

# Unexpected Athabaskan Pronouns

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*Many Athabaskan languages have two third person singular object pronouns which occur only in conjunction with third person subjects. The distribution of these pronouns is claimed to be semantically motivated; proposed theories include inverse voice (Willie 2000), topic/focus distinction (Hale, Jelinek, and Willie 2003, Jelinek and Willie 1996, Thompson 1989, 1996, Willie 1991, 2000, Willie and Jelinek 2014, a.o.), and obviation (Thompson 1989, 1996, Aissen 2000, Rice and Saxon 2001). In stark contrast to the data from other Athabaskan languages, we present here the two analogous third person object pronouns in Hän, which are fully predictable based on syntactic traits. In Hän, the two third person object pronouns, yě- and wě-, 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. The use of one pronoun over the other is determined by the person of the subject. Yě- is used when the subject is third person and wě- when the subject is first or second person. We argue that this distinction comes from a person agreement morpheme that occurs directly before*

*the object pronoun.*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent research on Athabaskan languages there has been much discussion on the distribution of Athabaskan object pronouns. Most Athabaskan languages have at least two third person singular object pronouns, and the factors which determine their distribution are widely debated. Theories include inverse voice (Willie 2000), a topic/focus distinction (Hale, Jelinek, and Willie 2003, Jelinek and Willie 1996, Thompson 1989, 1996, Willie 1991, 2000, Willie and Jelinek 2014, a.o.), animacy (Hale 1973, Thompson 1996), and obviation (Thompson 1989, 1996, Aissen 2000, Rice and Saxon 2001). No one theory seems to account for all Athabaskan languages, although it is generally accepted that the pronouns all stem from the same proto-Athabaskan roots.

Hän is an Athabaskan language spoken in Eagle, Alaska, US and the Dawson City area, Yukon Territory, Canada. It is extremely endangered and there are only six remaining speakers. Like other Athabaskan languages, Hän has two third person singular object pronouns occurring in complementary distribution. However, unlike with other Athabaskan languages, the distribution of Hän's pronouns can be predicted from syntax alone.

In this paper, using data collected through original field work, we propose that there is an object position within transitive Hän verb phrases which is obligatorily filled. When this position is not filled by an overt object DP (in situ), it is filled by an object pronoun. Within this position, there are two third person object pronouns. One pronoun, *yě-*, is used when the subject is also third person. The other, *wě-*, is used when the subject is first or second person.

In this paper, we provide a description and analysis of the distribution of Hän pronouns, as well as a comparison to recent accounts provided for other Athabaskan languages.

## **2. Basic Hän data**

### **2.1. When to use objects**

Hän object pronouns are used whenever an overt object is not directly

adjacent to the verb. Thus, object pronouns are used when there is no overt object DP or when the object DP is in some other way non-

adjacent to the verb (topicalization, adverbs intervening, etc.).

In general, the Hän word order is subject-object-verb<sup>1</sup> :

(1)

*lqyy shär nähtthè'*<sup>2</sup>  
 dog bear barked.at.PFV  
 'The dog barked at the bear.'<sup>3</sup>

When a third person subject DP is omitted, no pronoun takes its place:

(2)

*shär nähtthè'*  
 bear barked.at.PFV  
 'It barked at the bear.'

However, when a third person object DP is omitted, a pre-verbal

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in the morpheme glosses of this paper are the following:

- 1, 2, 3            1st, 2nd, or 3rd person
- O                object
- S                subject
- POSS            possessive
- FOC             focus marker
- PFV             perfective
- IMPF            imperfective

<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, we use the practical orthography developed for the Eagle dialect of Hän. This orthography is largely phonemic, with most consonant symbols based on English consonants. The following chart shows the orthographic consonants of Hän. An apostrophe following a consonant shows that it is glottalized. For each stop/affricate, the three symbols correspond to voiceless aspirated, plain voiceless, and glottalized versions. Glottal stop is represented as <'>, and <h> is as in English.

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Lateral	Palato-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Stop	b		t, d, t'				k, g, k'
Affricate		tth, ddh, tth'	ts, dz, ts'		ch, j, ch'		k, g
Fricative		th, dh	s, z, sr, zr	l, l (onset)			kh, gh
Sonorant	m w		n r	l (coda)		y	

Hän vowels are represented as follows. Back non-low vowels are rounded. All vowels except <ë, ö> can be written as long by doubling them. The same vowels all also have nasal counterparts, written with an ogonek accent. Low tone is represented by the grave accent over the vowel, while high tone is not written. <ë, ö> represent

pronoun is used:

(3)

*lqyy yë-nähtthè'*  
dog 3O-barked.at.PFV  
'The dog barked at it.'

Third person object pronouns are not only used when there is no overt object DP, as in (3). They are used whenever the object DP is not directly before the verb. For instance, (4) shows an example of topicalization in Hän, where the object, as the topic, has been moved to the beginning of the sentence. In sentences like this, where the object DP is not adjacent to the verb, an object pronoun is inserted:

(4)

*shär lqyy yë-nähtthè'*  
bear dog 3O-barked.at.PFV  
'The dog barked at the bear.'  
(*lit.* 'The bear, the dog barked at it.')

Note that the pronouns are used when the object DP as a whole is not adjacent to the verb. Object pronouns are never used when the object DP, no matter how large, is adjacent to the verb.

In (5) and (6), object DPs are marked with square brackets. In (5), the object is modified by a focus marker and in (6) the object is modified by a relative clause. However, since both DPs are immediately

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schwa (or a similar default vowel): <ë> in open prefix syllables, <ö> in stems.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e	ë, ö	o
Low	a		ä

For more detail concerning Hän orthography, see Michael Krauss' introduction to Ridley (1983).

3

It should be noted that this sentence cannot mean 'The bear barked at the dog.'

Topicalization is possible in Hän, allowing a somewhat free argument order, but such topicalization is always marked by a preverbal pronoun (see O'Leary 2017 for more information on topicalization in Hän). For any sentences that could receive more than one interpretation, both interpretations are given.

adjacent to the verb, any use of object pronouns is ungrammatical.

(5)

*John [sh-cār nöö] (\*yě-) nè'qyy*  
John my-car foc (\*3O-) 3sgS.stole.PFV  
'It was my car that John stole.'

(6)

*Percy [eyy shär layy y-è'àww] (\*yě-) jehk'ah*  
Percy that bear dog 3O-bit (\*3O-) 3sgS.shot.PFV  
'Percy shot the bear that the dog bit.'

## 2.2. Distribution of *yě-* and *wě-*

Hän has two 3rd person object pronouns: *yě-* and *wě-*. Above, we showed that *yě-* is only used when there is no overt object DP adjacent to the verb. *Wě-* follows the same distributional pattern.

These two pronouns occur in complementary distribution. *Yě-* is used when the subject is third person as well, as in (7). *Wě-*, on the other hand, is used when the subject is first or second person, as seen in (8).

(7) *yě-* (used when the subject is 3<sup>rd</sup> person):

*yě - dädähch'ee*  
3sgO — 3sgS.depend.on.IMPF  
'He/she depends on him/her.'

(8) *wě-* (used when the subject is 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person):

*wě - dädökch'ee*  
3sgO – 1sgS.depend.on.IMPF  
'I depend on him/her.'

The distribution of *yě-* and *wě-* is based purely on the person features of the subject. In the following section we describe why this is a rather surprising finding, based on the distribution of similar pronouns in other Athabaskan languages.

## 3. Other Athabaskan Pronouns

In other Athabaskan languages, as in Hän, the pronouns corresponding to *yě-* and *wě-* function as third person object pronouns. These pronouns are all descended from the Proto-Athabaskan *\*yə-* and *\*wə-*, and are normally referred to as *yi-/bi-* pronouns, or simply *y/b*

pronouns (Thomson 1996).

The distribution of these pronouns varies across languages within the Athabaskan family. Broadly, there are two patterns that the y/b pronouns follow. In Apachean (Southern Athabaskan) languages, they are used obligatorily in every transitive sentence, while in Northern Athabaskan languages, they are used only when there is no overt object DP in the sentence (Rice & Saxon 2001). Hän, as shown above, does not quite follow either of these patterns.

In both Southern and other Northern Athabaskan languages, the y/b pronouns only occur when the subject of the clause is also third person. In contrast, in Hän, *wë-* appears when the sentence subject is first or second person (see (8) above).

Additionally, the function of the y/b alternation in Hän diverges from the function of the same alternation in other Athabaskan languages. In other languages, the alternation has been argued to encode a number of distinctions, including focus or topicality (Platero 1982, Thompson 1996, Uyechi 1996, Rice & Saxon 2001, Hale, Jelinek, and Willie 2001), animacy (Hale 1973, Thompson 1996), obviation (Thompson 1989, Willie 1991, Aissen 2000), and inverse voice (Thompson 1996, Willie 2000). In this section, examples of the distribution and function of y/b pronouns in several Athabaskan languages will be examined both as an overview of the role these pronouns play in the Athabaskan family and to contrast that role with our proposed analysis for Hän *yë-/wë-*, which is outlined in section 4.

### 3.1. Focus/topicality

In Apachean languages, the y/b alternation has been argued to encode animacy (Hale 1973), and more recently, topicality (Thompson 1996, Uyechi 1996, Rice & Saxon 2001, Hale, Jelinek, and Willie 2001). This section gives examples from two Apachean languages, Jicarilla Apache and Navajo, showing how the y/b alternation encodes topicality in these languages.

The following examples from Jicarilla Apache show how the y/b alternation in that language encodes topicality. The reflex of the ‘y’ pronoun, *yi-*, occurs when the subject is topical, as in (9). Evidence for the topicality of the subject noun phrase ‘*ishkiyíí* ‘boy’ comes from the fact that (9) is elicited as a response to the question ‘What did the

boy do?’.

- (9) Jicarilla Apache (Uyechi 1996: 127)  
*ishkiyí chékéé y-aa’í*  
boy girl YI-sees  
‘The boy sees the girl’  
(Answer to ‘What did the boy do?’)

The reflex of the ‘b’ pronoun, *mi-* occurs when the object is topical, as in (10). In this sentence, the object *chékéé* ‘girl’ is the topic, supported by the fact that this sentence is elicited by the question ‘What happened to the girl?’.

- (10)  
*chékéé ishkiyí m-aa’í*  
girl boy BI-sees  
‘The girl is seen by the boy’ (Uyechi 1996: 127)  
(Answer to ‘What happened to the girl?’)

The Jicarilla Apache data shows how the y/b alternation encodes topicality in cases where there are verb-external subject and object DPs. The following data, from Navajo, shows a case where this pronoun alternation also encodes topicality, but when both subject and object are pronominal.

In Navajo, as in Jicarilla Apache, the ‘y’ pronoun, *yi-*, is used when the subject is topical. In (11), the pronominal third person subject is topical, so the verb is marked by *yi-*. The sentence in (11) is elicited as the answer to ‘What did he do?’, providing evidence that the pronominal subject is indeed topical.

- (11) Navajo (Rice & Saxon 2001: 1)  
*yiztal*  
YI-3SGO-3SGS-kick.PFV  
‘He (topic) kicked him’  
(Answer to ‘What did he do?’)

The only way that (12) differs from (11) is that the object, rather than the subject, of the verb ‘kick’ is topical. In this case, the verb is marked with *bi-*. This sentence answers the question ‘What happened



analysis of the y/b alternation in Hän outlined in Section 4.

The function of the y/b alternation in Hän does not appear to be related to topicality/focus or any type of inverse construction. The following examples show cases in which a subject can be topicalized/focused without the use of either a ‘y’ or ‘b’ pronoun (15), an object can be topicalized/focused with no object pronoun (16), and (17) shows that leftward movement of an object DP requires the use of a pronoun (yě-).

(15) Topical/focused subject, no pronoun

[*John nöö*] *sh-cär* (\*yě-) *nè'qyy*  
John FOC my-car (\*3O-) 3SGS.steal.PFV  
‘It was John who stole my car.’

(16) Topical/focused object, no pronoun

*John* [*sh-cär nöö*] (\*yě-) *nè'qyy*  
John my-car FOC (\*3O-) 3SGS.steal.PFV  
‘It was my car that John stole’

(17) Leftward movement of object DP, pronoun required

[*Sh-cär nöö*] *John* \*yě-) *nè'qyy*  
my-car FOC John \*(3O-) 3SGS.steal.PFV  
‘It was my car that John stole.’

The above examples show that a topicality or focus analysis will not be able to account for the distribution of y/b pronouns in Hän, as well as suggesting that the alternation is more of a syntactic than pragmatic or semantic phenomenon in Hän than in any of Jicarilla Apache, Navajo, or Koyukon.

### 3.2. Animacy

In Hän’s closest linguistic and geographic neighbor, Gwich’in, the y/b alternation behaves in an entirely different way from Jicarilla Apache, Navajo, and Koyukon. First, in Gwich’in these pronouns occur only as oblique objects (objects of postpositions). The alternation of the y/b pronouns (Gwich’in reflexes *ya-/va-*) in this language is determined by the animacy of the subject. In (18), the subject is ‘Susan’, and

animate subject; the oblique pronominal object is realized as *ya-*:

- (18) Gwich'in (Thompson 1996: 86)  
*Susan yakak nadhat*  
Susan y-on stand.IMPF  
'Susan is standing on it/him/her.'

In (19), the subject is *kii* 'rock', which is inanimate. In this sentence, which forms a near minimal pair with (15), the pronominal oblique object is realized as *va-*:

- (19)  
*Kii vakak nànaii*  
rock b-on fall.PFV  
'A rock fell on it/him/her.'

The above examples show primarily how the y/b alternation in Gwich'in encodes animacy. Another important aspect of the function of alternation that can be taken away from these examples is that the y/b alternation, although it involves object pronouns, can be conditioned by features of the subject as well as of the object. This will be important for determining the function of the y/b alternation in Hän in the following section.

### 3.3. Other Athabaskan languages

Although the main categories of analyses proposed for the y/b alternation throughout the Athabaskan language family are topicality and animacy, as discussed above, there are other characteristics of the distribution of these pronouns in several languages in the family that appear to be relevant to the analysis of Hän *yë-/wë-*.

In Hupa, a Pacific Coast Athabaskan language spoken in Northwest California, *yi-* is a subject prefix, while *bi-/mi-* is an oblique object prefix and a possessor prefix (Thompson 1996: 92). This lends more support to a relationship between at least the 'y' pronoun and the subject of a clause. Further support for this relationship can be seen in the fact that in other Athabaskan languages, the third person object pronoun is always null when the subject is non-third person (Young and Morgan 1987: 64). This is similar to the Hän *yë-/wë-* alternation, with *wë-* appearing wherever an object pronoun in other languages would be expected to be null.

As discussed above for Koyukon, subject/object inversion does not appear to play a role in the distribution of y/b pronouns in other

Athabaskan languages, despite initial appearances. The paradigm from San Carlos Apache shown below provides further evidence for this fact. *Yi-* and *bi-* are oblique object pronouns in this language, and the four sentences below show that both pronouns can occur regardless of the order of verb-external subject and object.

(20) San Carlos Apache (Thompson 1996: 84); O S b-V

*John gat biká' nagu*  
 John cedar b-on fall.PFV  
 'The cedar fell on John.'

(21) S O b-V

*gat John bikà' nagu*  
 cedar John b-on fall.PFV  
 'The cedar fell on John.'

(22) S O y-V

*John gat yiká' nagu*  
 cedar y-on fall.PFV  
 'John fell on the cedar.'

(23) O S y-V

*gat John yikà' nagu*  
 cedar John y-on fall.PFV  
 'John fell on the cedar.'

In Eyak, a member of the Na-Dené family (along with Athabaskan languages and Tlingit) the general third person object pronoun is *'u-* (cognate with Hän *wě-*) (Thompson 1996: 94). This pronoun occurs in all constructions that involve a third person pronominal object and does not alternate with the Eyak reflex of the *'y'* pronoun. This will be relevant to our proposed analysis of the Hän *yě-/wě-* alternation below, as we will argue *wě-* is actually always present in third person pronominal object constructions. The fact that this type of distribution of the *'b'* pronoun is attested in a related language lends support to this type of analysis.

Despite the above evidence, the pattern of distribution of y/b pronouns in the Athabaskan family as a whole is far from clear or uniform. While the pronouns are derived from the same historical source, their function in each language appears to vary greatly. The following section proposes an analysis of the alternation in Hän that is unique among previous analyses of the phenomenon in other languages in the

family.

## 4. Theoretical account for Hän

Hän's two third person object pronouns clearly behave differently than analogous pronouns in other Athabaskan languages. And it seems that the use and distribution of these pronouns can be predicted based only on syntax. More specifically, the pronouns are used when there is no overt object DP directly next to the verb, and the choice of *yě-* vs *wě-* is based on the person feature of the subject. This section proposes a theoretical account for these two observations.

### 4.1. When do the pronouns occur?

First, we must establish what triggers the use of object pronouns in Hän. They are used whenever there is no overt object DP (as in (3) repeated below as (24)), or when the object DP is not adjacent to the verb (as in (4) repeated below as (25)).

(24)

*łqyy yě-nähtthè'*  
dog 3OBJ-barked.at.PFV  
'The dog barked at it.'

(25)

*shär łqyy yě-nähtthè'*  
bear dog 3O-barked.at.PFV  
'The dog barked at the bear.'  
(*lit.* 'The bear, the dog barked at it.')

We propose that the object DP originates in an object position within transitive VPs, and that in Hän, this position must be filled for the sentence to be grammatical. Therefore, whenever the object position is not filled by the full object DP, it is filled by an object pronoun instead.

For instance, if the object DP is moved from its original position, a pronoun is inserted to fill the empty object position left behind. In Figure 1, the full DP is topicalized to the left periphery (O'Leary 2017, Manker 2014, Rizzi 1997). The object DP position cannot be

left empty, and so the pronoun *yě-* is inserted to create the grammatical sentence which was seen in (25).

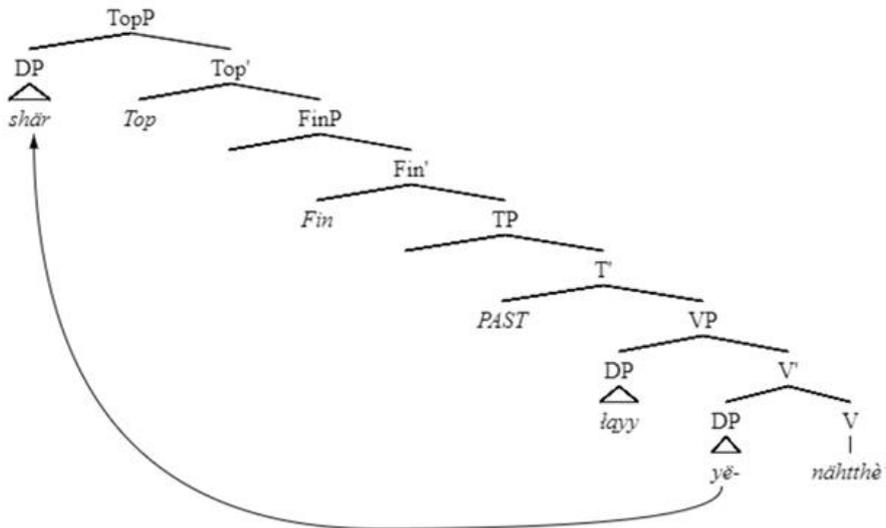


Figure 1: The object pronoun is inserted into the gap left by the topicalized object. See O'Leary 2017 for more detail.

## 4.2. Distribution of *wě-* and *yě-*

The other observation that should be formally explained is the distribution of *wě-* and *yě-*. So far we have seen that *yě-* is used when the subject is third person and *wě-* is used when the subject is first or second person.

We propose that *wě-* is the underlying form of both object pronouns in Hän, and that it undergoes a morphophonological change under the right conditions to become *yě-*.

A strong piece of evidence supporting this theory is that *wě-* is the

prefix used for third person singular possessives: References

(26) Third person singular possessive:

*wě* - 'iww

3sg.POSS – beads

'his/her beads'

All other object pronouns (which are realized as verbal prefixes) are identical to their possessive counterparts. As shown in Table 1 and Table 2, every object pronoun is identical to the possessive prefix of the same person and number, with the exception of the third person singular pronoun *yě*-.

	<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> person</b>	<i>shě</i> -	<i>ni</i> -
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> person</b>	<i>ně</i> -	<i>khwě</i> -
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person</b>	<i>wě</i> -/ <i>yě</i> -	<i>hu</i> -

*Table 1: Object pronouns/prefixes*

	<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> person</b>	<i>shě</i> -	<i>ni</i> -
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> person</b>	<i>ně</i> -	<i>khwě</i> -
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person</b>	<i>wě</i> -	<i>hu</i> -

*Table 2: Possessive prefixes*

If the underlying third person singular object pronoun is, as we have proposed, always *wě*- underlyingly, then we would have the added benefit that there would be no difference between object pronoun

prefixes and possessive prefixes.

If the underlying third person singular object morpheme is *wě-*, then there must be some process that creates *yě-* when the subject is also third person.

In Hän morphology, it is common for null morphemes to effect the phonological realization of adjacent morphemes. For instance, each verb stem is associated with one of four classifier morphemes: *-d-*, *-l-*, *-ł-*, or  $\emptyset$ . Each of these morphemes, including the null classifier, drastically changes the phonological realization of the adjacent subject pronouns (which, like object pronouns are realized as verbal prefixes).

Another relevant feature of Hän verbal morphology, which is largely templatic, is that subject morphemes occur in several different morpheme “slots” depending on the subject’s person and number features. All singular subjects as well as second person plural subjects are represented by morphemes that occur directly before the verb. These morphemes are phonologically affected by/combined with the adjacent classifier and modal morphemes; with that in mind, we have listed these morphemes together in the template in (27) below. The third person and first person plural subject agreement morphemes each have their own slot within the complex morpheme template. A template showing the order of the relevant verbal prefixes is shown in (27):

(27) Subject and object prefix template:

3pIS – O – 1pIS – ... – CLASS/SUBJ/ASPECT - verb

Based on the wide spread of subject agreement morphemes, we believe that there could easily be other templatic slots which contain morphemes that are inflected based on subject features. Therefore, we propose that there is a morpheme directly preceding the object morpheme which shows agreement with the person features of the subject. This is similar to Navajo, which also has a subject agreement position directly before the object (Speas 1990).

To account for the Hän data, we propose that the first and second person subject agreement morpheme is  $\emptyset$ , shown in (28). The third

person subject agreement morpheme is *y-*, shown in (29).<sup>4</sup>

(28) 1st/2nd person agreement morpheme  $\emptyset$ :

*(hě) -  $\emptyset$  - wě - (trě) - ...*

3plS – ObjAgr – 3sgO – 1plS – ... – verb

(29) 3rd person agreement morpheme *-y-*:

*(hě) - y - wě - (trě) - ...*

3plS – ObjAgr – 3sgO – 1plS – ... – verb

When the 3<sup>rd</sup> person subject agreement marker *y-* co-occurs with the third person singular object pronoun *wě-*, they merge to make *yě-*, as shown in (30). We propose that the 3<sup>rd</sup> person subject agreement marker *y-* phonologically impacts only the third person singular object pronoun and not any of the other object pronouns, as the other pronouns do not begin with glides and are unaffected by /j-/.

(30) Underlying:

*y - wě - dädähch'ee*

3S – 3sgO – 3sgS.depend.on.IMPF

Surface:

*yě - dädähch'ee*

3S+3sgO – 3sgS.depend.on.IMPF

‘He/she depends on him/her.’

This theory, of course, splits what used to be one alternating pronoun into two separate adjacent morphemes. Under this theory, the historical *y-* and *b-* pronouns do not fill the same slot in the Hän verbal morpheme template. In fact, the theory that we suggest above assume that the Hän equivalents of *y-* and *b-* co-occur.

If correct, the co-occurrence of *y-* and *b-* is not unique to Hän. In Kuyokon, another Athabaskan language, the two pronouns also co-

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<sup>4</sup>

The third person plural subject and first person plural subject morphemes which occur on either side of the object morphemes are both provided in the template, although they would clearly never co-occur. Additionally, *wě-* would never co-occur with the third person plural subject morpheme, and *yě-* would never co-occur with the first person plural subject morpheme. Note that other subject morphemes (besides third plural and first plural) are expressed in a single morpheme along with classifier and aspect immediately before the verb stem.

occur:

- (31) Koyukon (Thompson 1996: 88)  
    *be - ye - neel'aanh*  
    3SGO - 3SGS - see  
    ‘S/he is looking at him/her (topic).’

## 5. Summary

We present here that the distribution of object pronouns in Hän is drastically different than the distributions in other Athabaskan languages, despite the likelihood that they all descended from the same Proto-Athabaskan pronouns. Other Athabaskan object pronouns are distributed based on topic, voice, animacy, or other semantic factors (see section 3 for relevant citations). On the other hand, Hän third person singular object pronouns are distributed based on purely syntactic features.

Hän object pronouns occur whenever there is no overt object DP adjacent to the verb, which we posit is due to an object position within the VP that must be filled in order to create a grammatical (transitive) sentence. Within that position, one object pronoun is used when the subject is third person, and the other elsewhere. We propose that the object pronoun is always *wě-* underlyingly, and that a third person subject pronoun *y-* may precede it, leading to a surface *yě-* when the subject and object are both third person.

We hope that further research into the distribution and behavior of these pronouns will lead to a more complete understanding of the incredibly complex verbal domain found in Hän and other Athabaskan languages.

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