

How areal are areals?
Spatial reference, prototypes, and metaphorical extension in Dene

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Several strategies exist for morphologically encoding third-person referents in Dene (Athapaskan, Athabascan) languages. Alongside typologically more common patterns of affixation that distinguish more topical or agent-like referents from less topical or patient-like ones is the so-called 'areal' prefix, which marks agreement with "areas or abstractions, topical humans objects, or function[s] as a dummy" (Thompson 1993: 332). Cognates of this morpheme are attested in all branches of the Dene language family, and often appear in common verbal and nominal constructions. Yet, despite the prevalence of this morpheme cross-linguistically and the apparent breadth of its grammatical and semantic scope, relatively little evidence has been presented outside of Thompson (1993) to support the claim that the meaning of this morpheme is indeed centred around spatial reference, as its name suggests, rather than any other of the attested meanings.

Drawing on examples of the areal prefix from a corpus of naturally-occurring speech from one Canadian Dene language, this paper considers (a) the range of referents targetted by this marker, with the aim of establishing prototypical usage(s) of this prefix in actual discourse; (b) extensions of these prototypical cases to less common or novel semantic contexts (e.g. through metaphors such as TIME IS SPACE); and (c) possible grammaticalization of this marker in both possessive and transitive verb constructions in several Dene languages. By giving closer attention to the range of referents associated with the areal marker in discourse, this study aims to contribute both to understanding this morpheme's semantic scope and grammatical function in the Dene language family and to facilitating a closer comparison of this construction with other referent marking systems cross-linguistically.

References

Thompson, Chad. 1993. The areal prefix *hu-* in Koyukon Athapaskan. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 59 (3). 315-333.