Explanation of the Healy Lake Dialect of the Tanacross Athabascan Language

Rick Thoman

Ellen Demit was one of the very last speakers of the Healy Lake dialect of Tanacross Athabascan, and the traditional stories she tells in her native language constitute an important source of information about the Healy Lake language.

Linguists generally recognize three distinct Athabascan languages in the greater Tanana River Valley: Upper Tanana, Tanacross, and Lower Tanana.[1] The names are simply geographic, with the name *Tanacross* coming from the community that had the largest concentration of speakers in the late 20th century. Each of these languages has specific features that set it apart from neighboring languages. However, the languages of the Tanana River Valley make up a dialect chain, in which the speech of neighboring villages differed only slightly, but with increasing distance the differences became quite significant.

Tanacross Athabascan is the traditional language of the Upper Tanana Valley extending from the Volkmar River in the west to about the Taylor Highway in the east, and north to about Chicken and the Middle Fork Fortymile River. The speech of the Mansfeld Lake and Healy Lake peoples, while clearly part of the same language, differs slightly, with Healy Lake dialect having some features characteristic of the speech of the Goodpaster and Salcha peoples, just downriver from Healy Lake.

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[1] In historic times, people along the very lowest reaches of the Tanana River (below Tolovana) spoke Koyukon, a language distinct from the Tanana River Valley languages. Some authors (e.g. Kari 1996) add a fourth Tanana River language, Middle Tanana, for the speech of the Goodpaster and Salcha bands.

Nearly all of the academic linguistic work on the Tanacross language has been done with speakers of the Mansfield dialect. This is a consequence of the simple fact that, in recent times, there have been many more speakers of the Mansfield dialect than Healy Lake. This is in part because only a handful of speakers survived an epidemic in 1942–43, which killed most of the residents of Healy Lake (Callaway and Friend 2007:143–144).[2] The following notes are from Holton's (2000) summary of Michael Krauss's notes from the early 1960s, a few pages of fieldnotes from James Kari from the early 1990s deposited in the archives of the Alaska Native Language Center, and an analysis of the traditional stories recorded by Ellen Demit for this project.

The Tanacross language is distinguished from adjacent languages by a number of phonological features. Some of these characteristics are enumerated by Krauss and Golla (1981:76), while other have become clear more recently:

• Development of high tone from Proto-Athabascan vowel constriction
• The conditioned obstruentification of Proto-Athabascan stem-initial *n and *m
• Africation of stem-initial *y to a palatal fricative, phonetically /ʃʲ/
• The partial devoicing of stem-initial fricatives
• Both the first person singular verb prefix and classifier ł have become h.

• The merger of the Proto-Athabascan reduced vowel *ɑ with *ə

Additionally, Tanacross has a vowel system that is phonetically different from adjacent languages, and it has maintained stem-final consonants to a much greater extent than Upper Tanana, spoken upriver at Tetlin and Northway, which otherwise share many of these features with Tanacross. All these features are shared by the slightly different dialects traditionally spoken at Healy Lake and Mansfield.

Healy Lake differs from the Mansfield dialect of Tanacross in the following ways:

• A full schwa usually follows stem-final voiced obstruents. In Ellen Demit's speech, this is especially true following voiced stops, but less so following voiced fricatives, e.g. Healy Lake **łuugə,** Mansfield **łuug** *fish.* In these texts we have chosen to write this final ə, in contrast to the usual practice with Mansfield dialect-derived materials, where the final ə, if present at all, is typically much less distinct.
• Proto-Athabascan *ə is often retained as such in Healy Lake, unlike Mansfield, in which the usual reflex is [ɛ]. The initial vowels in Ellen's speech are relatively consistent, although the ending syllables frequently vary between the Healy Lake dialect and Tanacross. For example, in prefix syllables, /ə/ is mostly [ə], while in stems, /ə/ seems to vary between [ɛ] and [ə].[3] The phonetic

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[2] By one count (Connie Friend 2009, personal communication), perhaps only five or six fully fluent speakers of Healy Lake dialect were still alive by 1950.

[3] Any conditioning environments have yet to be worked out, though

Stella Healy wrote in ink under the photo: "Me and my cousin and dogs."

Photo courtesy of Lee Saylor

value of /ə/ varies significantly in each dialect depending on the phonological environment. Following palatals (especially j and sh), Healy Lake /ə/ is raised to /ɪ/.[4] Before [g], Mansfield [ə] becomes /æ/. Before velar fricatives, in both dialects /ə/ is lowered to [ɐ~ɑ]. Because of the high frequency of /ə/, the two dialects can sound. At first blush, significantly different.
• Proto-Athabascan noun stems with final *-χ sometimes remain as [x] instead of [h] as in Mansfield, e.g. Healy Lake **xax** but Mansfield **xah** *goose* *χɑχ.
• Semi-voiced fricatives have more voicing than at Mansfield, though this is often not obvious in Ellen's speech in these stories.
• more [b] or [mb] for the labial sonorant than Mansfield, e.g. Healy Lake **debee**, Mansfield **demee** *sheep*.
• d-classifer + Ø inner subject sometimes yields /-də-/, as in Lower Tanana (always -t- in Mansfield) e.g. Healy Lake **natedebeek**, Mansfield **natetmeek** *He or she is swimming around.* In these stories the forms vary and are written as Ellen pronounced them.

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it seems clear that before a nasal [ə] and [ɛ] are in free variation, e.g. menh *lake is*, in these stories, indifferently [məŋ] or [mɛŋ].

[4] Minoura (1993:33–34) reports a very similar phonetic realization of /ə/ following palatals in most dialects of Upper Tanana.