

Personal naming practices in T̥chq̥ yatì

This paper examines personal name formation in T̥chq̥ yatì, a Dene language spoken by ~2000 people in the central Northwest Territories (Statistics Canada 2021). Although relatively widely spoken, documentation of T̥chq̥ yatì is sparse, and pre-existing research on personal names in the language (and indeed, in the Dene family as a whole (i.e. Rice (1989:202); Moore (2007)) is virtually non-existent. As such, at the request of multiple community members, I present here an analysis of a newly compiled list of over 500 T̥chq̥ personal names, dating from the early 19th century to the present day. This list is a combination of the contents of several existing manuscript namelists and treaty records, as well as hundreds of novelly elicited personal names from consultants across the T̥chq̥-speaking region. As in many other North American language families (i.e. Inuit-Aleut (Macdonald 2009), Algonquian (Wolvengrey 2023), Iroquoian (Cooke 1952), and Siouan (DeMallie 2021)), the personal names in this dataset have diverse morphosyntactic and etymological origins. I divide them here into three broad categories based on formation patterns, source language, and usage; the ‘native’ set (names of an entirely T̥chq̥ origin), the ‘neo-contact’ set (names of European origin), and the ‘mixed’ set (names with elements of both). Individuals often have several names from multiple of these sets.

The ‘native’ set is by far the most internally diverse; with the exception of non-inflecting particles and pronouns, virtually any grammatical utterance or lexical item is a valid target for personal name formation. Nouns (i.e. *Gotèwhìq̥* - ‘Dragonfly’), verb phrases (i.e. *Tì Ts’àts’eedì* - ‘Pays the Water’), adpositional phrases (i.e. *Kw’azhù* - ‘Under the Moss’), adverbs (i.e. *Ts’eewhìq̥* - ‘Quietly’), and even numerals (i.e. *Ek’èdìq̥* - ‘Little Eight’) and interjections (i.e. *Hàbìyè* - ‘Happy New Year’) are all attested as personal names. The semantic categories are also diverse, including physical characteristics, habitual actions, inanimate objects, animals, and kin relations (particularly through teknonymy (the naming of parents after their children)). A substantial subset of these names are denotationally obscure, with no obvious synchronic meaning. The names in this set are also often transient, changing and evolving through an individual’s life.

The ‘neo-contact’ set consists of phonological adaptations of European personal names (i.e. *Welèq̥* - ‘William’, *Maàro* - ‘Mary Rose’); these adaptations are often highly lexicalised and idiosyncratic, and there is considerable variation in the phonological processes applied. Unlike names in the ‘native’ set, ‘neo-contact’ names are generally sex-specific, and given their typical correspondence with the legal given name of the bearer, are generally permanent.

Finally, the ‘mixed’ set consists of ‘neo-contact’ names modified with native T̥chq̥ lexical elements (i.e. *Aliwhòcho* - ‘Big Alphonse’, *Nàhgq̥ Dawì* - ‘Bushman David’). Unlike the ‘native’ set, these ‘mixed’ names tend to follow a relatively small set of construction patterns, and unlike the ‘neo-contact’ set, they too are semi-transient, changing to reflect the evolving appearance, personality, or societal role of their bearer, but retaining their ‘neo-contact’ base.

References

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