Breaking with Tradition, (Re)assessing Navajo Word-Formation: A Case Study
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One of the most fundamental issues in Navajo linguistics, and more generally within Athabaskan literature, concerns the modeling of formation principles that govern verbal derivation and inflection. This is necessitated by the fact that the Athabaskan verb exhibits a number of structurally ‘aberrant’ properties. Some of the most commonly asserted features are listed in (1) (cf. Rice 2000).

(1) a. Discontinuous dependencies are common.
   b. Inflection is interleaved with non-category changing derivation.
   c. Classes of prefixes (e.g. adverbials) appear to have linearly fixed ‘positions’ in relation to the verbal stem.

In order to explicate verb-formation, most analyses reject the traditional templatic representation that reference grammars or dictionaries implicitly presuppose: OBL.OBJ + DERIV + ASP + DIST/PL # OBJ + {DEICTIC.SBJ} + DERIV + ASP + SUBJ + VAL + [V.STEM] (Hoijer 1971: 125). Instead, several alternative approaches have been established. For instance, Speas (1990; cf. Rice 2000) argues that word-formation follows from general (morpho)syntactic principles promoted in generative grammar; whereas, Hargus (e.g. 2007) employs OT alignment constraints to affixation whereby morphophonological factors interact directly with morpheme order. Even more defiantly, Kari (e.g. 1992) utilizes ‘stacking templatic word formation’ in which strings of prefixes are interdigitated in cyclic derivations.

In the present analysis, I argue for yet another model that breaks with tradition(s), in particular those associated with the Navajo verb. The Construction Grammar (CxG) perspective I assume is a departure from generative approaches to word-formation. I reassess Navajo verbs as a class of constructional objects that are subject to typing and taxonomic organization (cf. Michaelis 2015). The taxonomies of constructions are established on a basic verb category distinction, identified by divergences in morphological productivity: ACTIVE-TYPES and NEUTER-TYPES. These superordinate categories are furthered organized into constructional classes that are defined by their intrinsic argument structure (ARG-ST) features: INTRANSITIVE-CX, TRANSITIVE-CX, APPLICATIVE-CX, STATIVE-CX, PASSIVE-CX and so on. Under a lexicalist framework, I show that Navajo verbs can be analyzed on a surface level, without deferring to underlying representations or unrealistic procedural movement of morphemic constituents (cf. Fortescue 2007).

As CxG states that there is no rigid division between the lexicon (storage) and syntax (computation), these ostensibly disparate components are conceptualized as networks of
constructions that are organized according to constructional complexity and schematicity (Croft and Cruse 2004: 255). Thus, lexical and grammatical units are treated identically, motivating a uniform conception of constraints on form-meaning pairings (Sag et al. 2012: 5). These factors allow for handling the Navajo verb as a constructional object, rather than an abstract syntactic or morphophonological procedure.

References


