

Alaskan Russian: From the 18th into the 21st Century

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How much of Russian linguistic and cultural heritage is alive in Alaska?

- Russian cultural and linguistic heritage in Alaska is visible in:
 - Orthodox Christianity
 - Russian names and place names
 - Russian language
 - Oral (family) history
 - Written history
 - Miller, Gwenn A. Kodiak Kreol: Communities of Empire in Early Russian America, Cornell University Press, 2010.

Alaskan Russian (AR)

- Regional variant of Russian that developed in Alaska at the time of Russian America
- Different from any variety of Continental Russian (CR)
- Main source of evidence: Ninilchik Russian (NR)
- NR = variety of AR that has been preserved in the speech of descendants of the RAC pensioners settled in Ninilchik village (Kenai peninsula, Alaska)
- Research questions:
 - **Where else in Alaska?**
 - How related to the Russian of the northeastern Siberia?

Ninilchik Russian is a variety of Russian

- It is moribund:
 - No speakers under 80
 - Barely functioning as a means of communication
 - Very limited competence in younger speakers/rememberers
 - Strong individual variation
- Still:
 - 12 loan words from local languages for 2500 entries in the NRD
 - Phonemic system not dramatically different from CR
 - Keeps pivotal oppositions of palatalization
 - Grammar of the spoken-only Russian language
 - *Away* 'now, already': Leer 1979. Kodiak Alutiiq dictionary: 81. *awa'i*
 - DM > marker of new analytical perfective
 - *Ya awáy ad'ihál; Ya awáy kónchila bil'ó st'irát'*
- NR is a modern incarnation of AR
 - Special circumstances

Alaskan Russian: Ninilchik case

- Russian language of Ninilchik is NOT a contact language
 - A language of Creoles, but not a creole language
- Ninilchik Russian is a variant/dialect of Russian in its own right
 - Has its own phonetic system
 - Well preserved - even if restricted - vocabulary
 - Peculiar grammatical patterns
 - Language variant of certain time and location
- A surviving fragment of the linguistic and communicative system that emerged in Russian America by the mid-19th century.

Who were communicating parties of Russian America?

- Officers and officials at RAC
- Colonial citizens
- Creoles
- Natives

How we understand "Russians"

- Citizen of the Russian Empire vs. ethnic Russian vs. officer / official at RAC
 - Finlanders and Finns
 - Cf. the term 'Scandinavians'
- Points of the group story after 1867:
 - Loss of 'Russian territory'
 - Russian~American competitiveness and mutual stereotypes
 - Evolution of the term 'Russian' in the 20th century

What was meant by "Creoles"

- People of mixed origin vs. people of certain cultural background, special status and role in RAC and Russian America

Who were "Natives"

- Eskimo-Aleut speaking peoples vs. Athabaskans vs. Tlingits
- Or, with another meaning of 'Aleut' (=baptized native population):
- Aleuts vs. other aboriginal people of Alaska

Oral history: Native and Creole groups' Narratives

- Points of the Creole story:
 - Hardships of the American period
 - Internalization of Russian culture and language as 'local, original culture'
 - Conscious and forced choices and troubled memories
- Points of the Native story
 - 19th century - adopting new religion and material culture
 - Early 20th century - frictions with Creoles; hardships at the start of the American period and later
 - Late 20th century - retaining identity (religion) and reviving culture as source of identity search
 - Unangan people, Sugpiaq language, or Sugcestun

Ninilchik History in a Nutshell

- Russian-American Company pensioners
- Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) mothers
- Encapsulated culture
- Separate language development
- American school in the 1910-ies
- Modern cultural patterns
 - Russian heritage is considered part of the indigenous culture as opposed to the non-indigenous - mainstream American from the 'lower 48'.

A Timeline of Alaskan Russian

Period	Mid-18 th to mid-19 th cent.	1867 to the end of 19 th - first half of 20 th cent.	First half of 20 th century	Second half of 20 th cent. - present time
Stage / variety	Colonial Russian	Alaskan Russian loses the status of the colonial language	AR as postcolonial indigenous language	Obsolescent AR
Processes	Continental Russian in contact with the local languages => emergence of Alaskan Russian	Russian linguistic and cultural heritage is internalized as local	Russian-English bilingualism; traumatic experiences	Claiming native culture back

Ninilchik Russian in a Nutshell

- Grammar and phonetics losses
 - *Евоный мать целый ночь телевижн караулил*
- Lexical borrowings
 - Practically zero borrowings from local languages
- Retaining features of the 19th century Russian of a certain social strata

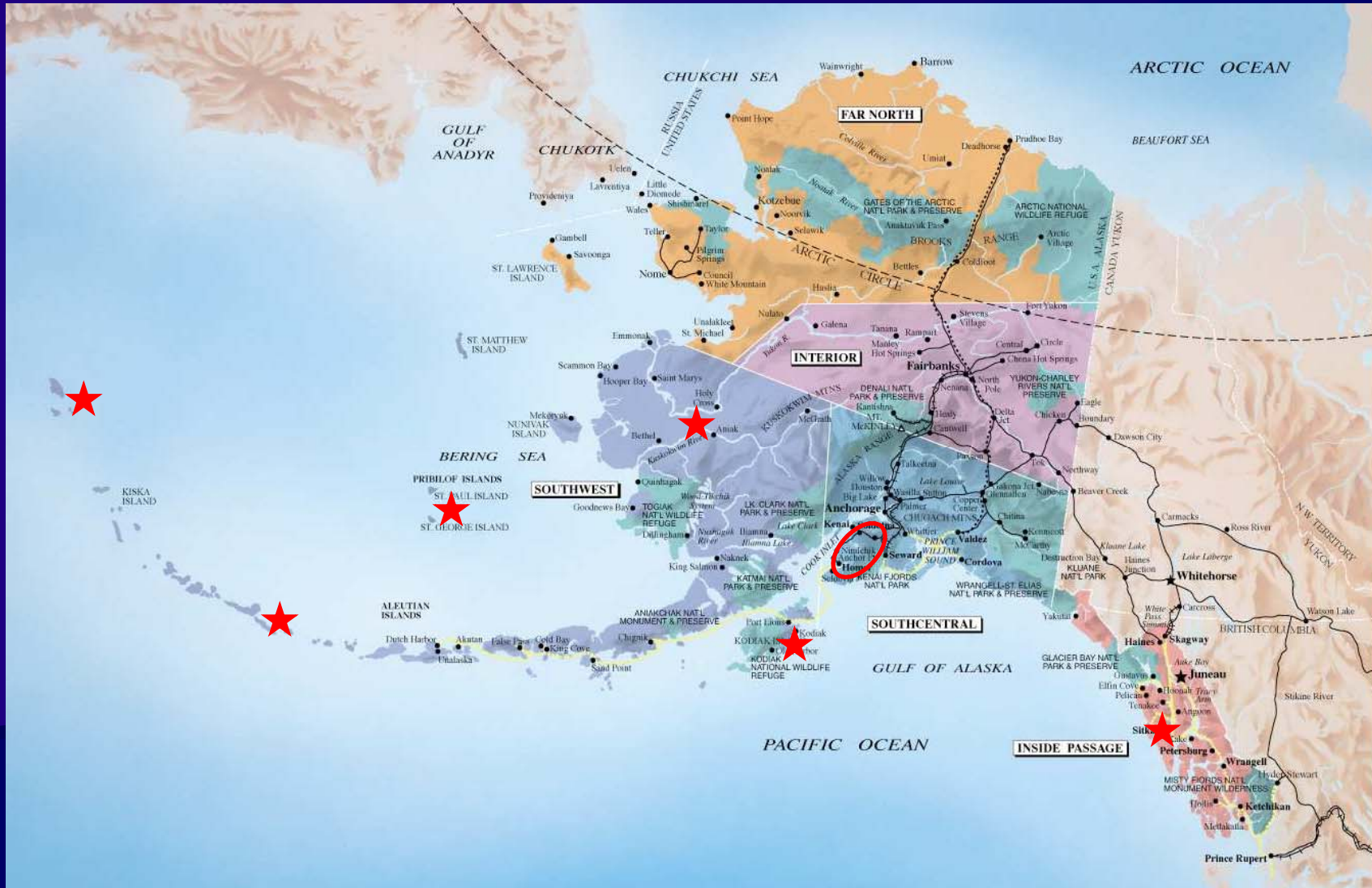
What to look for after 20 years of exploration

- Ninilchik-Russian Dictionary (2017, 2019) and work in progress
- To analyze new data on the distribution, functioning and degree of preservation of AR in its various historical locations in Alaska
- Instrument:
 - Sociolinguistic surveys in the form of semi-structured interviews

Parameters of the sociolinguistic typology

- Bilingualism or trilingualism in the family and community: Native American/AR/English
- Language repertoire of the priest in the community: SR/English/AR/Native American
- Specific locations and economic activities and processes: trapping/trading/mining/other labor
- Specific time frames: first half of the 19th century / second half of the 19th century/ first half of the 20th century/ second half of the 20th century
- Roles of individuals who served as agents of change.

AR locations as mentioned in the various sources



Where we looked: Locations

- Ninilchik
- Nanwalek

Summer of 2019:

- Kodiak city
- Ouzinkie
- Saint Paul island
- *Anchorage
- Nikolai
- McGrath
- *Yakutsk, Russia

Nanwalek: Russian in the Native community

- Nanwalek, or English Bay, initially - Aleksandrovskaya **odinochka**
- 2017: Three hundred people
- All of them of 'creole' origin
- A case story of two men - **Nicholas Moonin** and his son-in-law **Sarjus Kvasnikoff** from Ninilchik
- Juanita (=Stepanida) Kvasnikoff's appointed Alutiiq 'the native language' of Nanwalek, which determined the fate of Russian.
 - Stepanida and Sarjus' children don't speak Russian
 - A few sayings
 - *kak d'ilá, star'ík?, Chizhik-Pizhik, Ladushk'i*

Three sisters of Nanwalek



Kodiak city

■ Bill (Wassily) Hartman

- Grew up speaking Russian with his mother
 - *Beb'ichk'i; Dewachka*
 - *Chayknut'*
 - *Ana l'ub'it m'in'a natopat'*
 - *Stupay nawerhu*

■ Sonny (Alexei) Chichenoff

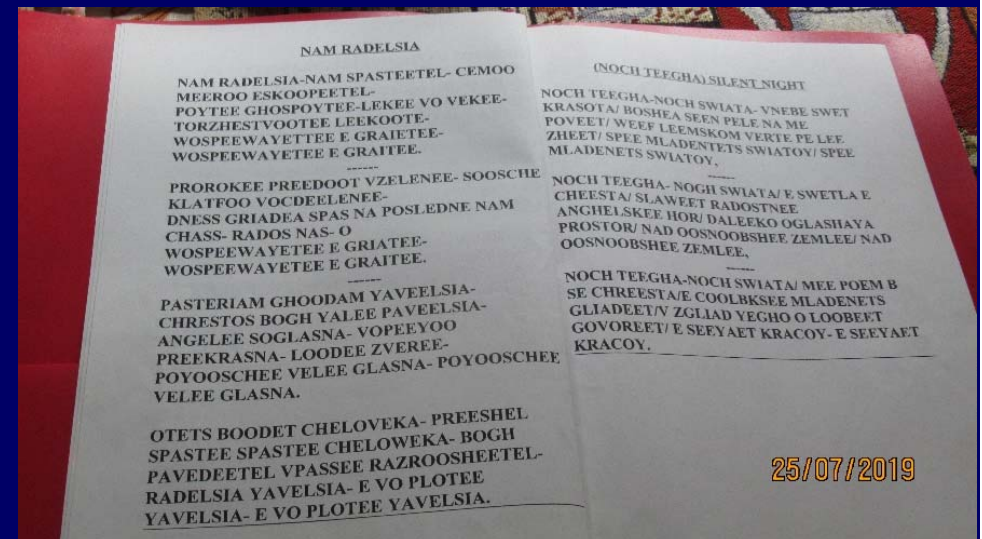
- Born in Afognak
- Parents spoke English to him, but he learned Russian listening to their conversations
- Relocated to Port Lions after the Good Friday earthquake (1964)
- Lives in Kodiak



Ouzinkie



- Lilly Pestrikoff
- Tatiana Chichenoff
- Their father Larry Elanak
- Priest F. Garassim
- Difference between two Kodiak locations: urban and rural
- Similarity: presence of Alutiiq, though to a different degree



Kodiak vs Ninilchik Russian

- Case system is destroyed to a greater degree
 - waz'm'í kaml'éyka
 - Ya xachú parézhit' éta dóska
- The same true for gender and tenses
 - Sonny Chichenoff mixes 2Sg and 3Sg in present tense
- But aspect is better preserved (Bill Hartman)
- Also: polite 2Pl, patronymics
- Today, Alutiiq became the choice for 'minority language'.
 - Not in Bill Hartman's youth

Pribilof Islands

■ Saint Paul island:

- Actors

- F. Michael Lestenkoff
- Nikolai Stepetin
- Agafon Krukoff

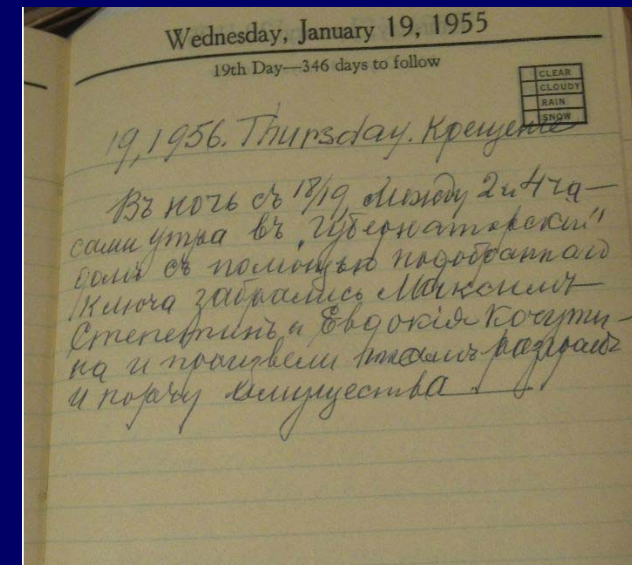
- Interviewees

- Aquilina Lestenkova
- Greg Fratis
- Alex and Rena Kudrin



■ Narrative of the Aleuts from Pribilof Islands

- Russian vs. Slavonic
- "Slaves of the harvest"
- Drama of the Funter Bay



Languages of Pribilof islands

- Around 1918 - *Agafon's* grandfather:
 - Aleut = Russian > English
- Around 1930 - *Agafon's* father:
 - Aleut = English > Russian
- Russian words in Russian and in Aleut
 - *stul'chik* vs *stuulux'*
 - *Sabak* as a 'bad word'
 - *Behave yourself, not sabak*



Ninilchik Russian is a surviving representative of the Alaskan Russian

- Russian speakers were a minority
- Separated from the Russian oecumene
- This is different from the Siberian case where contact languages emerged
- Russian as a post-colonial language was internalized by its speakers
 - It became a marker and a symbol of their identity
 - It shared the fate of other Native Alaskan languages
 - Thus, it became a truly indigenous idiom

Thank you for your attention!

