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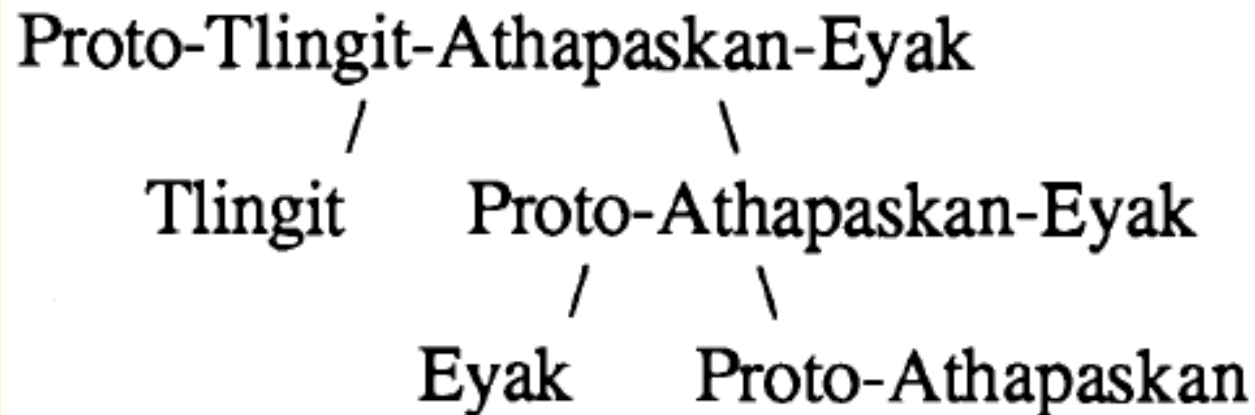
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Classification of Athabaskan languages (North America) based on 110-item wordlists: the current results

The 18th Sergei Starostin Memorial Conference on Comparative-Historical Linguistics
Moscow, HSE, March 23, 2022

Na-Dene linguistic family

- Tlingit (several dialects)
- Eyak (at least two dialects, both extinct)
- Athabaskan group (45-50 languages)



Athabaskan group of the Na-Dene linguistic family

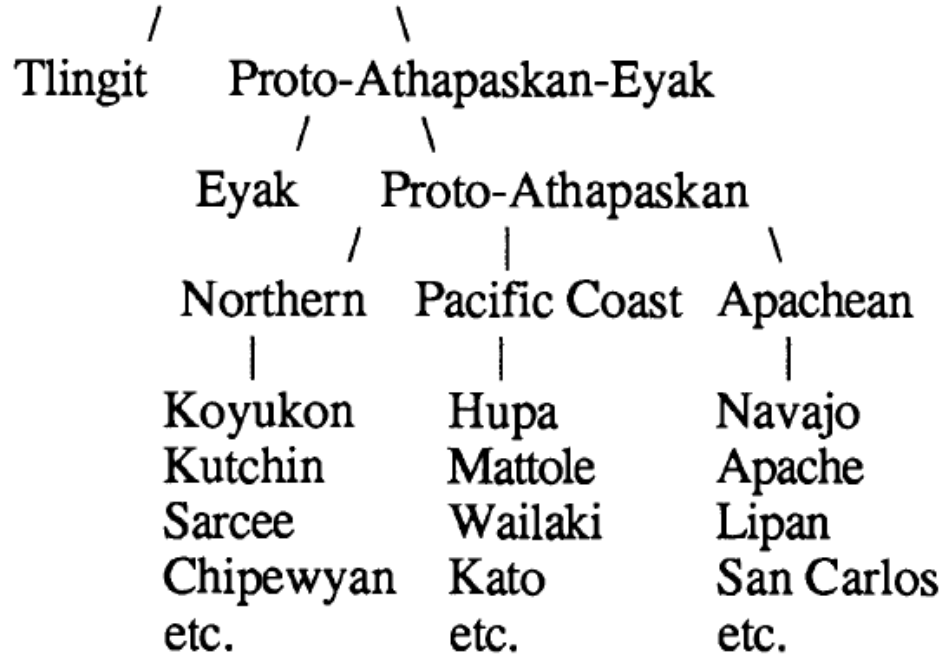
- 45-50 living or recently extinct languages
- three geographic areas:
 - 1) Alaska-Canada (Northern Athabaskan),
 - 2) California-Oregon (Pacific Coast Athabaskan, PCA),
 - 3) Southwestern United States (Southern Athabaskan or Apachean).
- Time depth and diversity \approx Germanic group of IE



Traditional classification = geographical distribution. Three sub-groups (e.g., Cook & Rice 1989: 2–4; Kari 2010: 208):

- 1) Northern
- 2) Pacific Coast Athabaskan (PCA)
- 3) Apachean

Proto-Tlingit-Athapaskan-Eyak



- PCA (ca. 10 languages w. dialects) – compact clade, consensus
- Apachean (5 languages w. dialects) – compact clade, consensus
- Northern (30-35 languages w. dialects) – ???

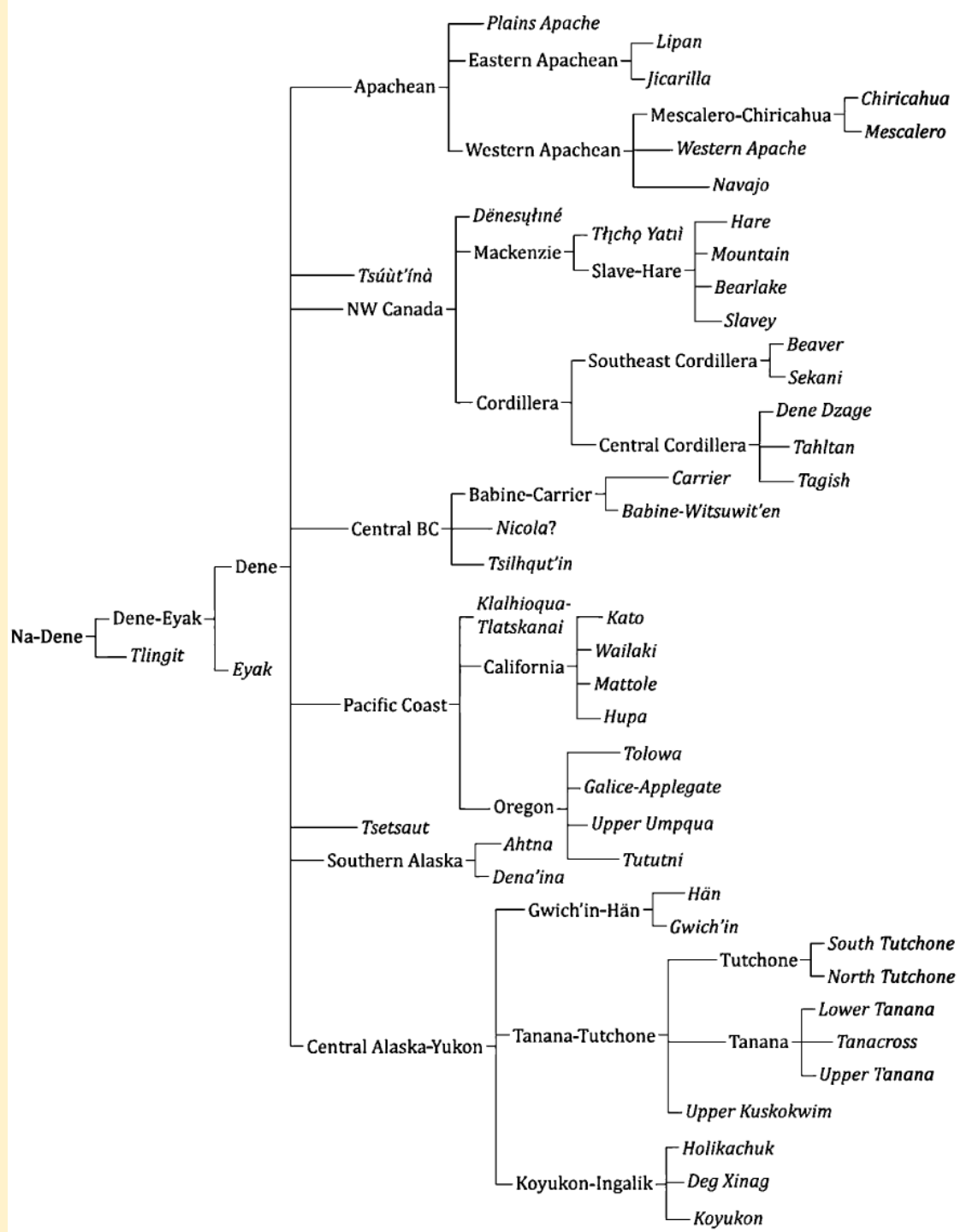
Already Sapir (apud Osgood 1936: 21–22) claimed that Northern Athabaskan is a geographic unit rather than a genealogical one

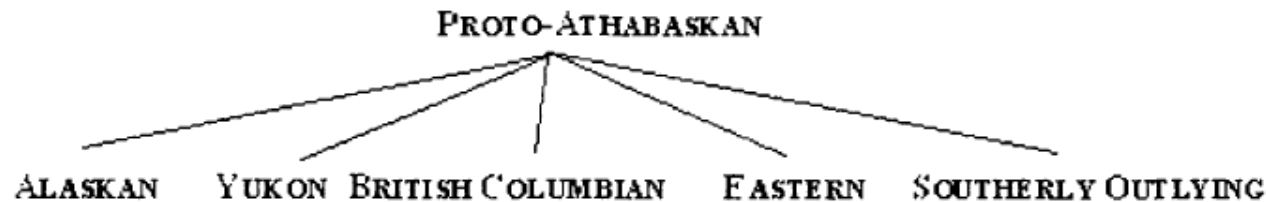
Northern Athabaskan

- Hoijer 1963: Athabaskan classification based on the developments (convergence or retention) of PA $*c$, $*č$, $*kʷ$. Result: no meaningful classification (see criticism in Krauss 1976: 323–327).
- “Northern Athapaskan is traditionally not a set of discrete languages but rather a cohesive complex, in which neighbors routinely communicate across dialect and language boundaries throughout the whole area, traditionally learning, at least passively, neighboring dialects and languages” (Krauss 1982: 74; similarly in Krauss & Golla 1981: 68).
- “The internal structure of Athapaskan, particularly of the Northern branch, continues to be worthy of study” (Cook & Rice 1989: 4)

Keren Rice's classification (apud Goddard 1996: 5, repeated by Mithun 1999: 346, Tuttle & Hargus 2004: 72–74, Jaker, Welch & Rice 2020):

- rake-like tree (no comments were offered, no criteria were disclosed).





Leer's subgroupings are given in (4) in more detail:

(4)

ALASKAN = Ahtna, Dena'ina, Deg Xinag, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Lower Tanana, Tanacross, Upper Tanana, Gwich'in, Han

YUKON = Tsetsaut, N. Tutchone, S. Tutchone, Tagish-Tahltan, Kaska, Sekani, Beaver

BRITISH COLUMBIAN = Babine-Witsuwit'en, Carrier, Chilcotin

EASTERN = Chipewyan, Slave, Dogrib

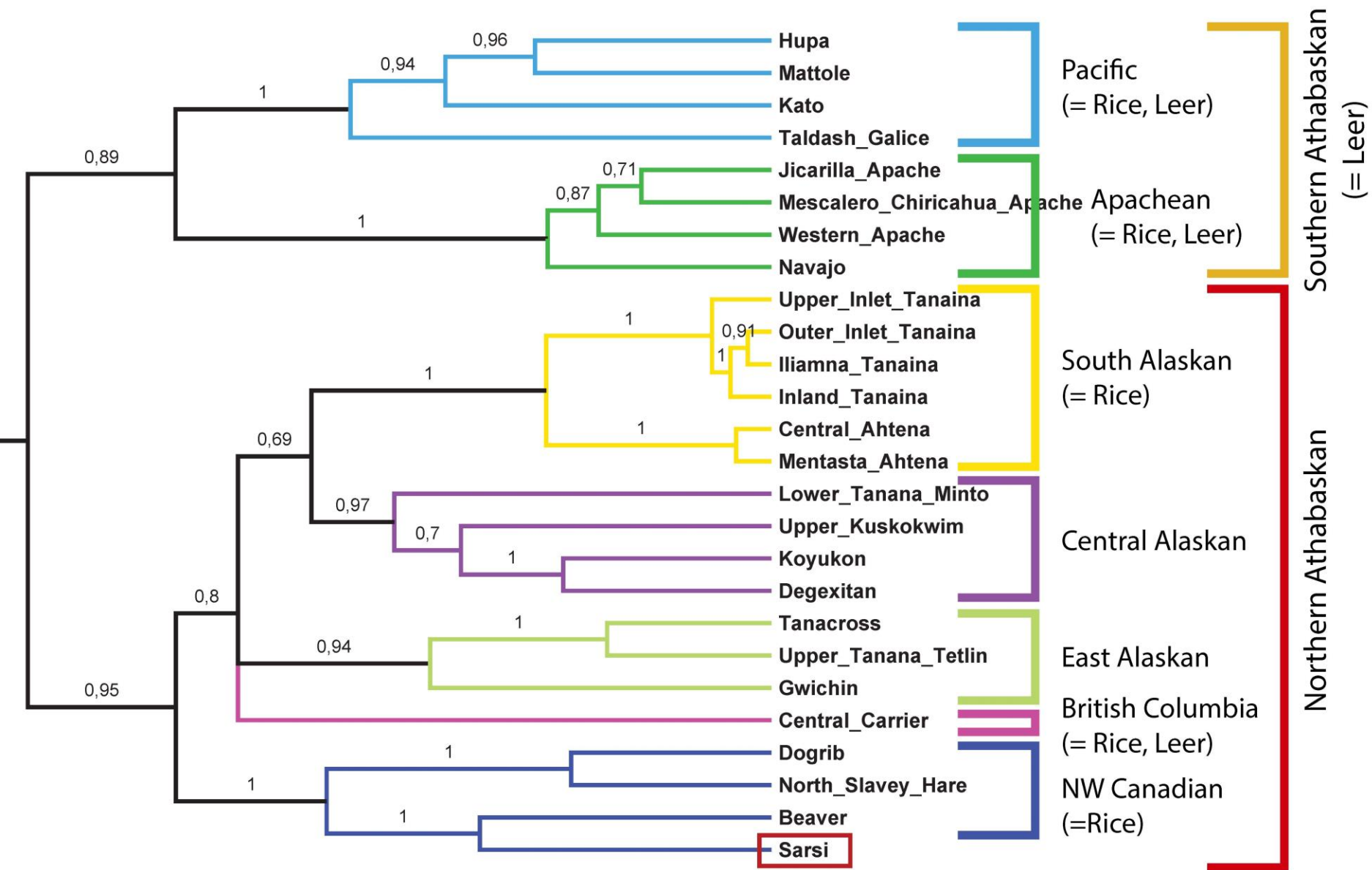
SOUTHERLY OUTLYING = Tsuut'ina (Sarcee), APACHEAN, PACIFIC COAST ATHABASKAN

Jeff Leer's classification (apud Tuttle & Hargus 2004: 73)

- Based on lexical and some phonological characters (no details have been published yet).
- Rake-like tree.
- PCA and Apachean form a distinct "Southerly Outlying" clade
- the composition of the "Northern" clades substantially differs from Rice's classification.

My classification

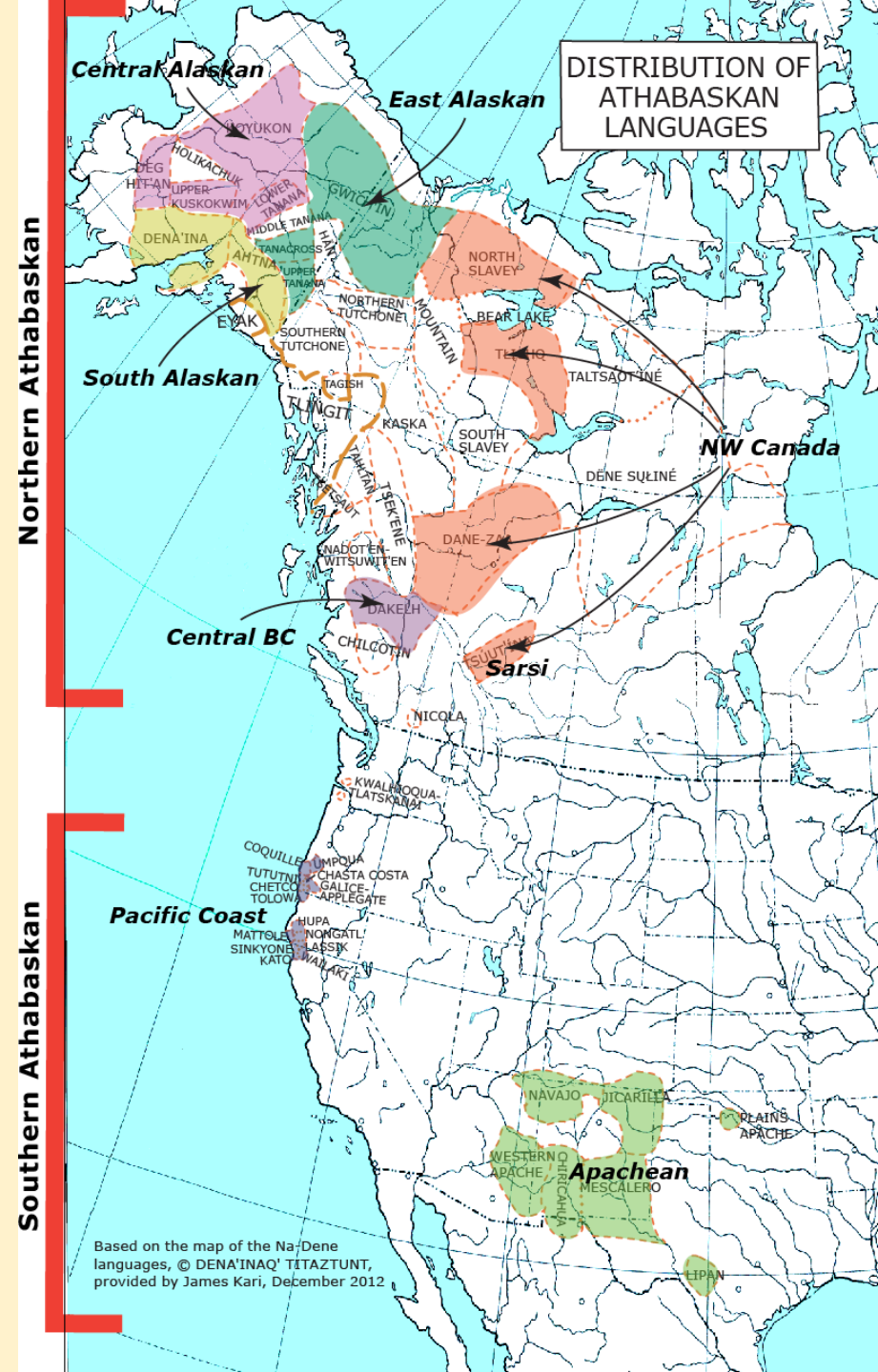
- 110-item Swadesh wordlists, compiled and elaborated in accordance of the methodology and general principles of the *Moscow School* (Kassian et al. 2010; Kassian 2015; Kassian et al. 2021; Egorov, Dybo & Kassian 2022).
- Wordlists for 22 languages (total 26 wordlists with some dialect included). Now available on *Moscow Lexical Database* <http://moslex.org/>
- MrBayes software, derivational drift eliminated (Kassian et al. 2021)



Main results

- 1) Northern Athabaskan represent a distinct clade.
- 2) Initial bifurcation into Northern Athabaskan and Southern Athabaskan (PCA-Apachean). The Southern Athabaskan (PCA-Apachean) clade has been previously proposed by Leer. But the existence of the Northern Athabaskan clade is now usually denied.
- 3) radiation of Northern Athabaskan into several young clades:
 - a. South Alaskan (Tanaina-Ahtena: thus Rice)
 - b. North-West Canada (Dogrib, North Slavey, Beaver, Sarsi: thus Rice, excluding Sarsi)
 - c. British Columbia (Carrier and others outside our analysis: thus Rice, Leer)
 - d. Central Alaskan (L.Tanana, U.Kuskokwim, Koyukon, Degexit'an) – previously not reported.
 - e. East Alaskan (U.Tanana, Tanacross, Gwich'in) – previously not reported.
 - f. Sarsi is confidently included in the North-West Canada clade – previously not reported.

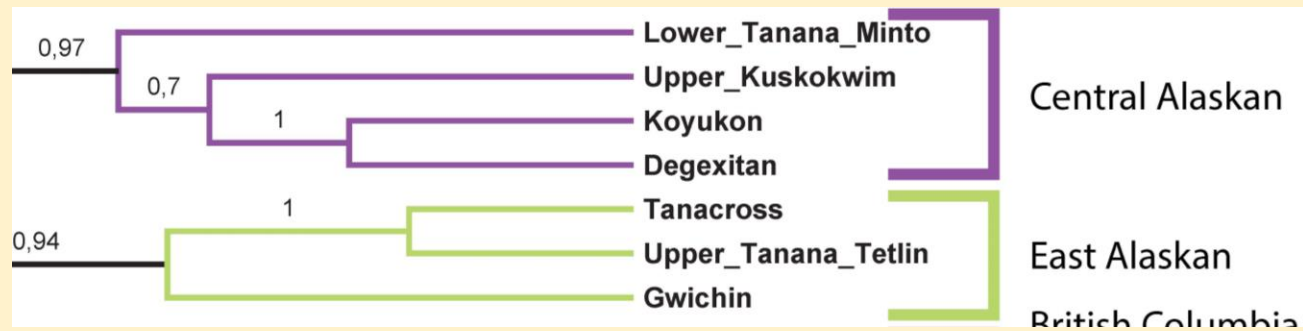
The proposed tree classification is coherent with geographic distribution



Highlights

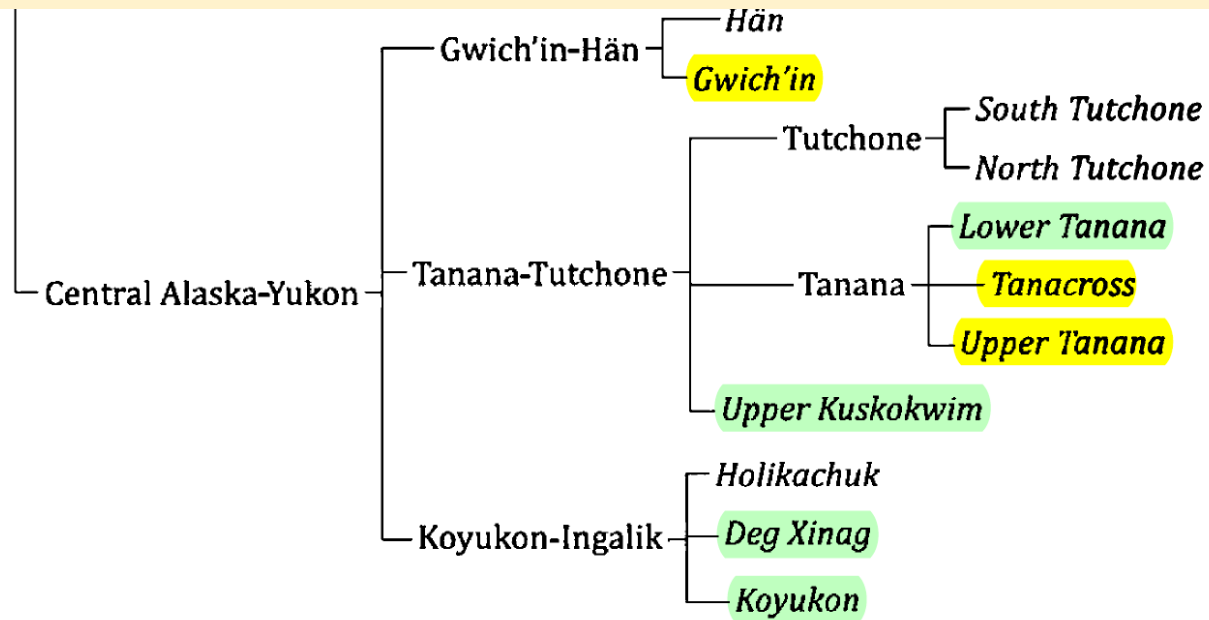
1) Two new Alaskan clades:

- Central Alaskan (L.Tanana, U.Kuskokwim, Koyukon, Degexit'an)
- East Alaskan (U.Tanana, Tanacross, Gwich'in)

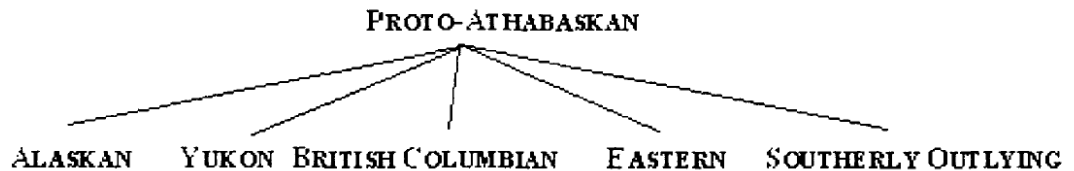


Highlights

Rice distributes these languages between several clades within a large “Central Alaska-Yukon clade” (my Central Alaskan are highlighted in green, East Alaskan – in yellow):



Leer includes all these languages together with my South Alaskan clade (Tanaina-Ahtena) in a large “Alaskan clade”:



Leer’s subgroupings are given in (4) in more detail:

(4)

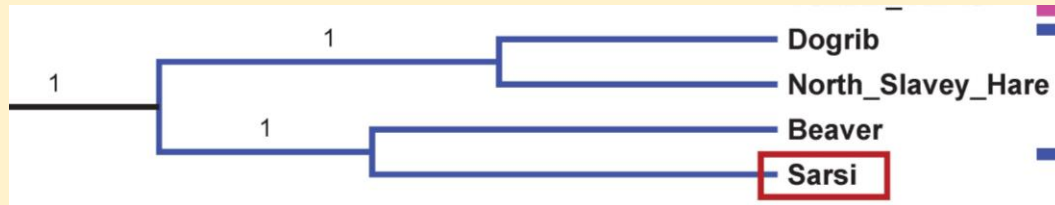
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Highlights

2) The Sarsi (a.k.a. Tsúùt'ínà) language as a member of the North-West Canada clade.



- Rice treats Sarsi as a distinct high-level clade.
- Leer considers Sarsi as a distinct branch within the Southern Athabaskan (PCA-Apachean) clade.
- The specific relationship between Sarsi and British Columbia Athabaskan languages such as Beaver, however, was proposed by Goddard 1915: 190, later it was adopted by Sapir (Osgood 1936: 21–22). The Sarsi self-designation *tsúùt'ínà* possibly contains *tso* ‘beaver’ which suggests that the Sarsi people are related to the Beaver people (Cook 1984: 1).

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