

In Memoriam

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Volume 43, numéro 1-2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071951ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071951ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)

1708-5268 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Krupnik, I. (2019). In Memoriam: Michael E. Krauss, 1934–2019. Linguist, Humanist, and a Pioneer for Better World. *Études Inuit Studies*, 43(1-2), 331–335. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071951ar>

In Memoriam

Michael E. Krauss, 1934–2019. Linguist, Humanist, and a Pioneer for Better World

Michael Krauss, a towering figure in the studies of Northern Indigenous languages and the first director of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (1972–2000), passed away on August 11, 2019, in Boston, four days short of his eighty-fifth birthday. He had a distinguished career of almost sixty years in the documentation and promotion of the world's endangered languages at many levels—from one minority language (Eyak) to entire language families (Esko-Aleut and Athabaskan), from the circumpolar region to humanity at large.

Krauss entered the field with more Northern Indigenous languages fluently spoken than today, even if in linguistic “obscurity.” His life ended with shelves and libraries of language materials he helped create and cohorts of linguists inspired by his work, yet with fewer Native children able to speak their ancestral tongues. During his lifetime, the winds of globalization reached the ever-remote corners of the globe and the general public came to understand, if reluctantly, the imminent threat to the world's linguistic (and biological) diversity. Krauss helped promote this message against forces of ignorance, cultural chauvinism, and government-led acculturation; he fought these powers incessantly, often ferociously all his life. As a result, he left the world a better place, at least as our vision of the value of Indigenous minority languages is concerned.

Born in 1934 in Cleveland, Ohio, and trained at leading American schools (BA University of Chicago, 1953; MA, Columbia University, 1955; PhD, Harvard University, 1959), Krauss was also a European-educated intellectual. He spent almost five years, between 1955 and 1960 studying, researching, and living in Paris, Copenhagen, Dublin, rural Ireland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. He spoke fluent Irish, Danish, Icelandic, and Faroese, in addition to French, some Russian, and, in some degree, scores of Alaskan Indigenous languages. His exposure to the plight of the ever-shrinking Irish Gaelic and to the efforts of the Icelanders and the Faroese to preserve their unique tongues prepared him well when, in 1960, he found himself teaching French in a small Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages in North America's northernmost university, located in what was then College, Alaska, and officially named the University of Alaska Fairbanks only in 1975. The fledgling university had neither resources nor interest in any work on Alaskan

Indigenous languages. Krauss had to overcome this attitude starting from scratch. He successfully gained the support of the university and lobbied the Alaska state legislature to produce bills to fund research and education in Indigenous languages (in 1972); build a new institutional tool for this mission, the Alaska Native Language Center (ANLC) (1972); and found the Alaska Native Language Archives, first within the Center and, later as an independent body, now the Michael E. Krauss Alaska Native Language Archive (since 2013).

Krauss's mission in support of endangered Northern languages was founded on three guiding principles that he formulated early in his professional career. First, that each language is a unique and irreplaceable form of human knowledge and that we are richer and stronger collectively when we speak many tongues, not just the chosen few. Second, that minority language viability is advanced (though in no way assured) when the language develops literacy and orthography, thus adding the power of writing and reading to its age-old forms of oral transmission. Third, reading and writing in one's mother tongue is empowering only when there are meaningful texts to read and not just schoolbooks, dictionaries, children stories, or propaganda pamphlets.

In following his principles, Krauss, an academic linguist, was inevitably pushed into the societal and political arenas to argue against the then-common views of Northern minority languages in the "English-only" environment. In his testimony to the US Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in July 2000, he presented his humanistic ideology in full force (perhaps tailoring it a bit for his special audience):

God created all languages equal...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...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. (Krauss in United States Senate, *Native American Languages Act Amendments Hearing*, 2000, 2)

Krauss started teaching classes in Alaska Native languages, first in Central Yup'ik in 1961 and continued until his retirement. He encouraged his colleagues at the Alaska Native Language Center to develop writing systems for all twenty Alaskan Indigenous languages and to teach reading and writing skills through local schools and university programs, adult classes, and teaching guides. Many of his former students and students of his ANLC colleagues became prominent Native intellectuals, writers, and linguists

themselves (e.g., Nora Marks Daunhauer, Anna Jacobson, Edna Ahgeak MacLean, James Nageak, Bernadette Alvanna-Stimpfle, Walkie Charles, Chris Koonooka, and many more). He envisioned *libraries* and *archives* of texts in Native languages filled with records of myths, Elders' stories, spiritual texts, biographies, practical knowledge books, travel, and place-names narratives, in addition to dictionaries, grammars, and scholarly papers. Over fifty-nine years, he succeeded in all of this and more; yet the goal to keep Native kids speaking their mother tongues through rural schools and university system became ever more distant.

Krauss's life-changing public moment came in winter 1991, when he gave a prophetic address at the Linguistic Society of America's annual meeting titled "The World's Languages in Crisis," later published as a seven-page paper in 1992. That short paper was a transformative call for arms to the international community of linguists, following Krauss's emphatic appeal that "We must do some serious rethinking of our priorities, lest linguistics go down in history as the only science that presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated" (1992, 10). Even if some of his numbers that summarized the dire prospects of the world's Indigenous languages in 1991 were later disputed, his overall message made him instantly one of the world's leading advocates for the "documenting endangered languages" movement.

Krauss's life-long personal monument was the exhaustive documentation of Eyak, a small independent language within the Na-Dené family that was once spoken in a narrow coastal area in southern Alaska. It became extinct as a spoken tongue during Krauss's fifty years of research, as the last elderly speakers gradually passed away leaving him the only bearer of the richness of Eyak language and lore. Krauss carried their—and his—love for the Eyak language throughout his life and helped preserve it in a monumental nine-hundred-page manuscript called *Eyak Grammar* (now ready for publication), a full Eyak dictionary (another manuscript of four thousand pages), a remarkably thoughtful book titled *In Honor of Eyak: The Art of Anna Nelson Harry* (1982) with the stories he recorded from Eyak Elders, and an additional nine hundred pages of transcribed Eyak texts and speeches. He sure knew how to fulfill his promises to the Elders who entrusted him with their wisdom.

Though primarily an Eyak and Athabaskan specialist, Krauss maintained deep interest and involvement in the studies of the Esko-Aleut languages. He developed the first practical orthography for the St. Lawrence Island Yupik and taught Yupik people in Gambell, Savoonga, and Fairbanks how to read and write in their native tongue (see photo). He supported teaching in all Alaskan Aleut and Eskimo languages, mentored cohorts of students and teachers, published research papers and collections, and produced two seminal maps, "Native Peoples and Languages of Alaska" (1974, with numerous

later reprints) and “Inuit Nunait – Nunagit Yuget” (1995). These maps, for the first time, featured all Native communities with speakers of various Esko-Aleut languages, including the percentage of children who speak the languages. He was particularly adamant in his support for the small endangered Eskimo languages in Chukotka, Russia—Chaplinski and Naukanski Yupik, and the now-extinct Sireniksi—and he assembled the world’s largest collection of printed and archival materials on those languages outside Russia.



Michael Krauss in Savoonga, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, early 1980s. Photo courtesy the Krauss family.

For decades, Krauss was a visible presence at numerous Inuit Studies conferences. To honour his many contributions, this very journal, *Études Inuit Studies*, published a special double-issue dedicated to Krauss’s life and work on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (“Preserving Languages and Knowledge of the North,” vol. 29, no. 1–2, 2005, ed. Louis-Jacques Dorais and Igor Krupnik). That issue includes Krauss’s CV, a list of his publications up to 2005, and his personal “Manifesto” from 2003, a product of life-long self-reflection:

“Just a linguist” is my professional self-definition. Linguists must lead in recognizing the absolute value of all languages: not only as objects of study for themselves, but also as treasuries of knowledge, culture and

identity, of nationhood itself. I am a linguist at that sense, inheriting a distinctly Hebraic tradition of preservation and empowerment of language by writing—then the latest technology—that is, the documentation or permanent record of the consonants of e.g., Jehovah’s speech to Moses—now the vowels too, and even the tones. (Krauss 2005, 31)

Michael Krauss was the man of many messages—on the Proto-Athabaskan language family relations; on the untold cost of the loss of even one human language (such as Eyak); on the current crisis overwhelming the world’s Indigenous languages; and the responsibility of linguists and governments to support minority tongues via proactive policies, public recognition, and respect. It would take time to sort which of these messages were visionary, even prophetic, but his overall legacy will be all of the above. His encyclopedic knowledge will be sorely missed and, as the spokesperson and the dean of Alaska Native Language Studies, he is irreplaceable. No one will lament his passing as a mentor, trailblazer, and a living bridge to their separated kin more than Alaska and Chukotka Native people themselves.

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