

# Effective Uncountability in Carrier Lexical Semantics

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Like other Athabaskan languages, Carrier has verb roots whose primary semantic content is to classify the absolutive argument. What it is that happens to this argument is determined by the prefixes attached to the verb stem. (1) illustrates some of the many derivatives of the stem for controlled handling of a two-dimensional flexible object. In all of these cases, a shirt would be an appropriate object.<sup>1</sup>

### (1) Different Types of Handling of a Single Type of Object

behanaitilčAS	he is going to take it out
didatałčAS	he is going to hold it up
dAγaitałčAS	he is going to hang it up
k'itałčAS	he is going to put it on (the table)
k'ANaitałčAS	he is going to put it back on (the table)
k'ANaitilčAS	he is going to take it off (the table)
sanaitilčAS	he is going to bring it back
γAγaitilčAS	he is going to give it to her
γAγAtilčAZ	he is going to lend it to her
nAtilčAZ	he is going to carry it around
?aitilčAS	he is going to bury it
taitilčAS	he is going to submerge it
naitilčAS	he is going to put it on the ground
yaiγAtilčAS	he is going to bring it ashore

There are four sets of these classificatory verbs. One set is for controlled handling, one set is for uncontrolled handling, one for inherent motion, that is, motion without either overt external cause or overt means of locomotion and one locative. Examples of the four types are given in (2), for the Non-Plural Default Object category and the Long Rigid Object category.

### (2) Examples of the Four Types of Classificatory Verb

Type	NPDO	LRO	Gloss
controlled	tayan?ai	tayantan	he put it into the water
uncontrolled	taya?AZ	tayalht'o	he threw it into the water
inherent	talts'At	tadankez	it fell into the water
locative	AS?ai	AStan	it is located

The classifications used by these four sets are not the same, and even when categories coincide, the stems may be entirely different, but some categories occur

<sup>1</sup> Further details of this and other aspects Carrier noun classification may be found in Poser (to appear).

in all four systems, and in some cases the same stems are used. The relationships among the categories are shown in (3). Where adjacent categories are given the same shading they are merged. Thus, the controlled handling and locative sets both distinguish the same eleven categories, while in the uncontrolled handling set the categories Non-Plural Default Object and Contents of an Open Container are merged.

(3) Relationships Among Classificatory Verb Categories

controlled	npdo	coc	body	2df	fluid	lro	mush	hay	fluff	pdo	euo
locative	npdo	coc	body	2df	fluid	lro	mush	hay	fluff	pdo	euo
uncontrolled	npdo	coc	body	2df	fluid	lro	mush	hay	fluff	pdo	euo
inherent	npdo	coc	body	2df	fluid	lro	mush	hay	fluff	pdo	euo

Our concern here is with the category that may to a first approximation be described as denoting “a quantity of minute objects”. Morice (1932:245-246, section 580) says:

... this objective stem relates to granulous matter: sand, salt, powder, dust, seed, rice, grain, &c.; to aggregates of small spheroidal objects: eggs, apples, potatoes, considered as a whole, or to a multitude of elongated and very slender things, such as net-floats, playing-sticks...

Similarly, Walker (1974:370) describes this root as applying to a container of loose items such as flour, coffee, tea, or rolled oats, and with the /n/ absolutive classifier prefix as applying to a container of round items such as marbles, eggs, rifle shells, or berries. What is common to both is that they seem to require that there be a large number of fairly small items.

However, this is not entirely accurate. First, the number of items need not be very large. I have conducted experiments in which I placed different numbers of coins on the table and asked a Carrier speaker how to say “the coins are on the table”. A single coin calls for the Non-Plural Default Object verb. Two coins usually call for this same verb, though they may also be described by the Plural Default Object verb. Three or four coins call for the Plural Default Object verb. The transition to the “quantity of minute objects” verb occurs typically between four and five.

Second, the items need not be minute. This root is applicable to piles of such relatively large objects as potatoes, apples, and grapefruit. It may apply to stones, even boulders. A jumble of boulders may be described by the form *tk'AdAnizdzai*, “they are upon each other”, where the stem is the “quantity of minute objects” verb. Compare *tk'Adiztan* “they are piled up” said of logs, with the stem for long rigid objects, and *tk'AhAyAzdla* “they have put them on each other” for a pile of clothes, with the Plural Default Object stem.

Such examples as these show that the items need not be minute or even small, and that their number need not be great. What unifies all of the examples is that the items constitute an undifferentiated mass, what we sometimes refer to colloquially as “a mess” of something. Very small items, especially those that do not differ one from the other in any way of interest to us, such as grains of sand or sugar, are most

likely to be regarded in this way, but even large objects such as boulders may be. The category denoted by this classificatory verb is that of “effectively uncountable” objects, objects that though discrete we do not individuate but treat as a collection of identical objects.<sup>2</sup>

Let us turn now to a different verb, one whose stem in the imperfective affirmative is /-dił/. This verb usually occurs with the absolutive classifier prefix for round objects /n/ and is most often heard describing “eating berries off the bush”, as in (4), a sentence and its translation both taken from Antoine et al. (1974).

- (4) Nyu sas mai naldil.  
that bear berries eat.round.IA.3ss  
That bear is eating berries off the bush.

For this reason, Morice (1932:421, section 940b) characterizes this verb root as describing:

The manducation of berries in their natural unprepared condition, and especially from the bush.

However, the use of this verb is not restricted to the consumption of berries. (5), also drawn from Antoine et al. (1974), contains an example of the same root with no absolutive classifier prefix:<sup>3</sup>

- (5) ?olɔ te sas ?adihken yayalkak ?ink'ez ?adih yaldil.  
spring when bear anthill tear.open.IA.3ss and ants eat.IA.3ss.3sdro  
In the Springtime bears tear open ant hills and eat the ants.

Judging from these two examples, /dił/ might refer to the eating of food in its “natural, unprepared condition”, but in fact it cannot be used of the great majority of foods. It is never used to describe the consumption of meat or fish or of plant foods other than berries, whether raw or processed.

Its true meaning becomes apparent if we consider in more detail the consumption of berries. With the /n/ prefix as in (4), this verb root is used to describe the eating of berries off the bush. It is not normally used to describe the eating of berries out of a bowl with a spoon. However, it is used to describe the situation in which one eats berries out of a bowl one at a time, with the fingers, with chopsticks, or even with a spoon if one takes care only to get a single berry each time. In other words, it is used when one eats berries one or a very few at one time. Here is the connection with bears eating ants. When a bear eats ants, he does not scoop them up in quantity but gets only a few at a time. If one were to fill a bowl with ants

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<sup>2</sup> This use of the term “effectively uncountable” is not the same as its use in mathematics, where it denotes sets of cardinality greater than  $\aleph_0$ . I retain it in spite of this defect since I have yet to find a superior alternative.

<sup>3</sup> The /y/ that appears in place of the absolutive classifier /n/ might appear to be another classifier prefix. In fact it is the third person singular definite object marker used with a third person singular subject disjoint in reference.

and eat them, or feed them to a bear, by the spoonful, this would not be described by the verb /dił/.

I submit, then, that the true meaning of /dił/ is:

To eat from an effectively uncountable set one or a few members at a time, that is, in such a way as to individuate the members of the set.

In sum, Carrier lexical semantics makes use of a concept of “effective uncountability”, that is, of sets of individuals of such a nature that their members are not normally, in the circumstances, individuated. This notion characterizes one of the categories of the classificatory verb system, and is part of the definition of one of the verbs of eating, which describes the marked situation in which an “effectively uncountable” set is eaten in such a way as to individuate its members.

## References

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