

Epistemics, evidentials, and other higher-order predicates in Dene Sų́liné: Packing the post-verbal stance stack

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Being polysynthetic and often fusional, Dene (Athapaskan) languages, which at one time were widely spoken across western North America, are infamous for their complex verb morphology. The stem-final verb word has received extensive attention morphologically on account of the numerous posited prefix positions that can or must accompany the word-final verb stem (Li 1946, Kari 1989, Rice 2000). Indeed, the extensive inflectional and derivational marking that is obligatorily present in certain verbs requires a certain suspension of belief by cognitive linguists who might be forgiven for regarding the Dene verb as a precompiled, largely idiomatic construction due to the fact that it resists both standard conjugation and decompositionality by speakers.

By comparison, post-verbal material in Dene languages has largely been ignored since natural discourse has rarely formed the basis of data analysis in the Athapaskan literature. However, a plethora of material, both stanced and unstanced, shows up in the right periphery of spontaneous utterances to the point that further neglect of this rich (inter)subjective, post-verbal position is both unwarranted and counter to the cognitive linguistic ethos of analyzing real usage data. The post-verbal position is where one finds periphrastic TAM markers (TAM material is otherwise obligatorily marked within the verb word), question particles, as well as—at least in most Dene languages—negative particles. The few accounts of evidential particles in Dene languages (DeLancey 1990, de Reuse 2003) also place them squarely at the right periphery. A wide range of desiderative, epistemic, and assertive predicates also show up in the right periphery (having scope, of course, on the preceding material), some of which may have been the original lexical sources of now reduced “discourse particles” that signal a plethora of stanced categories.

Using personal field notes and a corpus of conversational and narrative data, I exemplify how various categories of stance are marked in Dene Sų́liné (ISO 639-3: chp) and how subjective and stanced elements tend to stack up in natural discourse (cf. Dancygier 2012, Fraser 2015, Lohmann & Koops 2016), as they do in other languages being investigated in this special theme session. In addition to exemplifying the many categories—sometimes of exceptional nuance—that appear in post-verbal positions, I discuss the frequency, preferred combinations (univertation), ordering tendencies, and possible lexical origins (decategorization) of some of these now highly reduced yet highly collocating “extra-propositional” particles.

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