

Insights from a lesser-studied dialect: documenting Malimiut Iñupiaq

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Recently in the field of language documentation and revitalization, particular emphasis has been placed on the need to document as many varieties of a language as possible, whether it be dialect, register, sociolect, etc. In this talk I will summarize results of documentation work I have been doing—and intend to continue doing in the future—with speakers of the Noatak dialect of Iñupiaq (Eskimo-Aleut, northern Alaska, USA), a little-studied subdialect of Malimiut Iñupiaq with fewer than 200 speakers. The Malimiut dialect has received little attention compared to other dialects, and Noatak dialect none to my knowledge—a surprising situation given its physical location as the sole Malimiut village adjacent to the North Slope dialect (spoken in its neighboring village Kivalina).

Kaplan (1979, 1981) and others made several assumptions about the phonetics of Iñupiaq while doing phonological work but have never undertaken any phonetic analysis. I will present an experiment I conducted using fieldwork data and experimental results to demonstrate that a proposed phonemic merger of /ə/ and /i/ is indeed phonetically merged (in Malimiut). The merger is likely to result in a restructuring of the phonemic inventory in future generations. This will lead into a brief discussion of my dissertation research focusing on documenting morphosyntactic features of the Malimiut dialect.

The talk will then focus on future plans for Iñupiaq documentation, specifically 1) mechanisms for encoding evidentials, and 2) uncovering what is really being encoded with instrumental-marked objects of antipassive verbs. In other Eskimo-Aleut languages, both non-obligatory evidential marking (West Greenlandic, cf. Fortescue (2003)) and obligatory evidential marking (Alutiiq, cf. Leer (1990)) are described. If Aikhenvald (2004), de Haan (2008) and others are correct, evidentials are often areal features, so we may expect to find similarities between the evidentials observed thus far in Iñupiaq and in these other areal languages. I will present preliminary observations and an overview of my plans to document evidential marking in Iñupiaq. Finally, I will discuss the need to differentiate definiteness, specificity, referentiality, and genericness in the context of instrument-marked ‘objects’ of intransitive antipassive verbs.