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Essay Title: Language Recession

The Tlingit language of the Southeast Alaska natives is essentially dying, but with the proper intervention it will rise up again like the Phoenix. I believe that we must not let our language be wiped away like a sand castle when the tide rises; we must act quickly and wisely to protect it. I feel like the first step we need to take is to encourage Tlingits to be proud of our heritage and willing to learn our language.

Due to many reasons, the Tlingit language is receding at an unprecedented rate, just like the great Juneau Icefield. Linda Belarde, Curriculum Specialist of Sealaska Heritage Institute said, "One of the things I say to young people is that with every obituary, there goes another Tlingit speaker." My Pa's (Grandpa) generation was not allowed to speak Tlingit in school, so my parent's generation did not grow up hearing Tlingit spoken very often. Consequently, they did not learn to speak Tlingit. My uncle told me when he was in middle school, the kids bullied him and chased him just because he was Tlingit. He said, for a quite a while he did not want to be Tlingit. My church is willing to incorporate Tlingit into the worship services, but no one knows Tlingit well enough to translate songs to sing or able to offer up prayers in our own language.

It was not until my sophomore year of high school that I had any significant contact with the Tlingit language. I took a language class at the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) to meet my high school foreign language requirement. With a lot of studying and practice and an almost perfect attendance record, I received an A in the class. Now, Lingít sh tuxáltóow (I'm learning Tlingit). Ever since then, I have been trying to teach my family some of the words and now, Pa enjoys coming over and helping me with my Tlingit. Until a few weeks ago when he came to visit, my Uncle did not know about any local programs to help revive the Tlingit language. I was able to tell him about many programs that have been implemented to assist in language protection and revival.

A troubling fact I've faced while telling my friends about learning Tlingit, is they view it like Latin; dead, unpractical, and a waste of time. Hearing that hurts me more than any other insult could. It also makes me want to prove them wrong and learn more and more Tlingit. I am learning the language, so maybe in a few years we'll have our language being spoken on a more regular basis in my church and community. I hope that we can also say prayers and sing songs in Tlingit. Soon, I hope to attend Tlingit Talking Time, offered once a month by another local church. By participating in these activities, I hope to show my friends that there is still hope for Tlingit.

Efforts to revive the language are being made on a broader scale, as well. As an attempt to reverse the death spiral, Woosh kaanáxh gaxhtuda.aat: (Let Us Gather Together) Conference convened in Sitka in 1993 where elders, teachers, and learners of the Tlingit language gathered together to rescue the language. At that time it was estimated that there were only about 200 fluent speakers left. According to the Sealaska Heritage Institute website "while continuing to honor the Institute's mission statement, "To perpetuate the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian

cultures,” the Trustees in 1997 adopted language restoration as the foremost priority of the Institute.” Since then, SHI has created a variety of programs to help revive the language, including: vocabulary games on their website, a Facebook page, the Latséen Leadership Academy that SHI puts on each summer to give middle school students a week immersed in their culture, and an e-newsletter that keeps subscribers updated on SHI’s activities. In addition, SHI used to run Tlingit emersion retreats to help revitalize the Tlingit language.

Also, there are places like University of Alaska Southeast that have programs to help the Tlingit language by offering language classes taught by speakers and a unique apprenticeship course. In this course, students have the opportunity to work with a mentor fluent in the language while attending the weekly class. At UAS, there are numerous resources and instructors, like Marsha Hotch and Lance Twitchell, who are truly helping us revive our language.

Just recently, in 2012, the Alaska State Legislature passed Senate Bill 130, “which is intended to protect and restore Alaska Native Languages. The legislation will establish the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council to assess the state of Alaska Native Languages, reevaluate the programs within the state, and make recommendations to the Governor and Legislature to establish new programs or reorganize the current programs.” (www.legis.ak.state.us)

The state of our language is like the Juneau Icefield receding, because there are more fluent elders dying than there are people learning it. Without intervention, it will melt from our lives until there is nothing left. Individually, I can help by telling people about the vocabulary games, continuing to learn to speak Tlingit myself, and by talking with elders in order to preserve their knowledge. But, in a broader sense, all of these resources are useless if we as a people don't have enough pride in our heritage to take advantage of them and learn our language. This is one of the major issues we face as Tlingit. We must learn to have pride in our heritage. I, for one, will not sit idle while the flames of life are fading from our language. Yee gu.aa yáx x’wán ch’a tlákw kaa tóowoo kaligei yee yoo x’atánk (Have courage. Always be proud of your language.)

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