Basic pieces, complex meanings: Building attitudes in Navajo

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It is crosslinguistically widely-attested for different attitude reports to be distinguished chiefly by their verbs, e.g. think/denken, vs. want/wollen. In familiar accounts, the attitude verb determines the meaning of the attitude report in its entirety. More recently, however, Kratzer (2006, 2013) and Moulton (2009) have argued that key semantic aspects of English and German attitude reports come from embedded material, not attitude verbs.

I present fieldwork data from Navajo in support of Kratzer and Moulton’s compositional account. Navajo sentences in (i) express either belief or desire ((1c) is string ambiguous). Unlike their English translations, however, the Navajo sentences all contain the same verb, nízin. I show that nízin is not lexically ambiguous between meanings on par with familiar entries of think and want. Rather, Navajo is a limiting case in the empirical landscape predicted by Kratzer and Moulton: the embedded clause determines all attitude-related meaning and nízin only adds the attitude holder.

\textit{1sg.tall} \hspace{1em} \textit{3sg.nízin} \hspace{1em} \textit{1sg.tall} \hspace{1em} \textit{desire 3sg.nízin}  
‘S/he \textbf{thinks} I am tall.’ \hspace{1em} ‘S/he \textbf{wishes} I were tall.’

   c. [Nisneez dooleel] nízin.  
\textit{1sg.tall} \hspace{1em} \textit{future} \hspace{1em} \textit{3sg.nízin}  
(i) ‘S/he \textbf{thinks} I will be tall.’ \hspace{1em} (ii) ‘S/he \textbf{wants} me to be tall.’

Crucially, clauses embedded by nízin can also function as main clauses with meanings intuitively related to attitudes. E.g., unembedded nisneez (compare (1a)) expresses an assertion (‘I am tall’) whereas nisneez dooleel is ambiguous much like (1c), expressing an assertion (‘I will be tall’) or a priority (‘I need to be tall’). I propose that Navajo builds beliefs and desire from nízin and operators (assertion, priority) used beyond attitude reports.

\textbf{References:}  