

# Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan: A case of resistance to language contact

**Andrej A. Kibrik**

**(Institute of Linguistics RAS and Lomonosov MSU)**

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# Properties of a language



## Classical view

- Inheritance from the ancestral language
- NB: still found in some special traditions

## Realistic view

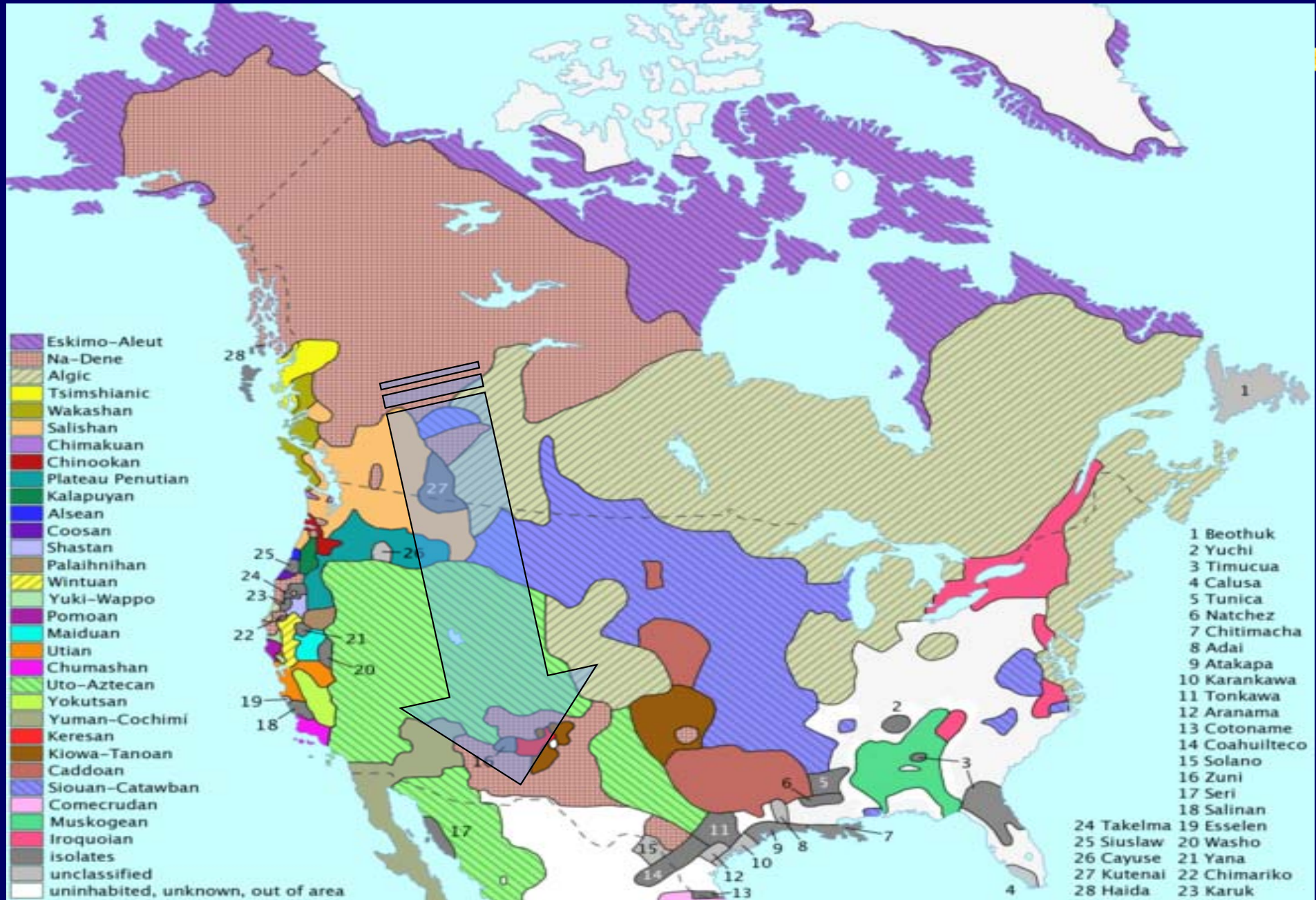
- Inheritance  
plus
- Interference
  - ranging from convergence phenomena to contact languages

# However



- Surprisingly, some languages are quite close to the classical model
- Athabaskan languages
- Sapir (1921: 209, 228): “The Athabaskan languages of America are spoken by peoples that have astonishingly varied cultural contacts, yet nowhere do we find that an Athabaskan dialect has borrowed at all freely from a neighboring language. <...> The cultural adaptability of the Athabaskan-speaking peoples is in the strangest contrast to the inaccessibility to foreign influences of the languages themselves.”

# The case of Navajo



# The case of Hupa

- Spence 2016, "Lexical innovation and variation in Hupa (Athabaskan)"
- Brown's (1999) metrics of "lexical acculturation"
  - percentage of borrowed vocabulary
  - convergence index
    - from -1 (coinages based exclusively on native material)
    - to +1 (exclusive borrowing)
- Hupa
  - 20%
  - -0.67



# In this talk



- A review of borrowed phenomena in Upper Kuskokwim, interior Alaska
- Main point: very little external influence
- Attempt for an explanation

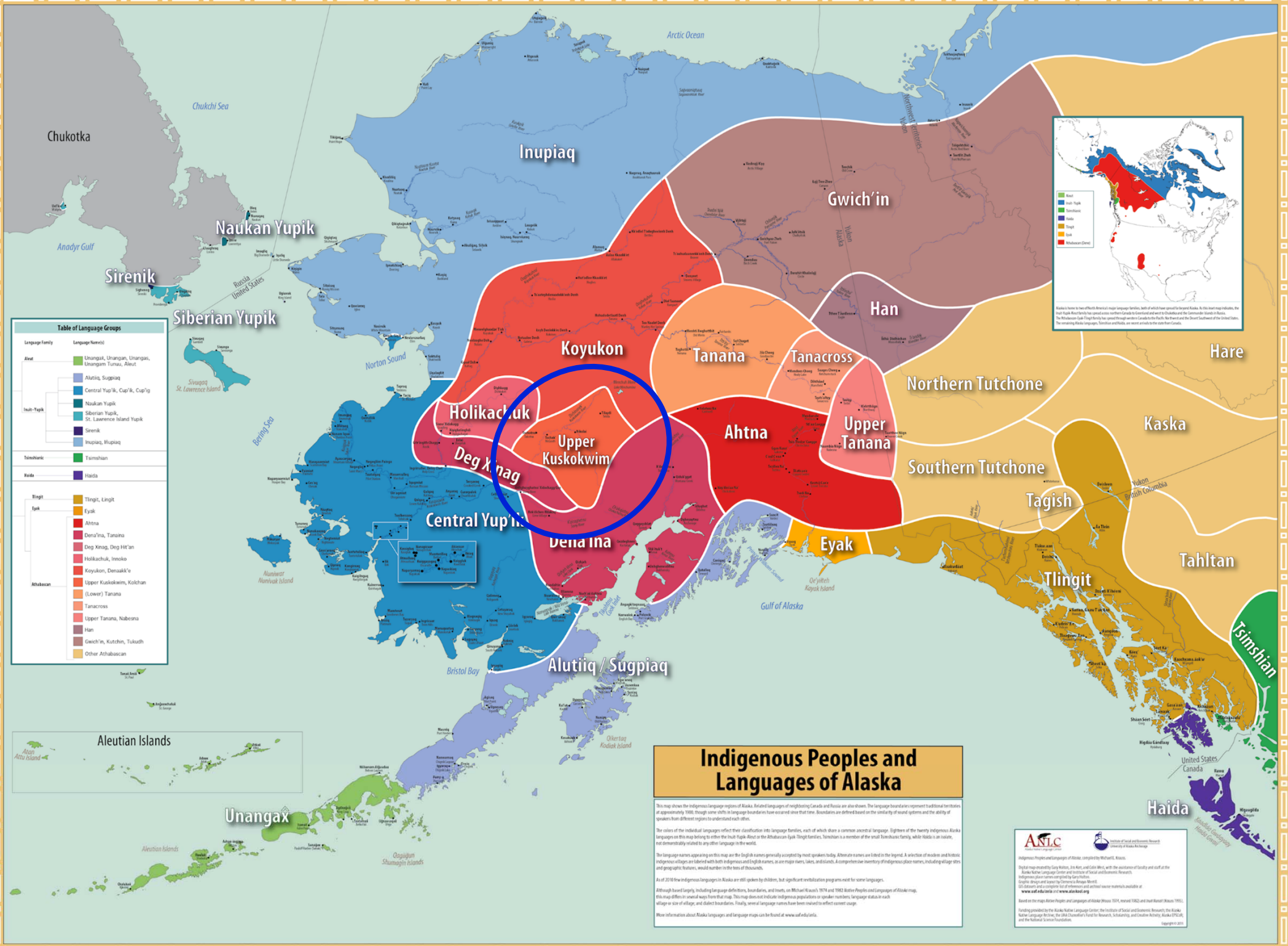


Table of Language Groups	
Language Family	Language Name(s)
Aleut	Unangut, Unangan, Unangas, Unangam Tunus, Aleut
	Alutiq, Sugpiaq
	Central Yup'ik, Cap'ik, Cap'ig
Inuit-Yupik	Naukan Yupik
	Siberian Yupik, St. Lawrence Island Yupik
	Sirenik
	Inupiaq, Iñupiaq
	Tsimshian
Tsimshian	Tsimshian
Haida	Haida
Tlingit	Tlingit, Lingit
Eyak	Eyak
	Ahtna
	Dena'ina, Tansina
	Deg Xinag, Deg Hit'an
	Holikachuk, Ineko
	Koyukon, Denaak'le
	Upper Kuskokwim, Kolchan
	(Lower) Tanana
	Tanacross
	Upper Tanana, Nabesna
Han	
Other Athabascan	Gwich'in, Kutchin, Tukudh
	Other Athabascan

## Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska

This map shows the Indigenous language regions of Alaska. Related languages of neighboring Canada and Russia are also shown. The language boundaries represent traditional territories of approximately 1900. Though some 16th-century language boundaries have endured since that time, boundaries are defined based on the similarity of sound systems and the ability of speakers from different regions to understand each other.

The colors of the individual languages reflect their classification into language families, each of which share a common ancestral language. Eighteen of the twenty Indigenous Alaska languages on this map belong to either the Inuit-Yupik or the Athabascan-Eyak-Tlingit families; Tsimshian is a member of the small Tsimshianic family, while Haida is an isolate, not demonstrably related to any other language in the world.

The language names appearing on this map are the English names generally accepted by most speakers today. Athabascan names are listed in the legend. A selection of modern and historic Indigenous villages are labeled with both Indigenous and English names, as in major rivers, lakes, and islands. A comprehensive inventory of Indigenous place names, including village sites and geographic features, would far exceed the limits of this chart.

As of 2010 few Indigenous languages in Alaska are still spoken by children, but significant revitalization programs exist for some languages. Although broad learning, including language diffusion, boundaries, and loans, on Michael Krauss's 1974 and 1982 *Native Peoples and Languages of Alaska* map, this map differs in several ways from that map. This map does not indicate Indigenous populations or speaker numbers; language status in each village or size of village; and dialect boundaries. Finally, several language names have been revised to reflect current usage.

More information about Alaska languages and language maps can be found at [www.uaf.edu/ila](http://www.uaf.edu/ila).

**ALIC**  
Alaska Native Language Center  
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska. Compiled by Michael E. Krauss.  
Digital map prepared by Gary Watkins, J. In. Keri, and Gabe Wink, with the assistance of Sallie and staff at the Alaska Native Language Center and Institute of Social and Behavioral Research.  
Indigenous place names corrected by Gary Watkins.  
Graphic design and layout by Corinne A. Arango-Morales.  
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[www.uaf.edu/ila](http://www.uaf.edu/ila) and [www.alanet.org](http://www.alanet.org)

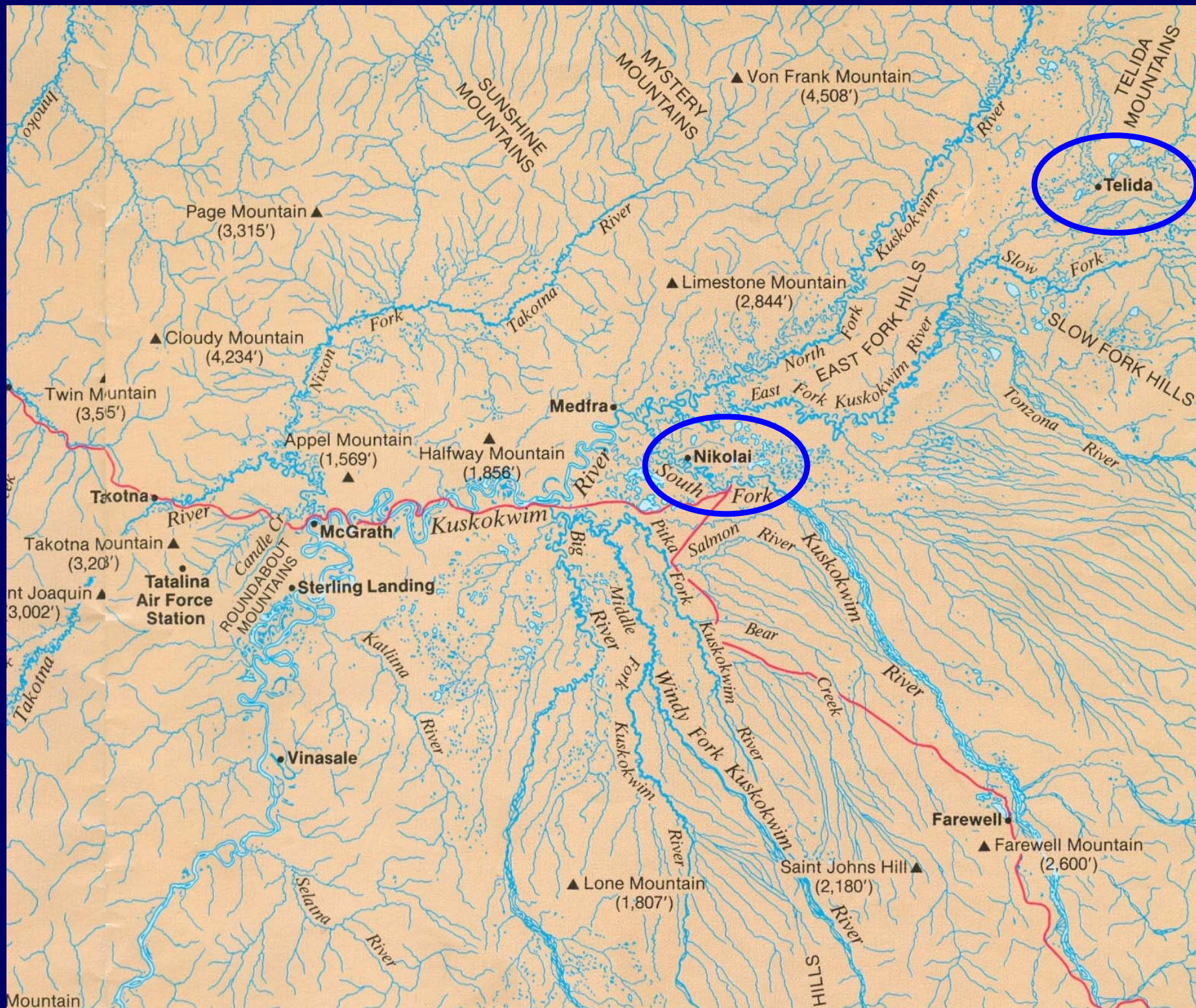
Funding provided by the Alaska Native Language Center, the Institute of Social and Behavioral Research, the Alaska Native Language Archive, the USA Department of the Interior, the National Science Foundation, and the National Summer Session.

# Upper Kuskokwim people



- Among the 11 (or 12) Athabaskan tribes in Alaska
- The UK tribe/language was identified as distinct by Hosley, Krauss, and Collins in early 1960s
- Most of the UK people reside in the village of **Nikolai**
- Religion: Russian Orthodoxy (since the 19<sup>th</sup> century)
- Traditionally, a few hundred people occupied a territory of the size of the Netherlands
- Semi-nomadic seasonal life style





Telida

Nikolai

# Upper Kuskokwim language



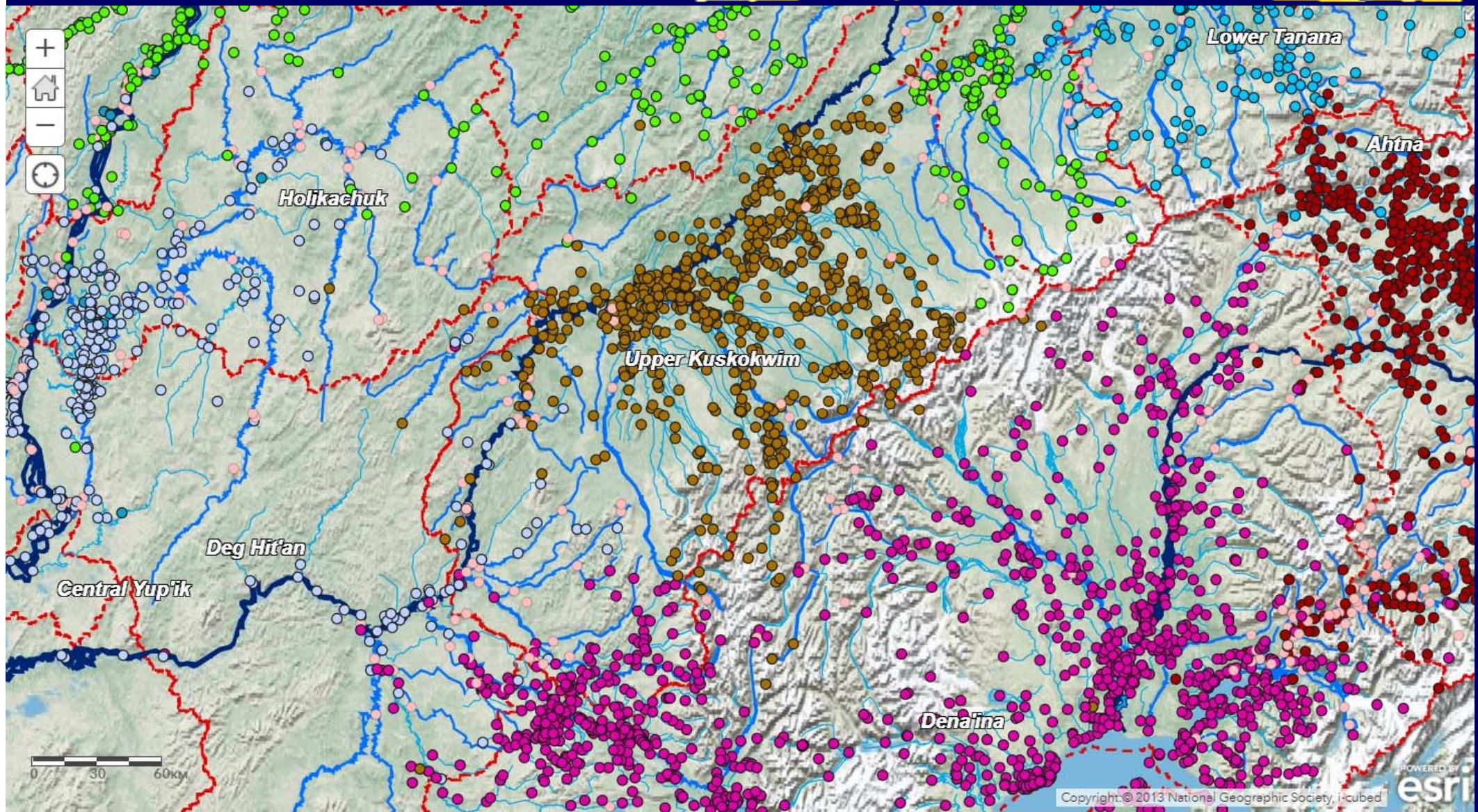
- Moribund: 10~40 speakers left out of the population of about 450
- Teaching UK at school since 1973, no result
- Prior work – Collins and Petruska 1979
- Our team – eight field trips between 1997 and 2019

# Old prehistory



- The UK area is close to (or is included in) the original Athabaskan homeland (Krauss 1980; Kari 2010; Hargus 2016)
- The area was occupied by Athabaskans for thousands of years
  - According to different opinions, about 3.5 K years (Krauss 1980) or from 6 K years up to 12 K years (Kari 2010)
- Apparently ancestors of all of the native Americans once travelled through or near this area, but no one settled there apart from proto-Athabaskans
- Athabaskan languages are characterized by “geolinguistic conservatism” (Kari 2010; also cf. Sapir 1921; Fortescue 1998; Campbell and Poser 2008)

# Kari and Smith's toponymic map



# Place names



- James Kari and associates have collected over 900 UK place names (streams, lakes, mountains, landscape forms, etc.)
- All of them (with very few exceptions) are native Athabaskan descriptive terms, such as:
  - *diniltseje noʔ* 'red paint creek'
  - *tohwnagheʔo di* 'where a hill comes into water'
  - *ʔizdlaghe zighash noʔ tʔogh ʔizʔone*  
sheefish harvest river headwaters standing  
'Mount Hesperus', lit. 'the one at headwaters of sheefish  
are harvested stream'
- There are no signs of borrowing place names from any substrate language

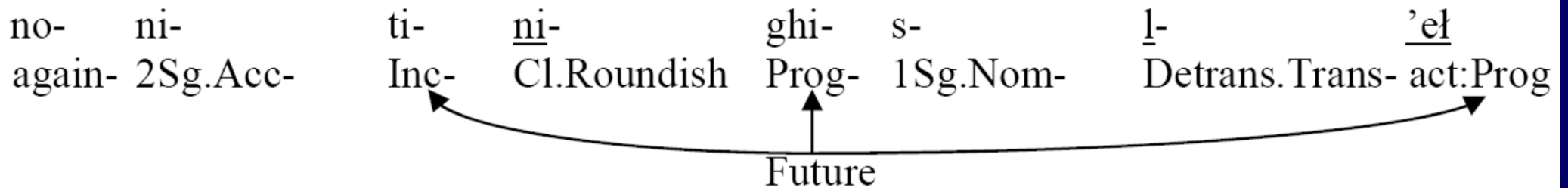
# Geographic isolation



- Remote area
  - separated from the South by the Alaska range
  - far from the coast
  - connected to the coast by the Kuskokwim river, far smaller than the Yukon
  - difficult swampy terrain, hard to cross in summer
- As a result, it was accessed the least of all by Russian and American travelers
- Even though a very small language, it was preserved somewhat longer than other Alaskan Athabaskan languages

# Verb morphology

*nontinghiji'el*



'bye', 'I will see you next time'

- Long words
- Many morphological positions in the verb (**polysynthesis**)
- Root –CV(C) at the end (**unusual**)
- Almost exclusive prefixation (**unusual**)
- Complex verb lexeme derivation (**unusual**)
- Derivation and inflection are intermingled (**unusual**)
- Order of inflectional morphemes is not canonical (**unusual**)
- One grammeme is conveyed by several devices (multiple exponence) (**unusual**)
- Complex morphophonemics: s+l > j (**unusual**)
- .....
- **Borrowing verbs is nearly impossible**





# 1. Contact with other Athabaskan

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- Interior Athabaskan languages constituted a dialect chain/network
  - At least this concerns Lower Tanana – Koyukon – Holikachuk – UK
  - Some important UK individuals arrived from Yukon
    - including chief Nikolai, born in the 1850s
  - from Holikachuk
  - and from Lower Tanana
- UK was not a well-defined language itself: profound dialectal differences between older speakers (born in early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

# Consolidation of the UK tribe/language



- The non-discrete situation lasted till early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when UK villages were established
- and when the Russian Orthodox religion became firmly established as a cultural distinction
- Borrowings from other Athabaskan languages are difficult/impossible to trace because of ethnic comparative-linguistic knowledge

# Michael Krauss (1981) : "Native comparative Athabaskan linguistics"

- "With speaker's awareness of phonological correspondences potentially affecting the form of diffusions, it can become unknowable whether a form which appears to be descended from the proto-language by regular phonological development is in fact so descended by always having been in the "language", or was at one time not in the language, but borrowed into it from a related language or dialect, with correct phonological adjustment, thus no longer detectable as a loan or dialect borrowing" (p. 7).



1934 - 2019

# Mount McKinley / Denali



- 'the tall one'
  - KY: *Deenaalee*
  - UK: *Denaze*
  - LT: *Dinadhi*
  - DH, HO: *Denadh*
- 'big mountain'
  - DN: *Dghelay Ka'a*
  - AT: *Dghelaay Ce'e*

# Partial exception: Toponyms in the UK periphery



- Yentna river
- DN *yentnu* 'backbone river'
  - *yen-* 'backbone'
  - *-tnu* 'river'
- UK *yanatno*?
  - root not understood
  - vowels changed randomly
  - cf. *yin-* 'backbone'
  - *-no*? 'river, stream'

## 2. Contact with Yup'ik Eskimo

- Very few Yup'ik loanwords
  - *duyuk* 'salt' < *taryuq* 'salt, brine, ocean'
    - DH *dighiyuq* (K)
    - HO *daghiyuq*
    - KY *degheyukk*
  - *dwhjak* 'pipe' < Ing. *tuxgaq* < CY *tugkar* 'tusk'
  - *yolwhk'a* 'window' – from Alutiiq *yaaləq* (CED: 108)
    - probably via Dena'ina:  
*yuleq* 'window, windowpane'; *yulq'a* 'window opening'
    - or via DH *yolq'a* 'window, smoke hole'
    - *-k'a* 'cavity, opening'
  - *londik* 'thimble'
    - probably from Yup'ik (CY *tekeq* 'index finger, thimble')
    - via Dena'ina: *lukdeq* OR *lukdeq*
    - *lo-* 'hand'
  - *ghwlwk* (endearing particle) < CY *ruluq* 'poor, nice'
    - *tsuyda ghwlwk* 'the poor grandma'
    - the only identified borrowing directly from Yup'ik

# UK and Yup'ik



- Avoidance of contact with Yup'ik till the beginning of the Russian period
- In the case of rare contacts Athabaskans usually develop a limited knowledge of other languages
- Other people rarely learn Athabaskan as a L2
- From late 19<sup>th</sup> century Eskimos were gradually becoming cultural intermediaries between Russians and UK
  - priests visiting
- Eskimos gradually expanded upriver
  - Alec Alexia (b. 1884) who married into the UK community
  - Apparently became a fluent speaker
  - His son Miska Alexia (b. 1915-1917) was partly bilingual
  - But his daughter Agnes Nikolai has zero knowledge of Yup'ik
  - Alec hardly contributed to the UK language

# UK as a typical Athabaskan language with respect to language contact

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- Very few lexical borrowings from Yup'ik
- No known grammatical borrowing
- Verb structure prevents borrowing in principle
- Athabaskans developed a highly complex and impenetrable system and were content with it for an unlimited period
- Not a hint of participation in a linguistic area, God forbid Sprachbund



# 3. Contact with Russian

- Started in 1844 (Lavrenty Zagoskin's expedition) or a few years earlier
- Lasted well beyond the official end of Russian America (1867)
- No evidence that UK people ever learned to *speak* in Russian (unlike coastal native peoples in Alaska)
- But they learned OCS prayers and chants by heart, without understanding lexical and grammatical content



# Russian borrowings



- Athabaskan languages open up somewhat for borrowing only under culture shock:
  - Alaska – from Russian
  - Canada – from French and English
  - Pacific – from English
  - Navajo – from Spanish
- About 80 nouns of Russian origin
  - European artefacts (tools, food)
  - cultural (mostly religious) concepts
- Borrowed phonemes: *boze* 'God', *anhere* 'archpriest'

# Mediated Russian borrowings

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- Most of them are really not directly from Russian, but via the mediation of another Athabaskan language and/or Yup'ik
- When borrowed via another Athabaskan language, usual phonological recalculation occurs, e.g.
  - *denje* 'money' < Den. *dingi* < Rus. *den'gi*
  - Cf. UK *jija* 'berry' – Den. *gega*

# Direct Russian borrowings

- *suhale* 'crackers' < *suxari*
- *mesruk* 'sack' < *mešok*
- Normal assumption in language contact literature: borrowing occurs via bilingualism
- However, in this case bilingualism is unlikely
- Hypothesis: not via entrenched bilingualism but rather via **ostensive presentation**
- Cf. **direct encoding** in neurolinguistics
- Shtyrov et al. 2022
- *It is a glorp*
- vs. Implicit encoding, or fast mapping – learning in context

# Explicit encoding and fast mapping (Shtyrov et al. 2022)

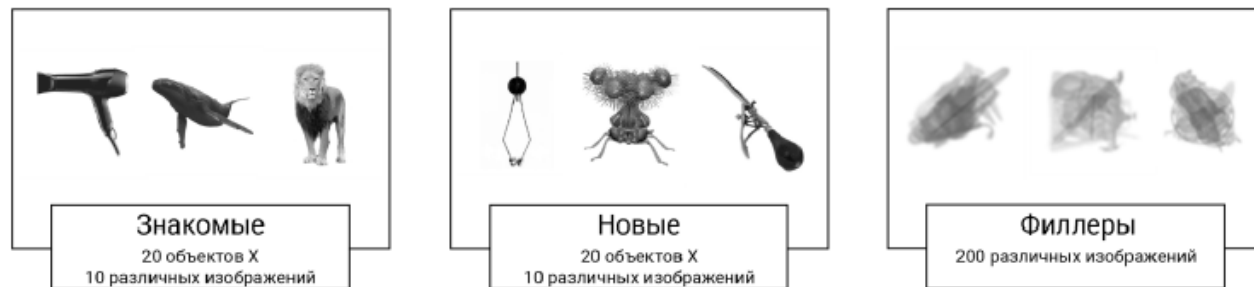
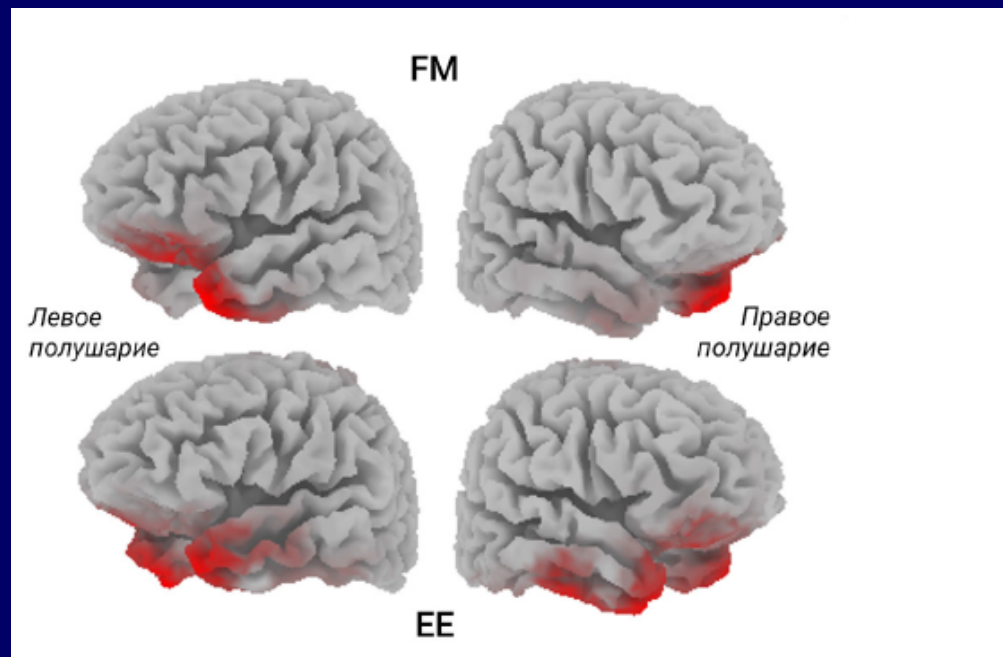


Рисунок 1. Примеры изображений предметов, предъявлявшихся в парах со знакомыми (слева) и новыми (посередине) словоформами, а также бессмысленных изображений-филлеров (справа)

- No statistically significant differences between two strategies of learning
- Both strategies lead to rapid learning
- Though neuronal patterns are different
  - Earlier activation in FM
  - Bilateral activation in EE



# 4. Contact with English

- Began in early 1900s
  - Several early borrowings, e.g. *fala?ena* 'guys'
- Very limited bilingualism before WWII (only "gatekeepers")
  - But Anglo people penetrate the area (see Raskladkina 2019)
- Contact became massive in 1948 (missionary school)
- Bilingualism spread during the following decades
- Balanced bilinguals: those born in 1940s
- This generation also leveled out the dialectal differences
- Language shift in 1960-70s
- Complexity of Athabaskan helped to preserve these languages intact but now it speeds up their decline

# Borrowing from English

- Lexical – very few, e.g. *sbel* < spear
- Massive code mixing, including inside words, e.g. *himch'iFAMILY* 'their family'
- Grammatical – only one instance
  - *?istrih* 'I cry'
  - *zistrigh ts'e?* 'I don't cry'
  - *no ?istrih* 'I don't cry'
- Semantic – many, e.g. traditional geomorphic directional terms reinterpreted as magnetic directions

# Unusual purity of UK



- Very few loanwords
  - Partial exception: some Russian nouns
  - Borrowing rate of 27% (Brown's 1994 methodology)
    - 21 concepts out of 77, 19 of them (ultimately) from Russian
- Almost no identifiable external grammatical influence
- UK largely conserves the original Athabaskan type



# Conclusions: Causes of UK's purity

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- Geographic isolation
- Long residence in the area, without any unrelated languages in the vicinity
- General disinclination of the Athabaskan languages to borrowing and “geolinguistic conservatism” (Sapir 1921, Brown 1999, Kari 2010)
- Native comparative knowledge of Alaskan Athabaskans
- Scarcity of contact with Yup'ik and of bilingualism in Yup'ik
- Lack of bilingualism in Russian
- Brief period of partial bilingualism in English
- Special morphology, almost excluding borrowing of verb roots or affixes

*Thanks  
for  
your  
attention*

