

KEYNOTE ADDRESS:
THE CRITICAL NEXT STEP FOR ALASKA NATIVE LANGUAGES

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Alaska Native language maintenance and revitalization is the subject of Edna Ahgeak MacLean's keynote address, given on March 16, 2013, at the 40th Annual Meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association in Anchorage. MacLean holds a Ph.D. in Education from Stanford University. Among her many accomplishments, she developed and taught Iñupiaq language courses at the University of Alaska Fairbanks from 1976 to 1987, served as president of Iłisaġvik College in Barrow from 1995 to 2005, and recently completed a comprehensive dictionary of North Slope Iñupiaq (MacLean, in press), which will be available in 2014.

ABSTRACT

Despite the establishment of Alaska Native language programs in Alaska's schools, use of indigenous languages is declining. The former policy of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs to eradicate the use of Alaska Native languages in schools and homes will succeed unless the community members assist. Adults who were abused as school children for speaking their Native languages must now be recruited to champion language revival programs in their communities. The time is right for a realignment of resources and the creation of opportunities to nurture our indigenous languages.

Paġlagivsi! Aarigaa maaniitchumiñaġama. Greetings! It's wonderful to be here. I've enjoyed the conference and I thank Aron Crowell, director of the Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution, for inviting me. And thank you all for being here today. I am Edna Ahgeak MacLean, an Iñupiaq from Barrow, Alaska.

Many of you have heard of the abuse that Alaska Native children received from their teachers in the Bureau of Indian Affairs day schools for speaking their Native languages in the schools. The mistreatment was widespread, but I will focus on the issue using the Alaska North Slope region, and specifically my home town. The observations I make are based on the experiences that I shared with my fellow Iñupiat of Barrow, who are now the ages of fifty-five and older.¹

My intent is not to focus on the abuse itself but to try to understand my and my fellow classmates' reaction to the situation we find ourselves in today because of the abuse. Because I am included in this group, I will use the



first person pronouns “we” and “us” to refer to this group throughout my talk.

I am Iñupiaq. I grew up in the Iñupiaq culture and language of my community and was punished for speaking Iñupiaq in the school of the same community.

The purpose of schooling was to teach us English and for us to learn non-Iñupiaq knowledge so we could assimilate into the American culture quickly. The method that some of the teachers chose to teach us English was to beat Iñupiaq out of us.² I’ve wondered why the teachers chose this method when other noncruel learning methods were known.

Some of my friends dropped out of school because they did not understand English well and were punished for speaking Iñupiaq. Most of the time they were asking questions of other students in Iñupiaq for clarification of what the teacher wanted us to do.

Many of us hung in there because we had to. We endured the humiliation whenever any of our classmates were subjected to verbal or physical abuse for inadvertently speaking Iñupiaq.

We were sent to boarding schools by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for our high school years, away from our communities. Some of us enjoyed those years away from home, learning new things about the world we found ourselves in. But some of us felt terribly homesick and went back home and became immersed once again in the subsistence lifestyle and joined the workforce in our communities.

Many of us who stayed in the schooling process became more fluent and literate in the English language. We used Iñupiaq less and less, but we did not forget it. We returned to our Iñupiaq communities for the summers.

After graduation from high school in the late 1950s, 1960s, and into the mid-1970s, many of us left our home communities again for further schooling in trade schools and colleges, becoming carpenters, plumbers, electricians, heavy equipment operators, electronic technicians, airplane and car mechanics, secretaries, teachers, nurses, and lawyers.

Upon graduation from the trade schools and colleges, some of us melted into communities outside of our Iñupiaq communities, but many returned home to live and work.

We became immersed in the hunting culture with its associated activities and increased our knowledge and use of the Iñupiaq language.

Learning the English language and the American ways of behavior had been a good thing since we needed

the English language, the knowledge of the American culture, and the technology skills associated with English to succeed in further education and to participate in the society we found ourselves in.

We returned to our communities as the civil rights movement, the bilingual education discussion, the Alaska land claims movement, and the emergence of the North Slope Borough government began. We worked hard within our communities to see successful conclusions. These were exciting and stressful times. We needed a good command of both English and Iñupiaq in order to participate fully. We communicated in Iñupiaq with our elders and we communicated in English with our partners and our adversaries.

Unfortunately, during all of this time we did not speak Iñupiaq to our children. We spoke Iñupiaq with each other, with our parents, and other adult members of our communities, but we did not speak Iñupiaq with our children. We talked to our children in English.

Because we did not speak Iñupiaq with our children, we have lost Iñupiaq as the first language of communication in our homes and in our Iñupiaq communities. Now, English is the language of communication in almost all of our families and in all of our communities. And Iñupiaq has become an endangered language. Our young people do not speak Iñupiaq fluently. The child-bearing women in our communities do not speak Iñupiaq. Consequently none of the very young are learning Iñupiaq at home.

The elementary and the high schools are having difficulty finding Iñupiaq-speaking teachers for the local Iñupiaq language programs. The local college is having a hard time finding fluent Iñupiaq speakers to participate in an Iñupiaq language nest³ program for preschoolers.

The only fluent speakers of Iñupiaq left are us—the grandparent generation who were abused or were always under the threat of abuse for speaking Iñupiaq in school, and are now hesitant to speak Iñupiaq to children and to young people. We are the resource which must be mobilized and persuaded to speak Iñupiaq to our young people and young children. We are now retired from eight-to-five jobs and some of us are available to help in community Iñupiaq language programs, but we do not. We’ve allowed our children to attend Iñupiaq bilingual classes but we did not speak Iñupiaq to them at home when they returned from the schools. And now our children send our grandchildren to Iñupiaq immersion classes in the schools, but

we still do not speak Iñupiaq to either our children or to our grandchildren.

Many of us believe the abuse we experienced at the hands of our teachers is the reason we find ourselves unable to speak in Iñupiaq to our children and grandchildren. This is probably true. We need to understand why it is so hard to speak Iñupiaq to our children and grandchildren. Some of us have said it is because we love our children too much. We do not want them to experience what we had to endure in school. We are angry that we had to endure the harsh treatment from our teachers for speaking Iñupiaq, and now resent the schools for wanting our children and grandchildren to learn Iñupiaq. We are afraid that we will not be understood by our children and grandchildren if we speak Iñupiaq to them. We do not want them to experience the communication gap that we experienced so many times in our classrooms with a teacher who was intent on eradicating our Iñupiaq language, the only language we were fluent in. We are afraid that we will not have the patience to deal with children who may have a hard time learning Iñupiaq. We do not want to become like our teachers.

Although physical punishment was overtly painful, the humiliation received by children made to stand in waste baskets for periods of time for speaking Iñupiaq was crushing. In 1983, Sixten S.R. Haraldson, a renowned medical doctor and anthropologist, stated in his address to an Alaska Federation of Natives education conference: “socio-medical problems of increasing dimensions among traditional groups, such as alcoholism, divorce, suicide, neurosis, and juvenile delinquency have been explained by deculturation.” Deculturation via language replacement and relocation was the purpose of school for many of us. The disastrous results have been and still continue to exist in many Alaska Native communities.

In 1977, Eben Hopson, the first mayor of the North Slope Borough, made a statement which many of us agree with. He said:

Many of our people believed that formal educational systems would help us acquire the scientific knowledge of the western world. However, it was more than technological knowledge that the educators wished to impart. The educational policy was to attempt to assimilate us into the American mainstream at the expense of our culture. The schools were committed to teaching us to forget our language and Iñupiat heritage (Hopson 1977).

The relocation and punishment practices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under the policy of eradicating our Native Alaskan languages is working. The Bureau of Indian Affairs may have shut many of us up from ever speaking our Native languages to our children and our grandchildren. Some of us have provided linguistic information to researchers, written grammars, dictionaries, and documented stories and histories—all activities that do not require us to speak Iñupiaq to children.

But now many of us realize we have to somehow change this behavior before it is too late. We are the last fluent speakers of Iñupiaq.

We do want our children and grandchildren to become fluent in Iñupiaq, but we do not help them learn to speak the language. This is our conundrum.

Our young people want to become fluent speakers of our Iñupiaq language. They want to identify with us. They want us to give them the Iñupiaq language. We have heard this plea from our young people at every conference for many years now. Yet we do not respond.

Some of us try but we quickly become discouraged as we face the prospect of not being understood. Now we are faced with a situation where the Iñupiaq language may never again be a language of communication in our families, unless the most critical resources—*us*, the Iñupiaq-speaking grandparents—are mobilized to speak Iñupiaq to our grandchildren in our homes.

I believe that in order to be effectively mobilized, we first need to understand why we experienced so much abuse from our teachers, then get rid of the barriers that prevent us from communicating in Iñupiaq to our grandchildren.

We, the grandparent generation, must come to grips with our experiences of abuse for speaking Iñupiaq, then move from there. We can no longer let those experiences impede our participation in the efforts to revitalize the Iñupiaq language on the North Slope of Alaska. We need to understand our children and our grandchildren will not be harmed by learning and speaking Iñupiaq. We need reassurances that our children and grandchildren will not fall behind academically in English by learning Iñupiaq.

A few of us know that learning another language well can only enhance a child’s ability to learn, but many do not. Many children in other cultures, for instance in Europe, grow up in fully bi- or even multilingual households. This type of information needs to be shared to reassure us that we are doing the right thing by speaking Iñupiaq to our children.

We know that unless *we* begin to speak Iñupiaq and insist that Iñupiaq be spoken around our grandchildren and our young people, we will definitely lose our Iñupiaq language. This knowledge is a source of impending grief for us. We realize if we do not begin speaking Iñupiaq in our communities on the North Slope, the Iñupiaq language will become extinct. We know the schools cannot by themselves save our languages. They need help from us.

The children need to hear us speak Iñupiaq to them. They need to hear us tell stories in Iñupiaq. They need to hear us explain hunting practices to them in Iñupiaq. They need to hear us speak about the land, the ocean, the animals, and the Iñupiaq way of life in Iñupiaq.

The children need to hear us comfort them in Iñupiaq. And we need to hear our grandchildren speak to us in Iñupiaq.

I think we can achieve a critical point in the language revitalization process if we can just get all the players and programs involved working together, and convince the fluent Iñupiaq speakers to participate and be part of the process. I believe several components need to be in place for the revitalization process to begin and to gain momentum.

First, we need to develop systemic plans of action for each North Slope community to increase opportunities for our children and grandchildren to listen to and speak Iñupiaq in each of our communities. This plan must take into account the existing Iñupiaq language learning programs and efforts. Their successes and their resources or lack thereof need to be understood.

The Iñupiaq language programs in our schools are doing their best, but the school-based second language teaching does not produce students able to carry on a sustained social conversation about the weather, what's for dinner, or what's happening in our communities. There is a need for our schools to begin graduating students with basic conversational ability in Iñupiaq. This has not happened yet, but there is hope that this will be beginning soon, as the district has embarked on a new program for learning Iñupiaq based on an accelerated approach to learning a language. One of the basic premises of this approach is to use only the Iñupiaq language in interaction with the students.

The local college has embarked on the development of an Iñupiaq language nest program for a limited number of preschoolers. They are having difficulty finding enough Iñupiaq speakers to work with them. But they are moving in the right direction. No word of English is heard by the

preschoolers in the language nest. The only language they hear is the Iñupiaq language. According to the director of the program, the preschoolers are learning Iñupiaq fast.

This is a very recent undertaking and, if the college continues with this program, it may be the spark that ignites the revitalization of the Iñupiaq language.

In May 1975, my family moved to Denmark to spend a year there. Our sons were three and five years old then. We enrolled them in a Danish *børnehave*⁴ from Monday to Friday. They were speaking fluent Danish in two months. They were surrounded by Danish and they learned it quickly. The same thing happened in Finland when they were nine and eleven years old.

This is probably what is happening in the Iļisagvik College Uqautchim Uglua [language nest] program for the preschoolers.

Besides the school and the college, there are no other organizations in the Barrow community using the Iñupiaq language on a daily basis to conduct a program or to carry on business.

Second, the systemic plans of action for each community must be developed in collaboration with representatives of local organizations, such as the Iñupiaq dance groups, churches, whaling captains' associations, to name a few. Each organization will be asked if they want to be part of the Iñupiaq language revitalization effort, and, if so, to identify what opportunities they can provide for the use of the Iñupiaq language in their organizations. For example, a church may be able to provide space for an Iñupiaq language choir classroom, hopefully with a couple or more Iñupiaq-speaking choir masters. The Ukpeaġvik Iñupiat Village Corporation may be willing to produce durable signs in Iñupiaq for restaurants, churches, schools and ask each organization to hang a sign on their premises. The Iñupiaq dance groups may be able to conduct their practices all in Iñupiaq. The systemic plan can also provide for a program of Iñupiaq language materials development following the example of the Pūnana Leo [language immersion program] of Hawaii, where they asked community members to create materials which would be used in the language nests.

Third, there must be a cadre of dedicated fluent Iñupiaq speakers willing to work alongside the local organizations. For example, there could be a cadre of Iñupiaq speakers willing to nurture preschoolers in Iñupiaq in the language nests which could be established in some of our communities. Each cadre of Iñupiaq speakers could be available as resources or as instructors if needed. This will

take some practice on our part. We have to determine that we will *not* switch to English when we face a young child. A flexible plan of participation will also be needed for the fluent speakers who want to help out in the Iñupiaq language programs. Most of the fluent Iñupiaq speakers are above the age of fifty-five years, so many may not want to or cannot participate all day long from eight to five, so flexible hours of participation will need to be established.

Fourth, we need coordinators who will not give up easily and will devote their time to the development and maintenance of the Iñupiaq language on the North Slope.

In short, we need information, training, and good systemic plans for each community together with organizers with good communication skills and cooperative spirits to make any language revitalization successful. Being prepared, I believe, is the best motivator.

In conclusion, we need not stand by helplessly as we witness the gradual loss of our Iñupiaq language. We can be mobilized to turn the tide by experiencing the joy of hearing our grandchildren speak to us in Iñupiaq. That happened to me a couple of weeks ago. One of my two granddaughters lives in the same city I do. I speak Iñupiaq to her whenever I am with her. I know she understands me most of the time when I speak to her in Iñupiaq, but she had not yet answered me in Iñupiaq, except to say *quyanaqpak* ["thank you very much"] when prompted, until last week.

Last week while driving her home from school, I asked her in Iñupiaq if she liked the raspberries I brought for her snack. Without hesitation, as she was readying herself to play with one of her games on my iPhone, she answered, "Ii, aaka. Aarigaa!" Those three words in Iñupiaq spoken without hesitation brought joy to my heart. Tears of joy sprung to my eyes. I had not anticipated that burst of joy. It was beautiful!

I want to experience the joy again. I want all of us to experience the joy I felt when my granddaughter answered me in Iñupiaq.

Quyanaqpak.

ENDNOTES

1. "From about 1910 to about 1960 a deathly silence descends over the Alaska Native language scene. This third period, half a century long, of complete suppression, was to prove fatal for many of the Native languages. During this time the school system was transferred from the U.S. Bureau of Education to the

Bureau of Indian Affairs, which together with most of the mission schools continued the active anti-Native language policy" (Krauss 1980:24).

2. "However, the long dark age, 1910 to 1970, of linguistic suppression in the schools had meanwhile done irreparable harm to the life of most of Alaska's twenty Native languages. Children were slapped, beaten, ridiculed, punished for speaking their own languages in school" (Krauss 1980:98).

See also *History of the Iñupiat: Nipaa Ilitqusipta / The Voice of Our Spirit* (2008), a DVD produced by Nanjinaaq Film Productions for the Alaska Native Education Program, North Slope Borough School District, Barrow.

3. A language nest program is an immersion-based approach to language revitalization.
4. A *børnehave* is similar to an all-day preschool and kindergarten. The children receive structured play times and lessons as well as care and nutritional meals.

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