

A Comparative Study of Reflexive Forms in
Three Northern Athapaskan Languages¹

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will describe the reflexive forms found in three Athapaskan languages of northern Canada: Chipewyan, Dogrib, and Slave. Reflexive morphology in these languages has different properties depending on whether the reflexive form serves as the object of a verb or postposition, or as the possessor of a noun. My focus in this paper is on the reflexive possessive forms. I show that different properties of reflexive forms in a single language are mirrored by different properties among the three languages. Cross-linguistic evidence thus provides additional support for distinctions set up on the basis of facts particular to one language, in this case, distinctions between possessive and non-possessive uses of the reflexive form.

2. ?ede- 'Reflexive', as the Object of Verb or Postposition

This section serves chiefly for comparison with the following section on the reflexive form as a possessor.

2.1 The Object of Verbs

The reflexive object pronoun ?ede- has been discussed chiefly in connection with its concomitant morphological effects: reflexive verbs contain the d- or l- classifier, while their non-reflexive counterparts contain the \emptyset or ɬ- classifier.² Thus we may compare the following pairs of reflexive and non-reflexive verbs. (?ede- and analysable classifiers are underlined.)

Chipewyan (data from Elford and Elford (1981))

- (1) a. ?edeghests'ér 'I scratched myself'
b. hests'ér 'I scratched it'
- (2) a. ?edek'enáɛltsiɬ 'he is washing himself'

- b. yú k'əná'ɛ̀t̥sɪɪ́ 'he is washing clothes'
clothes 3.IMP.wash

Dogrib

- (3) a. ?edèhkwí 'he cut himself (on an axe)'
b. tso ekwí 'he is cutting wood'
wood 3.IMP.cut
- (4) a. ?edenìwhehdle ìle 'I didn't like myself'
Neg
b. weniwhile ìle 'I didn't like him'
Neg

Slave (data from Rice (1983))

- (5) a. dah?ededéhdlú 'I hung myself'
b. dahdìlú 'I hung it'
- (6) a. ?edehídzá 'measure yourself'
b. be?ìhdzá 'measure it'

The examples above show that when used as a verbal prefix ?ede- has an identical function in the three languages: a verb containing the prefix ?ede- has a reflexive sense and differs morphologically from its non-reflexive counterpart in having the d- or l- (rather than \emptyset or ɬ-) classifier.

The examples above are representative of reflexives formed from two classes of verbs in Chipewyan, Dogrib and Slave: examples (1), (3) and (5) are examples of verbs which require direct objects; those in (2), (4) and (6) are examples of verbs which require indirect or oblique objects.³

Among the second class of verbs, the languages differ in some details. Thus, as Rice (1983:398) reports, a certain group of Slave reflexive verbs formed with ?ede- from verbs taking oblique objects show the change in classifier; others use ?ede-, but do not show this change. The group of classifier changing verbs in Slave is the group containing the \emptyset or e- incorporated postposition. In Dogrib, similarly, not all oblique object reflexive verbs display the classifier change; however, the generalization

that holds for Slave does not hold for Dogrib. Thus contrast the Slave and Dogrib reflexive and non-reflexive forms of the verb meaning 'to look at':

Dogrib

- (7) a. ?edeghàehdà 'I looked at myself'
 b. weghàindà 'I looked at him'

Slave

- (8) a. ?edegháyeyidá 'I looked at myself'
 b. begháyeyidá 'I looked at him'

Contrasts between the Dogrib forms (7a) and (7b) in the final pair of syllables indicate that (7a) contains the d-classifier but (7b) does not. Note the lack of contrasts in the Slave forms: neither verb in Slave has the d-classifier, as is predicted from the fact that it contains the incorporated postposition -ghá, not \emptyset or e-.

There seem to be verbs in Dogrib which do not show the classifier change, but it is as yet unclear which class of verbs this is. The question is likewise as yet unanswered for Chipewyan.

2.2 The Object of Postpositions

When ?ede- occurs as the object of a (non-incorporated) postposition, Chipewyan, Dogrib and Slave exhibit uniform characteristics: ?ede- occurs prefixed to the postposition, and exerts no effect on verbal morphology. Examples of postpositional ?ede- are given in (9) - (11).

Chipewyan

- (9) a. ?edets'én ainídhí u, "Beyúé kóli hálarehthesdi dé..."
 Refl.to 3.PF.think 3.clothes but 1s.PF.touch if
 'she thought to herself, "If I just touch his clothes..."'
 (Mark(Ch).5.28)
- b. ?edegha yasti
 Refl.for 1s.IMP.pray
 'I pray for myself'

(Petitot 1876:section 102)

3. Reflexive Possessives

The slight differences among Chipewyan, Dogrib and Slave that we saw in the uses of the reflexive prefix as the object of a verb or postposition contrast with substantial differences in the case of possessive forms. These differences among the languages support evidence internal to any one language that objective and possessive reflexive forms are distinct.

3.1 Slave

In Slave, the contrast between verbal or postpositional uses of the reflexive, and possessive uses, rests on two differences: first, the reflexive possessive form is de- rather than ?ede-; and second, the antecedent of a reflexive possessive must be a third person, unlike the antecedent of the verbal or postpositional reflexive, which may be of any person. These two differences are illustrated in (12), showing the postpositional use of the reflexive, and (13), showing a reflexive possessive:

- (12) a. ?edegh h́hch'o
 Refl.about 1s.PF.mad
 'I got mad at myself'
- b. ?edegh h́ch'o
 Refl.about 3.PF.mad
 'he got mad at himself'
- (13) a. *detúé ghq h́hch'o
 Refl.daughter
- setúé ghq h́hch'o
 1s.daughter
 'I got mad at my daughter'
- b. detúé ghq h́ch'o
 Refl.daughter
 'he got mad at his (own) daughter'

(This analysis is due to K. Rice, and is reported in Rice (1983).)

Other examples of the reflexive possessive prefix de- are given in (14):

- (14) a. dekóé gots'é ?anajá
 Refl.house A.to 3.PF.go back
 'he went back to his house'

(Mark(S1).3.20)

- b. dekíe whehtsi
 Refl.shoe 3.PF.make
 'he made his own shoes'

(Rice 1983:184(5))

Thus, within the grammar of Slave alone, there is evidence for distinguishing a reflexive form from a reflexive possessive form. The fact that all three languages under discussion distinguish verbal and postpositional contexts for reflexives from possessive contexts, and mark them in different ways, strongly suggests that the contexts are to be distinguished at any hypothesized earlier stage of the language also. As Rice (1983:147) notes, this difference in reflexive morphology is one of few criteria available for sorting simple inalienable nouns from postpositions in Slave; otherwise, their morphological characteristics are identical. The comparative evidence of the three languages suggests that the contrast between simple nouns and postpositions is typical of earlier stages also.

3.2 Chipewyan

Chipewyan differs from Slave in that a reflexive morpheme is not used as a possessive prefix. That is, the reflexive form is strictly objective, never possessive, in Chipewyan. English reflexive forms are the same, of course, since the construction *herself's watch is not found. (15) below contrasts examples of reflexive verbs with examples of the same verbs used with an object whose possessor is coreferential with the subject. (In this and following sections, the coreference relation is represented in the gloss by underscoring.)⁴

- (15) a. ?edək'enáɛłtsiɬ
 Refl.3.IMP.wash
 'he is washing himself'

- b. beyúé k'enáɛłtsiɬ
 3.clothes 3.IMP.wash
 'he is washing his clothes'

c. ?ɛdɛghɛts'ér
 Refl.3.PF.scratch
 'he scratched himself'

d. bɛdzaghé hɛts'ér
 3.ear 3.IMP.scratch
 'he is scratching his ear'

(adapted from Elford and Elford 1981)

My claim that Chipewyan does not use the reflexive morpheme as a possessive prefix is at odds with early descriptions of Chipewyan (Petitot (1876), Li (1946)), but conforms to later descriptions (Richardson (1968)) and to the evidence found in the Chipewyan dictionary (Elford and Elford (1981)) and in texts (Mark(Ch), Li and Scollon (1976)). Thus Richardson (1968:6) discusses ?ɛdɛ- as a verbal and postpositional prefix, but gives the following examples of possession:

(16) a. bɛkóɛ náɛr
 3.house 3.IMP.stay
 'he is staying at his house'

b. bɛ c'á tθihésya
 3.mother away 3.PF.run
 'he ran away from his mother'

(Richardson 1968:6,53)

Likewise, we find examples like the following in Elford and Elford (1981), but no examples of ?ɛdɛ- used as a possessive prefix.

(17) a. bɛdzagór huwíkar
 3.knee 3.PF.slap
 'he slapped his knees'

b. bɛdhié dɛnéɫna
 3.death 3.PF.win
 'he has earned his death'

c. bɛtthí hɛɫtthɛdh
 3.head 3.IMP.shake
 'he shakes his head'

The additional examples in (18) and (19) are taken from texts, with references as noted.

- (18) a. betélé́ niríłcúdh
 3.mat 3.PF.pick up
 'he picked up his mat'
 (Mark(Ch).2.12)
- b. tahı́ benéné́ k'élńıhi
 who 3.land 3.IMP.look after.Rel
 'one who cares for his country'
 (Mark(Ch).3.18)
- c. beεlikwié́ bı́lájeri héł syélyi
 3.disciples 3.hand.dirty with 3.IMP.eat
 'his disciples were eating with dirty hands'
 (Mark(Ch).7.2)
- (19) a. ?eyit'á łuri betsuné́ xéł náεer
 so (name) 3.grandmother with 3.IMP.stay
 'so Scabby stayed with his grandmother'
 (Li and Scollon 1976:145)
- b. beyaze nárıltı́ú né?εli k'ε néđtı
 3.child 3.PF.put down.and moss on 3.PF.lie down
 'when she had taken her child down, she lay down
 on the moss'
 (Li and Scollon 1976:231)
- c. ?εkú. ?edıni bek'á náθεłtsı
 then 3 3.arrow 3.PF.gather
 'he then took up his arrow'
 (Li and Scollon 1976:43)

Despite the fact that Li (1946:42) provides the following description of ?εdε-,

- (20) ?εdε- "one's own, my own, your own,
 his own, etc."

his sketch does not contain any examples of ?εdε- in this use. Petitot (1876:section 55) gives a similar description of ?εdε-, but seems to indicate that it is used only for third person possessors:

- (21) son, sa (réfléchi) édé, até⁵

Each of the three major sources, Petitot, Mark(Ch), and Li and Scollon, contains one example of ?εdε- apparently prefixed as a possessive. It is not surprising to find the use of ?εdε- in Chipewyan changed in the more than one hundred and ten years since the publication of Petitot's grammar, or the forty years between Li's fieldwork and the publication of Richardson's grammar.

There being so few examples of this type, however, it is difficult to guess at the linguistic generalizations which they exemplify. The following example comes from Petitot's grammar:

- (22) édétthu dépil"al' 'je me suis coupé la langue
avec les dents'
(Petitot 1876:section 168)

My transliteration of (22) appears in (23):

- (23) ?εdεtthú dεghil?ał
Refl.tongue ls.PF.bite
'I cut my tongue with my teeth'

Note that if we take Petitot's own description of ?εdε- as a third person reflexive seriously, the example does not fit the description: here ?εdε- occurs with a first person antecedent.

Consider now the example from Mark(Ch):

- (24) sεkwazε ?εdεk'oth hĩłcúhu, yεk'ε dálagałya ú,...
children Refl.neck 3.PF.take 3.on 3.put hands
'he took the children in his arms, and put hands on
each of them'

(Mark (Ch).10.16)

The form ?εdεk'odh hĩłcú, glossed 'he took (Object) in his arms' appears to contain the possessed noun ?εdεk'odh 'reflexive neck', and the verb hĩłcú 'he took (Object)'. The expression thus seems to receive an idiomatic rather than a strictly literal meaning, and its exceptionality with respect to my generalization may perhaps be explained on this account.

The example from Li and Scollon is the following:

- (25) ...?oteyé ?εdεłhot'ine yĩ-t'ĩ
well Refl.relative 3.PF.treat
'he treated (them) just like his own relatives'
(Li and Scollon, p.185)

In this example, it seems that the reflexive form may be marking the contrast indicated in the English gloss by the use of 'his own', rather than 'his'. If this usage of ?ede - as a reflexive possessive were systematic in Chipewyan, this would stand as some evidence for considering pronoun use in Chipewyan (particularly the use of reflexive versus non-reflexive forms) in the terms described by Timberlake (1980) for pronoun use in Russian, whereby the choice of reflexive or non-reflexive form depends on a certain set of semantic factors.

Leaving aside these examples which by current usage seem exceptional, it seems clear that Chipewyan and Slave differ substantially in the way possessive pronouns are used in each language. In Chipewyan, personal pronouns are used as possessors; in Slave, the reflexive form is used for third person possessors, and personal pronouns for others.

3.3 Dogrib

Speakers of Dogrib do not use the system for marking possession that is found in Slave or in Chipewyan; rather they use both. Thus consider the Dogrib sentences in (26):

- (26) a. sechàa ts'àwhehtla
 1s.grandchild 1s.PF.visit
 'I visited my grandchild'
- *?edechàa ts'àwhehtla
 Refl.grandchild
- b. nechàa ts'àwhìtla ?
 2s.grandchild 2s.PF.visit
 'did you visit your grandchild?'
- *?edechàa ts'àwhìtla ?
 Refl.grandchild
- c. wechàa ts'àhtla
 3.grandchild 3.PF.visit
 'she visited her grandchild'
- d. ?edechàa ts'àhtla
 Refl.grandchild
 'she visited her grandchild'

We see, then, that in Dogrib too, verbal or postpositional contexts for reflexivization differ from possessive contexts. Though the morphological system of possessive forms in Dogrib is not the same as the systems of Slave or Chipewyan, it too provides a contrast with the system used in the case of verbal or postpositional reflexivization.

4. Conclusions

As the preceding section demonstrated, Chipewyan, Dogrib and Slave treat possessors coreferential with the subject of a sentence in substantially different ways. Dogrib and Slave permit the use of a reflexive possessive in the case of third persons. Dogrib in addition permits the use of a non-reflexive in these contexts; here, the use of the ordinary third person pronominal prefix is an option. This is the rule in Chipewyan, though exceptions to it may occur.

The differences among the languages in possessive morphology contrast with relative uniformity in the case of non-possessive reflexives. For verbal and postpositional reflexives, all three languages follow a common pattern using the reflexive ?ede- for all persons. Thus, the contrasts that exist between verbal or postpositional contexts and possessive contexts in each of the languages, taken individually, support the idea that these contexts were distinct at some earlier period in the language's history.

As might perhaps be guessed, Dogrib is spoken in the area geographically between the areas in which Slave and Chipewyan are spoken, by people who have historically had close contact with their neighbours to the north and south. Dogrib uses both the symmetrical system of possessives used in the neighbouring language to the south, Chipewyan, in which coreferential possessors are all marked by non-reflexive, 'ordinary' pronominal prefixes, and also the system of reflexives used in the neighbouring language to the north, Slave, in which coreferential relations are marked by a reflexive prefix, whether between subjects and objects or subjects and possessors.

Dogrib shows an innovative use of the reflexive morpheme as a possessive beyond any use found in Slave. With a certain complement-taking verb, ts'eniwq 'want, think', either an indirect discourse or a direct discourse complement is possible in Dogrib, as shown in (30).

(30) a. Indirect discourse

John [lidi^h wedq] niwq
 tea 3.OPT.drink 3.IMP.want
 'John wants to drink tea'
 (lit. John wants, he shall drink tea)

b. Direct discourse

John [lidi^h wehdq] niwq
 tea 1s.OPT.drink
 'John wants to drink tea'
 (lit. John wants, I shall drink tea)

In the indirect discourse example, the use of pronominal prefixes matches the use of pronouns in the typical indirect discourse construction found in any language, for example the English John said that he was late. As in English, the third person subject of the lower clause in the Dogrib example is ambiguous between a reading on which it is understood as referring to John, and a reading on which it is understood as referring to someone else. In the direct discourse example, the use of pronominal prefixes matches the use of pronouns in direct quotation, for example the English John said, "I'm late". If sentences with the verb ts'eniwq are taken out of context, they are often ambiguous between an indirect and a direct discourse interpretation. Thus, (30b), taken out of context, might receive the direct discourse interpretation represented by its gloss in (30b); alternatively, it might receive an indirect discourse interpretation and thus be taken to mean, 'John wants me to drink tea'.

Now consider sentences with ts'eniwq which contain possessed noun phrases:

(31) Mary [ʔedeçhàa ts'awetla] niwq
 Refl.grandchild 3.OPT.visit 3.IMP.want

a. (indirect discourse interpretation)

'Mary wants to visit her grandchild'

b. (indirect discourse interpretation)

'Mary wants her to visit her grandchild'

(32) Mary [sechàa ts'àwehtla] niwq
 ls.grandchild ls.OPT.visit 3.IMP.want

a. (indirect discourse interpretation)

‘Mary wants me to visit my grandchild’

b. (direct discourse interpretation)

‘Mary wants to visit her grandchild’

As we see, both forms are ambiguous out of context. It happens however that ?ede- can be used in Dogrib sentences with ts'eniwo in a way unavailable in Slave which makes a sentence entirely unambiguous.⁶ An example parallel to (31) and (32) is (33):

(33) Mary [?edechàa ts'àwehtla] niwq
 Refl.grandchild ls.OPT.visit 3.IMP.want

‘Mary wants to visit her grandchild’

In this somewhat puzzling form, ?ede- is used very exceptionally as the reflexive possessive prefix in a clause with a verb marked for a first person subject. (Cf. (26a) above, the ungrammatical sentence.) This first person subject marking is interpreted as coreferential with Mary, as in direct discourse interpretations. In this case, then, two devices for marking coreference--direct discourse pronouns, and reflexive morphology--are unusually combined, by all appearances in order to provide an unambiguous structure for expressing a certain meaning.⁷

FOOTNOTES

¹This paper is an extended treatment of a topic touched on in Saxon (1984). I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the National Museum of Man in the form of contract no. 1630-1-469. I would also like to thank Keren Rice and Vital Thomas.

The sources of data used in this work are cited in the text, except for instances in which the source is my own Dogrib field notes. In using data from other sources, I have in general maintained the orthographic system used in the source. The following orthographic symbols are used, among others:

c, ch	[č]	sh, sy	[s]
dh, é	[ð]	th, θ	[θ]
gh	[ɣ]	tth, tθ	[tθ]
ɬ	[ɬ]	wh	[w]
nd	[ñd]	?	[ʔ]
ie (Slave)	[ie]	ε	[ε]
C'	glottalized C		
v̇	vowel with high-marked tone (Slave, Chipewyan)		
v̂	vowel with low-marked tone (Dogrib)		
ɣ	nasal vowel		

The following abbreviations are used in glosses and citations:

1, 2, 3	first, second, third person		
s,d,p	singular, dual, plural		
IMP	imperfective	Neg	negative
OPT	optative	Fut	future
PF	perfective	Rel	relative

John(Sl) refers to John ghaáádé Jesus gondié nezu.

Mark(Sl) refers to Mark ghaáádé gondi nezu.

Mark(Ch) refers to Mark behonié nezu Jesus gha.

²The classifiers occupy a central place in Athapaskan verb morphology, occurring as derivational markers, as in the formation of reflexives or causatives, and also having significant effects on inflectional morphology. The designation of the classifiers as being of the form d-, l-, θ and ɬ- is an abstraction; often the classifiers do not take these forms phonetically, though their presence is determinable from semantic, syntactic and morphological characteristics of the verbal structures. For further particulars of the form and function of classifiers in Athapaskan, see Rice (1983), Li (1946) or Young and Morgan (1980).

³The classification of verbs into these two types depends on a difference between the two in the form of their third person objects when the subject is non-third person.

Thus compare the examples in (a) with those in (b):

Chipewyan (data from Elford and Elford (1981))

a. hests'ér 'I am scratching it'

seké hests'ér 'I am scratching my foot'
ls. foot

- b. bεk'εnáεstsiɬ 'I am washing them'
- yú k'εnáεstsiɬ 'I am washing clothes'
clothes
- Dogrib
- a. nehtsi 'make it'
- lidi nehtsi 'make tea'
tea
- b. weghàinda 'look at it'
- bebì ghàinda 'look at the baby'
baby
- Slave (data from Rice (1983))
- a. yine?á 'you ate it'
- ɬéht'é yine?á 'you ate the bread'
bread
- b. meya?íhk'é 'I shot it in the air'
- chi ya?íhk'é 'I shot a duck in the air'
duck

The verbs of the second class require the prefix bε -/we-/me- as a marker of the third person pronominal object. This is not the case for the first class of verbs.

⁴Note that the examples (15b) and (15d) are not ambiguous in the way that the English glosses are. If subject and possessor are not coreferential, the prefix yε- occurs in the place of bε-, as is shown in (i) and (ii) below.

- (i) yεyú'é k'εnáεɬtsiɬ 'he is washing his (someone else's) clothes'
- (ii) yεdzaghé hets'éɾ 'he is scratching his (someone else's) ear'

Ye- serves the same function also in Slave and Dogrib.

⁵It should be noted that accents in Petitot's transcription system correspond to the use of accents in French orthography, serving to mark differences in vowel quality, and not as in modern transcription systems, to indicate high-marked (´) or low-marked (`) tone.

⁶See Rice (1983:chapters 38, 39, 45) for discussion of direct and indirect discourse complements in Slave.

⁷This construction is the topic of Saxon (1985).

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