Formulaic Language and the Athabaskan Verb

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This paper argues that the morphologically-complex Athabaskan verb can best be viewed from the perspective of Construction Grammar. In particular, we show that the aspectual marking in these languages constitute a set of formulae, in the sense of Wray (2002:9), who defines a formula as a sequence that is "stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar."

The aspect category in Athabaskan languages consists of fifteen to twenty contrasting spatio-temporal notions such as 'up to a point', 'to a point and back again,' 'a single time,' 'a series of single times,' and 'over a period of time.'   These aspects are marked morphologically by prefixes a variety of slots across the verbal template, and/or particular verb stem forms. These aspects are further elaborated by specific combinations of aspect-dependent adverbial prefixes, expressing notions such as 'out into the open', 'entering into', or 'through the ice'. Each such prefix string selects for a specific aspect or group of aspects. Beyond that, the particular subset of aspects for which any individual verb can be marked is largely determined by the verb's lexical semantic properties.

While Athabaskan aspect is similar to prototypical derivation in the sense of being both semantically rich and less than fully productive, it is nonetheless an obligatory element of any fully-formed verb word, and in this way resembles prototypical inflection.

We argue that the combinations of aspectual and aspect-dependent adverbial prefixes are like the prefabs described by Bolinger (1976), Erman and Warren (2000), and Wray (2002), among others, in being best understood as single unanalyzed units.

An examination of Athabaskan discourse, including folk stories, personal narrative, and conversation shows two frequent patterns of aspectual strings occurring as chunks, or prefabs. The first pattern involves repetition of a particular verb with alternating aspectual prefix combinations.   The second pattern is the repetition of a particular aspectual string with different verb roots. These patterns of repetition provide alternate construals of the events being reported on and thus serve to tie referents to the prior discourse and provide cohesion in the flow of information.

Example (1) is from a Koyukon conversation and shows both patterns, both repetition of a particular verb, that meaning 'to shake', with different aspectual values (Inceptive and durative), and the repetition of a particular aspect (Inceptive) with two different verb stems, 'shake' and 'fart':

(1) "Hun **detaałeneenh detaałeneenh**,
Pretty soon he started to shake and shake (Inceptive),

dedeneenh dehoon **detaadletle't**," yelnee.
he was shaking (Durative) and then he began farting (Inceptive)," he said.

Erman and Warren's (2000) study found that 58.6% of spoken English consists of formulaic sequences, so it is not surprising that a large part of the Athabaskan lexicon should consist of prefabs as well. The use of these aspectual prefabs allows speakers to indicate a particular construal of a situation (Croft 2012) and to manage the flow of information in discourse.

The paper concludes with discussion of the role of formulaic language in grammaticization and the formulaic qualities of polysynthetic languages in general.