

Computers aided in Ahtna dictionary

FAIRBANKS — University of Alaska Fairbanks linguists are using computers and an array of specialized software to produce dictionaries in Ahtna and Alaska's other Native languages, according to UAF.

It's often a race against the clock, but in the case of Ahtna — once spoken extensively throughout the Copper River area of Alaska — the linguists are offering some new alternatives for preserving languages.

"The material represented in this dictionary is not ivory tower and elitist," says Dr. James M. Kari, an associate professor of linguistics at the UAF Alaska Native Language Center. "It is a basic record of the aboriginal and modern worlds of the Ahtna."

Kari recently compiled and edited a 702-page Ahtna Athabaskan dictionary, published by the language center. Thanks to the purchase and free distribution of 500 of the dictionaries by Ahtna Inc., the volume sits in the home of virtually every person of Ahtna descent, as well as in schools and libraries throughout state.

The dictionary itself contains all the material ever written in the language, with more than 6,000 lexical entries, 9,800 example sentences and an English-to-Ahtna index with 11,250 entries. Among these are 16 terms for "bear," 22 nouns and verb themes for "snow" and 24 words for implements made of copper.

It also contains 60 pages of discussion on Ahtna grammar, with special attention paid to the incredibly complex Athabaskan verb.

"The Athabaskan verb is elaborate, exotic and rare," said Kari. "The verb theme 'to go' has been calculated to have over 500,000 forms. We've been working with verb themes, rather than actual words, because otherwise you'd end up with too big a book. This dictionary contains 1,368 verb themes."

Complicating Kari's task of building the dictionary is the extensive prefixing system of Athabaskan verbs. A single verb often has a half-dozen or more prefixes, rendering conventional alphabetization useless.

To solve the problem, Kari alphabetized the verb themes by roots rather than by whole words. According to Dr. Emmon Bach of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the



UAF photo by Jim Hussey

Dr. James Kari of the UAF Alaska Native Language Center has compiled an Ahtna Athabaskan language dictionary.

Ahtna format is "a model for a kind of layout to serve the needs of varied groups that will be using the dictionary."

Kari characterizes his dictionary as a "transitional" project, because it straddles the eras of file drawers and modern computers files. When he started his work in 1973, every noun, verb and article was noted on slips of paper and filed into drawers; in 1979, Kari had a 2,000-page handwritten draft.

Now, all that information management can be done on a personal computer, vastly accelerating the pace at which languages can be compiled.

"If I were to do a dictionary on the Lower Tanana language, for example, and if I weren't doing anything else, I could probably finish it in two years," Kari said. "It used to be that a scholar could finish one or two dictionaries in a lifetime."

Two dictionaries in a lifetime isn't fast enough for many Native languages. While preparing his dictionary, Kari worked with 80 Ahtna speakers — most of the surviving population.

"There are less than 100 Ahtna speakers, and the language faces extinction," says Kari. "This book is coming out in the later stages of the language."

Kari began working with Athabaskan languages on the Hupa Indian Reservation in California in the 1960s, where he was working as a teacher. He has been at the Alaska Native Language Center since 1973. In his work, he has not only developed respect for the languages, but for their speakers.

"Multi-lingualism is routine for many older speakers of the languages," says Kari. "For an elder in Tok to speak three Athabaskan

languages is no less a sign of intellectual and cultural sophistication than it is for Europeans to speak French, German and Italian."

While studying the dictionary alone won't be enough to allow readers to fully understand or use Ahtna Athabaskan, Kari hopes his effort to document the language will assist others attempting to teach Ahtna to a new generation of speakers.

The Alaska Native Language Center, which is part of the UAF College of Liberal Arts, has previously published Central Yupik and St. Lawrence Island Eskimo dictionaries and has a Koyukon Athabaskan dictionary in progress.

Copies of the dictionaries are available for \$25, plus \$3.50 for postage and handling, from the Alaska Native Language Center, Box 900111, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks 99775-0120.