On the First Person Plural Subject in Ulkatcho Carrier

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Proto-Athabaskan is reconstructed as having a single first person duo-plural subject marker, *iʔdəd (Story 1989). A distinction between first person dual and plural is not reconstructible, and many Athabaskan languages have no such distinction. However, many languages have innovated a first person plural subject marker, based on Proto-Athabaskan *tšʷ'ə , whose original sense, retained in most languages, was that of indefinite subject, equivalent to French *on*. In most of the languages in which the function of *tšʷ'ə was expanded, when it filled the first person plural slot the old first person duo-plural *iʔdəd ceased to have a plural function and came to be restricted to first person dual. This is a classic example of partial blocking.

I here report on an interesting development in the Ulkatcho dialect of Carrier. Carrier is a dialectally diverse Athabaskan language spoken in the central interior of British Columbia. The first order split among the dialects is between the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect and the Southern dialect group. The Southern dialects fall into two major dialect groups, the Fraser-Nechako group, consisting of the Lheidli T'enneh, S̲aik'uz̲ (Stony Creek), Nadleh, Stellakoh, and Cheslatta bands, and the Blackwater group, consisting of the Lhtakoh (Red Bluff), Nazko, Lhoosk'us Dene (Kluskus), and Ulkatcho bands.[1]

All dialects of Carrier have a reflex of Proto-Athabaskan *iʔdəd in the first person dual. This is /id/ in the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect, and /idʌd/ in the Southern dialects. All dialects also preserve the use of Proto-Athabaskan *tšʷ'ə as the indefinite subject marker; the reflex is uniformly /ts'/ with the optional allomorph /z/ in coda position. The indefinite use can be conclusively distinguished from first person plural use by its occurence in forms like *ts'ʌzda* "one sits", in which the stem /da/ is that of the verb "for one person to sit" and is therefore inconsistent with dual or plural.

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[1] This classification is my own, based on extensive fieldwork on the entire range of dialects; almost all previous work has been restricted to the Stuart Lake dialect. The *Ethnologue* uses the term "Southern Carrier" for the Blackwater group and treats it as a distinct language, while lumping the Fraser-Nechako group together with the Stuart/Trembleur Lake dialect under the heading "Central Carrier". ("Northern Carrier" is a now disparaged term for the Bulkley Valley/Lakes District Language, also known as Babine-Witsuwit'en, now recognized as a sister to Carrier proper.)

In all dialects, *tšʷ'ə has also come to be used as a first person plural subject marker. In most dialects, the result of the movement of *tšʷ'ə into the first person plural role has been a restriction of *iʔdəd to the dual, the expected partial blocking effect. However, in the Ulkatcho dialect, the two forms co-exist: only /idʌd/ < *iʔdəd can be used in the dual, but both /idʌd/ < *iʔdəd and /ts'/ < *tšʷ'ə can be used in the plural.

I should emphasize that this fact is very clear. When I first elicited verb paradigms from Ulkatcho speakers, I was struck by the fact that even when I first asked for the first person dual, and then explicitly contrasted it with and requested the plural, the response was most often the same "dual" form. I was again reminded of this phenomenon when a language teacher, whose limited training in language structure had used materials developed for the Stuart Lake dialect, asked me to help her understand the distinction between dual and plural, about which she was understandably confused since the forms that were presented to her as contrasting did not contrast in her dialect. It is clear that Ulkatcho speakers' use of the old duo-plural form in the plural as well as the dual is spontaneous and natural.

Ulkatcho dialect thus presents a counterexample to the strongest formulations of the blocking principle, under which the movement of the indefinite into the first person plural role ought to result in the immediate restriction of the old duo-plural to the dual.

Ulkatcho dialect presumably reflects the intermediate stage in the historical development. The indefinite first took on the added role of first person plural, resulting in competition between the two forms, as in Ulkatcho. Eventualy, the two forms became fully differentiated, with the restriction of the old duo-plural to the dual, as in the majority of the dialects. We have no record of the Ulkatcho dialect beyond short word lists prior to 1993, so we cannot tell exactly how long the two forms have co-existed. but we know that they have co-existed for at least three generations, since the usage of all speakers, from the elders to their grandchildren, is the same.

It has been suggested (Kroch 1994) that the principal if not unique cause of coexistence of competing forms is influence from another language. In this situation, one form is the native form, the other introduced from another language. It is clear that the innovative first person plural form in Carrier is autochthonous, and it is easy to see how the meaning of "one" can shift to "people" and then to "us". Furthermore, although no other prefixal distinction of dual and plural is present in Carrier, the idea of distinguishing dual and plural subjects is not foreign to the language, for a number of common verbs are restricted in the number of their absolutive argument, resulting in weirdly mixed paradigms. Here, for example, is the Ulkatcho paradigm of "to sit", which is really a composite of three different verbs: "for one to sit", "for two to sit", and "for three or more to sit".

To Sit (Ulkatcho Dialect)

	singular	dual	plural
1	sida	sidʌke	ts'ʌdeɬts'i
2	sinda	sahke	deɬʌts'i
3	ʌsda	hʌzke	hʌdeɬts'i

The innovation of a first person plural subject marker from the indefinite is therefore a very natural development. Nonetheless, we can ask whether the coexistence of two first person plural forms in Carrier might be due to pressure from another language.

During the past two hundred years, for which we have a reasonably good knowledge of the history, Ulkatcho Carrier has been in non-trivial contact with five languages:

1. Nuxalk (Bella Coola)
2. Chilcotin
3. English
4. Chinook Jargon
5. French

Contact has been particularly intensive with the first three languages. Ulkatcho people have a deeply interlocking relationship with Nuxalk people, involving extensive sharing of territory and resources and intermarriage. Virtually everyone has cousins in Bella Coola. The oldest elders are fluent in Nuxalk.[2] Ulkatcho people have also had extensive contact with Chilcotin. The older people all speak Chilcotin, as do many middle-aged people. I have heard speeches given at community affairs in Chilcotin. Ulkatcho people first came into substantial contact with English in the late nineteenth century. Today it is the dominant language in the community; most children speak only English.

Contact with the remaining languages has been much more limited. Chinook Jargon was widely used on the coast until the 1950s and so was known to those who worked in the coastal trade. It was also known to those who worked on the Fraser River. As a result, a few Chinook Jargon words came to be widely used (e.g. *čikʌmin* "money" and *goso* "pig") and some members of the community, mostly if not entirely men, could actually speak Chinook Jargon. However, it appears that Chinook Jargon was never widely known or used in the community.

Contact with French came about as the result of the arrival of French-speaking missionaries in the mid nineteenth century. They were few in number, and did not use French for their pastoral work, so any influence of French would be quite limited.

If there has been any influence from another language, it is most likely to have been from Nuxalk, Chilcotin, or English. We may easily dispose of this possibility, since none of these languages, and indeed, not one of the five languages with which there has been contact, distinguishes the first person dual from the first person plural.[3]

The only language with which Ulkatcho Carrier has been in contact that distinguishes first person dual from first person plural is Carrier itself. To the north, Ulkatcho territory adjoins that of speakers of the Fraser-Nechakoh dialect. If we suppose that the distinction developed first in the other dialects, then they might

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[2] The fact that the younger people do not speak Nuxalk does not reflect any weakening of the relationship; rather, it reflects the fact that even in its home Nuxalk is moribund. The youngest speakers are in their sixties.

[3] For Nuxalk see Davis & Saunders (1980). For English, French, Chilcotin and Chinook Jargon I rely on my own knowledge.

have been a source of influence on Ulkatcho. However, contact with the other dialects of Carrier appears not to have been very intense. The major routes of travel are East-West, along the waterways, not North-South. Indeed, this explains the dialect groupings, which follow the waterways. Although there has long been some north-south travel on horseback and by horse and wagon, the main road for Ulkatcho people for the last fifty years has been Highway 20, which runs West to East, from Bella Coola on the coast to Williams Lake in the interior. Insofar as the road facilitates language contact, it is with Chilcotin and English, and to a limited extent, Shuswap.[4]

Until the coming of the Catholic Church within the last 125 years, for Ulkatcho people the prestige culture was that of the Nuxalk, whose version of the clan and potlatch system, quite different from that of the other Carrier, they had adopted (Goldman 1943). Ulkatcho people shifted their focus southward to the Anahim Lake area, which had been abandoned by the Chilcotin, in the first part of the twentieth century; in 1940 it became their principal settlement. The Western portion of the area of contact between Blackwater speakers and Fraser-Nechako territory, corresponding approximately to Cheslatta territory, has had a very small population over the last two hundred years. In the first half of the 19th century, there was apparently a massive loss of life due to smallpox. Even now the Cheslatta band has only 227 members.[5] Since 1952, the Cheslatta people have lived along the southern shore of Francois Lake, well to the north of their traditional territory, due to the flooding caused by the construction of the Kenney Dam. There certainly has been some some travel, trade, and intermarriage between the two dialect groups, but the amount of contact does not seem to have been very great.

It is thus not out of the question that it is contact with the other dialects of Carrier that has permitted competition for the first person plural subject role, but it is far from clear that this is actually the case. Either something other than pressure from another language or dialect permits competing forms to coexist, or the necessary pressure is very slight.

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[4] Shuswap too lacks a distinction between first person dual and plural (Kuipers 1974).

[5] Contrast this with 804 for Ulkatcho and 171 for the closely related Lhoosk'us Dene band, a total of 975.

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