

Handbook of North American Indians

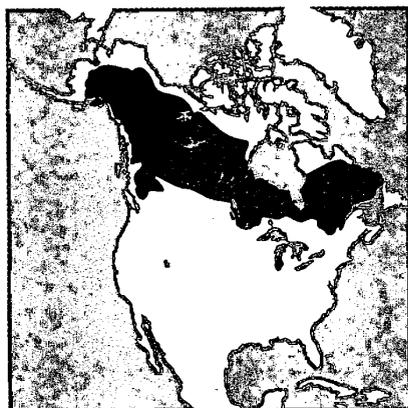
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Northern Athapaskan Languages

MICHAEL E. KRAUSS AND VICTOR K. GOLLA

The 23 languages described in this chapter form a recognized geographical subdivision of the Athapaskan* language family, usually referred to as Northern Athapaskan. They occupy a large, continuous area, mostly in the subarctic interior of Alaska and western Canada, but extending south onto the plains to include the Sarcee of southern Alberta. The Northern Athapaskan group includes the majority of the attested Athapaskan languages.

The other Athapaskan languages are found in smaller clusters in several diverse regions to the south. Various external factors (including the poor attestation of extinct forms of speech) make it difficult to enumerate the languages of these areas according to the same criteria as those used for the Northern group, and the numbers given here are approximate. Pacific Coast Athapaskan is a group of eight languages spoken by riverine tribes in Oregon and California: Upper Umpqua, Tututni-Chasta Costa, Galice-Applegate, and Chetco-Tolowa in southwestern Oregon and the immediately adjacent coast of northern California; Hupa, Mattole, Sinkyone-Wailaki, and Cahto in northwestern California. Kwalhioqua-Tlatskanai was a single language, now extinct, spoken near the mouth of the Columbia River in small enclaves on both the Washington and Oregon sides. The Apachean languages are a group of seven, spoken by tribes in the circum-Pueblo Southwest (Chiricahua, Jicarilla, Mescalero, Navajo, and Western Apache) and on the adjacent Plains (Kiowa-Apache and Lipan).

The Athapaskan family is one branch of a larger genetic grouping, Athapaskan-Eyak, the only other attested branch of which is Eyak, a single language, in 1980 nearly extinct, spoken on the south coast of Alaska near the mouth of Copper River (Krauss 1964-1965, 2, 1973:932-935). Tlingit, a single language spoken across a wide territory along the Alaska panhandle with but moderate dialect differences, bears a close resemblance to Athapaskan-Eyak in phonology and grammatical structure but shows little regular correspondence in vocabulary (Krauss 1969). Sapir (1915) believed he had sufficient evidence to demonstrate a genetic relationship between Tlingit and Athapaskan—no Eyak

*Athapaskan is the spelling preferred by the Alaska Native Language Center, since it reflects more directly the usual American English pronunciation (,ãθə'bãskən).

data were known to him at the time—and further claimed that Haida, spoken on the Queen Charlotte Islands to the south of the Tlingit area, was also part of this genetic group, which he named Na-Dene. Later work on Haida (Levine 1977; Lawrence and Leer 1977) has cast serious doubt on Sapir's interpretation of the Haida evidence, and most scholars concerned with the matter now consider Na-Dene to be an untenable hypothesis (Levine 1979; Krauss 1979). However, the nature of the relationship between Athapaskan-Eyak and Tlingit remains an open question (see Pinnow 1976 for a survey of research). While comparative work is hampered by the relative lack of regularly corresponding cognate lexicon, the close similarities between Tlingit and Athapaskan-Eyak verb morphology, in particular, clearly require a historical explanation. Krauss (1973:953-963, 1979) has suggested the possibility of Tlingit being a "hybrid" between Athapaskan-Eyak and an unrelated stock.

Prehistory

Archeologists working with Sapir's partly discredited Na-Dene hypothesis have suggested a correlation between "Na-Dene"-speaking groups and the early spread of the Northwest Microblade tradition in North America (Borden 1975; Dumond 1969, 1974; Carlson 1979). Bearers of the Northwest Microblade tradition were present in Beringia in the terminal Pleistocene and expanded east and south into large areas of Alaska and northwestern Canada by 5000-4000 B.C. If Tlingit is indeed related genetically to Athapaskan-Eyak, the time of their split could perhaps be correlated with the earliest appearance of distinctive Coastal and Interior subtraditions within the Northwest Microblade tradition, not long after 4000 B.C., and the tradition as a whole correlated with the entry of a hypothetical Proto-Athapaskan-Eyak-Tlingit into North America. Incomplete understanding of the relationship between Tlingit and Athapaskan-Eyak makes this highly speculative.

Any reconstruction of the history of Tlingit must take into account the distribution of Tlingit dialects, which are more deeply differentiated in the south than in the north, indicating a northward expansion, perhaps in fairly recent times. Indeed, Tlingit expansion into Eyak

territory near Yakutat was still taking place in the historical period. There may not be, then, any long association between Tlingit and coastal archeological traditions in the northern part of modern Tlingit territory. Further, the area of the earliest historical connection between Tlingit and Athapaskan-Eyak, whatever the nature of this connection, must probably be placed in far southern Alaska, or perhaps even British Columbia.

Proto-Athapaskan (PA) and Proto-Eyak, which must have become differentiated from one another by about 1500 B.C. (Krauss 1973:953), were clearly languages of interior-oriented peoples. The distribution of the Athapaskan languages certainly indicates an interior origin; among the Northern Athapaskans only the Tanaina occupied any significant area of coastline. The Eyak, despite their coastal location in the historical period (around Copper River in the twentieth century, somewhat farther to the southeast—from Yakutat to Controller Bay—in the nineteenth century), had a land-based economy and, unlike the Eskimo or Tlingit, never became sea mammal hunters. Wherever it occurred, the linguistic split between Proto-Athapaskan and Proto-Eyak was apparently followed by a total cessation of communication between the groups, for there is no evidence of subsequent linguistic interinfluence. Eyak is, surprisingly, no closer linguistically to its modern Athapaskan neighbor, Ahtna, than it is to Navajo.

The degree of diversity within Athapaskan indicates that Proto-Athapaskan was still an undifferentiated linguistic unit until 500 B.C. or later (Krauss 1973:953). The location of this language was almost certainly somewhere in present-day Northern Athapaskan territory; exactly where is difficult to determine, but some areas seem more probable than others. The areas of greatest (and hence oldest) differentiation in Northern Athapaskan are in the interior of Alaska, the Yukon, and parts of British Columbia. An argument against a central or western Alaskan homeland is the lack of old or intense influence from Eskimo in the languages of that area: Eskimo influence is readily apparent in Athapaskan languages such as Ingalik and Tanaina, which are adjacent to Yupik, but it is virtually absent elsewhere. Since both external connections of Athapaskan, Eyak and Tlingit, are in southeastern Alaska, it seems most likely that the Proto-Athapaskan homeland was in eastern interior Alaska, the upper drainage of the Yukon River, and northern British Columbia, or some part of this area.

The earliest directions of Athapaskan expansion were probably westward farther into Alaska and southward along the interior mountains into central and southern British Columbia. The isolated Pacific Coast Athapaskan languages appear to have been an offshoot from the British Columbia languages, as was Kwalhioquatlskanai. The degree of differentiation among the more isolated languages indicates that these intermon-

tane and coastal migrations took place for the most part before A.D. 500. At a subsequent period two other Athapaskan expansions occurred. One was eastward into the Mackenzie River drainage and beyond to Hudson Bay; the other was south along the eastern Rockies into the Southwest. These two later movements may have been connected. The Apachean languages of the Southwest appear to have their closest linguistic ties in the North with Sarcee, in Alberta, rather than with Chilcotin or the other languages of British Columbia; however, it is not likely that this is evidence for the Apacheans having moved southward through the High Plains, as some have suggested. The Sarcee in the north, like the Lipan and Kiowa-Apache in the Southwest, are known to have moved onto the Plains in the early historical period from a location much closer to the mountains.

Subgroups, Languages, and Dialects

Attempts to classify the Athapaskan languages into historically meaningful linguistic subgroups have not met with success (see particularly Hoiijer 1963 and the criticism in Krauss 1973:943–950). The effort has been hampered to some extent by the lack of good comparative data, but the principal difficulty arises from the fact that Athapaskan linguistic relationships, especially in the subarctic area, cannot be adequately described in terms of discrete family-tree branches. This is because intergroup communication has ordinarily been constant, and no Northern Athapaskan language or dialect was ever completely isolated from the others for long. The most important differences among Athapaskan languages are generally the result of areal diffusion of separate innovations from different points of origin, each language—each community—being a unique conglomerate. Figures 1–2 illustrate the overlapping areal distributions of some representative phonological and morphological innovations in Northern Athapaskan. A geographically isolated group of languages such as Pacific Coast Athapaskan or Apachean can perhaps be treated as a historical unit, but for Northern Athapaskan it is relatively useless to search for the kinds of extensive correlations of phonological, morphological, or lexical features that allow the establishment of a “subgroup” with an assumed common prototype. Between Northern Athapaskan as a whole and the band or community dialects that are its fundamental sociolinguistic units the only useful larger categories are languages, and even these are sometimes arbitrary.

Northern Athapaskan will be treated here as an assemblage of 23 languages. In defining these, several criteria have been applied in a fairly consistent way: strictly linguistic criteria, for the most part differences in the development of the Proto-Athapaskan sound sys-

tem; sociolinguistic criteria, particularly the ease or difficulty with which speakers from different communities naturally understand—or have learned to understand or profess to understand—each other's speech; and practical and historical criteria, such as the existence of an orthography and teaching materials or some other symbol of a common linguistic tradition, including a name for the language. In striving to attain consistency of definition it has been necessary both to split groups that have previously been considered single languages (for example, Tanacross and Lower Tanana, Babine and Carrier) and to reduce the status of some others from independent languages to dialects of a larger language (Slavey, Bearlake, Mountain, and Hare). In general, previous discussions of Northern Athapaskan languages (Osgood 1936; Hoijer 1963) have relied on a much narrower selection of criteria than that available in 1980.

Whatever the language boundaries, the network of communication in the Northern Athapaskan dialect complex is open-ended. It is probably worth noting that, even in 1980, perhaps most Northern Athapaskans live with only other Athapaskan speakers as neighbors and rarely hear a native language that is not Athapaskan. People from adjacent communities usually expect to be able to understand one another's speech, if not immediately then surely after some practice. Local dialects and languages are important as symbols of social identity, but the native expectation that these differences, even across relatively vast distances, will not be barriers to communication gives the Northern Athapaskan speaker a distinctively open and flexible perception of his social world.

Historical Phonology

Athapaskan words fall into three morphological classes: particles, nouns, and verbs. Particles are usually single morphemes, sometimes compounded. Nouns (speaking only of the morphological class, and excluding the large number of nominalized verbs or verbal phrases that function syntactically as nouns in every Athapaskan language) are also single morphemes for the most part, but unlike particles they can be inflected; nominal inflection consists of a paradigm of possessive prefixes. Verbs, by contrast, are usually quite complex, consisting of a stem morpheme preceded by one or more (often several) prefixes that mark various inflectional and derivational categories. Verb stems, uninflected nouns, and particle morphemes together comprise the phonological class of stems. Stem phonology is the focus of most discussion of the Athapaskan sound system. (For the phonetic values of the symbols used, see p. x and the orthographic footnotes in the respective chapters, this vol.)

The Athapaskan stem normally takes the form CV(C), that is, begins with a single consonant, has a single vowel, and sometimes but not always has a final consonant. Some examples from various Northern Athapaskan languages are: Chipewyan *θe* 'stone', *cez* 'firewood', *-zən* 'black'; Kutchin (Western dialect) *ki* 'stone', *ça* 'firewood', *-zqi* 'black'; Ingalik *θa* 'stone', *çəç* 'firewood', *-zəŋ* 'black'.

The Proto-Athapaskan stem-initial consonants† are reconstructed as in table 1. The reconstructed obstruents (all the reconstructed consonants except for **w*, **w̄*, **y*, **ȳ*, and **n*) can be grouped into nine series according to point of articulation and certain other features. In the development of the Proto-Athapaskan sound system in the various languages it is quite common for two or more series to merge as whole units. Much less common is the merger of two or more consonants within a series. A consonant series in Proto-Athapaskan or in a particular language will be referred to simply by citing the aspirated stop or affricate of that series, as is the usual practice in Athapaskanist literature: PA **t* (for PA **d*, **t*, and **t̥*; Chipewyan *θ* (for Chipewyan *θ̂*, *θ̄*, *θ̆*, *θ*, and *θ̇*).

Table 2 shows the usual reflexes in the Northern Athapaskan languages of the five obstruent series that have the most diverse developments. These were the series whose development Hoijer (1963) considered diagnostic of the major subgroups within the family.‡ As can be seen from table 2, different reflexes of these five series often serve to demarcate languages, but the fact that these represent areal interinfluences rather than deep phonological characteristics of a language or group of languages is apparent from a situation such as Tahltan, Kaska, and Tagish, where three dialects of nearly identical grammars and vocabularies nevertheless show three different patterns of series mergers.

The PA vowels are shown in table 3 with their commonest reflexes in Northern Athapaskan. Four full (or long) vowels are reconstructed, and three reduced (or short) vowels. In some languages the PA vowel system is fairly well preserved; in others, particularly where final consonants are reduced or lost, the original pattern is sometimes greatly altered by the introduction of secondary vowels and diphthongs (as in Kutchin). It is hypothesized that PA vowels occurred both with and without a feature identified as glottal constriction (**v̄* versus **v*). In some languages this feature is lost; in others the constricted/nonconstricted contrast develops into a phonemic tone system, with constricted vowels

† The major differences between the PA reconstructions here and in Krauss 1964 are that the series reconstructed in Krauss 1964–1965, 1 as **k̄* is symbolized here, more accurately, as **č̄* (Krauss 1980), and that voiced fricatives are again posited, with at least allophonic status. Two new sonorants are also included, tentatively reconstructed **ȳ* and **w̄* (but possibly **ŋ* and **m*, respectively).

‡ Hoijer actually used only 4 PA series, including under PA **č̄* the reflexes of both **č̄* and **č̆* as currently reconstructed.