ALUTIIQ: A LANGUAGE ON THE EDGE

by April Laktonen Counceller

The Central Gulf of Alaska stretches from the middle of the Alaska Peninsula, across the Kodiak Archipelago and the southern Kenai Peninsula to Prince William Sound (Figure 3). Despite its large size and varied environments, with glaciers, fjords, spruce forests, coastal meadows, and tundra, this region is culturally cohesive. Archaeological data illustrate a succession of similar maritime cultures occupied the Central Gulf for more than 7,300 years, and that at the time of historic contact the region was densely populated by a people with a shared language. A variety of terms have been used to refer to the region’s indigenous people: Aleut, Alutiiq, Koniag, Chugach, Sugpiaq, and even Pacific Eskimo. The use of these terms provides a background for understanding the history of the Central Gulf’s Native language.

Aleut is a term introduced by Russian traders, who used this word to refer to most of the Native groups of southwest Alaska: the Unangan from the Aleutian Chain, the Sugpiaq from the South Central coast, and the Central Yup’ik from the Bering Sea coast. Thus, the word Aleut is acknowledged as a relic from the historic

Figure 3. The Central Gulf of Alaska—the Alutiiq / Sugpiaq homeland.
era, one that lacks specificity as a cultural self-designator. Despite this situation, many Kodiak Elders use the term Aleut due to its long history (Pullar 1994). While few young people use Aleut, it is common for Kodiak Elders to apply this term to both the people and the language. Younger people will typically use Alutiiq in the same conversation, and the terms are understood to be interchangeable and based on personal preference.

The term “Alutiiq” was first adopted during the Russian era as a way of saying Aleuty (Russian for “Aleuts”) in our Native language (Leer 2001; Holmberg 1985). It came into use again in the 1970s and 1980s, and was selected purposefully by Kodiak leaders as the name for the Alutiiq Museum. While Alutiiq is the most commonly used self-designator on Kodiak today, others people from our same language family choose the self designator “Sugpiaq.” This is especially true on the Kenai Peninsula, and among those who have relocated to Anchorage where contact with other Native groups is common. Like the terms Yup’ik and Inupiaq, Sugpiaq means “real person” (Counceller 2010). For those who choose Sugpiaq, the term is felt to be more traditional. In contrast, proponents of the term Alutiiq feel their choice acknowledges the unique Russian history of the region while also reflecting the Native language pronunciation. Others are simply tired of changing the name of their cultural group.

The terms used to describe the language typically follow the use of self-designators. Elders who call themselves Aleut usually use the same word for the language. People who prefer Alutiiq will often call their Native language “the Alutiiq Language,” or “Alutiiqstun” meaning “like an Alutiiq” or “in the Alutiiq way.” Those who go by Sugpiaq typically refer to the language as Sug’tstun, which means “like a person” or in the “Sugpiaq way.” Because members of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq community are used to interacting with others who choose different self-designators, it is common to hear the language referred to by any and all of these terms in one conversation! For the purposes of this book, the primary term used will be Alutiiq, but it should be understood that either term is acceptable.

Another term used for the Alutiiq people, particularly by scholars, is Pacific Eskimo. The term emphasizes linguistic and cultural connections between Alutiiq culture and neighboring coastal cultures to the North, but it has never been used locally. Pacific Eskimo is not well liked in the Alutiiq region, as few people consider themselves “Eskimos.” Some even consider the term pejorative (Pullar 1992). However, there is a growing awareness that our language is related to the languages spoken in other parts of Alaska, and that it is part of a large language family that spans the North American Arctic.

The language spoken by Alutiiq people belongs to what linguists call the “Esk-Aleut” language family (Woodbury 1984). This group of related languages covers a geographic area stretching from the Gulf of Alaska where Alutiiq is spoken, west across the Unangan speaking world in the Aletuan Islands, and then north. In western coastal Alaska Native people speak the Yup’ik languages, and along the state’s far northern coast reside speakers of Inupiaq. Beyond Alaska, across of Northern Canada and Greenland, indigenous people speak a variety of Inuit languages marking the eastern extent of the Esk-Aleut language family (Figure 4).

The language spoken in the Alutiiq region is most closely related to Central Yup’ik (Krauss 1982). Speakers of both languages report a significant amount of mutual intelligibility — they can understand much of each other’s speech. However, there are also misunderstandings between the two languages due to differences in word meaning. For example, to a Central Yup’ik speaker the verb qanerluni may mean “to speak, to utter.” To an Alutiiq/ Sugpiaq speaker, it means “to curse” (Leer 1978, Jacobson 1984).

Although Alutiiq and Aleut/Unangan people have been called by the same name, Aleut, our languages have been separated for long enough that speakers of these distinct languages cannot communicate. Our cultures and languages are distinct. This information is not commonly known to outsiders. However, our Elders have long known that “Aleut from Kodiak” is different from the “Aleut of the Chain.”

The language spoken by Alutiiq people has two major dialects: Chugach and Koniag. Koniag Alutiiq is spoken in on the Alaska Peninsula and the Kodiak Archipelago. In contrast, Chugach Alutiiq is spoken on the Kenai Peninsula eastward to Prince William Sound (Figure 3). Within these dialects there are sub-dialectical differences. The Koniag dialect, for example, can be broken into Alaska Peninsula Alutiiq and Kodiak Island Alutiiq. On Kodiak, speakers identify a Northern style, traditionally spoken in the villages of Karluk, Larsen Bay, Afognak, Port Lions, Ouzinkie, and Kodiak. The Southern style is traditionally spoken in Akhiok, Kaguyak, and Old Harbor. There are even differences within these sub-dialects. Elders can often determine a speaker’s village of origin based on their choice of words or way of talking.

The differences between villages and sub-dialects are not major from a linguistic standpoint, but are of central importance to Alutiiq people, as speakers’ identities are tied to village and family connections. For this reason, all language revitalization efforts and materials development must take variation into account. When sub-dialectical variations occur in language materials, the Alutiiq Museum has a standing policy of listing the Northern style first, followed by the Southern style. This practice, also followed by other local language programs, offers respect to the more threatened Northern Kodiak style.

Alutiiq was originally an oral language, without an alphabetical form. Russian priests and Native students developed the first written form of Alutiiq in the early 1800s. These scholars used the Cyrillic alphabet to represent Alutiiq sounds. Remaining texts from this period include the Lord’s Prayer (1816), a catechism (1847), a primer (1848), and a Gospel of St. Matthew (1848). As Dr. Lydia Black laments in "Forgotten Literacy,"
Figure 4. Geographic distribution of Esk-Aleut languages (adapted from Krauss 1995).
although this form of written Alutiiq was used throughout our homeland, it quickly faded after Americanization (Black 2001).

It was during the first 100 years of American rule that the Alutiiq language struggled the most. Although some villagers learned English in addition to Alutiiq and Russian, negative pressure by mission and secular schools taught parents that the Native language would stigmatize their children. Fluent children learned that speaking Alutiiq could result in a ruler to the hand, a soapy rag in the mouth, or other traumatizing punishments. Many children of trilingual parents grew up monolingual, speaking only English in an effort to survive in American society. Today people ask their parents and grandparents why they didn’t pass on the gift of our heritage language. The bitter answer is often that the parents’ love was manipulated by “English only” proponents, who claimed that fluency in a Native language was a detriment to their child’s success.

Dr. Jeff Leer developed the Alutiiq alphabet in use today, work that began in the 1970s (Counceller 2010). The alphabet for the Koniag dialect has 26 letters and is similar to the Yup’ik alphabet and writing system. The Alutiiq alphabet underwent a number of minor modifications over the years, but has returned to the basic form introduced in Leer’s 1978 Kodiak Alutiiq Dictionary (Leer 1978). This writing system is based on Roman alphabet characters, which do not always sound the same as English letters. There are also letters made up of two or even three Roman characters that are considered single letters, such as ll and hh. The Alutiiq alphabet and writing system are used in all Alutiiq Museum language materials, including the Alutiiq Word of the Week. A guide to the sounds of the alphabet, complete with clickable audio files, is available on the language section of the Alutiiq Museum’s website at www.alutiiqmuseum.org. Guides to the Alutiiq writing system are currently in production. The use of a unified writing system has been a central need for collaborative language efforts on Kodiak Island as the community strives to turn the tide on Alutiiq language loss.

Table 1. Estimated number of fluent Alutiiq/Sugpiaq speakers of all dialects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of Speakers</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>Krauss 1982 — Native Peoples &amp; Languages Map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>Krauss 1994 — Many Tongues, Ancient Tales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Krauss 2007 — Native Languages of Alaska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Leer 2010 — Personal Communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Estimated number of fluent Kodiak Alutiiq speakers in 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style of Speaking</th>
<th>Speakers living in the Kodiak Archipelago</th>
<th>Speakers living beyond the Kodiak Archipelago</th>
<th>Total Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Style</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Style</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How many Alutiiq speakers are there today? The exact total is unknown, especially as scholars measure language ability on a scale of fluency ranging from novice to advanced, and ability can vary within one person when measuring understanding versus speaking skills. Generally, fluent speaker counts only identify those with superior language ability. In threatened languages, where no standard method of fluency assessment exists, scholars must sometimes use social rather than scientific tools to measure speaker numbers. For example, they count speakers who are named by other known fluent speakers. The Alutiiq Museum has used phone and small-group Elder polling to develop a fluent speakers list that is added to if existing speakers are identified, and updated when a known fluent speaker passes away.

The Native Peoples and Languages map, produced in 1982 by the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, identified 900 speakers (Krauss 1982). By 1994, the number of speakers had dropped by half (Krauss 1994) (Table 1). A 2003 survey of Kodiak Island identified only 45 partially or fully fluent speakers residing in the archipelago (Hegna 2004), although later surveys identified additional Elder speakers living outside of Kodiak, in places like Anchorage, Wasilla, and Washington state. Due to the regular passing of fluent speakers, whose ages average in the mid 70s, estimates of speaker numbers have been difficult to obtain and are often inaccurate. As of January 2012, the Alutiiq Museum estimates the current number of fluent speakers of the Kodiak Alutiiq sub-dialect to be just 45 (Table 2). All Alutiiq dialects show steady decline. Michael Krauss estimated 200 remaining fluent speakers for all Alutiiq dialects in 2007, and Jeff Leer estimated approximately 150 in 2010 (Krauss 2007). It is likely that the total number of remaining speakers of both the Chugach and Koniag dialects is less than 150 in 2012 (Table 1).
Despite this alarming decline, there is hope for the preservation of the Alutiiq language. Language revitalization projects have developed a small number of new speakers with basic and intermediate levels of fluency. Language learning resources are working their way into classrooms, preschools, and summer camps. And on Kodiak, the sounds of Alutiiq, once carefully hidden from the public, are now joyfully shared through public programs like the Alutiiq Word of the Week.

References

Black, Lydia T.

Counceller, April Gale Laktonen

Hegna, Shauna

Holmberg, Heinrich, J.

Jacobsen, S.
1984 *Yup’ik Eskimo Dictionary*. Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Kraus, Michael


Leer, Jeff


Pullar, Gordon L.


Woodbury, Anthony C.