Verbal "stem-agreement" in Algonquian languages as semantic-constructional selectionality

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Transitive verbal stems in Algonquian languages are standardly (Bloomfield 1946) described to be in an agreement relationship with their primary object: stems exhibit a Transitive Animate (TA) form when taking grammatically animate objects, and a Transitive Inanimate (TI) form when taking grammatically inanimate objects. In other words, the verbal stem agrees formally with the grammatical gender of its primary internal argument.

The present paper offers a different account: what appears to be transitive stem-agreement for grammatical animacy is not in fact agreement at all, but is instead morphology reflecting two differential object marking constructions. Specifically, TA morphology is actually a set of applicative and causative elements, which form the head-marking realization of dative-accusative syncretism, better known from its dependent-marking manifestations such as the Spanish *a*-accusative and the Hindi-Urdu dative *-ko* with specific animate objects (Mohanan 1990). Correspondingly, TI morphology is actually an antipassive construction, formally grammaticalizing the tendency seen in languages like West Greenlandic (Bittner 1987) or Mam for objects of low discursive salience to realize as instrumental/ obliques alongside a formally intransitive verb.

Evidence for this analysis of TA morphology is found first in that its syntactic distribution precisely parallels the Spanish and Hindi-Urdu systems' contrastive treatment of specific/individual-denoting animate nominals vs. bare property-denoting ones---the first take a dative "accusative", and the second do not. The translational semantic contributions of TA-marking morphemes also suggest adpositional incorporation (i.e. applicative syntax) in that they often give rise to canonical causative, instrumental/comitative-applicative, and dative-applicative (1a) readings; and indeed, explicit applicatives exist directly only as TAs (1b).

(1)   TA-markers

a.   nəkə̀motəne   nə-kəmot-ən.e-[w]
        'I steal'   1-steal-by_hand. LV^{NA}-W

        nəkəmótənɑmɑ   nə-kəmot-ən.e-(w)-ɑm.ɑ-[w]
        'I steal from NA'   1-steal-by_hand. LV^{NA}-(W)-Appl.DIR-W

b.   nətákitam   nə-ak-m.t.am-əp
        'I count'   1-count-by_voice.T.LV^{NA}-P

        nətakitámawɑ   nə-ak-m.t.am-aw.ɑ-[w]
        'I read it for NA'   1-count-by_voice.T.LV^{NA}-Appl.DIR-W

TI morphology in turn exhibits the two diagnostic components of an antipassive construction: an intransitive/detransitivized verbal form, with an instrumental/oblique-marked notional object. The first is seen in the existence of the well-established (yet inherently self-contradictory) category of Objectless Transitive Inanimate (2a)---stems with TI morphology (cf. (2b)'s TI) that take no identifiable object---even as there is no corresponding Objectless Transitive Animate. In this account, this explains simply: as antipassives, only TIs are structurally intransitive.

(2)   Objectless Transitive Inanimate vs. Transitive Inanimate

a.   nəkə̀latam   nə-kəl-am.t.am-əp
        'I hold with [my] teeth,   1-bound-by_mouth.T.LV^{NA}-P

in [my] mouth' (PD:187, gloss restored)

b. nəkəlátamən   nə-kəl-am.t.am-ən
    'I hold NI in my mouth' (PD:187)   1-bound-by_mouth.T.LV^{NA}-N

The second component is seen in the additional layer of "agreement" morphology for inanimate objects (3a), termed *N-morphology*: this is shown to occur independently as an explicit instrumental marker (3b), and also as a marker of the theme argument in double object constructions (3c), a category realized as instrumental/obliques in West Greenlandic and Chamorro alike.

(3)   N-morphology

a. wətalíhtonal akʷitənóhsisal

    wə-ətal-h.t.aw-əne-al   akʷit.ən-w-hs-s-al
    3-Xplace-cause.T.LV^{NA}-N-NIpl   soak.LV^{NI}-W-AFF-DIM-NIpl

    'he's making small canoes' (SDMC)

b. nətakámɑnal   nə-tak-am.ɑ-əne-al
    'I hit NA with NA(obv)' (PD:447) 1-hit-Appl.DIR-N-obv

c. nəmílɑnal nətémisal   nə-m-l.ɑ-əne-al   nə-em-s-al
    'I give NA my dog' (PD:280)   1-give-Appl.DIR-N-obv 1-dog-DIM-obv

TA and TI stem morphology therefore show all the indicators of being feature-driven selectional constructions (i.e. the head-marking versions of familiar selectional case alternations), rather than pure featural agreement.

From here we advance an account for the origin of the intransitive stem-agreement system, suggesting that it too arises from a construction attested outside the domain of what is traditionally considered agreement. Based on internal reconstruction evidence, we show that intransitive stem-agreement comes from auxiliation and affixation of semantically animacy-selective stance-verbs of the type commonly seen in Athabaskan, Siouan, and Uto-Aztecan languages: systems that again are not generally viewed as formal agreement.

In sum, a close look at the morphosyntactic properties of Algonquian stem-agreement systems shows that what currently appears to be formal agreement can be traced rather directly back to a purely semantically driven constructional and selectional system---making the distinction between selection and agreement far less clear-cut than we might otherwise think.

Abbrevs.: P,W, N: argument-feature-sensitive clause-type markers; NA, NI: animate, inanimate; LV: light verb; T: light noun used in unergative/antipassive constructions; Appl: applicative; DIR: direct voice LV; AFF, DIM: affective, diminutive; obv: obviative

References

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