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
Background

- 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

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

\[
\begin{align*}
sh-ch’il & \quad k’ii-ch’-d-ak-tsäľ \\
1\text{SG.PSR}-\text{clothes} & \quad \text{wash-INDF-QUAL-Ø.IPV:1SG.S:VV}-\text{wash:IPV}
\end{align*}
\]

‘I washed my clothes’
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.

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’
   \[ sh-tl’uul-\text{ù}’ \]
   1SG-rope-POSS
   ‘my rope’

   b. ts’exeh tl’ùùl’
   \[ ts’exeh \text{ tl’ùùl’ } \]
   woman rope:POSS
   ‘the woman’s rope’

(3) a. ugaan’
   \[ u-gaan’ \]
   3SG-arm-POSS
   ‘his/her arm’

   b. shnąą ugaan’
   \[ sh-nąą \text{ u-gaan’ } \]
   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’at’eey* preceding *V(P)*
• negative inflection
• negative suffix causing heavy stem with high tone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Affirmative</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperfective</td>
<td>jiyh aktsayh</td>
<td>k’àt’eey jiyh àktsáy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfective</td>
<td>jiyh dhaktsjį</td>
<td>k’àt’eey jiyh àktsiín</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: ‘1sg make sg mittens’

• cross-references to/explanation of word order, conjugation/mode prefixes, light & heavy syllables, tone, aspectual verb stem variation
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 ($3_{SG.S:DH.PFV:VV}$)
- 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


Other references


Tsin’įį!

Questions?

olga.lovick@usask.ca