

SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN THE UPPER KUSKOKWIM, ALASKA: FEATURES, DYNAMICS, AGENTS OF INFLUENCE¹

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The paper describes the sociolinguistic situation in the Upper Kuskokwim area for the period from the middle of the 19th century till the present time. In the early historical times this area extended from the Alaska range to the Kuskokwim mountains and from the Swift River to the watershed between the drainages of the Kuskokwim and Kantishna rivers. Representatives of the ethnic group under investigation, Athabaskan Indians, live in the upstream of the Kuskokwim river. Hence the name of the area, the group and, accordingly, the language.

This paper reveals the factors and agents of social influence that determined the language situation in this area at different times. The picture included, in the first place, the native language of the area, Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan in its local variants, as well as the languages of the neighboring territories, including, to various extent, Athabaskan (Koyukon, Deg Hitan, Tanana, Denaina) and Central Yupik Eskimo. Undoubtedly a special place is occupied by English as the language of the dominant culture. Since the inhabitants of Upper Kuskokwim are Orthodox Christians, of course, the Church Slavonic language was used throughout the twentieth century; and traces of the Russian language are noted in at least 80 loanwords in the Upper Kuskokwim language.

Among the most important agents of influence are the following:

- 1) **explorers and fur traders** who can be considered a single kind of agent since exploration was inseparable from the activity of the Russian American Company (later replaced by Alaska Commercial Company and some independent traders); they organized meeting points with locals to collect fur and to sell various goods.
- 2) **Russian Orthodox Missionaries**, whose activities were originally directly related to the RAC territory development and continued many years after the transfer of Alaska to the US. The Upper Kuskokwim people adopted Orthodoxy as their own ethnic and religious tradition, which helped them to preserve their cultural and linguistic identity longer than others. This process contrasts with the development of religious beliefs in other indigenous peoples who have been influenced by other faiths - the American Episcopal, Catholic churches, etc. (Such places are: the Eskimo settlement of Holy Cross, the Athabaskan Deg Hitan settlement of Anvik, located in the downstream of the Yukon river, as well as the settlements of the Middle and Lower Kuskokwim).
- 3) **mining and gold mining** came to the upper Kuskokwim later (from the beginning of the 20th century and later) and at a different scale than in other territories (Yukon, Kenai Peninsula); this brought a flood of Europeans and "lower 48 Americans" to the remote Alaskan territories.
- 4) **Government services in the field of health, education, and economic development** which became available to the Upper Kuskokwim people in the 20th century. First of all, it was a school that was organized in Nikolai in 1948 and radically changed the everyday life, patterns of communication and attitude to the native language.

The activities of these agents led to the intensification of contacts with the neighboring ethnic groups and with "white" Americans, resulting, among other things, in inter-ethnic marriages.

Currently, English is the main language of the Upper Kuskokwim people. The native language is considered to be dying, it is practically not used in everyday life and there are no more than 10-15

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speakers of various degrees of competence. According to studies (R. Collins, E. Hosley, A. Kibrik), the number of native speakers never exceeded 250-300 people.

At present the UKA people are concentrated in the Nikolai village (about 100 persons), in the regional center of McGrath and in Anchorage, the largest city of Alaska; they also partially dispersed across Alaska and change their place of residence quite often due to various reasons. According to our study, the number of living persons of UKA origin is about 380.