

PURITY OF UPPER KUSKOKWIM AS A TYPOLOGICALLY RARE PHENOMENON¹

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Upper Kuskokwim (UK) is an Athabaskan language of interior Alaska. Ancestors of the modern UK people have been residing in the area for some millennia, without languages of other language families spoken there during the reasonable time frame. Potential external influences upon UK include: other Athabaskan languages, Central Yup'ik (Eskimo), Russian, and English. UK demonstrates an unusually low level of external linguistic influence. The goal of this paper is to describe and explain this phenomenon.

1. The UK ethnic territory borders other Athabaskan languages: Dena'ina in the South, Lower Tanana and Koyukon in the East, Koyukon in the North, Holikachuk and Ingalik in the West. Athabaskan borrowings are difficult or impossible to identify because Athabaskans traditionally had a knowledge of inter-language sound correspondences and recalculated borrowings into the local phonetic system, making them indistinguishable from original forms. Generally during the early contacts with Athabaskan neighbors each Athabaskan speaker would speak his own language and understand (to an extent) another Athabaskan's talk. At the same time, before the European (Russian) contact and throughout the 19th century ethnic boundaries between UK and its Athabaskan neighbors were permeable: there was a substantial influx of migrants from the neighboring groups (possibly with the exception of Dena'ina on the other side of the Alaska range). It appears that those individuals from other groups who joined the UK community switched to the UK language.

2. Apart from the neighboring Athabaskans, the only other contacting group in the pre-Russian time were Yup'iks of middle and lower Kuskokwim. There were some Ingalik Athabaskans in between, but their population was sparse and some Yup'ik contacts must have been possible. These contacts became stronger during the Russian and post-Russian period as Yup'iks were cultural and religious intermediaries between the Russians and the UK Athabaskans. In the early 20th century some Yup'iks penetrated the Upper Kuskokwim area, marrying into the UK community. In such case they acquired UK and their children did not learn Yup'ik. There is no evidence of any UK people learning Yup'ik. Accordingly, only a couple of lexical borrowings from Yup'ik have been identified in UK. (But see below on Russian borrowings via Yup'ik.)

3. Contact with Russians started in mid-19th century but was never intense. There is no historical information of the UK people learning Russian. However, this contact had vast impact on the UK culture. Eventually the Russian Orthodox religion has become the most visible element of the UK ethnic culture. In fact, the UK people became consolidated as a distinct group (about the end of the 19th century) largely as a result of their strong affiliation with the Russian Orthodox religion. UK has about 80 lexical borrowings from Russian, all being nouns denoting European artefacts or religious concepts. Many of these borrowings bear traces of arriving via the mediation of a neighboring Athabaskan language (mostly Dena'ina or Koyukon) and/or Central Yup'ik. As for those borrowings that appear to have been taken directly from Russian, it is more likely that they arrived to UK due not to bilingualism but rather due to some kind of ostensive acquaintance with and nomination of particular referents.

4. Contact with English speaking migrants to the UK area started around the turn of the 20th century and became more intense in the 1930s and particularly 1940s. The period of partial English bilingualism was relatively short and limited and resulted in several lexical borrowings. There is an instance of English grammatical borrowing: the negative particle *no*. Massive language shift ensued

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in the 1960s, and at later times English elements in UK discourse qualify more as code mixing than as entrenched borrowings per se.

5. Converging causes behind the linguistic purity of UK include:

- Long residence in the area, without any unrelated languages in the vicinity
- Native comparative knowledge of Alaskan Athabaskans
- General disinclination of the Athabaskan languages to borrowing (Sapir 1921, Brown 1994)
- Scarcity of contact with Yup'ik and of bilingualism in Yup'ik
- Geographical isolation
- Lack of bilingualism in Russian
- Brief period of partial bilingualism in English.