Switch-reference in the Southern Hill Nisenan of Bill Joe

Introduction: I analyze the use of switch-reference morphology in a collection of Nisenan oral narratives that were shared by William Joseph (a.k.a. Bill Joe), a speaker of the Southern Hill dialect of Nisenan (nsz). A renowned storyteller, Bill Joe shared 71 oral narratives with linguist Hans J. Uldall in the 1930s which were published in Uldall and Shipley (1966). As in other Nisenan dialects, Bill Joe uses a set of suffixes to indicate whether the subject of one verb differs from that of another verb occurring in the same sentence. While Southern Hill Nisenan uses some of the same switch-reference suffixes as other dialects, I find that Bill Joe's Southern Hill Nisenan uses a novel set of suffixes for indicating that the two verbs' subjects are different. Moreover, I find that, contrary to claims in the Nisenan literature (Oswalt 1976) but consistent with patterns that have been observed cross-linguistically (McKenzie 2015), he also uses switch-reference suffixes to indicate (dis)continuity among a wider range of elements, such as the topic/theme of a narrative.

Canonical switch-reference: The Central Hill dialect of Nisenan uses -*in* and -*isan* to indicate that the subjects of two verbs are the same ("same-subject") and -*ičé* and -*se* to indicate that they are different ("different-subject"): -*se* indicates that the affixed verb has a first person subject (unspecified for number) and -*ičé* a second/third person subject (Eatough 1999:26–28). Analyzing approximately 1,800 instances of switch-reference morphology in Uldall and Shipley (1966), I have found that Bill Joe's Southern Hill Nisenan uses the same set of same-subject suffixes as does Central Hill. However, Bill Joe uses a larger set of different-subject suffixes that more precisely indicate the person and number of the subject of the affixed verb: (1) -*ise* indicates that the subject is first person singular, (2) -*hase* first person dual, (3) -*hese* first person plural, (4) -*menče* second person (unspecified for number), and (5) -*ičé* third person (unspecified for number).[1]

(1) …sikaalú čowisé saawó wokíttítom.

sikaalu	čow-**ise**	saawo	wokitti-tom
cigarette.ACC	win.bet-**1SG.DS**	flint.ACC	bet-PST

'When I had won all the cigarettes he put up a flint.' (Uldall and Shipley 1966:156–157)

(2) …peení túyhasé ʔɨdáwtom ʔelikím.

peen-i	tuy-**hase**	ʔɨdaw-tom	ʔelik-im
two-ACC	spend.night-**1DU.DS**	arrive-PST	Alec-NOM

'When we [Bill Joe and his wife] had been there two nights, Alec arrived.' (ibid:124–125)

(3) …nii heenté mɨsém halemeyhesé, "wayní dootíp," hátom…

nii	heente-mɨse-m	halemey-**hese**	wayn-i	dooti-p	ha-tom
1SG.GEN	henchman-PL-NOM	lose-**1PL.DS**	wine-ACC	buy-SG.IMP	say-PST

'When we lost, my fellows said, "Buy some wine!"'… (ibid:158–159)

(4) "sapwíypay mɨɨm ʔoo bendoyménče yaawekóywesi," hátomatoy.

sapwiy-pay	mɨɨm	ʔoo	bendoy-**menče**	yaawekoy-wesi	ha-tomatoy
three-time	that	rock.ACC	kick-**2.DS**	open-FUT	say-PST

'"If you kick that rock three times (it) will open," (she) said.' (ibid:26–27)

---

[1] Glosses: 1 = 'first person', 2 = 'second', 3 = 'third', ACC = 'accusative', DS = 'different subject', DU = 'dual', FUT = 'future', GEN = 'genitive', IMP = 'imperative', NMLZ = 'nominalizer', NOM = 'nominative', PL = 'plural', PST = 'past', and SG = 'singular'.

(5) …mɨyé bendayičé bu̯um búutomatoy.

mɨye	benday-**iče**	buu-m	buu-tomatoy
that.ACC	break.using.foot-**3.DS**	skunk-NOM	break.wind-PST

'When he broke that, Skunk broke wind.' (ibid:16–17)

Non-canonical switch-reference: While switch-reference morphology canonically tracks the identity of verbal subjects, cross-linguistic research has repeatedly found that the speakers of switch-reference languages may use the same morphology to perform "non-canonical" functions in longer discourses, such as to track topical (dis)continuity. Bill Joe frequently begins sentences in his narratives using a discourse particle *ha* 'and' in conjunction with a switch-reference suffix (e.g. *han < ha* 'and' + *-in* 'SS', or *hahese < -hese* '1PL.DS'). Studying a sample of 100 instances of such particles, Oswalt (1976) concluded that Bill Joe uses switch-reference morphology here to indicate whether the subject of the current sentence is the same as that of the preceding sentence. However, analyzing the full set of over 3,000 such particles, I have found that Bill Joe also uses switch-reference suffixes to signal (dis)continuity of the topic of the narrative. For example, the two sentences in (6) have different subjects, yet the discourse particle *ha* takes same-subject *-in* at the beginning of the second sentence because the two sentences together describe a single thematic event, namely how different parties would help their chief prepare for a bigtime celebration.

(6) …(a) kɨlé mɨsém ʔuutí yulúytom. (b) han mɨ kedé mɨsém hunmohó kačákpáytom…

a.
kɨle-mɨse-m	ʔuuti	yuluy-tom
woman-PL-NOM	acorn.ACC	pound-PST

b.
ha-n	mɨ	kede-mɨse-m	hunmo-ho	kačakpay-tom
and-SS	3SG.GEN	brother.in.law-PL-NOM	hunt-NMLZ.ACC	help-PST

'[When there was a bigtime they helped,] the women pounded acorn. His brothers-in-law helped with the hunting, [that is the way the chiefs managed…].' (ibid:80–81)

Discussion: Uldall and Shipley (1966) contains a rich collection of Nisenan language data, yet little published linguistic research has focused on Bill Joe's Southern Hill Nisenan, which has been maligned as "aberrant and problematic" relative to more northern dialects (Shipley and Smith 1979:171). These oral narratives exemplify an internally consistent linguistic system that is worthy of study. Moreover, Bill Joe's narratives represent an invaluable resource for Nisenan language revitalization efforts at the Shingle Springs Rancheria, a Nisenan heritage community whose efforts focus on revitalizing southern dialects of Nisenan. Bill Joe's grammar shows numerous similarities with the grammars of other southern-dialect speakers (author observations), justifying the use of the extensive documentation for Bill Joe to fill gaps in the documentation for other such speakers. In that the documentation for other southern-dialect speakers includes effectively no multiclausal utterances (i.e. which would use switch-reference morphology), an understanding of Bill Joe's switch-reference system is thus necessary to supplement these revitalization efforts.

References

Eatough, A. 1999. *Central Hill Nisenan texts with grammatical sketch*. UCPL 132. Berkeley, CA.

McKenzie, A. 2015. A survey of switch-reference in North America. *IJAL* 81:409–448.

Oswalt, R. L. 1976. Switch reference in Maiduan. *IJAL* 42:297–304.

Shipley, W., and R. A. Smith. 1979. Proto-Maidun stress and vowel length. *IJAL* 45:171–176.

Uldall, H. J., and W. Shipley. 1966. *Nisenan texts and dictionary*. UCPL 46. Berkeley, CA.