The fourth person: an exit from the ranking, not a second inverse

2026-11-11 audit pass 2. Apostrophe fixes only. Navajo glottal stops typed as ' or ’ (for example in prefix names like ’a- and ’e’e-, or words like Awéé’) now print as ’ (U+02BC), and a build step no longer turns the closing quote of an English translation inside a Navajo row into a glottal stop (‘...the girls.’, not ‘...the girls.’). No form, gloss or translation wording changed.

2026-11-11 audit pass 4. Copied examples: the essay builder dropped the first Navajo word of every example it copied from a working note (for example Witherspoon’s *Hastiin łį́į́’ yiztał* showed as *łį́į́’ yiztał*, so each gloss sat under the wrong word). The words are restored exactly as the working note prints them; no form was changed. See the pass 4 report.

Grant Golland (research by Grok Bot) · 2026-10-27 · status: SOURCED (Willie; W&J) + HYPOTHESIS (KEEP-DIR; the three-jobs grouping); Athabaskan comparison OPEN

Abstract

Navajo has a 'fourth person' (ji-, ha-/ho-), a third person singled out for humans and discourse prominence. Is it a second kind of inverse? Willie and Willie & Jelinek say no: the fourth person is not part of the animacy hierarchy, and a speaker can use it instead of the inverse. This essay sets the Navajo fourth person beside Algonquian obviation and the Greenlandic 'fourth', and argues that the shared labels hide three different jobs.

Restated on the unified structure (2026-11-15): the fourth person is a person value on an ordinary argument, with nothing extra moving (H51, H57a vs H57b, H60). See https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/unified-structure/#us-map (https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/unified-structure/#us-map). The essay's data, judgments and citations are unchanged; it is kept as the record of what was argued then.

1. The question

The Navajo verb has a fourth-person subject *ji-* and object *ha-*. Is it a second inverse, another way of flipping which participant outranks the other?

2. The data

Willie's minimal pairs SOURCED : SOURCED

(1) *łééchąą'í shishxash 'The dog bit me.'*

dog 1.3.bit

Willie 1991:123, (21)–(22). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (21).

(2) *łééchąą'í hashxash 'The dog bit that person.'*

dog 4.3.bit

Willie 1991:123, (21)–(22). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (22).

(3) *hashxash 4.3.bit 'It bit that person.'*

Willie 1991:124–125, (23)–(25). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (23a).

(4) *jishxash 3.4.bit 'That person bit it.'*

Willie 1991:124–125, (23)–(25). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (23b).

(5)

Yíh, haztał *'Oops, It kicked him [that person].'*

`4.3.kicked`

Willie 1991:124–125, (23)–(25). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (24).

(6)

**Yíh, biztał 'It kicked him [third person].'*

Willie 1991:124–125, (23)–(25). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (25).

The fourth person is for a "certain person", not for a plain noun:

(7)

Hó, jíícha

'That certain person, he cried.'

Willie 1991:109–111, (5)–(6). Copied from One fourth person, five uses: respect, reportative, story, impersonal, wish, ex. (6e).

(8)

**'ashkii jíícha.*

Willie 1991:109–111, (5)–(6). Copied from One fourth person, five uses: respect, reportative, story, impersonal, wish, ex. (6f).

In reported speech, it shifts the reference:

(9)

deesháał *jiní*

`1.arrive` `3.said [sic]`

a. 'That person$_i$ said that he$_i$ would go.' b. *"They say I will go.' c. *"That person says th

Willie 1991:143–147, (21)–(30). Copied from Same person or someone else? The fourth person in reported speech and person focus, ex. (23).

Passamaquoddy direct and inverse, for comparison (Bruening):

(10)

Pesq muwin *'-toli-nuhsuphoqal-a* *mahtoqehsu.*

`one bear` `3-Prog-chase-Dir.ObvP` `rabbit.ObvP`

'One bear (Prox) was chasing some rabbits (Obv).'

Bruening 2005:1–2, (1)–(3). Copied from Three things called fourth person: Navajo, Algonquian, Inuit, ex. (3a).

(11)

Mahtoqehs *'-toli-nuhsuphoqal-ku-l* *muwinuw-ol.*

`rabbit` `3-Prog-chase-Inv-Obv` `bear-Obv`

'A rabbit (Prox) was being chased by a bear (Obv).'

Bruening 2005:1–2, (1)–(3). Copied from Three things called fourth person: Navajo, Algonquian, Inuit, ex. (3b).

3. The argument

An escape hatch SOURCED . Willie §4.2.7 says the fourth person is "not involved in the animacy hierarchy". The speaker can use it "instead of Inverse voice forms" and keep the agent as "the external Nominative argument". W&J say the fourth person "cannot enter into the direct/inverse alternation". SOURCED

How it relates to the inverse HYPOTHESIS . The fourth person shares three properties with the inverse: fixed roles, impossible cells, and no demotion. HYPOTHESIS
Its relation to the scale is different. It takes a referent out of the ranked set; it does not flip alignment. On the site this is stated as person valuation at Σ bleeding the voice choice (KEEP-DIR). The architecture is the same as for the inverse, with a different lever.

Three jobs, one label SOURCED HYPOTHESIS : SOURCED

HYPOTHESIS

Label	What it does
Algonquian obviation	ranks two third persons by structural height
Navajo fourth person	takes a human referent off the ranking scale
Greenlandic "fourth" (3r)	marks a third person bound by the matrix subject

Navajo's counterpart to obviation is the *yi-*/*bi-* voice, as Willie notes (p. 96).

For Grant's thesis HYPOTHESIS . In both families, one verb affix reads the HYPOTHESIS role slot across the inverse: Navajo *da-*, and the Passamaquoddy final. Another affix reads the derived position. That is the same split in two unrelated families.

4. Counter-evidence

- **The fourth person is not isolated.** With a fourth-person owner the coreference returns (W&J (77)), but the name also moves outside, so the fourth person's effect cannot be separated (Essay 4) HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS
- **Relative clauses.** The relative tie obeys islands that plain coreference ignores (Platero 1978, as recorded). The site's reading is that what moves is a silent copy of a pronoun slot. The fourth-person data do not bear on this directly HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS
- **The Athabaskan comparison is weak.** Slave and Sarcee are known only secondhand, and no Apache source was opened. The cognate claim is Willie's OPEN . OPEN

5. Status

> The escape-hatch reading is sourced. Its placement in the derivation is a hypothesis. The scope test of Willie's (58) under the inverse (T10a) remains the decisive open experiment OPEN . OPEN

References

1. Willie, MaryAnn 1991, §4.2.7, pp. 96, 109–147, 216–217. OPENED
2. Willie, MaryAnn & Eloise Jelinek 2000, pp. 272–278. OPENED
3. Bruening 2005 (manuscript), pp. 1–14. OPENED
4. Platero, Paul 1974 (IJAL article on relatives). NOT OPENED
5. Cook (Sarcee) and Rice (Slave), secondhand via Willie. NOT OPENED

Working notes behind this essay: Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, One fourth person, five uses: respect, reportative, story, impersonal, wish, Three things called fourth person: Navajo, Algonquian, Inuit, Same person or someone else? The fourth person in reported speech and person focus, The relative clause as a clause under a ‘the one’ head: raised or matched? Platero 1973's island and enclitic-phrase data (T27m).

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