

Persistence and change in stem prominence in Athabaskan languages
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General agreement exists on one major point regarding prominence in Athabaskan languages, the importance of morphology. In particular, the stem is agreed to be prominent (see Leer 2005). This is signaled in several ways, depending on language: the stem stands out in terms of phonotactics (at least historically it has a bimoraic weight requirement), it allows for greater contrasts in terms of the consonant inventory and vowel inventory in many languages; tonal contrasts are more frequent in stems than in prefixes in tone languages. Phonetically, reports of stem prominence identify duration of both consonants (stem-initial consonants are reported to be longer in many languages) and vowels, among other factors.

In this presentation I examine stem prominence more carefully in a number of languages, taking into account three factors, the role of morphology, edge orientation, and weight.

As reconstructed for Proto-Athabaskan, morphology (sensitivity to the stem) and edge are important; while stems are prosodically heavy, it is not necessary to refer to weight in describing the position of prominence. Daughter languages develop in a number of ways, with some maintaining the system of Proto-Athabaskan and others changing it in various ways. Several languages have developed sensitivity to weight in addition to morphology and edge. Other languages maintain the basic system, but have introduced sensitivity to various factors, including phonological factors such as tone. Most surprisingly, given the focus in the literature, yet others appear to have prominence systems that are determined totally by weight and word edge, without need for reference to the morphological unit of stem – the final syllable or the final heavy syllable is prominent.

I trace a pattern of change, from a syllabic trochee at the left edge of the stem to a moraic trochee where the right syllable of the stem is prominent if it is heavy, to the expansion to further factors involving weight, to a situation where reference to the stem is no longer necessary, but only reference to weight and word edge. The ‘ingredients’ for all of these developments are present at the time of Proto-Athabaskan (the stem is at or near the right edge; the stem itself is generally heavy, with few suffixes that add a syllable), and different languages have prioritized them in different ways, leading to several different systems over a very small (basically two syllable) domain.