Roles, not words: what the Navajo verb takes as its arguments

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 łį́į́ʼ yiztał* showed as *łį́į́ʼ 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: HYPOTHESIS (T-STRONG fails; T-MID survives as the feature-bundle version FB, with key tests pending)

Abstract

Grant's thesis is that in Navajo the verb's arguments are theta roles, carried by the pronominal prefixes, and not the nouns of the sentence. This essay states the thesis in three strengths, sets out the sourced Navajo data that bear on it, and reports where each version stands. The strong version fails. The middle version, sharpened as a feature-bundle hypothesis (FB), meets no contradicting datum in the sources opened, but its decisive tests (Condition C minimal pairs, extraction from nominals, quantifier scope under the inverse) remain open.

Restated on the unified structure (2026-11-15): the "roles not words" theory is dropped; arguments are merged in the verb's scope with theta roles (VPISH) and the subject raises to Spec,TP by the working default. See https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/unified-structure/#us-premises (https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/unified-structure/#us-premises). The essay's data,

judgments and citations are unchanged; it is kept as the record of what was argued then. Note (2026-11-02): Grant has dropped this thesis. The essay is kept as a historical record; current work is in "Light determiners" https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/essays/light-determiners/ (https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/essays/light-determiners/).

1. The question

> Grant's claim, in his words on the site, is that in Navajo "theta roles, not lexical items, are the arguments". The working notes split it into three versions GRANT'S CONJECTURE :
>
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>
> - **T-STRONG**: only roles are arguments; nouns play no part in argument structure.
> - **T-MID**: the arguments are the role-bearing prefixes; nouns are linked to them, not merged in argument positions.
> - **T-WEAK**: roles, not nouns, decide some argument-structure facts (ranking, voice, number).

The question for this essay is narrow: which of these survive the Navajo data that the site has actually opened?

2. The data

Navajo verbs are complete clauses without any noun. Willie gives a verb word alone as a sentence, and the same word with an optional noun:

(1)

> *(ʼashkii)* *yicha*
> boy 3s.crying
> '(The boy) he is crying.'
>
> Willie 1991:57–62, (11)–(25). Copied from Which noun is which? Nominal adjunction: nouns attach to role slots, and the verb can overrule word order, ex. (11).

(2)

yíchxǫ’

`3s.ruined`

‘It is ruined.’

Willie 1991:57–62, (11)–(25). Copied from Which noun is which? Nominal adjunction: nouns attach to role slots, and the verb can overrule word order, ex. (12).

A free pronoun can stand with the verb, but not two that both claim one slot:

(3)

shí *shiiniltsą́*

`I` `1s.2s.saw`

‘I (am the one) you saw.’

Willie 1991:53–56, (1), (3)–(5), (7)–(10). Copied from Which noun is which? Nominal adjunction: nouns attach to role slots, and the verb can overrule word order, ex. (9).

(4)

**ní* *shí* *shiiniltsą́*

Willie 1991:53–56, (1), (3)–(5), (7)–(10). Copied from Which noun is which? Nominal adjunction: nouns attach to role slots, and the verb can overrule word order, ex. (10).

The distributive prefix *da-* is the sharpest datum. It requires a plural agent in the direct and in the inverse, and in the direct it does not care about the patient (Willie 1991:32, 82–85) SOURCED : SOURCED

(5)

’ashiiké *’at’ééké* *dayiiłtsą́*

`boys` `girls` `PL.3.3.saw`

‘The boys saw the girls.’

Willie 1991:81–84, (61)–(66). Copied from Number and quantifiers across the inverse: da- follows the agent, ex. (63b).

(6)

’ashiiké *’at’ééd* *dayiiłtsą́*

boys girl PL.3.3.saw

‘The boys saw the girl.’

Willie 1991:81–84, (61)–(66). Copied from Number and quantifiers across the inverse: da- follows the agent, ex. (63c).

(7)

**’ashkii* *’at’éékéé* *dayiiłtsą́*

(The boy saw the girls.)

Willie 1991:81–84, (61)–(66). Copied from Number and quantifiers across the inverse: da- follows the agent, ex. (63d).

3. The argument

Three findings carry the case for T-MID.

> First, the prefixes do the work of arguments. Willie (pp. 51–52) and Hale (ms. 5–7, 51) state directly that the pronominal prefixes are the arguments and the nouns are adjuncts linked to them SOURCED . SOURCED

Second, *da-* follows the proto-agent role across the voice flip, while definiteness follows the subject position. That is the thesis stated over a real prefix: a role, not a word or a position, is what the prefix counts HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

Third, the ranking that decides between *yi-* and *bi-* is computed before any noun is adjoined: rock and tree swap places with the event, and newborns are re-ranked by construal (see Essay 2) HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

The working notes sharpen T-MID as **FB**, the feature-bundle hypothesis: the verb's argument is a φ-level bundle [person, number, capacity rank κ, role], spelled out as the prefix, and nouns link to it by matching features. FB keeps what works in Jelinek, Willie, Hale and Speas, and gives Creamer's capacity ranking a home as κ HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

4. Counter-evidence

> T-STRONG fails. Nouns are arguments of postpositions; position and person, not only roles, decide links; quantifier and indefinite facts are hard for it. In that form Grant's claim is wrong HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

FB faces three challenges, none of them a contradicting datum:

1. **Speas.** Speas 1986/1990 places nouns in argument positions. Her Navajo data were checked datum by datum: 0 against FB, 1 supports, 16 compatible, 1 open. Her two tests (no weak crossover; grammatical multiple questions) target an operator-binding version of the Pronominal Argument Hypothesis that FB does not adopt. The 1990 revision and Barss et al. 1989 are not opened, so "survives Speas" is provisional OPEN . OPEN
2. **Condition C.** Hale 1999 (10), (11a) are in tension with FB-5, FB's exemption from Condition C. The tension holds only under ten assumptions that are not established for Navajo. An earlier statement on the site that FB-5 "is wrong" was corrected at 1:07pm on 2026-10-15 as too strong (Essay 6) HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS
3. **Possessor *yi-*.** The possessor-*yi-* literature also treats nouns as in argument positions (Essay 4) OPEN . OPEN

5. Status

Version	Status
T-STRONG	fails
T-MID as FB	survives; no contradicting datum; Condition C (D6) compatible, undecided
T-WEAK	survives

> The tests that could still contradict FB are Condition C minimal pairs, extraction out of nominals, and the scope of quantified nouns under the inverse. Willie's quantifier pair (58)–(59) has been checked on the page images, but it does not state the readings that would settle the scope question (T5c) OPEN . OPEN

References

1. Willie, MaryAnn 1991. Navajo pronouns and obviation (dissertation). Pages cited from page images as recorded on the site. OPENED
2. Willie, MaryAnn & Eloise Jelinek 2000. Navajo as a discourse configurational language. In Fernald & Platero (eds.), The Athabaskan Languages (OUP). OPENED
3. Hale, Ken 1999. Conflicting truths (pp. 171–173 as recorded on the site). OPENED
4. Speas 1986. Dissertation, Navajo chapters (pp. 209–281 as recorded on the site). OPENED
5. Speas 1990. Phrase Structure in Natural Language (revision; Navajo chapter). NOT OPENED
6. Barss, Hale, Perkins & Speas 1989. NOT OPENED
7. Creamer 1974. Ranking in Navajo nouns. Navajo Language Review 1(1). OPENED
8. Dowty 1991. Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. Language 67. OPENED

Working notes behind this essay: Do Navajo verbs take theta roles, not words, as arguments? The case for and against, Not quite a word: is the Navajo verb's argument a feature bundle?, Speas 1986 on Navajo: do nouns behave like arguments?, Which noun is which? Nominal adjunction: nouns attach to role slots, and the verb can overrule word order, Number and quantifiers across the inverse: da- follows the agent, Theta roles as arguments: the proto-role schema.

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