The Hän Video Documentation Project: Documenting Critically Endangered Dene Languages

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This presentation will discuss the results of the first stage of the Hän Video Documentation Project which began in summer 2013.

The goal of this project was to produce three short films of Hän speakers narrating videos of themselves performing culturally relevant activities, which included making beaded moccasins, cooking frybread, and preparing salmon.

This presentation will explore the strategies used to make this a useful means of language documentation given the difficulties of working with a critically endangered language.

Additionally, I will consider some interesting linguistic data that resulted from then format of this documentation.

Time permitting, we will view short segments of the films.
Hän

- Hän is a Dene language spoken in eastern Alaska in the village of Eagle, and in western Yukon in Dawson City.
- Today there are only 6-8 speakers who are all now English dominant and rarely have the chance to use the language on a regular basis. The youngest speaker is about 63. It is thus considered critically endangered (UNESCO).
Previous Documentation

- Previous documentation of the language includes:
  - A noun dictionary (Ritter 1979)
  - A book of stories written by the youngest speaker (Ridley 1983)
  - A collection of about a dozen recording stories from two speakers of the previous generation
  - Several very basic literacy workbooks (YNLC)
Previous Documentation

- Currently Willem de Reuse is writing an academic grammar which is the first major documentation project in the language.
- This work focused mostly on morphology and verb paradigms. Little work has been done on the syntax and semantics of the language.
- Additional documentation of connected speech is thus critically needed.
Video Documentation

- Video documentation can be an effective means of capturing both language and culture and their relationship.
- Provides a context for natural speech, which is particularly useful for speakers who no longer use the language on a regular basis or have limited fluency.
- More interesting for consultants, while being of value to both linguists and community members.
Hän Video Documentation Project

- Designed to elicit culturally relevant information in a framework that will aid speakers in remembering vocabulary and grammatical constructions.

- Includes three speakers of the language from Eagle, AK who each narrated their own video. Topics included: 1) Making beaded mocassins 2) Making frybread 3) Preparing salmon.
Designing the Project

- Discussed topics with consultants. The consultants were encouraged to choose a topic according to their interests and abilities.

- Recording took place within a roughly two-week period in July 2013. The first week was spent in Fairbanks with one speaker on the longest video, and a second week was spent in the village of Eagle on the second two videos.
Funded by a Jacobs grant and some additional funds, which paid for:

- Sony HDR-CX380 Video Camera, $449
- Zoom H4N Handy Portable Digital Recorder, $217
- Sony Movie Studio Platinum Suite 12, $50
- Consultant fees (variable)
- Supplies for things made in the videos, $360

Thus, some basic equipment is needed (camera, recorder) but these can be re-used. Consultant and travel fees will vary depending on the project.
Phase One: Record the activity without narration (besides occasional in situ narration). I then pieced together portions of the video into a roughly 15-20 minute video.

Phase Two: The consultants then watched the videos while narrating roughly in Hän. Often, this included discussing in English what sentences would be best.
Project Phases, cont.

- Phase Three: I then made clips of each sentence, writing up a rough script along with (sometimes very rough) transcriptions.
- Phase Four: We edited the sentences and re-recorded them when necessary. This often involved me reading the sentences we previously worked on for the speakers to repeat back (which proved difficult).
Phase Five: Sizing down the videos to about ten minutes each, adding the sound files and captions (English and Hän) for each sentence to the video.

Phase Six: (for summer 2014) Watch the videos with consultants, making any final changes in translations or re-recordings.
Difficulties

- None of the three speakers I worked with speak Hän on a daily basis, and thus sometimes have trouble remembering words, code switching between English and Hän, or simply may have difficulty accessing the full richness of their native language without thinking out sentences beforehand.

- This necessitated that we work on sentences together with all speakers present, while I sometimes suggested English sentences as starting points or helped to find other ways of saying things.
Difficulties, cont.

- All three speakers greatly benefited from working together. We had all three together when in Eagle, and this was very effective for them completing each others’ thoughts.

- Watching the video (rather than translating sentences without context) did seem effective in creating good sentences with some vocabulary not found in the current dictionary.
Differences in Speakers

- The three speakers I worked with were sisters but all were radically different in how they worked in this format of documentation. This caused some difficulties as I had to constantly adapt the approach.

- Additionally, the three videos proved to be quite different in length and structure and prompted different elicitation approaches.
Ruth Ridley - Moccasins

- Ruth Ridley was the narrator of the moccasins video.
- Ruth is the youngest sister, worked with linguists in the past to develop a writing system, also with de Reuse’s grammar.
- The filming for this video alone took 8-10 hours, which was unexpected (beadwork takes a long time!)
Bertha Ulvi - Frybread

- Bertha Ulvi was the narrator of the frybread video.
- Filming for this took no more than an hour.
- Bertha has worked with de Reuse on the Han grammar.
Ethel Beck – Fish Cutting

- Ethel Beck was the narrator for the salmon cutting video.
- Filming also took only about an hour.
- Ethel has worked with de Reuse on the Han grammar.
Challenges in each video (randomized)

- Speaker #1 was very good at producing lots of long sentences (even whole paragraphs) very quickly while watching the film footage without prompting or suggestions from myself. At the same time, her sentences included lots of English words and even whole phrases. How much English should be kept? Speakers in all the videos had this problem for some vocabulary--- (‘pattern,’ ‘dough,’ ‘table’) for example.

- Sometimes speaker #1 became nervous during the filming and recording and produced sentences that, when reviewing, she determined were ungrammatical or could be improved. We therefore worked with all speakers to edit her sentences and re-record them. It should be made clear that there is no pressure to produce perfect sentences the first time through.
Speaker #2’s sentences were all very slow (but well thought out), and often it was like translating a target English sentence word by word, which resulted in a lot of re-recording.

Once again, many English loanwords were used, but in this case it was more intentional when she did not know a word. I feel it is acceptable to allow speakers to use the words they are familiar and comfortable with.
The overall recording process went the smoothest with speaker #3’s video, probably due in part to me learning better methods of eliciting sentences or to her having watched her sisters make other videos first.

Speaker #3 didn’t need a lot of help from sisters except for a few words. In this case I structured the sentences more for her which helped—while I didn’t want to steer the narration too much in general the consultants seemed happy to have some direction for the narration.
Additional Problems

- Major issues with getting Hän subtitles correct. Hän vowels can have up to three diacritics and the program I’m using can’t handle this (even with different fonts, the alignment is always off or some diacritics disappear).

- As for the filming, in my first video I made several beginner errors: often it was difficult to get the angle right (hands covering the sewing) and sometimes the speaker would work on important parts while I was not there to film it.

- Volume and quality consistency of sound files. Some of this is fixable with further editing.

- How long should silent gaps be? (Without any narration that was elicited)

- Overall flow and length?
How video documentation can be useful for linguists

- Video documentation can constrain elicitation because the linguist may not be able to ask for specific sentences (though this is no different from stories or dialogues).
- However, the linguist can try to elicit certain types of sentences and constructions.
I tried to focus on eliciting lots of examples of complex sentences with adverbial clauses.

**Conditionals:**

1) Ėdhōh hēe ā’nintl’ù’ jë’ thimble nēnla’ kàyy dhāh’aa tr’āthet ēdhōh jēch’āt lē’

Hide with sew.2s if/when thimble your on wear because high tough might be

‘When sewing on hide you wear a thimble on your hand because the hide might be too tough.’

2) Dāhtl’aa hēe ontō’ jë’ juwee nts’ānn ātojay

Paper with hold.2s if then-NEG around slip

‘If you hold it with paper it won’t slip around.’
Purpose Clauses:

3. T’ähoo ļuu nähzhey ļ wëts’än ļ hökt’am ts’á’h hózo ļ tāhgayy
   Now thin-sliced fish from it cut.1s and good dry.FUT.3s
   ‘Now I’m cutting the extra meat off the fish so it’ll dry good.

4. Ľuu nänn tthi’ hózo ļ tāgay ļ haa hontsöl wēkayy ho’t’āā ļ
   Fish backbone flesh good dry.FUT.3s for a little on it cut.2s
   ‘So the backbone meat dries better, make a few holes in it.’
Good examples of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> (commands), and 3<sup>rd</sup> person (though not many plural forms). Speakers had different preferences for using commands (as if telling someone how to do what they were doing) and 1<sup>st</sup> person (describing what they were doing).

Also yielded lots of imperfective and future forms.

Good examples of tone sequences.
Unexpected data: The particle /źaː:/

- At least two speakers inserted the particle /źaː:/ in some of the sentences (for one speaker it was in nearly every sentence in the first run-through).
- Typical “doesn’t mean anything” particle that clearly means something (or has some function) of they wouldn’t say it.
The particle /žaː/, cont.

- When editing the sentences, the speakers would always say the /žaː/’s could be omitted, or shouldn’t even be there at all.
- At another point when editing Bertha’s video, Ethel said “You don’t need to say /žaː/, you’re actually doing X (whatever it is she was doing).”
- From their discussion, it seems as though /žaː/ indicates that the speaker is not actually doing what she says she is. This resulted from speakers narrating a film of them performing actions---when in fact they weren’t performing the actions when they were speaking.
- I am tentatively considering /žaː/ to mean “It’s as though X is doing Y.”
Conclusion

- Video documentation can be effective even with critically endangered languages.
- If possible, having speakers work together aids in memory.
- Allow speakers to work out sentences rather than feel pressured to produce them perfectly on the spot.
- Allow some flexibility with loan words.
- Adapt to each individual and each speaker. Some speakers might take more control of a project than others.
- Video documentation can be steered to elicit constructions of interest to linguists, while the finished product is also of value to language learners and community members.
Mahsi’ Choo!

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Bibliography
