Challenges
of an Athabaskan grammar

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Plan of talk

I. Basic information about Upper Kuskokwim
II. Premises of the descriptive project
III. Challenges of the language
  § Typological non-transparency
  § Morphological complexity
  § Unusual patterns of conceptualization
IV. Open questions
V. Conclusion

I. Basic information

- § Athabaskan (= Dene)
  - § About 40 languages in western North America
- § Belong to the larger Na-Dene language family
- § Three groups
  - § Northern (Alaska, Canada)
  - § Pacific
  - § Southern, or Apachean
- § Among the most morphologically complex languages of the world

Native languages of Alaska (M. Krauss)

Eskimo-Aleut

Athabaskan

Iñupiaq

Gwich'in

Siberian Yupik

Koyukon

Hän

Tanana

Tanacross

Holikachuk

Deg Hit'an

Upper Kuskokwim

Upper Tanana

Ahtna

Central Yup'ik

Tanaina

Eyak

Aleut

Alutiiq

Tlingit

Tsimshian

Haida

Krauss (1982), ©Alaska Native Language Center

Upper Kuskokwim, Central Alaska: the village of Nikolai

Upper Kuskokwim

§ Among the 11 (or 12) Athabaskan languages of Alaska

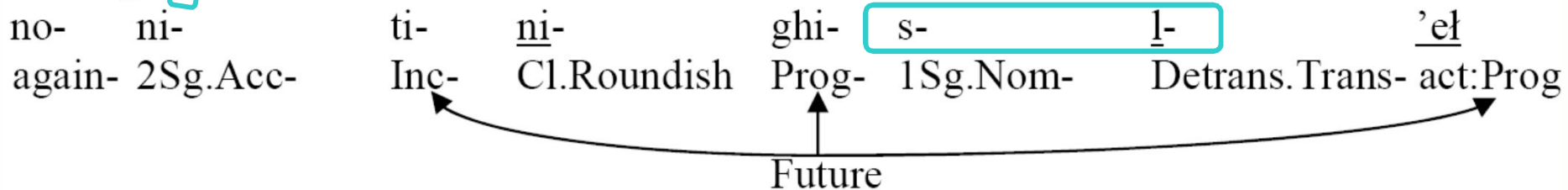§ Traditionally, a few hundred people occupied a territory of the size of southern Finland

Upper Kuskokwim

§ Overall number of the living people of UK descent – about 380 (Raskladkina 2018)

§ Everyday use of UK – almost none

§ Was used in four households in 2014

§ Less than 20 speakers left

§ The youngest fully-fledged speaker born in 1952

§ Teaching UK at school since 1973, no result

§ Prior work – Collins and Petruska 1979

§ Our team (A. Kibrik, M. Bergelson and M. Raskladkina) - seven field trips between 1997 and 2017

Grammar: crash introduction

nontinghiji'eł								
no-	ni-		ti-	ni-		ghi-	s-	l-	'eł
again-	2Sg.Acc-		Inc-	Cl.Roundish		Prog-	1Sg.Nom-	Detrans.Trans-	act:Prog

Future

'bye', 'I will see you next time'

§ Long verbs
Many morphological positions in the verb
Almost exclusive prefixation (unusual)
Complex verb lexeme derivation
Derivation and inflection are intermingled
One grammatical meaning is conveyed by several devices (multiple exponence)
Complex morphophonemics: s+l > j

....

II. Premises of the descriptive project

- § IIa. Ecological groundedness
- § IIb. Variation
- § IIc. Corpus
- § IId. Form and function in the organization of description

IIa. Ecological groundedness

§ Multimodal communication
- § Prosody
- § Gesture

§ Culture
- § General Northern Athabaskan, e.g. hunting beliefs and taboos
- § Religion: Russian Orthodox (since the 19th century)

§ Social structure
- § Seven families comprising the modern community
  - • All are related
- § Full coverage of the population of speakers in the descriptive project

§ Natural environment
- § Survival in subarctic conditions
- § Use of resources

IIb. Variation

§ Very high variation in the older generations (born before 1930)

§ Uniform merger A in younger speakers

	Interdental	Dental	Retroflex	Alveolar
	'my tongue'	'snow'	'raven'	'stick'
conservative	sitsula'	tsetł'	dotron'	dichinh
merger A	sitsula'	tsetł'	dotron'	dichinh
merger B	sitsula'	tsetł'	dotson'	dichinh
merger AB	sitsula'	tsetł'	dotson'	dichinh

Variation

§ Explanation

  § Traditional seasonal-nomadic life style

  - Bands only met occasionally
  - Hence strong dialectal variation: each speaker is a dialect

  § School in Nikolai starting from 1948

  - First generation of speakers who formed a stable speech community

IIc. Multi-genre corpus

§ Spoken discourse
- § personal stories
- § history
- § folklore
- § interview
- § conversation
- § comments on a film
- § sermon

§ Written discourse
- § personal letters
- § a variety of school materials

IId. Form and function in the organization of description

§ Part/chapter structure is largely based on formal categories

§ This is partly compensated for by Part XI.

§ Part V: Verb
  § 20. Root
  ....
  § 23. Basic inflection
  ....
  § 26. Conjugation
  ....
  § 29. Incorporation
  ....

§ Part XI: Linguistic phenomena in discourse
  § 64. Reference
  § 65. Information flow
  § 66. Use of verb forms
  § 67. Clause combining
  § 68. Local coherence
  § 69. Global coherence

III. Challenges of the language

§ IIIa. Typological non-transparency

§ IIIb. Qualitative morphological complexity

§ IIIc. Unusual patterns of conceptualization

IIIa. Typological non-transparency

§ Obscure terminology that emerged and became entrenched in early 20th century

§ Example: so-called "classifiers"

§ Immediate pre-root position

§ Four options:

- ø-
- di-
- ł-
- l-

"Classifiers"

duł di-ø-gwnh   — causativization →   duł di-ł-gwnh
'the wood is drying'   + Trans   's/he is drying the wood'

reversive ↓ −Trans   autobenefactive ↓ −Trans

tsa no-di-di-gwnh   duł di-l-gwnh
'the rock dried (back)'   's/he is drying the wood
          for his/her own benefit'

§ More appropriate term: transitivity indicators   17

True classifiers

§ Classificatory verb roots – 'lie', 'move'

§ 'it lies'
- zi-tanh – a living thing
- zi-tonh – an elongated object
- zi-konh – an object in an open container
- ....

§ Classificatory prefixes – "gender"

§ ghisdlał 'I am carrying multiple objects'

§ di-ghisdlał 'I am carrying wooden, growing objects'

§ ni-ghisdlał 'I am carrying roundish objects'

§ Much confusion about Athabaskan in typological literature (on both transitivity-related derivations and on classifiers)

IIIb. Morphological complexity

§ Quantitative
§ Qualitative

§ Discussions of complexity, when made empirical, involve quantitative features in the first place

§ "A definition of grammatical complexity can be based on the usual understanding of a complex system as one consisting of many different elements <...> The features surveyed were <...> numbers of elements in the system" (Nichols 2009: 110, 113) [note caveats there]

Quantitative complexity: verb form template

15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	-1	-2	-3
preverbal pronoun	preverb	locative	iterative/reversive	incorporate	dative pronoun	accusative pronoun	nominative pronoun	gender	inceptive	negation	mode	perfective	nominative pronoun	transitivity indicator	ROOT	mode	negation	nominalizer

Quantitative complexity

§ Quantitative complexity is often called polysynthesis

§ However:

§ North America is generally a polysynthetic area

§ Athabaskan languages are polysynthetic, but not extremely polysynthetic

http://wals.info/feature/22A#2/34.5/143.6

§ There are more spectacular polysynthetic languages

- length of morphemes
- average number of cooccurrent morpheme positions

Eskimo polysynthesis

ayag-qaqu-cuar-yuumiite-qapiar-llru-yugnarq-u-q-qaa
travel-now.and.then-little-want.not-very-Past-probably-Indic-3Sg-Qu

'I guess she probably did not really want to go for those short trips, did she?'

(Central Yup'ik, Eskimo, Alaska, Mithun 1999: 408)

Qualitative complexity

§ Athabaskan morphology is much more special from the point of view of qualitative complexity

§ In order to not overcomplicate things, I use terminology from Bickel and Nichols 2007

1. Exponence: meaning-to-form relationship	Opaque: cumulative and multiple
2. Distinctiveness	Many meanings are conveyed by similar forms (homophony)
3. Degree of freedom	Fusion
4. Regularity	Variance, allomorphy, sensitivity to inflectional classes
5. Position	Prefixation
6. Obedience to scope	Violations of scope principles
7. Structure	Templatic

Illustration: Root allomorphy

"Mode"	'paddle'	'PL move'

Impfv	2Sg n-e-kash
	       'you arrive paddling'
		2Pl n-wh-dał
		       'you guys arrive'

Pfv	3Sg n-e-kanh
	       'he arrived paddling'
		3Pl hi-n-e-datł'
		       'they arrived'

Prog	3Sg to-kał
	       'he will paddle'
		3Pl h-o-dił
		       'they are walking'

Suffixation treatment (Koyukon, Axelrod 1993)

	Impfv	Pfv	Prog=Opt
Neuter	nh	Œ	Œ
Transitional	h	t~Œ	h
Momentan.	sh	nh	È
Peramb.	sh	nh	ch
Continuative	Þ	nh	È
Persistive	h	h	h
Reversative	h	nh	h
Durative	Þ	Œ	Œ
Consecutive	Œ	Œ	Œ
Repetitive	sh	ch	ch
Directiverepet.	sh	Œ	ch
Semelfactive	Œ	Œ	Œ
Bisective	Þ~nh	Þ~nh	Þ~nh

Root allomorphy

§ Diachronically:
- § suffixation, dependent on "mode" and lexical aspect

§ Synchronically:
- § suffixes can only be partly discerned
- § there are other operations, such as alternation
- § extreme allomorphy of verb root
- § allomorphy is irregular

§ Many-to-many correspondences between meanings and forms
- § One meaning (e.g. imperfective) is conveyed by many suffixes
- § One suffix corresponds to several mode-aspect combinations, often unrelated

IIIc. Unusual patterns of conceptualization

§ Athabaskan verbs are complex in terms of derivation

§ Index of verb complexity (IVC, Kibrik 2012)

  § Number of lexical (root and derivational) morphemes per verbal lexeme

  § English: 1.09

  § Russian: 1.48

  § Koyukon: 2.52

§ English 'see' vs. Upper Kuskokwim lit. 'act with roundish things upon X'

§ English 'hunt' vs. Upper Kuskokwim 'act with a wooden object upon an area in concealment'

§ Root semantics is relatively general and abstract

IV. Open questions

§ Glossing

  § Qualitative morphological complexity makes morphological glossing problematic

  § For example, because tense-aspects meanings are often conveyed in two or more different parts of the verb form

§ Lexicon

  § Extreme derivational potential makes it difficult to enumerate lexemes derived from one root

  § Root allomorphy makes it difficult to enumerate either basic roots or all root forms

V. Conclusion

§ In this descriptive project, I aim at creating an Athabaskan grammar

   § providing insight into this rather peculiar language family

   § opening Athabaskan data to a wider range of linguists, including typologists

To the memory of

Bobby Esai Sr.

Philip Esai

Nick Dennis

Willie and Betty Petruska

Jim Nikolai