

Parents: Speak Your Native Language to Children—

Tragedy of Dying Native Languages

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(Third of four parts)

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third article in a three part series tracing the present state of native languages in Alaska. Most of the information for the articles was obtained from Dr. Michael Krauss of the University of Alaska).

Go from one Indian village to another in Alaska - from the Interior of Alaska to the Southeast corner of the Alaska panhandle. How many children in the villages speak to each other in their native language?

Painfully few, found Dr. Michael Krauss, a University of Alaska linguist whose work has included tracing the death throes of Indian languages in

Alaska.

Dr. Krauss is one of, if not the, foremost expert in Alaskan Athabascan Indian languages. In recent years, he has devoted most of his time to preserving a record of the Eyak language - a separate Indian language in Alaska still spoken by only three known residents of the Copper River area.

About 3500 years ago, the Eyaks came down the Copper River out of Interior Alaska and settled in the Cordova area. From the east, the Tlingits expanded into the Copper River area.

Then, white America, civilization and alcohol wreaked their work on the few Eyaks who remained. In Cordova, there is an Eyak Gas Station and hardly

anyone remembers the Eyak Indians who used to own that part of Alaska.

To linguists, Eyak is unique. It is not Eskimo, not Athabascan, not Tlingit or Haida either. It is a separate language group which differentiated from the Athabascan languages long enough ago to be a third branch of Alaskan Indian languages.

From comparing the languages, linguists derive valuable information about their origins - and where the people who spoke them came from.

So, Eyak had to be preserved and what it lacks in speakers it makes up for in the excellent documentation of an Eyak dictionary and grammar, which Dr. Krauss spent several years

(Continued on page 6)

Native Languages...

(Continued from page 1)

preparing - as a monument to a dying people.

Yet, in the Southeast of Eyak territory, the Tlingit and Haida Indians despite their numbers in thousands face the same extinction of their language.

Haida is dying, doomed, Dr. Krauss explains. Only the older people speak the language and only in a tiny number of villages.

In the Tlingit villages, the situation is approaching this. Hardly any children anywhere speak the language.

Among the Tlingit people, however, many are becoming concerned with the death of their language. From Canada and the lower 48 black and Indian nationalist movements are having their influence on Tlingit youth.

The Tlingits are a highly political people. Reawakened nationalism could combine with a resurgence of cultural interest among the young to lead to a Tlingit renaissance.

As of now, the position of the language is perilous, says Dr. Krauss.

Yet, in half a dozen high schools in Southeast Alaska and in Alaska's three colleges a handful of teachers are presenting classes in Tlingit as a second language.

At the University of Alaska, Dr. Krauss, who began the first course in Eskimo at the college in 1961 now teaches Tlingit. At Alaska Methodist University Nora Florendo teaches Tlingit conversation and grammar.

She is from Hoonah, one of the Tlingits campaigning to renew interest in her language and culture.

She is spurred on by the realization that Eyak is nearly extinct, fewer than 100 people speak Haida and the Athabascan languages are approaching this state.

As of now, the scattered teachers presenting Tlingit work in the dark. They are widely separated and each must painfully put together his own curriculum.

However, on June 1, the Tlingit teachers will meet at Sheldon Jackson College to coordinate a program for Alaskan schools. At Sheldon Jackson, they plan to organize curriculum and adopt the standard spelling devised by Constance Naish and Gillian Story of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

With work, the Tlingit people

could save a literature for their 10,000 people, teach Tlingit in the schools and perhaps reawaken it among the young of their tribe.

For much Athabascan, or Athapaskan, is one the white men applied to the Indian people they met in the interior of Canada. It comes from the name of a lake.

Actually, the Athabascan languages in America comprise several dozen separate but related languages belonging to tribes from Alaska to Apache Country. The Navajos, 140,000 strong, all speak Athapaska.

About 10 of the Athabascan languages are in Alaska and with few and scattered exceptions the languages in Alaska are moribund.

In Tananacross, a few children speak their language. In Tetlin it is strong. It is weaker in Northway. A few isolated villages in northeast Alaska also retain their language - Arctic Village, Venetai, Chalkeetzik, Birch Creek. Probably, they comprise only a few hundred people.

Overall few Indian children speak their language. Already, for many dialects, only a few of the old people still remember-of use only to linguists and historians trying to preserve the language for future study.

Almost no Alaskan Indians have any knowledge of what it means to be an Athabascan - of the widely separated peoples who speak their language and share many parts of their culture.

In the schools, Indian children do not learn of the 140,000 Navajos who speak Athabascan, often read and write their language and preserve a proud and powerful heritage in the southwest.

Yet, the children are fed numerous facts about white Americans and the European history these late comers brought with them. Their own history and culture is kept largely secret.

Not knowing these things, parents devalue their language and do not teach it to their children. Some feel others will teach them - the schools, authorities, somebody. Yet, the truth is that a child can learn his language only in his home - from his parents. He can learn English from almost anyone.

NEXT: Eskimo - a last hope.