

Towards a Grammatical Description of Northern Tutchone

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Northern Tutchone is a critically endangered Indigenous language spoken in the Yukon. With only about a dozen native speakers left, revitalization efforts like those currently led by the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun are of vital importance (First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, 2025).

A key pillar of such revitalization initiatives is the grammatical description and analysis of the language (e.g., in the form of a grammar or grammar sketch), which promotes a better understanding and appreciation of the language, supports translation and language modelling technology, aids the creation of pedagogical materials, and serves as a record of the language to be used by future generations of speakers and learners.

To date, however, there has been no published linguistic research describing any aspect of Northern Tutchone grammar, despite strong community interest in such resources.

The present research project helps address this gap in the literature by contributing to a description of Northern Tutchone grammar, thereby also leading to an improved understanding of the Dene language family more broadly.

The objectives of my research project are as follows.

1. The collation and organization of existing language materials,
2. The analysis and description of select grammatical features of Northern Tutchone, ranging anywhere from phonology to morphology, syntax, semantics, or discourse, and
3. The inclusion of this work in a grammar sketch of Northern Tutchone.

In order to achieve these goals, my project has involved the collation and analysis of both textual and audiovisual materials collected in the *Kwän Dëk'án' Do* Northern Tutchone corpus. Textual materials include both printed materials such as storybooks and language lessons, and handwritten archival materials. Audiovisual materials consist of recordings of Northern Tutchone as read by native speakers in controlled settings. In addition to these materials, I conducted an extensive review of the literature on related languages in order to guide my research and support my analyses.

My work has successfully resulted in the preliminary analysis and description of multiple previously undescribed features of Northern Tutchone grammar. These features include the phonology (sound system) of the language, numerals and quantifiers, possessive prefixes on nouns, imperatives and prohibitives, and directionals, as well as dialectal variation in each of these.

These descriptions will be put towards an ongoing grammar sketch of Northern Tutchone, currently being co-written by myself and collaborators Scott Bushey, Christopher Cox, Anthony Daynes, Louise Koren, Ashley Promislow, Frances Sobolak, and Patricia Wallingham. When completed, our grammar sketch will serve as a resource for both specialist and general audiences, such as community members and Northern Tutchone language teachers.

Finally, my work highlights gaps in our current data and puts forward avenues for future research, given opportunities for consultation with speakers. It also offers methodological insights into the grammatical description of similarly un- and under-described languages, where existing documentation is limited and fieldwork is not possible. Ultimately, my CUROP project serves as a stepping stone towards the comprehensive grammatical description and analysis of Northern Tutchone, in the hopes that this will support ongoing language revitalization efforts.

References

First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun. (2025). *Kwän Dék'án' Do*. Retrieved August 11, 2026, from <https://kwandekando.ca>.