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Carl H. Harrison  
*SIL-UND*

Victor P. Monus  
*SIL-UND*

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## THE PARTICLE t'ah IN SLAVEY DISCOURSE

Carl H. Harrison and  
Victor P. Monus

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0. The purpose of this paper is to describe the particle t'ah<sup>1</sup> in its various uses within Slavey discourse.

Slavey is a member of the northern group of the Athapaskan language family, two languages of the southern group being Navajo and Apache. It is spoken by an estimated 2,500 people who live in widely-separated settlements throughout the Mackenzie River Valley in the Northwest Territories, Northeastern British Columbia, and Northwestern Alberta, Canada.

Some of the significant features of the language are its clause-final verb position, phonemic pitch, potentially long prefix strings, frequent morphophonemic elision, and wide distribution of glottalization.

Several folk narratives are represented in this analysis, and one short annotated text is included for illustrative purposes.<sup>2</sup>

1. Preliminary notes on discourse structure. A Slavey folk narrative consists, with occasional exceptions, of the following parts: aperture, background, narrative body, closure and finis. The narrator may digress at any point, interjecting explanatory or further background material. The illustrative text given below was consciously compressed by the narrator and for this reason aperture and background are combined into one sentence and the usual finis is absent. Otherwise, the various parts of the story contain features typical of corresponding parts in longer narratives.

The aperture is a formula of the once-upon-a-time variety. The background introduces at least the first major participant and gives information necessary for an appreciation of the narrative line. The narrative body is made up of one or more episodes, each of which is divisible into paragraphs, of which one is usually identifiable

as the climax. The closure ties up loose ends, makes a moral, summarizes or describes a final resolved state of harmony. The finish is a formula for ending stories.

2. i-t'ah as paragraph marker,<sup>3</sup> and other features of discourse. Each paragraph features one participant as the focus, acting alone or interacting with others. Among other features signalling paragraph or focused-participant change, two of the more reliable are the particles i-t'ah and a nominal form referring to the new participant-in-focus. The reader is referred to paragraph 2 of the story where the nominal me-h-tie is the participant brought into focus for this paragraph. it'ah can be used to segment the story into four parts.

1. Aperture - background.
2. it'ah, 1st narrative paragraph featuring the strong-eyed man.
3. it'ah, 2nd narrative paragraph featuring the strong-eared man.
4. it'ah, closure.

In the second paragraph of the narrative body, since the participant in focus switches to the companion, a clause level nominal expression is used. Throughout the rest of a paragraph, bound pronoun anaphors are the principal method for forming a continuing referential chain to the participant in focus. Fourth person bound anaphors refer to any other participant interacting with the participant-in-focus.

In narrative paragraph 1, even though another participant is given full nominal form, the 3rd person reflexive prefix de *his own* serves to mark this as a reference to someone who is not the participant-in-focus of this paragraph. Thus it is still *strong-eyes* who is talking to his companion. *Strong-eyes* is still in focus.

Occasionally a participant-not-in-focus is featured as the underlying agent in a particular action. In such case, the verb takes the passive form, featuring, once again, participant-in-focus as the one affected by the action.

Participants in a folk story as a whole are ranked. The top ranking participant (hero or protagonist) is introduced into the narrative as "man", "woman", "young man", or some such nominal expression. Second ranked participants, unless they are unrelated antagonists, are usually referred to by nominal expressions related to the first ranked participant by means of a possessor prefix forming some expression such as "his mother", "his children", or, in the case of this story, "his companion".

The participant-in-focus in a particular paragraph is referred to by a nominal expression at the beginning of a paragraph unless there has been no switch of focus from a previous paragraph (background or aside). Thus in the first narrative paragraph of the story, the focused participant is not renamed because he was named in the background.

3. Uses of t'ah other than marking paragraph.

3.1 Instrument, material source, or means. t'ah is used to mark instrument, material source, or means within a clause.

(1) gondi aek'ase t'ah

short story

*by means of a short story*

(2) k'i t'ah det'aa laondih thehtsi

birch his wings like he made

*He made wing-like things for himself from birch bark.*

3.2 Reason or Cause. t'ah is used to mark reason or cause in a reason-result or cause-result sentence.

(3) ɬaʊlii kaadi t'ah

always he says

*because he always said that*

(4) mezhaa ɬo t'ah

his-children many

*because he had many children*

In this position t'ah functions in a manner similar to other logical function words. Compare the following:

(5) dene yeláetth'e enide

man his-hand-sticks if

*if a man's hand gets stuck*

(6) nogha dene gha tthih náɿ'a ah'ɿ

wolverine man for trap sets has

*Wolverine sets traps to (catch) man.*

(7) náts'ezéh kuu

someone - hunts

*even-though they hunt*

- (8) henih thehtsi gots'eh/ dechi yek'eh náj'a qlá  
raft he-made and-then wood on-it stand he-made

*He made a raft and after that he stood sticks on it.*

4. Further notes on t'ah as a paragraph marker. Occasionally a speaker of the language will use t'ah alone as a paragraph marker. For some time this made a clear analysis difficult. However, other features characteristic of paragraph change are usually present to clarify the function of this particle. One of these that occurs quite frequently is a locative expression which takes the story line to a new location, a clear signal for at least a paragraph change, and possibly a new episode.

- (9) t'ah yu'qo dechi ghalia kanéetq  
over there wood thin he-looked-for

*He went over yonder to look for some thin wood.*

Intonation and pause are other cues to the status of this particle in this position.

If falling intonation and pause come immediately before the particle, it is further confirmation of a paragraph break.

#### 5. An illustrative discourse.

##### 1. Aperture      2. Background

time	particle	noun	numeral	pron.-noun	adj.	verb-
thaa	t'qh	dene	lie	me-ndaa	natse	go-i-Ø-
long	ago	man	one	his-eye	strong	pl.-perf.

intrans.

lé//

mode-3-be

##### 3. Episode 1 (there is only one)

###### Paragraph 1

particle	substant.	verb-trans.	locative	noun-
<u>it'ah</u>	de-h-lie	ká-h-Ø-ndi/	yunaanee	tu-
	his-with-one	thus-with-3-say	across	water-

locative	noun	noun	postpos.	verb-intrans.	part.
naanee	ts'o	dechi	k'eh	k'e-Ø-dah/	si
across	fly	tree	on	modal-3-walk	ques.

verb-intrans.	verb-trans.
Ø-ghá-ì-2-nda/	yé-h-Ø-ndi//
3-postpos.-imperf.	4-with-3-say
mode-2-see	

Paragraph 2

particle	pron.-num	part.	pron.-noun	adj.	adv.
<u>it'ah</u>	me-h-tie	chu	me-dzie	natse	duye
	his-with-one	too	his-ear	strong	very

verb-intrans.	part.	verb-trans.	part.	demo.
Ø-Ø-t'e	t'ah/	ka-yé-h-Ø-ndi/	hɔɔ/	ezhi
thus-3-is	since	thus-4-with-3-	oh!	that
		say		

part.	loc.	noun	verb-intrans.	verb-trans.
lɔ	yunaa	dahsij	ná-de-Ø-tth'e	dé-h-tth'e
apparently	across	something	adv.-inceptive	adv.-1-hear
			aspect-3-sound	

part.	verb-trans.
lɔɔ/	yé-h-Ø-ndi//
apparently	4-with-3-say

## 4. Closure

part.	loc.	part.	demo.	noun	postpos.	noun	num.
<u>it'ah</u>	yunie	t'q̄h	di	ndee	k'eh	dene	ɔki
	past	ago	this	world	on	man	two

natse	go-ì-Ø-lé//
strong	plural-perfective
	mode-3-be

## Free Translation

A long time ago there was a man with unusual eyesight. So he said to his friend, "(Say), do you see that fly walking on that tree across the lake?" Since his friend, also [referring to his exceptional faculty] had exceptional hearing, he said to him, "Oh, is that what I hear making a sound from across there?"

So in the past there were two unusual men in this world.

6. This paper outlines certain discoveries concerning discourse structure in Slavey with particular reference to the particle t'ah. There are a number of other interesting particles and important features of discourse that are in process of yielding to various discovery procedures of the type that are brought to light in recent literature (see Bibliography). Slavey speakers use other devices to heighten or diminish focus on major participants, to create suspense, to relate time frames, and, in short, do everything necessary to make a Slavey story interesting and intelligible to a Slavey listener.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The apostrophe is used to indicate glottal stop when it occurs between vowels and glottalization of the preceding consonant elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup>We are indebted to Ted Trindell of Fort Simpson, N.W.T. for the story used in this paper.

<sup>3</sup>The particle t'ah occurs with or without i-, the anaphor for previously recounted material. With i- it functions as a paragraph marker. Without i-, it has the various uses discussed in section 3.

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