

A Cognitive Linguistics Approach to Studying Language Relationships in Athapaskan

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Recent assessments of the relation between cognitive linguistics and historical linguistics have stressed the value of approaching the latter in terms of the former (Winters 2010), and of the similarity in interests between cognitive semantics and the historical-philological tradition (Geeraerts 2010a, 2010b). These discussions have focused on the study of language change in particular, placing less emphasis on other aspects of historical linguistics. However, Wilkins (1996) has demonstrated that applying cognitive semantic understandings of polysemy can lead to a more strategic search for cognates. This study builds on Wilkins' insights, but goes beyond the search for cognates itself by investigating the distribution of patterns of lexicalization among the languages of a firmly established family: the Athapaskan languages of North America.

Athapaskan is a family of languages spoken over a wide area of western North America, stretching west from northern Canada to the coast of Alaska, and south to the Mexican border (Mithun 1999: 349). Despite the distances between groups of speakers and substantial cultural diversity, Athapaskan languages everywhere display easily discernible grammatical similarities and widespread patterns of cognation. Nonetheless, variation occurs in the manner in which certain concepts are lexicalized. This variation is analyzed by means of an onomasiological database covering a single, if broad, semantic domain: that of the terms for denoting the human body and its by-products. Different languages employ differing strategies for lexicalizing concepts from this domain. For example, the concept 'leg' is lexicalized in at least two different ways across the language family:

Ahtna (Alaska)	-ts'ən	literally 'bone'
Southern Tutchone (Yukon)	-tth'än	literally 'bone'
Hare (NWT)	-w'éné'	literally 'bone'
Chilcotin (BC)	-tθ'én	literally 'bone'
Carrier (BC)	-dzat	literally 'upper leg'
Navajo (Arizona)	-jáád	literally 'upper leg'

This small sample shows two sets of cognates. Both can be shown to have undergone metonymic shift. The lexicalization of the concept 'leg' occurs through a term otherwise denoting 'bone' in the first four cases, whereas the last two cases employ a term used to denote 'upper leg' in other Athapaskan languages. While individual terms seem to indicate historical groupings among the languages, the inclusion of further data leads to the emergence of a complex distribution of lexicalization strategies. These distributions can be understood and brought to bear on questions in Athapaskan linguistics with the support computer-aided analysis and mapping methods.

The results of the study are twofold. On the one hand, studying patterns of figurative lexicalization sheds light on relationships among the languages of this family and thereby contributes to solving questions of historical relatedness among Athapaskan subgroups by adding a semantic perspective to the data derived from sound-based investigations and archeological findings. On the other, it paves the way for investigations of socio-cultural motivations for the distribution of lexicalization patterns in the spirit of what Geeraerts has termed the "socially enriched pragmatic onomasiology" (Geeraerts 2010a: 350): demonstrating which patterns occur where in the Athapaskan world opens the way for the introduction of cultural, social and ecological data as variables to draw on in the explanation of lexical change.