

Place-Intensive Narratives in the Dene Ethnogeographic Research Program

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The cornerstone of an ethnogeographic research program is the cumulative drainage-based place names list. For Alaska Dene languages the shared constantly informative rule-driven generative geography can be reconstructed by the cultivation of archival sources and by repeated reviews of place names lists with the most expert speakers. The place names database promotes editorial consistency and cross-disciplinary research options. When we have recorded place-intensive narratives by experts who know the geography of the Dene band territory really well, these recordings should be the highest priority for specialized language work.

In recent projects for Western Ahtna and Upper Kuskokwim place-intensive narratives on travel and land use by Jake Tansy (Ahtna) and Miska Deaphon (Upper Kuskokwim) are being advanced through editorial stages. The narratives reconfirm and refine the place names lists and maps for each language. When Tansy's or Deaphon's *travel routes* can be translated and mapped, we glimpse Dene landscape cognition in its most rarified and specialized register.

Depending on the investment of editorial time, it is possible to track Tansy's or Deaphon's orchestration of place names, inflected riverine directional words, landscape descriptors, as well as directional affixes in verbal derivations. There are interesting translation conundra: when mentioning some proximate ridges is the expert using place names or offering highly technical geomorphological descriptions? In the Tansy and Deaphon texts the constant awareness of the flow of water is conspicuous. The Dene riverine directional system is showcased in a distinctive grammatical category; nine roots occur in a mini-verb-like complex: PREFIX-ROOT-SUFFIX. Tansy and Deaphon adjust and clarify geographic views by combining place names with one to three directionals in a sentence.

This nine-root directional system can be reconstructed for Proto-Dene, and should be viewed as the Dene semplate, viz. the semantic theory of Levinson and Burenhult (2009). The nine roots appear in distinct word categories such as the disjunct verbal prefixes, postpositions, the noun lexicon (e.g. parts of houses or boats, anatomy, and especially place names).

Levinson, S.C. & N. Burenhult. 2009. Semplates: A new concept in lexical semantics? *Language* 85: 153–174.