Walking like a porcupine, talking like a raven

Figurative language in Upper Tanana Athabascan*

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This paper investigates the cultural grounding of animal idioms describing human behavior in Upper Tanana Athabascan. Semantically, we can identify two types of idioms. Type I idioms are grounded in observations of real-life animals. They are iconic in that they are based on, and evoke, rich images. Type II idioms are grounded in mythology. Certain animals are cultural symbols, representing a particular trait. Type II idioms are thus symbolic. Comparison with other Alaskan Athabascan languages demonstrates that such idioms are common, but also that they are extremely endangered since they are part of the colloquial, rather than formal, language.

Keywords: Upper Tanana, Athabascan, animal idiom, metaphor

1. Introduction

The Upper Tanana Athabascan language, spoken in eastern interior Alaska, employs a number of animal idioms to describe human behavior. An example is given in (1). Following the Upper Tanana expression, speaker initials and the date on which this expression was recorded are included in parentheses.

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(1) *Łįį (kʼe)*[1] *uhtʼiin ahłįį*. (CD, June 29, 2010)
dog (like) people 2PL.S-be
'You guys don't listen.' (lit.: You guys are (like) dog people

The consultant recalls her mother frequently saying (1) to her and her siblings. Sh
explained that dogs are regarded as creatures that do not listen unless they are wel
trained. [–listening] is thus a connotative meaning of *łįį* 'dog', and the idiom in (
transfers this trait to humans. Note that connotative meanings are culturally define
and not identical cross-linguistically. In German, for example, the noun *Hund* 'do
has the connotation of 'faithful' (as in *jemandem wie ein Hund folgen* 'to follow som
one [as faithfully] as a dog'). The connotative meaning 'inattentive' is not present i
German, while the German connotation seems not to be present in Upper Tanana.

The discussion of the cultural basis of these idioms will show that they can b
grouped into two types. While most of these metaphors are grounded in careful obse
vation of the natural world, some are grounded in mythology. There are thus (at leas
two layers involved in the understanding of these idioms.

Idioms like (1) are quite common in Upper Tanana, just like they are common i
German, English ("he's as cunning as a snake, strong as an ox, slippery as an eel, ea
like a pig", etc.), and other languages. In their cross-linguistic study of idiom
Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005: 323) for example claim that "every language analy
sed in this respect contains a group of idiom- or proverb-constitutents denoting an
mals [...]". Their sample however is limited to Indo-European languages plus Finnis
Chinese and Japanese.

With respect to languages in the Americas, literature on figurative language i
general and animal idioms in particular is scarce. Christ (1995) and Field (2009) stud
metaphor in Navajo, an Athabascan language spoken in the American South-Wes
Basso (1990) discusses 'wise words' in Western Apache, a language closely related t
Navajo. These wise words are very similar to the expressions studied here, and refe
ence will be made throughout this paper to Basso's methodology and findings. Ove
ing (1985) is a study of somewhat similar expressions in Piaroa, a Salivan languag
spoken in Venezuela and Columbia. It appears however that the field of phraseology i
severely underdeveloped in the languages of the Americas, making the present stud
an important contribution.

Throughout this paper, the human addressed by or referred to in the idiom will b
called the *Target*. The animal representing this trait will be called the *Source*. The tra
picked out by the idiom will be called the *Predicate*. While some attention will be pai
to the formal structure of these expressions, i.e. to how the equation or comparison o
Source and Target is verbalized, the main focus of this paper will be on the Predicate
the conceptual link between Source and Target. Following Basso (1990: 61), I will as
sume that this link derives from connotative meaning elements of the source. For ex
ample (1), this means that the word *łįį* 'dog' has connotations like 'poorly trained' an

1. The parentheses around *kʼe* 'like' indicate that this element is optional.

'does not listen'. These connotative features of the Source (dogs) are shared by the Target (the person(s) to whom (1) is addressed), even though some conceptual meaning features are not shared by Source and Target. Through the Metaphorical Principle 1 identified by Norrick (1981: 80), the designative or, in the terms of Leech (1974), conceptual meaning features not shared by Source and Target are removed. This will be discussed in greater detail in §4.1.

In this paper I draw on a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. The methodology is that of anthropological linguistics, involving structured elicitation and in-depth qualitative analysis of the data (see also Section 2.2). The theoretical framework draws on componential semantics (see for example Leech 1974, but also implicit in Norrick 1981 and Basso 1990), Cognitive Linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Turner 1989, Katz 1998, *inter alia*) and is influenced by the Conventional Figurative Language Theory as put forward by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2.1 provides the reader with some background information on Upper Tanana language, culture, and oral literature. In Section 2.2, I present the data and discuss methodological considerations of data collection, while Section 2.3 contextualizes the data with respect to research on idioms. The cultural motivation of the idioms is discussed in Section 3.1 for Type I idioms and Section 3.2 for Type II idioms. Section 3.3 is a further discussion of the motivation of these idioms. Section 4.1 addresses the metaphoric processes involved in idiom formation and issues of lexicography, while Section 4.2 discusses whether the idioms should be considered figurative or not. Section 4.3 widens the perspective to include data from two other Alaskan Athabascan languages. The findings are summarized in Section 5.

2. Background

2.1 Linguistic, geographical and cultural background; data

Upper Tanana is a Northern Athabascan language, spoken by about 95 people in eastern interior Alaska (USA) and the western Yukon Territory (Canada). It is an extremely endangered language, not only because of the small number of speakers, but also because most speakers are older than 50 years, and very few of them use the language on a daily basis. The language of daily communication in the Upper Tanana settlements today is mostly English.

In this study, I also draw on data from two additional Alaskan Athabascan languages, namely Koyukon and Ahtna. Both languages are also highly endangered. A map of the Alaskan Athabascan languages is shown in Figure 1.

Traditionally, the Upper Tanana followed a subsistence lifestyle (McKennan 1981: 565f.). Their year was structured by the advent of different natural resources (McKennan 1959: 46f.; Lovick 2008). In order to access all of these resources, the

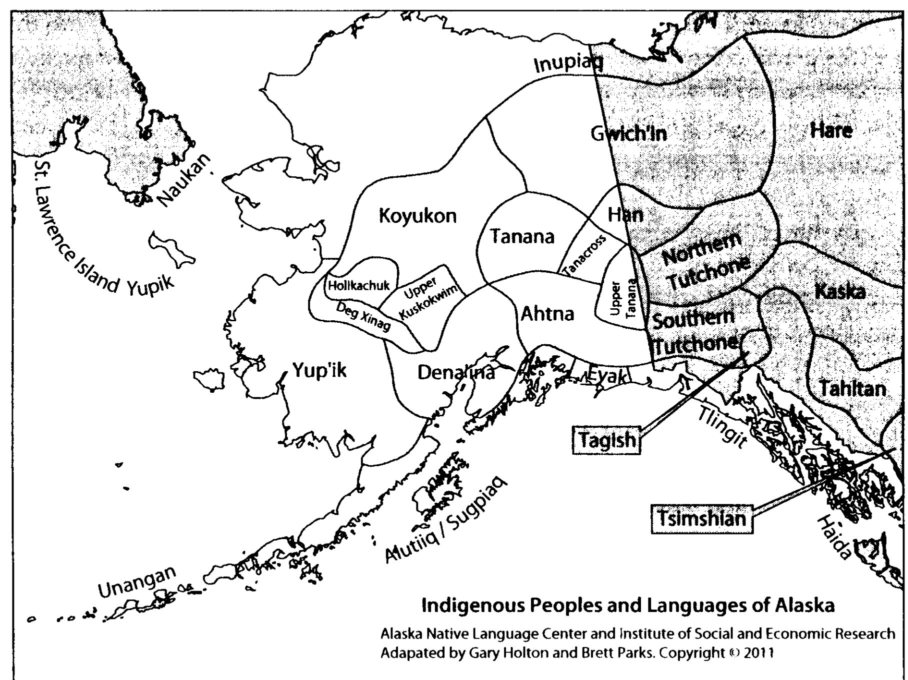

Figure 1. Indigenous peoples and languages of Alaska. (Krauss et al. 2011)

Upper Tanana were semi-nomadic, following a seasonal round. A consequence of the subsistence lifestyle is an intimate relationship with the natural environment and a wealth of knowledge about the animals that share their world. While this knowledge has not been the subject of a detailed study (as opposed to Nelson's 1986 study of the Koyukon), it became apparent in many conversations during my own research on changes in the Upper Tanana area (2006–2008). Animals also are part of many old-time stories (see Tyone 1996 and David 2011 for examples).

The Upper Tanana area has a rich story-telling tradition. Old-time stories are known in many Northern Athanascan languages under several different labels (see Lovick 2011 for an overview). They are set in mythical times, when animals and humans could still communicate (see McKennan 1959: 162 and Ruppert 1996: ix for Upper Tanana, Ellanna and Balluta 1982: 39ff. and Fall 1990: 4 for Dena'ina, Nelson 1986: 24 and Ruppert 1990: vi for Koyukon, Mishler and Simeone 2004: 126 for Han; all languages are Alaskan Athabascan). The stories serve several purposes: "to entertain, educate and inspire – to cause the reader or listener to think" (Attla 1990: ix, see also Ellanna and Balluta 1982: 39ff., 49f., Fall 1990: 5–7, etc.) Stories are told to educate the young. Before the 20th century, none of the Alaskan Athabascan languages were written down so all knowledge was transmitted orally, much of it through old-time stories. Elders often compare these stories to biblical stories (see also de Laguna 1995: 76) in

that the narratives provide the listener with a moral code and in that magic, or miraculous events, are common. Stories also explain why the world is the way it is. Stories are not owned by individuals and are known to every member of the group. Knowing the stories is one of the things that make a person an Upper Tanana Athabascan.

Traditionally, stories were told in the evenings in winter (Jetté 1908) in a group setting. More recently, stories are told at other times of the day and during the other seasons, and today, they are often told in English since the target audience – young people – does not understand the traditional language well enough anymore. Several of the stories discussed here were recorded with myself only as the audience. This recording setting is somewhat unnatural, since speakers are asked to tell a traditional story in the native language to an outsider. Sometimes, they tell an English version first to facilitate my following the Upper Tanana version; on other occasion, the English version follows the Upper Tanana one.

2.2 Data, definitions, methodology

The data in this study consists of nine idiomatic expressions describing human behavior.[2] A complete list containing literal and actual (idiomatic) meaning can be found in (2)–(10). Example (1) above is repeated here as (2) so all examples are displayed together. All expressions were confirmed by several other speakers on different occasions.

(2) *Łįį (kė) uht'iin ahłįį.* (CD, June 29, 2010)
dog (like) people 2PL.S-be
'You guys don't listen.' (lit.: You guys are (like) dog people.)

(3) *Ts'iit kė sǫ nah'dagn.* (CD, June 29, 2010)
porcupine like don't you.don't.walk
'Don't walk so slowly.' (lit.: Don't walk like a porcupine.)

(4) *Shehts'ade kė etnaa.* (CD, June 29, 2010)
mouse like she.works
'She's hard-working.' (lit.: She works like a mouse.)

(5) *Taatsąą' kė hǫǫheey.* (SB, July 9, 2010)
raven like they.talk
'They are telling old-time stories.' (lit.: They talk like ravens.)

(6) *Shuhshyiidn įįłįį.* (CD, November 30, 2006)
boreal owl you.are
'You are stupid.' (lit.: You are a boreal owl.)

(7) *Dlagn nłįį.* (CD, November 30, 2006)
squirrel he.is
'She cannot sit still.' (lit.: She is a tree squirrel.)

2. More animal idioms have been documented in this language, so this list is not exhaustive.

(8) *Nahtsįą nłįį*. (CD, July 7, 2010)
wolverine she.is
'She is a thief/kleptomaniac.' (lit.: She is a wolverine.)

(9) *Taatsąą' k'e dach'idhiltsįį*. (SB, July 9, 2010)
raven like he.resembles
'He is a liar.' (lit.: He resembles Raven.)

(10) *Nahtsįą k'e dach'idhiltsįį*. (RS, July 26, 2010)
wolverine like she.resembles
'She is resourceful, resilient.' (lit.: She resembles Wolverine.)

The data above was collected as follows. (6) and (7) were mentioned by a consultant during the elicitation of a word list in 2006. She gave 'stupid person' and 'person who cannot sit still' as alternate meanings for *shuhshyiidn* 'boreal owl' and *dlagn* 'tree squirrel', respectively. In 2010, I revisited these expressions with the same consultant and asked her if she knew other phrases like these. Over the next few days, she came up with (2), (3), (4), and (8). Similar interviews were conducted with five other native speakers of Upper Tanana, and several others were consulted on a more occasional basis. The elicitation of each idiom was followed by a discussion of its meaning, the 'explanatory paraphrase', as Basso (1990: 59) terms it. Over the course of 3 weeks of fieldwork, each expression was discussed with several speakers. Some of the interviews were recorded, during others, I simply took notes.

2.3 Formal observations

All expressions above are examples of figurative language as defined by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005: 19) as "[...] all the conventional figurative metaphors and metonymies (words, idioms, proverbs, and the like) that point to a denotatum not directly but via other concepts [...]". They are metaphorical in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 154) in that they allow us to understand a concept in the terms of another concept. The expressions (2–10) point to the concept of human behavior via the concept of animal behavior. Furthermore, they are idioms in that they are conventionalized and their intended meaning can not always be recovered without difficulty (Katz 1998: 3), requiring semantic reinterpretation based on shared cultural knowledge (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 40).

There are some formal differences between the expressions. (2–5) and (9–10) are best classified as open conventional similes (Fishelov 2007: 74) in that the Target[3] (human) and the Source (animal) elements are explicitly stated, but that the Predicate, the trait that the human and the animal have in common, is not explicitly expressed (a closed conventional simile would be "He is as strong as an ox", where *strong* is the predicate). Expressions (6–8) are metaphors in that they do not contain a comparing

3. Fishelov (2007: 73) calls them *Tenor* and *Vehicle* rather than *Target* and *Source*.

element and instead equate the Target with the Source. However, it is perfectly possible to add the comparing postposition *kè* 'as, like' to any of the expressions (6–8), while it apparently is not possible to remove *kè* from (3–5) (speaker judgments differ with respect to (2)). We thus follow Fishelov (2007: 72) in assuming that, for the purposes of the present discussion, the difference between metaphors with an explicitly stated equation and conventional similes is negligible. Both of these can be interpreted as an "invitation to compare" Target and Source (Fishelov 2007: 72); the presence or absence of the comparative postposition *kè* 'as, like' does not affect this. Generally, some expressions seem to be more fixed than others, although a greater corpus would be necessary to confirm this impression. I assume for the time being that these expressions are in fact one-word idioms, with the animal term being used idiomatically.

For the remainder of the discussion, all the expressions in (2–10) will be referred to as idioms, regardless of their status as metaphors or conventional similes. We will instead be concerned with the semantic differences between (2–8) on the one hand ("Type I idioms") and (9–10) on the other hand ("Type II idioms").

3. Cultural grounding

Following Basso (1990), I view the similarity between Target (human) and Source (animal) as a bundle of connotative features. In order to understand the actual meaning of phrases like *tsiit kè sǫ nahǫdagn* 'don't walk slowly; lit.: don't walk like a porcupine', we need to understand how a porcupine and a (slow-walking) human resemble each other. This was done through interviews where six Upper Tanana speakers were asked on different occasions for their interpretation of the idioms (2)–(9). The interpretations were remarkably similar to each other. The lists of interpretations in the next two subsections are not verbatim transcripts of one speaker's interpretation, but rather compilation of several speakers' opinions. In the next two subsections, we will identify two types of idiom based on the connotative features used for metaphorization.

3.1 Type I expressions: Observation

In the first type of expressions, the connotative features are derived from observation of the animal's characteristic, observable behavior. The expressions of this type are listed in (11a–g):

(11) Explanations for Type I idioms

a. *Shuhshyiidn į̨įłį̨į̨.*

'You are stupid (lit.: you are a boreal owl).'

Shuhshyiidn ('boreal owl') is a dumb animal. If you see him, you can walk up to him and pick him up and put him down. You can poke his eyes with your finger. He won't even care. He's passive and dumb. (CD, November 30, 2006; RS, July 26, 2010)

b. *Łįį (k'e) uht'iin ahłįį.*
'You guys don't listen (lit.: You guys are (like) dog people).' Dogs need to be trained. If a dog isn't trained, he won't listen. Kids are the same; if you don't train them right, they won't listen. (CD, June 29, 2010; RD, June 29, 2010)

c. *Dlagn nłįį.*
'He can't sit still (lit.: he is a tree squirrel).'
You've seen squirrels. You know how they're always running around, never sit still, always talking talking talking. You know [a member of the community], they call him *dlagn* 'tree squirrel', because he never sits still. (CD, November 30, 2006. Other consultants recalled an aunt who was called *dlegn* 'tree squirrel', for the same reason.)

d. *Nahtsįą nłįį.*
'She is a thief (lit.: she is a wolverine).'
Wolverines steal things out of your traps. Long ago, Yamaagn Teeshyaay [he who went around the world] came to Wolverine and tried to straighten him out, but he had no luck. So Wolverine still steals everything out of your traps, and what he doesn't eat, he pees on and shits on. (RS, July 26, 2010)
Wolverines are no good. They steal stuff out of your traps, and what they don't eat, they pee all over it. Like in that story I told you. That woman who lives there [points], she's a wolverine, that means she steals. She's a kleptomaniac; she always steals, she can't help it. (CD, July 1, 2010)

e. *Ts'iit k'e sǫ nahǫdagn.*
'Do not walk so slowly (lit.: do not walk like a porcupine).'
My mother, when we used to walk around [i.e. on their seasonal migration], she always got mad at us. "Don't walk like porcupines," she'd tell us when we wanted to stop to drink water or eat berries. "Don't walk like porcupines!" She used to get mad at us. (CD, June 29, 2010)
Have you seen a porcupine walk? They stop here, stop there, they're always eating... [laughs] They're just so slow. If I was walking around the lake, looking for duck eggs, behind JS here, and she's walking really slowly, I could tell her *hanteey' įįhaalh, gee, ts'iit k'e la shttheh natįįdaak* 'hurry up, gee, you're walking in front of me like a porcupine'. (DN, July 2, 2010)

f. *Shehts'ade k'e etnaa.*
'She is hardworking (lit.: she is working like a mouse).'
Mice are always putting up food for winter. That's good, because they won't go hungry. If a person is always putting up food and wood for winter, then that person is like a mouse. It's a good thing to be like a mouse. (CD, June 29, 2010)

g. *Taatsąą' ke hǫǫheey.*
"They are telling old-time stories (lit.: they are talking like ravens)."
You know, when you have several old people in a room and they're just talking, just telling old-time stories? They say about them 'they're talking like ravens'. Because they sit there, like ravens do, just talking. (SB, July 9, 2010)

All of the above expressions are based on observation of the animal's behavior. Even to a non-Upper Tanana person, many of these explanations are intuitive: tree squirrels are fidgety, mice spend a lot of time caching food for winter, untrained dogs certainly can be a nuisance, and porcupines walk very slowly and stop frequently. Due to the strong image component (Lakoff 1987: 446ff.; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 14) of these expressions, they all evoke a vivid mental image of an animal acting in a particular way.

In several instances, the target behavior of the animal is also the topic of myth. The discussion of the idiom comparing thieves to wolverines nearly always triggered the mention of a Yamaagn Teeshyaay story. Yamaagn Teeshyaay, 'the one who went around the world', is the main character of a very important story cycle set in mythical time that exists, in some form or another, in all Alaskan Athabascan groups (see for example McKennan 1959: 175–189 for a number of translated Tsa-o-sha[4] stories recorded in the Upper Tanana area, David (2011) for several bilingual Upper Tanana narratives about Yamaagn Teeshyaay, Demit and Joe 2010 for a narration of the Traveler cycle in close-by Healy Lake Tanacross, Attla 1990 for a narration of the cycle in Koyukon, to name but a few). Yamaagn Teeshyaay travels around the world and encounters many peoples (both human and non-human). In almost all cases, Yamaagn Teeshyaay somehow changes ('straightens out') these peoples; in the Upper Tanana version of this cycle for example he teaches Bald Eagle not to eat human flesh, and is responsible for Camprobber's and Woodpecker's characteristic markings.

During the discussion of the idiom involving *nahtsįą* 'wolverine; a thief', consultants always brought up the incident where Yamaagn Teeshyaay encounters Wolverine, tries to 'straighten him out' – and fails. Wolverine is one of the few animals that resist Yamaagn Teeshyaay, which is why, to this day, Wolverine robs traps and fouls whatever he cannot eat. The observable habits of this animal (described for example in Nelson 1986: 156f.) have been translated both into a narrative explaining the world and into an idiom describing human behavior.

In several other Alaskan Athabascan groups, there is a myth about a hard-working mouse who is in some form hampered by a (usually lazy) boy. There is also an old-time story about a porcupine who kills a brown bear simply by refusing to budge (Attla 1983: 66–75). Despite the fact that neither of these stories is known to the Upper Tanana speakers I worked with, the existence of these stories is important, for two

4. This name was transcribed by James Kari (1997) as *Tsa' Ushyąą* 'Smart Beaver'. It is another name for *Yamaagn Teeshyaay*.

reasons. First, stories are shared over a large area (this similarity was already notice by Boas 1914: 380ff.) and the same story recognizably exists in several close-by groups The Upper Tanana Elders are aware that they have lost much of their cultural knowledge and there are now very few expert story-tellers. Their not remembering a stor does not necessarily mean that it never existed in their culture. Second is the fact tha Athabascan values seem remarkably stable over time. Basso (1990: 61) cites an example from Western Apache: "Butterflies are girls because sometimes they act crazy, jus chasing around after each other having a good time when they should be working helping out with chores and younger children." The very same trait of butterflies – thei flightiness – actually features in an Upper Tanana myth where a butterfly leads tw young girls astray (see for example McKennan 1959: 199–203, Tyone 1996: 23–33 David 2011: 118–133), even though this behavior has not been verbalized in an idion in that language. The same characteristic animal behavior may thus be encoded in ar idiom in one Athabascan group while it is encoded in a narrative in another.

An important point raised by Basso (1990: 64) is the fact that all of these expressions refer to characteristic *behavior*, not to appearance. From a western point of view this is somewhat surprising, since many of our animal idioms focus on the appearanc of an animal. The German expression *eine graue Maus* 'a grey mouse' refers to an inconspicuous (usually female) person. Similarly, English *fat as a pig* refers to the appearance of a person, not to their behavior. The resemblance between the animal anc the human is not physical, but instead culturally constructed. An interesting discussion regarding the arbitrariness of connotations for a number of English idioms can be found in Searle (1979: 105ff.). It is this arbitrariness that renders cultural knowledge necessary for the comprehension of idioms.

3.2 Type II idioms: Grounded in mythology

In Type II idioms, the connotative behavior is not that of the actual real-life animal, but that of a mythological character who has animal form. Two examples are given in (12):

(12) Type II idioms

a. *Taatsąą' dach'idhiltsįį.*
She is a liar (lit.: she resembles Raven.)
You know the story where Raven eats the children's eyes? It's because he always acts like that. He lies, and he steals. That's why they say that liars are like Raven. (SB, July 9 2010)

b. *Nahtsįą dach'idhiltsįį.*
She is resilient/resourceful (lit.: she resembles Wolverine.)
You know, they call [other Elder] *Nahtsįą* ('wolverine'.) I wonder why they do that? [calls that person on the phone and then explains:] He says that it's because he always outsmarts people. He had a hard life, and he always came out on top. He always bounces back. (RS, July 26 2010)

In both cases, additional cultural context is needed to understand these idioms. I will discuss Wolverine first.

In the discussion following RS's uttering (12b.), it became apparent that the bearer of the name seemed rather proud of it – despite the negative connotations evoked by the other meaning of *nahtsįą*. RS further explained that the ability to outsmart people and be resourceful in difficult situations is linked to the same Yamaagn Teeshyaay narrative discussed above: When Yamaagn Teeshyaay wants Wolverine woman to change her ways, she climbs a tree to get away from him. Yamaagn Teeshyaay tries to climb after her, but she keeps urinating on him. Finally, he gives up and leaves. There are very few animals that manage to outwit Yamaagn Teeshyaay, and the fact that Wolverine Woman succeeds in doing so seems to be present in tellings of the Traveler Cycle across Alaska (see also de Laguna 1995: 330 for a brief discussion of the Koyukon version of this narrative). By calling the Elder in question 'Wolverine', the speakers pick up on an attribute of the mythological, rather than the actual animal, i.e. on a connotative feature motivated by mythology. This is obvious from the fact that the explanation of the expression (and the name) always directly referred to the Yamaagn Teeshyaay myth, and never involved a discussion of the behavior of the actual animal. This is in contrast to the other conversations about wolverine (with the meaning 'thief'), where both the myth and observations about wolverines stealing from traps formed part of the explanation. While it is likely that ultimately the myth also derives from observations, the observation is not central to the interpretation of the expression in (12b.).

(12a.) is also grounded in myth. When asked for an explanation of this idiom, all speakers responded by telling me a brief Raven story – always the same story. An English translation of the version told in Upper Tanana by SB on July 27, 2010 follows in (13):

(13) Raven, that Raven, he came to the village. Down the hill, over the mountains he came. On the other side of the mountains there were a few berries, and he rubbed them all over himself. He painted the bottoms of his feet with berries. And then, when he came to the village, only children and their mothers were staying there. Their fathers, their fathers had all gone out hunting, they were gone.

"Up there there are lots of berries, there are lots of berries," he exaggerated. "Look under my feet!"

And then, that Raven, "his own feet", he told them, but I forget how he said that. He had his own language. "I'll stay with the kids!" he said. And "You guys go, you guys go look for berries," he told them.

They went. There were no berries. They came back and Raven had eaten all the children's eyes.

He only said that there were berries because he wanted to eat the children's eyes. That's all I remember.

Raven (or Crow)[5] is one of the most important figures in Alaskan Athabascan cos mology. Raven's importance is evident from book titles such as Nelson's ethnograph "Make Prayers to the Raven" (1986) or Kenny Thomas' 2005 autobiography "Crow i my boss". Throughout Alaska, there is an abundance of Raven stories; see for exam ple Tenenbaum (2006: 74–131) for four Raven stories in Dena'ina, de Laguna (1995 for a total of twenty Crow narratives from the Koyukon area, translated into English or McKennan (1959: 189–195) for a nine Raven narratives in English from the Up per Tanana area. In all Alaskan Athabascan groups, Raven is endowed with two op posing powers. On the one hand, he is a creator; he is the one who put sun, moor and stars into the sky (see McKennan 1959: 190f. for Upper Tanana; Nelson 1986: 1 for Koyukon; Thomas 2005: 215, 217 for Tanacross) and the one who created Alask (McKennan 1959: 190). On the other hand, Raven is a trickster and a liar, sometime even in the same story (see de Laguna 1995: 324ff.). It is this aspect of Raven that i the focus of the narrative in (13). The fact that this narrative was chosen by severa consultants to explain why Raven is a liar suggests that it is a particularly clear anc concise characterization of Raven. Note that the explanation of (12a) also only in- volved a mythical reference; no observations about real-life ravens were made by an speaker, and no typical real-life situation was described. Thus, the two expressions ir (12) cannot be understood without (cultural) knowledge of two important Athabas- can story cycles.

3.3 Summary

We have seen that we can identify two types of idioms: Type I idioms are based on similarity of animal behavior observable in the real world, while Type II idioms are grounded in similarity of behavior of mythical characters that have animal shape.

The split between Type I and Type II idioms corresponds roughly to the distinc- tion between icon-based and symbol-based motivation (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 90–98). Type I idioms display iconic motivation through rich image schemata, requiring the access to cultural knowledge (95) about the behavior of these animals. The behavior identified in those idioms is culturally defined, since different behavioral aspects could be (and are) picked out in other languages: Porcupines (and hedgehogs) are in English associated with prickliness (rather than slowness), dogs in German are associated with loyalty (rather than not-listening), and Idström (e-mail from August 7, 2010) points out that in Inari Saami, a connotative meaning of 'wolverine' is 'greed'. Connotations are truly culture-dependent.

Type II idioms display symbolic motivation in that characters like *Nahtsį̨ą* 'Wolverine' and *Taatsą̨ą̨'* 'Raven', through their role in mythology, are cultural symbols (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 97) representing resilience and trickery, respective- ly. These idioms do not evoke an image schema for consultants, since no behavior of a

5. The terms 'crow' and 'raven' are used interchangeably throughout much of Alaska.

real animal (that would provide motivation for an image schema) is verbalized. Instead, these idioms trigger the recollection of myths.

4 Discussion

4.1 Idiomaticity and figurativeness

Idiomaticity, the semantic reinterpretation required by an idiom, is related to figurativeness (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 40), which is considered to be a gradual feature (25) in that an expression can be literal, non-literal (and non-figurative), and figurative. An expression is figurative if it has an image component and if it is subject to additional naming, i.e. if there is a more 'normal' expression for the idiom under consideration (18). "More normal" is, of course, difficult to evaluate. When talking about Raven (the liar from (12a) above), SB uses the verb form *huu'èl stadootnii'aa* 'he misrepresented/exaggerated to them'. Due to the complex morphology of Upper Tanana, it would easily be possible to derive a nominalized form in the customary aspect from this verb theme, meaning then something like 'someone who misrepresents customarily' – a liar. However, when I asked the question "What would you call a liar?", the answer was *taatsąą'* 'raven', and not the hypothetical form described above. The Upper Tanana lexical file prepared by James Kari (1997) and expanded by myself contains no entry for 'liar'. Similarly, words for 'slow', 'not listening', 'stupid/dumb', 'thief', etc. cannot be found. This may be because the lexical file is a work in progress, or, as Basso (1990: 68f) suggests, because these idioms fill accidental lexical gaps. Without more structured lexical work on Upper Tanana, this question cannot be answered.

It is however apparent that the Type I idioms discussed here have an image component, i.e. that they evoke a prototypical or conventional image of the situation described (Lakoff 1987: 446; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005: 94ff) This is obvious from some of the explanations given in (11a–f), which describe a prototypical situation where the animal's characteristic behavior can be observed: picking up or poking a boreal owl, watching a porcupine waddle along while stopping frequently to look for food, watching a mouse running about gathering food for winter, or watching a congregation of ravens cawing and 'talking'. One Upper Tanana individual bearing the nickname *dlagn* 'tree squirrel' has a road sign showing a squirrel and bearing the caption 'Squirrel Zone' on his front porch. When discussing the idiom *ts'iit k'è sǫ' nahǫdagn* 'don't walk like a porcupine', several consultants imitated the walk of the porcupine. These idioms draw on rich conventional images that seem to be present in the speakers' minds.

In contrast to the present analysis, Overing (1985) argues against seeing similar expressions in Piaroa, a language spoken in Venezuela, as 'metaphorical' (her definition of metaphor suggests that she means 'figurative' in the terminology of the present article). One of her central arguments supporting this view is that the Piaroa themselves,

who apparently use and value metaphor and figurative language highly, claim tha these expressions are not metaphorical but should best be understood literally (Overin 1985: 158). This is different to the Upper Tanana expressions under consideration here During our discussions, consultants would frequently point out that the idioms abov are not to be understood literally, that they should be understood tongue-in-cheek and one consultant even used the word 'metaphor'. Of course, this does not mean tha preceding generations of Upper Tanana would have shared this view. Maybe in a tra ditional Upper Tanana world view, these idioms would have been interpreted as litera (or as non-literal but non-figurative), drawing on for example the many narratives in volving humans changing into animals and vice versa. Ultimately, we have no way o knowing this. We thus need to limit our argument to the present-day view of thes idioms, which is that they are figurative.

4.2 Metaphor, metonymy and polysemy

We follow Basso (1990: 61) in assuming that the link between Target and Source is a connotative feature of the Source, e.g. [+ slow] for 'porcupine' or [+ quick] or [+ restless for 'squirrel'. In Type I idioms, the relationship between the item from the Source do main (i.e. an animal term) and the item from the Target domain (i.e. a kind of human behavior) is thus a kind of meaning extension, resulting in polysemy based on the metaphorical principle involving the removal of a core semantic feature (Norrick 1981: 80). To give an example, the word *ts'iit* has a number of semantic features, both conceptual (core) and connotative; core features include [+ living being, + porcupine ...], while one of the connotative features[6] is [+ walks slowly]. Removing the feature [+ porcupine] from the word *ts'iit* results in the meaning 'living being that walks slow ly'. This meaning is conventionalized so that the word *ts'iit* is now polysemous with two meanings: (1) porcupine; (2) creature that walks slowly.

Evidence for this polysemy comes from an interview with speaker CD on Novem ber 30th, 2006. The task at hand was the elicitation of a word list to investigate vowe quality and quantity. Two words on the list were *dlegn/dlagn*[7] 'tree squirrel' and *shuh shyiidn* 'boreal owl'. When I asked CD about the word for 'tree squirrel', she replied by giving me the form *dlagn* and then commenting that this was the nickname of another speaker of the language. She further explained that this was because this person never sat still, just like a squirrel. The same happened when I asked for the word 'boreal owl'. CD explained that her mother had frequently called her *shuhshyiidn* whenever CD was not quick enough on the uptake. Clearly, both meanings of *dlagn* and *shuhshyiidn* were active in the speaker's mind on this occasion. (A similar methodology has been em ployed by Idström 2010).

6. There may be additional connotative features that are not relevant in formation of the idi oms under discussion.

7. The vowel difference in the two forms is due to dialect differences.

As a result, a number of animal terms in Upper Tanana are polysemous with a first meaning 'animal' and a second meaning '(human) behavior'. The second meaning is related to the first through the Metaphoric Principle 1 by Norrick (1981) applied to the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Turner (1989: 160ff.), which "allows us to understand human nature in terms of animal instinctual and biological nature" (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 186). By removing the conceptual semantic feature of [species] from the animal term, one is left with the meaning [sentient being displaying a particular kind of behavior]. This process is entirely regular for Type I idioms.

For Type II idioms, the process is slightly different since the relationship is metonymical rather than metaphorical. A particular animal (the whole) represents, or symbolizes, a kind of behavior (a part of that animal). The motivation for this symbol relationship lies in Upper Tanana mythology. This process appears to be more rare, but its result is also lexical polysemy.

This kind of regular lexical polysemy has of course implications for Upper Tanana lexicography. If the word *shuhshyiidn* has two meanings, then both of these need to be listed in a dictionary. Similarly, *dlagn* 'squirrel, person who cannot sit still', *łįį* 'dog, person who does not listen', *nahtsįą* 'wolverine, thief, resilient/resourceful person', etc. need to be recognized as polysemous words. This has been done for the Koyukon Athabaskan Dictionary (Jetté and Jones 2000), but apparently not yet for other Alaskan Athabascan languages.

4.3 Beyond Upper Tanana: Animal idioms in other Alaskan Athabascan languages

Among the Alaskan Athabascan languages, Upper Tanana is not unique in having animal idioms. According to Nelson (1986: 80), Koyukon Athabascans will say "He's just like *dotson'*, just like a raven," when talking about a someone who deceives others or who boasts, and will also imitate the raven's call "ggakk!" as an expression of scorn. Nelson (1986) also cites comparisons with *tokkaa'a* 'red-necked grebe' (87), *k'idełgho nodaala* 'black brant' (92), *baats* 'gull' (99), *ałkeeh doldoya* 'boreal owl' (109), *gguh* 'snowshoe hare, rabbit' (125) and probably many others: There is not enough space here to list them all. The Koyukon Athabaskan Dictionary also contains a number of such idioms thanks in particular to the efforts of Jetté in the early 20th century (see for example the wonderfully detailed discussion of the idiom *onts'aa gguh tł'ee* 'dumb like a rabbit' (lit. 'just like a rabbit's head'), Jetté and Jones 2000: 223, or that of the connotative meanings of *łeek* 'dog', Jetté and Jones 2000: 388).

The Ahtna Athabaskan Dictionary contains the expression *łik'es* 'an incompetent woman who does not pay attention, (lit. half dog)' which is "used as an epithet" (Kari 1990: 281.) This appears to be the only idiom similar to our Upper Tanana ones in the dictionary.

The different number of idioms in the three languages on the other is probably due to two reasons: time when the research was conducted and focus of the researcher.

Much of the work on Koyukon was done by Jetté, a missionary priest who lived from 1898 to 1927 among the Koyukon and who took copious notes about their language and culture. Part of these notes was integrated into the Koyukon Athabascan Dictionary, and it is likely that Nelson also made use of these notes for his anthropological study. Kari's work on Ahtna began in the 1970s; my own on Upper Tanana in 2006. The time difference may seem small – there are at most 50 years between the work of Jetté and Kari – but it is very important: Jetté's research predates the shift to English that has by now taken place in all Alaskan Athabascan groups; Kari's and my own research took place once language shift had begun. It is likely that Jetté heard these idioms in every-day life, whereas Kari and I worked to a large degree with speakers who do not use the language on a daily basis.[8]

The second reason lies in the focus of the work. Nelson (1986) is an anthropological study of the Koyukon Athabascan's relation to the boreal forest. It contains a wealth of information about each animal, including observations, traditions, edibility judgments, mythology, and linguistic expressions. This is a very different focus from that on lexicography which underlies Kari (1990) and Jetté and Jones (2000). I only became aware of this type of idiom when specifically looking for instances of figurative speech in summer 2010, despite the fact I had already recorded two instances in 2006. Once the language stops to be used on a daily basis, a special effort needs to be made to document and even notice figurative speech.

4.4 Use of animal idioms

Before closing, I wish to briefly comment on the use of these animal idioms in spontaneous speech. As mentioned in Section 2.1, Upper Tanana is not used on a daily basis anymore; thus the idioms are also not regularly used anymore. Speakers who are now in their 60s, 70s and 80s recall their own parents using these expressions when talking to them, but they do not recall using these expressions when talking to their own children, the last generation of children that learned Upper Tanana when growing up. (This generation self-reports to be not fluent today. I have however observed that many of them understand the language perfectly and suspect that fluency may actually be higher.) Typical situations for the use of the idioms were talking to children or close friends. Paul Platero, a linguist of Navajo descent, commented that in that language, similar idioms are 'very colloquial' and rarely used today (Platero, personal

8. Kari (personal communication, January 8, 2011) points out that many idioms are embedded in the body of oral literature that has been recorded in Upper Tanana. This is certainly likely, and means that a thorough review of this literature is indicated. This is, however, beyond the scope of the present study.

communication, January 8 2011). It seems that idiomatic, colloquial speech is lost even more rapidly than the more formal registers used in story-telling.

One domain where these idioms seem to have survived is in nicknames. While I have never researched names at all, I have informally observed that many Upper Tanana Athabascans (speakers and non-speakers alike) have one or more nicknames. Often, these nicknames correspond to a trait that also exists in an idiom, such as the community members with the name 'tree squirrel' or the individual known as 'wolverine'. These nicknames are always used respectfully and fondly, often jokingly. Never are they used in a derogatory or jeering fashion, just as the idioms are tend to be used fondly and 'in good fun'.

5. Conclusion

During the investigation of the cultural basis of animal idioms describing human behavior in Upper Tanana Athabascan, we have seen that we can identify two types of idioms. Type I is grounded in observable behavior of an animal; the relationship between the literal and the idiomatic interpretation is one of metaphor. Type I idioms are iconically motivated in that they describe a resemblance between the Target and the Source. Type II idioms are grounded in mythology. In myth, the animal has become a symbol for a particular trait; the idiomatic interpretation is thus one of metonymy.

Comparison with two other Alaskan Athabascan languages has demonstrated the degree of endangerment. Koyukon, where documentation began in the last years of the 19th century due to the efforts of Jules Jetté, has a large number of recorded animal idioms, both in the Koyukon Athabaskan Dictionary (Jetté and Jones 2000) and in the ethnographic study by Nelson (1986). Ahtna, where documentation began only after shift to English was well under way, has only one recorded animal idiom (Ahtna Athabaskan Dictionary, Kari 1990). My own structured efforts for Upper Tanana Athabascan resulted in the elicitation of nine idioms: again, this work took place well after language shift to English began. Despite long discussions with native speakers, and despite hours of recorded Upper Tanana conversation, I have yet to hear one of these expressions used in natural, spontaneous speech. I am confident that this research would have yielded many more idioms, had I just done it 100 years earlier. I am not saying that such work cannot be done, but it has become considerably harder through the severe endangerment situation.

This underscores the urgent need for documentation of these items. None of the Alaskan Athabascan languages are used on a daily basis anymore; hence, colloquial speech is getting lost even more quickly than the more formal genre used for narratives. The idioms discussed here truly are "Endangered Metaphors": The languages they are a part of are disappearing fast, but these idioms seem to be disappearing even faster.