

Yupik and English: Borrowing of the Word “Mukluk”

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Introduction and Overview

The artifact chosen for this project is a page out of one of Paul Silook’s journals written in 1917. The second paragraph that he wrote is entitled, “When a seal or mukluk is killed.”

This journal entry in particular captures the essence of loanwords. It highlights the borrowing of the word “mukluk” from Yupik to English. I discuss the Yupik influence on English in Alaska as well as phonological aspects of loanwords.

My analysis underlines the relationship between languages in Alaska and takes a look at Silook’s journal entry through the lens of the specific historical context of Paul Silook and St. Lawrence Island, the broad historical context of the early twentieth century effects that languages have on each other, and the phonological and semantic linguistic context of the word “Mukluk”.

Alaska in the Early Twentieth Century

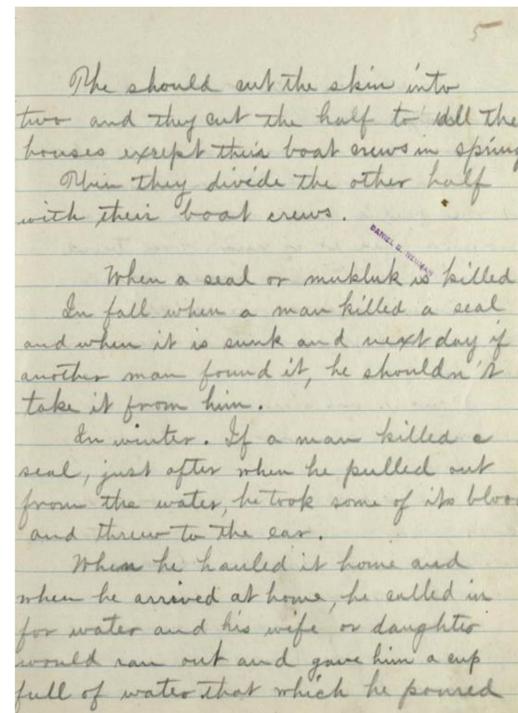
- ❖ 1900: The U.S. Army built the Trans-Alaska Military road, the first substantial road and telegraph system. Along the telegraph route, communities started to grow and roadhouses were built (Alaska Humanities Forum).
- ❖ Early 1900’s: The number of non-Native people coming into Alaska started increasing due to the Gold Rush and the development of fishing and timber industries (Barnhardt).
- ❖ 1905: Congress passed the Nelson Act. This “dual system of education in Alaska” was enacted in which schools for Alaska Native children were run by the federal Bureau of Education and schools for white students with a select few “civilized” Native students were run by the Territory of Alaska (Barnhardt).
- ❖ 1915-1923: U.S. government built the Alaska Railroad (Alaska Humanities Forum).
- ❖ Until the 1930’s Alaska’s population was mainly Alaska Natives (Jacobson).

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

- ❖ Yupik (sans apostrophe) refers to the Yupik family of languages, which consists of five similar, but mutually unintelligible languages (Green).
- ❖ Siberian Yupik or St. Lawrence Island Yupik is the language of the “majority of Eskimos in Siberia and by the people of Gambell and Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska” (Jacobson).
- ❖ Central Yup’ik (with apostrophe) is the language of the Central Yup’ik Eskimos in southwestern Alaska (Madenwald xv).
- ❖ The other three Yupik languages are Naukan; Pacific Gulf Yupik, or Alutiiq; and Sirenik, which became extinct in 1997. (Green).
- ❖ “Mukluk” is an English word for “Eskimo skin boots” borrowed (1865-1870) from the Yupik word *maklak* ([maklak]), meaning bearded seal. (Madenwald xviii).
- ❖ Many sounds are present in both Yupik and English, but each language has distinct sounds that don’t exist in the other language (Jacobson).
- ❖ If English lacks a particular sound needed in order to say a Yupik word, English speakers will use the closest equivalent to that sound (Jacobson).
- ❖ English speakers do not have the natural ability to utter the voiceless *l* of the original Yupik *maklak*, therefore the voiced *l* is used (Jacobson).
- ❖ When a Yupik word is used in English and the speaker wants to pluralize it, it is common for the English plural suffix –s is added instead of one of the Yupik plural suffixes (Madenwald xviii).



Photo courtesy of Alaska Native Knowledge Network



The should cut the skin into two and they cut the half to sell the houses except this boat crews in spring then they divide the other half with their boat crews.

When a seal or mukluk is killed. In fall when a man killed a seal and when it is sunk and next day if another man found it, he shouldn't take it from him.

In winter. If a man killed a seal, just after when he pulled out from the water, he took some of its blood and threw to the ear.

When he hauled it home and when he arrived at home, he called in for water and his wife or daughter would run out and gave him a cup full of water that which he poured

Taken from Paul Silook's journal v. x, page 5. Image courtesy of Alaska's Digital Archives

Paul Silook and St. Lawrence Island

- ❖ 1894: Professor Vene C. Gambell was accepted for a missionary/teacher position on St. Lawrence Island (Powell 25).
- ❖ Paul Silook was a young resident of St. Lawrence Island when he became bilingual because of the missionary teachers who came to St. Lawrence Island. Very few people were bilingual at the time. He wrote in Yupik and English (Silook 213).
- ❖ The missionaries helped the Yupik develop their writing system so the Bible could be translated into their language (Green).
- ❖ Silook worked as a substitute teacher, a translator for the church, and helped the early archeologists that excavated on the island in the 30's and 40's (LitSite Alaska).
- ❖ Silook is referred to as one of the first Native Alaskan ethnographers (Silook 213).

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