

Willem de Reuse

(U North Texas/MPI EVA)

The 'Occupy prefix' movement in the Western Apache verb

Western Apache belongs to the Southern Athabaskan or Apachean subdivision of Athabaskan, and is spoken by about 6,000 people on five reservations in east central and central Arizona, USA. As is the case with all Athabaskan languages, the structure of the verb word in Western Apache is very complex. The verb is so complex not because of the sheer number of prefixes that can occur on a verb, but rather because of its tendency to interdigitate derivational and inflectional prefixes, (along with complex morphophonemics or fusion of prefixes). This typologically unusual phenomenon has been called "interrupted synthesis" (Whorf, 1932). The traditional account of interrupted synthesis is to assign to every prefix a fixed position in a templatic structure. Such a template is unsatisfactory since it conveys the impression that the particular position of a particular prefix is almost completely arbitrary. In this paper, I will argue that there is a tendency towards a quasi-phonological template constraining prefix order. In this template, prefixes of similar phonological form tend to move to the same place in the verb word, via processes of prefix deletion, shunting, or accommodation. The postulation of a phonological template will also be discussed from an historical and typological perspective.