

Political Economy of Eskimo-Aleut Languages in Alaska: Prospects for Conserving Cultures and Reversing Language Shift in Schools

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“Utterances receive their value (and their sense) only in their relation to a market, characterized by a particular law of price formation. The value of the utterance depends on the relation of power that is concretely established between the speakers’ linguistic competences, understood both as their capacity for production and as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation; it depends, in other words, on the capacity of the various agents involved in the exchange to impose the criteria of appreciation most favourable to their own products.”

—Bourdieu 1991: 67

Introduction

During the latter 20th century, four out of six Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut languages have become moribund: Unangam Tunuu (Aleutian Aleut), Sugtestun (Pacific Gulf Yupik, Alutiiq, or Suk Eskimo), Cugtun (Nunivak Island Cup’ig or Cux Eskimo) and Iñupiatun. Two Yupik languages are still spoken by essentially all children in some villages: Yupigestun (St. Lawrence Island Yupik or Akuzipik) in both villages in the island and Yugcetun (Central Alaskan Yup’ik) in sixteen of fifty-five villages. Even these latter two languages currently are endangered and are declining in numbers of speakers, either absolutely, relatively, or both (see Graburn and Iutzi-Mitchell 1993 for details). The situations of the fifteen Indian languages in Alaska are as dire or even more so, with Eyak, for example, facing imminent extinction. Why is it that all of Alaska’s Native languages are in decline? And can the tragic loss of Alaskan languages and cultures be forestalled?

Analyses of language shift generally focus on language attitudes, domains of language use, and changing social networks. In Alaska, however, explanations for the loss of Native languages have relied almost exclusively on iden-

tifying a *single social policy* issue as the cause of language shift: students were punished in school for speaking their languages; later, as parents themselves, they avoided speaking their own languages to their children. This explanatory model of Alaskan language decline, then, leads to thinking that the solution to the language survival riddle must lie in teaching the languages to children who now do not speak it, either through convincing the parents to speak their heritage languages to their own children, or through organized programs of second language instruction in the schools.

Setting Alaska Native language shift within the wider contexts of sociocultural and sociolinguistic theory immediately reframes the issues. Schools do contribute to acculturation and language shift, not by the simple fact of physical and psychological punishments alone, but rather, as *loci of symbolic domination* schools play a key role in the reproduction of culturally constructed oppositions between categories of speakers. Thus, instead of seeking explanation in a unique historical cause, I propose a politico-economic analysis of language shift in Alaskan Eskimo and Aleut communities, then apply this analysis to the prospects for conserving cultures and reversing language shift.

With the phrase “conserving language shift,” I am adopting terminology used in programs, publicly funded in the United States, aimed at perpetuating traditional community lifeways (Hufford 1994). “Reversing language shift” is Joshua Fishman’s term for the intentional effort of revitalizing a language which otherwise is ceasing to be spoken as a first language, an active effort to reverse the course of language loss, an effort to return that language to daily use.

I argue that conserving cultures and reversing language shift are fundamentally part of the same thing. This is so, not only because language embodies a huge amount of any culture, but also because cultural practices are a large part of what determines which language is used in any interaction; that, in turn, influences whether a language is lost or is maintained. Cultural practices lead to language shift; cultural practices can lead to reversing language shift. Because of this, any effort to reverse language shift or language loss must start by examining how to revitalize the use of the language within its cultural setting.

Explanation is needed for why most *but not all* Alaskan Eskimo and Aleut communities have undergone language shift to a condition of English-only over the course of the 20th century. Looking at the conventional explana-

tion, I describe why it is inadequate, deriving as it does from a mistaken understanding of the nature of language and culture.

School Language Policies in Eskimo-Aleut Alaska

The received interpretation for language loss in Alaska, at least as received since the 1960s, is to point to the tragic history of school childrens' punishments for speaking their heritage languages in school. By the 1970s, most Alaskan children were no longer being punished or even officially discouraged from speaking their languages in school. In fact, the schools (in most cases) now included Native language instruction as part of the curriculum. Krauss (1980), Miyaoka (1980), and Sammallahti (1981) expressed hope that the programs of bilingual education would have halted language loss but also expressed aptly the concern that bilingual education *by itself* would be inadequate to halt language loss.

Clearly, this history of punishment is part of what has led to language loss. Just as clearly, however, the history of punishment cannot be shown to have a simple cause-and-effect relationship with language shift. There are Alaska Native communities where generations of punishment have not been followed by language shift and other instances where language shift took place only *after* the local Native language was given official sanction in the local schools. To put it another way, at the beginning of the first decade of bilingual education in Alaska in the 1970s, all Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut languages (with the possible exception of Cugtun) were still being spoken by entire communities of Native children; by the end of the second decade, only two were.

I argue that the reason scholars have not understood this is because of misunderstanding the nature of language, the nature of culture, the nature of human social action, and the relationships among these. I would like to reframe language loss as an issue subject to sociological and sociolinguistic analysis.

Linguists most often have examined language as consisting of words and sentences. Yet language does not consist of words and sentences. If it were, teaching the lexicon and having students memorize sample sentences would result in fluency; in fact, such almost never occurs, and this is precisely because *language is not words and sentences*. Language is symbolic communi-

cation between individuals, each acting to achieve situated goals. As such, school courses in which students memorize words and sentences are largely a-linguistic environments where second language acquisition is unlikely to occur.

Bourdieu's Sociology

As the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu portrays it, society is constructed both through coercion and consensus, requiring, as it necessarily does, the consensus of the dominated that the coercion of the dominant is legitimate.

I suggest that Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *cultural capital*, and *symbolic domination* can be useful in understanding how Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut languages have been in and out of use, seemingly in contrary synchronization with official policies in schools.

Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* covers much of what American cultural anthropologists mean by the term *culture*, but it has the advantage of emphasizing the social history of the group and the individuals' experiences of socialization within this historically-situated social context.

“The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constance over time, *more reliably than all formal rules and explicit rules*. This system of dispositions—a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices, an internal law of external necessities, irreducible to immediate constraints, is constantly exerted—is the principle of the continuity and regularity [in social actions]”

Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 54, emphasis added.

Bourdieu argues that the *habitus* in which one is culturally socialized creates *dispositions* to act in certain ways and, moreover, that these dispositions to act largely operate unconsciously. That is, people learn *and act upon* these dispositions, aiming to achieve specific interactional goals, all without necessarily consciously making comparisons among the choices.

Key to cultural socialization into one's *habitus* are one's parents and one's schools. Within the home and the school, the daily interactions inculcate young people into what is of value. These forms of *capital* Bourdieu labels as *economic capital*, *cultural capital*, *social capital*, and *symbolic capital*. Here I highlight his idea of cultural capital which includes language, art, religion, and educational credentials. As with all forms of capital, their *worth* or their *value* fundamentally is arbitrary; it is through the cultural socialization into a particular *habitus*, with its corresponding dispositions, that children learn which languages, which religious practices, which credentials to value. Additionally, children learn the interchangeability of different forms of capital, *i.e.*, the equation of some forms of cultural capital with economic capital.

History of Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut Languages

Habitus is a grammar for action. Just as the grammar for a language gives us the unconscious basis from which we speak and interpret the speech of others, so does the *habitus* give us the basis for our own actions and the inferencing of the intentions underlying the actions of others.

Part of the *habitus* of Alaska Natives growing up in the 20th century is the directly perceivable values of the speaking of the English language. The fact that children may or may not be punished for speaking a language in school is only one small component of how the language policy in school shapes children's *habitus*. More broadly, the ways that different languages are used in an institution specify the value that those languages have as forms of *cultural capital*.

When one class of people controls the exchange values in a society, *i.e.*, controls which languages, for example, can be used as cultural capital in order to acquire economic capital, wealth, power, and prestige, then we have what Bourdieu would call *symbolic domination* or *cultural violence*. This, I contend, is precisely what has happened in the schools of Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut communities. By controlling the "international exchange rate" (I might call it) whereby English as high value and the Native language very little, the schools—both as educators and as local employers—have undermined *and continue to undermine the value* of the local language within the local *habitus*, leading to a down-valuing of the local culture as well. It is this de-valuing of the local Eskimo-Aleut language in most Eskimo and Aleut villages that has led fluent

speakers to speak it less and has led partial- and non-speakers to fail to acquire fluency. For the most detailed, quantitative studies of Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut languages in a sample of villages, see Hallamaa (1997).

For Conserving Cultures and Reversing Language Shift

Two examples from an Alaskan Eskimo organization may serve to illustrate how symbolic domination leads dominated classes to reproduce the cultural values of their oppressors. At the board meeting of the trustees of an Eskimo-controlled community college in rural Alaska, English most often is selected as the appropriate language for almost all business discussions—even when the discussion is among the dean of the Eskimo language division, the Eskimo-speaking college president, and the all-but-one-Eskimo-speaking college board of trustees. A second example was a proposal from the college's top administration to its board of trustees, a plan to offer a \$2000 annual bonus in salary to those college faculty who could demonstrate fluency in the local Eskimo language. The administration's rationale was that this would encourage college instructors to become Eskimo speakers and encourage Eskimo speakers to become college instructors. Although the college's president, vice-president, and one faculty member spoke in favor of the proposal, and one board member presented a number of positive reasons for its adoption, the board vote was unanimously against the plan. Public arguments in opposition came from board members who stated that it would be too expensive if it indeed resulted in more of the college instructors learning to speak Eskimo (within an annual college budget of more than \$12,000,000, two or three of the college's 30 instructors would have qualified at the time), that it would be unfair to give a reward to the Eskimo language faculty for that which they should be expected to know as part of the minimal qualifications for their jobs (comparing the ability to speak Eskimo with the ability of a carpentry teacher to know his trade), and that, in the words of the college dean of Eskimo language, it was a "hare-brained idea."

I believe that these examples clearly illustrate in action another of Bourdieu's key observations of cultural violence, namely, that the minority class becomes so thoroughly inculcated into the values of the dominant culture that they themselves reproduce aspects of their own oppression. In fact, those of the minority who have become most successfully powerful in the

authorized institutions of the dominant class (schools and corporations) almost necessarily are the ones whose cultural capital is of the specie which is valued by that dominant class. As they exercise the class-based power of the dominant class, they reproduce the values of the dominant class—including *the devaluing of the Native language in their own communities.*

If this is so, any efforts to use the schools as the locus for reversing language shift and for cultural conservation must address the larger issue of how the schools currently participate in the reproduction of the dominant discourse of the dominant society. As children grow up, they are going to learn the “value” of the different forms of capital as they are used in their society. It is this first-hand experience that inculcates the values that one language is “naturally” of more value than another.

Current programs of incorporating Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut culture and language into isolated, “language and culture” classes, or having a “Native day” at school, do not give children the experience that their heritage languages and cultures are of high value. Quite the contrary: the fact that a special attempt to use the local culture and language—limited in time and space—clearly spawns a *habitus* where the Native language and culture are recognized by everyone to be of quite *limited value.*

I submit that it precisely is this recognition that the Native linguiculture is of limited value that causes language shift. It would only be by reversing the symbolic domination in the day-to-day operations of the institution that the schools would contribute to Alaskan Eskimo-Aleut linguistic and cultural power. This would require a radical, not piecemeal, alteration of the policies of staffing schools and school districts with non-locals. This would also require that local, Native-controlled school boards reach consensus that their local language and cultures are of greater value to their young people and take active steps to transform the political economic structure of the village schools in ways that increase the convertibility of their own cultural capital into local economic capital.

Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 25 Annual Meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association, 19–21 March 1998, at Anchorage, Alaska.

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