

Verbs of striking in Dene languages

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This study examines the semantics of Dene (Athapaskan) verbs of ‘hitting’ and ‘striking’ from a diachronic-comparative perspective, focusing especially on patterns of lexicalization and semantic change. Drawing on the theory of metonymy (Radden & Kövecses, 1999; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2003, 2011; Paradis, 2011) as well as theories of lexical structure (Pustejovsky, 1998; Paradis, 2005), this paper expands on previous studies on this subject in Dene languages (Snoek, 2022) aiming to substantiate the claim that Dene verbs have become increasingly schematic over time. The Dene languages are spread over a discontinuous territory in western North America. The largest continuous area where these languages are spoken stretches across interior Alaska, the Yukon and across much of the Canadian subarctic boreal forestland west of the Hudson Bay. South of the subarctic, Dene languages are spoken in the intramontane and plains regions of Canada. Intriguingly, languages belonging to this family are also found in two other geographically distant and separate regions: along the Pacific Coast in Oregon and Northern California and in the southwestern United States. The data considered in this analysis come predominantly from six Dene languages, each representing an areal and likely phylogenetic grouping in the language (Snoek, Stang & Rice, 2022): Koyukon (Alaska), South Slavey (Subarctic Canada), Carrier (Intramontane Canada), Tsuut’ina (Plains), Hupa (Northern California), and Navajo (American Southwest). The structure of the sample is motivated by the possibility of reconstructing earlier states of the verb forms under investigation as well as gaining insight into the stages of semantic evolution of these forms. The data are drawn from published resources and fieldwork notes. In this context, I would like to acknowledge the immense contribution of the speakers of Dene languages past and present to the rich datasets now available to us for study. Dene verbs contrast with verbs of ‘striking’ such as English *hit*, German *Schlagen*, or Warlpiri *pakarni* in that there is no form of the verb that lexicalizes ‘hitting’ or ‘striking’ in the absence of specifications of the object used in the action. The majority of Dene verbs of striking specify the instrument used in striking explicitly, e.g. Carrier *huyunteztsel* ‘they felled (it) with axes’. Here, the final syllable of the verb construction represents the stem which shares an etymological origin with the noun *tselh* ‘axe’. In contrast, other verb constructions draw on the system of classificatory verbs to indicate physical properties of the instrument *yegheet’ekk* ‘he beat it repeatedly with a stick’. In this example, the instrument is encoded lexically by the stem *-t’EEK* which can be used to describe the rapid movement of rigid elongated objects of many kinds. Following suggestions in Snoek (2022) and Fortescue (2006), the paper argues that Dene verbs of striking tendentially evolve from forms overtly encoding the instruments used in striking to more schematic meanings, all the while preserving semantic properties of manner and shape through metonymic meaning shifts. In addition, the results of the study are discussed in the context of typological and cognitive linguistic research on verbs of striking (Riemer, 2005; Viberg, 2016; Radden, 2022).

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