

Formal interaction of inflection and stem suppletion in Dene
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The problem. All Dene (formerly known as Athapaskan) languages have a system of classificatory verbs (Davidson, Elford, & Hoiijer, 1963), which show stem alternation according to the properties of their innermost argument (objects of transitive verbs and subjects of intransitive verbs) (1a-d). Though there were early attempts to formalize classificatory verb systems (Basso, 1968), later work saw them as pragmatically determined (Cook, 1986). I argue that at least part of the classificatory verb system in Northern Dene languages, suppletion for number, can indeed be shown to be a formal agreement system whose features interact strongly with inflectional agreement for person and number (2a-d).

The analysis. This system depends upon dual merge positions for the number feature: low, at the stem level (V), and high, at the inflectional level (INFL). I present evidence from Tłı̄ch̄o Yatı̄ and Slave that when low agreement is satisfied, high agreement is optional. This implies that the systems are formally linked. Furthermore, I show evidence from object agreement that inflectional agreement for number is licensed by the presence of a person feature, while stem agreement has no licensing dependency.

I further demonstrate that while the pragmatic elements of the system noted by Cook are undeniable, this is also true of the classifier systems of some East Asian languages: the link between classifier and noun can be, in certain circumstances, overridden by pragmatic factors. Since the consensus in the syntactic and semantic literature is that noun classification systems are formal in nature, the pragmatic elements of Dene classificatory verb stem alternations should not be a concern for a formal analysis.

That part of the classificatory verb system is demonstrably structural does not entail that all of it is. I present evidence comparing Dene classificatory verbs to cross-linguistic case systems to show that structural and non-structural elements can form a morphologically unified system.

Implications. The facts of the interaction of high and low formal number and person features support recent claims on dual realizations of number, gender and person (Kramer, 2009; Steriopolo & Wiltschko, 2010; Oxford, 2014; Acquaviva, 2015; Welch, 2016, among others). Further, since systems similar to the Dene classificatory verbs exist in other Indigenous languages of North America, cross-linguistic comparison needs to be done to determine possible interaction with inflection.

Data:

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| (1) Classificatory verb stems (Tsùt'ínà) | (2) Classificatory verbs and inflection (Tsùt'ínà) |
| a. <i>Sō-ghà-nī-t'óósh</i>
1SG-to-IPFV.2SG-give.mushy.object
'give it (mushy object) to me' | a. <i>Sō-ghà-nī-ǰó</i>
1SG-to-IPFV.2SG-give.default.object
'give it to me' |
| b. <i>Sō-ghà-nī-tsús</i>
1SG-to-IPFV.2SG-give.cloth.object
'give it (cloth object) to me' | b. <i>Sō-ghà-nī-ló</i>
1SG-to-IPFV.2SG-give.multiple.objects
'give them to me' |
| c. <i>Sī-t'óósh</i>
IPFV.3SG-be.located.mushy.object
'it (mushy object) is lying/located' | c. <i>Sī-ǰó</i>
IPFV.3SG-be.located.default.object
'it is lying/located' |
| d. <i>Sī-tsús</i>
IPFV.3SG-be.located.cloth.object
'it (cloth object) is lying/located' | d. <i>Sī-ló</i>
IPFV.3SG-be.located.multiple.objects
'they are lying/located' |

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