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The nature of Algonquian bipartite verbs and implications for borrowing

The most common type of verb in any Algonquian language is a de facto compound. It contains an initial and a final with lexical content, and often a medial as well. The information conveyed in a single such bipartite verb may require a clause and an adjunct, or even two clauses to express in a language like English. But the two basic parts of the typical Algonquian verb are not commensurate. The concrete finals come from a restricted set, around 50, and in some languages even fewer. The initials, on the other hand number in the thousands. In Talmy's (2000) terms initials are an open class and concrete finals are a closed class. The logic of Talmy's cross-linguistic analysis of motion verbs (1985) provides an insightful approach to understanding Algonquian bipartite verbs, not just motion verbs. This way of thinking about verb structure is largely compatible with Goddard (1990), but it provides a better way of thinking about the dynamics of language change, and raises interesting questions about how borrowing happens in bipartite verbs, whether the open class character of initials means that the initial is borrowed into construction with the parallel final, or whether verbs can only be borrowed whole.

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