Developing consistency by consensus: Avoiding fiat in language revitalization

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Phoneme inventory
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Emergent orthography

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Language play and change

Discussion
What is ‘fiat’ in revitalization?

- **FIAT** is the declaration of an obligatory linguistic standard in a speech community
  - OED: (< Latin *fiat* ‘let it be done’) an authoritative pronouncement, decree, command, order.

- obligatory means that everyone must follow the standard
- the prototypical example is an orthography
  - everything in the language must be written according to the standard
- another example is establishing modern terminology
  - “how do you say telephone?” “*a tóode yoo x’atangi át*, never *tenefon!*”
Why should we avoid fiat?

• standards are supposed to improve communication by establishing consistency in the speech community
  • but they don't always work, so what do we do when they don't?

• most linguistic practices develop naturally by emergent consensus
  • but critically endangered languages usually don’t have enough daily use for consensus to emerge quickly, and not enough time to wait
  • so standardization is supposed to replace the natural social processes

• but revitalization ideally renews the natural state of a language
  • rigid adherence to standards can kill emergent consensus
  • standards should be violable if natural development is occurring

• we will describe a few examples of emergent consensus in Tlingit

• we will also describe how to avoid fiat so that consensus can flower
Tlingit language background

- Tlingit /ˈklɪŋˌkɪt/ “cling-kit”, 
  *Lingít* /ˈlin.kɪt/ ‘person, Tlingit’
- member of Na-Dene family, 
  relative of Dene (Athabaskan) family & Eyak language
- spoken in Alaska, British Columbia, and Yukon
- critically endangered: ~200 speakers, nearly all > 60 y.o.
  - ethnic pop. up to 25,000
- ample documentation, but limited description
  - most description is unpublished manuscripts, hard to find
- active revitalization, but hampered by lack of description
  - maybe 15 conversationally fluent adult learners, 1–2 children < 2 y.o.
Orthography problems

- Tlingit has a very large phoneme inventory, largest in North America
  - there are up to 47 consonants
    - independent aspiration and rounding contrasts
    - full set of ejectives including stops, affricates, and fricatives
    - 12–14 uvulars and glottals
- only four basic vowels, but independent length and tone contrasts
  - so 16 possible vowels
- as a consequence, Tlingit is hard to make orthographies for
**Consonant inventory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bilial</th>
<th>alveolar</th>
<th>postalv.</th>
<th>lateral</th>
<th>palatal</th>
<th>velar</th>
<th>lab.-vel.</th>
<th>uvular</th>
<th>lab.-uvu.</th>
<th>glottal</th>
<th>lab.-glot.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unaspirated stop</td>
<td>( t )</td>
<td>( k )</td>
<td>( k^w )</td>
<td>( q )</td>
<td>( q^w )</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>aspirated stop</td>
<td>( t^h )</td>
<td>( k^h )</td>
<td>( k^{hw} )</td>
<td>( q^h )</td>
<td>( q^{hw} )</td>
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<tr>
<td>ejective stop</td>
<td>( t' )</td>
<td>( k' )</td>
<td>( k'^w )</td>
<td>( q' )</td>
<td>( q'^w )</td>
<td>(? )</td>
<td>(?^w )</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>unasp. affricate</td>
<td>( ts )</td>
<td>( tʃ )</td>
<td>( tɬ )</td>
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<td>asp. affricate</td>
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<td>ejv. affricate</td>
<td>( ts' )</td>
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<tr>
<td>fricative</td>
<td>( s )</td>
<td>( ʃ )</td>
<td>( ɬ )</td>
<td>( x )</td>
<td>( x^w )</td>
<td>( χ )</td>
<td>( χ^w )</td>
<td>( h )</td>
<td>( (h^w) )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ejv. fricative</td>
<td>( s' )</td>
<td>( ʃ' )</td>
<td>( ɬ' )</td>
<td>( x' )</td>
<td>( x'^w )</td>
<td>( χ' )</td>
<td>( χ'^w )</td>
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<tr>
<td>approximant</td>
<td>( (l)_{IA} )</td>
<td>( j )</td>
<td>( (u_)_{TA} )</td>
<td>( w )</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>nasal</td>
<td>( (m)_{IA} )</td>
<td>( n )</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\( A = \) Archaic Northern, \( I = \) Inland Northern, \( T = \) Tongass dialect. Parenthesized consonants without subscripts are idiolectal.
## Vowel inventory (Northern dialect)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>low tone</th>
<th></th>
<th>high tone</th>
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<td>short</td>
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<td>short</td>
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<tr>
<td>fnt.</td>
<td>í</td>
<td>è</td>
<td>í</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ctr.</td>
<td>è</td>
<td>èː</td>
<td>é</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bck.</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>àː</td>
<td>á</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ì</td>
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<td>ù</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>à</td>
<td>àː</td>
<td>á</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Existing orthographies

- Tlingit has had quite a few orthographies over the years
  - Cyrillic orthography (e.g. 1846)
    - а̀ кхустий /hà: qʰùstìjíˑ/ our culture.POSS
  - Kelly and Willard orthography (1905)
    - hä ḳo̱stēyē′
  - Shotridge’s orthography (e.g. 1915)
    - hà q’ust’iyí
  - first Naish & Story orthography (e.g. 1963), “NS1”
    - hah kóstèeyee
  - second Naish & Story orthography (e.g. 1973), “NS2”
    - haa kustèeyee
  - revised popular orthography (e.g. 1976) “RP”
    - haa kusteeeyí
  - Yukon Native Language Centre orthography (e.g. 1993) “Y”
    - hà khustìyí
- publications in NS2, RP, and Y are still in active use
Orthographic details

- most current orthographies derive from NS1 (NS2, RP)
  - apostrophe for ejectives: ch', x', tl' = /tʃ', x', tɬ'/
  - unaspirated is ‘voiced’ vs. aspirated ‘voiceless’: ts, dz = /tsʰ, ts/
  - underscores represent uvular sounds: g̱, k, k', x̱'w = /q, qʰ, q', χ'ʷ/
  - length is represented with Englishy digraphs: ei, ee, oo = /èː, ìː, ùː/
  - high tone is an acute on the first grapheme in a vowel: áa, á = /áː, á/

- but the YNLC orthography replaces uvulars, tone, and length
  - velar + h for uvulars: gh, kh, xh'w = /q, qʰ, χ'ʷ/
  - tone and length are combined into a single diacritic
    - short and low is plain: i, e, a, u = /ì, è, à, ù/
    - long and low with grave: i̹, e̹, a̹, u̹ = /i̹ː, e̹ː, àː, ùː/
    - short and high with acute: i̱, e̱, a̱, u̱ = /í, é, á, ú/
    - long and high with circumflex: ì̂, è̂, â̂, û̂ = /íː, éː, áː, úː/
Emergent orthography

- Tlingits wanted to write Tlingit in email and on the web in the 1990s
- underlines were easy on typewriters, but they are hard on computers
- in fact, diacritics in general are not easy in Anglophone countries
- people started combining the existing orthographies independently
- what emerged was the Email orthography
  - uvulars with C + h from YNLC: gh, kh, xh’w = /q, qʰ, χ’ʷ/
  - vowel tone and length from RP: ée, ú, aa = /íː, ú, àː/
  - without diacritics (e.g. txt msgs), postvocalic apostrophe: e’e ~ ee’ /íː/
- the inventors are unknown so nobody “owns” this orthography
- it is now conventional for Tlingit on Facebook, Twitter, in email, etc.
Avoiding fiat

• if we demand only official orthographies, people will feel held back
  • any kind of writing is better than nothing at all
  • communication is the goal, the standard is just one path there
• the Email orthography is a natural anonymous development
  • people use it because it’s effective for communication
  • it isn’t “owned” by one group, so it’s free to use and abuse
• we want revitalization to encourage natural language growth
  • if we insist firmly on standards, we may retard natural growth
• we have to be willing to “let go” of the language into the community
Neologisms

- a NEOLOGISM is a new word invented to fill some perceived gap in the language’s lexicon (inventory of words, mental dictionary)
- neologisms can arise from many different processes, e.g.
  - deliberate construction
  - borrowing from other languages
  - language play
  - extension and meaning shift of existing words
Creating neologisms

- highly endangered languages lack modern terminology
  - computer, cell phone, television, microphone, newspaper, etc.
- people may invent terms individually, but there’s no standard
- so a community may set up a council to develop terminology
- but quite often people just ignore the proposed terms
  - the terms may be awkward: *kashóok’ tlageiyí* ‘electric brain’
  - the terms may be hard to remember: *a tóonáx kadus’íks’át* ‘straw’
  - the terms may be “owned” and seem imposed on the community
Borrowing versus code-switching

- «machine kayéik aawa.áx» — “she heard the sound of a machine”
  - the word *machine* is English, stuck into the Tlingit sentence
  - this is code-switching, substituting one language for another

- «yú washéen katág̱ayi wulil’éex’» — “the engine cylinder rod broke”
  - the word *washéen* is Tlingit, meaning ‘engine’ rather than ‘machine’
  - Tlingit mostly doesn’t have *m* so it’s *w*, and high tone instead of stress
  - this is borrowing, the word is integrated into the language

- code-switched words tend to become borrowed over time
- code-switching isn’t inherently bad, it can enrich the language
- communication is more important than “purity” or “faithfulness” when a language is dying
  - borrowed words develop from emergent consensus
  - encouraging natural development means accepting change
Language play

- «wáa sá aduspelled?» — “how do people spell it?”
  - English spelled interpreted as s-√pelled ‘CL-√spell’
  - yéi wutusipelled ‘we spelled it that way’ — perfectly regular
  - we get a new verb root by reinterpreting the English word

- so maybe «ash wutusikáayp» — “we Skyped him”

- or «a kaanáx wusikíp» — “he skipped along on top of it”

- these may be frowned upon by some, but they use the language’s own logic to communicate in a creative and fun way

- banning this kind of play would stunt the growth of the speech community since such play is a natural development of language
Extension of existing vocabulary

• «ch’u tle dziyáagín gunéi gaxtoo.áat»
  “we’re going to start going later”
• the word dziyáagín ‘later’ has been extended to English usage
  • «dziyáagín ikḵwasatéen» — “I’ll see you later”
• lately it’s gone even further
  • «dziyáagín!» — “later!” (said on departure)
• the English logic is transferred to Tlingit, and Tlingit adapts to fit it
• nobody planned this sort of thing, it emerged naturally from use
• barring its use may please purists, but it represents active participation in the speech community
  • an alternative is to mark it as “slang”, not permitted in formal contexts but acceptable in casual contexts
Working with mistakes

• when learners make mistakes, it’s tempting to instantly correct them
• our elders sometimes correct us, but sometimes not
• feedback in the form of “reflections”, restating the same thing
• we already do this in conversation, so it’s natural to do in teaching
  • “he said he was feeling kinda strange”
  • “yeah, he said he was feeling funny”
• the following exchange was on Facebook (people acting like a raven)
  • «ts’ootaat at xha i khudli’ootl aa déi ... akwé?»
    “morning food yours scavenging that way ... right?”
  • «ts’ootaat atxhaayíghaa ldakát yéide kheeydli’óotl (gwál)»
    “everywhere you have scavenging for breakfast (maybe)”
  • «ts’ootaat atxhaayíghaa ldakát yéide kheell’óotl»
    “you’re scavenging everywhere for breakfast”
• people provide gradually better models for each other
A language owned by everyone

- standardization can be beneficial for establishing consistency
  - but enforcement of standards should be flexible to permit growth
- languages should be “owned by everyone” in the community: 
  *ldakát uháan haa at.óowux sitee, yá haa yoo x’atángi*
- emergent consensus is better than making standards by fiat
  - fiat is unnatural, emergent consensus is natural
  - revitalization should progress from artificial to natural
  - revitalization leaders need to be willing to “let go” of the language


Veniaminov (Веніаминовъ), Ivan (Иванъ). 1846. Замччания о колошенскомъ и кадьяксомъ языкахъ (Observations about the Tlingit & Kodiak (Alutiiq) languages). Санктпетербургъ (St. Petersburg): Императорский академий наукъ (Imperial Academy of Science).