The Dene verbal compound: representing the complex inflectional system of the Dene (Athabaskan) verb word

Within a Word and Paradigm approach to morphology words, not morphemes, are the basic units in the lexicon (Milin et. al., 2009; Ackerman & Malouf, 2012; Blevins, 2014, 2015; Plag & Baayens, 2008, Baayens et.al. 2014, 2015). Fully inflected words are lexical units, organized into paradigms, which encode the relationship between words, fundamental objects in the lexicon. In this framework, much work has been done on nominal inflection and derivational systems. Much less has been done on the more complex inflectional systems of verbal morphology, which may encode rich morphosyntactic functions. In this talk I will lay out the structure of a typologically unusual and highly complex system, the Dene (Athabaskan) verb word, traditionally captured by a ‘position class’ template of around 23 prefix ‘positions’ used to order verbal morphemes. I’ll demonstrate that is an unworkable system. Instead, the Dene verb is a unusual but simple and principled variation on compounding. The model is based on evidence from phonetic studies and lexical patterns.