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### The Athabaskan Languages: Perspectives On A Native American Language Family

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# INTRODUCTION

**Theodore B. Fernald and Paul R. Platero**

The Athabaskan language family stretches from Alaska through northwestern Canada and also appears in the American Southwest and in isolated regions of Washington, Oregon, and California. Navajo is currently the most widely used with somewhere between 90,000 and 150,000 speakers. The reason for the high margin of error in the estimated number of speakers is easily imagined by people who are familiar with what happens with endangered languages. In the case of Navajo, it is difficult to decide whom to count as a Navajo speaker: many people spoke it fluently when they were children but no longer do. They may understand some Navajo when they hear it, but they may no longer attempt to speak the language themselves. The other Athabaskan languages are numerically far worse off than Navajo and are very unlikely to survive the coming century.

The chapters in this volume range from technical analyses of the grammars of these languages to issues involved in trying to preserve Navajo. They were all presented at, or are closely related to, the Athabaskan Conference on Syntax and Semantics held at Swarthmore College (Pennsylvania) from April 25 to 28, 1996. Most of the essays in this collection are technical works of scholarship, making a contribution to the ongoing effort to understand human language in general and the Athabaskan languages in particular. These articles represent the current state of the art, and it would be very difficult for people with no background in linguistics to make sense of them. The volume contains two nontechnical essays that might appeal to a wider audience. The first is this introduction, which will describe in some detail what the conference at Swarthmore was all about. It will conclude with a brief overview of the other chapters in this volume. The second nontechnical essay is a summary of a discussion of the interaction of sacred and secular aspects of Navajo culture and its effects on efforts to use the Navajo language in public education. This discussion took place at the Swarthmore conference. The nontechnical essays are presented in this volume alongside the theoretical chapters for two main reasons. One is that including them provides a reflection of the conference at which they were presented. The

other is that linguists need to do everything we can to help preserve the languages we work with.

The Swarthmore conference was unusual in that it brought together people and issues involved with intellectual, practical, political, and cultural work on Athabaskan. These issues are interrelated, but it is rare for theoretical linguists to get so deeply involved in them. (It is not rare for the linguists who are Navajos themselves to get so involved; one must confront fears of language shift every day.) This was a conference which combined work in theoretical linguistics with a series of discussions about ways to assist the speakers of Navajo with some of the problems surrounding the efforts to sustain it as a modern language. In addition to the linguists who work on Athabaskan syntax and semantics, we invited several educational professionals who are involved in teaching Navajo language and literacy to other Navajos. Our original goal was to have a discussion of a thesis of Paul Platero's, that efforts to preserve the Navajo language and culture would benefit from a separation of religious and secular cultural matters in educational settings. (A summary of this discussion is included in this volume.) Since we were inviting linguists and native speakers of Navajo to a conference, and since in the past it has been difficult for linguists to get consistent judgments on quantification data in the field, it was natural for us to have a discussion of data of this sort. As plans for the conference became more specific, it became clear that there was a need for a discussion of the gulf between academic theorists and language educators, so we added a discussion of these issues. The difference between theorists and educators does not quite coincide with the Navajo-Anglo distinction. Five Navajos who have doctoral degrees have produced linguistic work on Navajo. Four of them were present at the conference, and their presence changed the dynamics of the discussion. One of the high points of the conference came when the theoretical issues of Navajo linguistics were discussed in Navajo. This was a lengthy and sustained discussion of certain quantificational and scope taking particles and nuances of interpretation of sentences containing them. This may have been the first time ever that such a discussion took place in Navajo. It was a significant moment for those of us who seek to preserve the strength of Navajo language and culture; scientific investigation was being conducted about Navajo in Navajo.

This conference was unusual in a number of ways. To the Navajo educators, the strangest thing was its location in Pennsylvania, far from traditional Athabaskan territory. This is odd since many Athabaskans have a close personal connection to the land they inhabit. The conference was also unusual in that the participants consisted of theoretical linguists and language educators, and the topics under consideration covered two fairly distinct domains of inquiry.

The conference was held in Pennsylvania for a number of circumstantial reasons. Swarthmore College is where both of us were working at the time. Paul was invited here as the Eugene M. Lang Visiting Professor for Social Change to coteach a course on the structure of Navajo with Ted. In conversations between the two of us and also with Ken Hale and Clay Slate, the idea emerged of taking advantage of the opportunity in other ways. We decided to have a broader discussion of certain issues affecting the strength of the Navajo language. We realized that Pennsylvania was an odd location for a meeting about the Navajo language and culture, but we did not want to miss the opportunity with which

we were presented. In fact, there is a historical connection between Swarthmore College and the Navajo Nation: Gladys Reichard, the anthropologist and linguist who produced numerous works on Navajo grammar and culture, completed her undergraduate education at Swarthmore in 1919. Swarthmore is a college that is proud of its heritage. Holding the Athabaskan Conference on Syntax and Semantics at Swarthmore continues Reichard's legacy.

There were several reasons for creating a conference which focuses on both theoretical linguistics and issues of the interaction of education with language and culture. In the particular case of the groups involved in this conference, there had already been a fair amount of interaction going in both directions. Linguists have been involved in putting to pedagogical use the insights of their analyses, and professional educators have attended linguistics conferences in the past, to add insights from practice and to further their understanding of grammatical theory. In general, linguists and language educators have some very important common goals. For both groups, it is of tantamount importance that the speech community with which they work should survive. In the past, linguists have benefited the speakers of the languages on which they work by analyzing how the language works and sometimes by writing descriptive grammars. The product of linguistic analysis may be beneficial to members of the speech community if it can be used in pedagogical settings, in teaching grammatical analysis, for example. Although this is valuable work, in many cases it is not enough to help preserve the strength or even the existence of the speech community. Linguists need to be more deeply involved, both in an effort to maintain linguistic diversity and as a matter of fair exchange for the valuable data we obtain. Linguists customarily provide monetary compensation for the time and expertise of native speakers who are the source of their data. But money gets spent and disappears, often without providing a significant benefit to the community where the language is spoken. The discussion sessions at this conference represented an effort to offer something more useful to the Navajo culture by providing a forum for educational and cultural issues and by getting linguists more deeply involved in these concerns. The discussion of quantificational sentences, in addition to being useful linguistic research, was an effort to get Navajo language educators more deeply involved in work on theoretical linguistics, in hopes of stimulating their interest in the scientific study of the Navajo language.

The article reporting the discussion session of the conference considers the thesis that public schools in the Navajo Nation would benefit from a separation of secular and religious elements in Navajo culture. This separation would allow public schools to provide instruction of and inquiry into the secular domains, which would include the grammar of Navajo. This would make it possible for a portion of the culture to be discussed and investigated in schools without violating the doctrine of the separation of church and state. This would also make it possible for students who do not hold traditional Navajo religious beliefs to study secular aspects of Navajo culture. The proposal to make a distinction between the secular and the religious may be opposed in a different direction by those Navajos who believe that it would be impossible or improper to separate religion from other aspects of culture. The thesis is controversial, but it deserved to be discussed. We are not doing anything so presumptuous as to recommend policy, but we hope that our discussion will be of some benefit to the Navajo

Nation by clarifying certain issues. It is likely that other groups of American Indians are faced with similar difficulties in their schools. We hope that our discussion will be of use to them as well. Finally, we hope that linguists will be inspired to become more involved in finding ways to be of service to communities that are the source of the data we need. This conference has done this in two ways: by providing a forum for a discussion of language education issues and by involving language educators in the work of linguistic theory.

Both groups of participants in this conference view the endangerment of a language and a culture with great sadness. Languages are natural systems for encoding information in a way that makes sense to people. There are many different ways in which a human language can be configured, but these do not encompass every logical possibility. This apparently is due to the architecture of human brains. To figure out all that language can teach us about human cognition, we need to be able to study as many languages as possible. When a language dies, researchers lose a piece of the puzzle. The Athabaskan languages differ from the heavily studied Indo-European languages in a great variety of ways. This makes them especially valuable to linguists and cognitive scientists.

There is an intimate interaction between a culture and the language it uses. When a language is lost, the culture loses many of its art forms and possibly some of its concepts. The decline of a culture and a language involves many complex issues that we cannot cover adequately here. Although we are indulging here in generalizations, we hope the point is clear and uncontroversial. When a culture is lost, humanity loses a unique perspective of the universe and how people fit into it. The worldview of a culture is the result of a collective effort to follow assumptions about the universe to their logical conclusions. As our species faces technological, social, ethical, and political issues it has never faced before, we need every consistent set of assumptions about the universe that we can get. An example of this is the effort being made by Herb Benally and others at Navajo Community College to develop an educational curriculum that is consistent with Navajo philosophy. It was noted that the Anglo-American system of education has not been generally successful at providing Navajo young people with a basis for leading wonderful and exciting lives. We think the same can be said, in general, for Anglo-American young people. At a time when so many Americans are concerned with the state of education in our country, the perspective offered by another culture may make a valuable contribution.

These comments provide a view of the motivation behind this conference. The goals are consistent with those of a good number of educators and linguists. The Athabaskan Conference on Syntax and Semantics certainly did not address all the issues raised here, but the conference was designed to contribute in a modest way to their resolution.

The collection of chapters that this volume comprises may strike some as unusual, since it includes a discussion of certain sociological issues alongside theoretical work in linguistics. The volume reflects the unusual character of the conference. This was more than a traditional linguistics conference in which the speakers of the languages under scrutiny participate at best as observers. In organizing this conference, we tried to find a way to be of service to the community of native speakers who are our sources of data. They are from a culture that has been exploited in the past by European-American culture, and their culture

and language are struggling for survival. It behooves linguists to make contributions where we can. We would like to argue that what is unusual about the conference and this volume ought not to be so unusual. Linguists have a responsibility to any endangered speech community. Where there is a theoretical conference that focuses on the language of any such community, there ought to be sessions addressing ways to be of better service to the goal of preserving that community and its language.

Linguists are convinced of the value of linguistic diversity, but many other people are not. Linguists are, then, the most likely outsiders to care whether a speech community survives. This alone is reason for involvement, but there is a further matter. Aside from disease and war, the main challenges to the survival of a language come from economic pressures on the native speakers. Consider Navajo as a relevant case in point. Although there are a number of ways to make a living in Navajo country today, in nearly every case a worker will be more successful if he or she knows English, and there are fairly few jobs in which not knowing Navajo is a serious impediment. Tourism has been significant in the Navajo economy, but economic development in that direction adds pressure to stop using Navajo.

The Navajo language itself is one resource that is highly valued outside the Navajo community which could add pressure to retain the language. Unfortunately or not, the main market for this resource consists of linguists who depend on the existence of the speech community for data. Unfortunately, linguists do not command adequate financial resources to offset the economic pressures that push a speech community to abandon its traditional language. Although it is customary for field linguists to compensate their consultants, these arrangements never have a significant economic impact on the community: as far as we know, no one has made a career as a consultant for a field linguist. We are sure that many linguists would love the state of academic finance to allow such eventualities to obtain, but we cannot get off the hook so easily. We are obligated to do everything we can to contribute to the survival of an endangered speech community.

The theoretical essays in this volume focus mostly on issues of syntax and semantics. There is a major linguistic controversy surrounding the Athabaskan family, among certain others. The question is whether nominal expressions should be analyzed as arguments, as is traditionally assumed, or whether they are better treated as adjuncts coindexed with pronominal arguments that are incorporated into the verb. Chapter 11, by MaryAnn Willie and Eloise Jelinek, adds an important argument to this debate in support of the claim that nominals are adjoined. Chapter 2, by Leonard Faltz, extends these assumptions to account for various idiosyncrasies of Navajo semantics. Supporting the other side of the debate is Chapter 4, by Ken Hale and Paul Platero, considering facts about negative polarity items in Navajo. Ted Fernald, in chapter 3, article does not take sides in this debate but investigates some issues in genericity and the contrast between individual- and stage-level predicates. A better understanding of quantification in Navajo may eventually be relevant to the syntactic controversy.

Chapter 10, by Chad Thompson, and Chapter 5, by Dagmar Jung, deal with questions of word order in Koyukon and Jicarilla Apache, respectively. Keren Rice, in Chapter 8, considers issues of argument structure and subject in three

Athabaskan languages. She concludes that the position in which a subject appears depends on semantic properties of the subject rather than on any subcategorization mechanism. Melissa Axelrod, in Chapter 1, lays out nominal and verbal aspectual classification in Koyukon and draws parallels between them. Chapter 9, by Carlota Smith, concerns the interpretations of Navajo verb bases.

In Chapter 7, Joyce McDonough, argues that the position class does not exist as a morphological type. Her work is on Navajo, which in the past has been taken to be a canonical example of position class morphology. In Chapter 6, Jeff Leer takes a historical linguistics perspective leading to the reconstruction of negative/irrealis morphemes in Proto-Athabaskan-Eyak-Tlingit. There are numerous comments throughout on the syntactic and aspectual effects of these morphemes.

In addition to these articles, which were presented as papers at the conference, this volume includes an additional a chapter that figured prominently in several of the conference discussions. Chapter 12, "The Function and Signification of Certain Navaho Particles" was written in the 1940s by Robert Young and William Morgan. The paper was published by the Education Division of the United States Indian Service, with an intended audience of Anglo educators of Navajo children. The original introduction was designed to explain to English teachers why their Navajo students seemed to sound monotonous when they spoke English. It explained that Navajo is a tone language and that emphasis and association to focus are accomplished by adding particles to sentential constituents rather than giving them intonational stress, as is done in English. The remainder of the article is a catalogue of Navajo particles with copious example sentences reflecting various nuances of meaning. This catalogue has been highly sought after by linguists who work on Navajo natural language semantics, but copies of it have been very hard to locate. This volume includes the original article in its entirety along with a new introduction by Robert Young. It is being included in this volume as a service to scholars and because it figured prominently in the discussion sessions of the conference.