This book attempts to analyze language revitalization among the Kaska language community in the Yukon Territory of western Canada. Meek’s goal is to show how the practice and ideologization of the Kaska have influenced Kaska language revitalization. Meek reveals that there is a decreased in-home use of the Yukon’s indigenous languages, resulting in a territory-wide shift from aboriginal languages to English (p. xiii).

In chapter 1, the author presents the colonizing history of Watson Lake’s Kaska community from language suppression to language revitalization. In chapter 2, Meek details the theoretical framework of “sociolinguistic disjuncture” and the challenges of disjuncture for endangered languages and the pursuit of language revitalization. In chapter 3, Meek focuses on interactions with children and other Kaska language learners. In chapter 4, Meek describes the ways in which indigenous languages are “manufactured” by both “experts” (researchers, linguists, educators) and indigenous communities. By “manufactured,” we mean “replaced” by more dominant dialects or even by English. In chapter 5, Meek focuses on the role of aboriginal languages in government and other nation-building ventures. In chapter 6 (the final chapter), Meek links her findings about disjuncture to broader theoretical and applied concerns.

The first thing I noticed about the language revitalization program of the Kaska (p. 2) was that there was no mention of the Kaska community actually requesting a language revitalization program. Without this initiative, I cannot foresee language revitalization efforts succeeding. There were government agencies, such as the Kaska Tribal Council and the Aboriginal Language Services who were apparently interested and supportive. But were the Kaska themselves requesting this at the grassroots level? The low attendance at these “language learning” meetings, of about 20–30 people, indicated that perhaps the Kaska themselves were not overly enthusiastic about this program (p. 2). A second indication that the Kaska might not be interested in language revitalization was the fact that a survey was done among three Kaska communities with 40, 100, and 110 speakers. The percentages of Kaskas still using Kaska in those villages were only 15%, 0%, and 9% (p. 12).
Some might argue with my comment that there was no mention of the Kaska community requesting a language revitalization program by saying that there were native speakers of Kaska sitting on the Tribal Council. Yes, this may be true. But I have observed over the years of my field experience that tribal leaders often submit to what the “white man” or the “government leader” wants. I assume that this same phenomenon is happening here. Also, the tribal people on this council were receiving a salary from the government so if the tribal leaders said, “No we don’t want these classes,” it is possible that they would stop receiving a salary. So it makes sense that they would go along with what the government officials wanted.

Meek explained many of the reasons as to why the Kaska language was in decline. Canadian boarding schools apparently stripped away the Kaska heritage by changing the students’ clothes, hairstyles, religious practices, and language and replacing them with those deemed to be more appropriate by the adult educators and legislators.

Meek doesn’t mention whether the Canadian boarding schools actually forbade the use of Kaska in the classroom or outside of class or both. She also doesn’t mention whether these boarding schools required a certain school uniform or not. But Meek quotes a study (Nettle and Romaine 2000) whereby a dominant language “subplanted” an indigenous language and that this happened in the boarding school (p. 4). Meek also quotes other studies whereby First Nation peoples may have refrained from speaking their languages because of negative stereotypes that surrounded their identity as Indians (p. 21). So I accept her claim that, “Canadian boarding schools apparently stripped away the Kaska heritage…”

Also, many non-natives moved into Kaska communities thereby making the Kaska language the minority language. This population shift was due to historical events such as the fur trade, the gold rush, and the construction of the Alaskan Highway (p. 16).

Meek mentioned an ideology of a predilection toward monolingualism which pitted native parents who supported the acquisition of their aboriginal first language against institutional educators who promoted the acquisition of the national language.

However, Meek went on to state, “For various reasons, articulated in the literature, language revitalization projects seldom realize their ultimate goal: to create new (first language) speakers…Today’s atmosphere of multiculturalism and aboriginal rights is equally a path for the ongoing march toward language death” (p.41).

Meek quotes Grenoble and Whaley (2006) who discuss nine factors enumerated in UNESCO (2003) for the assessment of a language’s vitality in order to develop successful language revitalization practices. The factors are the following:

- Factor 1: Intergenerational transmission
- Factor 2: Absolute number of speakers
- Factor 3: Proportion of speakers within the total population
- Factor 4: Trends in existing language domains
- Factor 5: Response to new domains and media
- Factor 6: Materials for language education and literacy
Factor 7: Government and institutional language policies, including official status and use
Factor 8: Community members’ attitudes toward their own language
Factor 9: Amount and quality of documentation.

Meek spends the rest of chapter 2 discussing how these nine factors impact the language situation of the Kaska. Meek’s analysis of the Kaska language situation in light of these nine factors is mixed. The number and proportion of Kaska speakers (factors two and three) are substantial. Between 30 and 50 percent of the people living in the First Nation neighborhoods in Watson Lake acquired Kaska as their first language. However, only 0–15 percent still use the language interactionally in everyday contexts (p. 12).

Domains of practice (factors four through six) are fluid in the sense that people can be overheard speaking Kaska at the grocery store, while dining at the Chinese restaurant, in their homes, or out at their cabins. Meek states that domains have increased due to the establishment of new language policies and programming that led to the creation of texts, an aboriginal language curriculum, and radio and television programming. However, Meek didn’t mention the impact of television on the Kaska language. She only mentioned that there was a television show on the history of the Gwich’in language and their land (p. 148).

Some of the unanswered questions for me regarding this study were:

Why were the Kaska not requesting a language revitalization program for their language? Did they really want such a program? Did they really understand what it would entail? Also, how long did this language revitalization program last? When did it start? Is it still ongoing? I could not find the exact year that the Kaska language program started.

As a field linguist involved in the preservation of a minority language in Asia, this book is particularly relevant. But I feel future research needs to be focused on helping native peoples see the value of language preservation efforts for their children and grandchildren. Let’s not focus on the details of how to do language preservation. Let’s focus on why we should do language preservation.

References
