytime."

I am of the opinion that statements like these in the 1981 speech or the recent "living dead" remark have contributed to an atmosphere of persecution and ethnic polarization in Alaska.

I also feel that it is possible to de-

velop themes and projects that encourage the Alaskan Native community that offer opportunities and hope for the languages, however, that is not the subject of this article.