

On an inverse-type origin of Iroquoian person prefixes

The Iroquoian languages, spoken in North America, are among the morphologically most complex languages in the world. In this paper, I will focus on the verbal pronominal prefixes in these languages, which make up one of the largest paradigms of person categories among the world's languages (cf. Chafe 2000, probably only tied with the person marking of the Gunwingguan languages in Australia, viz. Heath 1984). Using traditional descriptive techniques, these paradigms of pronominal prefixes range up to more than 60 different prefixes, which clearly show regularity, but which are not straightforwardly morphologically analyzable.

Synchronically speaking, the person marking system of the Iroquoian languages is of the stative-active type, distinguishing radically different affixes for two different classes of intransitive verbs, one class with typically more agent-like subjects and another with typically more patient-like subjects (Mithun 1991: 528ff.). Transitive situations use a wild variety of special, diachronically fused, person prefixes.

Although various attempts have been made to analyze the internal structure of these transitive prefixes for individual languages (e.g. Lounsbury 1953 for Oneida), but I argue show that a proper understanding of the morphological structure of these prefixes is only possible from a diachronic perspective, comparing the minutiae of variation between the various close-related Iroquoian languages.

Using this approach, I will argue that the internal morphological structure of the transitive prefixes shows remains of inverse-type marking, in which transitive situations are marked according to the relative prominence of the agent and the patient. Such inverse-type systems are well-known to occur in languages from the neighboring Algonquian language family, and it is tempting to consider shared origin as a source of this parallelism. However, the current evidence is not sufficient for any claims of genealogical relatedness between the Iroquoian and Algonquian languages, and the observed parallel is at most an areal phenomenon.

References

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