Description before explanation: linguists' and learners' grammars

Descriptive Grammars and Typology II

Olga Lovick

Outline

1. Upper Tanana Dene language & potential grammar users
2. Extant Northern Dene grammars
3. Design features of a grammar (by audience)
4. Challenges
5. Conclusion

Figure: Road to Tetlin

Setting the scene

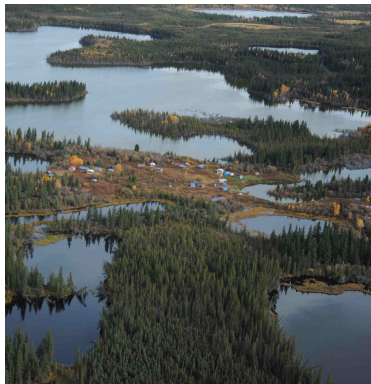Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska

Background

Figure: Last Tetlin, (c) Cherry & Kirst (2010)

- Northern Dene (Athabascan), Alaskan subgroup, "Headwaters" cluster (Leer 1996)
- $<$fewer than 50 speakers, most of them elderly
- five dialects (two not currently spoken)
- local revitalization efforts through Doyon Ltd. (AK), Yukon Native Language Centre

Setting the scene

- Upper Tanana teachers are themselves learners of the language—not fluent speakers

- most have very little or no background in linguistics or grammar

- enthusiasm for revitalization of Upper Tanana language and culture

- explicit expectation that I contribute to this meaningfully

Figure: Northway Dancers, Newsminer March 14, 2018

Documentation history

1959 SIL-linguist Paul G. Milanowski: dictionary, partial bible translation

1970s Michael E. Krauss, Jeff Leer: word lists for comparative research (ANLA)

1980s James Kari: lexical file (1997), text collection (Tyone 1996), place names (1997), notes (ANLA)

1980s John T. Ritter: lessons, literacy sessions (YNLC)

1990s Nobukatsu Minoura: 3 papers on dialectology, typology

2006– Olga Lovick: 2 text collections, several papers, vol. 1 of grammar published, vol. 2 in press, notes, recordings (ANLA)

Language profile

- head-marking, overwhelmingly prefixing, SOV
- three inflecting word classes (verbs, nouns, postpositions)
- extremely complex verbal morphology: polysynthetic, fusional, incorporating, polypersonal
- discontinuous lexical / derivational morphemes making up "verb themes"

(1) shch'il k'iijaktsäł

sh-ch'il   *k'ii-ch'-d-ak-**tsäł***
1SG.PSR-clothes   wash-INDF-QUAL-Ø.IPV:1SG.S:VV-wash:IPV

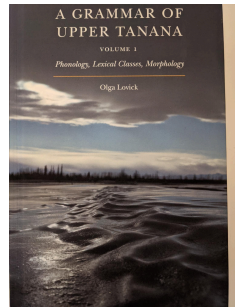'I washed my clothes'   UTOLAF14Nov2001:019

My original goal

Write a comprehensive, fully-glossed, typologically informed, descriptive grammar of Upper Tanana that is useful to linguists as well as language learners.

A GRAMMAR OF
UPPER TANANA
VOLUME I
Phonology, Lexical Classes, Morphology
Olga Lovick

Faust I (J.W. v. Goethe, translation by G.M. Priest

Wer vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen / und jeder geht zufrieden aus dem Haus.
Bring much and you'll bring this or that to everyone / And each will leave contented when the play is done.

Other grammars (Northern Dene)

- all of them are of Canadian languages (Northern BC and Mckenzie subgroups)
- 4 comprehensive (Morice 1931, Rice 1989, Cook 2004, 2013)
- 2 are typologically informed (Rice 1989, Hargus 2007)
- 1 is directed at learners/speakers (Jaker & Cardinal 2020)

Descriptive grammar goals

- comprehensive (Cristofaro 2006)
- use of general ontologies; explanation of subcommunity ontologies (Good 2004)
- analysis well grounded in the data
- naturalistic, corpus-based data (Himmelmann 2012)
- full & consistent glossing of examples (Comrie et al. 2015)
- data references (Andreassen et al. 2019)
- basic linguistic theory, typologically informed
- include culture, language use

Requirements by audience

Linguists

- comprehensive
- general & subcommunity ontologies
- analysis well grounded in the data
- naturalistic corpus data
- full & consistent glossing of examples
- well-referenced data
- basic linguistic theory, typologically informed
- include culture, language use

Community

- comprehensive
- minimizes use of technical terms
- comparison to English; simple rules
- simple examples
- no glossing beyond the word level (Hargus et al. 2020)
- references optional
- ??
- include culture, language use

Example A: possession

- possessor expressed as pronominal prefix or NP
- alienability distinction (suffixes, syntax)

(2) a. shtl'ùùl'

       sh-tl'uuɫ-v̀'
       1SG-rope-POSS

       'my rope'

    b. ts'exeh tl'ùùl'

       ts'exeh tl'ùùl'
       woman rope:POSS

       'the woman's rope'

(3) a. ugaan'

       u-gaan-'
       3SG-arm-POSS

       'his/her arm'

    b. shnąą ugaan'

       sh-nąą   u-gaan'
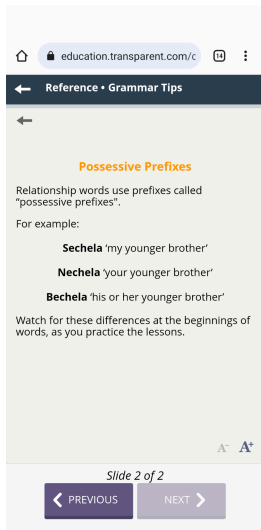   1SG-mother 3SG-arm:POSS

       'my mother's arm'

Example A: possession

When preparing a "Grammar note" for the Upper Tanana lessons of Doyon Languages Online, the info on the screenshot was suggested as model:

- only singular prefixes
- no discussion of suffixes
- no discussion of nominal possessor
- but there is a cultural note about kinship terminology

https://doyonfoundation.com/language/doyon-languages-online/

Example B: Content questions

- question word in situ
- focus marker causes nominalization

(4) a. *Mary doo eh-got?*
         Mary who 3SG.S:DH.PFV:VV-punch:PFV

         'Whom did Mary punch?'   Notebook #3, p. 97

     b. *Doo ch'a Mary eh-godn?*
         who FOC Mary 3SG.S:DH.PFV:VV-punch:PFV:NOM

         'Who punched Mary?'   Notebook #3, p. 97

- cross-references to/explanation of word order, nominalization, focus marker

Example C: Standard negation

- negative particle *k'a(t'eey)* preceding V(P)
- negative inflection
- negative suffix causing heavy stem with high tone

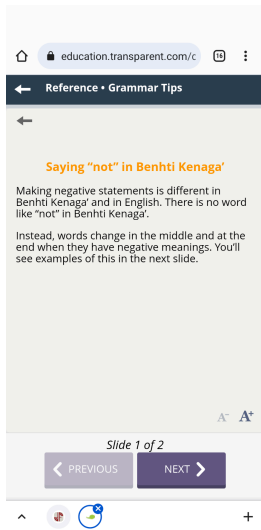| Mode	Affirmative	Negative
Imperfective	jiyh aktsayh	k'àt'eey jiyh àktsáy
Perfective	jiyh dhaktsi̜i̜	k'àt'eey jiyh àktsíín

Table: '1sg make sg mittens'

- cross-references to/explanation of word order, conjugation/mode prefixes, light & heavy syllables, tone, aspectual verb stem variation

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Example C: standard negation

Lower Tanana "Grammar note" for
Doyon Languages Online

- it's certainly accessible!
- But in order to answer polar
  questions, a speaker needs to
  know how to negate clauses!

https://doyonfoundation.com/language/doyon-languages-online/

A frustrating experience for learners

- technical terms ("possessor and possessee, alienability, nominalization, focus marker, inflection, heavy stem")
- technical information in glosses (3SG.S:DH.PFV:VV)
- cross-references, explicit and implicit

Faust I (J.W. v. Goethe, translation by G.M. Priest

Bring much and you'll bring this or that to everyone ???

Figure: Useless Object by Alan Duben

Accessibility

- Given the morphological complexity of Dene languages, a grammar suitable for linguists will create barriers for language learners without linguistic training

- The same document is unlikely to meet the needs of all potential users (electronic grammars pose a potential way out)

Accessibility

For a grammar to be useful to learners, it needs to meet somewhat different standards:

- laddered, pedagogical approach (de Reuse & Goode 2006)
- explanation of **every** technical term
- limited scope (Faltz 2002 for Navajo; Jaker & Cardinal n.d.)

Description first!

- The writer has to have a fairly good grasp of the grammar in order to
  1. develop a laddered approach w/ minimal cross-references
  2. provide simple explanations
  3. avoid pitfalls

Grammars

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Tsin'įį!

Questions?

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