Truncated Multilingualism  
- St. Lawrence Island Yupik and Iñupiaq Eskimo Languages -

1. Introduction

In the previous paper, I discussed overview of Alaska Native language retentions and increasing importance of singing songs in indigenous languages. This paper closely looks at two language communities, St. Lawrence Island Yupik and Iñupiaq in Barrow in Alaska, and their language uses and practices. In the post colonial period, the two communities made significantly different decisions regarding socio-economic and political spheres, which results in contrasting economic situations, attitudes toward their own traditions, and language retentions.

2. Setting

2.1 Overview of the communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>St. Lawrence Is. (SLI)</th>
<th>Barrow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Middle of the Bering Sea</td>
<td>Northernmost community in Alaska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/language</td>
<td>SLI Yupik</td>
<td>Iñupiaq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (Eskimo pop.)</td>
<td>1,400 (95%)</td>
<td>4,500 (57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income (US $)</td>
<td>$31,458 (Gambell) $23,438 (Savoonga)</td>
<td>$67,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car, road, public transportation system, clinic, police, fire department, restaurant, hotel, museum</td>
<td>None of them exist on the island</td>
<td>All of them with sophisticated facilities exist in the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**St. Lawrence Island:** St. Lawrence Island is located in the Bering Sea, 200 miles from the Alaskan mainland and 40 miles from the Russia mainland. The island is nearly 100 miles long and averages 20 to 30 miles wide. Today, the entire population of St. Lawrence Island is approximately 1,400, of which more than 95% are indigenous Yupik. Historical interactions between Yupik residents of St.
Lawrence Island and on the Russian mainland involved extensive trade networks, intermarriage, warfare and migrations over several thousand years which continued into the twentieth century (Krupnik 1994). During the Cold War, however, Yupik people on both sides of the Bering Strait were prohibited from interacting with one another for more than 40 years.

There are two villages on the island, Gambell and Savoonga. The population is approximately 650. The island is known as one of the most isolated rural communities in Alaska. Due to the lack of major industry or other source of private employment, approximately 30% of families on the island live below the poverty line. While men make constant preparations for hunting as the weather permits, women stay busy with many hours of meat processing. As St. Lawrence Island is blessed by rich marine mammal natural resources, the people’s subsistence activities have an economically important role.

**Iñupiaq in Barrow:** Barrow is the northern most community in the United States and home to Iñupiaq, whose language is Iñupiaq, one of the westernmost branches of the Eskimo language spoken from Northern Alaska to Greenland. According to US census in 2000, the population in the community is more than 4,500, approximately half of whom are Iñupiaq.

Barrow has dramatically increased in population during the past 50 years due to investment by the U.S. military, the petroleum industry, regional and village corporations, and the North Slope Borough. The median household income is $67,097, much higher than the U.S. national average, $41,993. Despite its remote location, Barrow’s strong economy has drawn a rich ethnic mixture of Euro-Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Central and South Americans, in addition to the indigenous Iñupiaqs. It is the largest community on the Alaskan North Slope and
serves as a hub for transportation, regional government administration, communications, economic development, and education in the region. Life in Barrow is very different from that on St. Lawrence Island. In contrast to St. Lawrence Island where the four-wheel all-terrain vehicle is the primary means of transportation, in Barrow, people rely on cars and trucks to travel an isolated 30-mile road system. In the local supermarket, a variety of foods is found including fresh vegetables, fruits, and ingredients for ethnic cuisine, such as Mexican and Asian. There are five hotels, a court, a hospital, a senior centre, and a women’s shelter. No similar facilities exist on St. Lawrence Island. Buying a car in Barrow is extremely expensive since there are no roads into the community. Car owners pay as much as $5,000 for airfreight from the closest cities, Fairbanks or Anchorage, yet many households own more than one vehicle.

2.2 Colonial and post-colonial history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>St. Lawrence Is.</th>
<th>Barrow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrival of Yankee Whalers</td>
<td>1848 (no permanent station)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival of missionaries</td>
<td>1894 (Presbyterian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold War</td>
<td>One army base and two air force bases (1946)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska Native Language Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (based on discovery of oil field)</td>
<td>- Did not participate in the act - Gave up on cash revenue - Privatize the entire island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent industrial development</td>
<td>Turn down all, including those from petroleum, mining and communication companies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the mid-nineteenth century, when commercial whalers discovered a substantial number of bowhead whales in the Bering Sea, the lives of Alaskan Eskimos in the coastal villages have been changing dramatically as they have moved closer to integration into the larger economy and political system of Euro-American society. By the early twentieth century, due to pressure from Presbyterian
missionaries and the United States government, indigenous religions, healthcare, and social systems in these two locales had been radically transformed. In modern times, the Cold War contributed to militarization in both communities. For 40 years, Yupik people living on the Russian mainland and on St. Lawrence Island were prohibited from contacting or visiting each other. Since the late 1960s when the Alaskan economy and politics were transformed by the discovery of oil, Barrow Iñupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik have made remarkably different decisions in addressing similar, if not the same, critical issues, such as land claim settlements, subsistence regulations, and industrial development. Today, the impact of those decisions has resulted in divergent socio-economic and political statuses as well as differing perspectives of how they interpret their traditional way of life.

The discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay, about 200 miles east of Barrow, in 1968, followed by petroleum exploration of the oil-rich land on the North Slope has become a focus of national interest for socio-economic and political reasons. It forced the federal government to negotiate land claims with Iñupiaq along with the rest of Alaska Native peoples, which resulted in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. ANCSA has dramatically affected Alaska Native peoples in numerous ways, particularly North Slope Iñupiaq. It has provided Iñupiaq ownership of the land providing them enormous power and wealth. In 1972, the State of Alaska consolidated Iñupiaq lands into the North Slope Borough, giving Iñupiaq greater control over territorial decision making, and in 1974, the State provided Borough far-reaching powers including tax revenue from the petroleum industry. Iñupiaq connections to the past, land, and tradition became more important than ever.

When it comes to St. Lawrence Island, Yupiks had different options than other Alaska Natives in the passage of ANSCA. The settlement act allowed communities
located on former reserves to opt out of participation in the regional corporate system. St. Lawrence Islanders chose ownership of the entire island, which conveyed about three and a half times more land than if they participated in ANCSA. As a result, the island became private property owned jointly by two village corporations in Gambell and Savoonga. This decision left St. Lawrence Island without the start-up capital of the regional corporations and the island became one of the financially poorest communities in Alaska. Yet, no one on the island seems to regret the decision, and many people are proud to point out that they chose to preserve the integrity of their land and Yupik way of life over money.

Today, Iñupiaq people in Barrow try to balance between industrial development, such as oil and gas, and protection of their traditional way of life, such as subsistence hunting. St. Lawrence Islanders, on the other hand, turn down all the proposals for such developments.

2.3 Language Retentions

**St. Lawrence Island Yupik:** St. Lawrence Island Yupik has the best indigenous language retention in Alaska. In the late 1980s, 95.5% of the population on the island spoke the Yupik language. During my stay on St. Lawrence Island in 2006-2007, everyday conversation among adults over 25 years old was conducted in Yupik. Despite St Lawrence Island Yupiks vital role in a wide range of contemporary settings, however, many community members were concerned about the decline of the Yupik language retention, saying that teenagers and young children have not been learning to speak Yupik. They were perceived to be speaking mostly English, the language they encounter through television, movies, American pop music, and at
school. As with many other Natives in Alaska, Yupik language proficiencies among young generations have been dramatically declining since the 1990s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gambell</th>
<th>Savoonga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 25</td>
<td>Yupik &gt; English</td>
<td>Yupik &gt; English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 &gt; 20</td>
<td>Yupik &lt; English</td>
<td>Yupik &gt; English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 &gt; 10</td>
<td>English / Yupik &lt; English</td>
<td>Yupik &lt; English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 &gt;</td>
<td>English (Yupik &lt; English)</td>
<td>English / (Yupik &lt; English)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are slightly differences between the two communities on the island. In Gambell, people older than 25 years old are bilingual Yupik and English speakers who prefer to speak Yupik as their first language. People between 20 and 25 years old understand Yupik well, but English seems to be their dominant language. Many teenagers have a passive understanding of Yupik, which means if elders talk to them in Yupik, they will understand it but answer in English. Children under 10 years old are almost monolingual English speakers who have more limited understanding of Yupik than teenagers. In Savoonga, the language retention seems to be a little stronger than in Gambell, but the situation does not considerably differ from Gambell. Adults over 20 years old seem to be more comfortable speaking Yupik than English; adolescents have a varying degree of understanding depending on their family backgrounds; and children under 10 years old are monolingual English speakers with limited understanding of Yupik.

According to local informants, boys are generally more fluent Yupik speakers than girls since it is the primary communication language in hunting. While many boys told me that hunting is cool and happily go hunting with their elders, girls expressed disinterest in domestic work associated with a subsistence lifestyle. Ingluq, a teenage girl said, “Cutting walrus meat, picking greens and berries, doing dishes, baby-sitting, they are all boring!” Rather, she prefers to hang out with friends or
watch television. Since hunting and gathering are still important parts of everyday life in the community, “awareness and participation in activities sustaining of family life” is crucial for children’s language acquisition (Nevins 2004:280). Children acquire a language at home through social interaction with other family members and participation in family and community activities. When children and Yupik dominant speakers take part together in subsistence activities which are culturally specific and often lack relevant translation in English, they spend more time listening and speaking their ancestral language which creates an important context for mastering and retaining it.

In Gambell, many parents and guardians speak English to young children because they think that children “listen well” if they speak English. Nobody knows exactly why this radical shift to English is occurring, but there are many opinions offered. Television is always the top reason given. Linguist, Michael Krauss calls television a “‘cultural ‘nerve gas’ – insidious, painless, and fatal” (Krauss 1980:57). As I have witnessed, many people in rural villages may spend all day watching television and movies, especially during the long months of dark and cold winter. Such prolonged periods of exposure to outside culture seem to influence language acquisition among children. Others believe that the school curriculum pressures the students to be monolingual. According to several parents of teenagers, their children spoke only Yupik until they entered pre-school. In school, they usually had great difficulty with reading and writing in “standard” English and spent a considerable amount of time and energy to understand the language. “Standard” English is considered to be different from “village” English that many people in rural Alaska speak, which underlies discourse patterns in spoken and written English influenced by grammars of the ancestral language and their distinctive worldview (Basham 1999,
Kwachka and Basham 1990, Scollon and Scollon 1981). By the time when they overcame difficulties with learning English at school, they had to start learning the complicated Yupik grammar and writing system which made them lose interest in learning Yupik.

**Iñupiaq in Barrow:** Language retention in Barrow contrasts sharply with the situation on St. Lawrence Island. 10 years ago, only 8% of households in Barrow spoke Iñupiaq as the primary language (North Slope Borough Economic Profile and Census Report 1998/1999). Today, many elders over 70 years old are bilingual, some of whom prefer Iñupiaq to English as a communication language. Many older people in their 50s and 60s are bilingual with Iñupiaq and English, but their communication language is exclusively English. Many people under 45 years old are English monolingual speakers with limited understanding of Iñupiaq (figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Barrow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 70</td>
<td>Iñupiaq &gt; English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 &gt; 45</td>
<td>English / English &gt; Iñupiaq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 &gt;</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through the community’s concerted efforts, announcements and news are broadcast over citizens’ band, public radio, and television in the indigenous languages as well as in English. Native languages, along with English, are also spoken at the openings of conferences, meetings, festivals, and ceremonies sponsored by Native corporations and people in the communities. English is expected to remain the dominant language, though Iñupiaq language today is gaining a certain prestige in some contexts. For example, people who are bilingual in English and Native languages tend to get higher positions in tribal government, as successful role models of bridging two worlds. However, the result of their efforts to preserve Iñupiaq in
bilingual education is not entirely successful, as few young people under 45 years of age are fluent Iñupiaq speakers.

3. Language Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Yupik for adults</strong></th>
<th><strong>Yupik for children</strong></th>
<th><strong>Iñupiaq</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State</strong></td>
<td>Daily language</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>Institutionalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Register</strong></td>
<td>Public, festivals, cultural events, church, Eskimo dance</td>
<td>Private Home School</td>
<td>Meeting with insiders/outsiders School Literacy (pamphlet for cultural events) Local media (TV, radio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genre</strong></td>
<td>Eskimo song</td>
<td>Formal speech for insiders Ceremonial speech for insiders Religious speech in church for insiders Informal speech Daily conversation</td>
<td>Informal speech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now I would like to turn my discussion of language endangerment into language use. In order to analyze language use in the two speech communities, I divide them into three cohorts: 1) the Yupik language for adults, which I consider daily language; 2) the Yupik language for children which is in a transitional state; and 3) the Iñupiaq language for all generations which became more institutionalized.

**State:** I put the Iñupiaq language as an “institutionalized” language because speakers of the language are culturally specialized people: 1) Bilingual educators and linguists; 2) people who give speech in cultural events; and 3) elders whose life experiences based on the older form of subsistence life have become institutionally marked as a experts of “being Eskimo” with specialized indigenous knowledge (Meek 2007:3). The language is not used in daily conversation anymore.
Register: All the groups use the language in public, especially in cultural
events, church service and Eskimo dance. On St. Lawrence Island, Christian worship
is held in mixture of Yupik and English at home and in church. My hosts, for
example, hold worship twice a day at home. Each service takes almost one hour,
which consists of prayers in Yupik, singing hymns in English, reading the Bible in
Yupik and English, singing hymns in the two languages, followed by more prayers in
Yupik. Barrow, on the other hand, has two church services a week: an Iñupiaq
service for elders and an English service for everybody else.

Both language communities use indigenous languages in meetings. While
Yupik people use the language for the meeting with insiders, Iñupiaq use the language
in a meeting for both insiders and outsiders. Children learn Iñupiaq in school as a
second language in bilingual education programs. However, at home, young people
never speak Iñupiaq to elders, and elders speak only English to their offspring and
grandchildren in any context, based on assumptions that they do not understand
Iñupiaq and cannot communicate with the language. For the bilingual education
program, more than 350 textbooks were published in the 1980s and a number of new
publications continues to grow. Thus, literacy of Iñupiaq children in Iñupiaq seems to
be higher than those of Yupik children in Yupik.

Finally, in Barrow, there is a program called “Eskimo Channel” on local
media, such as TV and radio. In the program, they broadcast recordings of cultural
events and Eskimo dancing and singing. Local government also makes
announcements both in English and Iñupiaq.

Genre: While Yupik people tend to use the language for speech with insiders,
Iñupiaq is used for more public domain targeting both insiders and outsiders. For
young Iñupiaq people, the discourse about the Iñupiaq language means the discourse about Iñupiaq culture and tradition. The language is spoken in the beginning of a meeting, saying a few sentences in Iñupiaq, then the speaker switches to English which continues until the end of the speech. As I have discussed in the previous paper, singing songs in Iñupiaq is the most common genre for young people. Though many have mastered the skills for singing songs and have memorized a few sentences identifying themselves Iñupiaq when they speak in public, it does not seem that they have begun to use the language in the everyday sense. Young people never speak Iñupiaq to elders, and elders speak only English to their offspring and grandchildren in any context, based on assumptions that they do not understand Iñupiaq and cannot communicate with the language. The efforts memorizing lyrics of Iñupiaq songs that young people make result more in the creation of a ritual language based on ancient Iñupiaq than actually advancing the cause of active language learning (Bloch 1974, 1976).

**Code-mixing**

**SLI:** Code mixing is common in all generations in both communities. While fluent Yupik speakers occasionally insert English words, especially nouns, in their Yupik utterances, young English dominant speakers often include Yupik words, which are socially and culturally relevant in the community, in their English sentences. For example, one anecdote of Qavalaghaq as a toddler, which his family enjoys retelling, illustrates his perception of both languages. Qavalaghaq, now a six-year old boy, speaks English as his first language, but his utterances always include Yupik words. When he was three or four years old, his family went camping to pick greens and to hunt seals, as they do every summer. One morning, the curious young boy was
carefully observing excrement that his family member left in the honey bucket. He then declared, “Mom, you made nanuq (polar bear). I will make maklak (bearded seal),” referring to the shapes he imagined. Everybody burst into laughter, but Qavalaghaq did not know what was funny in his statement. Qavalaghaq lives with his grandparents in their mid-60s, uncle (mid-40s), male cousin (teenager), father (early 40s), mother (early 30s), and three-year old brother. His father is Yupik and his mother is from outside of Alaska. The dominant language among the adults in the household is Yupik. The mother and two young children have passive understanding of Yupik but speak English as a communication language. The grandfather and father are skilled hunters who occasionally take the boys seal hunting. For the young boys, hunting is the “coolest” activity, which becomes the focus of their favorite play activity, shooting and harpooning stuffed animals with their imaginary weapons. Qavalaghaq’s innocent statement about excrement, therefore, could be considered a derivative of his developing knowledge of both languages and his exposure to the unique subsistence activities in the community.

**Barrow:** Like St. Lawrence Islanders, code-mixing is common in the form of Iñupiaq words inserted in English utterances. For example, people from the age of young children to those in their thirties often make such mixed statements:

“Today, I saw natchiq / ugruk / tutu (ringed seal / bearded seal / caribou).”
“I went to see my aaka/ aapa (grandfather / grandmother in contemporary Iñupiaq. The words mean mother/father in older Iñupiaq as well as in Iñupiaq dictionaries).”

While these examples may not seem at first to differ substantially from the statement made by Qavalaghaq on St. Lawrence Island who talked about excrement, people who use the Iñupiaq words in English conversations in Barrow often do not have even a passive ability to understand Iñupiaq, and they usually do not use the Iñupiaq words
outside of the community. While Native leaders consciously tend to use their Iñupiaq names in public domain, especially in the situations when they talk about their culture to people from the Euro-American society, the majority of people in the community are likely not to say Iñupiaq words nor use Eskimo names in communications with non-Native people both inside and outside of the community. The use of such words confirm Iñupiaq’s shared cultural knowledge in the community. The code-mixing in Barrow is more related to their ethnolinguistic identity, which means “people’s institutions of social categoriality emerging from certain cultural assumptions about language … [which is] the central and enabling vehicle or channel of thought and culture” (Silverstein 2003:532). In other words, Iñupiaq people who may not have proficient knowledge of their own indigenous language use special terms or expressions related to the language or legends in English sentences as identity markers.

4. Discussion

*It will be an open discussion with the audience.*
Works Cited


