

## Eskimo-Aleut Linguistics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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The field of Eskimo-Aleut linguistics has a relatively long history, longer than that of any other indigenous language family in North America<sup>1</sup>. The reason for this is the early work that was done on West Greenlandic, primarily by Poul Egede, Topp, Fabricius and later by Samuel Kleinschmidt. It is interesting that this work was done in Greenland, the eastern extension of the language family in a region not generally considered part of North America. This early language work that began in the first years of the eighteenth century is the result of comparatively early colonization of Greenland by Denmark and Norway, accompanied by missionary activity that resulted in works that have influenced the entire field of linguistics, and here I refer particularly to the outstanding grammar written by Samuel Kleinschmidt. I was reminded of all this walking through Nuuk one day in May, 2002, with Louis-Jacques Dorais, as we stopped at the small monument that was erected to Kleinschmidt, and many of you can picture the old lantern hanging from a post. We remarked that we had never before seen a monument to a linguist. The only one I have seen since is in central Copenhagen, in recognition of four linguists including Rasmus Rask, the nineteenth century Danish linguist who first recognized the Eskimo-Aleut relationship.

I would like to attempt first of all to situate Eskimo-Aleut studies within the greater field of linguistics and give you an idea of why it is important, beyond its value to those of us involved in the field. Modern linguistics has not existed as a separate field for very long, less than a century at any rate. It emerged from early historical studies and also from within anthropology, where it is still considered the fourth field. Historical linguistics was largely concerned with language relationships and language change, essentially how modern language families evolved from ancient languages and the sorts of linguistic processes that are responsible for particular types of developments. Anthropological

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<sup>1</sup> This talk was given at a plenary session and thus intended for a general audience of non-linguists. I have chosen to maintain the spirit of the original talk, and it is given here in a form very close to what was presented orally.

linguistics dealt largely with language descriptions, often Native American languages that belonged to the groups that were of interest to cultural anthropologists. In the late 1950's linguistics developed new concerns, related to what is often called the Chomskyan revolution. Psycholinguistics gained importance with studies of language and the mind. A major area was language acquisition that focuses on how children acquire language and the innate propensity for language that is unique to humans. Rather than describing individual grammars, many linguists sought principles of universal grammar that relate all languages. Claims were made concerning common underlying structures that are manifested differently in individual languages, due to language-specific rules that give rise to surface structures. And surface structures are manifested as the actual sentences that we speak. Early work in generative grammar and related linguistic theories relied heavily on data from European languages, since these were close at hand, were known to the researchers, and were generally well-described. But of course broad claims about languages must be based on a wide range of data from different languages and especially from different language types.

This brings me back to Inuit linguistics, one of the non-Indo-European language areas that was so necessary for bringing things back into balance. Without looking at the diversity of world languages, it is not possible to gain a picture of a typical language. Why should English or French be considered paradigmatically representative, while Eskimo-Aleut languages would be somehow less typical with their very different polysynthetic structure? Linguistic theories could only be considered serious if they accounted for a variety of language types, and as a result, linguistic typology studies have gained vastly in importance.

At this point I would like to talk about specific types of knowledge that Inuit languages contribute to linguistics. Of course every language on earth deserves to be documented as fully as possible for the sake of scientific knowledge as well as for the speech communities and their descendants. Science and knowledge in general are enriched in different areas by different language types. I'm not going to talk about language and culture here, since we know that language is used to convey culture, which is in turn embedded in language. Grammatical systems, however, can differ greatly from one language to another, and they provide linguists with examples of what is possible or at least what occurs in the world's languages. Languages typically have noteworthy aspects that make them stand out in comparison to other languages; and languages generally have other aspects that may be viewed as perfectly ordinary and unremarkable.

Eskimo word structure is well-known for being polysynthetic, meaning that words are constructed of multiple units of meaning, often making them quite long. Languages of this type clearly raise the question, “What is a word?” Although this issue is not trivial even in European languages, Eskimo linguists must use a very different definition of word. There are simple nouns like *qimmiq* ‘dog,’ but then there also cases where a simple noun is incorporated into a larger utterance, for instance *Qimmiqpaunitchuq* “It is not a dog” in North Slope Iñupiaq. Words can be even longer, for example, *Miñuaqtuǵviñmuñniañiñmiuq* “He or she also won’t go to school,” derived in a series of steps from the base *miñuk-* ‘to color or mark.’ (*Miñuaqtuǵvik* is school, *muk* is ‘go to,’ *niaq* is the future, *ñit* is negative, *mi* is also, and *uq* is 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular intransitive.) These complex words – there are 8 morphemes, or meaningful units, in the second word – translate as entire sentences in European languages. They are words in that they are morphological entities, divisible by students of grammar but not usually by native speakers; they are phonological entities as well, subject to sound processes that distinguish one word in a series from the next.

This polysynthetic morphology raises a host of other questions of interest to linguists. For example, how does a small child acquire such a language? Where do they begin, and what are the steps and stages that they go through to become fluent speakers? Language acquisition studies abound for European languages, and fortunately there is work being done for Eskimo languages, but much more remains to be learned about this subject. Unfortunately, not all Eskimo-Aleut languages are being learned as first languages by children, so in a number of cases such a study is not possible.

A related question that I wonder about relates more directly to the field of education than linguistics: how do people read polysynthetic languages? What strategies are employed in the reading process? Although children learning to read English are taught to “sound out the words,” we know that this is not how fluent reading is done. People recognize and register individual words and when a word is not easily recognizable, parts are looked at and sounds may be dealt with. In a language like Iñupiaq, it cannot be the case that readers recognize the majority of words, since words are long and complex and formed creatively by the writer or speaker the way sentences are created in English. Probably, reading fluency results from recognition of individual chunks, as Mick Mallon calls them, parts of words that recur, that may be made up of more than one morpheme, and that become familiar to a reader. Suffixes and word endings can appear very different in different words, though, because of rules and changes that occur when they are added to word stems, making the same entities hard to recognize depending on the context. Of course reading improves with practice, and the Alaskan Iñupiaq situation is complicated by a relatively small body of available reading literature, so that comparatively few people

ever get the amount of reading experience that would result in very fluent reading.

Beyond word structure, there are areas of Eskimo phonology (sounds and sound systems) that stand out as particularly interesting. Looking at the sound inventories of these languages, there are few individual sounds that would be considered “exotic,” but the prosodic systems of the Yupik languages are certainly intriguing to linguists. This prosody involves syllable adjustment rules, whereby consonants or vowels may become lengthened due to the shape of an adjacent syllable. Take the word *qayami* meaning ‘in the kayak’ that occurs in Iñupiaq and all throughout the Inuit language branch. The very same word is said *qaya:mi* in Central Alaskan Yupik as well as St. Lawrence Island Yupik. The second *a* is long because the word has successive open syllables, *qa* and *ya*. As for consonants, Iñupiaq *nanipiaq* means ‘real lamp’ with a single *p*, but Central Alaskan Yupik has a long *p* in the same word, *nanip:iaq*, because of its position in the word. (An aside: why do the Inupiat say *kuuppiaq* for ‘coffee’ with a long *p*, just as in Yupik? There’s a good chance that they got coffee via the Yupiit, along with the name and its pronunciation, and the long *p* may tell the story. The word originally comes from Russian *kofe*.)

Leaving phonology behind, one more element of Eskimo-Aleut languages that fascinates linguists is the complicated system of demonstrative words. Demonstratives are words meaning things like ‘here,’ ‘there,’ ‘this one,’ or ‘that one,’ except that where English has just a few words, Eskimo-Aleut languages typically have an elaborate system indicating a thing (or person) in terms of its location relative to the speaker, whether it is visible, and how much space it occupies. So Iñupiaq *kanna* means ‘that one down below, visible’ but *samna* means ‘that one down below, not visible.’ Something you can see beneath you on the floor would be called *kanna*, but something beneath the floor in the cellar would be *samna*. There are usually over twenty demonstrative stems that occur with various endings, meaning such things as ‘to here,’ ‘from here,’ ‘through here,’ ‘located here,’ and more. A number of linguists have looked at demonstratives in the different languages, and at least one has proposed a possible functional explanation of their presence, related to featureless winter landscapes.

I have tried to outline a few remarkable features of Eskimo-Aleut languages, and certainly other linguists would have their own list. The anaphoric system of Aleut is another unusual system and represents an interesting development in terms of reference, but it is too complex to describe here.

Besides making useful data and language descriptions available to scholars interested in theory, Eskimo-Aleut linguists have balanced scholarly research with applied work that benefits Inuit communities. Many of us have produced dictionaries, texts, and

language learning materials, even spelling manuals and Berlitz-style phrasebooks with sound recordings because they are of use to indigenous communities. Applied work has gained, or perhaps I should say regained, respectability within linguistics, so that at many universities, students and faculty now do work which directly benefits language communities. A number of Inuit have emerged as serious scholars of their languages, further strengthening the bonds between linguistics and Inuit communities. Alaska's Edna MacLean and Greenland's Puju and Naja Trondhjem are but a few of the indigenous linguists who concentrate on their own language.

The large number of linguistics and language papers presented at this conference gives an indication of how many active scholars there are in this field. There has not been such a gathering of linguists working in this area in quite a long time. You have been able to hear about the research of those who have presented here, but I would like to point out a number of other projects that are either currently in progress or recently completed. My information is not exhaustive and I hope to learn of more work deserving of mention. Although they may be long and tedious to compile, dictionaries are extremely useful not only to linguists and other researchers in our field, but very much to the community of Inuit language speakers and learners. In Alaska Jeff Leer is working on a Sugpiaq dictionary, and Steve Jacobson is preparing an updated dictionary of Central Alaskan Yupik. A new edition of the *St. Lawrence Island/Siberian Yupik Eskimo Dictionary* has recently appeared. In 2005 Jacobson published the *Naukan Yupik Eskimo Dictionary* in English and Russian versions with co-authors Dobrieva, Golovko, and Krauss. I wish Jacobson were here at this conference, but he is too busy writing dictionaries. Edna MacLean, originally from Barrow, Alaska, is working to complete the North Slope Iñupiaq dictionary. Wolf Seiler of the Summer Institute of Linguistics recently published the *Iñupiatun Eskimo Dictionary* for the Malimiut Iñupiaq dialect. I am working on Seward Peninsula Inupiaq, particularly King Island. For Aleut, Anna Berge and Moses Dirks have recently written *How the Atkans Talk: a Conversational Grammar* with audio CD's in the Western dialect. Jean Briggs and Alana Johns are preparing an Utkuhalingmiut dictionary for this under-documented Western Canadian dialect. A new Labrador Inuttut dictionary, *Labradorimi Ulinnaisigutet*, is now in print.

Closely related to linguistics is the field of language planning, which is particularly important for endangered and minority languages. Language planning is concerned with efforts to guide the use of languages in society, sometimes through official policies, and also deals with questions of political and social status of languages, with language revitalization and bilingual education, and often too with vocabulary modernization to bring languages up-to-date with terminology for current technology and culture. Many or

even most Eskimo-Aleut languages are in an endangered state, and moreover, all are in some sense minority languages in relation to larger national languages, those being English, Russian, French, and Danish. Language planning discussions are not uncommon in the north, and several projects related to the International Polar Year (2007-2009) take up this subject.

Thank you to all of you who have come to listen to a talk with “linguistics” in the title. I hope to have given you an overview of some of the current concerns in Eskimo-Aleut linguistics and where these languages and our work fit within the larger field of linguistics. And thank you to the conference organizers for inviting me to speak this morning.

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