

Beyond Frog Stories: Speakers' Attention to Path and Location in Ahtna Discourse

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Over the past two decades a popular method for comparing how languages encode path and manner in motion events has been “Frog Stories” elicitation (e.g., Slobin 1996, 2004; Slobin and Berman 1996; Strömquist and Verhove 2004). In this research paradigm, speakers are shown a textless storybook called *Frog, Where Are You?* (Meyer 1969) and are asked to recite the events depicted in their native tongue. My recent study of Ahtna, a polysynthetic Athabascan language of southcentral Alaska, reveals that Frog Story narrators tend to make use of only a small portion of the grammar of path and location available to them. A description of motion events in Ahtna based primarily on Frog Stories would give us only a glimpse of the ways spatial relationships are expressed in actual discourse.

In this talk I compare Ahtna Frog Stories with a culturally specific genre of discourse, that of personal travel narratives. Data come from my own fieldwork and from a corpus collected by James Kari in the 1980s. Travel narratives are detailed accounts of overland journeys taken by storytellers in their lifetime. The Ahtna are traditionally semi-nomadic, and talk about travel and geography is a culturally prominent activity (Kari to appear, 2008). Given the extreme climate of Alaska and the subsistence-based lifestyle of the Ahtna people, very often the survival of the tribe depended upon hunters' abilities to describe overland travel and the migration habits of big game like moose and caribou. Individual Ahtna men are often intimately familiar with large swaths of the 35,000 square miles of Ahtna territory and beyond. The prominence of “travel talk” in Ahtna culture is reflected in the sheer size of Kari's corpus.

Ahtna grammar has developed several systems for accurately and carefully describing the position and direction of a referent in the landscape. Among these are verb prefixes, postpositions, a class of riverine directionals and a near-paradigmatic toponymic system. I discuss the distribution of these systems across travel narratives and Frog Stories. In the former, speakers fully exploit Ahtna grammar to create vivid and detailed descriptions of travel routes. In the following example from a travel narrative, nearly every word contains some path- or location-describing element (bolded):

((*C'uka Ts'ulaen'i Gha Nen' Ta'stedet Dze'* 'how we went hunting out in the country'. Speaker: Adam Sanford. Transcription by James Kari.))

- | | | | |
|---|--|-------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Du' | yihwts'en, | |
| | exactly | from that area | |
| 2 | ts'inats'edet | dze' | 'ungge. |
| | we go again from | distantly upland | |
| | <i>'From there, then we would start out again to uplands.'</i> | | |
| 3 | 'Utggu | daagha | ngge', |
| | distantly in a general area | top | upland |

- 4 **ngga** **Ts'itael Tl'aa** **ts'e'**,
upland straight water rushes headwaters and
'Up above the tree line upland to 'Headwaters of River That Flows Straight','
- 5 **yihwts'en** **'unggat,**
from that area a point distantly upland
- 6 **Tsaani 'Ael Na'**,
grizzly bear trap stream
- 7 **yet** **kets'edel.**
there we go against a place
'from there on upland we reached 'Bear Trap Creek'.'

Frog Stories, on the other hand, display very little beyond locational verb prefixes and a handful of semantically bleached uses of riverine directionals.

I believe the difference can be explained by the speakers' attention to the different tasks that characterize the two genres. In travel narratives, speakers are concerned with describing physical locations on the landscape and the relation between them, while Frog Story narrators are concerned with tracking the activities of animate characters. I discuss how this difference is reflected in the choice of cohesion mechanisms in each.

While studying elicited Frog Stories may help us to compare motion events cross-linguistically, ultimately it may not be essential for Frog Story narrators to create a fully fleshed out sense of landscape. This may hide the full potential of the grammar from us. A thorough description of path and location in Ahtna must also include data that are more naturally acquired. These findings support casting a wide net when making typological observations, and basing grammatical descriptions on a variety of data sources.

References

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