

# Unexpected Athabaskan Pronouns

WAIL – May 2017

Blake Lehman & Maura O’Leary  
University of California, Los Angeles

## 1. Introduction

- There has been much discussion in past years about the distribution of Athabaskan object pronouns.
- Hän is an Athabaskan language with only six remaining speakers, spoken in Eagle, Alaska, US and in the Dawson City area, Yukon Territory, Canada.
- Like other Athabaskan languages, Hän has two third person object pronouns.
- In other Athabaskan languages, the two third person object pronouns are distributed based on topic, focus, animacy, voice, and/or obviation.
- By contrast, Hän’s pronouns can be predicted from syntax alone.
  - Whenever the object DP is not adjacent to the verb, that “object position” must be filled by a pronoun.
  - One pronoun, *yě-*, is used when the when the subject is also 3<sup>rd</sup> person.
  - The other, *wě-*, is used when the subject is 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person.
- We provide here a description and analysis of the distribution of Hän pronouns, as well as a comparison to the accounts provided for other Athabaskan languages.

## 2. Basic data<sup>1</sup>

- Hän has two 3<sup>rd</sup> person object pronouns: *yě-* and *wě-*
- These pronouns are used when the object is not overtly specified or if the object is in some other way non-adjacent to the verb (topicalization, adverbs intervening, etc.)
  - (The examples below show the distribution for *yě-*, but the distribution for *wě-* is identical)

(1) a. **No pronoun**

(łayy) shär nähtthè’

dog bear barked.at

‘The dog/(it) barked at the bear.’

*Unavailable:* ‘The bear barked at the dog.’

---

<sup>1</sup> This presentation is based on original data collected at the 2016 Institute on Collaborative Language Research, at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Many thanks to speakers Ruth Ridley, Ethel Beck, and Percy Henry, as well as Willem De Reuse, the participants of the Hän practicum at the 2016 Institute on Collaborative Language Research, and the organizers of the same institute.

**b. Topicalization/left topic dislocation**

shär ɭayy yë-nähtthè'  
bear dog 3O-barked.at  
'The dog barked at the bear.'  
*Unavailable:* 'The bear barked at the dog.'

**c. Pronominal object/no overt object DP**

ɭayy yë-nähtthè'  
dog 3O-barked.at  
'The dog barked at it.'  
*Unavailable:* 'It barked at the dog.'

- The pronouns are used when the object DP as a whole is not adjacent to the verb. Adjacent object DPs, no matter how large, are not used with *yë-* or *wë-*. (Object DPs are marked with square brackets below.)

- (2) John [shcär nöö] (\*yë-)nè'ayy  
John my.car FOC (\*3O-)3sgS.stole  
'It was my car that John stole'
- (3) Percy [eyy shär ɭayy y-è'əww] (\*yë-)jehk'ah  
that bear dog 3O-bit (\*3O-)3sgS.shot  
'Percy shot the bear that the dog bit.'

- Hän has two 3rd person object pronouns: *yë-* and *wë-*
  - *yë-* is used when the subject is 3rd person
  - *wë-* is used elsewhere

- (4) a. *yë-* (used when the subject is 3<sup>rd</sup> person)  
yë - dädähch'ee  
3sgO - 3sgS.depend.on  
'He/she depends on him/her.'

b. *wë-* (used when the subject is 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person)  
wë - dädökch'ee  
3sgO - 1sgS.depend.on  
'I depend on him/her.'

### 3. Other Athabaskan Pronouns

- In other Athabaskan languages, 3rd person object pronouns are *only* used *when the subject is also 3rd person*.

Assuming 3rd person object and subject, the pronouns are used

- always (in Apachean languages)
- only when there is no overt object DP at all (in Northern languages)

(Rice & Saxon 2001)

#### **Hän, by comparison:**

- Hän uses 3rd person object pronouns whenever the object is not adjacent to the verb.
- When the subject is 1st or 2nd person, other Athabaskan languages use no object pronoun and Hän uses *wë-*.

- Other Athabaskan languages also have two third person pronouns (generally called *y-/b-*, from proto-Athabaskan *ye-/we-*, but their distribution is very different from Hän's, and varies greatly from language to language

#### 3.1 Focus

- In the Apachean languages, *yi-/bi-* alternation has been argued to encode animacy (Hale 1973) or topicality/focus (Platero 1974, Thompson 1996, Uyechi 1996, Rice and Saxon 2001, Hale, Jelinek, and Willie 2003)

Jicarilla Apache (Uyechi 1996):

- *yi-* appears when the subject is topical, as in (5)
  - The question that elicits (5) as an answer provides evidence for the topicality of the subject noun phrase *'ishkiyíí* 'boy'
- *bi-* occurs when the object is topical, as in (6)
  - In (6), the object *chékéé* 'girl' is more topical, shown by the question that elicits this sentence as an answer

(5) 'ishkiyíí      chékéé      yaa'í  
boy              girl              YI-sees  
'The boy sees the girl.'  
(Answer to 'What did the boy do?')

(6) chékéé              'ishkiyíí              maa'í  
girl                      boy                      BI-sees  
'The girl is seen by the boy.'  
(Answer to 'What happened to the girl?')

(Uyechi 1996: 127)

Navajo (Rice & Saxon 2001):

- Navajo shows that the topicality analysis extends to cases in which both subject and object are pronominal
  - In (7), the pronominal subject is topical and the verb is marked by *yi-*
  - In (8), the object of the verb ‘kick’ is more topical than the subject, so the verb is marked by *bi-*

(8) *yiztał*  
‘He (topic) kicked him.’  
(Answer to ‘*What did he do?*’)

(9) *bistał*  
‘He (topic) was kicked by him.’ / ‘He kicked him (topic).’  
(Answer to ‘*What happened to him?*’)

(Rice & Saxon 2001: 1)

- In addition to providing evidence for the *yi-/bi-* alternation as encoding topicality, the Navajo examples show that the alternation is not directly associated with subject/object inversion in that language

Koyukon (Thompson 1996):

- Function of *yi-/bi* alternation similar to topic/focus distinction in Navajo
- Thompson (1996) describes the Koyukon construction as “inverse voice”
  - in an inverse construction, “a clause with a topical (or important) object is marked differently than one in which the subject is the more topical argument” (Thompson 1996: 88)
  - *ye-* can mark both subject and object
    - marks object when object is less topical than subject
  - *be-* marks clauses in which the object is more topical
  - since Koyukon does not generally allow subject/object inversion, alternation between *ye-/be-* must be related to topicality or discourse reference tracking

(10) *be - ye - neel’aanh*  
*3sgO-3sgS-see*  
‘S/he is looking at him/her (topic).’

(11) *ye-neel’aanh*  
*y:O-see*  
‘S/he (topic) is looking at him/her.’

(Thomson 1996: 88)

### Hän, by comparison:

- Subject can be focused without a pronoun

(12) [John nöö] shcär (\*yë-)nè'ąyy  
John FOC my.car (\*3O-)3sgS.stole  
'It was John who stole my car.'

- Object can be focused without a pronoun

(13) John [shcär nöö] (\*yë-)nè'ąyy  
John my.car FOC (\*3O-)3sgS.stole  
'It was my car that John stole'

- Movement of object DP leads to pronoun use

(14) [Shcär nöö] John \*(yë-)nè'ąyy  
my.car FOC John \*(3O-)3sgS.stole  
'It was my car that John stole.'

### 3.2 Animacy/Obviation

Gwich'in (Thompson 1996):

In Hän's closest linguistic/geographic neighbor, Gwich'in, the *yi-/bi-* alternation behaves in an entirely different way

- These pronouns only occur as oblique objects (objects of postpositions)
- The alternation is related to animacy of the subject
  - In (15), the subject is 'Susan', an animate subject; the oblique object is *yi-* (whose Gwich'in reflex is *ya-*)
  - In the second sentence of the near minimal pair, (16), the subject is *kii* 'rock', and the oblique object is marked by *bi-* (Gwich'in reflex *va-*)

(15) Susan yakak nadhat  
y-on stand  
'Susan is standing on it/him/her.'

(16) kii vakak nánaii  
rock b-on fell  
'A rock fell on it/him/her.'

(Thompson 1996: 86)

- The above Gwich'in examples show both the fact that the *yi-/bi-* alternation is related to animacy in that language, but they also show that the alternation can be conditioned by features of the subject as well as the object

### 3.3 Other Athabaskan languages

- In Hupa, *yi-* is a subject prefix, while *bi-/mi-* is an oblique object prefix/ possessor prefix (Thompson 1996:92)
- In other Athabaskan languages, the third person object pronoun is always null when the subject is non-third person.
- “Third person direct object is usually represented be null if the subject of the verb is first or second person” (Young and Morgan 1987: 64).
  - This is similar to what happens in the alternation between *yë-* and *wë-* in Hän
- Subject object inversion doesn’t matter in other Athabaskan languages, see Koyukon above, as well as the paradigm from San Carlos Apache below:
  - both *yi-* and *bi-* can occur regardless of the order of the verb-external subject and object

San Carlos Apache (Thompson 1996):

(17) John gat bi-ká’ nagu  
cedar b-on fell  
‘The cedar fell on John.’

(18) gat John bi-kà’ nagu  
cedar John b-on fell  
‘The cedar fell on John.’

(19) John gat yi-ká’ nagu  
cedar y-on fell  
‘John fell on the cedar.’

(20) gat John yi-kà’ nagu  
cedar John y-on fell  
‘John fell on the cedar.’

(Thompson 1996: 84)

- In Eyak (member of Na-Dene family along with Athabaskan and Tlingit), *we-* is the general 3rd person object pronoun (Thompson 1996: 94)
- Despite the above evidence, the distribution of *y-/b-* in Athabaskan languages as a whole is less than clear:

“The appearance of *y-* signals that an argument is part of the focus/obviative but identification of an argument as part of the focus/obviative does not ensure that the form is *y-...* The identification of an argument as topic/proximate ensures that the form is *b-*, but the appearance of *b-* does not signal that the argument is topic/proximate” (Rice and Saxon 2001: 14).

## 4. Theoretical explanation for Hän's pronouns

### 4.1 When do pronouns occur?

- Hän's pronouns can be predicted purely from syntax
- They are used to fill an obligatory object position within the VP when it is not saturated by an overt object, even when the overt object appears elsewhere in the sentence

### 4.2 When/how do we get we- and ye-?

- We propose that *wë-* is the underlying form of both object pronouns in Hän.
  - *wë-* is used for possessives and postpositions

(21) *wë* - 'iww  
3<sup>rd</sup>POSS-beads  
'his/her beads'

- The morpheme order of (the relevant) prefixes in Hän is as follows:

3<sup>rd</sup>PL.SUBJ - OBJ - DIECTIC SUBJ - ... - CLASS/SUBJ - ...

- We suggest that there is a subject agreement morpheme which immediately precedes the object pronoun (when there is an object pronoun)
  - The first and second person subject agreement morpheme is  $\emptyset$

3<sup>rd</sup>PL.SUBJ - 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup>.SUBJ - OBJ - DIECTIC SUBJ-... - CLASS/SUBJ - ...  
(*hi/hë*) -  $\emptyset$  - *wë(3rd)* - (*tr'ë*) - ...

- The third person subject agreement morpheme is *y-*

3<sup>rd</sup>PL.SUBJ - 3<sup>rd</sup>.SUBJ - OBJ - DIECTIC SUBJ-... - CLASS/SUBJ - ...  
(*hi/hë*) - *y* - *wë(3rd)* - (*tr'ë*) - ...

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> person subject agreement marker *y-* merges with *wë-* to make *yë-*.

(22) *y* - *wë* - *dädähch'ee*  
3SUBJ-3sgO - 3sgS.depend.on  
'He/she depends on him/her.'

- This type of morphological inflection based on adjacent null morphemes is common in Hän (classifiers drastically spell-out of subject pronouns, etc.).

- The two object pronouns in other languages, which are very likely historically related to the pronouns of Hän, can also co-occur:

Kuyokon:

(23) be-ye-neel'aanh  
 b:O-y:S-see  
 'S/he is looking at him/her.'

- In Hän, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person subject agreement marker y- does not phonologically impact the other object pronouns, which do not begin with glides

	<b>SG</b>	<b>PL</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> person</b>	shë-	ni-
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> person</b>	në-	khwë-

- Morpheme order:
  - The object pronoun morpheme occurs before the deictic subject morphemes:
 

(24) Ruth wë-dä'-tr'ë-dähch'ee  
 (3O)-√- 1plS-depend.on  
 'We are depending on Ruth.'
  - The subject agreement morpheme occurs after the 3<sup>rd</sup> plural subject morpheme:
 

(25) Hi- y- ë- hnöö  
 3plS-3S- 3O- say.past  
 'They said to him.'
- Similarly, Navajo is reported to have a subject agreement position directly before the object (Speas 1990)

## 5. Summary

- The distribution of object pronouns descended from Proto-Athabaskan *\*ye/we* in Hän is drastically different than that in other Athabaskan languages
  - It is not related to animacy or topic/focus distinctions, not necessarily related to subject/object inversion (alternation occurs even with pronominal subject and pronominal object)
- A new analysis for Hän is proposed in which:
  - There is an obligatory object position that must be filled by an object pronoun or verb-external DP
  - *wě-* is the default third-person object pronoun
  - there is a subject agreement position to the left of the object pronoun position
    - this position is empty for non-third person subjects, but filled by *yě-* (or the features that *yě-* is composed of)
    - adjacent *y + w* surfaces phonologically as *y-*
- The proposed analysis shows that the pronoun alternation in Hän has features that are found in other Athabaskan languages:
  - sensitivity to properties of the subject (Gwich'in, Hupa, Navajo)
  - subject agreement position adjacent to object position within the verb (Navajo)
  - indirect rather than direct relationship to subject/object inversion
- The combination of factors that determines the distribution of pronouns in Hän is unique among the Athabaskan languages
  - The relationship between syntax, morphology, and phonology appears to be more complex for these pronouns in Hän than any other language
- Further research into the distribution and behavior of these pronouns could lead to a more complete understanding of the complicated verbal domain found in Hän and other Athabaskan languages

## References

- Aissen, Judith. 2000. Yi- and Bi-: proximate and obviative in Navajo. In Andrew Carnie, Eloise Jelinek, and MaryAnn Willie. *Papers in honor of Ken Hale, Working Papers in Endangered and less familiar languages I* (2000). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MITWPL. 129-150.
- Hale, Kenneth, Eloise Jelinek, and MaryAnn Willie. 2001. Topic and focus scope positions in Navajo. ms.
- Jelinek, Eloise and Mary Willie. 1996. 'Psych' verbs in Navajo. In Eloise Jelinek, Sally Midgette, Keren Rice, and Leslie Saxon (eds.) *Athabaskan Language Studies. Essays in honor of Robert W. Young*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press. 15-34.
- Platero, P. (1982). Missing Noun Phrases and Grammatical Relations in Navajo. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 48(3), 286-305.
- Rice, Keren. 2000c. Another look at the y-/b- pronouns: Evidence from Slave for b- as a case marker. In Andrew Carnie, Eloise Jelinek, and MaryAnn Willie. *Papers in honor of Ken Hale, Working Papers in Endangered and less familiar languages I* (2000). Cambridge, Massachusetts: MITWPL. 109-128.
- Rice, Keren and Leslie Saxon. 2001. The y-/b- pronouns in Athapaskan languages: Perspectives on content. Handout from WAIL/SSILA 2001. Accessed through Alaska Native Language Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks
- Speas, Margaret. 1990. *Phrase Structure in Natural Language*.
- Thompson, Chad. 1989. Voice and obviation in Athabaskan and other languages. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon
- Thompson, Chad. 1996. The history and function of the yi-/bi- alternation in Athabaskan. In Eloise Jelinek, Sally Midgette, Keren Rice, and Leslie Saxon (eds.) *Athabaskan Language Studies. Essays in honor of Robert W. Young*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press. 81-100.
- Uyechi, L. (1996). The Navajo third person alternation and the pronoun incorporation analysis. *Athabaskan Language Studies: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Young, ed. by Eloise Jelinek, Sally Midgette, Keren Rice, Leslie Saxon*, 123-135.
- Willie, MaryAnn. 1991. Pronouns and obviation in Navajo. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona.
- Willie, MaryAnn. 2000. The inverse voice and possessive yi-/bi- in Navajo. *IJAL* 66. 360-382.
- Willie, MaryAnn and Eloise Jelinek. 2000. Navajo as a discourse configurational language. In Theodore Fernald and Paul Platero. *The Athabaskan Languages: Perspectives on a Native American Language Family*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 252-287.
- Young, Robert, and William Morgan. 1987. *The Navajo language. A grammar and colloquial dictionary*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.