

# Dene Languages Conference Theme and Special Session

Description to be included in call for papers

## General Conference Description

The Dene Languages Conference is the world's most important annual conference for the study of Dene (Athabaskan) languages, bringing together linguists, educators, language learners, and language activists from all parts of Denendeh and beyond. The theme for this year's conference is "Language and History". There will also be a special session on "Standardization and Variation".

## Special Session: "Standardization and Variation"

Dene languages, with their many complex symbols and diacritical markings, can be quite challenging to write just by ear, and many language workers have expressed a desire for some form of standardized spelling, which learners can just memorize. At the same time, there is a great deal of variation within each language—in forms used in different villages, by different families, by different generations of speakers, and in formal and informal situations. In this context, standardization also runs the risk of suppressing or marginalizing any dialects other than the 'standard'. Given this context, we invite presentations which address any of the following questions:

- Are standardization and variation mutually exclusive? That is, can we accommodate variation within a standardized spelling system?
- Should standardization apply to some areas of language but not others?
- Does standardization need to apply to entire 'languages', or can there be different standards for different villages / communities?
- Does standardization help with 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition, or with the acquisition of Dene literacy?
- Are certain resources necessary as a pre-requisite to standardization—for example, a grammar and a dictionary in the language?
- Can there be more than one writing system (i.e. roman script and syllabics)?

We welcome all viewpoints relating to this topic, both for and against standardization, especially from language workers and language teachers, relating their own experiences with literacy and the role of standardization. This special session will consist of 3-4 formal presentations, followed by a panel discussion, followed by open discussion.

## Conference Theme: "Language and History"

Language is in many ways a product of history. Language changes over time, and the languages we speak today are the result of many changes accumulated over thousands of years. At the same time, Dene languages are known to be remarkably conservative, particularly in their verb system, where many seemingly irregular or fossilized patterns provide a direct window into the linguistic past. Finally, learning one's traditional language creates, for many people, a sense of connection with history, with one's ancestors, and with one's traditional lands. In this context, we invite presentations on any of the following topics:

- **Historical linguistics and linguistic reconstruction.** What can we infer about how Dene languages sounded long ago, using historical linguistic methods?
- **Subgrouping.** It has previously been argued to be impossible to construct a ‘family tree’ of Dene languages, due to extensive contact and borrowing (Krauss 1964), although new methods in linguistics may make it possible to address questions thought to be unanswerable before. We welcome presentations using different methods of subgrouping (sound change, morphophonemics, lexicostatistics, etc.) as well as arguments both for and against subgrouping.
- **Use of historical or archival materials.** How were Dene languages written in early missionary, explorer, and fur trading records, and what does this tell us about how languages have changed from that time to today?
- **Reconnecting with history through language.** Presentations relating positive experiences of heritage language learners reconnecting spiritually with their ancestors, community, and traditional culture by re-learning their heritage language; language learning as a healing process.
- **Learning language through history.** Using elders’ stories about the old days as part of language teaching.
- **Linguistic change in progress.** Is the language changing right now? Is this good or bad? Should we write the language the way it’s used right now, or try to bring back “old language”? All viewpoints on this topic are welcome, provided they are supported with examples and evidence.

## Conclusion

Proposers should submit an abstract of no longer than 2 pages (including all pictures, references, graphs, and examples) to Dr. Alex Jaker, [amjaker@gmail.com](mailto:amjaker@gmail.com). Abstracts will be reviewed by a committee, both for quality and relevance to this year’s conference theme or special session topic. While presentations on any aspect of Dene language, culture, and history are welcome, priority will be given to those presentations which fit this year’s themes.