

The Future of Alaska Native Languages :

Television and Radio: Menace or Opportunity?

Editor's Note - This article is the fourth and final installment in a series about the concern for the survival of Alaska Native languages. The writer is Head of the Alaska Native Language Program at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. Dr. Krauss is a linguist noted for authoritative studies of Alaska Native languages.

By **MICHAEL KRAUSS**

So far, I have discussed only the educational system and its effects on the future of Alaska Native

languages. However, as threatening as the school situation still is, an even graver threat to the survival of Alaska Native languages is now upon us. This is the inevitable and rapid spread of English-language radio and especially television to every village and home. The cultural and linguistic battleground is now shifting from the classroom to the living room.

Within a few short years, practically every Native-speaking home will have a color television set receiving several channels of the usual commercial and educational programming in English to flood the home for

several hours a day. The battle of the living room has begun with this invasion by what I call "cultural nerve gas" - insidious, painless, and fatal. The fate even of Siberian and Central Yupik could be sealed in a decade of this.

Yet there is great hope and opportunity here too, for television and radio can be much more quickly adapted to the service of Native languages than can an educational system. For one thing, educational systems depend heavily on the written word.

(See *CULTURAL SURVIVAL*, Page 6)

● Cultural survival or suicide: community responsibility

(Continued from Page One)

Converting them to the service of Native languages requires development of an alphabet, training of teachers and writers, and the pupils and eventually the whole community to learn to read and write in the Native language. Compared to the time it takes to learn to read and write, for instance, it takes very little time and training to learn to speak one's own language into a microphone, and no time or training at all to learn to enjoy hearing a broadcast in it.

There is an important lesson in the way Citizens' Band radio has been adapted widely to the service of Native language and culture. People learn immediately to communicate with each other over CB radio in their own language, as they use it for their own purposes, for example in coordinating their movements in hunting and fishing. This shows how readily convertible electronic communications are to the service instead of the destruction of Native language and culture — but that has already been demonstrated for some time with the telephone and tape recorder. Even more important, the use of these and CB radio shows what happens when a communication system is truly controlled by its users.

Satellite radio and television in rural Alaska is not locally controlled at all. The systems right now being installed, especially television, are imposed from outside the Native language communities, as extensions of huge statewide and nationwide networks. The programs will be rained down from the heavens, for the people to accept as passively and unquestioningly as the weather, controlled by the gods in Juneau or California. The systems are now being set up in this way

with no real local input, control, or content. Instead of further losing control of their own cultural environment and fate, the people must immediately become actively involved in determining the kind of radio and television they will have. At the very least they must provide a supplement or alternative to the outside-controlled network programming, in the form of locally controlled systems that can serve the needs of the language communities.

The areas I am primarily concerned with here are those where Native languages are still spoken or at least understood by the children, so that they may survive if enough is done. The main instances are Central Yupik, Siberian Yupik on St. Lawrence Island, and certain Inupiat locations. Each language area would require a different system. For Central Yupik there would have to be a network involving many villages, with broadcasting centers at Bethel, Dillingham, and perhaps also elsewhere. Local reporters or TV cameramen could tape local subjects and events to broadcast directly, or send the tapes to broadcast centers, and the centers could also produce a variety of programs. St. Lawrence would need mainly a system in which Gambell and Savoonga would broadcast to each other and themselves (and conceivable to what is left of their relatives in Siberia). Inupiat would need a system something like that for Central Yupik but also extensive exchange of programs with Canada and Greenland. Other language areas with smaller numbers of speakers should have local stations broadcasting in the language, perhaps especially 10-watt radio stations, which are relatively easy to set up. The importance of radio should not be underestimated: it is the

sound and not the picture which carries the language; radio programming is cheaper and easier to produce; it is also easier to take in, since one can more easily do other things while listening to radio than while watching television. People speaking Native languages should learn to operate television cameras, local television and radio stations, and to produce programming in Native languages, for at least some significant part of the day, as an alternative to the nationwide network programs.

The problem is not that the nationwide programs are bad. It does not much matter even whether they are the Incredible Hulk or Masterpiece Theatre, Hee Haw or Sesame Street. The problem is that they are not Native. However, by Native I do not mean Native-language soundtrack or voice-over channels added to network programs, producing for example an Eskimo-speaking Archie Bunker (though that might be interesting). I also do not mean Native-language programs which are essentially imitations of network programs. That would be too expensive and in the end self-defeating. What is needed is programming conceived by and about the people themselves. I can only list here a few things that I might offhand imagine: radio or television broadcasts reporting a potlatch, or featuring a storyteller, a dance, a basketball game, beaching or even hunting a whale, a new baby, local community news, school news, weather reports, bush radio messages, talk shows, personalities, Native affairs and politics. None of these are too expensive or beyond the ability of community people to learn quickly to produce.

Innovative and imaginative programming of this kind, and also appropriate local systems servicing the language area, are not prohibitively expensive; they might cost much less than what is routinely spent, for example, on highway construction, runway extensions, or sports facilities. Moreover, a Native organization with a good proposal writer should stand an excellent chance in competing for grant money from funding agencies for innovative systems and programming of this type, for and by the Native language community.

There is another important way in which radio and television are more readily convertible to the service of the language

ages (aside from using the electronic rather than the written word): these media are a system with far fewer cultural strings attached than education has. Educators traditionally come with training in the English language and beliefs in Outside American culture, which they have come to spread. Radio and television, however, are at least partly available as empty systems, and at least many of those who bring them to the villages would infact wish to see the system used for the local language and culture. The ideological battle here will be far less difficult, but the stakes are just as great.

I believe it is essential to understand and act on this treat or opportunity soon, vigorously, and imaginatively. Otherwise, the potential these media have for strengthening Alaskan cultures and languages will be lost in their destruction. Good bilingual education alone will not be sufficient to counteract the effect of English-only radio and television. The final tragedy is unnecessary and can still be prevented, but only by understanding, determination, and courageous effort. Just as linguists, educational administrators, teachers, local school boards and parents must work together to convert the schools from the destruction to the strengthening of Native languages, so also imaginative and determined media personnel and villagers must work together to take active control and convert radio and television to the service of the Native heritage.

Awareness of self and control of self are as important for a culture as for an individual. A small nation lacking perspective of its cultural position and what it stands to lose will lose its culture. In the same way, a larger nation has a similar responsibility. If it cannot control its own growth ("you can't stop progress"), if it cannot prevent itself from destroying everything in its path, then it is a cancer which will end up destroying the life upon which it feeds.

Finally, we must understand and remember that the only way a living language is transmitted from one generation to the next is by parents speaking that language to their children. A school and even a television set which inundates the children with another language — say English, do not themselves alone prevent the children from becoming

bilingual. Children will still be able to speak their parents' Native language, provided the parents speak that language to them, fully realizing that that is the only way their children will learn it. The amount of time the children are involved with the English-speaking school or television will of course detract from that spent with the Native language, but the ability to speak more than one language well is in fact very common throughout the world; it is perfectly normal, healthy, and advantageous. The most destructive effects of the school and media are in the attitudes they impose on both parents and children. They cannot take the knowledge of the Native language away, but through generations of punishment and brainwashing in English-only schools, and now more swiftly through the stunning and stupefying power of television, they can destroy or paralyze the parents' will to transmit the Native language and the children's will to learn it, unless the language is also respected, used, cultivated, and celebrated in their lives. With adequate Native-language programs in the schools and on television and radio, the basic responsibility for the survival of Native languages is more clearly recognized for what it is and has always been: that of parents to speak their language to their children. Not bilingual education! not even bilingual television! can themselves keep Alaskan languages alive; only parents speaking the languages to their children can do that, as has always been the way.

If Alaska Native languages die I frankly do not know what future there is for Alaska Native cultures. Language is in my view the most essential part of a culture. I do not know to what extent a culture, an identity, a nation, can survive without its own language. Language suicide may be cultural suicide.

I realize that much of what I have written in this series is not pleasant or easy to face. However, I consider it my responsibility and the responsibility of the Alaska Native Language Center to do what we can to preserve and promote Alaska Native languages as a heritage of Alaskans for the future of Alaska. I have tried to be frank about what I see, even if some people are offended or displeased. I would not want it that we saw Rome burning, and would not want it said that we failed to warn people of the dangers and losses they must face in the future of Alaska Native languages. At the same time, I have tried to include positive suggestions for what I myself see might be done to save what can be saved for the future. I hope this is more the beginning than the end.