

Templates, paradigms, and morphological typology: Perspectives from Dene languages

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Templatic morphology (a.k.a. position class morphology, slot-and-filler morphology) is typically understood as one form of morphological organization in which the linear order of morphemes bears little apparent relationship to other synchronic semantic, syntactic, or phonological factors (Good 2011). Although templatic morphological structures have been reported in many language families, Dene (Athapaskan, Athabaskan) languages are often upheld as offering particularly striking examples of morphological templates in action, with some Dene verbal constructions analyzed as having upwards of twenty distinct template positions (cf. Kari 1989). While templatic morphology has been seen as a typological hallmark of the Dene language family (cf. Mithun 1999: 361), recent analyses suggest that morphological templates may not be necessary—or even entirely adequate—as models of Dene word formation (McDonough 2000, Rice 2000). This raises questions as to the appropriateness of templatic morphology as a typological category: if one of the prime examples of this form of morphological organization can be analyzed *without* the use of templates, what other support can be mustered for morphological templates as a cross-linguistic concept?

This talk traces the implications of non-templatic analyses of Dene verbal morphology for morphological typology and for ongoing research and revitalization efforts in this language family. In particular, it proposes that paradigm-based approaches may not only present an empirically viable means of analyzing Dene morphology, but also offer several potential advantages over the corresponding template-based analyses. With paradigm-based models casting Dene morphology in a markedly different typological light, this talk considers to what extent purportedly templatic attributes of Dene morphology remain in the wake of paradigmatic analysis—and, thus, what support might still be found in the resulting models for the notion of distinctively templatic morphology.

References

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