

A typologically oriented portrait of the Athabaskan language family

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“It often appears as if any generalization that one draws about morphosyntax is falsified by the verb in some Athapaskan languages” (Rice 2000: 1).

Overview

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|---|---|
| 1. Genealogical and geographical information | 4. Towards lexical typology: A case study in conceptualization of motion, or was Einstein the first to discover relativity? |
| 2. Why Athabaskan languages are special | 5. Conclusion |
| 3. Morphosyntactic features: typological highpoints and thrills | |

1. Genealogical and geographical information

Na-dene (=Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit)

Tlingit

Eyak-Athabaskan

Eyak

Athabaskan (about 40 languages)

Northern: Slave, Chipewyan, Upper Kuskokwim and other Alaskan...

Pacific: Hupa, Tolowa...

Southern (Apachean): Navajo, Western Apache...

2. Why Athabaskan languages are special

- have a reputation of being very different from other North American languages
“The Nadene languages, probably the most specialized of all...” (Sapir 1929)
Greenberg 1987
Cf. Mithun 1999 and 2001 p.c.
- typologically exceptional in many ways
- very intricate structure: “hopeless maze of irregularities” (Young and Morgan 1972:40)
- poorly understood in typological literature due to opaque traditional descriptive terminology

3. Morphosyntactic features

(★ marks typological highpoints, ★★ marks typological thrills)

NB: Most of these features are shared by all Athabaskan languages, but some may be represented to a different degree (e.g. Navajo is most polysynthetic)

3.1. Basic morphosyntactic features

- among the most morphologically complex languages of the world (syntactic structure is quite simple); just about everything that can be coded morphologically (rather than lexically or syntactically) in a human language is coded so in the Athabaskan verb

- polysynthetic expression of grammatical meanings
- consistent head-marking
- accusative alignment
- verb-final word order

(1) Navajo (Young and Morgan 1943)

gał báhí mąʔ ii--yéé tsé y-ee--y-ił --n-da-dzi-s-neʔ
 grey.rabbit coyote_i--Encl rock_j it_j-by--he_i-at--Pref-Distr-Pref-Pf-throw.SCO
 ‘The grey rabbits threw rocks at that coyote (stoning him to death)’

3.2. ★★ (Almost) exclusively prefixing

“Standard average Athabaskan” verb template (D[erivation], I[nflection], Q[uasi-inflection])

- 18 proclitic
- 17 (b) Oblique +
(a) preverb
- 16 various derivational
- 15 reflexive Accusative pronoun
- 14 iterative
- 13 distributive
- 12 incorporate
- 11 number
- 10 Accusative pronoun
- 9 non-1/2 person Nominative pronoun
- 8 transitivity decrease
- 7 qualifier
- 6 inceptive
- 5 qualifier
- 4 conjugation
- 3 mode
- 2 1/2 person Nominative pronoun
- 1 transitivity indicator
- 0 ROOT**
- +1 (often opaque) old mode/aspect suffix
- +2 enclitic

3.3. ★ Prefixation is combined with postpositions and verb-final word order

(cf. Konstanz Universals Archive, universals #506, 892; in the sample of Bybee, Pagliuca, and Perkins 1990 Slave is the only genuine counterexample to the tendency that V-final entails suffixing.)

(2) Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan (henceforth: UKA)

duł koʔ di-zi-s-do ‘I am sitting on a log’
 log on Pref-Md-1Sg.Nom-sit

3.4. ★ Grammatically accusative without evidence for syntactic relations

- Non-promotional passive
- No inter-clausal syntactic processes referring to the syntactic statuses “subject”, “direct object”...

See Kibrik 1992, 1996

3.4. for some languages (Navajo), internal (“pronominal”) argument type

Jelinek 1984; Van Valin 1977, Boas 1911, Duponceau 1819

- ◆ most frequently (62% cases in Navajo spoken discourse) full NPs are not there, so there is nothing to agree with
- ◆ Navajo represents privileged, as well as less privileged participants on the verb, and in that sense does not differentiate between them

(3) Navajo

y-e-i-ø-ní lóóz

‘He led it to her’

33.Obl_j-to-33.Acc_k-3.Nom_i-led

- ◆ different pronominal elements on the verb can cooccur with the same full NP

(4) Navajo

‘My older brother is sitting’

a. shí naaí

ø-sidá

b. shí naaí

dzi-zdá

1Sg.Poss:older.brother

3.Nom-sit

1Sg.Poss:older.brother

4.Nom-sit

See Jelinek 1984, Willie 1991, Kibrik 1992

- ◆ more conservative Athabaskan languages are not exactly like Navajo in that respect: UKA is pronominal-internal/nominal-external

(5) UKA

a. dish ?ił t’as

b. y-ił t’as

c. *dish

y-ił t’as

chicken he.is.frying

it-he.is.frying

chicken

it-he.is.frying

See Saxon 1989

3.5. ★ Poor correspondence between semantic categories and template positions

one semantic category in more than one alternative position

nominative

one semantic category simultaneously in more than one position

transitivity

aspect see 3.7 below

negation

multiple cases of obviously inexplicable homophony and allomorphy in grammatical morphemes

15 synchronically different *d*-morphemes in Navajo in the same part of the verb form

1Sg.Nom prefix is *sh-*, except in the perfective form non-detransitivized verbs it is *é-*

3.6. ★★ *Affix ordering is not governed by semantic scope/relevance*

Bybee (1985: 34-35): the most common ordering of grammatical categories:
 [for prefixation]: (D) person – (C) mood – (B) tense – (A) aspect – ROOT

(6) Central Alaskan Yup'ik (Eskimo-Aleut, Mithun 1999: 407)

ROOT | DERIVATION | INFLECTION

iter-	ngnaqe-	rraar-	tur-	llru-	u-	q	'he always wanted to enter first'
enter-	try.to-	first-	repeatedly-	Past-	Indic-	3Sg	
			ASPECT	TENSE	MOOD	PERSON	

Bybee 1985: 35: "in one language [in the sample – A.K.], Navaho, the person markers occur closer to the stem than tense markers".

(7) Navajo

nihideestsit 'I will move on the buttocks to a point'

DERIVATION		INFLECTION			ROOT	
ni-	hi-	di-	ghi-	s-	l-	tsit
Term-	Ser-	Inc-	Prog-	1Sg.Nom-	Val-	move.sitting
DERIVASP	LEXASP	INFLASP	TENSE	PERSON	VALROOT	
B	A	C	C	D		Scope/relevance ranks

See Rice 2000

3.7. ★★ *Extreme concern for expressing aspectual meanings*

(8) Navajo

-tsaad/-tsáád/-tsi?/-tsit 'move sitting' (Young and Morgan 1987d: 628)

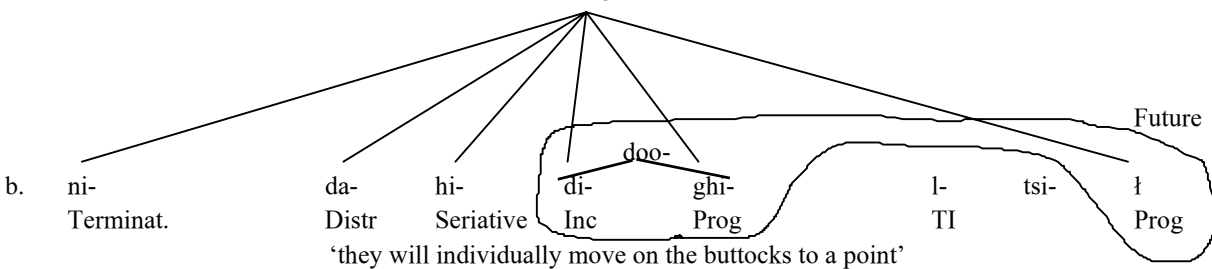
			5-7		4-3	2	1	0	+1
<i>Deriv</i>	<i>Iter/Rep</i>	<i>Distr</i>	<i>Qualifier</i>	<i>Inceptive</i>	<i>Conjug-Mode</i>	<i>1/2 Nom</i>	<i>TI</i>	<i>Root</i>	<i>suffix</i>

a.

hi-	s-	[l-]	tsáád
Seriative	1Sg.Nom	TI	

'I am hopping on the rump'

6 distinct aspectual affixes

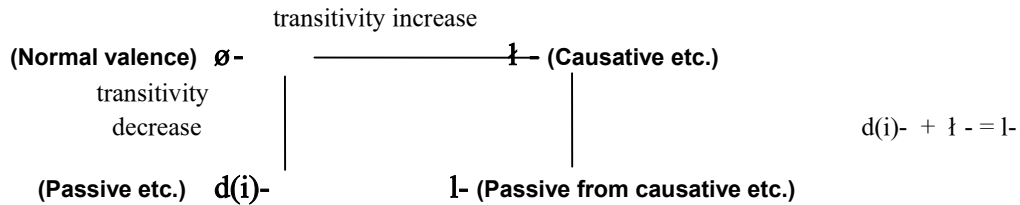


See Kari 1979, Axelrod 1993.

3.8. ★ Bizarre morphophonemics

3.9. ★ Rich system of transitivity marking

Pre-stem morphemes: Transitivity indicators (TIs, traditional term: “classifier”): \emptyset -, l -, $d(i)$ -, l -



(9) Navajo

- a. na-a- \emptyset -bé ‘he is taking bath’
 Pref-Md-NormVal-bathe
- b. na-bi-y-í -l -bé ‘you are giving him a bath’
 Pref-3.Dat-Md-2Sg.Nom-Caus-bathe
- c. na-[?]-ii-l-bé ‘smth/someone is being bathed’
 Pref-Indf.Dat-Md-DetransCaus-bath

See Kibrik 1993, 1996, Thompson 1996, Rice 2000

3.10. ★★ Verb lexical semantics: strikingly unusual patterns of conceptualization

4. Towards lexical typology:

A case study in conceptualization of motion, or was Einstein the first to discover relativity?

4.1. Classificatory verbs

(10) UKA, as well as all further examples

‘I carry it’ ghi-s-ROOT
 Prog-1Sg.Nom-ROOT

Rock	gun	gloves	water in a bucket	baby
<i>ghi-s-[?] ot</i>	<i>ghi-s-tet</i>	<i>ghi-s-[d-]lat</i>	<i>ghi-s-kot</i>	<i>ghi-[s-]t tał</i>

Same roots are used for series of verbs meaning ‘bring’, ‘give’, ‘wash’, ‘find’, ‘lose’, etc., etc. Classificatory verb are based on class membership of the Absolutive

4.2. Consider 4 stereotypical meanings of classificatory verbs

- (i) ‘lie’
- (ii) ‘move (intr)’/‘fall’
- (iii) ‘throw’/‘drop’
- (iv) ‘carry’

4.3. Different roots for ‘lie’ (i) and ‘move’/‘fall’ (ii)

	Stiff compact (rock)	Stiff diffuse (gun)	Multiple (gloves)	Animate (baby)
(i) ‘lie’	- <i>ʔo</i>	- <i>to</i>	- <i>la</i>	- <i>ta</i>
(ii) ‘move’/‘fall’	- <i>ninh</i>	- <i>ghet</i>	- <i>dak</i>	- <i>yo</i>

The classifications of objects are similar but not identical; there are more classes for ‘move (intr)’/ ‘fall’ verbs; apparently the construal of movement requires more relevant distinctions than being at rest.

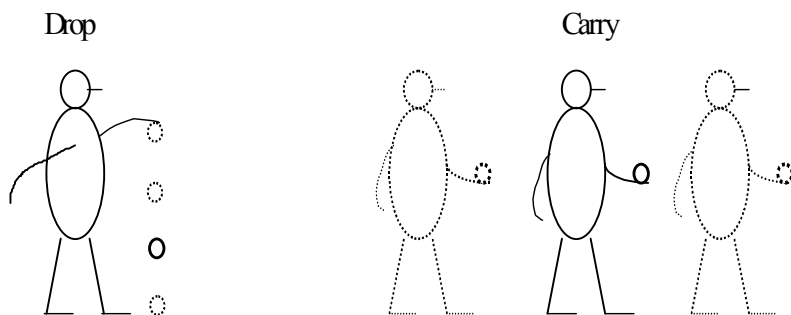
4.4. ‘Throw’/‘drop’(iii) verbs are causatives from ‘move’/‘fall’ (ii): causative formation

- (11) a. dichinh no-di-ghe-ø-ghit ‘the stick fell down’
 stick down-Pref-Md-NormVal-SDO.move.Pf
- b. dichinh no-di-ghi-ł -ghit ‘I dropped the stick’
 stick down-Pref-Md-[1Sg.Nom-]Caus-SDO.move.Pf

4.5. ‘Carry’ (iv) verbs’ roots coincide with those of the ‘lie’ (i) verbs

- (12) a. tudzile zi-ø-tonh ‘the ice pick lies’
 ice.pick Md-NormVal-SDO.lie.Pf
- b. tudzile di-ghi-s-ø-tel ‘I carry an ice pick’
 ice.pick Pref-Prog-1Sg.Nom-NormVal-SDO.lie.Prog

- NB: There is no increase in transitivity in the ‘carry’ verbs compared to ‘lie’ verbs
- Reason: In carrying, unlike throwing/dropping, the patient moves together with the agent. In carrying, the patient remains at rest *relative* to the agent.



4.6. Athabaskan Einsteins

“The theory of relativity says that all laws of physics are the same in all inertial frames of reference. An inertial frame of reference is a frame of reference which is moving at a constant velocity relative to an observer. The observer's frame of reference is generally considered to be "at rest", although this does not mean the same thing as Newton's absolute rest. A person making an observation about something else that is in motion can consider himself at rest relative to the object he is observing. <...> If any two people observed each other as they moved in different directions, each person could consider himself at rest, and the other person moving. Both points of view are equally valid, according to special relativity.” (Popular Internet introduction to the Special theory of relativity; <http://www.rpnet.net/~bart/frames.phtml?general>)

- Athabaskans have known for a long time before Einstein and Galileo: object location/motion is different depending on the frame of reference
- Carrying and dropping may seem similar actions of movement causation, from an objective perspective. But these types of movements are conceptualized differently, in a relativist fashion, in the Athabaskan languages
- Carrying is conceptualized as a subcase of being at rest, because when X is carried its frame of reference moves together with X, and relative to the Agent, X (=the Absolute) is at rest.
 - ‘A carries X’ essentially means ‘X is at rest within the frame of reference of moving A’.
 - The idea of movement is rendered not by the root but by derivational or inflectional affixes.
- On the contrary, throwing or dropping is conceptualized as causing independent movement relative to the Agent’s frame of reference.
- So in reporting such motion events Athabaskans take the perspective of the agent, not of an external observer (speaker).

4.7. Animacy against relativity: carried animate patients are not treated as being at rest

(13) a. to-ø-tał ‘he will lie down’ b. si-gh-e-ł -tał ‘you carry me’ (Collins, Petruska 1993: 52)
Fut-NormVal-An.lie.Prog 1Sg.Acc-Md-2Sg.Nom-Caus-An.lie.Prog

- Animate Absolutes have their own frame of reference and their physical movement is understood as linguistic movement as well, even when they are at rest relative to the agent
- So in the Athabaskan conceptual system relativity of motion can be overruled by animacy

5. Conclusion

I am exploring the hypothesis that:

- A better understanding of the system of event conceptualization, as realized in the Athabaskan verb root, can help to tackle the most intricate problems of Athabaskan grammar, such as:
 - non-scope-governed morpheme order
 - excessive aspectual marking
 - apparent irregularity and typological exceptionality
- From this one can proceed with a lexical typology of languages, i.e. a cross-linguistic comparison of conceptualization profiles in certain lexical domains

NON-OBVIOUS ABBREVIATIONS IN GLOSSES

Md – one of mode (tense-aspect- modality) affixes	Nom – nominative	Distr – distributive plural
Pf – perfective	Acc – accusative	Indf – indefinite
Prog -- progressive	Dat – dative	Val – valence marker
Fut – future	An – animate entity	NormVal – normal valence
Inc -- inceptive	SCO – stiff compact object	TI – transitivity indicator
	SDO – stiff diffuse object	Encl – enclitic
		Pref – prefix of irrelevant function

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