

Seven hundred million to one: Personal action in reversing language shift

Sept cent millions contre un: l'action personnelle dans l'inversion du changement des langues

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Volume 29, numéro 1-2, 2005

Préserver la langue et les savoirs
Preserving language and knowledge

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/013945ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/013945ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)
1708-5268 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Dauenhauer, R. L. (2005). Seven hundred million to one: Personal action in reversing language shift. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 29(1-2), 267–284.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/013945ar>

Résumé de l'article

L'article considère l'influence qu'une personne peut avoir sur une langue qui lutte pour sa survie linguistique et sur la transmission de cette langue, en comparant et contrastant la situation des langues répandues, telles que le putonghua (plus traditionnellement appelé le chinois mandarin, avec 700 millions de locuteurs) et des langues peu répandues, telles que la langue eyak que seulement une personne parle. L'article examine les joies et les dilemmes qu'apportent de tels travaux, les résultats pratiques (*i.e.* textes et documents) et les récompenses spirituelles (principalement des satisfactions) tirés d'exemples de nos propres travaux des dernières 35 années à étudier la langue tlingit, et des travaux de nos collègues, spécialement Michael Krauss, dans le contexte d'un volume célébrant son 70e anniversaire et aussi ses 45 ans de travaux au nom des différentes langues des Autochtones de l'Alaska et des langues indigènes en voie de disparition autour du monde, spécialement autour du cercle polaire de l'hémisphère nord. L'article a un but non-formel et non-technique et s'adresse à tous les lecteurs, spécialement aux membres des communautés dont les langues indigènes sont en voie de disparition.

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Richard L. Dauenhauer*

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Abstract: Seven hundred million to one: Personal action in reversing language shift

The paper considers what influence a single person can have on language survival and transmission of knowledge, comparing and contrasting the situation of large languages such as Putonghua (traditionally called Mandarin Chinese, with 700 million speakers) and small languages such as Eyak with as few speakers as one. It examines the delights and dilemmas of such work, the practical results (such as texts and documents) and the spiritual rewards (mostly satisfaction), drawing examples from our own work of the last 35 years with Tlingit, and from the work of colleagues, especially Michael Krauss, in the context of a volume celebrating his 70th birthday and 45 years of work on behalf of Alaska Native languages and endangered indigenous languages around the world, especially in the circumpolar north. The paper is by design an informal and non-technical address to the general reader, especially members of communities whose indigenous languages are endangered.

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Introduction

I begin this paper with a riddle and a confession. The riddle is from Koyukon Athabaskan, collected by the Jesuit scholar Julius Jetté (1913: Riddle 106) about a century ago. The riddle part: I found my last year's arrow. The answer: Using the same lamentation or song of mourning twice.

Let me emphasize at the start that this paper is not a lamentation, but is intended as an expression of optimism and joy about language revitalization. But, having opened by quoting the Athabaskan scholarship of a Jesuit priest, I hurry now to confession and explain why the riddle is appropriate. I am using this paper twice. I first used it long ago and far away, 10 years ago as the keynote address to the Alaska Native Education Council in Anchorage, Alaska. So, while it may be poor form to use an arrow that's been lying in the leaves and snow all winter, and not to come up with a new song or academic paper, I think I can get away with repeating it for several reasons: it is still unpublished; there is probably nobody in the current readership who heard it 10 years ago, or, if so, remembers hearing it; I have nothing new to say on the subject; and even if you've heard it all before, it's still ok—like going to an all-Beethoven concert and waiting for the Archduke trio, comparing Pablo Casals and Yo Yo Ma.

There is one major difference between 10 years ago and now. Part of the symposium for which this paper was resurrected was to honour a man whose individual and personal effort has made a difference in reversing language and knowledge shift in the North—Michael Krauss, who devoted his career not to a major language such as Putonghua, with 700 million speakers, but to Eyak, which now has only one. Another difference: the reason I have nothing new to add to the subject now is that over the last 10 years, Nora—my 30-year partner in marriage and scholarship—and I have published several articles elaborating the socio-linguistic themes first presented in this unpublished paper. The titles give an indication of how the ideas evolved and were fleshed out in a decade of publication.

In “Oral literature embodied and disembodied” (1995), we showed how oral and written literature are contextualized differently, how with living oral tradition we must always bother people, and how much of the fieldwork deals with death and dying. Among the tradition bearers whose work we discuss is Anna Nelson Harry, especially her “Lament for Eyak” (Krauss 1982:155-7) whose stories Michael Krauss collected, transcribed, translated, and published in the course of his monumental research on Eyak. In “Technical, emotional, and ideological issues in reversing language shift: Examples from Southeast Alaska” (1998), we remember that there are many emotional aspects of the research that we may overlook in our concern with technical aspects. “The paradox of talking on the page: Some aspects of the Tlingit and Haida experience” (1999a) is about editing aboriginal texts, and attitudes toward literacy; how the junction of oral and written literature is an exciting moment in intellectual history. “Tracking Yuwaan Gageets, A Russian fairy tale in Tlingit oral tradition” (2001) is about collaborative research between indigenous scholars and those entering the tradition from outside. This theme is continued with “Louis Shotridge and indigenous Tlingit ethnography: Then and now” (2003b). Our most recent work is “Evolving

concepts of Tlingit identity and clan” (2004b) where we address culture change and face the irony that change may be the only constant in the history of language and culture.

The present paper was the start of all of that, 10 years ago. Reviewing our work from this perspective, it’s like a three-legged stool. This paper, its elaborations described above, and other academic papers are the theoretical leg. Our text and translation work in Tlingit oral literature is the second leg (1987, 1990, 1994, 2000b, 2004a), and our pedagogical grammars (1999b, 2000a, 2002) and efforts in applied linguistics are the third. So, although old, this paper ties together 30 years of work in a way that is new and different. The paper is by design an informal and non-technical address to the general reader, especially members of communities whose indigenous languages are endangered. Although grounded in academic experience, this is deliberately not an academic paper in the conventional sense, but is based on 35 years of field experience in Alaska. The title of the paper alludes to the theme of the symposium, which, in turn, alludes to the work of Joshua Fishman (1991).

I want to raise the idea of making a difference in the history or a language, and I will do so in two ways. The first is more familiar and conventional, maybe even *cliché*. But I hope some personal examples will give it new life. I want to consider first how literature and language can make a difference in our lives, and how they have in mine. Then, I want to turn the idea around, and talk about how our lives can make a difference in language and literature; why we’re doing the things we do. I will close by returning to the first part of the theme: achievement; finding out what each of us is to do, and doing it.

How literature can make a difference in our lives

As I mentioned, it is a bit of a worn *cliché* from teachers that literature can change your life. But it’s true. My life has been shaped and even dramatically changed by literature, and I’d like to give some examples. One of my favorite escapes when the world is too much with me and I want something totally irrelevant and unrelated is to retreat to reading and translating ancient Greek poetry, especially the “Erotic Epigrams” from Book Five of the *Greek Anthology*. The American poet Robinson Jeffers has a great line: “The honey of peace in old poems.” I like that. It is soothing to get away from it all. But it is also humbling first of all to realize that these poems survive because someone composed and wrote them down over 2,000 years ago. Who could have imagined then, that someone in Juneau, Alaska, would be translating these, and that an audience at an Alaska Federation of Natives convention in Anchorage would be hearing them, and that they would find their way into the present publication. It is also humbling, because each generation thinks it’s the first to discover sex. There is nothing like ancient Greek erotica to cure us of this arrogance and ignorance.

The R and X rated poems provide even stronger doses of humility. I am using a bilingual edition edited about 100 years ago; when the poems got too pornographic for the Victorians, they translated them into Latin, so you have the original Greek on one

page, and the Latin on the other. By the way—they did the same thing to the Tlingit Raven stories, to get Raven’s erotic exploits past the censor. You’re reading along in English and it suddenly switches to Latin. You know you’re missing something good, because your Latin is good enough to recognize the names of certain body parts, but not the verbs and grammar that tell you what’s happening with them. You begin to regret that Latin is no longer taught in our schools. So it goes. Let me read you a couple of the short ones, in my own translations. Here’s where Cupid’s arrow enters world literature by Asklepiados, from around 270 BC:

The winter night is longer than the stars,
and stormy. Back and forth, I pass her door,
in darkness, rain-soaked, wounded by desire
for her who treats me with deceit. Not love
did Aphrodite strike me with, but grief.
The red-hot arrow sizzles in the rain.

Here’s one by Meleagros, from around 90 BC:

Timárion, your kiss is glue.
Your eyes are fire.
Look at me, I smolder,
Touch me, and I’m stuck.

I can identify with that. It takes me back to college! Like old poetry, the old epics also have something to say to us. I’ll save the oldest, the Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*, the oldest written story in the Western Literature, for my closing comments. But other important books from the ancient middle east are the Homeric epics (*The Iliad* and *Odyssey*), the Hebrew *Old Testament*, and the *New Testament*. My wife, Nora, was attracted to the *Iliad*, the Old English *Beowulf*, and the Icelandic *Saga of Njal* because they seemed so Tlingit in their concern for funerals and genealogy. I can witness that my first adult reading of the *Gospel of John* changed my life forever. It is also sobering to realize that all of this literature survives because someone, at some moment, took the time and effort to write it down.

Just as these and many other examples of world literature have something to offer to all of us, and to Alaska Native people, so also does Alaska Native oral literature have something to offer to rest of us in Alaska, and to the world. I’d like to give a personal example of how a single speech from Tlingit changed my life. In the late 1960s and early 1970s I was teaching at Alaska Methodist University in Anchorage. At that time, Nora, who would eventually become my wife, had raised her children, and wanted to return to school. She completed her GED and enrolled at AMU, majoring in anthropology and specializing in Tlingit. I was working with her in areas of Tlingit literacy and linguistic analysis, and in folklore and oral literature. At one point she showed me something she was working on for a term paper. It was a speech for the removal of grief offered by Jessie Dalton of Hoonah at the memorial potlatch for Nora’s departed uncle Jim Marks. Nora read her translation to me. I was overwhelmed. This was a side of Tlingit literature that had never been documented and published before. The poetry of the speech was as beautiful and intricate in imagery, as rich in

metaphor and simile, as the English poetry of Donne and Shakespeare. I immediately thought of the opening lines of *Richard the Third*: “Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York.” The speech from this elder in Hoonah, composed and delivered orally in Tlingit, was equally contextualized in the culture, equally expressive in metaphor and simile, and clearly ranks with the recognized classics of world literature. Let me read a few passages to you from the speech by Jessie Dalton:

Does death take pity on us too
my brother’s children,
my fathers?
All my fathers.
It doesn’t take pity on us either,
this thing that happens,
Which is why you hear their voices like this,
your fathers,
lest your tears fall without honor.
[...]

Here someone stands wearing [...]
this Mountain Tribe’s Dog [hat].
It’s just as if
it’s barking for your pain is how I’m thinking about it.
[...]

The Tern Robe.
[...]
These terns I haven’t completely explained,
these terns.
Your fathers’ sisters would fly out over the person
who is feeling grief.
Then,
they would let their down fall
like snow
over the person who is feeling grief.
That’s when their down
isn’t felt.
That’s when
I feel it’s as if your fathers’ sisters are flying
Back to their nests
with your grief.
[...]

[...]the Frog Hat.
[...]
During the warm season
this father of yours
would come out.
That’s when
I feel it’s as if your father’s hat
has come out for your grief,

[...]
your grandparents' hat.
With your grief
he will burrow down,
with it,
with your grief, he will burrow down

(Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1990: 243-253).

These passages changed my life. I suddenly realized the full power of Tlingit oral literature, and the extent to which it was unknown and unappreciated by the world at large. Through ignorance, unavailability, racism, or prejudice against oral literature in general, such classics of Alaska Native oral literature remained outside the academic canon. As a teacher of comparative literature, I realized as never before the need for accurate texts and translations of this oral literature; and I realized also that, because of linguistic and cultural complexity, the job could best be done—or perhaps only be done—by Native speaking scholars coming from within the tradition. This was also a turning point for Nora, who applied herself to acquiring the technical skills and achieving the competence necessary for documenting and expressing this greatness of Tlingit language and literature (see also Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 2003a).

This speech became a part of our lives for the next 30 years. We published the Tlingit text in a small booklet in 1971, and in 1990 published the Tlingit text with facing English translation, cultural annotations, and glossary. The orator had no idea that her words would go beyond the immediate room in Hoonah in 1968, that her oral performance would transcend that speech event by being tape-recorded, written down in Tlingit, and translated into English. The speech has literally been heard around the world, and it never fails to move and inspire those who hear or read it. One of my favorite passages from Psalms applies here: “Their proclamation has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the universe” (Ps.19:4). I think of it often when I think of the tradition-bearers with whom we have worked. Through the books we have edited, it is not our words that go out, but the words of the great storytellers and orators of Tlingit tradition. This certainly applies to the work of Michael Krauss with Anna Nelson Harry, and to the work of many of our colleagues in the field.

There are many other examples from Alaska Native oral literature that shaped my life and work (such Laura Norton’s “The Boy Who Found the Lost,” Walter Meganack, Sr.’s “Bear Story,” Dick Kamluck, Sr.’s “Ivan Durak Steals and Ring”) but I don’t have time to go into them here. Most of these were called to my attention by my students of 30 years ago, and many are included in the special issue of the *Alaska Quarterly Review* on Alaska Native Writers, Storytellers and Orators that we edited with Gary Holthaus in 1986, expanded by Jeane Breinig and Patricia Partnow (Spatz *et al.* 1999). But I would like to mention just one more, also in this volume.

Many years ago, Eliza Jones of the Alaska Native Language Center transcribed and translated a story by Sally Pilot called “Ggaadookk.” It is one of my favorite stories. I liked it from the beginning because I didn’t understand it at all. It bewildered

and confused me. I always tell my students, “If you don’t understand a story from an unfamiliar culture, there are only two reasons: either 1) you’re stupid; or 2) there’s something new and different going on. Since we assume you’re not stupid, there must be something new and different going on. So, you stick with it, and figure out the patterns.” As I struggled with the story for months and years (I’m a slow learner), I grew to like it even more. Then finally, one day, it hit me: ka-pow! It basically has to do with metaphor and learning to speak indirectly; I see it as being connected with the famous Koyukon riddling tradition with which I opened this paper. I grew bold enough to write a paper on the story. With fear and trembling, I sent the paper to Eliza, who, in her quiet way, replied with something like, “Yeah, I think you could read it that way.” But since it is a riddle, I will leave it to readers to find and enjoy the story on their own.

I like to use both of these examples to make the point that Alaska Native literature is not children’s literature. This is a soap-box that I preach from at every opportunity, so I won’t pass up the chance to sermonize here. All too often, oral literature in general and Native American literature in particular, are trivialized in the school curriculum. This is racism: the perception and treatment of adult literature from another language and culture (especially if it’s not white) as children’s literature. This is wrong. Native literature certainly includes stories for children (and I’m all for “kiddie lit”), but we don’t teach *Macbeth* or Dickens in fourth grade, and we shouldn’t stick all Native literature there either, and complain when it doesn’t work. We need to take Alaska Native literature seriously, as adult literature. Beginning with ourselves as teachers and parents as models, we need to take it seriously and present it as such to young adults, especially in the upper grades and college. I think this is a matter of spiritual and physical life and death. As we witness the increase in suicide, in drug and alcohol abuse among the young, in family and community violence, we need to draw on the creative resources of oral traditions that have sustained and guided indigenous cultures for generations. To this end, we began working in the mid 1980s with Ron and Suzanne Scollon under the sponsorship of Sealaska Heritage Foundation and subsequently other organizations on developing what we call the “Axe Handle Curriculum,” and conducting community retreats and outreach activity to get the books off the shelves and into people’s lives. I don’t have time to discuss these further here, but much of this work is now available on the Alaska Native Knowledge Network website (Scollon and Scollon 2002).

How language can make a difference in our lives

I would now like to turn to language, and consider how Alaska Native languages can make a difference in our lives. I won’t go into as much detail here. Again, it’s kind of a cliché, but none-the-less true, that knowing more than one language can make a difference in one’s life. One of the most frustrating, ongoing experiences in my life and work is trying to work with school teachers and administrators who are monolingual speakers of English, whose concept of foreign language learning is typically limited to a year or two of required French or Spanish. Often, the value placed on language is utilitarian. There is some wisdom to this. If you want to talk to more people, learn English, Spanish, or Chinese. Tlingit and Yup’ik won’t get you very far. They used to

tell you, “If you want a good job, learn to speak and write ‘payroll English.’” (That’s the kind of English you get paid for speaking and spelling.) Or, you can get rich and make enough money to hire an unemployed English teacher to do it for you. But I don’t want to go into economics here.

I also don’t want to delve much into the negative side of language experience. Hearing or speaking a language can also bring back unpleasant memories. One Tlingit elder was punished so often as a child for speaking Tlingit in school, that to this day he says he still can taste the soap when he speaks Tlingit. This is the kind of mental and cultural damage that school culture has inflicted on three generations of Native people. The anguish survives, and remains a powerful factor working against the survival of Native languages.

I’d like to address the fun side of language. Language study can provide intellectual satisfaction and spiritual pleasure. Different languages are interesting. They can be fun and satisfying. Let me give a few favorite examples.

English has a pair of words: “this” and “that,” to point things out. We have a third word, “yon,” which is more archaic or dialectal. Russian is simpler; it has one word, “éto,” meaning both “this” and “that.” Tlingit has four words: *hé*, *yá*, *wé*, and *yú*, to signify this or that depending on whether it’s closer to me or you or equidistant or over yonder. But the prize goes to the Eskimo languages. Yup’ik and Inupiaq are famous for the 36 or so words for this and that! This can take some time to learn, but it pays off when you go hunting with a Yup’ik friend. If he says “Shoot that one!” you know which animal in the herd to aim at.

Tlingit and the Athabaskan languages do some of this in verbs. If there are several objects on a table, a Tlingit speaker can say, “Give it to me!” and you will know which object is meant. There are different verbs and prefix combinations for different shaped objects in motion or at rest: stick or long object; stone or small, round object; cloth; a chair or frame-like object; rope extended; rope coiled; empty container; full container; human object; plural objects, etc. Tlingit rain, of course, is a long, slender, object in downward motion into the open. But before you can say “It’s raining,” you have to determine if the rain is ongoing and you are entering into it, or if your activity is ongoing and the rain is entering into it. Of course, the “it” has bothered people learning English for years. *What* is raining? *What’s* the *it*?

Two of my favorite examples are the Tlingit verbs “to speak” and “to think.” Both are made up of a stem surrounded by a series of prefixes and suffixes that translate literally as continual or repeated involving an empty container, namely your mouth or the inside of your head. Some other of my favorite Tlingit examples are the verbs “to see” and “to know.” In English we say “I see” and “I know,” using the present tense. But in Tlingit, these are perfective, or non-present forms: “*xwasiteen*” and “*xwasikoo*.” This makes perfectly good sense: before I can say that I see you, I must have already acquired and processed the optical image. Before I can say I know, I must have already acquired the information. These examples show some of the different concepts that shape the way we speak and think.

Another example is how different languages treat time. English verbs have time built into them: past or non past. It is impossible to say something without conveying time. “I saw him” and “I seen him” are both past tense; but the “I seen him” speakers don’t run the schools. Other languages have an aspect system, like Russian and most Alaska Native languages. The verbs convey information about how often you do something, did you finish it or just do a little bit of it, or do you do it all the time, only once, or only now and then. We English speakers have trouble learning to say the Russian, Yupik or Tlingit equivalent of “I always go show sometimes,” but this makes perfectly good sense in what some people call “heritage English, or “village English,” the English now spoken as a first language in Native villages, that drives the English teachers nuts. After 30 years, I still can’t get it right in Tlingit.

The biggest problem we usually face in bilingual education is convincing monolingual people of its intellectual and spiritual value! Their minds are often closed to bilingual education, perhaps because their minds have never been opened through the experience of another language.

How our lives can make a difference in language and literature

I want to turn now to the most important part of this paper. I have described how literature and language can make a difference in our lives. But is the reverse true? Can our lives make a difference on language and literature, in reversing language and knowledge shift, in preventing or slowing down the ever-increasing loss of indigenous languages and the traditional knowledge they convey and contain? The answer is yes and no.

Let’s look at the “no” first. Friends of ours, whom some of you know from their work in Alaska and northern Canada, Ron and Suzanne Scollon, now at Georgetown University, have taught English and linguistics in Hong Kong for several years. Ron has described to me how different it feels to do research on Chinese, in contrast to Alaska Native languages. Over 700 million people speak Putonghua (“Common Talk,” standard modern Chinese, formerly called Mandarin). Over 60 million speak Cantonese. There are a dozen or so additional Chinese languages or “dialects” with at least one million speakers each. Nothing we can do will have an impact on Chinese, for better or for worse. Chinese has been around for centuries and is continuing to grow. The Chinese invented printing, and books have been around for centuries. So Ron is having fun studying Chinese language and literacy, but both will be around long after all of us are gone, and nothing we say or do will have any impact on how the Chinese use or feel about their language and literature.

It’s the same with my translating Classical Greek poetry. I do it because it’s fun, but it won’t have any impact on the language or the field. Classical Greek has been gone for over a thousand years, although modern Greek is alive and well. Scholars have been studying and writing about ancient Greek ever since the Romans started teaching it as a foreign language in their schools. One more poet translating

Asklepiados in the Juneau rain will have little impact on the literary fate of the *Greek Anthology*.

It's a little different with creative writing in English. As a poet, I hope to create something new, and make the modest contribution to the world of literature, but nothing I do will affect the survival of the English language one way or another. It's also somewhat different with lesser-known languages, whose literatures are less widely translated. I am happy that my translations of modern Finnish poetry from almost 40 years ago have helped introduce that literature to English readers; but the Finnish language is also alive and well, and other translators have come along and added to that body of literature in translation. Likewise my recent translation work with colleagues in Russia, translating the Native languages of Siberia: I am translating the Buriat *Epic of Almzhi Mergen* into English for the first time, but the Buriat language (very similar to Mongolian) is alive and well, with about 300,000 speakers. My Buriat colleagues are delighted that their national epic is finally being translated into a major world language other than Russian; it's great for the ethnic "PR," but it will have no impact on their own language and its survival.

As Michael Krauss has argued for years, nothing the University of Alaska (or any other school) does in German, French, or Spanish will have any impact on those languages. But what we do with Alaska Native languages will have impact. One more student paper on Spencer or Dryden will not change English literature. But a term paper or project on the oral literature of a village elder could very well impact Alaska Native literature, and contribute greatly to our understanding and appreciation, like Nora Dauenhauer's paper described above, or Christopher Koonooka's (2003) book, described in this volume. It's not like a new translation of Confucius or Homer; it's like writing Homer down for the first time. I hope it's not too prideful to say that some of my students of 30 years ago have given eternal life to oral performances that were ephemeral. I am proud of them, and of the elders who consented to work with them. They have given the world of literature something that was not there before.

So, we can make a difference with Alaska Native literature. A good example is Eyak, which now has one speaker, in contrast to the 700 million of Putonghua. The work that Michael Krauss did with Anna Nelson Harry will remain as permanent record of Eyak literature, now that the living oral literature is gone (Krauss 1982). What one elder and one apprentice scribe can do to document a speech or story can make a permanent contribution to the place in world literature of an Alaska Native oral tradition. Michael Krauss has degrees from French and Icelandic universities, and a Ph.D. dissertation on Irish Gaelic, but I cannot imagine what impact any 45 years of work he might have done in Irish, French, Icelandic, or Faroese language and literature would have made compared to his work on Eyak and other Alaska Native languages. This includes language work that he has done directly, by himself, or indirectly through support of many Alaska Native writers and students of their own languages.

We are fortunate now that in the last 35 years so many talented Native writers have worked with their own languages and oral literatures, most of them beginning through the encouragement of Michael Krauss and his colleagues: Eliza Jones, Katherine Peter,

Elsie Mather, Edna MacLean to mention a few; and for Tlingit, my wife, Nora, and many other writers in various communities. This is the kind of work that will make a difference, and I am happy and fortunate to have been able to play a part in this. For Tlingit we were able to build on the orthographic and linguistic contributions of Constance Naish and Gillian Story of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, but I should take this opportunity to emphasize for the record that our work would not have become what it is without the encouragement and support of Michael Krauss. Many of the elegant and expanded editions of our Tlingit texts and grammars published today by Sealaska Heritage Institute and the University of Washington Press were drafted over 30 years ago with the support of the Alaska Native Language Center.

Michael Krauss expresses the philosophy behind this in his “Manifesto” of December 13, 2003, read at the October 2004 symposium in Quebec. “Linguists must lead in recognizing the absolute value of all languages: not only as objects of study for themselves, but also as treasuries of knowledge, culture, and identity, of nationhood itself. I am a linguist at that sense, inheriting a distinctly Hebraic tradition of preservation and empowerment of language by writing—then the latest technology—that is, documentation or permanent record of [...] Jehovah’s speech to Moses” (see also Krauss in this volume).

I’d like to turn for a few minutes to the subject of preservation. The word is widely used. You hear about “preserving the language and culture.” But what do we mean by “preserve”? I see two meanings, and I think it’s important to distinguish between them. We can preserve berries in two ways: by making jam, and by keeping the berry patch alive. We can preserve fish in two ways: by somehow putting it up as dryfish, smoked fish, frozen, canned or jarred; and by keeping the salmon stream and salmon run alive. It’s very important to distinguish between jam and the berry patch, between canned salmon and the salmon stream. As great as documentation is, it remains canned salmon and jam. The wonderful, ancient poems that survive in the *Greek Anthology*, the powerful speech by Jessie Dalton that survives because someone taped it and someone wrote it down, as beautiful as they are, are still preserves like jam or dryfish. For ancient Greek, the berry patch is gone. For ceremonial speeches in the Tlingit language, the salmon run is endangered, but we are encouraged by the new generation of Tlingit students and their wonderful enthusiasm. For the first time in 30 years, we are reaching a “critical mass” both of students of Tlingit and Haida, and of institutional support, and we have renewed hope for an optimistic outcome.

It is one thing to preserve through documentation; it is another to preserve through sustaining the language and tradition. It is important to understand that for Tlingit, for example, my wife and I can do much to document the oral literature, but we can do little or nothing to keep the living tradition alive. We can’t make agendas for other people. No linguist can save language X for someone else. We can document a language, we can learn a language ourselves, but transmitting it to another generation is a different process. For a language to survive as a living language, it requires a hearth or market-place—ideally both. By this, we mean that either children still learn the language at home (or hearth), or, if they don’t, there is some commercial or economic reason to learn and use it (a market-place). Some languages people use at home; others

they use on the street. Millions of people use English for both; additional millions of people around the world learn and use English in the market-place, but learn and use other languages at home.

The problem for Alaska Native languages is that we are rapidly losing both the hearth and market place. For the languages with which I am most familiar, Tlingit and Haida, there is neither. No woman of childbearing age still speaks Tlingit or Haida as a first language. In most cases, even the grandparents now no longer speak Tlingit or Haida. There is no commercial reason in the modern world to learn Tlingit or Haida. Many funny stories survive in Tlingit oral tradition about Henry Moses and Charlie and Izzy Goldstein, Jewish merchants and fur traders of the early 20th century who learned to speak Tlingit fluently. They learned it on the playground at school with Tlingit kids, and they used it as adults to do business with Tlingit. In those days, more people spoke Tlingit in Juneau than English. Tlingit had a hearth and a market-place. But we can't learn the language that way any more. It will no longer happen automatically.

Today, our motives must be spiritual, cultural, intellectual, or personal in some other way. Today, the methods we use to learn and teach the language must be artificial. We try to make these methods similar to hearth and market-place, and as natural as possible, but they remain artificial. They can also be alien and bewildering to native speaking people who want to teach the language, but have trouble teaching it to kids in school. The biggest challenge today in teaching of Alaska Native languages is how to design school, community, or family programs that really work. We believe that these languages can be learned and used, but there are undeniable challenges to learning and to transmission to another generation. For learners whose first language is now English, many of the Alaska Native languages, especially Na-Dene languages, are extremely difficult to learn for many technical reasons such as complex sounds and grammar; but, in addition, there are many emotional and political barriers to Native language instruction. For many, if not most languages, we have at least some instructional materials. The big problems are emotional and political. By emotional, I mean dealing openly and honestly with the mixed feelings that many Native people have regarding the use and preservation of their languages. I'll return to this more later. By political, I mean getting the materials into schools. Let me rant and rave about this right now.

I get aggravated and frustrated with colleagues and administrators who argue to extend French or Spanish down to the fifth grade, but who continue to find all kinds of reasons not include Alaska Native languages anywhere in the curriculum. I have nothing against French or any other language in the fifth grade—the more, the better—but languages should not be pitted against each other in such ways, or an elective course in a Native language should not be scheduled in conflict with courses required for graduation. The University commitment should be more than hiring a speaker off the street for a one-credit conversation course. Year after year, schools and colleges have sent people into the classroom with no training or ongoing support to teach Alaska Native languages, and they wonder why the programs fail and the teachers get discouraged. The message being sent is loud and clear: “Native languages are useless and obsolete; they are not real languages and shouldn't be taught along with German

and Japanese.” And: “We won’t let you teach English without years of training and all kinds of books, but for Native languages, you don’t need any.” These messages have been making a difference for over 100 years. These are now fewer than 10 Haida speakers in Alaska, probably less than 50 speakers on the entire earth. There are less than 500 speakers of Tlingit. These figures, by the way, are now generous estimates and are about half of what they were in the original paper of 10 years ago. What the schools do about Haida and Tlingit and other Alaska Native languages can make a difference. I am happy to note that the situation has greatly improved, and many schools and colleges now enjoy the enthusiastic support of the administration for Native language programs. This is the end of my rant and rave and pointing the finger at the schools. As one Tlingit elder once said, when you point at someone else you have three fingers pointing back at you. Let’s look at ourselves a bit.

Achievement: finding out what each of us can do, and doing it

I’d like to end by considering achievement. I take achievement to mean finding out what each of us can do and doing it. There are many kinds of achievement. We usually think of it in academic, professional, and career terms. But it can be anything. For all of us, part of it must mean being who we are: a child or sibling, a father or mother, a spouse, a grandparent, a teacher or an elder. Part of achievement has to include being a loving, competent, and caring member of a family or community. It means staying healthy and being sober. It means discovering and doing what we are uniquely called to do as a family and community provider, whether with cash or hunting or fishing, sewing or cooking or childrearing.

The traumas of language and cultural suppression and loss have certainly contributed to the dysfunctional dynasties, families, and communities we find throughout the circumpolar north. We feel that stopping and reversing this shift can be part of the healing process, and it is well underway in many individuals, families, and communities. Like the Twelve Steps of AA, it starts with personal awareness, making decisions, and taking action, and then expands from there (see Arundale 2003).

Because I’m describing language survival here, I want to focus on that. There are many different roles, many separate challenges, many ways in which to achieve: as a reader or listener; as a writer or storyteller, as a speaker of a language or as a learner. It may be something as basic and important as speaking the language to children and grandchildren, thereby keeping it alive. It may be working with elders to tape record and write down their stories. It may be teaching the language in the schools. It may be through providing administrative support. Whatever it is, it’s finding what we can do, here and now, not procrastinating, and not making agendas for others as a substitute for taking personal responsibility and action.

There are often barriers to achievement, and I’d like to mention a few. Most of these have to do with race, identity, and self-concept. The particular role we play is a very personal thing. For many of us it is a very spiritual thing as well, and the way is not always easy and clear. One way or another, it requires being in spiritual connection

with our higher powers in whatever way we can. The Biblical admonition is “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it.” The word “blessed” in English is connected to the word “bliss.” The Greek word used in the Bible means “happy.” I mention this because I believe the achievement we’re talking about should be a happy and positive thing. But one of the biggest barriers is guilt. Many Native people feel guilty and ashamed because they speak a Native language. Many other Native people feel guilty and ashamed because they do *not* speak a Native language. I have heard some Tlingit elders publicly denounce the younger generation for not speaking Tlingit, even denying that they have a right to consider themselves Tlingit. (Ironically, these elders are denying their own grandchildren, and seem unaware of the complex and insidious process by which languages are abandoned when no longer spoken to children.) It would be ridiculous to suggest that God does not like Hebrew or Greek, but there are many elders who feel that God does not like Tlingit or Haida. I have heard public statements that Tlingit culture is an abomination in the sight of God, and that teaching Tlingit is demonic. (Ironically, English is as pagan and demonic as it gets: look at our names for days of the week and months of the year; even our word “God” is pagan in origin.) These are difficult problems to resolve, and each person must sort these things out for him or herself. One of my favorite family quotes is from my wife’s Auntie Jenny Marks, who said, “God made us with our language and culture. How can it be bad?”

The opposite extreme can also be a barrier: to insist or expect that all Native American persons speak and appreciate the ancestral or heritage language. This is not something we expect or require of other ethnic groups. In my own case, I am of Irish and German ancestry. I have studied German since high school, and I have a master’s degree in German. I’ve studied a little about Irish, but I don’t know any Irish beyond being able to read the signs on the bathroom door and distinguish the Ladies from the Gents. Each of us has only one lifetime, and we are often called in many directions. The trick is to find the one that is right for us, what the Zen Buddhists call the “path with heart.” Nothing prevents a college student of Yupik, Tlingit, or Athabaskan heritage from majoring in French or Classical Greek. Speakers of English, French, Danish, and other languages become fascinated with Inupiaq; conversely, there is nothing wrong with persons of that heritage studying Scandinavian linguistics, or French or English literature, just as N. Scott Momaday studied Emily Dickinson, although it might not make the same impact (and in his case, he writes in English, not Kiowa).

Learning Tlingit is not every Tlingit’s cup of tea. There is no reason to expect this any more than to expect that every American of German ancestry should speak German. No one should feel guilty for speaking Tlingit, and no one should feel guilty for not speaking it. (Or, if you do feel guilty, then do something about it.) This can too easily degenerate into a no-win situation: you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t. We need to view difference of opinion with tolerance, and work to create “I’m OK, You’re OK” situations. The main difference between German and Tlingit is that if German dies out among German-Americans, there are three countries full of speakers in Europe. For Native American languages, this is the homeland. If the language dies out here, there’s nowhere else to go.

Another barrier is oversimplification. Many Native people have “bought into” the misconception that the Native languages are simple, and can be learned quickly and effortlessly, especially if one is Native. (I call this the genetic fallacy.) These are very intricate and complex languages. It took the elders a lifetime to master the vocabulary, cultural contexts, and the full range of stylistic variation and communicative competence. It will take beginners a while to learn even the basics. It’s not something you do next week or next time they offer it. It’s not something you finish in a semester or a year. These are not languages you just “pick up.” They demand tremendous commitment.

Another factor to consider is the role of parents and the older generations as role models. When it comes to language retention, we can’t be like the parents who send their children off to church or Sunday school, but stay at home themselves. For language, this creates the illusion of “surrogate survivors,” that the toddlers will somehow master the heritage language and keep it alive, even if we can’t. The alternative to this is families studying the language together, like the Suzuki method of music teaching. We advocate this in our “Axe Handle Curriculum” mentioned above (Scollon and Scollon 2002).

I think the biggest barrier to achievement of language preservation is racism. It certainly underlies most of what I have just been talking about, and it haunts almost every classroom or language project I know of. There are whites who oppose the teaching of Native language and culture. On the other hand, there are whites who are more excited about learning Tlingit than many Tlingit are. Beginning Tlingit teachers are always amazed at how well the white kids do. It’s not genetic; it has to do with attitude and expectations. There are Natives who don’t want whites involved with their language. I’ve never been accused of stealing German or Russian, but I have been accused of stealing Tlingit. If I had a dollar for every accusation of getting rich off of Tlingit, I’d be a rich man today. On the other hand, there are Natives who expect schools and white linguists to save their languages for them, and blame them when they don’t. These are tough questions to sort through and resolve, but I believe that these race and identity related issues lie at the heart of Native language preservation in Alaska today. Any effective reversal of language and knowledge shift must begin with an open, honest assessment of the community situation, as part of what Fishman (1991) calls “ideological clarification.” I also believe that much of the emotion is connected with the stages of grief described by Dr. Elizabeth Kübler Ross in her books on death and dying. As we all know, most of the Alaska Native languages are moribund. According to Michael Krauss, of the 20 Alaska Native languages, only two are still being spoken by children.

Conclusion

It is with the image of children that I would like to conclude, by turning to the oldest written document in western literature, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, composed about 5,000 years ago, and preserved on clay tablets in various now-extinct middle-eastern languages, in what is now war-torn Iraq. When the hero's friend dies, the hero journeys to the afterlife and angrily challenges the gods, asking why people have to die. Why can't people live forever, like the gods do? One of the deities replies, explaining that immortality is really pretty dull. Nothing ever changes. And he tells the hero: "Cherish the little one holding your hand. That is the lot of humankind."

None of us will live forever. No language lives forever. *Gilgamesh* survives because someone wrote it down 3,000 or 4,000 years ago; because some archeologist found the clay tablets in the desert and some linguist eventually deciphered them. We need to cherish our languages today, and the people who still speak them, or who might someday learn to understand or speak them in ways that are meaningful to them. We need to cherish each other and ourselves. We need to recognize what we need to do, achieve the skills we need to do those things, and then do them, and in so doing, hope to make a difference.

Some of us are called upon to document; to preserve the jam and smoke the salmon. Others of us are called upon to preserve the berry patch and salmon stream. Whatever the role to which we are called, we need to train and discipline ourselves to do the best job we can, in the hope and belief that we can make a difference in reversing language and knowledge shift in the North.

Acknowledgments

I thank my colleague Virginie Duverger for the French translation of the abstract.

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