

Statement by Michael E. Krauss, Director Emeritus, Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, July 20, 2000, at Hearing on S.2688, the Native American Languages Act Amendments Act of 2000.

First, to help evaluate what is at stake here, and to appreciate how diverse our uniquely American languages are – in a nation that calls diversity its strength – I shall present some basic statistics, with figures of which few of us may be aware. I shall then turn to show how many of these languages still survive, generally, and in each of the United States, and then evaluate their viability in terms of age of those who still speak those languages, to show exactly how close we are to losing them – unless we face these facts and finally take adequate measures, the immersion-type programs provided for by the Amendments to the Native American Languages Act which this hearing is about.

No one can know how many languages were spoken as of 1492 or 1620 or even 1776 in what is now the United States. Their number was in any case well over 300. Undoubtedly many languages disappeared without a trace, not only because languages have always been replaced by others throughout human prehistory as well as history, but also because disturbance and disease caused by European arrivals very often spread like wildfire through parts of this continent well ahead of the actual frontiers of direct European contact and record. Languages of which we have some knowledge or documentation themselves number about 300. (In counting “languages” there is more often than not the problem of distinguishing “dialect” from “language.” The chief criterion used here is that of mutual intelligibility. Speakers of dialects of one language can understand each other without much practice or learning, whereas speakers of different languages cannot. There are of course often many shadings between language and dialect, but we may arrive at that figure of 300 languages by European-like standards, whereby say Spanish and Portuguese, German and Dutch, Russian and Polish are different languages, but perhaps not Swedish and Norwegian, or Russian and Ukrainian.)

To appreciate better the degree or depth of diversity in this comparison, remember that e.g. Spanish, French, Italian are closely related, very similar indeed, being variants of Romance; German, English, Norwegian likewise, of Germanic; Russian, Polish, Bulgarian likewise, of Slavic; and furthermore that, in turn, Romance, Germanic, Slavic are demonstrably branches descended from a single ancestor, of the family called Indo-European. All the languages of Europe are Indo-European, except for Basque, and for Finnish-Estonian-Hungarian, so all of “traditional” Europe has only these three language families. Ancient genetic relationships older than about 5,000 years in time-depth can be highly controversial among comparative linguists; however, we can safely say that at the same level of clarity and agreement we have that Europe has only those 3 language families, Native North America easily has 5 to 15 times that many language families – to provide some rough idea of how the degree of North American language diversity compares with the European. Some American families such as Athabaskan or Algonkian are very widespread and include dozens of languages, while another dozen or so families consist of a single language like Haida, Zuni, or Natchez, like only Basque in Europe, isolates with no genetic relations yet proven. Languages of different American families

like Eskimo and Athabaskan, Uto-Aztecan and Iroquois, can be as different as English and Chinese, Finnish and Zulu. Here I shall only add – a point to return to later – that the texture or density of this Native American diversity is – as true for the world in general – very uneven, and that by far the greatest diversity is in California, still with about 50 languages, of 10-15 families.

Though human languages are very unequal in the number of speakers they may have, very unequal in the political and technological or economic power they may have, that inequality has nothing whatever to do with the nature of the languages themselves; the power or fortunes of English or Japanese, Navajo or Passamaquoddy, have nothing to do with quality of their verbs or vowels, or the complexity or logic of their grammars. God created all languages equal. There are no “primitive” languages. Every human language is an exquisitely complex intellectual masterpiece, created and polished by untold generations, as the ever perfect expression of their culture and experience, of intimate knowledge of their specific environment, and of their own special interpretation of universal human experience. They are our different ways of thinking, and of understanding the world. All languages are as complex and divine a mystery as a living organism. All languages have not only the same human intellectual level, but also have the same inherent potential to develop – provided they are given the right to do so. In our country, until 1990 only English was given that right, to the exclusion of all Native American languages.

After centuries of tragedy, at last with the Native American Languages Act of 1990/1992, our American languages were explicitly recognized as an asset to our nation, and as deserving of support, instead of being considered, at best, an impediment to the progress and welfare of their speakers. (J. D. C. Adkins, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1887: “Teaching an Indian youth in his own barbarous dialect is a positive detriment to him.” President Grover Cleveland, *New York Times*, April 4, 1888: “It will not do to permit these wards of the nation, in their preparation to become their own masters, to indulge in their barbarous language.”) The recent radical policy shift cannot, however, so suddenly reverse the loss incurred, or reverse the negative processes so systematically set in motion through generations of repression. In fact we are finally at this hearing now to recognize what is really needed to reverse these processes. It is certainly high time, the eleventh hour.

In that connection, I shall turn again to some statistics on where we stand at this point. The figures are of course only approximate. A truly adequate account of the viability of Native U.S. languages would require skilled observation of the language situation in every Native American community, at one extreme the degree to which children actually communicate with elders and with each other in their heritage language – and at the other extreme whether there still is at least one person, no doubt very old, who actually still could carry on a conversation in the language, or who remembers even some of it; if there is not, the language is extinct. Such adequate investigation nationwide would take someone ten or twenty years to do, or a skilled crew of five or so perhaps two to four years – maybe feasible for a million dollars, especially with the help of regional or local

consultants – certainly a project worth consideration.

Short of such a survey, for the moment, I can only provide an approximation from data, mostly obtained from previous limited surveys and from specialist consultants, in connection with the 1990/1992 Native American Languages Act. The two documents appended to the present statement, to which I here refer, are (1) the January 1992 version of the unpublished “Number and Viability of Native American Languages by State” which I compiled and submitted to Senator Murkowski for his use as a sponsor of the Act, and (2) my article entitled “The condition of Native American Languages: the need for realistic assessment and action,” published in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 132.9-21, 1998, edited by our co-panelist Teresa McCarty. The first published version of these statistics is in my 1992 statement in the *Hearing before the Select Committee on Indian Affairs. United States Senate. 102nd Congress. Second Session. On S.2044 (Senate Hearing 102-809, p. 18-22)*. Quoting myself from the 1998 article I reminisced that the 1992 hearing “was ably chaired by Senator Inouye of Hawaii, who noted in his opening remarks that there are more Native American languages spoken than some people think – ‘perhaps 50 or 60.’ I was able to open my testimony with the good news that the senator’s estimate was in fact very low, and that the number of Native North American languages still spoken in the United States alone [i.e. not counting Canada] was 155.” That is indeed the good news, that over one half of the languages known to be spoken in the U.S. are still with us, not extinct, by the definition above – very remarkable, in fact powerful testimony to the cultural and spiritual strength of Native America.

Since the early 1990’s the most significant update to those figures comes from a 1994 report by Leanne Hinton and Yolanda Montijo which increases the number of California languages to about 50, from the 30 that I had listed in 1992; however, that was not by adding languages thought to be extinct, but rather by a much finer definition of languages previously classed as dialects. That raises the number of Native American languages still extant in the U.S. to 175 (of an original total now also 20 higher than ca. 300).

The big question facing us, however, is this: For how much longer will these languages still be spoken? True, over half of our languages are still with us after all these 500 or 200 years, of adversity, but at the rate things have been going until recently, or as I put it, “unless there is radical change and success at reversal of language shift,” the next 60 years will see the extinction of 155 languages, all but 20 of the remaining 175.

To explain, I divide the extant languages into four classes:

- Class A: Still spoken by all generations including children;
- Class B: Spoken only by parental generation and up;
- Class C: Spoken only by grandparental generation and up;
- Class D: Spoken only by the very oldest, over 70, usually fewer than 10 persons – nearly extinct.

The following figures are now five to ten years old, and would by now in most cases

have to be considered somewhat generous, were it not for one all-important new factor: the classification is based on unidirectionality, not allowing e.g. for children speaking the language again after having skipped a generation or more. It thus does not account for gain, now documented only in a few cases, true, but the crucial issue for the amendments we are considering. Without counting that, the figures are as follows, at best: only 20 languages (11%) are in Class A, still spoken by children, by far the smallest class; 30 (17%) are in Class B, parental generation and up; 70 (40%) are in Class C, grandparental generation and up, the largest class; and 55 (31%) are in Class D, nearly extinct, the next largest class. The California increase – alas – added only to Classes C and D, 10 each. Without reversal of language shift, at the rate things were going, and figuring that the youngest speakers reach the age of 80, then accordingly, most of Class D would be lost by the year 2010, leaving 120 U.S. languages; Class C would be lost by 2040, leaving 50; and Class B by 2060, leaving only the 20 languages in Class A, those still spoken by children now. However, even those best-off languages are spoken by only some of the children, as in the case of Navajo, in most cases now a minority, as in the case of Yupik, or of Hawaiian (only the Ni'ihau children – not counting those who are becoming fluent speakers in the survival programs we are now considering). Without those immersion-type programs, as trends continue, though 175 of the 300+ historically known languages native to the U.S. have somehow in some sense survived extreme adversity to this day, the first 60 years of this century would see the extinction of about 90% of those survivors, and perhaps none would survive the whole century, even as only a memory. We are at the precipice.

Of the 20 languages with some children speakers, about 12 are in Arizona and New Mexico, a relative bastion of Native American language maintenance: Navajo, Western and perhaps Mescalero Apache, Hopi, Zuni, Havasupai-Hualapai, Jemez, Northern Tiwa, Eastern Keres, Tohono O'odham, one small group of Southern Paiute, perhaps still Cocopa, and Yaqui. The rest are St. Lawrence Island and Central Yupik in Alaska (in perhaps 17 of 68 villages); Hawaiian only on the tiny island of Ni'ihau – not counting the survival school children – everywhere else the speakers are 70 or older; presumably some Mikasuki in Florida, Choctaw in Mississippi, Lakota-Dakota in some places, presumably some Cherokee in Oklahoma, and perhaps Koasati in Louisiana. Children speakers of Native American languages in other states are either highly exceptional individuals, e.g. raised by conservative grandparents, or come from recent survival-school type programs. New York, for example still has 5 extant languages, all Iroquoian, 3 in Class C, 2 in Class D, but there are now reportedly again children speakers of Mohawk, from successful community language survival programs.

For all U.S. languages state by state I shall here summarize the results of the 1991-2 survey I presented to Senator Murkowski. Twenty-nine states still had one or more local living native language. Of these states, 17 had three or more such languages. I shall list these states in the order of the number of different languages in each, followed in parentheses by the hyphenated four-figure “profile” of the number of languages in each viability class, A, B, C, D, in that order. California, with by far the largest total number, 50, comes first, with the profile 0-2-18-30, meaning that most California languages, 30 of

them, were nearly extinct (a few of those might already have been in fact extinct, and several more might be by now), 18 were still spoken by grandparental generation, 2 by parental (Mohave and perhaps Northern Paiute), and there were at that time no reported children speakers of any language native to California. For a listing of the name of each of the actual languages in each category, state by state, I refer to the appended 1992 document. Many languages are extant in more than one state, by original distribution or by historical movement (usually displacement), but I am not counting relatively recent movements, e.g. the thousands of Navajos in Los Angeles; a language may be in different viability classes in different states, e.g. Cherokee with presumably some children in places in Oklahoma (A-C?), but not in North Carolina (C?). Furthermore, in many cases of languages in a complex of more than one community, the classification may be a range, e.g. A through C (A-C) as in the case of Oklahoma Cherokee or Alaskan Yupik, or it might be highly discontinuous, as especially Hawaiian, A only on Ni'ihau, D everywhere else (until recently). In all complex cases (of both types), in the following numerical profiles each such language is counted only in the class of its highest/strongest segment. Thus, bearing in mind that classing languages like Hawaiian or Yupik as A, where in fact only some children in a minority of locations in the language area are fluent speakers of the language, introduces a very misleading bias, we may now consider the listing of the 17 states with 3 or more languages as follows, in descending order of their total number of languages, followed in parentheses by the "profile" (optimized as warned above) of the number of those languages in those classes A-B-C-D in that order.

California	50 (0-2-18-30)	New York	5 (0-0-3-2)
Oklahoma	21 (1-2-12-6)	Wisconsin	5 (0-2-1-2)
Alaska	20 (2-7-10-1)	Idaho	5 (0-2-2-1)
Washington	15 (0-0-8-7)	Nevada	4 (0-2-2-0)
Arizona	12 (6-4-2-0)	Utah	3 (1-1-1-0)
New Mexico	11 (5-5-0-1)	Minnesota	3 (0-1-2-0)
Montana	11 (0-3-7-1)	Nebraska	3 (0-1-2-0)
Oregon	8 (0-1-3-4)	Kansas	3? (0-0-2-1)
North Dakota	6 (0-1-4-1)		

Five more states have two: Wyoming (0-1-1-0), South Dakota (0-1-0-1), Michigan (0-0-2-0), Maine (0-0-1-1), Florida (1-1-0-0); and seven states have one: Louisiana and Mississippi (1-0-0-0), Texas and Iowa (0-1-0-0), North Carolina and Colorado probably (0-0-1-0), and also Hawaii (1-0-0-0) but that especially with the qualifications mentioned above.

[These figures are re-presented in fully tabular form appended to this report.]

None of these figures in themselves give any idea of the size or numerical importance within the state or nationally of the Native American populations involved, either as speakers or non-speakers of the heritage languages. Such figures have their own significance, of course, but the present survey is even further from being adequate to present those. Perhaps the systematic survey suggested above could also provide that

very important information. Hawaiian again is an extreme. Hawaii is perhaps the only state so far as we know that has had only one language, of a people who still form such a large part of the state population, and which once was the language of a government and extensive literature.

Native American languages were once spoken in what are now each of the 50 states. Of the 21 states which have no surviving local native language and also of the 29 which still do, several states have local populations whose languages are now extinct, which now have no native speakers, but which are documented in some form well enough that on the basis of that documentation the language has a real possibility of being revived. The best known instance of that process is Hebrew, which had no native speakers at all for most of two millennia, but which was assiduously studied and cultivated with fervent dedication in scholarly and ceremonial domains, to become spoken again by children, first only in Jerusalem of the 1890s. Without that documentation, especially in the form of a highly respected text, the maintenance in any form and eventual revival of Hebrew would of course never have been possible. It is interesting to compare the linguistic quality of the documentation of Hebrew with that of many, potentially still the majority, of Native American languages. For example, only the consonants of what God spake unto Moses were written down; the vowels were basically left out. Nowadays, we not only know how to write the vowels as well as the consonants, we even know how to write vowel length or tones to boot, where such exist; i.e. our transcriptions are (or should be) far better, to give fully adequate account or indication for an excellent pronunciation. Furthermore, no one two thousand years ago thought to ask remaining Hebrew speakers the names of plants and animals, or to make any systematic vocabulary investigations or dictionaries, or of course grammars, as such. In terms of texts of cultural value and inspiration Hebrew was certainly well off, but for quality of purely linguistic documentation most Native American languages have a great advantage over Hebrew, at least potentially, even in terms of writing system – not to mention direct sound recording.

Good writing systems skillfully compiled grammars dictionaries and texts, are of course absolutely necessary for the revival of extinct languages, based on all information that can be gathered from all archival resources. With that, and with the necessary absolute determination of the people themselves, it has been shown that languages can be revived. We should therefore be prepared to see requests for support also from groups, ultimately, whose languages no longer have any native speakers.

Even where a language has native speakers, even children speakers, in order to develop for it the functions necessary for it to serve its speakers through this century, a linguistically sound writing system, well-designed dictionaries and grammars, well-transcribed or well-written texts for cultural or educational use, are all a critical need. True, living languages are first and foremost spoken, at least normally. Nothing should distract from that, as sometimes literacy can be misused to do. (Far too many limited current programs focus on writing and spelling, which some children may learn to do impressively, yet not be able to participate in the simplest conversation.) Nevertheless, bearing in mind at all times the primacy of spoken language, academically sound support

for any educational language program is a necessity. Archiving is another necessity: finding, preserving, organizing, and making appropriately accessible all the documentation of the language, from the earliest to the current, in a secure dedicated place. I agree with the finding that the Alaska Native Language Center is the most advanced institution in the United States to serve as a model for the kind of academic support described above.

In concluding this statement, restricted mainly to providing background statistical information on the present state of Native American languages and on how close we are to losing this most uniquely American aspect of our heritage, I stress once again that if we wish to restore the vitality of that heritage instead of losing it, we must undertake and support the programs for which these amendments to the Native American Languages Act are designed to provide.

Language by State and Degree of Viability (T=Total, A=Spoken by children and up, B=Parents and up, C=Grandparents and up, D=Few oldest, nearly extinct.). Note qualifications in text of report.

	<u>T</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>		<u>T</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
California	50	0	2	18	30	Nebraska	3	0	1	2	0
Oklahoma	21	1	2	12	6	Kansas	3?	0	0	2	1
Alaska	20	2	7	10	1	Wyoming	2	0	1	1	0
Washington	15	0	0	8	7	S. Dakota	2	0	1	0	1
Arizona	12	6	4	2	0	Michigan	2	0	0	2	0
New Mexico	11	5	5	0	1	Maine	2	0	0	1	1
Montana	11	0	3	7	1	Florida	2	1	1	0	0
Oregon	8	0	1	3	4	Louisiana	1	1	0	0	0
N. Dakota	6	0	1	4	1	Mississippi	1	1	0	0	0
New York	5	0	0	3	2	Texas	1	0	1	0	0
Wisconsin	5	0	2	1	2	Iowa	1	0	1	0	0
Idaho	5	0	2	2	1	N. Carolina	1	0	0	1	0
Nevada	4	0	2	2	0	Colorado	1	0	0	1	0
Utah	3	1	1	1	0	Hawaii	1	1	0	0	0
Minnesota	3	0	1	2	0						

The national total of languages at each degree (Note: Totals do not directly follow from table above, as many languages are in more than one state).

A	20	11%
B	30	17%
C	70	40%
D	55	31%
Total	175	