
Sustaining Linguistic Continuity in the Beringia: Examining Language Shift and Comparing Ideas of Sustainability in Two Arctic Communities

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Abstract: In order to answer the critical question of “how (and whether) communities can sustain continued use of their languages in the future,” this article addresses the subject of linguistic “sustainability” by comparing linguistic situations in two geographically and politically divided Yupik communities with dissimilar degrees of language maintenance: the predominantly Russian-speaking village of Novoe Chaplino in the Russian Far East and the still bilingual (English-Yupik) village of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island in the United States. Addressing the question of sustainability from “within” – that is, looking at what “sustainability” looks like and how it works on the ground – the article discusses the place of language ideologies in this process, advocating for a move away from purists’ conceptualisation of language to more experimental practices and “bilingual games.”

Keywords: language sustainability, ideology, linguistic purism, Yupik, Chukotka, St. Lawrence Island

Résumé : Afin de répondre à la question importante à savoir « comment les communautés peuvent maintenir l’usage de leur langue dans le futur », cet article traite du sujet de la durabilité linguistique en comparant les situations linguistiques de deux communautés Yupik qui sont géographiquement et politiquement séparées, et qui maintiennent leur langue à des degrés divers : le village à prédominance russe de Novoe Chaplino à l’Extrême-Orient de la Russie et le village encore bilingue (anglais-yupik) de Gambell sur l’île Saint-Laurent aux États-Unis. En examinant les idéologies linguistiques (attitudes sociétales et changements de codes) et en abordant la question de la durabilité “de l’intérieur” – c.-à-d. l’étude de ce qu’est la durabilité et sa mise en pratique sur le terrain – cet article plaidera contre des conceptualisations puristes de la langue et pour des pratiques plus expérimentales de « jeux bilingues ».

Mots-clés : durabilité linguistique, maintien/changement linguistique, idéologies linguistiques, purisme linguistique, Arctique, Yupik, Chukotka, Île Saint-Laurent

Introduction: A People Apart

Imagine you have a people, bound by kinship, speaking the same language, living within a distance of some 60 kilometres (38 miles), and yet divided not only by a geographical border but also by human-made borders. For almost half a century, they live in total isolation from each other, and, when they finally meet, they are no longer able to speak to each other because one of the groups has lost its language. This is indeed a story of the Yupik people, who throughout history have been known under a common designation of “Siberian Yupik Eskimos” or simply Yupik (the plural form is Yupiget). With a total population of some 2,300 to 2,500 people inhabiting the areas around the Bering Sea, the Yupik people constitute only a tiny minority among 150,000 Inuit residing in Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Russia. Approximately 800 Yupiget (by their own definition) currently live on the shores of the Chukchi Peninsula in the Russian Far East, mainly in two villages: Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki. Another 1,500 to 1,600 Yupiget live in Alaska, United States, mostly in two villages – Gambell and Savoonga – which are located on St. Lawrence Island. The total population of the island ranges between 1,300 and 1,400 people, with 97 percent identifying as Native American. An additional 150 to 200 Yupiget reside in the city of Nome on the southeastern coast of the Alaskan Seward Peninsula. Roughly the same number lives in the area around Anchorage in Alaska.

The social and kinship ties of the Yupik people go far back into prehistory and are well documented (Bogoraz and Boas 1913). As far into the 20th century as the 1950s, the Yupiget of Chukotka and Alaska spoke practically identical dialects of the Yupik language – the language of the western sub-branch of the Inuit branch of the Eskaleut language family. Researchers have often attributed this striking linguistic similarity to the repopulation of the island by the Chukotkan residents after a severe epidemic of famine and plague in 1978 and 1979 reduced the island’s population to some 300

people (Krauss 1980, 46; Krupnik 1994, 49–80). In fact, in spite of the control of St. Lawrence Island passing to the United States in 1867, along with the rest of Alaska, the repopulation of the island by the Chukotkan Natives and exchange between the Yupik people on both sides of the strait continued until the late 1920s. This helped to sustain homogeneity in their culture and language.

In 1923, Soviet rule was officially established in Chukotka, marking both the ideological and actual political separation of the Yupik people. Then, in 1948, as a result of political tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, the border was closed, and all movement across the Bering Sea was banned. For the next 40 years, the border remained closed, and the people stayed completely cut off from each other. As the people became integrated into the dominant ideologies and mainstream cultures – Soviet and American respectively – they followed rather dissimilar paths of development with regard to their ways of life, traditional cultures, and languages. The inhabitants of St. Lawrence Island, being geographically isolated from the Alaskan mainland by the waters of the Bering Sea, remained relatively isolated and have displayed a high degree of linguistic resilience, compared to their neighbouring Alaskan communities. In fact, for a prolonged period, Gambell and Savoonga remained the only rural Alaskan communities where the native language was passed onto the younger generations. In the beginning of the 1990s, in fact, just a couple of years after the reopening of the Russian-American border, the village of Gambell was still described as being fully bilingual, with St. Lawrence Island Yupik being spoken by 95 to 99 percent of the residents (Jolles 1997, 87). In Chukotka, on the other hand, the contact of the local Yupik population with the Russian-speaking population was intense, affecting all aspects of local ways of life and greatly diminishing local cultures and languages. Nikolai Vakhtin, a Russian linguist who conducted fieldwork in the area in the mid-1990s, estimated that the number of Yupik speakers numbered less than 200, and all were above 55 years of age (Vakhtin 2001).

Between 2003 and 2007, I conducted fieldwork in three of the Yupik villages, visiting Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki in 2003 and 2005 and then Gambell in 2007. Combining methods of interactional sociolinguistics and ethnography of communication, my research focused on the ways the Yupik people have been adapting linguistically (and culturally) to the changes brought in by the Russian and American mainstream cultures and ideologies. In particular, I have looked at the ways that local community members utilise and make use of different ways of speaking (and coding) in everyday interaction

and how they frame their communication (its form and function) within broader contexts of social and cultural practices and beliefs (Morgounova 2010). What I have observed is that in spite of the analogous set of rules of interaction, ideas, and beliefs about different ways of speaking and the ways languages should be used (for instance, purification of the Yupik language and the ways Yupik is separated and kept apart from English/Russian), the effect that these ideological constraints have on conversational language choice of individual speakers are rather dissimilar.¹

In this article, I focus on the role of language ideologies and linguistic purism in language sustainability/language revitalisation efforts and on the ways in which the ideas of “proper” and “appropriate” language practices enter into face-to-face interaction of individual speakers. Giving credit to external, contextual factors, the analysis focuses more on “situated interaction” and “the self.” I address the question of sustainability “from within,” and I ask how the users’ desire to preserve their minority language relates to their views and ideas about their language(s). Then, by looking at how individual speakers employ a variety of societal attitudes, cultural frames, and communicative strategies into their communication, I show how the individual speakers actually evaluate language choice in the course of concrete interaction. Linking more locally situated aspects of language use to the macro issues of social institutions, belief, and ideologies allows us to see the existing disjuncture between ideological conceptualisations of languages and those locally situated ways of valuation and exchange applied to a group dynamic. I argue that although language competence matters, the actual, motivating force of linguistic change “often lies within social evaluation of language,” both locally as well as globally (Wertheim 2003, 84–85; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 70). In fact, in language revitalisation/language sustainability efforts, purist ideas might be deeply problematic, hindering the actual acquisition of the minority language by the younger and/or less secure speakers. To “sustain” minority languages, I argue, we need to move away from the conceptualisation of language as ideology to more experimental practices and “bilingual games.” To bring us closer to understanding the problems and opportunities presented to both nation-states and local communities when trying to revive or sustain their minority languages, this article brings the situation in Chukotka and Alaska into perspective by comparing cultural encounters and linguistic behaviours (mother tongue attitudes and code-switching) in two villages: the village of Novoe Chaplino and the village of Gambell (Sivuqaq).

The Village of Novoe Chaplino

Situated on the southeastern tip of the Chukchi Peninsula, only 25 kilometres away from the regional centre of Provideniya, the village of Novoe Chaplino is easily accessible from town by vehicle. When I did my fieldwork in the village in 2005, 330 people were registered as “Eskimos” (mainly Chaplino Yupik) out of a total population of 448 people. Another 84 were designated as Chukchi, 3 as Dolgans, while 31 were incomers, mainly Slavic people from central parts of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. In addition, the village hosted 65 foreign individuals (mainly Turkish) and eight construction workers from the neighbouring village of Yanrakynnot. The overall poverty of the region was striking, although the majority of the villagers did manage to survive due to the effective network of informal economies. Most jobs in the village were in the social sector: administration, school, kindergarten, and the health centre. A few others worked at the electric plant and pumphouse.

Initially a whaling community, the relationship of the local population to sea mammal hunting was complex and unambiguous. It has been restructured a variety of times since the Soviets reached Chukotka in 1923, and it was stopped completely in 1993 and unofficially reintroduced in 1997 (officially in 1998). In 2005, 18 men were involved in sea mammal hunting. They were employed as hunters by the regional municipality – the area’s administrative body, which was introduced in Chukotka in the 1920s. In practical terms, this meant that the hunters did not preside over their equipment or harvest but had to submit it to the municipality, who then sold the meat back to the local people, including the hunters themselves. Most of the whaling activities took place outside of the village at the whaling base in Inaghpik, which is situated approximately 50 kilometres away from the village. Staying in Inaghpik several weeks at a time, the hunters were rather segregated from the rest of the community.

The local people of Novoe Chaplino (represented by the local administration) had little to say about matters regarding political and economic decisions. Such discussions (from monetary income to sea mammal hunting) were undertaken on the regional level. However, the local School Council, the Women’s Council, and the Parent’s Council together administrated the social problems in the village: children from socially troubled families, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse. In spite of the fact that the head of the local administration at the time was a Chaplino-born Native woman, most of the administrative posts in the village were occupied by non-Natives, which produced inequality

between Native and non-Natives and caused certain hostility toward the incomers.

The level of Russification in the village was high. The majority of the population conversed in the Russian language, told Russian jokes, ate Russian food, read Russian books, and watched channels 1 and 3 on the Russian state television. Russian was the language used in all functional domains of social life – government, administration, education, and mass media – and it was the language children most often heard at home. The use of Yupik in the village was fragmented and particularised; it was mainly associated with practising the traditional way of life and used in expressing forms of (folk) culture, such as singing/drumming as well as in ritualised styles of speech in ceremonialised contexts (see Morgounova 2010).

When I asked the village administrator how many people spoke Yupik, she counted on her fingers and told me that only a few elderly speakers still spoke the language fluently and that there might also be a few women in their forties and fifties who could do so as well. When I later visited the school principal, a settler from the central part of Russia, she passed her own judgment (in Russian): “Well if you care to find language here, I tell you directly, there is no language here, and cannot be. The Elders, they spoke. The language is disappearing with the Elders.” “The local people”, she explained to me, “have a tendency to exaggerate how traditional they are and how they speak their language; yet, I have never heard them really speaking it. The majority of them do not want to maintain their language, while the effort of the few villagers is pointless. One is not an army,” she concluded, using a Russian proverb, and switched to another topic. From time to time, however, I would hear a Yupik lullaby, a funny Yupik remark, a greeting or a joke told in Yupik, and, occasionally (and more often than it might seem at first), a word or two would sneak into the conversation of the villagers, even the very young ones, who otherwise would claim they spoke solely in Russian.

The Village of Gambell

Cut off from the Alaskan mainland by the waters of the Bering Sea, the village of Gambell – with 95 percent of its population of 616 being entirely Yupik – appears as a micro-society in its own right. Technologically advanced, the village inhabitants still live a subsistent lifestyle dependent largely on sea mammal hunting and whaling. Seal, walrus, and whale meat constitute an integral part of the Sivuqaghmiit diet. In fact, the whole life of the village is organised around seasonal hunting, and the

practice of hunting itself is structured around clan-based family relations. This relationship is long established and is bound by the traditional organisation of the society into paternally defined clans, where the oldest men (and, rarely, women) function as clan leaders (Hughes 1960, 1984).

Being a good hunter means being able to provide food for your family, and it is a matter of both survival and prestige. Hunters are involved in undertaking important decisions regarding the hunting season, trade, rituals, and so on, and, as a rule, they hold high status within the community. Since most social interaction in the village is with kin – in Gambell, people often say: “everyone is related” – the majority of the boating teams are often organised around (extended) families. Children often find their companions among their relatives as they grow up together, and, later, they become hunting partners (Jolles 1997, 93). Practically everyone here belongs to one of the two religious communities, the Presbyterian Church or the Seventh Day Adventist Church, to attend funerals, weddings, and regularly held Sunday services. The churches arrange meetings as well as summer schools for children, play significant roles in the social life of the village, and they actively advocate for the preservation of the Yupik language. The only “white” people residing in the village for prolonged periods are local teachers. Yet, as Pam Powell (1998, 97–98) correctly points out, “there is so much separation between the teachers’ quarters and the native housing, that the teachers are segregated, [fostering] a continued division between school and everyday life.”

When I encountered the village of Gambell in the spring of 2007, I was immediately brought into the world of the Yupik language. Spring is the time of whaling and walrus hunting. It was my first morning in the village, and I was awakened by loud Yupik talk, coming from the hall of a bunkhouse where I was staying. Fifteen minutes later, I was standing on the shore, surrounded by a crowd of some 50 four-wheelers (ATVs) and snow machines, and, for the first time in my life, I heard people speaking exclusively in Yupik. Next to me, a man was talking on a walkie-talkie in Yupik, passing a message to the rest of those waiting on shore, and it was all in Yupik. A minute later, a younger woman passed by on a ATV, and when she asked the man something in Yupik, he again replied to her in Yupik. Noticing me, he turned and excused himself: “I am sorry, I hope you are not offended we are talking in our language. You see, it is easier for us to speak our own language.” Turning back to his interlocutor, he again switched into Yupik. Later that day, making my way back to the bunkhouse through the gravel, I saw a little girl running toward

her older brother shouting: “*Amak me, amak me too*” (“Lift me up and carry me too”). “*I am going telaananga*” (“I am going sailing”), answered the young man, taking off toward the sea on his Honda. I was lost in the moment – lost in this seemingly (to me) “authentic” world of a language that “was supposed to be dead.” Yet, here in Gambell, I found it was very much alive, enacted in every move and behaviour of the community members across generations, gender, and social differences. In fact, that very morning, I, a complete foreigner, memorised my first Yupik words: *aghvesiiq* (bowhead whale), *aghveq* (whale), *ayveq* (walrus).

Nonetheless, the people of Gambell expressed a growing concern about “losing their language.” The number of families using English was said to be increasing, and there had been a drop in the use of the Yupik language among the youngsters. When I asked a woman at the Native Corporation office about the number of Yupik speakers in the village, I was told that such information was not available but that “the children do not know how to speak the language properly anymore.” Instead, she said, they speak the language in its “simplistic form”: it was “kind of mixed,” and “they pronounce words in the English way.” For example, they may sometimes use sound /sh/ instead of /s/ (Morgounova 2010, 181). Likewise, some of the meanings have become confused – for example, the difference between *aaptakaa*, meaning “I asked him/her” and *ungipitaka*, meaning “I told him/her.” “The children think both words mean ‘he told me,’ and they pronounce Yupik words with an English accent,” a Sivuqaq Elder told me.

Why Does Language Matter?

In Gambell, the growing concern about people “losing their language” had to do with the fact that language is seen as an important aspect of collective self-recognition as well as a key facet of group recognition in the eyes of the outsiders. A Sivuqaq Elder expressed it as follows:

I’ve noticed, when you first came and heard us speaking in our language, the first-time visitors are always surprised to hear us speaking in our language – and that’s to me identity today. That we speak our language today, whether other cultural groups in the State are losing or have lost theirs. (Sivuqaq, July 2007)

The Yupik language is also viewed as an essential aspect of cultural (and biological) continuity. Hence, some have told me that they want their children to speak the Yupik language simply because they “wanted to be remembered.” Others pointed out to me that losing one’s language means “losing who we are.” In this view, language

and ethnic identity are deeply intertwined. Preserving one's language is important because, as part of what Joshua Fishman (1989) calls ethnic paternity (that is, ethnicity, emotionally experienced as primordial kinship ties), it is perceived as biological inheritance, allowing us to feel (and claim) a bond of one's own kind. It is something that is deeply tied with the past and the future "as part of being remembered" and as tied to the continuity of one's own kind. Language, therefore, is experienced as a deeply emotional matter.

When I asked the local population of the village of Novoe Chaplino "whether and why it was necessary to speak Yupik," the answer was similar. People linked language to their ethnic identity: "But of course we need to speak our language, because without language who are we then? We are not Russians, and then we are not Yupik either." While few people claimed they could speak the language fluently, the majority of the Yupik residents I have interviewed agreed that speaking Yupik was "a matter of pride to every Eskimo in Chukotka." When speaking Yupik, people strived to speak Yupik correctly – that is, in a grammatically and phonologically correct way, "like the elderly people do."

This view of language goes back to the Herderian view of language as "distinct and separate and as belonging to just one equally distinct and separate people," and it usually encompasses the idea of linguistic purism: the idea that languages should be maintained in their "original," linguistically correct form and kept "pure" (that is, untouched by foreign influence) and apart from other languages (Yildiz 2011, 7–8). Purism (from Latin *purus* "pure" and *-ism*) means "purification" or "cleansing" and is often used as a strategy to keep foreign elements away from language, music, literature, architecture, and culture. It often forms the basis for national (top-down) language policies, but, more importantly, it may also structure a collective perception of the normative frame within which linguistic behaviour is understood: which language is right and which is wrong, good or bad, and what kind of speaking is normal and/or appropriate, when, and with whom (Spolsky 2004). It may also serve as the basis for a community's language management strategies, implied in a series of "rules of speaking." Each community, according to Spolsky, shares a general set of shared beliefs and ideas about "appropriate language practices, sometimes forming a consensual ideology, assigning values and prestige to various aspects of the language varieties used in it. These beliefs both derive from and influence practices. They can be a basis for language management or a management policy can be intended to confirm or modify them" (14). The following section explores how these beliefs and ideas about "appropriate language practices" as they relate to the

idea of linguistic purism, structure a group's perception of the normative frame within which their linguistic behaviour is understood.

Language Ideologies at Work in Gambell

Gambell language behaviours – in particular, attitudes toward the Yupik language – reveal what Fishman (1989, 28) calls "the 'pull' of unalterable paternity in the face of organised attempts to plan, change, improve, or modernise the language." Among the strategies employed by the community to administrate linguistic diversity in the area (focusing on the sustainability of the Yupik language) are control over the influx of English borrowing, restrictions on mixing, and "practices of language separation," so to speak – that is, a restriction on the social domains of English versus Yupik language use.

Until recently, for instance, there have been only a few English borrowings in Yupik. Instead of borrowing directly from English, the Sivuqaghmiit have preferred to coin words from the language's own stock of morphemes or to adjust words according to Yupik phonetic composition – for example, the English "hook less" became in Yupik "ukles" meaning "zipper." In recent decades, however, as it is "no longer necessary to create words" (assumed because everyone knows and uses the English words), one Sivuqaghmiit Elder pointed out to me that the people of St. Lawrence Island have borrowed more words from English. Words like computer, television or TV, walkie-talkie, and so on are borrowed directly from English, without being adjusted to the language beyond the point of adding a Yupik ending, such as clinic-aaq and orange-aaq (Jacobson 1995, 440).

Today, the majority of the adult population of Gambell identifies themselves as bilingual, as they "speak both English and Yupik." They believe, however, that the two languages should be kept apart and spoken one language at a time and that they should be spoken in their phonetically and grammatically correct form, without interference from another language. There is, in fact, a clear-cut line between what is understood as code-switching – "conventional" (and accepted) language alternation understood in situational terms (compare Blom and Gumperz 1972) – and language-mixing – understood as disorderly non-conventional use of the following type: "*Sakninaq, wind picked up as we were leaving, but we tugumiqa out there ... Nani un'ga. Naqamalla wata ellmaragsaqan*" ("It is rough; wind picked up as we were leaving, but we went on ice and held the boat out there. Somewhere out there [in the ocean]. If only it would get calmer").

Code-switching is restricted by generally acknowledged "rules" and norms that structure language choice

according to the context, the topic of the conversation, as well as the age of the interlocutors. For instance, English would be used when talking about money or school matters because these are the domains of English, and Yupik will be used when talking about “the traditional stuff.” “Traditional stuff” basically includes activities and topics related to subsistence practices such as whaling and boating, fishing, berry picking, weather conditions, and flora and fauna in general. “In hunting, yeah, it’s all in Yupik. Boating,” a local hunter told me in 2007: “There are certain parts of boating, equipment, that we use in Yupik. I use different kinds of ice that we use in Yupik – it can be just one little word in Yupik – and hunting for sure. It is almost exclusively Yupik, because everybody else speaks Yupik, because everyone knows all Yupik” (Male, 28, Gambell). Another hunter from a different boating crew, who is not fluent in Yupik and feels more at ease with English, confirms: “When you get a bunch of hunters together, it is going to be strictly Yupik. Doesn’t matter if you speak English or not. You just cannot stop doing things because somebody doesn’t understand. If you don’t understand, they’ll find someone that they can communicate with. In my case, they know I speak mostly English, but it doesn’t bother them. They just keep on speaking Yupik, they know I’ll understand, and I’ll do the words, I’ll respond to it” (Male, 32, Gambell). According to yet another local hunter, a 25-year-old young man, it is easier to speak Yupik in certain situations: “It takes a while to get your mind working completely in the English way. Sometimes it is easier for us to speak Yupik in order to stress certain points ... It is easier to communicate in Yupik, especially on the CB [radio] when you have to maybe limit your time” (Male, 25, Gambell). What is also interesting is that many speakers would claim that they would switch into English when speaking to a child because “English is their language now.” Yet the younger people would be expected (and “requested”) to speak Yupik to the community Elders “to show their respect.”

Language-mixing is another matter, and it is generally not appreciated. It is considered indicative of a poor command of Yupik and is symbolic of language attrition and identity loss. Children who often mix Yupik with English are said to be losing their language (and losing who they are) and, hence, are identified as non-speakers. When the children grow up, they are expected to know how to speak Yupik, and those who mix and “make mistakes” are usually shamed for it, corrected, and even laughed at. For the people of Gambell for whom the Yupik language is the key to kinship-interpreted group membership (the community we-code), the ability to speak the language in an appropriate way in a variety

of situations (with Elders or during whaling and community gatherings) is an important tool in defining who is a worthy and valuable member of the community. It plays an important role in defining the leadership, be it that of whaling activities, communal affairs, or representation on more global, international levels (Morgounova 2010). Language, in this sense, is not “mere communication.” Rather, what language communicates is the person’s (tacit) knowledge and acceptance (even when negotiated) of a set of locally conventionalised rules, obligations, and values holding between community members for a particular conversational exchange. Language choice, in this case, is “indexical of social negotiations” (compare Scotton 1988). It is an act of display, through which one’s own and others’ loyalty and worthiness is displayed and evaluated and which marks his or her “legitimate” in-group membership. In Gambell, whether one is a worthy member of the community or not may be defined in terms of linguistic competence, or in terms of a person’s ability to speak “proper Yupik” and keep the two languages apart; in other words, this is their ability to “behave (in) Yupik (way).”

While this surely motivates some of the speakers to learn “proper Yupik,” entering face-to-face interaction, these views may produce a rather negative effect on the actual language choice of the individual speakers, limiting their productive output. For instance, the lack of linguistic competence among the younger speakers (a belief that children do not speak the language properly anymore) is the reason many parents choose to speak English to their children. In Gambell, in fact, there is a sort of intergenerational language segmentation between the older (Yupik-dominant) and the younger (English-dominant) residents, which is recognised as highly problematic for language sustainability. The belief that children do not speak the language properly leads parents to shift into English when addressing their children, thus “depriving” them of the possibility of language choice (although I did register a couple of cases where the children had challenged their parents by continuing to switch into Yupik). Furthermore, the idea that the language should be spoken properly or not spoken at all also produces a feeling of linguistic insecurity and even shame among the less secure speakers. So even though a speaker might do quite well in Yupik, in the course of actual interaction – when every action is subject to evaluation and display – the less secure speakers may choose to speak English, or to avoid speaking at all, in order not to lose face.

Let me introduce Naya, who is a local girl in her mid-twenties. She is the daughter of a local hunter and has four siblings. When I met Naya, she was working

with a group of five other girls on tagging walruses. From what I could tell, Naya spoke relatively well in Yupik and would regularly converse in Yupik with her grandma “because some English words she wouldn’t understand.” She also spoke Yupik to her older sister, who was a much more secure speaker of Yupik. Nonetheless, Naya has been constantly telling me that she does not speak the language, at least not to the people in the village, because her Yupik is poor, and she did not want to offend the Elders or be criticised. The fact is that, according to the traditional clan-structured (*ramke*) organisation of the society, the oldest men (or, in rare cases, women) in the clan usually have the highest status in the clan hierarchy (Hughes 1960, 1984; Jolles 2002). Hence, the people older than oneself deserve a certain respect. One of the ways of showing respect is through language. By switching into Yupik at the opening of an encounter, community members display their respect but also mark that they are worthy members of the community. In this case, the lack of good Yupik skills can lead to embarrassment. Embarrassment, according to Erving Goffman (1967, 105), has to do with “unfulfilled expectations.” An individual will therefore avoid placing herself in this position (102). Although greetings (that is, “well-known indeterminacies that arise at the opening of an encounter”; Rampton 2009, 160) may be used to reduce the tension and to avoid violation of an “ideal sphere” that lies around the recipient (62), in Gambell, the most secure strategy would be to avoid speaking at all. In fact, “avoidance,” in the case of younger speakers, is often perceived as the surest way to prevent threats to one’s face. By avoiding the act of speaking, young people avoid being shamed and losing face.

Naya, for instance, who spoke Yupik regularly to her older sister and grandmother, whom she knew very well, would neglect speaking Yupik to those who she knew might criticise her for not being fluent. When I interviewed another sibling pair, the younger one (who was 19) told me that since she did not speak Yupik she would only speak to those Elders who spoke English. The older sister (who was 21) had grown up with her grandparents and spoken mainly Yupik as a child, and she said that she tried to speak to the Elders but confirmed that it is easier not to. “I am bad,” she noted, embarrassed; “some Elders get offended.” To avoid embarrassment, she would avoid speaking Yupik. Instead, she would “reply” with a short gesture to show an agreement or a negation, or she would simply speak English, thus reproducing the belief that young people “do not speak the language anymore.” The strategy chosen in these cases has more to do with the individual speakers’

evaluation of their language skills and the effect that “speaking” may produce on one’s “self-image” than with their actual ability to speak the language.

In contrast, when speaking to their siblings and friends, young people use all of their linguistic repertoire and may very well (and often do) mix Yupik with English because “it is easier, faster,” “more convenient” or a “more natural” way, or, simply, “because this is how we all [young people] talk.” In fact, the young people today see themselves as “kind of mixed.” A young local hunter in his mid-twenties explained: “I was brought up in both languages – kind of mixed, or how you say it? Both in modern and western ways. Went to school, and then, at home, I am also involved in hunting and speaking my own language, so I grew up both learning English and our own language and ways of life ... I think I knew as much English as Yupik by the time I could really speak. My parents – strictly Yupik.” Mixing, then, constitutes a separate code, a sort of token, used by the young residents of the St. Lawrence Island to mark their dual identities. It is a phenomena in many respects similar to a form of youth jargon (also known as “ethnolect”) used by bilingual adolescent speakers in urban ghetto environments all throughout Europe (see Kotsinas 1992; Quist 2000).

A few other cases have also shown that children and youngsters may choose to switch into English in order to wield power. For example, if they are being wrongly accused or scolded, they may choose to switch into English to explain themselves and to claim their righteousness. Switching in this case is used as a communicative strategy of repair. Sivuqaghmiit parents, on the other hand, regularly switched into Yupik in conversations with their children when they scolded or instructed them, for the purpose of getting their attention or claiming their authority: “When we do this, they know that now, this is serious, they have to listen,” a young local mother explained to me. For the younger people, the Yupik language then becomes associated with negative emotions such as rage, anger, frustration, or, in the case of children, their own powerlessness (Morgounova 2010, 122).

We can therefore conclude that how the Sivuqaghmiit speakers evaluate their languages (what kind of language to use when and with whom) in the course of face-to-face interactions depends not so much on their actual linguistic competence but, rather, on the ways they anticipate that “speaking in a particular way” may affect their “self-images,” their communicative goals, and their relations with the interlocutor, along with their knowledge of the “normative” frame (attitudes about “proper” and “appropriate” ways of speaking). Purists’ ideologies in this case work in two ways. They help to

separate and to maintain the domains of the Yupik language. Yet, on the level of everyday conversation, they may “force” the less secure speakers to actually deselect their language in favour of a more secure code.

Language Ideologies at Work in Novoe Chaplino

In Chukotka, where the number of fluent speakers is limited to a few elderly residents, the use of Yupik is highly particularised, and Russian is considered to be the only appropriate, legitimate, and, hence, unmarked form of speech. Speaking minority languages in the presence of people of Slavic descent is considered morally inappropriate. “We would never speak our language in the presence of the Russians,” a local woman in her forties told me: “It is not allowed. We, Eskimo, have an in-born *savoir faire*” (“врожденное чувство такта / *vrozhdennoe chuvstvo takta*”). The majority strives to speak Russian “properly” – that is, accent free – because an accent (Yupik or Chukchi) in the Russian speech is a marker of stagnation: it is associated with the ways that elderly (more rural and less educated) people talk. With the population of the village being extremely mixed, “speaking proper Russian” is also a Yupik way of differentiating themselves from the Chukchi, who are said to “have a different accent.” In the village setting, however, people may take on a “Yupik accent” (a way of speaking Russian with Yupik intonation, as the elderly women do) merely for metaphorical purposes, for instance, of evoking a stereotype of Yupik people as being “very gay people, with good sense of humour” (Morgounova 2010, 134–135).

The use of the Yupik language is largely ascribed to (and increasingly used in) subsistence activities, such as sea mammal hunting: “The hunters, they speak, they understand,” people often told me. A few others (mostly women) claimed to have “relearned” the language in the 1990s due to their prolonged stays in Alaska. These women often liked to point out that when speaking Yupik they “strive to speak it properly, like the elderly people do.” Nonetheless, the majority acknowledged that they speak Yupik with a particular (Russian) accent and that they sometimes mix it with Russian. In fact, as the number of “authentic (real) speakers” in the village is constantly decreasing, Russian-Yupik mixing, the insertion of single and multiple Yupik word elements and lexicalised expressions into Russian speech, and fragmented switching into Yupik is becoming the only way of speaking Yupik in Chukotka. “Code-switching is a relatively new phenomenon,” a Chaplino Elder, a drummer, and a former teacher of Yupik noted in 2003: “Before, we were not allowed to speak our language, and we

were ashamed of speaking it, ashamed of who we are. Today, those who know how to speak [Yupik] will speak to those who can, an Elder or an Eskimo from Alaska.” In fact, although mixing of languages is not considered to be the proper way of speaking, and is generally not appreciated, in particular, by the more fluent speakers, the use of Yupik words and Yupik mixing in the speech of less competent speakers, particularly children and youngsters, is appreciated and even encouraged: “It is better they speak this way than no way at all,” I was told.

Locally, the everyday speech of the villagers was peppered with Yupik words and expressions – the use of greetings at the introductory encounter or the use of culturally loaded words related to traditional activities and artefacts, names for fauna and flora, place names, and other culturally specific words. People sometimes used baby talk and warnings, and they scolded and instructed their children in Yupik (Morgounova 2010; Schwalbe 2015). It is interesting that although the local school currently does not officially support Native languages and, as a matter of fact, hours designated for Native language instruction were reduced in favour of English in 2005, local teachers unofficially try to integrate Yupik into their teaching by bringing in Yupik words and lyrics into well-known Russian children’s songs and poems. An example is the following version of a famous children’s poem by a famous Soviet children’s author Agnia Barto:

*Матросский насуперак, тапghaaghaq в руке,
Несу я angyaghrak по быстрой реке
И скачут waten’gi за мною по пятам
И просят меня: «Прокати капитан!»²*

“In this way,” the local teacher (female, 43) told me, “they learn, and they understand.”

In fact, the 2003 questionnaire research that I conducted in a local school in grades 5 to 11 showed that almost all schoolchildren in the village (with the exception of a few) had some knowledge of the Yupik language and, in particular, the traditional vocabulary. Although no one claimed to be fluent in the language and just three individuals considered their knowledge of the language to be fairly good, the majority were able to give several written examples of Yupik words and phrases that they regularly used. Examples of Yupik words included words that were part of the traditional vocabulary, such as *angyaq* (skin boat), *angtughpaq* (walrus bull), *mangtak* (skin of a whale), *nungightaa* (to tie a boot), *nunivak* (a very popular edible plant, which can also mean “tundra”), *qikmiq* (dog), *qiku* (clay, used for seal oil lamps), *quvegsi* (*Polygonum tripterosarpum*,

which is a food plant), *tunuq* (reindeer), *uupa* (sea peach), and so on (see Morgounova 2010, 171, 123).

During everyday interaction, children would also cross over to Yupik by using Yupik words (or accents): “Эй ты, юк, че толкаешься/ Ei ty, yuk, cho tolkaeshsia?” (“Hey, you, man, don’t push”). I once heard an eight-year-old boy shout to another: “Сам ты, куйнык, отойди отсюда / Sam ty, *kuinykh*, otoidi otsiuda” (“You are yourself a reindeer, get lost”) came the reply. In this way, they are bringing into play a variety of existing attitudes for a single purpose: to show emotion (contempt) while negotiating their relations and social roles. What is interesting is that the ways (and situations) in which the Chaplino residents choose to bring a Yupik word or a phrase into conversation locally (on the village level) are very similar to the cases of Yupik switching that I have recorded in Gambell. Yupik can be used to express emotions, agreement, praise, or encouragement; to get someone’s attention; to show respect (for example, by using a Yupik greeting of the type “where are you going,” “where have you been,” or “the weather is getting bad” at the beginning of the encounter); to assert or wield power (for example, when instructing or scolding children); or to mark one’s personal stances or likes (or dislikes) by briefly shifting to another form of talk. Or it can be employed for merely pragmatic reasons because it is “faster,” “easier,” “more convenient,” or “more natural” and “intuitive” to speak in a particular way. Parents may use Yupik with their children to get attention or to claim “authority” when instructing or scolding their children, to emphasise that “now, it is serious, we really mean it,” or to teach them the little they know: “Because this is the way their own mothers did it.” In fact, in Chukotka, “words” (that is, the insertion of Yupik single- and multiple-word items into Russian speech) have taken on the function of “speaking,” through which one’s legitimacy and “identities” are established and maintained: “But of course we speak Yupik,” one of my younger acquaintances told me, “we use Yupik words all the time.” Moreover, while in Gambell, purist attitudes caused the less secure speakers to abandon speaking Yupik in cases when it threatens their face, in the village of Novoe Chaplino, even the non-speakers continuously (and increasingly) switched into Yupik to mark their loyalties and group belongings. In recent years, experimental bilingual practices, like inserting single words into everyday speech and well-known rhymes and songs, retelling Yupik stories and lullabies, imitating the Elders’ talk, or even the sounds of the drum singing, became a way of maintaining (and acquiring) at least some parts of the Yupik language. In this case, the desire to preserve one’s native language seemed to be more powerful

than the actual (lack of) linguistic competence, motivating people to acquire/maintain at least some parts of the Yupik language, even when it seemed “already lost.”

The problem, however, is that while the link between Yupik identity and language remains strong, the prevailing opinion across Chukotka in general is that of “language loss” (“the language is disappearing with the Elders”) and “double half-monolingualism” – that is, the view that the Indigenous people speak neither of the two languages properly, but half and half. The few women in their forties who claimed to have relearned the language in recent years and who regularly switched into Yupik in the course of interaction (as I observed) were not considered to be the real speakers of the language on the basis that they spoke “partially” and that their speech was “fragmented” and “incomplete.” The local Elders who were considered the “real speakers” and who could still converse in Yupik about “trivialities” and make jokes or remarks in Yupik, admitted “to have given up their language” when speaking to their children and grandchildren: “Why speak with them?” an 82-year-old Chaplino woman and a speaker of Yupik told me in an interview in 2005: “I tried, but they don’t understand.” As others have concluded, “the language environment (*языковая среда* / *iazykovaia sreda*) in the village is absent.” What is also important is that by being linked to the “loss of cultural identity” and “of continuity as a people,” this idea of “double half-monolingualism” and “language loss” that predominates in Chukotkan public discourse has allowed for the continuing stigmatisation of the children of Yupik, Naukan, or Chukchi ancestry: “They are neither Eskimo nor Russians. Well, I don’t know who they are at all.” These children are repeatedly exposed to expressions of identity that are “negative,” “less progressive,” “worthless,” and even “already lost.” Within this framework, Russian is still (and now probably more than ever) seen by many as “progressive” and “necessary,” both regionally and nationally.

The Context of Problems and Opportunities in Gambell

These attitudes and beliefs, of course, were not expressed in a vacuum but, rather, have been subject to powerful social and political agendas. One of the obvious reasons why the island managed to maintain their linguist integrity is the fact that the assimilationist policy of the American “melting pot” and the philosophy of assimilation of immigrant peoples and “inferior races” (including Indigenous peoples) into the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture proved to have little effect on St. Lawrence Island (Krauss 1979; Powell 1998). In fact,

although the first missionaries settled on the island as early as 1894, geographical isolation meant that the two villages somehow remained largely untouched by the anti-Native assimilationist policy and the heavy suppression of Native languages that was initiated in 1910 by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).³ Indeed, as one of the Yupik Elders expressed it: “Thank God Sheldon Jackson and the rest of the Catholics and other denominations never followed us out here. Otherwise, we would be like the other cultural groups [in Alaska]. We would have probably lost our language.”⁴

Even when the first governmental school was built by the BIA in Gambell around the 1930s, the people continued speaking their language. It was not until the late 1950s that it became a requirement for children to learn English (Apassingok et al. 1987). By that time, however, in the wave of the 1960s civil rights movement (1964–68), the liberalisation process, and the resurgence of ethnicity, the public policies “shifted in the direction of protecting rights of linguistic minorities” (Bonvillain 1993, 323). Followed by the decline of the “melting pot” philosophy and the recognition of the Native languages by the educational system in the years between 1960 and 1970, Alaska Natives saw “a transitional period of rebirth of interest in Alaska Native languages and a shift of developments in their favour” (Krauss 1980, 26). In 1967, the federal Bilingual Education Act was passed.⁵ Although the passing of the Act did not actually promote bilingualism, as it aimed to provide compensatory education for limited English speakers and, hence, was “primarily an act for the Anglification of non-English” (Fishman 1981, 517–518), it did permit instruction in languages other than English in publicly-supported schools (Krauss 1980, 29; Powell 1998, 15). When experimental bilingual education was introduced in Alaska in 1970, it was introduced to four Central Yupik schools but not on St. Lawrence Island. A year later, in 1971, responsibility for managing rural schools was transferred to the Alaska State-operated school system that relied on work of locally instituted advisory school boards, which, in turn, pushed for “culturally relevant curriculum, including bilingual education” (Powell 1998, 15). Finally, in 1972, a pair of bills on behalf of Alaska Native Languages were passed, making Alaska “one of the first states to require that children be introduced to education in their native language” and producing a generation of speakers who could read and write Yupik (Krauss 1980, 29).

At the same time, when the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed, the islanders opted out of the financial agreement in favour of retaining full control of the island.⁶ As a result of this, the island

is now jointly owned by the people of Gambell and Savoonga, with sea mammal hunting (under the 1972 Maritime Mammals Protection Act), tourism (including the 1988 bird watching agreement), and monetary income from jobs being controlled locally by the Native Corporation (Hughes 1984, 265). This sustains the traditional clan-based structure of the community and empowers community Elders. More importantly, with no satisfactory telecommunication ties as far into the 20th century as the 1970s, Gambell and Savoonga remained rather isolated, not only geographically but also culturally. When the American linguist, Michael Krauss (1980), from the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, visited Gambell in 1980, he wrote in his *Report on St. Lawrence Island School Administrators and Personnel* that there were approximately half a dozen families in Gambell that were primarily English-speaking, and in one elementary school class the number of English-dominant children was over 30 percent.

Beginning in 1976, public telephones, emergency medical communication, and eventually television reached the island, speeding up the exposure of the local population to mainstream American culture and the English language, and producing the first generation of speakers who actually grew up in a bilingual environment. This was the tipping point in the history of St. Lawrence Island Yupik, signifying the beginning of the decline of the local dialects. One of the village Elders explained: “If you want to see or read the news, play games and follow what is happening around you, you need to know the English language. And if you want to watch cartoons and be able to understand them, you have to know English.” Another Elder expressed a similar point of view: “Yes, surely we are [losing our language], because all the exciting things in life today are all in English, whether it is a television, or MP3, or a computer, because their [children’s] friends all speak English to each other, and the TV and movies that they watch, like the rap ... they all want to be like Mike [Jones, a famous American rapper, popular among local children].”

Then, in 1991, the Russian-American border was reopened, permitting visa-free travel for Natives across the international border. In 1988, to symbolise the agreement, the first jet plane carried a group of Alaskan officials and Native leaders from Nome to Provideniya (Grebenshikov 1992). Beginning from the 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, there have been several exchange programs initiated between Chukotka and Alaska, allowing the Yupik residents of Chukotka to visit their relatives and friends in Alaska. “When they first came,” recounts a resident of Gambell, a hunter in his

early forties, “they spoke just like us. They were very amazing people. Most of them were drummers and dancers, the entertainers. And they were very cool people to watch and very cool to be with.” The excitement, however, soon turned to disappointment as people realised how different they were. As a series of negative stereotypes of the Chukotkan Natives as “dirty,” “poor,” “backward,” and “always expecting to be given something” emerged, the islanders began shifting away from their “shared” identity as Yupik, orienting more toward “being American” or “being both, the Sivuqaghmiit and the American”: “All the natives there made me appreciate my country. The level of poverty there is very high. They call us rich people. And we also have more freedom than the natives there. We are not afraid of white people, and they are ... and there is more prejudice in Russia too,” I was told. As a result of this “appreciation” and the growing exposure to American culture through television and the Internet, people began to orient more toward the English language as a way of “being American.” In May 1996, the St. Lawrence Island’s Tribal Council undertook a decision to refer to their language as St. Lawrence Island Yupik, for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from their “Russian” neighbours, the Siberian Yupik (Schwalbe 2015).

Today, many people in Gambell identify themselves as “being both, American and Yupik” or “a kind of mix” – that is, brought up both in American and Yupik ways. Although there is a certain ambiguity about the outside Anglo-American culture, which is associated not only with negative values (gambling, alcohol, and drug abuse, an inferiority complex, and even hatred) but also with status, opportunities, and “all funny things in life,” the status of the English language is growing and so is its use. The majority of people acknowledges that a good command of English is needed to manage well in school, to get a higher education, a better (paid) job, and/or to manage life outside of the community. Families that are predominantly Yupik-speaking are often identified by the younger people negatively as being “less economically and technologically advanced”, and hence “less modern,” “more traditional,” and “more backward.” Their children are said to perform less well in school. So far, Yupik continues to play an important role as the tribal language, which sustains its high status and its use not only in domestic affairs but also in more intimate, private, and emotional matters. Yet (perhaps in the wake of the cross-border encounter), the romanticised idea of the traditional (Yupik) way of life, perceived as harmonic in opposition to the mainstream Anglo-American culture, as well as the locals’ “need” for persistence of their tribal

language for in-group communication, is not as strong as it had been before. At this point, motivating young speakers to actively use their language is crucial. Yet, the prevailing belief that the younger speakers “do not know how to speak the language properly” affects language choice of the individual speakers in favour of English, which contributes to the reproduction of the seemingly radical disjunction between the older generation and the young.

The Context of Problems and Opportunities in Novoe Chaplino

The context of language shift/maintenance in Chukotka is multi-faceted and somewhat complicated. While the islanders remained relatively isolated, geographically and culturally, through most of the 20th century, the Native people of Chukotka have been moved, mixed, collectivised, made literate, and “imaginarily unified” into being a “we are all Soviet” kind of people. It is evident that the early Soviet ideology, having “an all-country scope to build a new ‘socialist’ nation of formerly exploited non-Russian ‘working masses,’ each with a written language and literate communist bureaucracy of its own,” supported a literacy program for the small northern minorities (Krupnik 1992, 192). The first school in the settlement of Ungaziq (Old Chaplino) was opened at the beginning of the 1930s. In 1932, Russian was introduced as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum as part of a bilingual education. Similarly to other colonial contexts, the Soviet educational system provided little (if any) support for the acquisition and maintenance of the Yupik language, instead promoting the acquisition of the Russian language. In 1937, the previously used Latin script was exchanged for the Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet, while a large number of Russian loanwords (some 300) were introduced into the Yupik vocabulary, in order to speed up the acquisition of the Russian language (Krauss 1980; Vakhtin 1992, 31).

The Soviet government promoted and encouraged ethnic ceremonialism and, consequently, the expressive forms of culture (the traditional folklore and sport disciplines) as a way to display Soviet diversity to the outside world. However, the communist ideology itself, grounded in Marxism-Leninism, was “bound to a representation of the indigenous people as primitive and backwards in comparison to the ‘technologically more advanced’ Russians” (Schwalbe 2015, 18). While Soviet propaganda emphasised the superiority of ethnic Russians, it presented the distribution of sea mammal harvests as irrational and whaling in general as a sign of capitalism

(Kuoljok 1985). Sea mammal hunting became a part of collectivisation and, then later, the industrialisation processes, with the control over hunting resources slowly passing to the Soviet government.⁷

Policies of forceful relocation, carried out by the Soviet government in the 1950s and 1960s, the introduction of Russian-speaking boarding schools, and the massive influx of the Russian-speaking populations into the area intensified the Russification process dramatically (between 1955 and 1975, the population of Chukotka doubled from 7,000 to 15,000 people; see Krupnik 1993, 24). In 1957, the people from Ungaziq were forcefully moved to their present (New Chaplino) location, where they were mixed with other local groups, including the more numerous group in the region, the Chukchi (originally, the Luoravetlan). A year later, a Russian-speaking boarding school was established in the village, housing children from neighbouring settlements within the municipality. Administered by outsiders, who saw themselves “as superior and were generally treated as such in relation to the local population,” the boarding schools treated the Native children as a lower (subordinate) sort of people, encouraging them to give up on their language in favour of Russian (Schwalbe 2015, 18). The traditional way of living became a symbol of stagnation and backwardness, allowing for the emergence of a series of negative stereotypes of Natives as “dull,” “uneducated,” and “less civilised” people, producing a feeling of inferiority, dependency, low self-esteem, and shame (Morgounova 2010).

The Communist system, however, allowed at least some of the Indigenous residents (for example, Chukchi resident Lina G. Tynel, who acted as Chukotka’s governor from 1970 to 1978) to receive preferential treatment if they elected to become members of the Communist Party and to assimilate to Russian culture and language (Schwalbe 2015, 18). Consequently, many began to see Russian as a symbol of status and the means to improve the quality of one’s life. Parents began to see the acquisition of Russian by their children as an investment in the children’s intellectual development, academic success, and better job opportunities – an attitude that still prevails in Chukotka. Moreover, since people’s civility was often judged by their ability to speak proper, accent-free Russian, speaking Russian for young people in the 1960s and 1970s became a way of showing that you were “worthy” and that you were “a civilised human being,” just like the Russians. “We all wanted to be like Russians,” several of my interlocutors told me. Speaking in the native tongue (Yupik or Chukchi) became symbolic of stagnation and inferiority. It was an object of shame, leading to the abandonment of native languages by younger generations of speakers. In their oral accounts,

the inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino often remember how ashamed they were of speaking their language with their parents (Morgounova 2010). By the end of the 1980s, Russian was the lingua franca of the whole area, and there were almost no children (or very few) that had grown up speaking Yupik (Vakhtin 1997).

In the second half of the 1980s, the situation began to change. The process of glasnost softened the “formerly tight bureaucratic control,” which stimulated political and economic activism and increased international research in the area (Gray 2005; Kerttula 2000; Vakhtin and Krupnik 1999, 29). Researchers working with Chukotkan minorities described the situation in Chukotka at the time as “ethnic catastrophe” (Vakhtin 2001, 160). In the late 1980s, following the rest of the country, the Chaplino boarding school was converted into a regular day school, and the native language was reintroduced into the school curriculum. As the people remembered they were “a nation in its own right,” their interest toward ethnicity and their concern about, and loyalty toward, their (Yupik) language in general also grew. This process was fortified in the 1990s, when the socio-economic and ideological crisis following the demise of the Soviet Union hit Chukotka, plunging the whole region into extreme poverty. This forced the Russian-speaking settlers to flee the area in large numbers. The local population saw themselves as being “left behind,” abandoned by their Big Brother. In 1999, Nikolai Vakhtin and Igor Krupnik (1999, 34) wrote: “The spiritual vacuum which the collapsed ideology of communism left behind demands a replacement.” It is therefore only logical to suppose that “the sudden demise of Soviet values triggered a growing interest in ethnic roots, religion, alternative spiritual values, and new identities” (33).

Within this context, the reopening of the Russian-American border, followed by a continuous exchange programs and visits between the Yupik people across the border throughout the 1990s, had tremendous economic and spiritual significance. It opened new ways of defining “old ethnicity” within a different, global context. With the Yupik language on St. Lawrence Island being maintained, it became the most explicit marker of a “shared” Yupik identity. People began to practise Yupik, and they were quite enthusiastic about studying it at school (Vakhtin and Krupnik 1999, 34). Speaking Yupik with single words which were inserted into the Russian also became “a way of speaking Yupik.” In 1997, when sea mammal hunting was reintroduced in Chukotka as an alternative way of survival, “speaking Yupik” became a way of identifying one’s right to this resource. Those who spoke Russian were said to be “too Russified” and were usually not considered “real hunters” at all, and hence, were excluded from sub-

sistence hunting practices. As more young people got involved in hunting, they began to acquire Yupik words in relation to the traditional vocabulary, particularly with respect to sea mammals.

The year 2000 brought new changes and challenges. Along with the new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, came a new governor – a young and energetic Russian oil millionaire, Roman Abramovich – and, with him, new capital and a wave of incomers not only from central parts of Russia but also from abroad, mainly from Turkey. By that time, Chukotka was the poorest region in the whole country. Within several years, Chukotka's wealth and general standard of living increased significantly. New houses, health care centres, and schools were built all across Chukotka. In between 2003 and 2005, 100 new one-family houses were built in Novoe Chaplino, transforming the village from its once-gloomy Soviet appearance into a modern-looking community. The Abramovich government carried out a “we are all in it together” policy, which was advantageous economically and politically (Gray 2005). It allowed for the transformation of cultural heritage into “a marker of ‘Chukotkan identity’ for both the Native and non-Native population” (Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002, 19). Reinvigorated by Putin's “nostalgia for the Soviet times,” this policy led in Chukotka to “an apparent drift from ethnicity to territoriality” (19, 34) and back to a dependency on Russians: “We have always said that the Russians won't abandon us” (female, 43, Chaplino). The new settlers at large sustained the stereotypes of the local population – still prevalent in public and local discourse – as “lazy,” “dirty,” “drunken,” “suicidal,” and now also “ungrateful to the Russian government” and as people who had voluntarily given up their culture and language. This discourse of endangerment and “lost identity,” implemented in the ideas of “double half-monolingualism” and “language loss,” produced a new feeling of shame and guilt – shame for not speaking Yupik and guilt for having lost one's language, for having lost “who we are” (Morgounova 2010). With continuing globalisation and fortifications of the English language in the education system in recent years, the Yupik language is no longer seen as an intermediary between the Yupik people of Chukotka and Alaska. Within this framework, the Yupik language is “redefined” as being “useless,” “unnecessary,” and even “already lost.” Moreover, this idea of “one people – one language” makes room for only one language: instead of promoting multilingualism and the acquisition of minority languages along with Russian, the general opinion in Chukotka today is that it is better that children speak one language properly – namely, Russian.

Conclusion

The administration of languages on the macro and micro levels, as this article shows, usually takes, as the point of departure, the idea of linguistic purism, which is predominant in national ideologies. Languages are seen as distinct and separate and as belonging to just one equally distinct and separate people, and language and ethnic identity are perceived as deeply intertwined. Because linguistic purism binds language with ethnicity, it is easily associated with group cohesion and with ethnic self-determination and may therefore be used as part of the minority group's “resistance-solidarity strategy” (compare Bailey 2000), hence promoting and sustaining the continuous use of their minority language. Yet, in language sustainability/language revitalisation efforts, they may also represent a potential problem, producing a feeling of linguistic insecurity and even shame among less secure speakers, who may then choose to speak a majority language in order to avoid embarrassment and losing face. This is particularly true in a situation of (unstable) bilingualism with a language shift under way, like the one we are witnessing in Gambell, where there is a kind of intergenerational language segmentation between the older (Yupik-dominant) and the younger (English-dominant) speakers. Another problem is that the purist ideology makes space for only one “correct” (standardised) language, leaving no space for “blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages” (Yildiz 2011, 8). Yet, in language revival situations, like the one we have been witnessing in Chukotka in the 1990s, “bringing about alternations in what people are already saying,” to paraphrase Nancy Dorian (1994, 481), can “produce more resistance than prescribing certain ways of speaking a language they have yet to learn.”

Sustainability, although it is most often used in its narrow sense (as synonymous with “environmentally sound”), incorporates a variety of economic, social, political, and cultural factors (see World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). The question of linguistic sustainability, then, implies “maintenance” (or transformation) of the existing values into what is considered to be economically, socially, politically, culturally, and communicatively most sound, secure, or safe. In the Arctic, where identities are multiple and complex, and inter-group relations have long been characterised by amalgamation, cultural tension, and societal inequality, languages that have the capacity to implicitly link people to particular ethnic identities are anything but neutral. “Sustainability” is therefore linked to the question of power and political agendas in a society, which assign value to various languages and ways of speaking. An important reason for abandoning the Yupik language in Chukotka has to do

with the fact that Yupik became symbolic of subordinate identities. Soviet national ideology made languages into the main marker of ethnicity and then evolved Russian into the key maker of “civility” in the Soviet “civilising processes,” to borrow the expression from the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1991), assigning negative value to regional languages and speech varieties. Yet the link between own-ethnicity-associated language (to use Fishman’s terminology) and a positive identification on its own does not presuppose language maintenance in a community. Although a change in political ideology may promote language revival efforts among the minority groups, as the case of Chukotka shows, it also shows that identity is not bound to linguistic integrity; a single Yupik word, a song, a certain accent, or even a gesture is enough to mark one’s loyalties, claim solidarity and/or group membership, exclude someone from a conversation, or include someone in a group. As this article shows, there is a disjuncture between ideological conceptualisation of languages and locally situated ways of valuation and exchange. The latter is the question for larger economies (that is, a system of supply and demand) and the specifics of local inter-group dynamics. In contrast to Chukotka, where the language shift was rapid and vigorously painful, on St. Lawrence Island, which remained geographically and culturally isolated for the most part of the 20th century, it is a slow one. With the density and multiplicity of social networks with a high level of dependency and reciprocity producing a high level of cultural and linguistic solidarity, the Yupik speakers in Gambell are still linguistically better off. Yet, with ever-increasing exposure of the Native population to the global world by a means of television, Internet, and travelling, the idea of cultural isolationism does not work. So far, restrictions on borrowing and code-switching and negative attitudes toward language-mixing (along with the segregation of temporary residing in the village outsiders) have helped to maintain the Yupik language within the community. Yet, with continuing generational segmentation between children (English) and Elders (Yupik), a language shift on St. Lawrence Island may very well be underway. Motivating children to speak the language through approval and positive language correction (with repetition rather than correction leading to the approval of the speakers, similar to strategies promoted in the acquisition of languages by monolingual speakers) may be just enough to sustain the Yupik language on the island. However, this requires a constant effort by the parents and possibly a look beyond purist ideologies toward more experimental practices and “bilingual games.”

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Notes

- 1 Much of the research on the Yupik language focuses on external (geographical, demographical, governmental, or economic) factors, thus leaving aside ways in which individual speakers manage their talk (and social relations) in the course of everyday interaction. My own research focused on ideological aspect of interaction and the capacity for human beings to make choices (Krauss 1979, 1980; Krupnik 1992; Krupnik and Vakhtin 2002; Slezkine 1994; Vakhtin 1997, 2001).
- 2 My translation: “A sailor’s hat, a rope in the hand / I carry a steamer down the streams of the river? / And frogs are jumping, chasing my steps / And ask me: ‘Give us a ride captain [Jack].’”
- 3 The Bureau of Indian Affairs was the principal administrative body responsible for providing education to Alaska Natives and for the administration and management of land held in trust by the United States for American Indians, Indian tribes, and Alaska Natives until the passage of land-mark legislation in 1975.
- 4 Sheldon Jackson was the minister of education in Alaska and a member of the Presbyterian’s Domestic Mission. He saw the conversion of Natives to Christianity by a means of education as “the foremost method for civilising natives and assimilating each group to American culture” (Powell 1998, 11).
- 5 Bilingual Education Act, 81 Stat. 816 (1968).
- 6 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, 43 USC 1601–1624.
- 7 For more information on the collectivisation of sea mammal hunting, see Kerttula 2000; Krupnik 1993; Kuoljok 1985; Nielsen 2005; Pika 1993; Slezkine 1994.

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