

The “Babushka” of Kodiak: Eunice Neseth, code-switching, and ethnic mobilization

Jacob Holley-Kline

jdholleykline@alaska.edu

INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

- The Kodiak Community Oral History Project, whose interviews were conducted in the 1970’s and transcribed in 1983 and 1984, features interviews with Kodiak residents. The interviews were conducted by Joanne B. Mulcahy, Joan F. Connors, and Michelle Ryan.
- Kodiak’s complex linguistic history is primarily informed by three languages: Aleut, Russian, and English.
- Eunice Neseth, a Russian-Aleut and Swedish Kodiak resident, lives at the intersection of these influences.
- In one of her interviews for the Kodiak Community Oral History Project entitled “Eunice Neseth-Katmai/1976,” she uses the word “Babushka” when talking about her grandmother’s reputation in Kodiak.
- Through the lens of code-switching and ethnic mobilization, I argue that her use of “Babushka” represents the sharp social distinction between Old Russian and Aleut speakers in Kodiak and, in use with English, a recognition of both her own and her grandmother’s Russian identities.

FOCUSED HISTORICAL INQUIRY

- The Kodiak Community Oral History Project is a collection of interviews with long-time Kodiak residents completed in the 1970’s. All interviews were transcribed and released between 1983 and 1984.
- Eunice Neseth is the subject of four of these interviews, which were conducted in English. She was born in 1907 to Eulavia von Scheele, a Russian-Aleut, and Herman Ernst Henning von Scheele, a Swedish man.
- She spoke Russian with her grandmother and English with the rest of her family, and she could understand Aleut (Neseth, 1; Neseth, 4).
- In the transcript “Eunice Neseth-Katmai/1976,” Neseth states that villagers called her grandmother, Parascovia Gregorioff, “Babushka” (13) as a sign of respect.

BROAD HISTORICAL INQUIRY

- Kodiak is a town on Kodiak Island, Alaska. It has been central to Alaska’s history of European contact, beginning in 1762 with the arrival of Russian fur traders. The first permanent Russian settlements in Alaska and the United States were established by Russian merchant G.I. Sheilkhov on the island between 1784 and 1786 (Grinev, 444).
- The Russian language would be formally introduced into Kodiak’s Aleut population after the arrival of the Russian Orthodox Valaam Mission in 1794 (“Russian Orthodox,” para. 4). The missionaries established the first Russian Orthodox church in America on Kodiak, translating their holy texts into both Russian and Aleut and educating the Aleuts in several trades (“Russian Orthodox,” para. 14).
- Then Tsar Paul I decreed that Russian America’s southern border would be the 55th parallel north, essentially claiming Alaska. The Russian-American company held a monopoly over Alaska for 20 years, during which time they employed *promyshlenniki*, or Russian fur traders, Russian-Aleuts, and Aleuts to trap and acquire furs.
- Those workers who stayed in Alaska post-retirement settled in either Ninilchik or Afognak. A destructive tidal wave hit Afognak in the 19th century, forcing those residents who survived, many of whom spoke Russian, to move to Kodiak or Ninilchik (Golovko, 4).
- English arrived with Presbyterian minister Sheldon Jackson in 1877. Jackson established schools with strict English-only policies and the expressed goal of suppressing Alaska Native languages and culture (Dauenhauer, 13). As a result, the Aleut language nearly vanished, dwindling to only 50 speakers in 2010 before efforts to revive it increased (Resneck, 2010).
- Russian speakers on Kodiak developed the “Old Russian” dialect, referred to by Golovko as “a language without literacy” (11). English overtook the dialect, and Old Russian stopped being a means of communication. Instead, it took on a demonstrative function and came to mark a definite social distinction within Kodiak (Golovko, 9).
- Coupled with the influx of migrant workers from Italy, Norway, the Philippines, Mexico, China, and other countries, Kodiak became the linguistic melting pot of Alaska (Grantham, 2013). However, English continues to be the dominant language on the island.

“She was living in a house downtown ... Then she had people come to her ... she was sort of a town mother. And called ‘Babushka.’ Everyone called her ‘Babushka’ because she was old and they sort of depended on her ... For spiritual guidance.”
-Eunice Neseth, 1976



LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

- Heller notes that *code-switching* (this term, in her article, is used interchangeably with *code-mixing*) can be used as a strategy of “ethnic mobilisation,” or the process by which ethnic groups organize aspects of their identity.
- I analyzed Neseth’s use of the word “Babushka” (13) in the context of code-mixing and ethnic mobilization.
- She refers first to her grandmother as a “town mother” (13), alluding to the traditional role of Native Alaskan grandmothers (Cross, Day, & Farrell, 45).
- I discovered that, while she refers only to other people using the word, its occurrence in her interview is an example of code-mixing which represents two things: the social distinction between Old Russian and Aleut speakers in Kodiak and, when used in the context of English, a recognition of her grandmother’s Russian identity and, by extension, her own.

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