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REVIEW ESSAY:
**“HOW DO YOU TRANSLATE ‘DISCIPLINE RUBRIC’
INTO YUP’IK?”**

*Youth Culture, Language Endangerment,
and Linguistic Survivance*

By Leisy Thornton Wyman

Multilingual Matters, 2012. 303 pages.

In 2000, Leisy Thornton Wyman returned as a researcher to a remote Central Alaskan Yup’ik Eskimo village in which she had taught secondary school from 1992-1995. Having departed to pursue doctoral work in education, linguistics, and anthropology, she returned to engage in a 14-month ethnographic study. She was puzzled to find that, in only five years, youth language use had tipped toward English, a situation that had seemed inconceivable in 1995.

The resulting longitudinal, comparative ethnography represents 20 years of work in Piniq (a pseudonym). Wyman analyzes youth culture amid rapid language shift and delineates ways that resources for heritage language development are grouped, preserved, and eroded. She examines how these varying and unpredictable groupings drive linguistic change. She does not aim to designate a policy, institution, or practice as cause; her analysis presents a web of contingencies. She centralizes youth as active agents and refutes commonplace assumptions about language shift—including the role of globalized youth

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culture, the ascription of low status, and the absence of allegiance. To wit: Hip hop and social media had scant effect on language change in Piniq, and young people expressly wanted to be strong Yup'ik speakers.

The text comprises seven chapters plus an introduction, conclusion, and epilogue. The first three chapters provide context, and the final four analyze youth language use in the years 1992-2001. The conclusion discusses implications for sociolinguistics, education, and language policy programming and offers guidelines for educators and researchers. The epilogue traces the ramifications of No Child Left Behind between 2001 and 2012 and discusses ongoing shift and preservation.

The introduction outlines the study and its three conceptual lenses: language ideologies, language socialization trajectories, and linguistic survivance. Perhaps this third bears explication. It applies Vizenor's (2008) formulation of survivance, a fusion of survival and resistance. It is not meant to classify speech acts; forms of survivance do not necessarily work for or against shift. It is an analytical tool, a corrective against binary interpretations casting people in passive, simplistic roles (heroic/tragic, noble/tainted, traditional/modern, and, for sociolinguistic purposes, speaker/non-speaker). Survivance highlights the creative maintenance of identity amid conflicting and hostile forces, such as deracination, language endangerment, schooling, and adolescence itself.

From the first chapter, Wyman is clear in expecting her research to serve the community. She discusses her purpose and her methodological considerations, both practical and ethical. The study compares two consecutive peer groups—the older being the last group of young people to interact with each other mostly in Yup'ik (the "Last Real Speakers"/RS) and the younger being the first group to use English as their primary peer language (the "Get-by"/GB group). "Cornerstone generations" are designated to study language shift; in this case, the concept fits consecutive peer groups about five years apart.

The second chapter focuses on Yup'ik's central role in youth socialization and explains core cultural categories and local language ideologies. Chapter three analyzes developments and vicissitudes in local school policies. The people of Piniq were supposedly in charge of school programming decisions, but discussions were often in rapid English and without translators. After one meeting, Wyman asked a Yup'ik teacher why no one volunteered to translate.

His wry response: “I don’t know... How do you translate ‘discipline rubric’ into Yup’ik?”

Wyman maintains a balanced focus on school programming as one among many elements in a complex linguistic ecology, in keeping with her framework and data. Still, the GB group was the first for which core instruction in early elementary school was not delivered in Yup’ik; it is reasonable to wonder about the ramifications. The administration had both high turnover and a poor grasp of bilingualism research; did schooling drive shift inordinately? Wyman explains in the conclusion that community members’ perceptions and diagnoses of language shift obscured the extent to which bilingual programming decisions mapped squarely onto shift. They saw school as responding to rather than coproducing shift. She analyzes school influence and addresses the tension between the goals of schooling and the dreams of Indigenous communities. Her study will be invaluable for future researchers investigating schooling and shift.

Chapter four focuses on the RS group, taking up language socialization trajectories and analyzing language negotiation in and out of school. Chapter five extends to language socialization within families and analyzes the complex changes that “combined to unevenly erode young people’s overall resources for learning Yup’ik” (195). Wyman identifies contingencies such as migration, birth order, playmates, schooling, and family policies. She illustrates, in concrete detail, the concepts building throughout the book, teasing out the ricocheting, variable, seemingly small factors fueling language tip. The presentation of the families’ dilemmas and responses is vivid and cogent.

Chapters six and seven analyze GB language brokering. Adults were frustrated with GB youth for speaking English; youth were too insecure in their Yup’ik to speak to adults. Chapter six shares youth insights about language socialization. It also shows how acts of “getting by” created a highly localized youth culture. Chapter seven looks at the increased, and gendered, opportunities for learning Yup’ik in subsistence contexts. Wyman also documents examples of demonstratives that are part and parcel of Yup’ik culture and knowledge; they also are only available to sophisticated speakers. Elders worried that young people were losing their “linguistic orientation to the land” (250). Still, the youth demonstrated strong connections to Yup’ik and creative forms of survivance as they negotiated adolescence and shift.

Throughout the study, Wyman cites a range of research to situate, counter, or support ideas and policies about language use in Piniq. Her work is original, clear, and carefully organized. It will be of interest to educational policymakers and advocates, education scholars, and teacher preparation programs. Scholars, researchers, and policymakers studying land-use and language will benefit as well. The book is also a resource for students of ethnography investigating the structure and organization of multilayered studies.

Unlike classroom behavior norms, linguistic ecologies do not map evenly onto prepared rubrics. Wyman beautifully demonstrates that efforts to understand cultural change must attend to intricacy and be mindful of the pitfalls of the ready-made idea.