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The diachronic dimension of "interrupted synthesis": The stability of non-layered morpheme structure in Athabascan languages

When Worf (1956) used the term "interrupted synthesis" for the classification of Athabascan languages, he referred to the fact that morphemes are scattered across the verbal template, deviating from a more iconic order of lexical compounding. This feature has puzzled linguists since today.

Following a functional view of morpheme order (Bybee 1985), derivational and thematic morphemes tend to appear closer to the stem and furthermore fuse with the stem, since they are highly relevant for the meaning of the stem. Subject indexation and inflection in general, on the other hand, does not change the meaning of the verb significantly, and are therefore more likely to be placed at the periphery of the word. Inflection, since having a more general meaning instead, can attach to a high number of verbs, but does not tend to fuse with the stem. The distribution of more relevant/less general (darker) and less relevant/more general morphemes (lighter) is shown in the verbal morpheme positions of Ahtna and Navajo<sup>1</sup>:

A / T	D	T	I	I	I	I	T	I	I	TMA	T	N	T	TMA	N	TMA/T	I	D/T	S	TMA
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Ahtna verbal morpheme positions

A / T	D	I/D	I	I	T ( T M A )	T M A / T	I	D / T	S
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Navajo verbal morpheme positions

Although the emergence of this disparate order has been explained, concluding that the morpheme order reflects quite well the degree of grammaticalization/age (Mithun 2011 for Navajo), the question about their stability – i.e. why these morphemes and discontinuities are still present in verbs and have not further undergone fusion or erosion – has not yet been satisfactorily answered. For Rice (2000), Athabascan morpheme order follows semantic scope principles, but these principles rather explain the relative position of morphemes than their broader, discontinuous character.

While there are tendencies of reordering and fusion, all Athabascan languages still show a non-layered morpheme order. By comparing the templates of a dozen Athabascan languages, it is shown that the notions of "relevance" and "generality" are still factors at work, but in a more general way. Morphemes of high generality retain their position, while morphemes that are relevant to the stem do not necessarily drift towards the stem at the right end of the complex. Rather, inter-morphemic relevance leads to morpheme attractions and clusters. This can be seen in Ahtna vs. Navajo. In Ahtna, TMA-morphemes are more general and therefore, have retained a more distributed structure. In Navajo, TMA and T (thematic positions) have increased their co-dependency, so that they appear next to each other. In sum, the high stability of non-layered morphology is due to 1.) morphemes being attracted to other morphemes rather than to the

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: A(dverbial), T(hematic), I(ndexation), T(ense)M(ood)A(spect), N(egative), D(erivative) and the S(tem) morphemes.

stem due to their relevance to one another and 2.) highly general morphemes interrupting the fusion of the morphemes that would be relevant to the stem.

References:

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