Place Naming Strategies in Lower Tanana

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Introduction

Lower Tanana is an Alaska Native language traditionally spoken in the vicinity of the Minto Flats and the Tanana Valley, including the region now occupied by the city of Fairbanks. It is one of some forty languages in the Athabascan (Dene) language family. The language is extremely endangered, with fewer than 25 speakers (Krauss 2007).

Like all Dene languages Lower Tanana features a highly complex verbal system organized around a root morpheme which must be inflected for mode and aspect, preceded by as many as a dozen prefix positions which index participants and signal aspectual and adverbial information.

nontenegheje'ił
no-n-te-ne-ghe-je-'ił
again-2SG-FUTURE-see-FUTURE-1SG.CL-see
'I will see you again' (Tuttle 2009)

The dominant place naming strategy used is a "generative" one in which a single specific term may be combined with as many as 11 different generic terms to create a suite of names for places in a particular region. In Lower Tanana 43% of names use the generative strategy (Kari 2012).

Common Geographical Lexicon in Lower Tanana
(Kari, 2012)
A. Common verb suxes or enclitics in place names
   1. 'area' : -khw
   2. 'specic place of' : -denh
   3. 'that which is VERB' : -i
B. Common geographic noun roots in place names
   1. Land Forms
   a. land, country: nen', -nena'
   b. mountain: ddheł, -ddhela'
   c. hill: teyh, -teya'
   d. ridge: seth, -sedha', -yeddha'
   e. riverbank: bethw
   f. island: nu, -nu'
   g. at, meadow: chenh, -chena'
   h. uplands, an entire drainage: donga'
   3. Water Features
   a. lake: benh, -bena', menh, -mena'
   b. pond: datltoni
   c. stream: -no' (primary); -nik'a (secondary)
   d. stream mouth: -chaget, -dochaget
   e. headwaters: -tl'ot, -khwtl'ot
   f. long straight river channel: -toya'
   g. anabranch along island on main stream: -nunkw
   h. slough: todani'okhw
   i. stream owing into lake: edileni
   4. Man-made or man-used features
   a. village: kayekh
   b. trail: -tena
   c. portage, pass: -toteth
   d. accessible mountain ridge: -ch'oghwna'
   e. grave, cemetery: -tth'enhk'at
   3. Some Common Areal Nouns in Place Names
   a. below, beneath: -t'okh, t'ogha
   b. on, at a place: -k'et
   c. on a broad surface: -koget
   d. in a region, area, environment: -ti
   e. along the distance of: -ghoyet
   f. at the end of, limits of: -logha, loyet

Results

In this project I analyzed ~16 hours of archival recordings and annotated them using ELAN software to indicate relevant geographic information. Based on these annotations, I identify the remaining place naming strategies in Lower Tanana. These include:

Descriptive: describing the geographic features
Incidental: recalling something that happened or was seen at a place
Functional: describing the functionality of a place
Metaphorical : describing what a place resembles.

Over 1000 names have been identified in Lower Tanana. Here I list selected examples of each naming strategy.

Descriptive
- *K'iyh Ttha Nilani* : the one with the young birch
- *Tonełkwn' Mena'* : clear water lake
- *Ch'etontswkh No'* : brown water creek
- *Chenh Chwkh* : big meadow
- *Tu Nadełdenh* : where there is hot water
- *K'wy' Ch'eda'* : tough willow
- *Nudh'onh No'* : island is there creek
- *Nudh'onh Mena'* : island is there lake
- *Beghentadhdleni* : current flows behind it
- *The'odi* : all the time (hill name describes that you hear noise all the time, from the wind)
- *Ch'enok'et* : mineral lick (moose lick salt there)
- *Menh K'wkhchwkh* : on big lake
- *Dwkh T'wkhde* : elevated nest place (nests in the tree)

Incidental
- *Dathdlazri Dena'iłghełdenh* : where a brown bear knocked someone down
- *Tsoni Tr'iłtanh No'* : creek where we found a brown bear
- *Dedenach'ilok* : someone hurt us (brown bear killed a man)
- *Gwkh Nitsił* : rabbit potlatch house (name comes from seeing one set of rabbit tracks)

Functional
- *Ch'etebił No'* : lynx snare creek
- *Niłk'ach'enidetl'unh Mena'* : snares set on both sides lake
- *Bek'et Notr'iyhtr'edełgoyi* : on it we dry out a canoe
- *Nełtrith Hał Toteth* : wolverine trap portage
- *Ninotr'iyhleyahdenh* : where canoes are left
- *Bek'et Tabił K'at Khwloyh Mena'* : net places are on it lake
- *Be'ot Noyeghiłdhedenh Tth'enhk'at* : the grave of the one that was killed by his wife
- *Beghw Tr'etreghi* : by it we cry (used to be village there with a big gravesite)
- *Dwkhtso Dedhlodenh* : where there are caches (cache is there, above the ground)

Metaphorical
- *Tr'edhdo* : someone is sitting (rock formation looks like someone sitting down)
- *Sresr Yona' Tr'eghił'odenh* : ram object extends out (there are white rocks lined up that look like sheep walking)
- *Seyatth'ena No'* : my jawbone creek (named for the bend in the creek)

Minto Flats
(photo courtesy ADF&G)

Kari et al. (2012)

Data

The primary data source for this project is a collection of 20 recordings made between 1979 and 1999 with Lower Tanana speakers Peter John, Matthew Titus, Robert Titus, Margaret John, Eli Charlie, Lizzie Saw, Frank Jacobs, Al John, Solomon Luke, Hester Ivan, Celia Peterson, and Elsie Mahany. These recordings are primarily interviews in which speakers are asked not only to indicate the Native names and locations of Lower Tanana place but also to discuss the significance of those place and the motivations behind the names. The recordings are housed at the Alaska Native Language Archive (www.uaf.edu/anla)

Minto Flats (photo courtesy ADF&G)

Conclusions

There are multiple strategies for naming places in Lower Tanana. These include the previously documented Generative strategy, as well as a Descriptive, Functional, Incidental, or Metaphorical strategy. In many of these cases, identification of the naming strategy cannot be achieved merely by consulting the gloss of literal meanings in the place names list.
This is especially true in the case of Incidental and Metaphorical names, where it is crucial to consult archival recordings of native speakers.

Outstanding Questions

What makes a place name?
Nomentr'ediłtoni (0998a) (6026b). The speaker stresses that this is a single place containing three lakes. Previous documentation breaks these lakes up into three separate places.
Nitl'et K'otena Mena' (0985a) is the name for Cranberry Lake. The speaker only uses one term, but the previous documentation breaks it up into two.
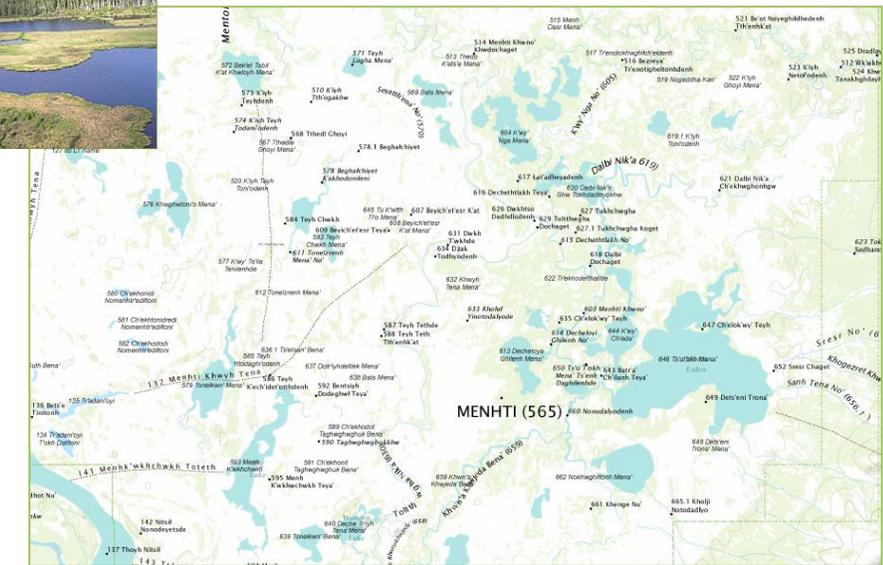There may be some discrepancy between what researchers are counting as place names and what native speakers are. Apparently for speakers of LT a single place name can include different features which in English could each receive a distinct name. This is further evidenced by the speaker defining *Dradlaya Chaget* as including hill and all, and does not refer to just the stream mouth. Also, the place *Teyh Chwkh Ti* refers to the hill in question and all the other little hills in the area.

When is the suffix –denh a part of the place name?
A statement on the use of the suffix –*denh* also raises a question of what goes into a place name. When verifying *Khwtethmenhdenh*, the speaker explains that the name is *Khwtethmenh*, *Khwtethmenhdenh* is correct, but used when you're talking to someone that doesn't know where the place is. (2556a, 2:34-2:51) This suggests that for native speakers –*denh* may not be a part of the place name, or at least not one-hundred percent of the time. *Tr'enotokhwghitch'ełdenh* is only pronounced with –*denh* when introducing the name, but in the five pronunciations that follow, –*denh* is omitted (0989a). *Dotron' Tr'iłtanhde No'* is another instance where the speaker doesn't include the suffix. He states the place name as *Dotron' Tr'iłtanh No'* (0984b).

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http://www.adfg.alaska.gov

Chief Peter John (photo courtesy Tanana Chiefs Conference)

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