

The Grammaticalization of Dene Demonstratives

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This paper compares narrative data from a variety of Dene (or Athapaskan) languages with an aim to better understanding the similarity among devices deployed in each language for alternatively foregrounding certain event participants while backgrounding certain event episodes. Dene demonstratives and relativizers/nominalizers spring from the same well historically (Sapir 1923: 139, Thompson 1979: 1, Young & Morgan 1987: 1, 6, 20, et passim) such that morphemes that accentuate nominals in discourse (demonstratives) are morphologically similar to ones that attenuate predicates (relativizers/nominalizers). The grammaticalization pathways that see demonstratives (and other deictics) potentially developing into personal pronouns, focus particles, nominalizers, relativizers, subordinators, complementizers, or conjunctions (cf. Diessel 1999, 2006; Heine & Kuteva 2002), are alive and well in Athapaskan. These devices are compared across examples from traditional stories as well as from personal narratives, as exemplified in (1)-(3) in the Northern Athapaskan language, Dene Sų́liné, along with other morphemes that also cross the space and time, as well as the noun and verb divide.

In addition to arguments for the grammaticalization of Dene demonstratives into a host of other functional particles based on (a) a high degree of cognation of deictic elements and nominalizers/relativizers across the various Dene languages, (b) robust N-V conversion and morphological parallelism in the family, (c) a typological tendency towards parataxis rather than syntactic subordination, I claim that (d) the Dene data conform to well-attested grammaticalization streams in the literature involving demonstratives, and (e) the relations holding between the various extended senses are conceptually coherent, if one takes a Cognitive Grammar point of view (cf. Langacker 1987, 1991); to wit, the range of functions all involve the creation (and grounding) of nominals or nominalizations out of other types of predication.

The systematic exploration of contextualized examples across related languages is yielding a plethora of indexicality, event-framing, viewpoint, evidential, and epistemic phenomena that have hitherto received scant attention in the Athapaskan literature. Moreover, the highly subjective, abstract, and context-specific nature of these grammatical devices provides real challenges for glossing (the grammatical glosses in (1)-(3) are provisional and merely intended to illustrate) and interpretation, especially since few fluent speakers remain and the devices are so different from their periphrastic English counterparts. These types of elements are most subject to or the result of grammaticalization, which subsumes a range of phenomena that most cognitive linguists take for granted, but which most Athapaskanists remain indifferent to. Since these languages have a historical record dating back, at most, just over a century, we must rely on comparison with other languages to better understand how these framing devices work so we can better assist remaining speakers to produce the most natural records of their highly threatened languages and to appreciate the textual legacy left behind by previous generations of fluent speakers.

Dene Sų́liné (ISO 639-3: chp)

- (1) *eyi* *Tha Nadéltth'er-hi* *behonié* *sį*
that.one Tha Nadéltth'er-RELZ her story EMPH
 'Her, the one who is Tha Nadéltth'er, this is her story.'
- (2) *t'ąhi* *sas-xeł* *thetj-i* (Li 1930/1946: 420; glosses are Li's)
the.one bear-with IMPF.3SG.sleep-who
 'the one who was sleeping with the bear'
- (3) *kú* *edetqon-i* *heł* *ets'įnathé* *níh* *nedá* *asą*
 and REFL.IMPF.hold-NMLZ with finally ground 3SG.IMPF.sit.down EVID
 'so, while (she's) holding herself, she finally sits down on the ground'