

## ‡Names for Denali in Alaska Native Languages and the Denali Name Change of 2015

by James Kari

Five Athabascan (or Dene) language areas have had some territory in the stream drainages that surround Denali National Park and Preserve: Ahtna to the east, Dena'ina) to the south, Upper Kuskokwim to the west, Koyukon to the north, and Lower Tanana to the north-east. Athabascan travel and place naming are purposeful, and there is an extensive network of Athabascan place names surrounding the Central Alaska Range in the traditional land use areas for streams, lakes, and accessible mountains and ridges.

The name “Denali” is based upon the Koyukon place name as used by the people north of the mountain. Table 14 shows the two different names for the tallest mountains of the Central Alaska Range, one in the languages to the north and west of the range, and one in the languages to the south. These names can apply to the peak Denali/Mount McKinley, but more generally they apply to all of the high peaks of the Central Alaska Range. The names in Table 14 are spelled in the local practical alphabets, in a standardized alphabet, and in the International Phonetic Alphabet (or IPA). The five names

closest to Denali are also summarized on Map 41. There are no clearly aboriginal names for Denali recorded in other Alaska Native languages.

The entire Alaska Range is commonly referred to as **Deghilo:yi** (see 7.62) ‘the objects that are in a line’ or ‘the plural objects that are suspended’. Athabascan people have a quiet reverence for Denali. They tend to avoid talking about the mountain much like they avoid mentioning the names of their ancestors. Place names for major streams and landmarks or for various sacred hills and ridges near the old village sites are mentioned much more frequently than are the names for Denali.

In 1903 James Wickersham heard a Koyukon legend from the blind chief Koonah on the middle Kantishna River. The chapter in Wickersham 1938:238-254 has the story of the giant Yacko (**Yokuh** or ‘Big Sky’) that begins: “Long before Denali, the high one, was raised to the sky, Yako dwelt in the land where the Tena live.” There are other recordings of ‘Big Sky’ stories by Athabascan experts such as Hester Evan, Peter John, and Katie John. The narrative told in 1903 by Koonah seems to be the only

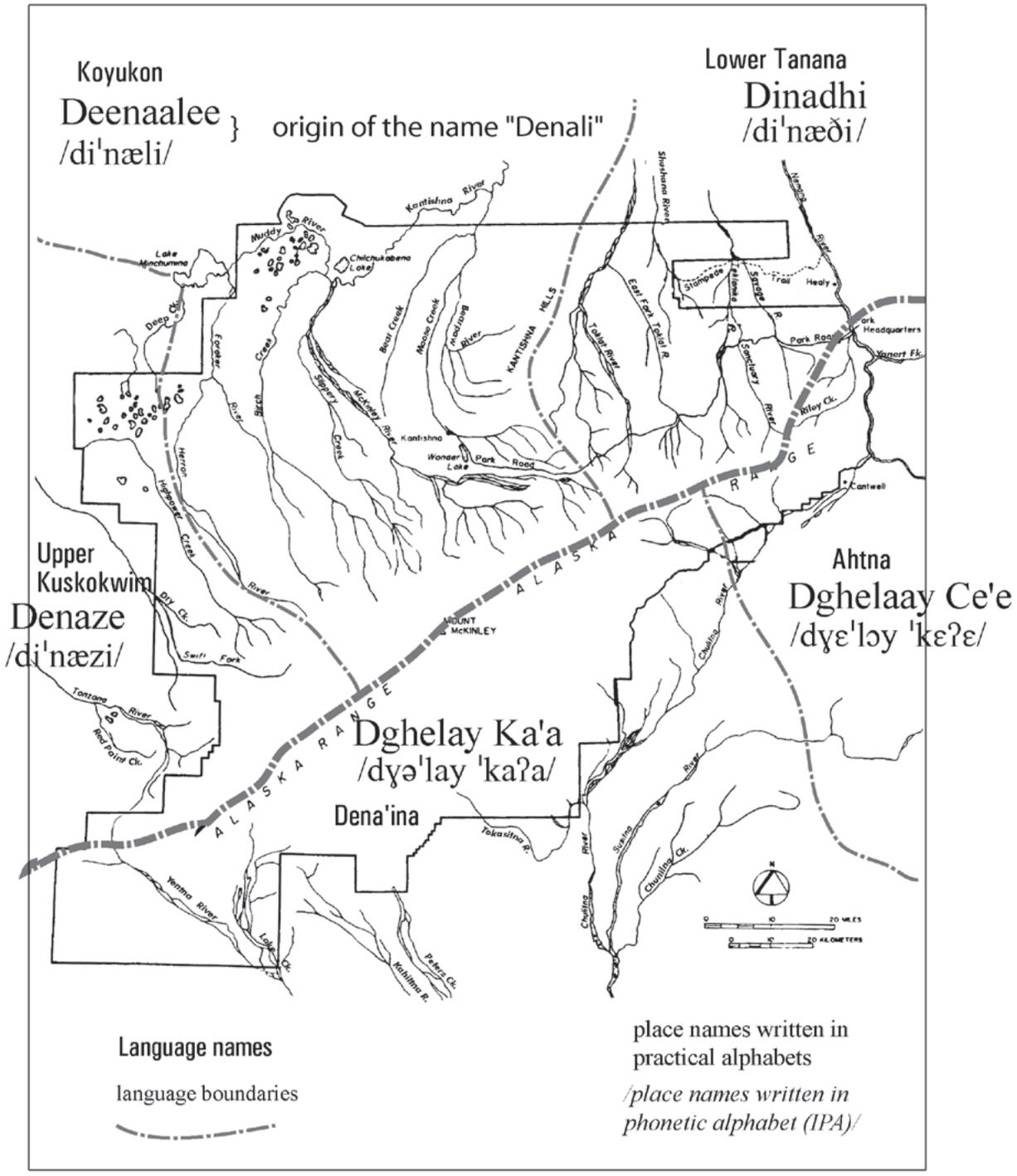
**TABLE 14A. ATHABASCAN NAMES FOR DENALI/MT. MCKINLEY**

**North of the Alaska Range: literally ‘the tall one’**

Native language	spelled in local practical alphabets	spelled in a standardized alphabet	spelled in the IPA
Koyukon	Deenaalee	Diinaalii	/di'næli/
Lower Tanana	‡Dinadhi, Dinadhedi	Diinaadhi, Diinaadhedi	/di'næði/
Middle Tanana	Diineezi	Diinaadhi	/di'næði/
Upper Kuskokwim	Denaze	Diinaazii	/di'næzi/
Ingalik (Deg Hit'an)	Dengadh, Dengadhi	Dengadh, Dengadhe	/de'ŋað, de'ŋaðe/
Holikachuk	Denadhe	Diinaadhii	/di'næði/

**South of the Alaska Range: literally ‘mountain-big’**

Native language	spelled in local practical alphabets	spelled in a standardized alphabet	spelled in the IPA
Ahtna	Dghelaay Ce'e, Deghilaay Ce'e	Dgheloy Ke'e, Deghiloy Ke'e	/dʒe'lɔy 'ke?e/
Dena'ina (Upper Inlet)	Dghelay Ka'a	Dghelay Ka'a	/dʒə'laj 'ka?a/
Dena'ina (Lower Inlet)	Dghili Ka'a	Dghili Ka'a	/'dʒili 'ka?a/



**MAP 40**

Athabascan names for Denali.

MAP BY JAMES KARI

**TABLE 14B. ANALYSIS OF KOYUKON DEENAALÉE**

The Koyukon name **deenaalee** is a nominalized verb derived from the commonly used verb theme Ø + **naal** ‘to be long, tall.’ The word is composed of four morphemes:

<b>d</b>	+	<b>ee</b>	+	<b>naal</b>	+	<b>ee</b>
gender prefix		neuter prefix		verb stem ‘tall, long’		nominalizing suffix ‘the one that’

one that is centered on the origin of Denali. Shem Pete did not have a story about Denali.

The name “Denali” does not literally mean ‘The Great One,’ as is commonly stated, but is instead based upon the verb theme (see Table 14B) that means ‘high’ or ‘tall.’ Alaskan scholars Jules Jetté and James Wickersham correctly translated Denali as ‘the high one’ (Jetté and Jones 2000:432, Wickersham 1938:243). William Dickey’s statement, “The Indians of Cook Inlet have always called this the Bulshaia (great) mountain” (1897:325), is not factually correct. Dickey recorded the Russian word for ‘big’ from some Dena’ina men, but I have never heard that term applied to Denali by Shem Pete or other Dena’ina speakers.

The first documented sighting of the mountain was on March 7, 1834 when Alaska Native Andrei Glazunov saw a high mountain from the mouth of the Stony River in the middle Kuskokwim River area. He recorded the name as “Tenada” (VanStone 1959). This is clearly a Deg Hit’an (Ingalik) name, probably from the McGrath area, **Dengadh**. Glazunov was a Russian creole and a speaker of the Kodiak Alutiiq language. He was literate in Russian, and he was formally documenting previously unexplored areas of the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers at the direction of Admiral Ferdinand von Wrangell. Tenada and other westerly names from Glazunov’s journal appear on the 1839 Wrangell map, considered the best map of its time of west and southcentral Alaska (Wrangell 1980 [1839]; see Map 17, p. 86).

William Dickey assumed that his sketch map of the Susitna River (Dickey 1897a; see Map 43) was the first to record a name for the tallest mountain of the Central Alaska Range. Alfred H. Brooks, to enhance the case for the name “Mount McKinley,” claimed that there was no Russian map with names on the tallest mountains of the Alaska Range (Brooks 1911:24, 1953:230). However, “Tenada” on the Wrangell map of 1839 was the first time one of the Athabascan versions of “Denali” appeared on a prominent map (Kari 1986b).

The choice for a name for the tallest mountain has long been controversial. Since the early 1900s most Alaskans, Native and non-Native, have adopted the name Denali. Hudson Stuck (1914:vii-xi) made a passionate case for “Denali” in his account of the first ascent of the mountain.

Donald Orth, former secretary of the U.S. Board of Geographic Names (USBGN), summarized the Denali-McKinley name change controversy (Orth 1980, 1985). There has been vocal civic support in Alaska for the name change for over forty years. In 1975 the Alaska Legislature officially adopted the name Denali for the mountain and recommended that name to the USBGN. However, the Board could not issue a ruling because annually from 1977 to 2015 a bill had been introduced in Congress by members of the Ohio congressional delegation to retain the name Mount McKinley (Ohio being President McKinley’s home state).

Since 2012 a Wikipedia entry “The Denali/Mount McKinley Naming Dispute” has been a source for historical information and news items. In the summer of 2015 the Denali-McKinley name change issue was getting renewed attention. On August 28, 2015 Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell issued a secretarial order with the approval of President Barack Obama to change the official name from Mount McKinley to Denali. The Department of Interior press release of Sept. 1 noted that the repeated introduction of legislation by the Ohio delegation (1977-2015) had the effect of indefinitely deferring any further consideration of the McKinley-Denali controversy by the USBGN. “The 38-year impasse between the BGN and Congress was unique in BGN history, a situation that was never anticipated when the policy was adopted,” said Doug Caldwell, the Chair of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. (The Wikipedia entry on Denali is interesting.)

The restoration of Denali as the official place name has been applauded by a broad spectrum of Alaskans. In the days following Denali name change, Alaska’s governor and congressional delegation, tribal leaders and many other Alaskans stated that the name change is a sign of recognition and respect for Athabascan and other Alaska Native languages and traditions.

Denali is Alaska’s most visible mountain and most prominent place name. The Denali name change will enhance people’s awareness of the concept of indigenous geographic knowledge. It introduces to the public basic concepts such as official place names, Native-origin place names (Denali), and authentic Native language names (such as Koyukon **Deenaalee**).