

NINILCHIK RUSSIAN IN THE BROADER CONTEXT OF ALASKAN RUSSIAN¹

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Ninilchik Russian is a unique variety of the Russian language. We believe it is a remnant of Alaskan Russian – a language that emerged at the end of the 18th century as a result of Russian colonial presence in Alaska and served as a means of communication in Russian America until the end of the Russian period in 1867. By that time Alaskan Russian became the native language for the people of mixed Russian/Native origin (Creoles) residing in various parts of Alaska. As a result, some varieties of Alaskan Russian kept developing and serving as a means of communication, creating and maintaining cultural identity of local communities long after the “Russian period”. Ninilchik was one such place and, due to many factors combined, became a major location where this linguistic variety survived till the beginning of this century.

It is obvious that in Russian colonial times some forms of Russian were spoken in every place where Russian presence was noticeable. What is not obvious and demands special research is proving that at the end of 18th-beginning of 19th century there existed a *lingua franca* which emerged as a result of contact between Russian and the indigenous languages of Alaska. We believe that this *lingua franca* was a specific variety of the Russian language of that time. At the beginning of the 21st century, we can only glimpse that variety by the “iceberg tip” in the form spoken by representatives of the Ninilchik community. This situation is like what archaeologists face when they reconstruct a culture from the presently available remnants. Attribution in time plays a crucial role in such reconstruction. Therefore, one of the first steps in this work is building a timeline determining the stages/varieties of Alaskan (Ninilchik) Russian. This is represented in Table 1.

Table 1

Timeline for changes in Alaskan Russian (AR) and Ninilchik Russian (NR)

<i>Beginning from:</i>	<i>Stage / variety</i>	<i>Processes</i>
Mid 18 th century	Common AR	Aleut-Russian bilingualism
Late 18 th century	Alutiiq-influenced variety of AR	Alutiiq-Russian bilingualism
1840s	Established NR	Russian monolingualism
1920s	Endangered NR	Russian-English bilingualism
WWII	Obsolescent NR	Dominance of English, decay of NR

In this paper we provide data from our 2017 fieldwork regarding two of the abovementioned processes: *Alutiiq-Russian bilingualism* and Russian *monolingualism*.

Contacts between the Alutiiq population around the Kenai peninsula and the Russian-speaking Ninilchik residents continued up to the 20-th century; in such communities as *Nanwalek* and *Port Graham* Russian was spoken until recently. As always in the case of sparsely populated areas, the role of individuals and specific circumstances would have crucial impact on the linguistic choices in the community. We explored such individual case in *Nanwalek*.

In exploring the *Russian monolingual* stage of Alaskan Russian we pay attention to the fact that the so-called “Russian” population of Russian America represented many regional, social, and eth-

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nic groups, which influenced the development of Alaskan Russian, its resulting form, and its significant variation among families and individuals.

Second, less discussed, but probably even more important fact is that Alaskan Russian has always existed as an oral language. For a number of years crucial to its development Ninilchik Russian did not experience any influences of any kind from written languages: it was a monolingual community where the overwhelming majority was illiterate. Thus, Ninilchik Russian syntax had no interference from the syntax of a written language.