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## OPINION

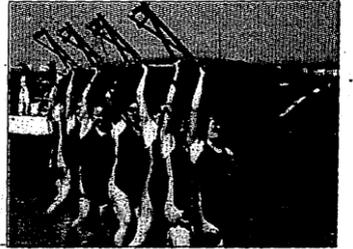
Student apathy a problem at Western events

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Women's rowing team captains reflect on season

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Tuesday, June 3, 2008

# THE WESTERN FRONT

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## Western dance majors take a final bow

Elise Watness  
THE WESTERN FRONT

Western senior Megan Riddle won't be writing a thesis, final paper or preparing a presentation for her senior project. Instead, she will be taking the spotlight in a dance concert along with Western seniors Lena Traenkenschuh and Vanessa Wallen.

In order to receive their Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in dance, the three students will perform and show their choreography in a performance called "Three Ways In," June 5-7 at Western's off-campus dance studio Ving! Traenkenschuh will exhibit choreography, Wallen will be featured as a soloist in performance and Riddle will perform and present her choreography.

Riddle said she, along with the two other seniors, are primarily responsible for organizing the concert before they graduate, so they will have experience putting a show together when they enter the professional dance world. Faculty involvement is minimal

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## Viking dynasty: four years and counting



photo courtesy of Angie Rosillo

Members of the Viking women's rowing team pose by holding up four fingers to represent the four consecutive years they have won the NCAA Division II National Championship. The competition was held Sunday at the Sacramento Aquatic Center on Lake Natoma.

Western seniors, Amelia Whitcomb, Staci Reynolds, Samantha Marikis and Metta Gilbert finish their careers with the team

Harte Onewein  
THE WESTERN FRONT

Anticipation rose nationally and tears fell before the No.1-ranked Viking women's rowing

team of eight began their race Sunday in the grand finals at the NCAA Division II National Championship, held at the Sacramento Aquatic Center on Lake Natoma.

Months of training, early morning practices, traveling and hard work paid dividends for the Vikings yet again as they won their record-setting fourth consecutive NCAA Division II

national title, making them the only women's rowing team in any division to win four titles in a row.

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## Discovery could prove link between Native American and Siberian languages

Marie Biondolillo  
THE WESTERN FRONT

A Siberian language with fewer than 200 speakers may hold a clue to understanding the early history of North America.

For decades, linguists have theorized that a Siberian language family called Yeniseic is connected to a Native American language family called Na-Dene, but they have found limited evidence to support this idea.

However, at a recent international conference in Fairbanks, Alaska called the Dene-Yeniseic symposium, Western East Asian studies director and linguistics professor Edward Vajda presented extensive evidence of a connection between the Yeniseic language family and the Na-

Dene language family.

Until now, scientists have not been able to connect any Native American languages to any Asian languages, despite evidence that the Americas were settled by Eurasians who immigrated across the Bering Strait during the Ice Age.

The discovery is also significant because it suggests the existence of a new ancient language family, something linguists had thought impossible to discover anymore, Vajda said. Ancient languages can be difficult to study because written records for them are usually sparse or nonexistent, said Western junior and linguistics club president Marten van Schijndel.

"Since most linguistic change occurs more rapidly in

speech, even given any existing records, it is difficult to find evidence of linguistic change over time," Schijndel said.

Because studying the people of 10,000-12,000 years ago is so difficult, Vajda's findings are of interest not only to linguists but to anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, genetics scientists and cultural studies specialists, said Larry Estrada, Western American cultural studies director and Fairhaven professor.

"Dr. Vajda's research adds one more piece to this puzzle and allows for further investigation and questions as to how parts of early American civilization evolved and from what roots," Estrada said. "[Vajda's]

see **LANGUAGE** page 3 ▶

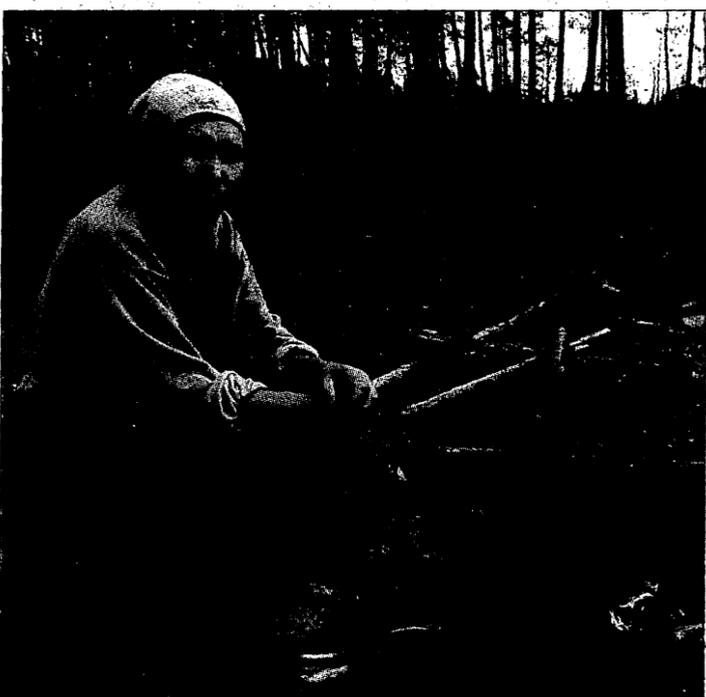


photo courtesy of Edward Vajda

Maria Irikova, one of Edward Vajda's informants, sits by a fire in the taiga near Kellogg Village in Central Siberia. Vajda's research may prove that a Siberian language called Yeniseic is related to the Native American Na-Dene language.

# LANGUAGE: Siberian Ket resembles Native American Na-Dene

► from 1

research gives us added insight to the overall migratory nature of people, culture and language within a particular part of the world."

## Yeniseic history

Vajda's findings resulted from his study of Ket, a Yeniseic language he began studying more than 20 years ago.

Languages traditionally spoken by people living along Central Siberia's - river are called Yeniseic by linguists.

Approximately 1,100 Ket people live along the Yenisei river today, but only approximately 200 of them speak Ket fluently.

The Ket are the only surviving Yeniseic people. The Yeniseic people are believed to be some of the earliest inhabitants of Central Siberia as their DNA is different from that of surrounding Russian and Siberian people.

The Ket language is completely different from any other Siberian language as well.

Six Yeniseic languages are known to linguists today, and historical records indicate more existed.

Of the six known languages,

only Ket is still spoken by native speakers.

Ket and the Yeniseic languages have long been a mystery to linguists because they seemed disconnected from any other known languages.

## Vajda's study

Vajda said he became interested in Ket because its origins were so mysterious.

Through trips to Siberia and with the help of other linguists, Vajda became an expert on the language.

Since Ket may become extinct soon, Vajda said he was inspired to record as much of the language as he could, but he was also intrigued by its resemblance to Native American languages in the Na-Dene language family.

The Na-Dene languages are Native American languages spoken in the Western part of North America and include Navajo, Tlingit and Eyak.

"In the early 1990s, even before becoming aware of claims of genetic relationship by other scholars, I noticed how Ket verb prefixes bore an uncanny resemblance to those of Navajo, a language I had studied earlier," Vajda said.

Vajda said he then became

aware of linguists who had previously theorized connections between the Ket's Yeniseic language family and the Na-Dene language family, including Alfredo Trombetti and Merritt Ruhlen.

Ruhlen had done extensive research on the connection and had linked Yeniseic not only to Na-Dene but to Basque, Burushaski and other language families.

However, many linguists were skeptical of these connections because not enough evidence had been provided to support them, Vajda said.

"The reason for this persistent skepticism is that there is no way to distinguish a brilliantly correct deduction from a wrong guess in genetically classifying languages unless the evidence cited is systematic and substantial," Vajda said.

## The Yeniseic-Na-Dene connection

Through intensive study of Ket and with the help of experts in the Na-Dene language family, Vajda said he could show the connections between Yeniseic and Na-Dene through analysis of the languages' grammar, verb structure and cognates, which are

words that share common origin and meaning, such as English's "committee" and Spanish's "comite."

Vajda said his work relied on the research and assistance of many other linguists, including Johanna Nichols, Bernard Comrie, James Kari, Jeff Leer and Michael Krauss.

Vajda's work suggests Yeniseic and Na-Dene have a common ancestor language.

This connection could change how linguists evaluate the timeline of how these languages developed and what historical events caused them to change, Schijndel said.

"[Vajda's findings] may have important consequences as [they] draw a more definitive path ancient speakers traveled," Schijndel said.

## Implications of the Yeniseic-Na-Dene connection

While most researchers agree Vajda's findings conclusively point toward a new ancient language family that spans the Asian and North American continents, much is yet to be discovered about how the Americas came to be populated, Estrada

said.

While ancient people probably migrated from North Asia to the Americas across the Bering Strait, people from other parts of Asia, Polynesia and even Africa may have migrated to the Americas as well, Estrada said.

Additionally, many Native American tribes believe their ancestors are completely indigenous to the Americas, Estrada said.

Linguists will have to work with archaeologists, human biologists and paleo-ecologists in order to understand the history of how the Na-Dene and Yeniseic peoples came to be connected, said University of Alaska, Fairbanks professor and Na-Dene language expert James Kari. Kari organized the conference at which Vajda presented his findings.

"It does appear that historical linguistic evidence for the Dene-Yeniseic language family will generate some new collaborations across fields that pertain to Northern prehistory," Kari said. "We look forward to the exchange of papers and to future conferences and events that can bring together scholars and also eventually some members of the Dene and the Yeniseic language families."

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fall and summer!

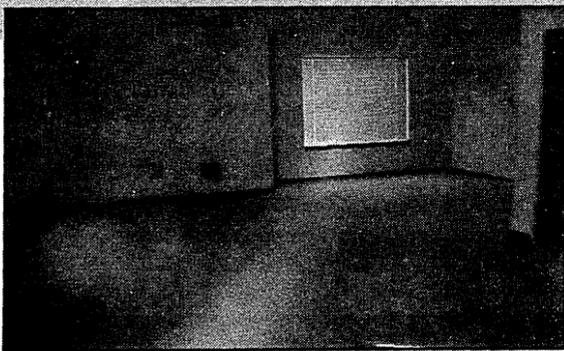
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