

Athabaskan Pronouns: A surprisingly syntactic explanation from Hän

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1 Introduction

- Hän is an Athabaskan language with only six remaining speakers, spoken in Eagle, Alaska, US and in the Dawson City area, Yukon Territory, Canada.
- There has been much discussion in past years about the distribution of Athabaskan object pronouns.
- Like other Athabaskan languages, Hän has two third person object pronouns, which are used as verbal prefixes and prefixes to postpositions.
- 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 direct object pronouns can be predicted from syntax alone.
- However, as when the same two pronouns act as objects of postpositions, the distribution of *yë-* and *wë-* is based on *person* and *animacy* features, combining the behavior of Hän direct object pronouns and the behavior of postpositions in Gwich'in, a nearby Athabaskan language.
- We provide here a description of the distribution of Hän pronouns, as well as a comparison to the accounts provided for other Athabaskan languages.

2 Hän Direct Objects

- Athabaskan languages are known to have two third person singular object pronouns
 - They are generally referred to as *Y-/B-* pronouns, from the proto-Athabaskan pronouns *ye-* and *we-*
 - Their distribution varies greatly from language to language and has been the subject of many papers.
 - However, we contend that, even among a wide variety of behaviors from other Athabaskan languages, the distribution of Hän's pronouns is significantly different from the behavior of any other documented Athabaskan language.

- Hän, like the other Athabaskan languages, has two 3rd person singular object pronouns
 - *yě-* and *wě-*
 - In keeping with Athabaskan literature, we will gloss these with Y- and B- to clearly demonstrate how Hän compares with the other languages shown.
- Background: Hän is an SOV language.
 - There is no scrambling.
 - Non-wh objects can only occur before subjects in the case of hanging topic left dislocation.
- Object pronouns are used when the object is not overtly specified *or* if the object is in some other way non-adjacent to the verb (hanging topic left dislocation, adverbs intervening, etc.).
 - (The examples below show the distribution for *yě-*, but the distributions for *wě-* and nearly all other object pronouns are identical.¹)

(1) a. **Overt object**

łayy shär nähtthè'
 dog bear barked.at
 'The dog barked at the bear.'
Unavailable: 'The bear barked at the dog.'

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

łayy yě-nähtthè'
 dog Y-barked.at
 'The dog barked at it.'
Unavailable: 'It barked at the dog.'

c. **Hanging topic left dislocation**

shär łayy yě-nähtthè'
 bear dog Y-barked.at
 'The bear, the dog barked at it.'
Unavailable: 'The bear barked at the dog.'

- Object pronouns are used when the object DP is not adjacent to the verb. Adjacent object DPs, no matter how large, are not used with *yě-* or *wě-*.

(2) Percy [eyy shär łayy y-è' àww]_{DP} (*yě-)jehk'ah
 that bear dog Y-bit (*Y-)3sgS.shot
 'Percy shot the bear that the dog bit.'

¹ The exception is the third person plural object pronoun, which can occur in a surprisingly wide variety of locations within the sentence.

- Differences in use between *yě-* and *wě-*:
 - *yě-* is used when the subject is 3rd person
 - *wě-* is used elsewhere
- (3) a. *yě-* (used when the subject is 3rd person)
- yě* - *dädähch'ee*
 Y - 3sgS.depend.on
 'He/she depends on him/her.'
- b. *wě-* (used when the subject is 1st or 2nd person)
- wě* - *dädökch'ee*
 B - 1sgS.depend.on
 'I depend on him/her.'

3 Some Other Athabaskan Direct Object Pronouns

- In all other Athabaskan languages, 3rd person object pronouns are *only* used when the subject is also 3rd person.
 - So, the same conditions which lead to the use of *yě-* in Hän license the use of either pronoun in other Athabaskan languages

Subject features	Hän pronoun	Other Athabaskan pronouns
1st or 2nd person	<i>Y-</i>	--
3rd person	<i>B-</i>	<i>Y-</i> or <i>B-</i> depending on other features

- Assuming 3rd person object and subject, object pronouns in other Athabaskan languages 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 *wě-*.
- 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)
 - Below, we will show some examples of the arguments for topicality, with the data mirrored in Hän, thereby showing that topicality does not affect Hän pronouns.

Jicarilla Apache (Uyechi 1996):

- *yi-* appears when the subject is topical, as in (4)
 - The question that elicits (4) as an answer provides evidence for the topicality of the subject noun phrase *'ishkiyíí* 'boy'
- *bi-* occurs when the object is topical, as in (5)
 - In (5), the object *chékéé* 'girl' is more topical, shown by the question that elicits this sentence as an answer

Jicarilla Apache			Hän			
(4) a.	`ishkiyíí boy	chékéé girl	yaa`í Y-sees	b.	chaa t`ëgaa noh`íí boy girl sees	
	‘The boy sees the girl.’				‘The boy sees/is looking at the girl’	
	(Answer to ‘What is the boy doing?’)				(Answer to ‘What’s the boy doing?’)	
(5) a.	chékéé girl	`ishkiyíí boy	maa`í B-sees	b.	t`ëgaa chaa yënoh`íí girl boy Y-sees	
	‘The girl is seen by the boy.’				‘The boy sees the girl’	
	(Answer to ‘What’s happening with the girl?’)				(Answer to ‘What’s happening with the girl?’)	
	(Uyechi 1996: 127)					

Navajo (Rice & Saxon 2001):

- The Navajo data below shows that the topicality analysis extends to cases in which both subject and object are pronominal
 - In (6), the pronominal subject is topical and the verb is marked by *yi-*
 - In (7), the object of the verb ‘kick’ is more topical than the subject, so the verb is marked by *bi-*

Navajo		Hän	
(6) a.	yiztał Y-kicked ‘He (topic) kicked him.’ (Answer to ‘What did he do?’)	b.	yëkhetdonayy ‘Y-kick.PROG’ ‘He’s (topic) kicking him’ (Answer to ‘What is he doing?’)
(7) a.	bistał B-kicked ‘He kicked him (topic).’ (Answer to ‘What happened to him?’) (Rice & Saxon 2001: 1)	b.	yëkhetdonayy (*wëkhetdonayy) ‘Y-kick.PROG’ ‘He’s kicking him (topic)’ (Answer to ‘What’s happening to him?’)

4 Postpositions

- Hän uses the same two pronouns as 3rd person singular objects of postpositions.
- Just like with direct objects, the objects of postpositions are sensitive to the person features of the subject. Assuming all else is equal, we once again see that:
 - *yě-* is used when the subject is 3rd person
 - *wě-* is used elsewhere

(8) *yě-khayy dhejaa*
 3sgO-on sit
 ‘She/he is sitting on it/him/her.’

(9) *wě-khayy dhihjaa*
 3sgO-on 1sgS.sit
 ‘I am sitting on it/him/her.’

4.1 Animacy features

- Like direct objects, objects of postpositions do not react in any way to focus, topicality, or voice. However, they are subject change based on the animacy features of the subject.
- In Hän’s closest linguistic/geographic neighbor, Gwich’in, the *Y-/B-* alternation behaves in a similar way (Thompson 1996).
 - Many Hän speakers also speak Gwich’in, as it is the closest neighbor to Hän geographically. Hän speakers often refer to Gwich’in as “that language from down the river” and have told us that the two languages are mutually intelligible for the most part.
- Gwich’in pronouns only occur as objects of postpositions
- The *Y-/B-* alternation in Gwich’in is conditioned by the animacy features of the subject
 - In (10), the subject is ‘Susan’, an animate subject; the oblique object is *Y-* (whose Gwich’in reflex is *ya-*)
 - Meanwhile, in (11), the subject is the inanimate *kii* ‘rock’, and the oblique object is marked by *B-* (Gwich’in reflex *va-*)

		Gwich’in		
(10)	a.	Susan	<i>y-</i> akak	nadhat
			Y-on	stand
		‘Susan is standing on it/him/her.’		
(11)	a.	kii	<i>v-</i> akak	nànaii
		rock	B-on	fell
		‘A rock fell on it/him/her.’		
		(Thompson 1996: 86)		

		Hän		
(10)	b.	Susan	<i>yě-</i> kayy	nàthhät
			Y-on	stand
		‘Susan is standing on it.’		
	b.	Tthee	<i>wě-</i> kayy	nädänayy
		rock	B-on	fell
		‘A rock fell on her.’		

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