

# Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan: Its past, present, and future

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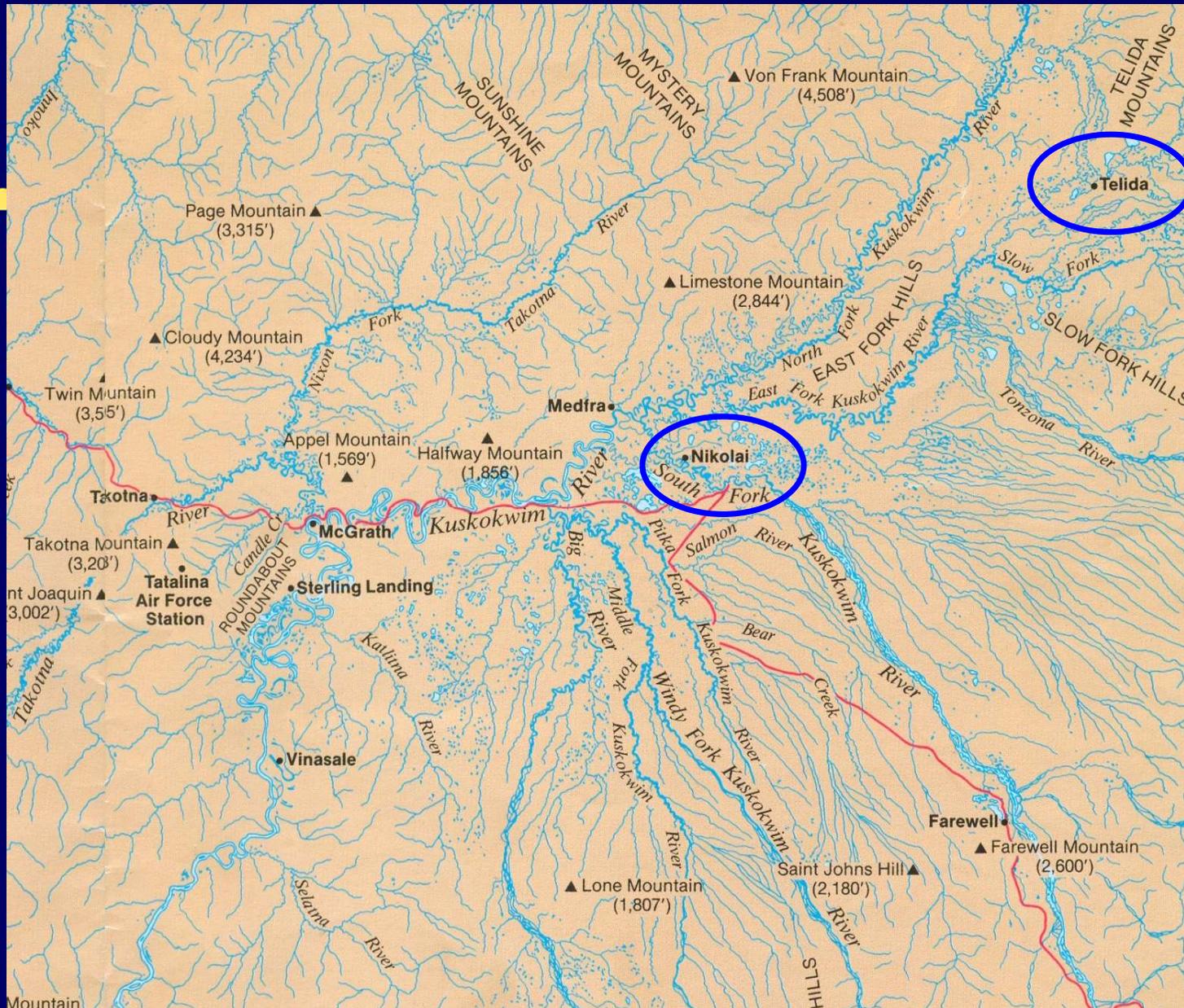
# Athabaskan languages

- Na-Dene
- Three areal groupings
- Among the most morphologically complex languages



# Native languages of Alaska (M. Krauss)





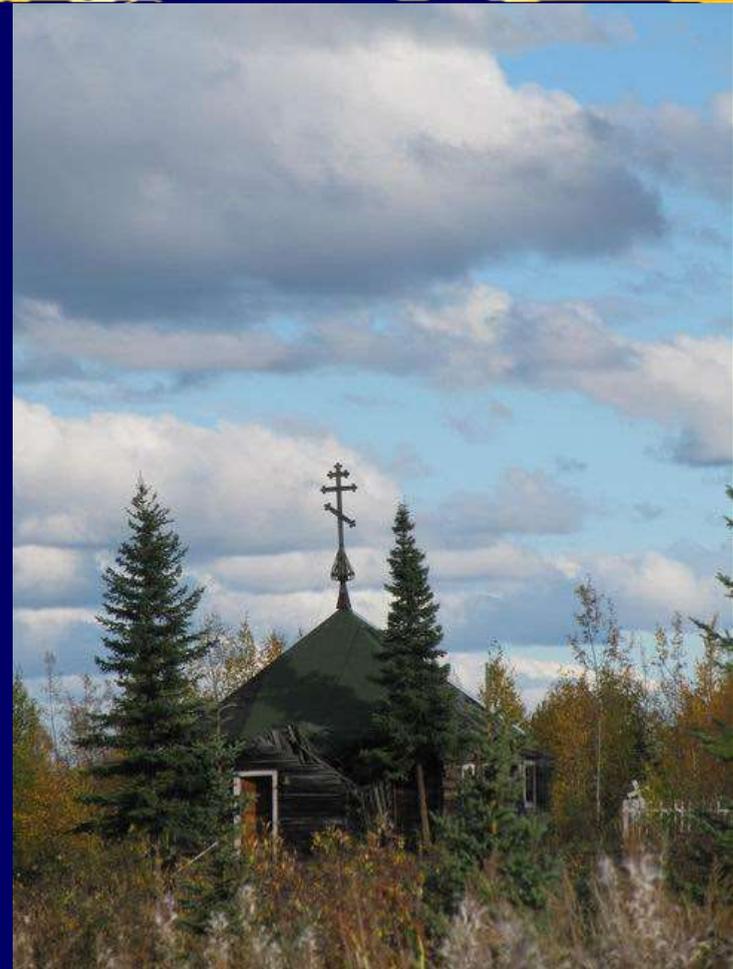
# Upper Kuskokwim people

- Among the 11 (or 12) Athabaskan tribes in Alaska
  - The UK tribe/language was identified as distinct by Hosley, Krauss, and Collins in early 1960s
- Semi-nomadic seasonal life style
- Traditionally, a few hundred people occupied a territory of the size of Switzerland
- Overall number of the living people of UK descent – about 450 (Raskladkina 2018)
- The largest concentration of the UK people: in the village of **Nikolai**
  - Nikolai was established about 100 years ago
  - The population of Nikolai is 90% native
- Religion: **Russian Orthodox** (since the 19<sup>th</sup> century)

# Nikolai: a bird's eye view



# Church in Telida



# Upper Kuskokwim language



- Actual use of UK – almost none
  - Was used in four households in 2014
  - All four husbands died since then, the last one in 2018
- Less than 15 speakers left
  - The youngest fully-fledged speaker born in 1952
  - Latent speakers among younger people (in their 50s)
  - Teaching UK at school since 1973, no result
- Prior work – Collins and Petruska 1979
- Our team (A. Kibrik, M. Bergelson and M. Raskladkina) - eight field trips between 1997 and 2019

# Linguistic example

- nilo'ist'oh *I am waving my hand*      silo' *my hand*
- nika'ist'oh *I am moving my foot around*      sika' *my foot*
- nigo'ist'oh *I am moving my knee around*      sigwt' *my knee*
- nitse'ist'oh *I am moving my head around*      sitse' *my head*
  
- nilo'isjiyah *I am moving my hands*

# PAST



- Old prehistory
- The UK area is close to (or is included in) the original Athabaskan homeland (Krauss 1980; Kari 2010; Hargus 2016)
- The area was occupied by Athabaskans for thousands of years
  - According to different opinions, about 3.5 K years (Krauss 1980) or from 6 K years up to 12 K years (Kari 2010)
- No direct evidence of any unrelated languages around during this time
- Athabaskan languages are characterized by “geolinguistic conservatism” – resistance to change (Kari 2010; Sapir 1921; Fortescue 1998; Campbell and Poser 2008)

# Place names



- Kari and Smith (2017) have collected and mapped over 900 place names (streams, lakes, mountains, etc.)
- All of them (with very few exceptions) are native Athabaskan descriptive terms, such as:
  - *diniltseje no?* 'red paint creek'
  - *tohwnaghe?o di* 'where a hill comes into water'
- There are no signs of borrowing place names from any substrate language

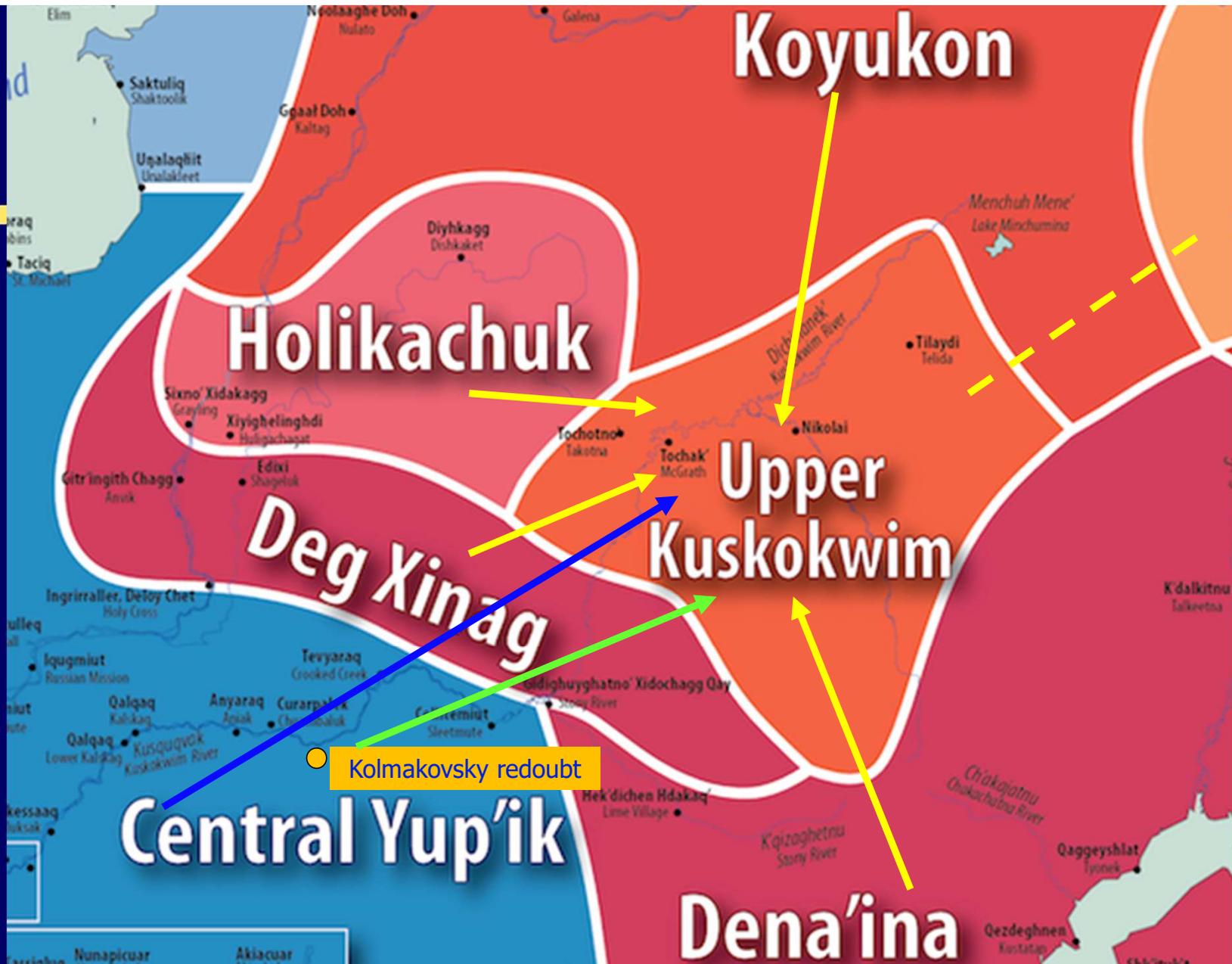
# Geographic isolation



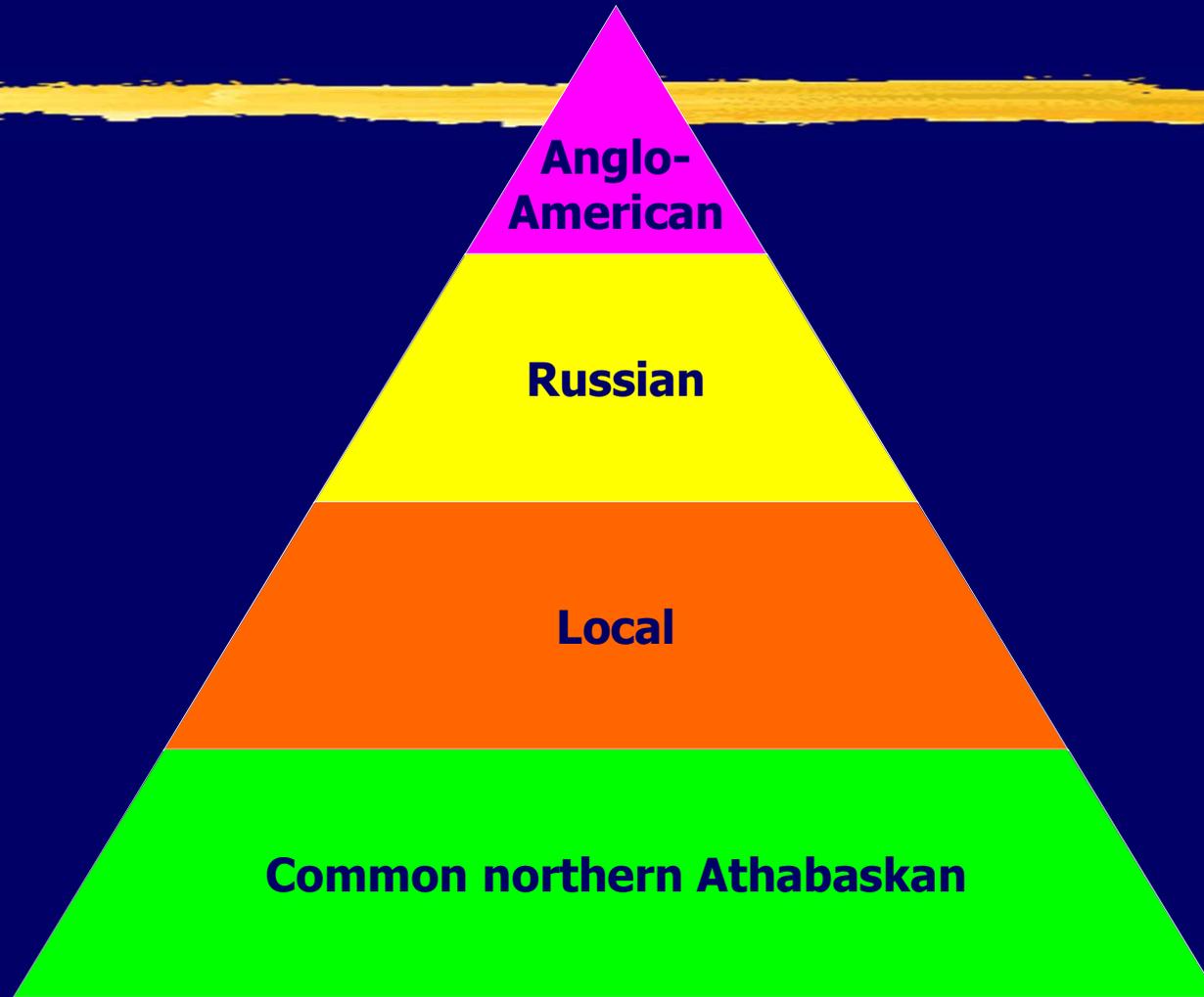
- Remote area
  - separated from the South by the Alaska range
  - far from the coast
  - connected to the coast by the Kusokwim river, far smaller than the Yukon
  - difficult swampy terrain, hard to cross in summer
- As a result, it was accessed the least of all by Russian and American travelers
- Even though a very small language, it was preserved somewhat longer than most other Alaskan Athabaskan languages

# Four kinds of external contacts

- Other Athabaskan
  - contacts with all neighbors
- Yup'ik Eskimo
  - hostility until the Russian period
- Russian (from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century)
  - profound cultural influence
  - Russian Orthodox religion eventually replaced the pre-Christian culture
- English (from early 20<sup>th</sup> century)



# Cultural layers



# Formation of the ethnic group

- Dialect continuum: Upper Kuskokwim – Tanana – Koyukon – Holikachuk
- Integration of individuals from these other groups
- Linguistically quite different from:
  - Deg Hit'an
  - Dena'ina
- UK identity is defined by a conjunction of two features:
  - Interior Athabaskan
  - devout Russian Orthodox
- Villages founded in early 20<sup>th</sup> century



# Bobby Esai and Mira Bergelson



# Internal variation

- Very high variation in the older generations (born before 1930)
- Uniform merger A in younger speakers

	Interdental	Dental	Retroflex	Alveolar
	'my tongue'	'snow'	'raven'	'stick'
conservative	sit <u>s</u> ula'	tsetʃ'	dotron'	dichinh
merger A	sit <u>s</u> ula'	tsetʃ'	dotron'	dichinh
merger B	sit <u>s</u> ula'	tsetʃ'	dot <u>s</u> on'	dichinh
merger AB	sit <u>s</u> ula'	tsetʃ'	dot <u>s</u> on'	dichinh

# Explanation



- Traditional seasonal-nomadic life style
  - Bands only met occasionally
  - Hence strong dialectal variation
  - Eventually, each remaining speaker of the older generation was a dialect

# PRESENT: starting from WWII



- American school starting from 1948
  - First generation of speakers who formed a stable speech community and a unified dialect
- Rapid language shift in the 1960s
- Language maintenance efforts in the 1970

# Ray Collins

- SIL-funded project of Gospel translation
- 1960s – 1970s
- Abandoned because of the language becoming moribund



# Teaching materials (Ray Collins and associates)

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- Orthography
- School dictionary and grammar
- Dozens of pedagogical brochures, see <http://ukpreservation.com>

# Betty Petruska (1944 – 2016)



# Steven Nikolai (1952)



# Paradoxical story of language maintenance efforts



- In early 1970s many school children still knew the native languages
- In parallel with the growing efforts of language teaching in the 1970s – 1990s, steady movements towards the complete abandonment of the language
- By early 2000s that led to the teachers' frustration and, gradually, the cancellation of the "bilingual" program

# Reasons



- External socio-economic factors
  - inertia of the 1940s-1950s school's influence
  - association of well-being with English
  - TV etc.
- Naïve character of the pedagogical methodology
  - language as a bag of words
  - primarily lists of nouns

# Attitude towards the language



- Sociolinguistic poll in 1997
- 84% support language preservation, 71% would like to be literate, and 91% want their children to speak UK
- All school age children expressed interest in language learning
- But these are intentions, not practices

# Nikolai Community Development Plan

- 2012-2022
- Prepared by TCC and the NEVC
- Signed by the First Chief and the Mayor
- Ongoing Goal: Preserve the Upper Kuskokwim Language
- How would you rate the importance of preserving the Upper Kuskokwim Language?
  - 100% thought it was important or extremely important.
- Voices of Nikolai residents:
  - "I want to see our language to come back I don't want to see it die."
  - "We need to work on our language now, our elders are not going to be with us forever."

# FUTURE



- Many strong factors that caused language shift in 1960s do not operate now
- There are successful cases of language maintenance
- Methodology is available
- Need for language activists who would initiate a new trend
- New start in the modern circumstances?



*To the memory of*  
Bobby Esai Sr.  
Philip Esai  
Nick Dennis  
Willie and Betty  
Petruska  
Jim Nikolai

