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Direct, inverse, and neutral: Refining the description of Algonquian transitive verb forms

Few terms are more fundamental to Algonquian linguistics than "direct" and "inverse", but the exact denotation of these terms is surprisingly unclear. Does the term "inverse", for example, denote a particular *morpheme* (PA *-ekw* 'INV'), a particular *agreement pattern* (the use of central agreement to index the patient), or a particular *configuration of arguments* (e.g. 3 acting on 1)?

I argue in this presentation that the terms "direct" and "inverse" primarily denote *agreement patterns*—that is, particular ways of using argument-indexing morphology. The term "inverse" can also be used to denote a *morpheme*—the special theme sign that appears in inverse forms—but the parallel use of the term "direct" is not justified. It is also not justified to use the terms "direct" and "inverse" to denote *configurations of arguments*. For example, just because a form involves a third-person agent and a first-person patient, this does not necessarily make the form inverse. To use the terms "direct" and "inverse" without considering the actual morphology of the verb is to deprive the terms of any principled meaning (cf. Heath 1998:83).

Furthermore, I argue that not all TA forms are direct or inverse (cf. Bloomfield 1962:141; Dahlstrom forthcoming:4.17). Instead, I propose that there are in fact *three* transitive agreement patterns: direct, inverse, and NEUTRAL. The patterns are defined by the behavior of the theme sign and the central agreement (in the sense of Goddard 1969), as laid out in Table 1.

PATTERN	DEFINITION OF PATTERN	
	BEHAVIOR OF THEME SIGN	BEHAVIOR OF CENTRAL AGREEMENT
Neutral	indexes patient	indexes agent and/or patient
Direct	indexes patient	indexes agent
Inverse	inverse marker (PA *-ekw*)	indexes patient

Table 1. Transitive agreement patterns in Algonquian

The presentation discusses the diagnosis of these patterns and surveys their distribution across paradigms and languages. Some edge cases, ambiguities, and exceptions will be identified. The diachronic development of the three patterns will also be discussed in light of Givón's (1994) typology of inverse systems, with particular focus on the significant expansion of the inverse pattern that took place when the independent verb inflection first developed (cf. Goddard 1974). It will be argued that the neutral pattern preserves the original Algic agreement system while the direct and inverse patterns originated as an active-passive voice contrast (cf. McLean 2001) that has, at least in some contexts, been bleached of its original syntactic and semantic correlates.

References

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