New Ways of Analyzing Syntactic Variation 2

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Regular session papers

So similar in principle, but so different in practice.
Mixing texts, elicitation and experimentation in the study of the
Plains Cree independent and conjunct verb constructions

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The verbal grammar of Plains Cree (ISO code: crk), a polysynthetic Algonquian language spoken across Canada, exhibits a pervasive morpho-syntactic constructional alternation, namely the *independent* vs. *conjunct orders* (e.g. 1-2):

(1)   *kikî-nôhtê-wâpamâw*
        Ind.2Sg+Pret+PreV/want+*see*.Verb.Transitive.Animate+3SgO
        You (Sg.) wanted to see him/her.

(2)   *ê-kî-nôhtê-wâpamat*
        Cnj.Preverb/ê+Pret+Prev/want+*see*.Verb.Transitive.Animate+2Sg.3SgO
        You (Sg.) wanted (were wanting) to see him/her.

In linguistic descriptions and pedagogical materials of Plains Cree, these two alternative constructions are given straightforward English translations: independent verb forms are translated as simple forms ('he does something', 'he did something'), while conjunct verb forms are translated as progressive (*-ing*) forms ('he is doing something', 'he was doing something'). Thus, these two orders are described as being semantically disparate. Another distinction between the two constructions involves where and how they are presumed to be used: independent verbs are claimed to occur in phrases that can stand alone as sentences, while conjunct forms occur alongside an independent phrase: 'he did something (independent) while something else was happening (conjunct)' (Wolfart 1973, 1996; Okimāsis 2004). Wolvengrey (2011) echoes this, indicating that the conjunct may be used in both main and secondary clauses, while the independent is "most closely associated with the main clause" (ibidem, 45). However, conjunct verbs can occur independently outside the context of an independent verb, and many speakers, when asked, will find the conjunct more natural in numerous contexts. Cook (2008) explored these facts and her investigations suggest that the context for a conjunct verb is not necessarily an independent verb form, but that a conjunct verb must simply occur in some pre-existing context within the discourse or conversation.

Nevertheless, any Plains Cree verb can presumably be used in either order, with restrictions based primarily on the overall pragmatics and semantics of the message being conveyed. Moreover, each order can in principle both express the same range of person/number features for their actor (subject) and/or goal (object), but with distinct morphemes, and each can be modified with the same set of preverbs, particle-like prefix morphemes that in part resemble auxiliary verbs and in part adverbs (see e.g. *-nôhtê-* 'want' in examples 1-2 above, or *-âpihtâ-kîsikâwi-* 'at noon').

Furthermore, Wolvengrey (2011) claims that the choice of order has no systematic bearing on a sentence's word order. Though previous sources offer no concrete numbers or indications of which order seems to be most common, Cook (2014) notes that the independent is more syntactically restricted in interpretation, and thus potentially rarer, in comparison to the conjunct.

Nevertheless, prior corpus-based research with other morphologically rich languages such as Finnish has indicated that verbs may substantially differ as to their overall inflectional profiles, and that these differences may be semantically motivated (Karlsson 1985, 1986; Arppe 2006). Therefore, we have conducted a similar empirical study of Plains Cree verbs with a corpus of 94,000 words, where we have observed significant differences in the number of independent vs. conjunct for individual lemmata (Figure 1). For instance, *itwêw* 's/he says thus' occurs almost only in the independent, while *tipiskâw* 'it is night/dark' occurs only in the conjunct), with the rest of the verbs exhibiting a continuum of varying proportions between independent vs. conjunct forms. Moreover, we have also observed significant differences on the whole for the four conjugation classes, in how verb forms altogether per each class (Intransitive Inanimate, Intransitive Animate, Transitive Inanimate, Transitive Animate) are used in either order.
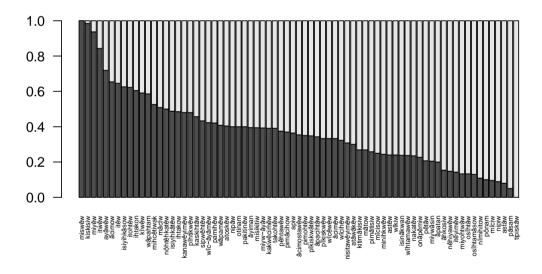

Figure 1. The proportions of independent vs. conjunct forms for a selection of frequent verbs (1.0 ~ only independent forms; 0.0 ~ only conjunct forms observed).

Following up on these empirical corpus-based observations, we will explore possible motivations and explanations for such divergent preferences, starting with the morphological structure of the verbal constructions, e.g. associations between order and actor/goal person, tense, as well as preverbs. Moreover, we will scrutinize whether more fine-grained semantic classifications of the lemmata, than the four general conjugation classes, might explain order preference. Finally, we will expand to the sentential context and evaluate how order choice is determined when multiple verbal constructions are used in the same sentence.

Furthermore, as the texts that are at our disposal for Plains Cree are quite small, and furthermore restricted in terms of their genre, we will contrast these corpus-based results by presenting preliminary qualitative results from field linguistic elicitation that we are conducting in a Cree community. This has allowed us to collect metalinguistic, explicit introspection on when either order is, or should be, used, as well as pursue more indirect probing of native speaker linguistic knowledge through systematically structured experimentation on which of the two alternative orders of a verb is preferred by our consultants, either in isolation, or within example sentences, providing some carefully selected contexts. This allows us to contrast and mix multiple types of linguistic evidence, namely naturally produced language as well as linguistic judgments, as part of language documentation work.

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