

ISEGR initiates Native Language Program

An Alaska Native Languages Program has been initiated by the University of Alaska's Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, according to Victor Fischer, institute director.

"The native peoples of Alaska have shown an increasing interest in preserving their own customs and languages," Fischer said.

"This interest along with the fact that native students at the university who are truly bilingual generally achieve greater academic success than those native-raised students who are monolingual in English, prompted the institute to begin this program."

The first project under the new program is aimed at developing teaching materials for the Yupik Eskimo language, spoken by an estimated 14,000 persons in the state.

Principal investigator for the Yupik project will be Oashito Miyaoka, assistant professor of linguistics and foreign languages at the university.

Prof. Miyaoka will be assisted by Irene Reed, who along with Prof. Miyaoka, taught Eskimo classes at the university, and by Patrick Afcan, an Eskimo student

who speaks fluent Yupik.

Prof. Miyaoka said Yupik, or some variation of the language, is spoken in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area and in villages on the Kenai Peninsula, Kodiak, Bristol Bay, Nunivak and St. Lawrence Island and the Norton Sound area.

"The Yupik project will be based on materials accumulated during past research undertakings and through preparations for the university Eskimo classes," Prof. Miyaoka said.

"The project begins this month. By the end of the summer, we plan to have completed a primary grammar with a glossary and exercises accompanied by tape recordings. These teaching aides will be designed for individuals outside the classroom as well as for classroom work."

Prof. Miyaoka explained that Yupik was given first priority because of the large numbers of people who spoke the language.

"There are also groups which are smaller than Yupik in number," he said, "but for whom the language is very much alive, such as Kutchin, the native language of more than 1,000 persons in and around Fort Yukon. It is important that these groups be considered for future projects."