

Productivity, polysynthesis and the Algonquian languages

Morphological productivity is the creation of new word forms from a set of interpretable stored elements (morphemes). At present, there is limited research on productivity and the representation of complex words in Algonquian family and other polysynthetic languages, whose morphological richness and productivity has been described as equating the complexity of English syntax (Fortescue 1994: 2601, Rood 2002: 295, Evans & Sasse 2002).

Efforts to explain the morphological productive capacity of Algonquian languages and that of polysynthetic languages in general, and have not resulted in the development of a coherent framework. In describing polysynthetic verb formation. Bakker (1997: 246) describes Cree morphological combinations within the stem as having “strongly idiomatic or lexicalized meaning”, although it seems possible “to make new combinations with them productively”. He also reports that Cree speakers are “able to ascribe a meaning to new formations when they hear them”, although they cannot “ascribe meanings to the formatives themselves”. Fortescue (2007) makes similar claims about polysynthetic languages in general. In all, the Algonquian descriptive research is remarkably consistent in accepting the recursive tripartition into initials, medials and finals (Frantz 1991, Wolfart 1996, Valentine 2001, Bakker 2006), rooted in the foundational work of the early American scholarship, although their productivity has not been surveyed in many cases.

In this paper, I present data on Michif and Plains Cree and their word formation processes (Mazzoli forthcoming 2020, Mazzoli, Bakker & DeMontigny forthcoming 2021). I will focus on the functioning of semi- and unproductive morphological patterns, in order to contribute to our understanding of limited productivity in derivation within the framework of Construction Morphology (Audring & Jackendoff 2019). I will also explore whether or not polysynthetic languages could be defined as a typological class by their morphological productivity, which includes defining the relation between polysynthetic morphology and syntax.

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