Dialogue designs for language preservation
and linguistic exploration of Tahltan (Northern Athabaskan)

John Alderete, `alderete@sfu.ca`
Simon Fraser University, October 2005

Executive Summary

This memo describes dialogue designs, 1-2 minute conversations in colloquial Tahltan that are documented as CD quality recordings and transcribed using the Tahltan practical orthography (same as the Children's Dictionary). As I explain below, these short projects offer many benefits in terms of building capacity for language learning and language documentation. It is community-based, centered in teams established in the three communities of Telegraph Creek, Dease Lake, and Iskut. The output of these teams can be sent to trained linguists (like myself or Tahltan academics) for verification and commentary. Two short dialogues and two other longer dialogues have been created using this method, and they can serve as models for further dialogue creation (included in this package), thought they can also be improved on.

First two dialogues (see attached materials after appendix)

In August of 2005, I tried the method described in this memo with three elders in Telegraph Creek. The idea was to try to make a creative work that was something in between a long list of words in isolation and long monologues (like the ethnographic texts and stories done in the past). I had tried this before with Pat and Edith Carlick in 2001, but the dialogues ended up being rather long, which made it hard to finish the work in one or two days. That is why the dialogues are under a minute in duration: it made it possible to work together with the native speakers to plan out and record a conversation in a short period of time, and also it took me only one hour to make the sound file and rough draft of the transcription. This made it possible to complete the dialogue in one day.

Topics of everyday activities were chosen as the themes of the dialogue. One dialogue is about building a fire to keep the house warm and another was about doing some alternations on a shirt. They follow a natural question-answer format, and contain vocabulary centered on the chosen theme. It might be better in the future, however, to design dialogues that go beyond simple question-answer format, to explore the full range of dialogues in Tahltan.

One aspect of recording the dialogues is that they are recorded in stereo: there are two native speakers. This means that a recording kit is needed that and record two separate channels (more on this below in the Suggested recording setup section).

Benefits of dialogues

Why make dialogues, as opposed to other projects, like those with word lists or stories? The benefits below address this question by listing the direct and indirect benefits of dialogue creations.

1. Direct: *training in transcription, without the problems*
Dialogue creation offers opportunities for learning to listen and transcribe Tahltan words in a way that reduces some of the problems in other projects. Because they are dialogues, it is usually not an issue how to break up the spoken text into sentences. Each participant only gives one or two sentences, so the end of the sentence is generally when the conversation turns to another person. Also, because the dialogues are about one minute long, it is possible to finish a project in one day, which can help build confidence.

2. Direct: *dialogues are a basis for language lessons*
A well-designed dialogue, after it has been verified and corrected, can be very useful in language learning and teaching. Dialogues contain many useful ingredients for making language lessons: vocabulary centered around a theme, sentence patterns that can be extended by replacing words or phrases, and importantly, an entire conversation, which is rich in cultural information and linguistic patterns. The Appendix contains an illustration of how a whole language lesson can be centered around dialogues in the very successful series *Learning Indonesian by self-instruction*. (xxx get this xxx)

3. Indirect: *discovery of new linguistic patterns*
Because the native speakers are free to converse in any way they see fit, they will often use linguistic structures that linguists have not discovered yet. This is very important to obtaining a complete understanding of Tahltan grammar. For example, the rules of forming sentences with 'some put X into Y' are very complex and interesting. The sewing dialogue provides one example of a sentence of this type (second three of speaker B), which can be studied further by simply extending the uses and contexts for this pattern. When properly understood, this type of pattern can be documented by linguists in linguistics research papers, which are of great interest to the larger linguistics community. Furthermore, the correct grammatical rule of how to form this sentence type can be incorporated into language lessons as well.

4. Direct: *natural speech*
People often complain, rightly I believe, that word lists have a kind of artificial character: they have a monotone intonation and there is no context for the words in the list. Long monologues can also have these problems, though they are avoided by dynamic speakers. Dialogues, if properly designed, can 'bring the language to life' with a natural setting for the conversation, and when a speaker has another speaker to communicate with, the results are often more natural. Natural sounding speech is clearly more useful for language learning and for linguistic research—both are interested in the natural language as it is actually used.

5. Indirect: *no need for linguistic training*

The only prerequisites for creating dialogues are enthusiasm and good project management skills. Most Tahltan people have had some exposure to the practical orthography, and they can use example words in sound charts to see how the sounds of Tahltan are spelled. The real work is in designing the context for the conversation, i.e., picking a good theme (sewing, fishing, etc.), and building a dialogue around it. The 'how to' section below gives some tips as to how to make successful dialogues.

6. Indirect: *avoidance of touchy subjects makes new creations*
Many projects have documented topics that have complicated intellectual property issues. For example, some stories and songs are owned by individual families, while others are owned by the community. While these projects are very important, it can be difficult sorting out who has the right to make a copy of recording of this type, and as a result, many materials are not generally available. Dialogues about everyday activities avoid this problem: they don't discuss any touchy subjects and are in every way new creations, showing the vitality and creativity of the Tahltan language. That said, it is the decision of the TLCS how dialogues are to be used and copy-righted.

Suggested project management
Successful projects usually bring together lots of people who each contribute what they do best, and they are usually fully realized by completing a well-thought out project cycle. The model below describes the suggested team members to enlist in the project, as well as the project cycle.

Team members:

- *Native speaker consultants*: the elders who contribute their traditional knowledge; they are the 'actors' in the dialogues, and they play a crucial role in plotting out the dialogue

- *Project manager*: it's best to have one person doing the planning of interview dates, payment of team members, overseeing the completion of the transcription and sound recording, and finally making sure the final product is archived and made available to the larger linguistics community

- *Project assistants*: working with the project manager, assistants can be involved in the basic work of making the transcription, assisting with the sound recording, and helping the computer experts create the sound files and making them available to the public

- *Expert linguists and language teachers*: these people can either be involved in the actual work (i.e., they can be project managers) or they can listen to and verify the transcription. They can offer very useful comments about transcription practice, how to separate a string of sounds into individual words, and also identify the interesting linguistic patterns in the dialogues.

- *Computer/web experts/archivists*: the dialogue becomes a lot more useful when it is available on a computer. This may involve typing a hand-written transcription

into a word-processing program, digitizing a sound file, and making it available on a website (if this is desired). Also, when the transcription and recording are on computer files, it also makes it easier to archive them.

- *Administrators:* there are always forms to be filled out when people are paid. Someone needs to manage the bank account that funds the projects and disperse checks when the work is done. The TLCS has a protocol to be followed for paying elders and consultants.

Project cycle:

1. *Assembling the team*: make sure you understand who is going to do what and that you've got a commitment ahead of time from each person. It is possible that one person can serve many roles—like the project manager may do most of the transcription and recording, as well as other jobs.

2. *Testing the recording equipment*: make sure you understand how your recording equipment works and have tried it out with two mics. Make a test recording of two people and listen to the results, making sure it has CD sound quality.

3. *The interview:* create the dialogue during the interview, and try to use the extra time you have to confirm the correct transcriptions; it is easier to playback the recording and make the transcription with a native speaker present.

4. *Sending materials to experts:* once the recording is in some format (for example, MiniDisc, cassette, or computer sound file) and there is a written transcription of the dialogue, send the results to your linguist experts; they will send you their comments and suggestions to be incorporated into the final version.

5. *Storing and disseminated completed materials:* create a folder in your computer that stores the transcription file and the sound file and then make back up copies. Also, the other team members may want a copy, including the elders who shared their knowledge in making the dialogue.

Suggested recording setup

The recording kit for making dialogues should have certain features, and certain other features are desired because they make the recording easier to do. The TLCS already has two MiniDisc recorders, and with a stereo adapter, they can make dialogue recordings. Below, some recommendations are also made for two CompactFlash recorders that have all the features below and simplify the transfer of the recording to a computer. The project manager first has to acquire the necessary components of the recording kit and test it out before dialogues can be made.

Required features of the kit
- *Two good quality microphones*: buy the best one you can afford. The tie-clip type is good for interviews. Audio-technica has many excellent mics, running about $150-400 each.

- *Two separate channels*: because there are two speakers, it's important to separate the channels, so each speaker will get a good clear signal and they will be recorded at the right level. Many recorders have the ability to plug in two separate mics, and they should be used if possible. Alternatively, if there is only one 'mic in' jack (which is stereo), then an adapter is required so that two mics can go into one jack.

- *Ability to set the recording levels:* most good recorders, including all made by Marantz, have the ability to adjust the input levels. This is necessary so that loud speakers are recorded at the same level as quiet speakers. They reduce distortion and are very important for CD quality sound recording. MiniDisc recorders generally have this feature, but you have to shift through many menus.

- *Ability to playback results*: a good recording of a dialogue usually requires about 10 to 12 attempts at 'getting it right'. It's very useful to be able to play back the last recording to the elders, so they can hear what they said and improve upon it. This also gives the project manager the opportunity to check the sound quality.

- *Digital recording:* cassette tapes are analogue recordings, but most modern recorders store sounds using the same kind of information as that found on a music CDs. There are digital DVD recorders, camcorders, CD recorders, and now digital recorders that record right onto CompactFlash cards, the cards that digital cameras use. Digital recorders are generally higher quality, and they allow the project manager to very quickly transfer the sound recording to a computer, the ultimate resting place for the recording.

Useful additional features:
- *Drag and drop importing of a sound file:* many recorders, like the ones listed below, allow the recorder to be connected to a computer using a USB cord, which enables the CompactFlash card in the recorder to be a drive on a computer. This means you can just drag the sound file onto another drive on the computer, saving many hours of re-recording onto a computer.

- *Comfortable and unobtrustive setup:* it's also very nice to have a recording setup that is relatively unobtrustive. One goal is to create a setup so that the native speakers will forget that they are being recorded. Wireless mics, or small tie-clip mics help with this. Also, try to find a comfortable setting, like at a kitchen table or a quiet office. Sometimes it's useful to stand up, which is difficult if the speakers are connected to the recorder by cords.

Three recommended recorders (likely to be dated soon): these are all good recorders and the Marantz recorders can be purchased through Terrace Sight & Sound (the one with all the music equipment, not the one in the mall; though you may need to special order them; contact Steve Forten at 250-635-5333 steve@sight-and-sound.ca for special orders). Just put the model number and manufacturer in Google and you will find the details of these recorders.

Marantz PMD 670 Compact Flash Card Recorder, $1000 CAD
This has all the features above, with extra buzzes and whistles in terms of recording settings. Has professional XLT inputs for mics.

Marantz PMD 660 Compact Flash Card Recorder, $700-800 CAD
Smaller handheld version of above recorder, with a few less buzzes and whistles. Has professional XLT inputs for mics.

M-audio Microtrack 24/96 Professional 2-channel mobile recorder, $500 USD
Also takes CompactFlash, has two channels, but the jacks are different (1/4'' jacks like for stereo headphones). Very small setup but very functional. Less buzzes and whistles, but many of the extras are not necessary.

How to: a procedure and some tips for successful dialogue creation

The procedure described below focuses on the interview in which a dialogue is created. It is recommended that the project manager read this over before starting, in order to have a rough idea of the hoped-for outcome and how to obtain it.

1. *Decide on a topic*
At the beginning of your interview, work with your native speaker collaborators to decide on the topic of conversation. The conversation can be about anything, from what to have for dinner to a discussion of how to care for pets. Consider the ability to create a natural scene for the conversation; could the elders easily image themselves in this setting? Also, flesh out logical vocabulary, trying to write down as many words relating to the topic as possible.

2. *Create the setting*
Once you have your topic, try to create a setting as natural as possible for the native speakers. For example, if you're talking about sewing a shirt, find some fabic that the elders can touch while speaking about it. The ability to point to objects is useful too, and certain topics may require specific rooms, like the kitchen for topics relating to cooking. The goal is to try to make the background for creating the dialogue as natural as possible so the dialogue will also be natural sounding.

3. *Brainstorm the outline of the dialogue*
This is the hardest part, but also the most fun because it involves using your creativity. Try to lay down a rough outline for the dialogue. Find a way to start the conversation, for example with a question or comment that invites a response. Try to weave in the vocabulary in natural ways but avoid the tendency to have one person always asking a question, and the other always answering. Though it's not necessary to have a script, try to give a rough outline for the whole conversation, including a statement that brings the conversation to a close.

4. *Practice without notes before recording*
Without any notes, try to do a 'dress rehearsal'. In other words, now that we have the background scene, and the basic direction of the conversation, pretend the native speakers are actors in a play and just let them act. They may find that they feel one response is less natural, or just not what they would say, and suggest a new way. The project manager can assist by trying to write out in English the rough script, but should allow the native speakers the time and space to create the new conversation. The conversation should be rather short, between 10-20 sentences in total, and roughly a minute in duration.

5. *Record and re-record*
Once you all feel you've got a good understanding of the dialogue, make a recording of the full dialogue. Reassure the speakers that it's okay to make mistakes and you can work at it until you get it right. Even if they make a mistake, try to finish the dialogue to the end. Then, play it back so they can hear what they said, and think about how to improve. It usually takes several attempts to get the dialogue 'perfect', or at least to a standard that all are happy with. Then take a break.

6. *Transcribe with elders present*
Either using paper and pencil, or a laptop computer, make a first attempt at a transcription of the dialogue. Play each sentence in isolation and try to pronounce the full sentence yourself. If the elders agree with your pronunciation, use that and their own repetitions to make the transcription. Try to complete the whole dialogue, remembering that this is a rough draft and it can be corrected later.

7. *Verify with available materials/ask questions*
Take another break for an hour or so, and go back over the recording yourself. Consult the Children's Dictionary to see if there are any words already in the dictionary, and triple-check your transcription, perhaps calling the native speakers on the phone to ask follow-up questions. Then send the recording and transcription to the linguists and language teachers who are part of your team for final verification.

TAHLTAN DAILY DIALOGUE: MAKING A FIRE[1]

Elders (native speaker consultants): Patrick and Edith Carlick
Transcriber: John Alderete, Angela Dennis
Date: August 24, 2005
Location: Telegraph Creek, British Columbia

TECHNICAL INFORMATION
File name of digital recording: <tdial_fire_aug05.wav>
Duration of recording: 39 seconds
Audio file attributes: 44,100 Hz, 16 bit, stereo
Transcription system: Tahltan practical orthography

COPYRIGHT

Speaker labels: Edith = 'A', Patrick = 'B'
A: Duda adint'il dugi z̲enē̲s
English: What are you going to do today?

B: 'ah 'ene hugha' adesłał
I'm going to work outside.

A.   Yeda agha adinlā
What are you going to work on?

B.   Ts'ets ghah adeslah
I'm going to work on wood.

A.   Ts'etsteł adinlilah
Are you going to make kindling?

B.   Ee ts'etseł adē̲slił
Yes, I'm going to make kindling.

A.   Ighats̲i adinlilah
Are you going to make shavings?

B.   Ee eghats̲i adē̲slił
Yes, I'm going to make shavings.

A.   Sestli' esduga k'udik'āh
I'm cold, make a fire for me.

B.   Menislin dechime honī̲z̲ī̲ł
I want this house to be warm

TAHLTAN DAILY DIALOGUE: SEWING[1]

Speaker labels: Margery = 'A', Edith = 'B'

A: Duda adint'il dugi zenes
English: What are you going to do today?

B: In'eje gha'adesłał
I'm going to work on your shirt.

A.   Duda adinlīl
What are you going to do with it?

B.   Ichohi adesłīł
I'm going to make it bigger?

A.   Duda ichohi adinlił
How are you going to make it bigger?

B.   Ts'isā mekoge nadesdestlił
I'm going to put a piece on the side.

A.   Eslah'eł nanełlūł
I'm going to sew it by hand.

B.   Duda 'onzen'
What do you think?

A.   Sogā aden nēsen
I think it's good.