

Features of the Northern Northwest Coast Language Area

Defining a language area is different from defining a language family. While the borders of language families are drawn by systematic changes that languages share and piecing together what order those changes happened in, the borders of a language area are a bit more difficult to define. To the outsider, it might seem obvious that a language area would be defined by geography, since languages that are physically close together to be influencing each other the most. And while that's a half-decent starting point, it doesn't take into account any of the social nuances that would have ripple effects of change or non-change. Social elements are crucial to keep in mind when discussing language, since language is a method of being social and interacting with others. Linguists are in the unique position to examine how languages are affecting each other in an area, and more specifically define those borders.

This article will delve into the Northern Northwest Coast (NNWC) language area, which covers languages spoken on the southern coast of Alaska. The native languages of the Americas are less studied than the languages of Europe, so any research into a language area is still relatively recent. However, the language families are still pretty well-defined, so there's not as much confusion over whether a feature might be borrowed or inherited, which could be a problem in other areas of the world. The NNWC language area is also contained enough that there isn't as much to consider when it comes to external influences that might have changed what the language area is already influencing. With all of that under consideration, it must be acknowledged that the NNWC language area is still up in the air on what exactly it contains. That is partially what this article will be looking into, trying to

determine where exactly its borders lie, or at least where it's most likely for them to be. As an umbrella topic around this goal, language areas and the techniques used to define them will also be discussed, to some degree.

The most reliable way to find a language area is to find features shared in languages from different language families, or at the very least languages that are distantly related. These features need to be rare outside of the region, and specific enough that they stand on their own as evidence that the languages were brushing up against each other and leaving traces behind. In "Evidence for a Northern Northwest Coast Language Area" by Jeff Leer, there are two features that are found to be shared. The first and more widespread one is promiscuous number marking, or "the marking of number not by the choice of the pronominal morpheme but by a separate number-marking morpheme... in some instances the language allows promiscuous association: the number marker is free to associate semantically with pronouns bearing various syntactic roles within the clause" (Leer 160). In other words, there's a number marking feature, in the case of the languages going to be discussed, on the verb, and it's 'promiscuous' in the sense that it can apply to any noun phrase in the phrase containing the verb. All four languages that Leer's article is looking at — Haida, Eyak, Aleut, and Tlingit — have this feature, though Tlingit has a diluted or weaker version where the number marking feature is restricted to direct arguments of the verb.

This feature is very promising as evidence for the NNWC language area, since it's both specific and rare outside of these four languages. Promiscuous number marking is a strange feature to gain, since it adds ambiguity. However, it's simply asking the speaker to broaden the applicable area of something that they were presumably already doing beforehand, which is number marking in general.

If it were possible, it would be incredibly useful to figure out what system these languages might have been using prior to joining or forming the language area. This is where language families would come in. Unfortunately, Eyak and Tlingit are both at the very edge of their Na-Dene family tree, and with Eyak's next-to-none number of speakers, they're not great candidates for this kind of research (Ethnologue). Haida would have a better shot at it if linguists could decide which language family it actually belongs to — there seems to be a recently uptick in those considering including it in the Na-Dene language family, but exact location and general consensus haven't been locked down yet (Ethnologue). That only leaves Aleut, which is also on the edge of its language family, Eskimo-Aleut (Ethnologue). None of these are fantastic situations for a historical linguist trying to piece together how promiscuous number marking came in or even which language it developed in in the first place. To put it bluntly (and affectionately), the NNWC language area is a collection of oddballs.

You might have noticed that Aleut is the only language out of the four that is confirmed to be outside of the Na-Dene language family. Thankfully, it's fully incorporated, but without it, the NNWC language area might have a harder time being accepted by the linguistic community, since shared features are usually attributed to a genetic relationship instead of an areal relationship.

Leer's article also discusses another feature that Eyak and Haida share, which is periphrastic possessive constructions with alienable nouns. According to Leer, "inalienable nouns are preceded by possessive pronouns that are for the most part identical with object (or patient) pronouns. Alienable nouns, however, cannot be possessed in this way; possession is indicated either by possessive determiners or a periphrastic possessive construction" (Leer 177). Basically, alienable nouns can either be noted as possessed by a word like 'my' or with a specific word order construction. In Haida, this

means putting an ‘attributive’ pronoun at the beginning of the sentence, which doesn’t move in relation to anything else and doesn’t really act as a pronoun, since it’s not replacing a noun phrase anywhere, rather pointing to an existing noun phrase instead (Leer 177). In Eyak, a suffix is used instead: “-xaʔ ‘at, near, by, “on” (as in “it broke on me” = “to my disadvantage”), etc.’,” and this suffix is attached to the possessor (Leer 181). Though the exact constructions in Haida and Eyak are different in execution, Leer proposes that this is evidence that these two languages were at the center of the NNWC language area, influencing each other the most. Aleut would have been further away, and Tlingit hanging around at the edge with its verb-promiscuity restriction with the promiscuous number marking feature: see Fig. 3 from Leer’s article below.¹

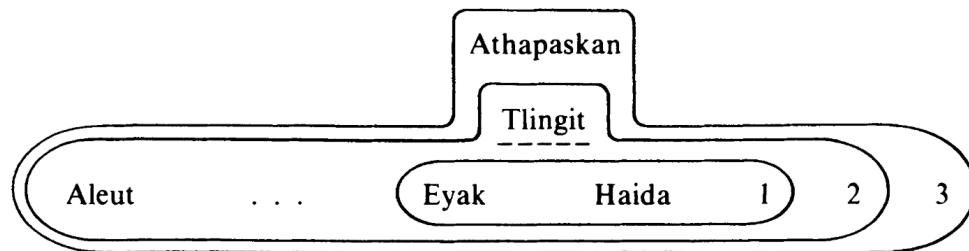


FIG. 3.—Schematic representation of the NNWC language area.

This layered version of the NNWC language area is an intriguing proposal, but more evidence would be needed to accept it as true. However, the periphrastic possessive constructions shouldn’t be ignored. The main issue with this diagram doesn’t lie in the Haida and Eyak pair, but instead in the inclusion of Aleut. For sure, Aleut is a part of the language area — otherwise, how did it end up with promiscuous number marking? — but there are a few things to keep in mind about it. Firstly, Aleut is

¹ Leer’s article is from 1991, and includes “Athapaskan” (now Athabaskan) as a language or macrolanguage of its own on the fringes of this diagram. The languages that Leer references as Athapaskan are both unclear and not a large part of his argument, and are therefore omitted from discussion in this article.

the most geographically separate from the other three languages, existing in the Aleutian islands instead of in the central coast like the rest. This means that if a stronger connection can be made between Aleut and the rest of the languages in question, especially Haida and Eyak, then the concept of the NNWC language area will be a lot stronger.

Leer's article doesn't cover every single feature that the NNWC language area has in common. However, a lot of the shared features are also shared more broadly. For example, the general lack of labials. While labials do exist at least a little bit in most of these languages, there are always very few. According to Taff, et al. in their article, "Phonetic structures of Aleut," "Aleut is in the 1% of the world's languages that do not have **p** and **b** (Maddieson, 1984). There are well-established cognate sound correspondences between Aleut and other members of the Eskimo-Aleut family. The lack in Aleut of all labial consonants but **m** is described by Bergsland (1986). Eskimo **p**- and **m**- correspond to the Aleut **h**-, **h** being lately lost in Eastern Aleut. Eskimo **-p**-, **-v**-, **-m**- correspond to Aleut and **-ᵐ**- and **-m**-" (Taff 234). Take note that only 1% of the world's languages don't have bilabial stops! What a coincidence it would be if the other languages in the NNWC language area also have very few labials...

Would you look at that! According to Michael E. Krauss in the forthcoming *A Grammar of Eyak*, Eyak only has the voiced bilabial stop, 'b', and only in its plain form, with no other labials (Krauss 145). This is in stark contrast to the rest of Eyak's obstruents, which are saturated with aspirated and ejective forms, making the bilabial stop rare in normal language. Like Aleut, Tlingit also has no bilabial stops. In fact, according to De Wolf, in "Tlingit phonology in a generative framework" from 1977, Tlingit has no labials at all! This includes all stops and nasals.

Unfortunately for this theory, Haida does have labials. According to Sapir in 1923, Haida has many labials, from the bilabial stop (the voicedness of which is unclear, it's written as 'b' by Sapir, and later sources like Hori's "Pitch Assignment Rules in Skidegate Haida" from 1996 has the voiced 'b', there seems to be a book by John Enrico from 2003 that seems to propose that the 'b' is voiceless, or at least devoiced, but I can't confirm this one way or another because Enrico's book isn't online anywhere — regardless, Haida has a bilabial stop) to the nasal 'm' and the labial approximant 'w'. Sapir also describes labialized gutturals (uvulars) and labialized velars, like 'gw' and 'q'w'. The 'labialized' effect might also be described as rounding, which Tlingit also has, so perhaps these don't count towards the labials in the end, since they don't count for Tlingit.

While the lack of labials would have been nice to have as another general confirmed feature of the NNWC language area, instead it appears that there might be a different subsection outside of the Haida and Eyak pair that contains Aleut, Eyak, and Tlingit. Additionally, there might be a new reinforcement from the rounded velars and uvulars that were just mentioned that Haida and Tlingit share, perhaps establishing another pair, though more evidence would be needed. This also makes sense geographically, since Haida is the furthest east, which is just a bonus point. As a side note, it might be possible that Eyak's inclusion of the 'b' was borrowed from Haida, since they're proven to be a bit of a pairing from the periphrastic possessive constructions. This would also explain the simplicity of 'b' in Eyak, since there are no aspirated or ejective versions of it like the rest of the plosives, suggesting that it works differently for some reason. If Eyak still had fluent speakers and more data could be gathered, it would be interesting to learn if there's a way to recognize Haida loanwords, and if the 'b' shows up in them more frequently, or even exclusively.

Phonology is one of the easiest things to point to for differences because it's documented for each language in charts, which are much easier to compare than long, dense paragraphs attempting to describe obscure rules. That being said, another feature stands out: animacy and plurals. Eyak, Tlingit, and Haida all have animacy systems for their pronouns. In Eyak, the line between animate and inanimate is drawn between human and inhuman, which means that plurals are only marked in demonstrative pronouns for humans, like he/she/they (singular) and they (plural), while inhuman/inanimate demonstrative pronouns distinguish for distance, like this/these (proximal) and that/those (distal) (Krauss 310). According to Crippen, in the "Tlingit Verbal Structure Handbook," shows that Tlingit has human and nonhuman versions for 3rd person possessive, independent, and postpositional pronouns (Crippen 10). Unfortunately, it doesn't go into much detail, just giving the barebones charts without any explanation of what might be occurring there.

Haida has a much more comprehensive animacy system compared to Eyak and Tlingit. It has four options: "[+human] [+animate] [+concrete] [+intangible]" (Edwards 400). These affect both nouns and pronouns. Hori wrote "Semantic Motivations for Split Intransitivity in Haida" in 2008, in which they explain that "[word] order in Haida correlates with the animacy and potency of the referents of NPs" (Hori 2008, 26) and "it should be pointed out that animacy is a covert category in Haida, in that it is not overtly marked in nouns or verbs but implicitly works as an effective factor for verb classification" (Hori 2008, 33), and all of this combines with other rules to make pronouns very complicated in Haida.

The more complex system in Haida might mean that it influenced Eyak and Tlingit to add animacy as well in a much more limited capacity, since it would be very difficult to go the other

direction naturally. This establishes yet another connection within the NNWC language area. Albeit, because of the positioning of Eyak and Tlingit in the Na-Dene language family, and Haida's non-position at the moment, it might be difficult to argue for language area influence over language family genetic connections, but it can't be ruled out, especially with the numerous other connections that have already been established. There might be a fair argument for the fact that because Eyak and Tlingit are closely related genetically, that it makes more sense to attribute their similar human/inhuman animacy in pronouns to the link through their language family instead of separate influence from Haida, which is very different.

Figuring out these distinctions is the difficult part of this process. It's possible that both propositions are true, that Eyak and Tlingit already had some form of animacy in their pronouns, but that Haida joined the NNWC language area (or that the NNWC language area formed, the timeline is unknown) and dropped off its [+human] animacy feature. This really can't be confirmed without more data and time, which currently would be very difficult to do.

Whether or not all of the connections proposed in this article are true, if even a few are, the diagram from Leer showing the layered language area must be incorrect. In his article, Leer put a lot of stock into the Haida and Eyak pairing, but with so many other equally strong connections between the other languages, and especially with the added Haida and Tlingit pairing (especially since Leer put Tlingit at the edge of the language area), it becomes more difficult to ignore the possibility that the layering doesn't make much sense. Either that, or the layering is different to what Leer proposed. Perhaps it started off as two pairs that then merged to create the NNWC language area. Leer even suggested, from the promiscuous number marking, that Tlingit entered late into the NNWC or was at

least on the periphery, and therefore influenced less (Leer 162) — would it have been possible for Aleut to have joined first and relayed new changes to Tlingit before it joined fully? There are many theories that could be posed. As more features are described and analyzed, a clearer picture of the NNWC language area can be formed. Unfortunately, with such small speaker populations for all four of these languages, it's unlikely for that research to be done.

In the end, the NNWC language area is fairly well supported. The only feature discussed here that all four have in common is promiscuous number marking, but significant connections can be made with subsets of the larger group. The two main pairings are very important. Haida and Eyak have the strongest connection out of all of them, sharing not only the periphrastic possessive constructions, but are also included the animacy trio of Haida, Eyak, and Tlingit (though that's perhaps the weakest proposition, it still reinforces their connection). On the other hand, the phonology was very useful in establishing two more groupings. The broader of the two was Aleut, Eyak, and Tlingit, which spawned from the lack of labials. However, that also revealed a possible pair of Haida and Tlingit, which both have rounded velars and uvulars.

Stepping back and looking at these groups now, it's clear that there are connections between all four. It's difficult to pick a specific pair or even a specific language as a locus to focus on because of how intertwined they are. That being said, both Eyak and Tlingit show up three times in the four smaller groups. It might just be easier to find features that involve them, though, so it doesn't have as much gravity as it might seem at first glance. In terms of influence, Haida seems the most influential, simply from the possibility that it added animacy to Eyak and Tlingit, but as already discussed, that's probably a flimsy argument. In the end, the NNWC language area, at the very least, does exist.

I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment. — Cielo Lee

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