

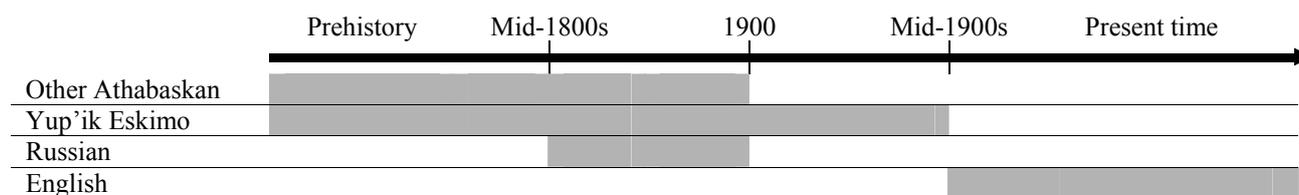
LANGUAGE CONTACTS IN THE ALASKAN INTERIOR: UPPER KUSKOKWIM¹

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Upper Kuskokwim (UK) is a small Athabaskan language still spoken by a few older persons in the village of Nikolai and some other towns in Alaska. UK population hardly ever exceeded several hundred individuals, whereas the ethnic territory is comparable to the size of Switzerland. The terrain includes riverine lowlands with tundra, swamps, and forest, as well as foothills of the Alaska range and other minor ranges. Upper Kuskokwim is a typical Athabaskan language, characterized by polysynthetic verb morphology, with highly complex morphophonemics and non-transparent morphological structure.

The network of the UK contacts with other languages consists of four layers. In the diagram below, periods of contacts within each of the layers is shown with shading. The timeline in the diagram contains three tentative boundaries, about 50 years apart.



Traditionally, interior Alaskan Athabaskan languages constituted a dialect chain, without firm ethnic and linguistic boundaries. This situation lasted until the turn of the 20th century, when the UK people established villages and became more settled than before. Borrowings from other languages are difficult to trace because Athabaskans used to have a keen feeling of sound correspondences that helped them to recalculate forms into their own phonemic system.

Contacts with Eskimos have been traditionally very weak. However, potential influence of Yup'ik upon UK could have lasted longer, in connection with the continuous expansion of the Yup'iks up the Kuskokwim river, first reaching the Middle and later the Upper Kuskokwim area. A number of important community members born in early 20th century were of Yup'ik origin and were bilingual. However, very few lexical borrowings from Yup'ik are found, one of them being *duyuk* 'salt'. No grammatical borrowings from Yup'ik can be identified in UK. Athabaskan languages are generally very resistant to grammatical and even lexical borrowing.

The period of Russian influence was short but led to much more significant results. That period started around the mid-1800s, when some Russian travelers reached the UK area. The UK people probably never acquired any Russian, but they learned Old Church Slavonic prayers by heart. About 80 Russian loanwords are identified in UK. Many of them, however, have arrived via the mediation of the neighboring Athabaskan languages (particularly Dena'ina), or Eskimo, or both. Some of the loanwords contain borrowed phonemes, never found in the native words, for example /b/ in *boze* 'God' (from Russian/OCS Боже, vocative from Бор 'God') and /ɾ/ in *anhere* 'bishop' (from Russian архиерей 'archpriest').

Finally, English influence began around WWII when a number of UK men started acquiring English. During the subsequent one or two decades bilingualism spread throughout the UK popula-

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tion, and a rapid language shift occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. A number of early lexical borrowings can be identified and distinguished from the instances of code mixing. Cf., for example, *fala'ena* 'guys, fellows', a native plural from a borrowing from English *fellow*; note that we see a non-native phoneme /f/ in this case, too. Some grammatical borrowings from English can be seen as well. Most notably, the original Athabaskan negative polarity verb forms, morphologically quite different from the positive forms, became frequently replaced by a combination of the particle *no* (from English *no*) with a positive form.

Overall, the case of UK is an instance of a highly limited contact-induced language change.