

An argument for binary features from obviative agreement in Ojibwe

The goal of this talk is to do a primarily empirical deep-dive into the ways in which patterns we can broadly characterize as “obviative agreement” appear in the Border Lakes variety of Ojibwe, with an eye towards theoretical implications. Obviation is a discourse-sensitive system that, roughly speaking, encodes whether a third person is “in the spotlight” (proximate) or simply present in the discourse, but not the main focus of attention (obviative). Certain patterns of obviative agreement are well known (and, I think, well understood). For example, across all Algonquian languages, in configurations where obviative “acts on” proximate, transitive verb appears with inverse morphology on Voice. Here, I consider a pattern that have been under-examined in the literature: the distribution of the “supplementary obviative” theme sign *-imaa* on Voice. I detail how this pattern does and does not fit with our current models of agreement in Algonquian, and give a general sense of directions for an analysis, with the goal of uncovering more about the basic morphosyntactic nature of obviation and features more broadly. The main conclusion is that, in order to capture the observed patterns, morphosyntactic features must be captured with a binary value system, providing an argument against privative features.