

143 Years after Russian America: the Russian language without Russians

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History of the ‘Creole Russian’ part of the Project.

Russian does not belong to Alaskan Native languages. Of the two language categories covered by the Project, ‘Alaskan’ and ‘Neighboring’, it should evidently fall into the second one. However, even within this category, it occupies a special place, as, unlike other ‘neighboring’ languages (Chukchi, Naukan Yupik, Itelmen, etc.), it is spoken not only in the ‘neighborhood’, across the Bering Strait, but in Alaska as well. As was stated by Michael Krauss in a preliminary note (unpublished) and in oral communication before the Project was launched, there are at least three groups of Russian speakers in Alaska:

1. Newcomers who arrived in Alaska in the 1990s and who mostly reside in the two largest Alaskan cities – Anchorage and Fairbanks. This group is a dispersed one, and it does not form a clear-cut community. However, a small Russian speaking ‘compact’ community in Delta Junction, in the Fairbanks vicinity, can be treated as an exception. It was formed by ‘new’ Russian speaking immigrants who, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, left their newly established countries (first of all, Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia) in the 1990s for a variety of reasons, the two most important of which being search for economic stability and religious freedom. From a linguistic perspective, this group is not of primary interest, as the immigrants’ Russian is just a variety of Standard Russian, and the interaction between Standard Russian and American English has been studied extensively, see works by Morton Benson (1957, 1960), David Andrews (1997, etc.), Maria Polinsky (1994, 1995, 1997); see also publications on diaspora Russian in Australia – by Ludmila Kouzmin (1973, 1982, 1988), Mark Garner (1985), in Harbin – Juha Janhunen (1987), in France – Golubeva-Monatkina (1993, 1994), in Germany (Ekaterina Protassova (1996), in Finland – Larissa Liesio (2001, etc.), Ekaterina Protassova (1994, etc.).

2. Old Believers. Historically, they stem from the Trans-Baikalian Old Believers community which moved to Manchuria during the construction of the East Chinese railroad and the city of Kharbin. After the Russian communist revolution of 1917, many of the Siberian Old Believers escaped over the boarder to China to join the already existing communities in remote areas of Manchuria and Sinkiang. Another communist revolution, the one of 1949 in China, again, caused disturbance among Old Believers, often with tragic results. By the late 1950, a minority of them, with an assistance from

international organizations, were relocated (via Hong Kong) to other countries, at their choice. The largest groups went to Brazil and Australia. Old Believers began their immigration to North America in the mid-1960s, most of them settled down in Oregon (the first families arrived from Brazil). In the course of time, being afraid of cultural assimilation, several families from Oregon moved to a more isolated area, Alaska. Today there are Old Believers communities in the Kenai Peninsula (Nikolaevsk) and on Kodiak Archipelago (Afognak, Raspberry Island). Despite certain controversies (due to different views of religious conduct) between some groups, the on-going globalization keeps Old Believers in different continents in close touch – by the internet and cell phones. Relatives from South America come to Alaskan communities to make money as seasonal workers in fishing industry. There is a number of publications studying Old Believers from an ethnographic and linguistic perspective: Dolitsky and Kuzmina 1986, Dolitsky 1991, see the collection of works ‘Russkij yazyk zarubezhya’ published in Moscow; currently, at St. Petersburg State University, there is a project under way studying Old Believers’ traditions and language in South America.

3. Descendants of Russian colonists. As is well known, Alaska was a Russian colony from the mid-18th century till 1867. Despite a relatively small number of proper ‘Russians’ in Alaska at all times (barely more than one thousand), the one hundred year Russian presence has had a tremendous impact on Native Alaskan cultures. In connection with this Project, it should be, first of all, mentioned that, among all other lands colonized by Russia, Alaska occupies a special place as regards the imposed social structure. Unlike any other part of Russia, the newly colonized land was ruled by a non-governmental formation, called the Russian-American Company (RAC). After a certain time of service,

promyshlenniki (white people in service), Creoles, and the Aleut had right to retire. Those who wanted to stay in the 'colonies' could settle down in one of the two specially designed villages – Ninilchik in the Kenai Peninsula, and Afognak in the Kodiak Archipelago. (It should be noted that both 'Creole' and 'Aleut' had little to do with ethnic labels, but rather designated social status.) After Alaska was purchased by the U.S.A., the addiction to the Russian language and Russian ways became an important identity marker for the Alaskan population. It is known that it was as late as 1950s that old people of the Aleutian Islands could still speak Russian. By the end of the 20th century, there were, however, only two places left in which Russian speakers still remained – Ninilchik and Kodiak. Unlike the village of Afognak that suffered the effect of a disastrous tidal wave, Ninilchik has been kept intact since the 1840s. Maybe this is the reason why there has been more scholarly attention paid to Ninilchik compared to former residents of Afognak. In the 1960s, Conor Daly, a student at the University of California Berkeley, collected linguistic material in Ninilchik. Later on he quit linguistic career; there are two unpublished papers by Daly (1985, 1986) at the UAF Alaska Native Languages Archive. These two papers contain valuable observations on the structure of Ninilchik Russian, but unfortunately they contain very little lexical information. This gap was bridged by the Russian linguists Andrej Kibrik and Mira Bergelson who in 1998 spent two weeks in Ninilchik collecting information on nominal vocabulary of Ninilchik Russian; Kibrik also published a short paper (1998) on the structure of this idiom. Later on, the nominal vocabulary collected by Bergelson and Kibrik was expanded considerably by Wayne Leman, a trained linguist who was born in Ninilchik, though not a speaker of Russian

himself. Now there is a 'checking copy' of the dictionary 'Ninilchik Russian: The First Language of Ninilchik, Alaska' (2009) stored in the UAF Archive.

Before the summer 2008 no linguistic work has ever been done on the Russian language of the descendants of Afognak village who, after the 'tsunami', had to move to a newly built village of Port Lions. Some people went to Ouzinkie, and some settled down in Kodiak and elsewhere.

Locations:

'Old Russian' speakers are dispersed in Kodiak Town, Port Lions, Ouzinkie, Anchorage; also in Seattle WA, Bellevue WA, in Los Angeles CA, etc. In the summer 2008 I collected field data at four locations – Kodiak Town, Port Lions, Ouzinkie, and Anchorage. The distribution of work time between them was uneven and depended on newly discovered data on the number of speakers available in each of the above-mentioned locations: while field work was conducted for three weeks in Kodiak and Port Lions each, only three days were left for Ouzinkie and Anchorage each. In 2009 I documented 'Old Russian' with speakers residing in Anchorage, Ninilchik, Kenai City, Bellevue WA.

Language Consultants:

In 2008, 12 to 14 people of Afognak origin could converse at least to some extent – 2 in Anchorage, 4 in Kodiak, 7 in Port Lions; others (at least twenty five) remember dozens of

words and expressions. Age: youngest in their late 60s, oldest in their late 90s. The most valuable language data was collected with the assistance of the following individuals (certainly the best speakers): John Pestrikoff, John Nelson and Helen Nelson (all Port Lions), Alexis Chichenoff, 74 (Kodiak Town), Katherine Helmig (Anchorage), Gladys Chichenoff (Bellevue WA). Among Ninilchik speakers (generally they demonstrate a better command of the language), most information on 'Old Russian' was received with the assistance of Betty Porter (Kenai City), Selma and Joe Leman, Louis Kvasnikoff (all Ninilchik), Semeon Oskolkoff (Anchorage). Generally speaking, the degree of language command shows an evident correlation with age. Besides the above mentioned individuals, many other people served as language consultants (the material received from different individuals may range from a short narrative to some phrases): Bill Hartman, Hazel Ardinger, Bettie Lukin, Iver Malutin, Lawrence Anderson, Zack Chichenoff, Fred Chernikoff, and many others. Many people, though not speakers, provided oral histories and valuable information on old traditions: Rosabel Baldwin (Kodiak), Ann Squartsoff (Port Lions), Esther Chernikoff, Nick Pestrikoff (Ouzinkie).

Method of Field Work:

As conversing in Russian has been no more part of my language consultants' verbal behavior for quite a while, the method used during the field work was continuous recording. The digital recorder was normally switched on at the beginning of conversation (if the consultants' gave their consent) and it was switched off when the session was over. As speaking Russian was an unusual practice for my language consultants, each session was a combination of an anthropological interview and a

linguistic questionnaire. It usually started with a free talk about the person's biography and old traditions. In the course of talk, questions about Russian names for various subjects and activities were asked. After that I asked my consultant to 'say something with this word in Russian' – this simple method turned out to be surprisingly effective. Translation of phrases from English into Russian was completely excluded, as it could have only provided corrupted phrases, a 'word for word' translation from English into Russian. In the same fashion, I never spoke Russian to my consultants not to make them feel embarrassed, as they perceived my Standard Russian a superior ('correct') language compared to their own. In the course of time, as I managed to acquire some 'Old Russian language' (this is my consultants' definition), I started carefully using some short 'Old Russian' phrases just to push conversation forward.

Material Collected:

As a result of the use of a 'continuous recording' method, the total amount of the material recorded is very considerable. Copies of all digital recordings and of all visual images were saved on an external hard drive. After the field work was finished, copies of all the materials, including paper copies of all the notebooks, were stored in the Alaska Native Languages Archive. Copies of most audio materials were also given to the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak City.

Preliminary Interpretation of the Field Material:

Language and Identity: Most consultants call their language ‘Old Russian’, some of them preferred the label ‘Slavonic’ which is obviously associated with the language used during Orthodox Church services. There was not a single person who used the label ‘Creole Russian’ or even mentioned the word ‘Creole’ just for once. Moreover, the term ‘Creole’ is only known today as a word with a routine meaning rendering mixed ethnicity. It does not revive any memories about a ‘social label’ introduced under the Russian-American Company in the 19th century. Kodiak ‘Old Russian’ speakers never call themselves Russian, though they admit (some of them know it for sure) that among their forefathers there were Russians (‘rusaki’). When asked where they came from, they point out to ‘Siberia’, some can even provide a name of the town. When asked about their ethnicity (‘nationality’), they say that they are ‘a mixture of everything’ (which is probably true). The most important ingredients of this ‘mixture’, in my consultants’ view, are Aleut (the local term for Alutiiq, or Sugpiat), Russian, and Scandinavian (there was a noticeable wave of migration from Scandinavian countries during an economic decline at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries). Another component that acquired more and more significance during the last 15-20 years in Kodiak is immigrants from Philippine.

In Kodiak City, ‘Old Russian’ can be rated as occupying the last place in the following hierarchy of locally spoken languages: English, Tagalog, Spanish, Turkish, Polish, Alutiiq, ‘Old Russian’ (though Turkish and Polish are spoken mostly in the summer by seasonal canary workers).

A remarkable thing about ‘Old Russian’ is that its speakers never were in contact with speakers of Standard Russian. Occasional contacts only happened starting 1990s: some Russian ships anchored in the Kodiak harbour, several Russian girls married Kodiak men

and settled down in Kodiak Town. However, all these contacts were sporadic and did not influence ‘Old Russian’¹ (and in Port Lions and Ouzinkie there was no contact at all). ‘Old Russian’ speakers complain that, during these occasional contacts (or when listening to scraps of Russian speech in TV news interviews), they could hardly understand anything at all (‘just separate words’, ‘they talk too fast’).

‘Old Russian’ stopped to be a means of communication long time ago. In some of our consultants’ families, parents spoke only Russian to each other, while today people are only able to exchange some phrases when meeting each other in town and call each other by their Russian names (see below). ‘Old Russian’ serves as an important identity marker, along with other cultural practices – Orthodox religion, cuisine (*pirog*, *balik*, etc.), some games (*lapta*, also card games – *durak*, etc.), songs, and rituals. For the purpose of identity, the language may not function as a language proper. It realizes a ‘demonstrative function’, and so it is used in a reduced form. It is quite enough for ‘speakers’ to know only some phrases or even separate words and be able to use them in an appropriate situation. On Kodiak Island, there is a number of words known to all the people, including white Americans: *banya* ‘steam house’, *chay* ‘tea’, *pirog* ‘pie’, *balik* ‘smoked fish’, *solyona* ‘salted fish’, *spasibo* ‘thanks’, *goroko* ‘the word cried out by guests at a wedding party to make a newly married couple kiss each other’, and even *nuzhnik* ‘outhouse’ and *zhopa* ‘ass’. For people identifying themselves as having Russian ancestry, a typical set of ‘self-identification phrases’ (all of them are received from people who are not fluent speakers) is as follows: *prahadi* ‘come in’; *sadis* ‘sit down’;

¹ There is one exception. A certain Moscow girl, named Katya (she married an American man who worked in Kodiak Town as an icon painter for a while) was a very sociable person and made friends with some ‘Old Russian’ speakers. She used to speak Russian to them oftentimes, and also taught their new friends ‘correct Russian words’. For example, I was stunned when I heard Hazel Ardinger say ‘Otlichno!’, a modern Russian word for ‘Excellent!’, ‘Nice!’.

uwidimsa ‘see you later’; *zdrawstwuy tawarishch* ‘hi friend’; *kak pazhivaesh* ‘how is it going?’; *kak sebia chustvuesh* ‘how are you doing?’; *na zdarovye* ‘to your health’; *kak dela* ‘how are things going?’; *kak titya zavut* ‘what is your name?’; *kak zdarovye* ‘how is your health?’; *puskay / pushchay* ‘I do not care’; *zamalchi* ‘shut up’; *pasuda* (sometimes - *pol*) *vymay* ‘wash dishes (the floor)’; *stupay na ulitsu* ‘go out’; *kushat’ nada* ‘time to eat’; *mamai kapat’ nada* ‘time to dig for mussels’; *hudoy (haroshiy) pagoda* ‘fine weather’, ‘bad weather’; *layda* ‘beach’; *dozh(d)ik sivodn’a* ‘it is raining today’; *darum (ty darum chilavek)* ‘you are good for nothing’; *lafka* ‘store’; *kwashnia* ‘sourdough’; *sluzhba* ‘church service’; *para stawat’* ‘time to get up’; *iswini* ‘sorry’; *spasiba – ne stoit* ‘thanks – you are welcome’; *pamoynik vytashchi* ‘take the bin out’; diminutives in first names – *Ivashka* (from *Ivan*), *Aleksashka* (from *Aleksey*), *Marfusha* (from *Marfa*), *Styopka* (from *Stepan*), etc.

Names play an important role as an identity marker. Last names are not of much importance in this respect, as they show up in all kinds of documents and IDs (though their ‘Russian form’, especially the ending -off, is certainly easy to identify). More important are first names. People of all generations in each family have two names that mark their ‘double identity’ – an ‘American name’ and a ‘Russian name’. The latter is received in Orthodox Church as a Christian name. Usually these two names resemble each other at least by their initial sounds – *Larry* and *Illarion*, *Fred* and *Fyodor*, *Aleksandr* (or *Alexei*) and *Sonny*, *Zack* and *Zakhar*, *Peter* and *Pyotr*, *John* and *Ivan*, *Gladys* and *Glafira*, *Helen* and *Yelena*, *Paul* and *Pavel*, *Mary* and *Maria*, *Steven* and *Stepan*, etc. Some elders remember about the practice of using patronymics (based on father’s name) after the first name. When greeting each other, they can jokingly call each

other *Ivan Petrovich*, *Fyodor Aleksandrovich*, etc. In most cases, the initial Russian patronymic turns into a middle initial in a full American name, e.g., John P. Pestrikoff (from Ivan Petrovich Pestrikoff), etc.

To conclude this section, it should be mentioned that ‘Old Russian’ is ‘a language without literacy’. None of my consultants know the Cyrillic alphabet, and they cannot read Russian. However the ability to read ‘Slavonic’ is considered to be prestigious. People never miss an opportunity to mention that either their fathers or other relatives were readers in church (*salomchik* – from the Standard Russian *psalomshchik*), they also like to show old documents written in Russian.

‘Old Russian’ and Alutiiq: According to our oldest Kodiak informants, in their young years, Alutiiq-Russian bilingualism was a wide-spread phenomenon in the three villages under consideration². At the same time, in old days, there was a clear (social) distinction between the Aleut people and the Russians even in Ouzinkie, not to mention the division of the village of Afognak into ‘Aleut Town’ and ‘Russian Town’ (‘Derevnia’), with sporadic young men’s fights in the ‘neutral zone’. There is linguistic evidence that ‘Old Russian’ modified many of its original words in accordance with Alutiiq³ phonetic models. In all Russian words, the Standard Russian phoneme /v/ is always realized as the bilabial sonorant /w/, which can only be explained by the Alutiiq influence (Alutiiq has /w/ and does not have /v/, cf. Alutiiq *witruuq* ‘bucket’, *wiilkaa*q ‘fork’), etc. The phonetic

² Today only John Pestrikoff is a fluent speaker of both languages, though some other Russian-speaking consultants can express themselves in Aleut or at least know many words and phrases (John Nelson, Helen Nelson, Katherine Helmig, and others).

³ There are over 500 Russian loan words in Alutiiq.

shape of many Russian words provides evidence that they entered ‘Old Russian’ from Alutiiq, for example, these are the words with the loss of palatalization after /r/: *trapka* ‘rag’, *pranik* ‘cookie’, and many others – these words sound exactly like in Alutiiq. Though, in other cases, the reflex of Russian palatalization is kept as /j/: ‘Old Russian’ /pryamoy/ vs. Standard Russian /pr’amoy/, etc. In some idiolects the initial /b/ in Russian words is replaced by /p/ which may also be the effect of Alutiiq-Russian contact, cf. Alutiiq *pasmakiik* ‘shoes’ (du.), etc. The cases presented above are just random samples, more evidence of phonetic influence of Alutiiq can be presented. The close interaction of Alutiiq and Russian in old times causes lexical diffusion and makes it difficult for ‘Old Russian’ speakers to distinguish between some lexical items. For example, most of them are confident that the words *piwa* ‘beer’ (cf. Alutiiq *piiwaq*), *chufli* ‘slippers’ (cf. Alutiiq *cuuflik*), *tachka* ‘wheelbarrow’ (cf. Alutiiq *taackaa*), *lapta* (cf. Alutiiq *laptuq*), *aladiks* ‘pancakes’, and many others are of Alutiiq origin.

What is the origin of ‘Old Russian’? This is obviously a dialectal form of Russian that has preserved many archaic words and colloquialisms: *rusak* ‘a Russian’; *dozhiday sperva* ‘wait first’; *tamaka* ‘up there’; *tiperia* ‘now’; *chistiy/chisto* ‘pure’, ‘just’ (e.g., *on lenitsa – chistiy king* ‘he is so lazy, just like a king’); *plut* ‘fraud’; *fabrika* ‘plant’, ‘canary’; *shipka* ‘very much’; *pustianka* ‘flat cake with sugar and cinnamon on top’; *kalidor* ‘entrance’; *kavaler* ‘boy friend’; *sera chafkat* lit. ‘to chew sulphur’; *ivonniy (yonniy)* ‘his’; *salomchik* ‘reader’; *tikolka* ‘a stick with a sharp (metal) end’; *galik* ‘broom’; *patret* ‘picture’; *chiwo* ‘what’; *chio-nibut* ‘something’; *agde* ‘where’; *ahto* ‘who’; *razhden’ye* ‘birthday’; *s angelom* ‘congratulation on an angel day’; *dikay* ‘crazy

(man)'; *dichayka* 'crazy (woman)'; *stolon'ka* 'salt shaker'; *drowyanik* 'wood shed'; *fchiras* 'yesterday'; *samandrawnny* 'despotic and willful person'; *atwerni* 'turn away, open'; *zabratsa naniz* 'get downstairs'; *zhoga* 'heartburn'; *dohtor* 'doctor'; *pil'u'li* 'pills'; *t'at'a* 'dad'; *mater* 'mother'; *t'ot'ka* 'aunt'; *dit'atko* 'baby'; *dasadnay* 'disappointing'; *nad'ozhno* 'for sure'; *shipoynik* 'dog rose'; *s'afka* 'killer whale'; *mezgir* 'spider'; *chishkat* 'to pee'; *warnak* 'thief'; *saldat* 'sailor'; *dObyt* (e.g., *eta baba safsem beremannyj, khtota ee dObil* 'this woman is quite pregnant, somebody got her'); *strop* 'belt', diminutives in first names (see above).

Some specific words of 'Old Russian' are also found in Russian Old Settler dialects of Siberia: *puchki* 'wild parsley', *naweska* 'garret', 'upstairs', *iwrashka* 'land squirrel', etc. Interestingly, some words found among Russian loan words in the language of the Aleutian Islands are not known by 'Old Russian' speakers on Kodiak, e.g., *kosogor* 'hill' (very frequently used in the Aleutian Aleut language – *kusugoorax*[^]).

'Old Russian' underwent its own development, cf. the innovation *letuchka* 'plane' (lit. 'the one flying'), and adapting words from other languages, not only from Alutiiq, but also from English, cf. *pushka/ pushochka* 'a sniff of tobacco', *kara* 'car', *chaypot* 'tea-pot', *rababutsi* 'rubber boots'; *gazalin* 'gasoline'; *bos* 'boss', *stampa* 'post stamp', etc.

Kodiak 'Old Russian' vs. Niniichik Russian. There is no doubt that these two idioms stem from one root. Initially that was one dialectal form of Russian modified under the influence, first, of Alutiiq, and later, of English. Spoken in two different communities, the two idioms developed certain distinctive features which are found, most naturally, not in

the grammar, but in the lexicon. The Ninlchik words *struzh* ‘plane’ (instrument), *krasnaya br’ushka* ‘robin’, *marskoy chayka* ‘kind of fish (numbfish?)’, *birloga* ‘den’, ‘lair’, *alen* ‘deer’, *kazna* ‘lynx’, *krolik* ‘rabbit’, *sahat* ‘moose’; *nushki* ‘women’s breast’; *d’uym* ‘inch’; *lotka* ‘boat’, and some others are not known by Kodiak speakers. While the absence of some words in the other idiom can be easily explained by the differences in fauna and flora, other discrepancies remain unclear.

What kind of language is ‘Old Russian’? As was noted earlier by Daly and Kibrik, it is often hard to distinguish between language changes that became part of (modified) language system and the process of language attrition. ‘Old Russian’ shows considerable variation on all levels depending on a particular idiolect. There are of course some common features found in all idiolects. As was mentioned above, those are, first of all, the ones in the phonological system. However, as regards specific features in common in grammar, they are not so obvious. Even the famous loss of gender agreement, first registered by Daly, and later confirmed by Kibrik, leaves a lot of room for doubt. During the first period of field work, I was absolutely convinced that the observations made by Daly and Kibrik find support in my material. However, in the course of time I noticed that this ‘loss of gender agreement’ does not work in the speech of some of my language consultants (best consultants!) – John Pestrikoff, John Nelson, and Katherine Helmig, or, to put it in a more careful way, it does not always work. Presumably, this fact indicates that this ‘loss of agreement’ is rather an effect of language attrition, than part of a modified grammatical system. On the other hand, we can admit that the ‘sum’ of individual language attrition acts will eventually provide a system language change. What

is clear, however, is that the ‘loss of gender agreement’ is number one on the list of individual language attrition phenomena. Undoubtedly, this problem requires more scholarly attention, but we should expect to encounter all the processes typical of language attrition in general – reduction (unification) in phonology, morphology, syntax, styles.

Conclusions: To conclude, it should be mentioned that Alaskan ‘Old Russian’ provides a very interesting, if not unique, material that allows a better understanding of what a linguistic map of Alaska looks like. It also gives new evidence of what happens with the structure of Russian when it becomes a minority language in close contact with languages, so different structurally and socially, as Alutiiq and English.

Another important result of this preliminary analysis is that Kodiak ‘Old Russian’ does not show any common structural features at all with the famous ‘Mednij Aleut’ spoken on the Commander Islands, Russia. While there is no doubt that the Russian speakers, who ‘invented’ Mednij Aleut in the late 19th century, spoke the same Russian idiom as was spoken all around Alaska, the ‘invention’ of the mixed Aleut-Russian language (‘Mednij Aleut’) took place at a different location, presumably on Attu Island or on Mednij Island. There are even fewer reasons to believe that ‘Old Russian’ show any common features with Russian-based pidgins, such as Russenorsk, Russian-Chinese pidgin, or Govorka of the Taimyr Peninsula.