

From Erosion to renovation
The emergence of the Coast Tsimshian preposition *da*

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Older materials (Boas 1911) in the Coast Tsimshian language of Canada's West Coast document the existence of a single preposition *a* which also exists in other members of the Tsimshianic family. In more recent scholarship (e.g. Stebbins 2003), *a* is much less frequent than *da*, which has the same function of introducing non-core arguments. This apparent innovation is peculiar to CT and is unknown in the other members of the family, but a historical and comparative perspective shows that the CT case illustrates degrammaticalization, from phonological erosion to coalescence and eventually to renovation.

Coast Tsimshian (CT) is part of the Maritime branch of the Tsimshianic family, along with the much more conservative Southern Tsimshian (ST). Sandhi phenomena make these two varieties more difficult to analyze than the members of the Inland branch, Nisqa'a (N) and Gitksan. In addition, CT has undergone the most phonological erosion, a fact that is relevant to the present topic.

Typical uses of the pan-Tsimshianic preposition *a* (/ʔa/) are shown in the following examples (morphemes are separated here, in the otherwise practical spellings):

(1) N *Hilt-hl lisy'een a-hl lax ang'o'osgw-iy'*. There are a lot of minks on my "trapline".

many-CON mink PREP-CON on resource.territory-1S

(2) ST *Haayld-i lisy'aan-t a-i na lax-yuub-u*. There are a lot of minks on my trapline.
 many-CON mink-ENC PREP-CON POSS on-land-1S

Most of the grammatical elements correspond in the two languages, but in ST the preposition *a* is obligatorily preceded by the Maritime enclitic *-t*, which does not add any definable meaning. This is also the case in some older CT examples, such as:

(3) CT *Hooltg-a waalb-at a(-a) ts'aak*. "Full was the house of fat" (Boas 1911:413)

filled-CON house-ENC PREP(-CON) blubber (= The house was filled with blubber).

although most cases show incipient coalescence as an enclitic or even a separate form *da*. The new form has become the most common preposition in modern CT speech, as in:

(4) CT *Heeld-a lis'yaan da n-laxyuub-u*. There are a lot of minks on my trapline.
 many-CON mink PREP POSS-on-land-1S (Stebbins 2003:202)

The new CT preposition *da* results from the phonological erosion and coalescence of three older morphemes, the enclitic, the preposition and the connective *-a*, the latter having merged with the vowel of the original preposition (Tarpent 2006).

The development of CT *da* confirms some of the findings in other cases of degrammaticalization. The three CT morphemes which have coalesced into one independent preposition through phonological erosion were none of them very salient, and two were semantically very weak clitics, all conditions which tend to lead to loss, but functionally, the syntactically independent prepositional component of the original morpheme sequence could not be allowed to disappear. Prefixing the desemantized, redundant enclitic *-t* to the vocalic remnant of the

original preposition renovated the latter by increasing its saliency, thus providing “enrichment in phonological substance”, one criterion that Lehmann (1995:19) thought necessary in order to validate the existence of degrammaticalization.

References

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