THE NAME ATHABASKAN

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The name *Athabaskan*, used to designate this family of languages and people who speak them, is like so many names for North American Indian peoples: it comes not from that language family or people themselves, but from their neighbors. The name *Athabaskan* is in origin a place name in the Cree Indian language, the most widespread of the Algonquian languages, here the Woods Cree dialect of northern Saskatchewan and Alberta, southern neighbors to the Athabaskans in western Canada.

The Woods Cree place name is pronounced [ahðapaskâw]. (The [a]'s are pronounced like the *a* in *father*, the [â] longer in duration than the three preceding; the [h] is literally pronounced as *h*; the [ð] is the voiced *th* of English *this*; more about the exact pronunciation of [p] and [k] later, in connection with the question of spelling the name.)

This form may be analyzed *ahðap-ask-â-w*, element for element, as follows[1]. The full form of the first is *ahðapiy*, meaning 'net, fishnet', and *-ask-* is a suffixed form of the word for 'plant', and *-â-w* may be translated as 'it is where', thus 'where there are plants distributed in a net-like pattern', specifically for an expanse of reeds or reed-like grass in shallow water.

This is a characteristic type of Cree place name, and this particular name has itself been noted in more than one place. In other Cree dialects the consonant that is ð in Woods Cree is *y*, or *n*, or *r*; thus, for example, early spellings of the name include *Arabaska*, and there is a place called *Anabusko* on the Hudson's Bay coast in Manitoba.

The original location of the place which was called *ahðapaskâw* and from which we get the name is not altogether certain, but by the late eighteenth century it referred to Lake Athabasca, a major lake (ca. 200 miles long) in northern Saskatchewan and Alberta. At the western end of this lake, in Alberta, there are large, shallow, reedy expanses where the Athabasca River flows into the lake. The native population of the general area is now mainly Chipewyan Athabaskan, but in early contact times the lake was a border area between Cree and Chipewyan, and there are still Cree at Ft. Chipewyan at the western end of the lake, as well as Chipewyan.

The Athabaskans' word for themselves, 'people', is of course completely different, orginally and still very widely pronounced approximately [dɒnɛˑ], where the [ə] is the indistinct first vowel of *today*, and the [ɛˑ] is as in *bed*, but long in duration. Some Alaskan forms of this word are spelled *dinaa*, *dena*, in Navajo it is *diné*, and widely

in Canada it is *dene*, hence the modern political entity, the Dene Nation. English spellings of this word, to be found in the earlier academic literature, are Tinneh, Ten'a, etc. Some scholars, and many of the people themselves, especially in Canada, prefer this genuinely native name (most often pronounced in English [dɛneɪ] ; the vowel of the first syllable as in *bed*, the second as *nay*).

The question then arises as to how the name *Athabaskan* came to be used instead for this language family, and remarkably enough, we have the precise answer. It is in fact quite unusual that we have exact documentation on the establishment of such a name. It was given by Albert Gallatin (1761-1849), a Swiss-born American of many talents, friend of Thomas Jefferson, in fact his Secretary of the Treasury (1801-1814), illustrious banker, statesman, and politician—a man who also shared Jefferson's interests in American Indian languages and in their classification. In his *Synopsis of the Indian Tribes within the United States East of the Rocky Mountains, and the British and Russian Possessions in America*, written about 1826, Gallatin states:

> . . . all the inland tribes, north of that line [from Churchill on Hudson's Bay to about Anahim Lake in Chilcotin country, west central British Columbia], and surrounded on all other sides, from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific, by the narrow belt inhabited by the Esquimaux and the other [Northwest Coast] maritime tribes last described, do, so far as they are known, belong, with a single exception [incorrect, here referring to the Kutchin-Loucheux], to one family and speak kindred languages. *I have designated them by the arbitrary denomination of Athapascas*, which, derived from the original name of the lake since called 'Lake of the Hills' [now again Lake Athabasca], is also that which was first given to the central part of the country they inhabit (italics mine) (Gallatin 1836:116-117).

So here we see that the name was arbitrarily chosen by Gallatin. The information on which he based this important conclusion came from the reports of explorers of the preceding 50 years, such as Hearne, Mackenzie, Franklin and Harmon. Gallatin may have picked the name from Hearne.

In 1841 Horatio Hale (Hale 1846:201-203) met speakers of Umpqua and other Athabaskan languages in Oregon, and thus connected the Pacific Coast groups with Athabaskan. Finally in 1852 William W. Turner (Turner 1852:281-282) of the Smithsonian published his discovery that the Apachean languages, including Navajo, also belonged to this family, thus defining the vast extent of this language family as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Gallatin's "arbitrary denomination" for it became, for better or worse, well established in the academic literature.

It remains now to consider the spelling of the name. At least since Gallatin's time, there seems to be general agreement on *Atha_as_a(n)* but disagreement as to whether the first blank should be *b* or *p*, and whether the second blank should be *k* or *c*. Thus one may see four spellings in use, *Athabaskan*, *Athapaskan*, *Athabascan* and *Athapascan*. I have been asked to recommend herewith which is best, and will see what I can do.

First some background on the pronunciation of the sounds in question in the Cree and English versions of the name. In Cree there are no aspirated stops (as [pʰ] and [kʰ] in English *pan* and *can*), or voiced stops (as [b] and [g] in English *bun* and *gun*), but only voiceless unaspirated stops (as the [p] and [k] in English *spy* and *sky*, or French *paille and caille*, so that the [p] and [k] of [ahðapaskâw] are like these latter, not like ordinary English (aspirated) *p* and *k* (or voiced *b* and *g* either). For some reason, the English pronunciation, both locally in Canada and in academic circles (and therefore by now amongst the many people who have learned the name in school), is quite generally [æθəbǽskən], with voiceless *th* [θ] as in *bath*, with voiced *b* (no aspirated *p*) in the third syllable, and of course

unaspirated *k*, normal after *s*, in the fourth.

Whereas the question of *p* vs. *b* should be considered in connection with the pronunciation, the question of *k* vs. *c* has nothing to do with pronunciation, since after *s* only the voiceless unaspirated stop is possible even in English, as in Cree, so the question of *k* vs. *c* is a matter of spelling style only.

We shall return to these questions, and the "right" way to spell the academic name *Athabaskan*, after first considering separately the spelling of the place name in Canada. This is of course a separate issue, and has its own history. I do not have full documentation on the matter, but since at least the mid-nineteenth century, the spellings for the lake (and river, and town) seem to have narrowed down to *b*, thus *Athabasca* or *Athabaska*, perhaps in accordance with the English pronunciation. There has been considerable variation, however, in the *c* and *k*, the *c* now seeming to predominate. For example, the town was spelled *Athabasca* until 1904, changed to *Athabaska* from 1904 to 1948, and since 1948 has officially been *Athabasca* again.

From 1882 to 1905 there was a District of Athabaska, consistently with *k*. However, now, at least on most modern maps, the town, lake and river are all *Athabasca*. *Athabaska* nevertheless remains a familiar (if not officially correct) spelling for these place names, and is the form which appears, for example, in the *Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World*, 1952, 1961.

We now come to the history of the spelling of the language family name in the academic tradition. In the nineteenth century literature all four possibilities may easily be found, but by the end of it, the *p-c* (as in Gallatin's) spelling clearly predominated. Thus the spelling *Athapascan* was used by such leading scholars of American Indian languages as John W. Powell and John R. Swanton of the Smithsonian, and Franz Boas, all most influential. Also Pliny Earl Goddard, a main specialist in Athabaskan linguistics during the first part of this century, spelled it consistently *Athapascan*. However, the most illustrious figure in the history of Athabaskan linguistics is unquestionably Edward Sapir, probably the greatest American linguist of his time, who also devoted much of his life to Athabaskan. Sapir spelled the name three ways at various stages of his career; significantly, the only spelling he never used was *Athapascan*, perhaps because of his disdain for Goddard. At first Sapir spelled it *Athabascan* (1907), but from 1913 at least into the 1920s he spelled it quite interchangeably *Athabaskan* or *Athabascan*, sometimes both ways in the same document (e.g., letter to Boas in 1921). From the mid-1920s Sapir seemed to favor *Athabaskan* somewhat, though he still used *b-c* also at least as late as 1928. Fang-Kuei Li, Sapir's most important student of Athabaskan at the University of Chicago from the late 1920s, always used *b-k*. After Sapir moved to Yale in 1931, about 1935, Cornelius Osgood, one of his associates there, and a leading student of Athabaskan ethnology, got Sapir to "settle on" the spelling *Athapaskan*, which soon became the standard in the academic literature, including the prestigious Smithsonian. Osgood recalled this as follows (1975:12-16):

> Soon after I began my Athapaskan studies in 1925, I noted the inconsistency between the *p* and *c* spelling used in the *Handbook of American Indians* (1910) and the *b* and *k* of my mentor, Edward Sapir. It was clear that the *Handbook* usage was based on Pilling's *Bibliography of the Athapascan Languages* (1892). The authority of the Bureau of American Ethnology was compelling but it could not match my respect for Sapir. When I pointed out the precedent of the *p* and *c*, he simply smiled his luxurious smile and replied that as a linguist he reacted against writing the symbol *c* for the sound more commonly indicated by *k*. It is not certain that his own spelling had resulted as a conscious variation. My own early tendency was to substitute the word *Déné*, but with two letters to lose their acute accents in print, a problem of pronunciation was obvious. Also, as others apparently had done, I saw a disadvantage in localizing the name if one were to follow the accepted *b* and *c* spelling of Lake Athabasca and consequently one band of the Chipewyan. Therefore we settled on *p* and *k*, the parallel to *b* and *c*, a compromise between tradition and teacher. This spelling became the standard usage in publications of the National Museum of Canada, and, later, in those at Yale.

When I began publishing on Athabaskan in the 1960s, I naturally followed the academic standard. (Some of my publications may have followed it whether I wanted to or not, by editorial policy, as is the case with the Smithsonian's new set, *Handbook of North American Indians*, where, in an article I co-authored, my preferred spelling of *Athabaskan* was overridden, explained in a footnote.) It always troubled me somewhat that the *p* spelling was in outright disagreement with the pronunciation. The only persons who pronounced it with a *p* were "outsiders" who knew the word only from writing, and the misleading spelling practice to me smacked of linguists' elitism. In about 1973, also with the encouragement of Ray Collins of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who regularly spelled it with a *b*, I changed over to *Athabaskan*, which has been the preferred spelling at the Alaska Native Language Center since then.

Finally, I shall review the reasons for these preferences, of *b* and *k*, and let the reader use his judgement.

In the original Cree, the sound was neither aspirated *p*, nor voiced *b*, but voiceless unaspirated [p]. The preferred letter for that would be *p* as in English *spy* (or, for sophisticated linguists, also *p* as *e.g.* in French or Finnish or Eskimo). However, since the voiceless unaspirated *p* cannot be pronounced as such in that position in English, and English pronunciation has definitely settled on the sound [b], use of the letter *p* there is outright misleading. I thus consider *p* either gratuitous or linguists' elitism, and prefer *b*. It can still be distinguished from the local Canadian place name—and perhaps that is desirable—by spelling it *Athabaskan* instead of *Athabascan*, especially as the place name now seems to be standardized as *Athabasca*.

As noted above, the difference between *k* and *c* has nothing to do with the pronunciation. The "normal" spelling of *k*-like sounds in English is with *c*, before all consonants and the vowel *a*, *o*, *u*, thus *clean*, *cat*, *cool*, *cut*. However, before the vowel letters *i* and *e*, because of the many English words of Latinate origin, where *c* has the value of [s], as in *city*, *cell*, English has to use instead *k* to represent the sound [k], as in *kitten*, *keel*. This is the main use of *k* in English; use of *k*, otherwise unnecessary, as in *Kleenex*, *Kool Kat*, has indeed a peculiar or exotic look. The same rules apply after *s* as in *scream*, *scale*, *scoop*, *scum*, but *scent*, *science*, therefore *sketch*, *skim*, though here there are more non-exotic exceptions, *e.g.*, *skate*, *skull*.

The same basic pattern prevails before vowels toward the end of words or names too, of course, as in *basket*, *Erskine*, with *k* before *i* and *e*, but *c* before *a*, *o* or *u*, as in *Tuscan*, *rascal*, *Franciscan*, *Roscoe*, *Moscow*, *Fortescue*. Such spellings have a normal English (and Latinate) look. However, as the English language incorporated vast numbers of exotic place names in North America, especially after crossing the Mississippi, *k* became common, even the norm, for *k*-like sounds in these names before all vowels. Thus for example, *Connecticut*, *Penobscot*, *Tuscaloosa*, but *Kokomo*, *Kansas*, and of course *Nebraska*, and *Alaska*. In Alaska, especially, such names abound, as *Eklutna*, *Kuskokwim*, *Matanuska*, *Kiska*, partly also under Russian influence, so that to us the spelling *Athabaskan* looks at least as normal as *Athabascan*, perhaps more (distinctively) American, especially western, and of course Alaskan. Linguists nowadays prefer the *k* too, as did Sapir, since that is the standard phonetic symbol for the sound (the symbol *c* in linguistics having various other values). So we generally agree in preferring the *k*, because it looks "American," accords with linguists' usage, and distinguishes the language from the local Canadian place name. For the *b* and *p*, on the other hand, there is still disagreement, but I consider *Athabaskan* preferable above all because it accords with the common English pronunciation of the name.