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Youth, Linguistic Ecology, and Language Endangerment: A Yup'ik Example

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Using data from a longitudinal study, this article traces how in- and out-of-school processes placed youth at the center of a community language tip into English in Piniq, a Yup'ik village in Alaska. During an early phase of language tip, youth underscored bilingual connections to community and place through storytelling with peers. Yet youth were also experiencing linguistic insecurities and losing forms that marked a linguistic orientation to land. Further, adult responses to youth language changes fed vicious cycles of reduced resources for and increasing doubts about bilingualism. Situating and examining young men's seal-hunting stories, the article highlights how youth in the first group to speak mostly English mediated life contingencies, uneven linguistic resources, and apprenticeship experiences as they learned a knowledge system embedded in the life of their community. Implications for educators in rapidly changing linguistic ecologies are discussed.

Key words: language ideology, linguistic ecology, language socialization, youth culture, language endangerment, community knowledge

Within many Indigenous communities in North America, youth live in rapidly changing linguistic ecologies, yet little research has examined how Indigenous youth mediate language shift. This article draws from a larger longitudinal study of young people's bilingualism in Piniq (all names are pseudonyms), a Yup'ik village of 600 in southwestern Alaska, from 1992 to 2001. The study

life of their community. As we will see, youth in the first group to speak mostly English used Yup'ik to connect to community, place, and local knowledge. Yet youth were also experiencing linguistic insecurities and losing linguistic “forms whose possibilities of use ha[d] been explored and learned for many generations” (Woodbury, 1998, p. 256). Further, adult responses to changing youth practices fed vicious cycles of increasing doubts about and reduced resources for bilingualism.

By situating youth language ideologies, trajectories, and practices, we can critically highlight the ways in which (a) linguistic resources are shaped across levels of daily life, timescales, and

STUDYING YOUTH IN LANGUAGE SHIFT COMMUNITIES

Theoretical Framework

Language shift is a notoriously complex phenomenon to document in progress. Often multiple internal and external pressures and processes combine to produce community language shift (Fishman, 1991, 2001). The “choice” to abandon a language involves social assessments about the possibilities and purposes of bilingualism, as well as value judgments about the role of the heritage language in maintaining community. While the “choice” may appear to occur suddenly, often, changing language ideologies—seemingly commonsense assumptions about languages relating to communities’ sociohistorical circumstances—lay the groundwork for shift before it is apparent (Dorian, 1989; Gal, 1979; Kulick, 1992). As we will see in the following, language ideologies may also proliferate quickly when individuals try to maintain or document an endangered language or make sense of language endangerment (Hill, 2006), naturalizing ongoing processes of shift.

Language shift studies must also examine how linguistic resources and language learning opportunities change as youth are socialized by adults, as youth socialize one another and younger children, and as adults interpret and respond to young people’s practices over time (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Kulick, 1992). Further, studies of language shift must take into account the ways that individual forms of bilingualism are shaped by unique life circumstances (Valdés, 2005, Zentella, 1997). By incorporating complex systems theory into language research, scholars are reconceptualizing how learners integrate heterogeneous sets of resources and experiences across longer and shorter processes of socialization, with implications for the formation of identities and language practices (Lemke, 2000). Scholars have also begun to document how individualized, yet overlapping language socialization trajectories account for simi-

later referred to as the last “real speakers” of Yup’ik. During this time I worked with Yup’ik teachers, community members, and youth on an intergenerational project in which students interviewed community elders as the basis for academic work in English and Yup’ik, and as part of a local language documentation project. In the mid-1990s adults and youth were already voicing concerns about language endangerment. As a teacher-researcher, I documented students’ metamesages and language use and critically considered language shift with secondary students. From 1995 to 2000 I lived elsewhere, yet continued to work on the documentation project and discuss language shift with educators.

In 2000 and 2001 I conducted 14 months of ethnographic research on young people’s peer culture and language shift in Piniq. In the 5 years I lived away, language shift had progressed rapidly. Community members quickly identified the last group to use primarily Yup’ik peers (the “real speakers”), and the first group to sp

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Placing Schooling in Linguistic Ecologies

Dominant discourses frame minority language loss as a natural, perhaps regrettable, but

Indigenous bilingual programs in Alaska, yet the program was reduced in the 1980s when a non-Native administrator questioned the program's effectiveness. From that time forward, English became the core language of instruction in the elementary school. The children in Piniq who first used English as a peer language were the first group to receive primary elementary instruction in English in the 1980s. In 2000 and 2001, most families started out speaking Yup'ik with their children, and the eldest children of these families used Yup'ik productively in peer culture. Many parents, however, noted how their children started using mostly English after attending school.

In the 1980s and 1990s, increasing village-urban and intervillage movement and the accompanying modern dislocation and relocation of family life (Fishman, 2001) placed additional pressure on young people's Yup'ik language-learning opportunities. Adults from Piniq increasingly moved back and forth between urban and rural Alaska, taking advantage of jobs and education elsewhere while maintaining villages as touchstones of Yup'ik identity (Fienup-Riordan, 2000). Increasing numbers of second-language Yup'ik-speaking adults also married into Piniq to raise their children close to elders and subsistence.

Adding further variation to an uneven picture of language tip, some young people's Yup'ik skills were fostered and activated by migration to strong Yup'ik-speaking villages and schools with stronger Yup'ik programs elsewhere. When children in transnational immigrant communities migrate to heritage-language speaking countries, their mobility supports heritage language development and maintenance (Zentella, 1997). Unlike learners connecting to countries with stable heritage languages, however, children in Piniq migrated to and from villages in an Indigenous region where language shift was already affecting a majority of villages (Krauss, 1997). During the course of the study many more children from Piniq moved back and forth to English-speaking places than Yup'ik-speaking places.

As processes above influenced the local linguistic ecology, local peer culture also became a driving force of language shift. In 2000 and 2001, youth in the "get by" group maintained a common base of receptive and limited productive skills in Yup'ik. A major

Both Mike and Nathan emphasize how unexpected life experiences, such as Nathan's stint in a distant city (line 7) and Mike's friendship with an English-speaking peer (line 8) influenced their non-use of Yup'ik. Yet Mike and Nathan overlook how longer-term processes shaped their identities as Yup'ik language "forgetters." Stories of how personal friendships "caused" personal language loss like Mike's, for instance, became common only after changes in schooling and migration eroded young people's collective resources for learning Yup'ik and local peer culture started "tipping" into English. By framing their stories as language "forgetting" in lines 7 and 8, Mike and Nathan leave open the possibility that changing circumstances and their own actions might allow them to "remember" how to be confident Yup'ik speakers. Yet as they narrate their language trajectories, Nathan and Mike also align to create seemingly logical outcomes of unexpected life events including language forgetting, linguistic insecurity, and collective language endangerment.

Importantly, in their spontaneous descriptions above, Mike and Nathan obscure how they themselves used Yup'ik locally. Similar to many of their peers, Mike and Nathan expressed insecurity about speaking Yup'ik and did not use advanced Yup'ik post-bases and word endings productively in extended Yup'ik utterances. Nevertheless, many youth like Mike and Nathan who spent years in the village grew adept at combining listening skills with predictable questions and statements in Yup'ik. After returning from Anchorage, Nathan used Yup'ik at home to interact with siblings who never left Piniq, as well as with grandparents, aunts, and uncles. As the younger child of a shifting family, Mike, as well, used Yup'ik with relatives and could translate when local elders exchanged pleasantries with outside teachers. Like others their age, Nathan and Mike also used Yup'ik receptive skills, token phrases, questions and simple statements to learn practices central to community life, as we will consider here.

Negotiating Connections to Community, Place, and Local Knowledge

Historically, Indigenous youth in many places have been socialized to understand their place in the world through language practices ranging from stories to naming practices, catechisms and lectures, as well as activities including observation and gendered apprentice-style learning (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). In Piniq youth who did not comfortably speak Yup'ik in 2000 integrated various forms of heritage language learning with the learning of *yuuyaraq* (the way to be human), a local knowledge system connecting Yup'ik with human-animal and human-to-human relationships, local activities, and ecological knowledge (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2004; Fienup-Riordan, 2000; Hensel, 1996). In the same interview above, Nathan and Mike describe learning to hunt seals¹:

1. Nathan: Sometimes, me, me and my *apii* (granddad) only go alone . . . It's fun when we goin (granddad03he wa

8. Mike: It's cool, cold, really/
9. Nathan: /Fun/
10. Mike: /Really/ . . . close, real.
11. Nathan: Yup.
12. Mike: You'll catch *maklaar*(bearded seal), big=
13. Nathan: =Really big, really fat, blubber.
14. Mike: And sometime the adults say, they'll cut 'em up, "*tangvauriqluci*" (watch carefully, be ever vigilant). [See discussion below.]
15. Nathan: They cut, cut, cut their head?
16. LTW: Um hmm.
17. Nathan: If they cut their head, put it in the water, say "*Cali taikina*, come back again." Throw it in the water.
18. LTW: Um hmm.
19. Mike: I did that at, uh, fall.
20. Nathan: I did that when we cut a *maklaar*(bearded seal).

Nathan and Mike describe how they used the simple Yup'ik prayer, "*Cali taikina*" (Come back again), and returned heads of hunted seals to the water (lines 17 and 18), enacting the belief that seals treated with respect will return to hunters. Nathan and Mike also use Yup'ik terminology to reference knowledge of types of seals (line 12, 19 *maklaar* bearded seal) and terms of endearment for older relatives (line 1 *apii/grandad*).

As was common, Mike and Nathan additionally recounted and reenacted the ways they used Yup'ik with adult mentors as they learned subsistence activities. Mike voices an adult mentor (line 14), and his seeming quote, "*tangvaur-i-qluci*," highlights both the challenges and strengths of heritage learners who may evidence linguistic errors yet still be acquiring heritage language phrases, vocabulary, and skills through participation in community activities (e.g., Valdés, 2005). "*Tangvaur-i-qluci*" echoes a common refrain used by adults when instructing youth to pay careful attention—"Tangvaur-aqluci" or "Be vigilant."²

Mike and Nathan overlap their speech (lines 8–10), then latch onto one another's statements (lines 5, 6, 12, 13) as the excitement of recalling seal hunting speeds the interaction. Overall, in the segment above, Mike and Nathan counter the common assumption that youth who speak dominant languages in endangered language communities orient away from local practices, physical spaces, and/or marginalized identities. Mike's offhand comment about seal-hunting being "everybody's" favorite hunting in line 6 and the pacing of the segment stand in marked contrast to local worries that English-speaking youth "wanted to be like whites." Mike and Nathan also complicate their earlier self-descriptions as Yup'ik language "losers" or "forgetters," as they offer contrasting evidence of the ways they, as Yup'ik language learners, use Yup'ik prayers, ecological terminology, endearment terms, and teachings to learn the knowledge system of their community.

Socializing One Another Through Storytelling About Subsistence

Scholars have documented how adults in the Yup'ik region orient toward Yup'ik identities and epistemologies in subsistence discourse (Hensel, 1996; Morrow & Hensel, 1992). Throughout

²From the verb stem "*tangvaur(ar)*" (to stare or to watch intently), with the plural second person subordinative mood ending *-luci* as an imperative. I thank Walkie Charles for *clainr.p.5(e 6)4.5* (and *-1.204te5.2(r.p[(an8)6..5 lfe5.0e5.2t)5r9(pe)-(cc*

the decade of the study, youth in Piniq underscored and distributed the knowledge they were gaining about the environment, their community, and adult roles over time as they told one another stories about their subsistence experiences. Both young men and women in the “get by” group were particularly likely to use Yup’ik in telling subsistence stories (Wyman, forthcoming). Villagers commonly noted in 2000 and 2001 that one of the last regular places to hear storytelling in Yup’ik among youth was in young men’s hunting stories. In another taped

themselves as knowledgeable participants in conversations about subsistence. In the excerpt above, after Evon asks Mike for a clarifying detail about a seal hunt he witnessed (line 10), Tom gains the floor in line 11 by using a relatively complex combination of morphemes in Yup'ik, "pugtangainarnartuq"(never let it pop up). In doing so, he shifts the conversation from strong Yup'ik speakers and hunters (Tom and Evon) listening to a minimal Yup'ik speaker with less hunting experience (Mike), to strong Yup'ik speakers sharing an inside joke about a different story. In the lines immediately following, Evon and Tom discuss the subsequent story in English (lines 12–13). However, Mike uses a clarifying question in Yup'ik to regain the floor (line 15):

Ex: Tegu-llru-an?
 'Take'-PAST TENSE-2sSUBJ/3sOBJ
 Gloss: Did you take it?

In his question, Mike combines a single, common verbal post-base to mark tense, -llru, with a transitive word ending marking subject and object, -an, demonstrating his knowledge of how to make simple statements in Yup'ik. At the same time Mike sticks to the type of simple Yup'ik construction that was becoming common among youth in 2000 and 2001.

Losing Language, Losing Direction . . . ?

As we have seen, in an early, uneven phase of rapid language shift, youth who described feeling insecure about speaking Yup'ik used Yup'ik tokenism to maintain and negotiate connections to community members and local knowledge, as well as to maintain their positions in local peer culture. Yet in 2000 and 2001, young people's stories also evidenced how youth were losing forms marking a linguistic orientation to land. Often scholars point out how a unique worldview and knowledge system disappears with each endangered language (Harrison, 2007; Woodbury, 1993, 1998). One feature of Yup'ik that particularly interests linguists is an extensive system of demonstrative pronouns, adverbs, and related verb stems meaning "to go (in some specific direction)." The Yup'ik demonstrative system elegantly marks a highly tuned orientation to the physical surroundings of the speaker. Yup'ik demonstratives distinguish, for instance, whether an object is near or far, up or down (in the air or down below, up or down the slope of the land), in or out (upriver or downriver), over or across from the speaker (as in across a body of water or trail), moving towards, moving away, spread out or contained (described in detail in Woodbury, 1993).

Elders who are fluent speakers of Cup'ik, a dialect of Yup'ik, use demonstratives to achieve "broad artistic and communicative goals" (Woodbury 1993, p. 10). Observing that speakers do not or only partially tend to translate form-dependent expressions like demonstratives into English, Woodbury argues that, while many aspects of cultural continuity transfer across languages, in language tip settings, "the continuity of intricate, complex, delicately tuned, deeply interwoven systems" can also be dramatically disrupted (1998, p. 256).

We see an example of this disruption above, at line 9, where Mike tells a short hunting story in English. As Mike briefly summarizes for his listeners where he went in a single hunting trip, he uses 6 instances of the demonstrative pronouns "this" or "that," the related adverb "there," and 3 instances of the verb "go" (identified in bold in the excerpt n0.012.00Obces of dyJ18.6s of3 Tc0.s19.62

experiences and knowledge of land, asking in line 14, “You know when we go down, we go that way?” Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine how Yup’ik demonstratives and related verb stems might dramatically affect the level of detail in the story above, or any similar description

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heritage languages and the ways they socialize one another and are socialized by adults to maintain connections to specific communities, knowledge systems, and spaces.

Schools are embroiled in historical and contemporary processes feeding rapid sociolinguistic transformation in Indigenous communities. Even after the directly oppressive period of Alaska Native education, the school in Piniq maintained “social and linguistic hierarchies [that were] remarkably persistent” (Jaffe, 2007, p. 73), undermining heritage-language programming and community heritage-language maintenance efforts. As history “sped up in the margins” (Hill, 2006) and language endangerment became evident, some educators, community members, and youth recognized the ways that the local school was undermining heritage maintenance. Yet many more pointed either to “single root causes” or an overwhelming array of out-of-school processes of language shift in community life. Together, these emerging logics of shift obscured ongoing effects of schooling on language practices, as well as local meanings of heritage-language maintenance and the possibilities for bilingualism.

Indigenous educators and community language advocates face tremendous challenges in rapidly changing sociolinguistic settings. In early language tip, young people’s linguistic repertoires may diverge, requiring educators to develop new programs, pedagogies and strategies for language planning as the proportions of youth with low and high productive skills change dramatically in as little as 5 years’ time (Wyman et al., forthcoming). While youth often initially maintain considerable receptive skills in heritage languages, they may quickly take up positions

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