

## Particles in Northern Athapaskan Languages

Mary Pepper

Volume 38, Number 1, mars 1993

La traduction et l'interprétation dans le nord du Canada  
Translation and Interpretation in Northern Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/003811ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/003811ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pepper, M. (1993). Particles in Northern Athapaskan Languages. *Meta*, 38(1), 98–100. <https://doi.org/10.7202/003811ar>

Article abstract

Particles in Athapaskan languages have discourse and syntactic functions. This paper will look at a sample of particles which have these functions, and attempt to answer two questions: 1) What is the primary translation and the secondary translation for each particle; 2) If speech is stripped of particles, is it still considered "fluent" speech?

# PARTICLES IN NORTHERN ATHAPASKAN LANGUAGES

MARY PEPPER

G.N.W.T. Language Bureau,  
Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada

## Résumé

*Cet article traite des particules que l'on trouve dans les langues athapaskan et qui ont des fonctions syntaxiques, communicatives. À partir d'un échantillonnage de ces particules, on tente de répondre à deux questions: 1) quelle est la traduction primaire et secondaire de chaque particule? et 2) si le discours est dépouillé de ces particules, peut-il toujours être considéré comme un discours structuré?*

## Abstract

*Particles in Athapaskan languages have discourse and syntactic functions. This paper will look at a sample of particles which have these functions, and attempt to answer two questions: 1) What is the primary translation and the secondary translation for each particle; 2) If speech is stripped of particles, is it still considered "fluent" speech?*

All Northern Athapaskan languages have a lexical category called the particle which cannot be inflected. Particles comprise demonstratives, adverbs, adjectives, complementizers, tense markers, auxiliary, verbs and conjunctions in English. In Athapaskan languages (and other Amerindian language families), these functions are carried by particles. Primarily, this category has syntactic, stylistic and discourse functions within the text.

Some common particles in North and South Slavey include: *2eYi* "that", *k'ala* "still, yet", *2arYune* "all", *gha* "future", *si* "probably", *2asi* "yes/no question", *gots'eh* "and", *-cho* "big", *Ya* "topic" (Rice 1989). Some particles are easily glossed by native speakers while others are untranslatable.

Particles present difficulties to the translator who is working from an Athapaskan source language text because they encode implicit meaning, either topicalizing or focussing information, or strictly grammatical information, and this meaning must be encoded syntactically, not lexically, in the receptor language text.

## DETERMINING THE FUNCTION OF PARTICLES USING A DELETION TEST

A portion of a North Slavey text, (Fort Franklin dialect)<sup>1</sup>, was tested to determine whether deletion of particles would lead to no change in organizational meaning, to a change in organizational meaning or to ungrammatical structures. The text sample is given below, with a literal and an idiomatic translation. The particles are given in bold-face. Following each sentence, a discussion of the results of particle deletion is given<sup>2</sup>.

- 1) Akweré faa ekúh tsééku **síí** too **nidé** náaredló **zq**.  
long ago-far-then-woman-this-night-if-she laughs-always.  
*Long ago there was a girl who laughed at night.*

The first set of particles occurring in the sentence initially set the mythical time of the story. All of the verbs in the text are in the present tense, but the mythical time set by

the introductory particles leads to a translation using past tense verb forms. If the particles *síi* and *nidé* are deleted, there is no change in meaning and the sentence remains grammatical. These particles are topic markers, and since this is the first sentence in the text, their deletion will affect style, but not meaning. The verb *-dló*, which lacks a repetitive aspect stem, is in the simple present tense with a repetitive adverbial prefix *ná-*. The deletion of the particle *zq* changes the meaning of the verb from customary or repetitive to simple aspect, that is, to finite and nonenduring action.

- 2) Benq *síi* too *nidé* náaredló nezq *le* hadi *kúlú* yek'éere?á *le*.

Her mother-this-night-if-she laughs-it's good-not-she says-but-she listens to her-not.

*Her mother told her that it was no good to laugh at night, but she didn't listen.*

The deletion of either of the particles *síi* or *nidé* change the focus of the text so that *benq* "her mother" becomes the discourse topic. In this case, the meaning is something like "her mother says it is no good for her (the mother) to laugh at night". The deletion of the particle *le* changes the meaning of the clause to an affirmative rather than a negative. If the particle *kúlú*, which functions like a conjunction following the embedded sentence, is deleted, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. Throughout the rest of the text, the deletion of *kúlú* following embedded sentences is disallowed.

- 3) *It'á* too *nidé* ts'ééku náaredló *t'á* deneke tsíne anet'í *kíhdi*, *kúlú* gots'énj2a *le*.

So-night-if-woman-she laughs-by-people-it is quiet-you be that way-they say, but-she pays attention to them-not.

*When she was laughing at night the people told her to be quiet, but she paid no attention.*

The deletion of the particles *it'á* and *nidé* has no effect on the meaning of the sentence. If the particle *t'á*, which functions like a conjunction, is deleted, the sentence is ungrammatical. Throughout the rest of the text, the deletion of *t'á* is disallowed. The particle *ke* is a pluralizer, and its deletion changes the meaning of *dene* from "people" to "person". The deletion of this particle would lead to a loss of Subject-Verb Agreement, since the verb *kíhdi* contains a 3rd singular direct object prefix (and a 3rd plural marker which cross references to subject position).

- 4) *It'á* qhdaa *síi* begha *dzá* q't'e *it'á* too *káa* ts'ééku náaredló *t'á* qhdaa *síi* whí bérat'í *le* *t'á* yéwhj kedi.

So-old man-this-for him-bad-it is-so-night-while-woman-she laughs-by-old man-this-Dene medicine-it's visible-not-by-he Dene medicinizes her-they say.

*So, an old medicine man, not liking her laughing at night, shot her with an invisible arrow.*

The deletion of the sentence's initial particle *it'á* has no effect on either the meaning or grammaticality of the sentence. The deletion of *síi* leads to a loss of information, although the basic meaning of the clause is retained. This particle serves to change the focus from *ts'ééku* "woman" to *qhdaa* "old man", that is, to emphasize the old man. This particle, by changing the focus to the male protagonist, also disambiguates the clause, since the remainder, *begha dzá q't'e*, can be translated as either "for him it is bad" or "for her it is bad". There is no gender distinction in third person pronominals in Athapaskan languages. The deletion of the particle *dzá* would lead to ungrammaticality since the verb *q't'e* would have no complement. The deletion of the particle *káa* will lead to a loss of meaning, specifically the time reference for the preceding clause.

- 5) *EYii* gots'ę ts'ééku *síi* dúwé ajá shétj *le* *k'ola* ajá.

That-from-woman-this-she's sick-became-she eats-not-also-became.

*She became ill and couldn't eat.*

The deletion of *eYii* leads to a loss of meaning, in this case anaphoric reference to the previously mentioned *whí* “Dene medicine”. The particle *síi* appears to be deletable with no ensuing loss of meaning. The deletion of *k’ola*, which conjoins two verb phrases, produces an ungrammatical sentence.

- 6) Deneke yek’ekredi **kúlú fí** akeh2 í.  
 People-they help her-but-in vain-they act (repeatedly).  
*The people tried to help her, but to no avail.*

The deletion of *kúlú* does not lead to either a loss in meaning, nor to an ungrammatical sentence; however the stylistic contrastive emphasis of the following clause is lost. In this case, *kúlú* does not follow an embedded sentence. The particle *fí* disambiguates the preceding verb *yek’ekredi*, which means either “they help her” or “they (bodily) move their hands around on her”. By deleting *fí*, the latter meaning becomes the primary meaning.

## CONCLUSION

Most particles serve to shift focus on nouns, or to topicalize nouns within the text, to provide anaphoric reference, to conjoin clauses, and to disambiguate lexical items which have multiple meanings. These particles cannot be deleted without loss of semantic or syntactic meaning. Other particles, such as *síi* and *it’á*, are stylistic and may be deleted with no resultant loss of semantic or syntactic meaning.

The translator working from an English source text must take care to include particles which will disambiguate anaphoric reference across sentences, and to include particles when focus shifts within the text. A good translation will include stylistic particles in order to ensure continuity and to delineate stanzas within the text.

The translator working from an Athapaskan source text must substitute English anaphoric pronouns, and rely upon syntactic structures such as the passive in order to retain or shift the focus and to topicalize within the text.

## Notes

1. The North Slavey text and idiomatic translation was written by Jane (Modeste) Vandermeer.
2. Ron Cleary and Dennis Kenny provided the readings on meaning loss / retention and grammaticality. I am grateful for their assistance.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- HOWARD, Philip G. (1990): *A Dictionary of Verbs of South Slavey*, Yellowknife, NWT, GNWT.  
 RICE, Keren (1989): *A Grammar of Slave*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.