An exploration of Upper Tanana conversational prosody

In this paper, we present a preliminary analysis of the prosody of a short segment of conversation in Upper Tanana, an Athabascan language spoken in Eastern interior Alaska. To this end, we recorded two fluent speakers of Upper Tanana. Since Upper Tanana is not used as the language of daily communication, some code-switching into English is also present. The analysis will focus on the Upper Tanana segments of the conversation, with occasional English words. Our approach is grounded in Conversation Analysis as proposed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974, and developed further by Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (eds., 1996), and Zuraida and Knowles (2006). Our goal is to identify syntactic, prosodic and visual cues to turn-taking.

We consider our data semi-natural in nature. Since this was the first recording of Upper Tanana conversation, the speakers were a little self-conscious and the discussion is not entirely relaxed. However, the topic was a compelling one, and soon both speakers were more involved with their subject matter than with the presence of the linguists.

Following previous studies of Athabascan prosody such as Tuttle (2003, 2005), Holton (2005), and Tuttle and Lovick (2007), we investigate pitch patterns, intensity, typical pause length and syntactic structure in one brief narrative segment for each speaker in order to determine individual prosodic patterns. Based on our findings on Upper Tanana monologue, we identify possible turn completion points in the conversation in a detailed orthographic transcript. The transcript is also annotated with respect to pitch and intensity for each syllable as well as pause (length, filled/nonfilled). We also note visual cues such as direction of gaze or hand/arm gestures in the transcript.

Our preliminary findings can be summarized as follows: Possible turn-constructional units can be identified by a convergence of prosodic and syntactic cues. Prosodic cues include strong final lowering, strong final raising, and final decrescendo, while syntactic cues are right phrase boundaries and phrase-final particles. The pitch cue just at the end of the turn is sometimes preceded by a point of narrative focus, highlighted by an increased pitch range and raised intensity. These cues interact with each other, as detailed in the examples below. Depending on the syntactic context, a strong final raise can be an indication of floor-holding, as in example (1), or of surrendering the floor to the other speaker, as in (2). Relative tone is indicated by underscores (low), dashes (mid) and slashes (high), pause unit is indicated by a line break.

(1)     AS:     ishyiit du' diik'aan eh _–_ _ – _          'when it was burning there'
                ne'                              /            'towards the South'
                ahm                            _             ''
                Black Hills henih (…)– – _ _          'what they call Black Hills (…)'

(2)     AS:     ishyiit dą' shta' įtsuul. _–_ __ /          'At that time, my father was small.'
        CD:     yeah yeah, hįįtsuul shyiit dą' shnaa. – –_/–_ _ 'Yeah. Yeah, they were small
                                                                              then, my mother.'

In most cases, the presence of a possible turn-completion point is acknowledged by the listener through back-channeling, without the listener actually taking over the floor. Both speakers frequently indicate their will to hold the turn by hand/arm gestures during a prolonged pause. The lack of significant pauses in conjunction with a steady pitch also indicates that the speaker is unwilling to relinquish the floor.

While our findings are preliminary and will need to be tested against a larger corpus of conversations, they offer us a first insight into Upper Tanana Athabascan conversation.

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