

LING 411/611: The Na-Dene language family

McGill University
Winter 2023
Tue. & Thu. 10:00–11:30 EST (UTC -5)
Leacock 109

Instructor: James A. Crippen
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Content and objectives of this course

This course explores the Na-Dene language family of North America, also known as Dene-Eyak-Tlingit or Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit. This family of around 40 languages includes languages spoken in Alaska (e.g. Tlingit, Eyak, Dena'ina), northern Canada (e.g. Kaska, Dëne Sų́liné), western Canada (e.g. Witsuwit'en, Tsilhqút'in), Oregon (e.g. Galice, Tolowa), California (e.g. Hupa, Wailaki), and southwestern USA (e.g. Navajo, Plains Apache). Topics addressed include historical and comparative research, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, as well as some intersections between language and culture in the family. Students will investigate and report on patterns and phenomena that are documented across multiple languages in the family, culminating in a final presentation and paper that summarize their research.

Course requirements and evaluation

The work for this course includes of a mix of reading, writing, discussion, and research in published literature and unpublished materials about languages in the Na-Dene family. In particular, this course involves:

1. Presentation of one assigned reading.
2. Posting discussions about weekly readings.
3. A final paper developed from a research question and bibliography.
4. An oral presentation in class about the final paper.

The final grade will be calculated according to the following percentages:

	LING 411	LING 611
Presentation of readings	10%	10%
Online participation	10%	5%
In class participation	10%	5%
Research question (paper proposal)	10%	10%
Initial bibliography	10%	10%
Paper draft	20%	30%
Final paper and presentation	30%	30%

Presentation of readings: Each student will present one of the assigned readings to the class. Reading selections will be assigned during the first week of class. Presentations should include a brief summary of the background, the goals and motivations for the paper, a sketch of the

proposal and critical discussion of the arguments, connections to any relevant material and topics already discussed in class, and questions about terminology or other issues that are unclear to the student. Presentations should highlight a few salient points in the reading and should not attempt to review every example or claim; the intent is to summarize the reading, not to present every detail within it. Presentations are generally around 10 to 15 minutes.

Online participation: Except for the first week, each student must post a question or comment about one of the assigned readings to the *myCourses* Discussion site by 5:00 pm (17:00) on Mondays and Wednesdays before class. Discussion posts may be a question or comment either focusing on the reading itself, or relating the reading to other relevant material (e.g. other literature in class, class discussions, literature elsewhere). Clarification questions are welcome but they should involve some discussion and not merely consist of “What does x mean?”. Discussion posts should be around one or two paragraphs in length: enough to make a point but not an essay. These discussions are particularly meant to help students who are presenting readings; because of this, late posts will not count for credit.

In class participation: This is a seminar class so participation is an essential component of the course. Students are expected to have completed the readings and to be prepared to contribute to the discussion of them in class. Total understanding of the readings is not necessary and contributing to the discussion does not mean being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Instead, contributing is about joining the conversation in a meaningful way. One effective way to contribute is to ask informed questions about the material, and another is to suggest connections between the material and related topics in the course. Every student should try to interact both in class and online, but students who are more reserved in class are encouraged to say more online.

Research question: The research question is the proposal for the final paper. Since students are unlikely to have access to a fluent speaker of a Na-Dene language, research for the paper will be based on published or archival materials. It may be on any topic in the phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, or semantics of Na-Dene languages. The question itself should be expressed in a single sentence (the “hook”) with a following paragraph that situates the question and connects it to wider issues. The final paper will answer this question, arguing for or against some analysis of the phenomena surrounding the question. A few relevant references are required to provide context for the question and material on at least two specific languages for investigation, but a detailed bibliography is not necessary.

Initial bibliography: The initial bibliography is a collection of relevant sources that will be the basis of the final paper. Some of these sources should be grammars or equivalent descriptions of Na-Dene languages which will provide primary data for the final paper’s analysis. Other sources should reflect previous research in the topic area of the research question, including relevant material from the Na-Dene literature but also a few relevant sources from more general linguistic literature to ground the question in crosslinguistic theory and analysis. Each source in the bibliography must include a short (one paragraph) discussion of its contents and an explanation of why it is relevant to the research question.

Paper draft: The initial draft of the final paper is a detailed outline for the eventual contents of the final paper. The section and subsection structure should be laid out along with one or

two relevant examples or tables that illustrate the main point for each subsection. Text in each section should be limited to short bullet points that sketch the eventual narrative in the final paper. This draft should provide a strong framework for the final presentation. More details on the structure of the paper draft will be given in class.

Final paper: The final paper is a short journal article-length (15–20 pp.) review, analysis, and discussion of the research question. The paper should be explicitly comparative, looking at data from more than one language in the family and connecting the reported phenomena to crosslinguistic description and theory. Undergraduate students should minimally provide a summary description of the presented phenomena, a review of existing literature both in the Na-Dene family and elsewhere, and offer some possible avenues for further analysis. Graduate students should develop and argue for an analysis of the presented phenomena in a relevant theoretical framework, noting especially any testable predictions that arise from the analysis which could potentially be investigated with fluent speakers or other additional data. More details on the format and structure of the final paper and presentation will be given in class.

Attendance policy: Attendance is not counted towards the final grade. But there is no textbook for this class nor any online guides and a considerable amount of material will be presented in class that may not be directly addressed or explained in the readings. Students are responsible for all of the material presented in class as well as in the readings, so attendance is critical.

Late policy and extra credit

Late work will not be accepted. Making up missed work is generally not possible, except for special circumstances (e.g. natural disaster, being admitted to hospital) which must be discussed with the instructor. Students who anticipate a conflict with a particular deadline must contact the instructor well in advance of the deadline; retroactive arrangements cannot be considered. There is no extra credit available and any requests for extra credit will be denied.

Statement on academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures; see <https://www.mcgill.ca/integrity>.

Statement on generative “AI” tools

Do not use any generative Large Language Model “AI” tools (ChatGPT, Bard, Claude, Gemini, etc.) for producing any work in this course. A major goal of this course is to give you experience in organizing and communicating complex ideas in writing. Use of a generative LLM tool directly subverts this goal and will be considered plagiarism which is a serious academic offence. In addition, since generative LLM tools have no epistemic comprehension, they produce bullshit (Hicks, Humphries, & Slater 2024: DOI [10.1007/s10676-024-09775-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-024-09775-5)) which

may be incoherent, misleading, or outright wrong, thus making you seem foolish. I would rather read rough writing from a human than eloquent nonsense from a machine. If you are interested in LLMs we have courses in our department about them, but this is not one of them.

Right to submit in French

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

People and land acknowledgement

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

About the instructor

James A. Crippen [ˈkɹɪ.pɪn] is an assistant professor of linguistics at McGill. He earned his PhD at the University of British Columbia in 2019, studying syntactic structures in the Tlingit [ˈkɹɪŋ.kɪt] language. James's research focuses primarily on the Tlingit language and its relatives in the Na-Dene family, but he has also worked on Haida, Chinook Jargon, Ktunaxa, Polynesian languages, and Micronesian languages.

James is a citizen of the *Lingít* [ʔɪn.ˈkít] nation that spans the USA–Canada border of southeastern Alaska, southcentral Yukon Territory and northwestern British Columbia. In Tlingit, *Dzéiwsh* [tsé:wʃ] is a member of the *Kak'weidí Deisheetaan* [qʰà.'kʷè:ˈtí tèt̚:ʃiː.tʰà:n] clan (Raven moiety) from the *Kakáak'w* [kʰà.'qʰá:kʷ] house group and is a child of the *S'iknax.ádi* [s'ik.nàχ.'ʔá.tì] clan in the Wolf/Eagle moiety. He comes from the *Shtax'héen K'wáan* [ʃtəx'.hí:n qʰwá:n] 'Stikine people' at *Kaachxan.áak'w* [qʰà:tʃ.χàn.'ʔá:kʷ] 'Wrangell, Alaska' by the mouth of *Shtax'héen* [ʃtəx'.hí:n] 'Stikine River'.

Readings

All readings are either available online or on *myCourses* as PDFs.

- Adlam, Robert G. 2007. The Northern Athabaskan survey of Edward Sapir and James A. Teit. *Anthropological Linguistics* 49.2: 99–117. JSTOR [27641822](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27641822).
- Axelrod, Melissa. 1993. *The semantics of time: Aspectual categorization in Koyukon Athabaskan*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Bar-El, Leora. 2015. Documenting and classifying aspectual classes across languages. In *Methodologies in semantic fieldwork*, M. Ryan Bochnak & Lisa Matthewson (eds.), ch. 3, pp. 75–109. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190212339.003.0004](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190212339.003.0004).

- Cardoso, Amanda, James A. Crippen, & Gloria Mellemsoen. 2022. Cross-dialectal synchronic variation of a diachronic conditioned merger in Tlingit. *Linguistics Vanguard* 8.55: 519–530. DOI [10.1515/lingvan-2021-0048](https://doi.org/10.1515/lingvan-2021-0048).
- Cook, Eung-Do. 1986. Athapaskan classificatory verbs. *Amerindia* 11: 11–24.
- Crippen, James A. 2019. *The syntax in Tlingit verbs*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia, PhD dissertation. LingBuzz [005047](https://lingbuzz.net/005047).
- Crippen, James A.; Déchaine, Rose-Marie; & Elfner, Emily. 2023. Tlingit (anti-)prominence. In *Word prominence in languages with complex morphologies*, Ksenia Bogomolets & Harry van der Hulst (eds.), ch. 6, pp. 178–218. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. DOI [10.1093/oso/9780198840589.003.0006](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198840589.003.0006).
- Enrico, John. 2004. Toward Proto-Na-Dene. *Anth. Linguistics* 46.3: 229–302. JSTOR [30028963](https://www.jstor.org/stable/30028963).
- Golla, Victor. 2011. Athabaskan (Na-Dene) languages. In *California Indian languages*, pp. 68–82. Berkeley: University of California Press. Project MUSE [26243](https://www.projectmuse.com/docview/26243).
- Hargus, Sharon. 2010. Athabaskan phonetics and phonology. *Language & Linguistics Compass* 4.10: 1019–1040. DOI [10.1111/j.1749-818x.2010.00245.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818x.2010.00245.x).
- Hoijer, Harry. 1971. Athapaskan morphology. In *Studies in American Indian languages*, Jesse Sawyer (ed.), pp. 113–147. (U. of C. pubs. in ling. vol. 65). Berkeley: UC Press. ANLA [CA938H1971b](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA938H1971b).
- Jaker, Alessandro, Nicholas Welch, & Keren Rice. 2020. The Na-Dene languages. In *The Routledge handbook of North American languages*, D. Siddiqi, M. Barrie, C. Gillon, J.D. Haugen, & É. Mathieu (eds.), ch. 20 pp. 473–503. New York: Routledge.
- Kari, James. 1992. Some concepts in Ahtna Athabaskan word formation. In *Morphology now*, Mark Aronoff (ed.), pp. 107–131. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. ANLA [AT973K1992](https://nsl.org/ANLA/AT973K1992).
- Kibrik, Andrej A. 1993. Transitivity increase in Athabaskan languages. In *Causatives and transitivity*, Bernard Comrie & Maria Polinsky (eds.), pp. 47–68. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kibrik, Andrej A. 1996. Transitivity decrease in Navajo and Athabaskan: actor-affecting propositional derivations. In *Athabaskan language studies: Essays in honor of Robert W. Young*, Eloise Jelinek, Sally Midgette, Keren Rice, & Leslie Saxon (eds.), pp. 259–304. Albuquerque: UNM Press.
- Kingston, John. 2005. The phonetics of Athabaskan tonogenesis. In *Athabaskan prosody*, Sharon Hargus & Keren Rice (eds.), pp. 137–184. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Krauss, Michael E. 1965. Eyak: A preliminary report. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 10: 167–187. ANLA [CA961K1965b](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1965b). DOI [10.1017/S0008413100005648](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008413100005648).
- Krauss, Michael E. 1969. On the classifiers in the Athapaskan, Eyak, and the Tlingit verb. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, memoir 24. ANLA [CA961K1969a](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1969a).
- Krauss, Michael E. 1977a. *Proto-Athabaskan-Eyak fricatives and the first person singular*. Unpublished manuscript. Fairbanks: ANLC. ANLA [CA961K1977a](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1977a).
- Krauss, Michael E. 1977b. *The Proto-Athabaskan and Eyak kinship system*. Unpublished manuscript. Fairbanks: ANLC. ANLA [CA961K1977b](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1977b).
- Krauss, Michael E. 1981. *On the history and use of Comparative Athabaskan linguistics*. Unpublished manuscript. Fairbanks: ANLC. ANLA [CA961K1981](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1981).
- Krauss, Michael E. 1986. Edward Sapir and Athabaskan linguistics. In *New perspectives in language, culture, and personality: Proceedings of the Edward Sapir Centenary Conference*, William Cowan, Michael K. Foster, & Konrad Koerner (eds.), pp. 147–191. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. ANLA [CA961K1986](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1986).
- Krauss, Michael E. 1987. The name Athabaskan. In *Faces, voices, & dreams: A celebration of the centennial of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka, Alaska, 1888–1988*, Peter L. Corey (ed.), pp. 104–108. Sitka: Alaska State Museums. ANLA [CA961K1987](https://nsl.org/ANLA/CA961K1987).

- Krauss, Michael E. 2005. *Athabaskan tone*. In *Athabaskan prosody*, pp. 51–136. (Current issues in linguistic theory 269). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI [10.1075/cilt.269](https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.269).
- Krauss, Michael E. 2006. A history of Eyak language documentation and study: Fredericæ de Laguna in Memoriam. *Arctic Anthropology* 43.2: 172–218. JSTOR [40316678](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40316678). DOI [10.1353/arc.2011.0095](https://doi.org/10.1353/arc.2011.0095).
- Leer, Jeff. 1999. Tonogenesis in Athabaskan. In *Cross-linguistic Studies of tonal phenomena: Tonogenesis, typology, and related topics*, Shigeki Kaji (ed.), pp. 37–66. Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. ANLA [CA965L1999b](https://nla.org.au/record/CA965L1999b).
- Leer, Jeff. 2006. Na-Dene. In *Encyclop. of language and ling.*, 2nd edn., Keith Brown & Anne H. Anderson (eds.), vol. 8 pp. 428–430. Amsterdam: Elsevier. DOI [10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/02272-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/02272-0).
- Levine, Robert D. 1979. Haida and Na-Dene: A new look at the evidence. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 45.2: 157–170. JSTOR [1264780](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1264780).
- Li, Fang-Kuei. 1930. A study of Sarcee verb-stems. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 6.1: 3–27. JSTOR [1263332](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1263332).
- Lovick, Olga C. & Siri G. Tuttle. 2024. Pitch patterns in standard negation in Alaskan Dene and the development of grammatical tone. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 90.4: 397–444. DOI [10.1086/731661](https://doi.org/10.1086/731661).
- McDonough, Joyce. 1999. Tone in Navajo. *Anthropological Linguistics* 41.4: 503–540. JSTOR [30028725](https://www.jstor.org/stable/30028725).
- Mithun, Marianne. 1999. *The languages of Native North America*. Cambridge: Camb. Univ. Press.
- Maddieson, Ian, Caroline Smith, & Nicola Bessell. Aspects of the phonetics of Tlingit. *Anthropological Linguistics* 43.2: 135–176. JSTOR [30028779](https://www.jstor.org/stable/30028779).
- Nater, Hank F. 2006. Athabaskan verb stem structure: Tahltan. In *What's in a verb? Studies in the verbal morphology of languages of the Americas*, Grażyna J. Rowicka, & Eithne B. Carlin (eds.), pp. 29–52. Utrecht: LOT. HDL [1874/296557](https://hdl.handle.net/1874/296557).
- Rice, Keren. 2000. *Morpheme order and semantic scope*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rice, Keren & Sharon Hargus. 2005. Introduction. In *Athabaskan prosody*, Sharon Hargus & Keren Rice (eds.), pp. 1–45. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Rice, Keren & Willem de Reuse. 2017. The Athabaskan (Dene) language family. In *The Cambridge handbook of linguistic typology*, Alexandra Aikhenvald & Robert M.W. Dixon (eds.), ch. 23, pp. 707–746. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sapir, Edward. 1915. The Na-Dene languages: A preliminary report. *American Anthropologist* 17.3: 534–558. JSTOR [660504](https://www.jstor.org/stable/660504).
- Saxon, Leslie. 2023. Dene – Athabaskan. In *The languages and linguistics of indigenous North America: A comprehensive guide*, Carmen Dagostino, Marianne Mithun, & Keren Rice (eds.), vol. 2, ch. 39, pp. 875–930. (The world of linguistics vol. 13). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. DOI [10.1515/9783110712742-039](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110712742-039).
- Tuttle, Siri G. & Sharon Hargus. 2004. Explaining variability in affix order: the Athabaskan areal and third person prefixes. In *Working papers Athabaskan languages vol. 4*, Gary Holton & Siri G. Tuttle (eds.), pp. 70–98. Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Native Language Center.
- Whorf, Benjamin L. 1932. The structure of the Athabaskan languages. Unpublished typescript; final paper for a class taught by Edward Sapir at Yale in 1932. ANLA [CA932W1932b](https://nla.org.au/record/CA932W1932b).
- Willie, MaryAnn. 2000. Individual and stage level predication and the Navajo classificatory verbs. In *Papers in honor of Ken Hale*, Andrew Carnie, Eloise Jelinek, and MaryAnn Willie (eds.), ch. 5 pp. 39–50. (Working papers on endangered and less familiar languages 1). Cambridge, MA: MIT.

- Wright, Richard, Sharon Hargus, & Katherine Davis. 2002. On the categorization of ejectives: Data from Witsuwit'en. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 32.1: 44–77. DOI [10.1017/S0025100302000142](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100302000142).

Schedule

<i>Wk.</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Readings</i>	<i>Assignments</i>
1	Jan 7 Jan 9	Introduction; Review of the family	Jaker, Welch, & Rice 2020; Saxon 2023; Leer 2006; Krauss 1987	personal language essay (1 p; no grade)
2	Jan 14 Jan 16	History of research on the family	Krauss 1981; Krauss 1986; Adlam 2007; Krauss 2006	readings assigned
3	Jan 21 Jan 23	Phonetics	Hargus 2010; Wright, Hargus, & Davis 2002; Maddieson et al. 2001	research ques. assigned
4	Jan 28 Jan 30	Tone and tonogenesis	McDonough '99; Rice & Hargus 2005; Leer 1999; Kingston 2005; Lovick & Tuttle 2024	
5	Feb 4 Feb 6	Verb template and affix ordering	Rice 2000: 9–19; Kari 1992; Crippen 2019: 10–16; Crippen, Déchaine, & Elfner 2023	research question due initial bibliog. assigned
6	Feb 11 Feb 13	The classifier: Voice, valency, maybe state	Kibrik 1993; Kibrik 1996; Crippen 2019: 3§1, 4§1, 5§1	
7	Feb 18 Feb 20	Classificatory (quali- ficational) verbs	Cook 1986; Willie 2000; Crippen 2019: 51–61	initial bibliography due paper draft assigned
8	Feb 25 Feb 27	Stem variation	Crippen 2019: 89–95; Li 1930; Nater 2006; CDE 2023	
	Mar 3–7	Reading break	
9	Mar 11 Mar 13	Gram. aspect & conju- gation classes	Crippen 2019: 480–487; Axelrod 1993: 18–24, 33–44	
10	Mar 18 Mar 20	Lexical aspect & verb theme categories	Bar-El 2015; Axelrod 1993: 25–27, 123–157; Crippen 2019: 65–72	paper draft due
11	Mar 25 Mar 27	Eyak and reconstruction	Krauss 1965; Krauss 1977a; Cardoso, Crippen, & Mellesmoen 2022	
12	Apr 1 Apr 3	Na-Dene and Haida (+ bonus topic?)	Sapir 1915; Levine 1979; Enrico 2004	presentations assigned
13	Apr 8 Apr 10	presentations	none	presentations
	Apr 14– Apr 30	Exam period	final paper due Apr 23