

Negative prosody in interior Alaskan Athabascan languages

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Upper and Lower Tanana are Athabascan languages of interior Alaska spoken along the Tanana river. Both languages have sparse low tone from proto-Athabascan glottalization and in synchronic glottal environments, while intonation provides most other pitches. However, a distinct pitch pattern characterizes negative constructions. This pattern is independent of tone from the glottal source.

In Upper Tanana, negative constructions are marked by a low-toned negative particle, low prefix, and a high-toned negative suffix. This suffix fuses with the verb stem transferring its high tone to the stem syllable, as shown in (1).

(1) Upper Tanana
ti.ni:ŋ t^ha.nat^h.ni.ʃok^h
He chased the moose.

k'ə.t'e:j nat^h.ni.ʃoŋ
He did not chase it.

In Lower Tanana, the negative suffix is a separate syllable, and carries a super-high-rising tone along with nasalization; the negative prefix is marked with low tone. This is shown in (2):

(2) Lower Tanana
hi.k^hæ jI.t^hæ
The dogs are barking.

hi.k^hæ jìθ.t^hæʔǣ:
The dogs are not barking.

Several other Lower Tanana morphemes are marked with the same high-rising tone, e.g. [jǣʔ] 'only'. This effect is not found in Upper Tanana.

The historical source of this pattern has not been established, though a loose connection with intonation has been suggested. Extra-high pitch and lengthening are also found in intonational intensification in both languages, but these are not tied to particular morphemes, as the negative pattern is. Based on examination of archived data and new elicitation, we propose that intonational accent, linked to adverbial morphemes and associated with negative semantics, is the source.