

X. RALC2006

1. Introduction

etoci-wəlasəwelətama eli-kisi-yo-pečihla yo peməkisəkahk; kamač ahč noləsəweləmæk yokik, msatak<sup>w</sup>ewəyak, pik<sup>w</sup>atəyak, eli kiseləmihətiti yo napečihlan weči kisi tasotəma alənapayi alətəwewəkan. kamač əpa nolitəhəsi, kisi wičohkeməlek<sup>w</sup>e iyo keti itama. kči wəliwəni.

eci wolasuweltòm eli kisi yùt peciy, yut pemkiskahk; komac na nulasuwelomak yuktok msatoqewiyik, piqotiyik, eli kiselomihtitit yùt npeciyan weci kisewestù skicinuwi latuwewakon. komac op nulitahàs kisi wicuhkemolèq yut keti itòm. kci woliwòn.

I'm very thankful to be here today; I'm also very thankful to the MPTN for allowing me to come and talk about Algonquian languages, and I'll be very happy if what I have to say can be of real help to you all. So again, thank you.

First off, what languages do we have represented here in the room today?

[response]

I'm asking this so that we can make connections. The things I'd like to talk about today have a very specific form in Penobscot and Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, the two languages I've been lucky enough to work with extensively. And that form is a bit different from, say, Nishnaabemwin-Ojibwe, or in Wôpanâak-Wampanoag, or Nehiyaawewin-Cree, etc. But the core patterns, the patterns behind these forms, seem to be much the same. So I'm hoping that what I have come up with based on Penobscot, and Passamaquoddy-Maliseet, will in fact also help people learning other Algonquian languages. So this talk, more than anything, is for the learners.

So first of all, I want to ask you all about your experiences in immersion settings. Immersion really is great, the only way to go, if you've got the option. As a language-learner, the languages I know best are the ones where my experience with them comes largely from immersion. 'Cause it's just language as life, as your daily reality. And that's what makes it happen.

[response]

Occasionally, however, we do hit a wall or two.

Say someone's trying to learn English by immersion. Now we're all mostly fluent speakers here. What if they ask us, "What does the word 'the' mean?" Let me put that question to you again: "What does the word 'the' mean?"

[give this some time]

Hard to answer.

Yet we all know how to use 'the'. We all know when it's used wrong, and when it's used right. Even though for the most part we have no clue how to explain it.

Now I imagine native speakers in the audience, native speakers of Algonquian languages [Haudenosaunee...], who have worked as teachers; you folks run across this all the time, no?

Raise your hands if you do!

[r]

So how do people go about answering the Algonquian-language equivalents of questions like "What does this word 'the' mean?". Or usually, these questions are just put to you as "Why do you have to say it that way?"

There are two common kinds of answers.

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| #1 | That's just the way it is.                            | [Deal with it, kid.]                                    |
| #2 | It's a definite determiner/it's the definite article. | [blah blah insert torrent of linguistic jargon here...] |

Hard to say which answer is \*less\* helpful to the average learner. Answer #1 doesn't tell you anything you don't already know, and answer #2, well, #2 \*sounds\* like a good answer, but it kind of misses the fact that "definite determiner" doesn't mean anything to most people. So it's not a helpful explanation, it's just saying, I know more linguistics than you do.

Rather often it's also actually saying, well, um, we linguists still don't know the whole answer, either, but we have nice technical-sounding name for the problem.

In other words, grammar jargon doesn't explain itself. It just makes you have to learn yet another language: the ever-expanding, rarely intelligible, and difficult-to-learn language known as Linguistese.

Making people learn Linguistese in order to learn their heritage language is silly, even cruel, definitely a waste of precious time, particularly if the \*use\* of the actual word or pattern doesn't come through. You can call "the" whatever you like if by doing that you can explain to me, the learner, how it allows me to communicate, what it does for me in the real world of talking to people. That's not an easy answer to come up with, but it's the one we as language learners really need (and pretty much \*only\* need): not what is it, but what's it for?

Again, these answers don't come easy: I think any language is a humbling thing for a person to try to understand.

With due respect then, today I'm going to try to see if we can look to our own daily-life knowledge of language, our daily-life use of language, to help us out with some distinctively Algonquian language patterns.

So what I have to offer today is certainly not any kind of claim to be anything like "the right answer", or the whole story, about these Algonquian language patterns. I'm not even a native speaker of any Algonquian language. All I hope, is that by drawing some attention to how we use languages \*in general\*, in our real lives, rather than just on paper, we'll come out with some useful ideas, some useable ideas. Needless to say, I hope that [actual] native speakers in the audience will be willing to point out problems wherever they come up. With luck, we'll solve more problems than we create.

So I should also add that I really want this to be an interactive talk, a workshop rather than a lecture. Feel free to interrupt with questions and/or suggestions. The Wabanakis who know me will all laugh when I say this, but I'd always rather have a nice back-and-forth, than just me lecturing for an hour. So yeah, interaction: so that we'll all have what I hope will be a decent amount of fun.

So off we go!

Today I'm going discuss two Algonquian language patterns that standard linguistic jargon makes difficult for students to make good use of: basic verb endings, and "spotlighting".

Again, basic verb endings, and "spotlighting".

I picked these two patterns not because they're fun for linguists to write their latest book about, but because they are basic tools to live in your language with. I think that that sometimes gets lost in all the charts of patterns, paradigms, and endings; it gets overlooked that these parts of the language are just as deep a part of life and expression as your words for 'love' and your words for 'family'.

Language \*is\* power. These patterns are not funny little boxes on grammar charts; these are the most basic of the tools you use to express yourself, to make yourself heard, and to hear and understand other people--and to do this all in a whole different language.

Hopefully today I can offer somewhat clearer, somewhat simpler paths to understanding these two patterns than you might have seen before, so that you can pick up these tools in your hand and start using them \*today\*.

I'll draw my examples from Penobscot, because it's the Algonquian language I'm most familiar with, but again, as far as I can tell, the basic \*patterns\* should be useful to learners of any Algonquian language, and I'll try to point that out as we go along.

One note:

Since the purpose here today is not to teach Penobscot, but just to borrow a few examples from it, I will not be using the standard Penobscot alphabet, which takes some getting used to. Instead, I will use a more familiar English-style spelling approach: it's simpler, though not nearly as efficient as the Penobscot standard. This is just for practical purposes, of asking a bit less of you the audience, and should not be read as challenging or disrespecting the Penobscot standard.

One other note:

I brought no handout. My hope is that I'll get these ideas across clearly enough orally, clearly enough that you can bring them home in your head. Language is first and foremost oral, after all. But if you find what I have to say useful, and want more, I'll be happy to share written versions of these ideas with anyone who asks. So just sit back and relax; it's an easy ride, and hopefully a fun one.

2.

First of these is just a quick trick, a foundation, and a shortcut, to learning all those verb endings.

[taking advantage of 2 for 1....]

The shortcut comes in the form of a question. Once we have the answer....

How do you say 'my' and 'your' in Penobscot?

It doesn't get much more straightforward. n'- for 'my', g'- for 'your'. So take a word like the word for 'name', wee-z'wahn, and add n'- for 'my-name', or g'- for 'your-name':

[go slow, unbelievably slow!]

n'-wee-z'wahn	'my name'
g'-wee-z'wahn	'your name'

Simple as that.

The only real difference with English is one you may have already noticed: that 'my' and 'your' are not

separate words. They're stuck on.

my-name  
your-name

Now for the trick. You've learned my- and your-. These are very handy words: very powerful, in fact, as any two-year-old can attest, when they discover the power of these words, and go through their "Mine! Mine!" phase.

But in Algonquian languages, with 'my-' and 'your-' you actually can do even more than that.

For this we'll need one more word to chew on, a word that means "s/he gets seen."

The Penobscot word is:

nah-mee-huh

Again, this means 's/he gets seen'.

We can also think of "nah-mee-huh" as meaning 'somebody/one sees her, people see her': it's the "-sees her" part of it (she's the one on the receiving end of seeing). So from "nah-mee-huh" we know who gets seen, but we don't know who does the seeing. How are we going to say something like "she gets seen by you" or "she gets seen by me"? Any guesses?

[audience response]

Yep. Algonquian languages are stunningly elegant: for "you do it", add 'your', and for "I do it", just add 'my'!

So with the g'- of 'your', you get

g'nah-mee-huh = s/he gets seen by you", which more simply just means "you see her"

and with the n'- of 'my', you get

n'nah-mee-huh = s/he gets seen by me", which means "I see her"

\*That's it.\* What I want to point out is that the entire system works that way, it follows this core, simple pattern. If you can master just these three words, you're good to go.

...thanks to the clean efficiency of Algonquian languages.

So let's look back on what we've got: two basic words 'my' and 'your', and a 'gets seen'.

Now there are complications, of course, but as best I can see, they're all just tweakings and/or expansions on this pattern, a clear and natural pattern. So you can practice basically all the "grammar" you need with just three words.

And already from this we can have a rich range of basic conversations, because now we have what we need to talk about the two people in every conversation: you, and me. If we learn more words, say, adding in a 'gets seen', or a 'gets talked to', or a 'gets eaten', or a 'gets liked...' and you're already able to produce and understand dozens of practical, useful sentences.

And that's the point I want to emphasize: not the grammar, not the pattern, but the utility, the real-

world usefulness. If you look at the whole grammar chart of a verb, it can make your eyes glaze over. But Algonquian languages are so well-engineered that you need only learn one small core part, the 'my' and 'your' part, the 'me' and 'you' part, and then (a) you gain a solid grasp on the whole. Everything else comes out of this. And then (b), at the very same time, this is the same core part that you can use, really use, right from day one, to start talking to people: talking about "you", talking about "me". (g'nahmeehuh? uh-huh, n'nahmeehuh)

So it just so happens that Alg languages give you two for the price of one: you learn my and your, you can talk about possession (and so already catch up to a 2-year-old)...but then use the same pattern to talk about who does what to who (I see her, you see her, etc.).

There's the simplicity, there's the power.

So there's my suggestion on learning basic verb endings: focus on something very basic, just my and your, to talk about possession relations, and kin relations (my mother, my father). Already useful, very useful in daily life. Because these then come back again with very little change, to help you talk about other relations, like who does what to whom.

3.

Now this next part is my absolute favorite thing about Algonquian languages. The "spotlighting" system. It's a beautiful feature of every language in the family, and all the more beautiful for being a system that's only clearly found in the Algonquian family of languages and no other. It's a true treasure of Algonquian linguistic heritage.

So what is it? Or better, what is it for?

It's been tricky for linguists to explain; and for native speakers, it's like trying to explain what "the" means: so basic, yet so hard to pin down. Particularly since it doesn't translate simply, the way, say, 'cat' or 'dog' might. And yet it's not mysterious or obscure: it shows up in more sentences than not: it's a very basic part of everyday speech.

To try to get a foot in the door here, I'm going to ask another series of questions about how we use language in general.

This means that I'm going to ask you to think about some sentences, and what they mean to us, how we make sense of them. This isn't something we normally think about, so it may seem a bit tricky at times. All I'm asking, however, is for a chance to take you all with me on a short trip through everyday language use, pointing out some things that we all actually know, but almost never notice.

And again, the reason being: I think we as learners of Algonquian languages can benefit from stepping back and looking at the uses, the patterns of language that we take for granted.

So the first of these comes as a question that can be asked of (or about) just about any language:

What's the difference between the following two statements?

I eat while I read.

[versus]

I read while I eat.

I'll say those again, so that we can think about this for a second [repeat examples].

Any suggestions [no linguists!]?

[response]

These two ways of putting it both tell the same story, right? I read, I eat, these two things happen at the same time....

But notice the difference. Each version takes a different perspective on the story. It seems like the main perspective, the "spotlight" of perspective is on the plain "I do it" part: the "I read", "I eat" part. And then the "while I do it" part (while I eat, while I read) is a sort of hanger-on.

[pause for aud to reflect]

The hanger-on only there because of the main event, the plain event, the one in the spotlight. If "while I read" gets the Oscar, it'll only be for best \*supporting\* actor/actress. And if it were on stage, you'd only see it by the light reflecting off of the star event, the plain phrase "I eat", which is in the spotlight.

Let's run through this again with this in mind:

I eat while I read.

[versus]

I read while I eat.

[don't proceed from until you get some sense that the audience is really following]

[choice!]

So that's the basic idea of spotlighting: choice of perspective. Any story can be told from a number of perspectives; and this pattern is a tool to do it. A tool we all have mastery of, quite naturally.

We choose one thing to have the spotlight, and use the plain pattern "I do it". And then we put any others to the side using a pattern like "while I do it...". [I do A, while I do B]

Having this pattern, using this pattern, makes you the director, since you can switch the spotlight back and forth however you see fit.

I emphasize \*this\* [contrastive intonation] because again, this is not some weird rule they force down your throat in grammar class. This is a natural pattern we all command, without even noticing, and it makes us able to communicate our perspectives and priorities, clearly and precisely.

[pause]

So that's the basic idea. We'll come back to it again in a moment; since I'm soon going to suggest that Algonquian languages have a comparable, yet quite distinctive spotlighting system of their own.

To get there, however, I'd like to turn back once more to everyday speech. This, after all, is the point: I'm not here to drone on about abstract ideas about when you use the word "while" in English, but instead to offer a possible path to what I think is a truly beautiful tool for expression, one that happens to be developed to the highest capacity in the Algonquian languages.

So one more brief point before we move on, one more observation about how we use languages in

general, in practical life.

It's just this: when we hear the phrase "her mother", how do we understand what it means?

For this I'll need three willing volunteers from the audience. Any takers?

(May I ask your names?)

[A B C ]

Okay, now me and A are going to have a conversation. Hi A, how are you doing?

[r]

Now here are two questions. When me and A have that conversation:

Who's "me"? The talker, Conor.

Who's "you"? The person being talked to, the listener. In this case, A.

"You" and "me" are the core of any conversation.

[pause]

[Take this point slow, give people time to attend to it.]

Again, that's something we don't think of much, but it's pretty clear, right?

This is the key point here: you and me. We *\*are\** the conversation. And conversation is the core of language in general.

This is absolutely crucial to understanding what I'm going to say from hereon.

Again: "you" and "me": together, we make a conversation, the core of a conversation.

Now, what about "her"? [indicating B]

Remember, we're trying to understand the phrase "her mother".

Who is "her"? Not "me" the talker, not "you" the listener. Just somebody else. *\*Anybody\** else: somebody or anybody not directly involved in the conversation. Somebody, who, at least for now, is a bit on the outside.

The outside of what?

The outside of that core, that you+me core that forms the core of any conversation.

Talking about this kind of thing can get a bit mind-numbing---"I" am "me", "you" are "you", wait now if "you" talk, "me" is "you"...and so on.

So I'll pace down for a second and point out again that all I'm saying so far is what everybody speaking a language knows.

"You", and "me", are words for the conversation partners: you and me, when we talk to each other, *\*are\** the conversation, are the center of the conversation, and everybody else outside of that center is a

her, or a him, or a them...the other people.

Got this? You and me, the core. Her, him, them...not core: everybody else outside.

Our volunteers make this possible for visual learners.

Why is this all important? Why don't we leave this kind of discussion just to linguists?

Because the more we understand this, the more we understand how language is really used in the world--and shortly, I'll show how it directly helps us with Algonquian language patterns.

Okay, so one last review: YOU-ME as the core, the "her" on the outside.

[the next bit is to give people a space to digest]

Forgive me if I'm being repetitive, especially all you teachers and linguist folk who know this stuff well. It's a very basic point, something everybody knows, at least unconsciously, but at the same time it's not one we ordinarily think about much, so I don't want to rush over it.

And that's all we need to know at this point: YOU-ME as the core, the her/him/them on the outside.

Any questions?

[r]

\*Now\* for the interesting bit. The one that gets our foot into the door of the \*Algonquian\* spotlighting system. And yet again, something quite natural and everyday.

Suppose C is B's mother.

C walks by. A, you ask me, who's that?

And I answer, that's her (B's) mother.

Now if you hear the phrase "her mother", how do we understand what it means?

It means "her" [indicating B] mother [indicating C]. [can move gaze, body orientation from B to C while you say it]

"Her" [indicating B, with emphasis] mother [indicating C].

We have to go through B, right? That's the "her" of "her mother".

More specifically, you and me, to understand "her mother", we have "go through" "her", B, to get to C.

[Slow. Go over this.]

Talking about C as "her mother", as opposed to just "C" makes us have to go \*through B\* to get to C.

Hopefully you are all saying, "Wow. This is so obvious. And I'm starting to fall asleep. Please wake me when we get to an Algonquian language."

Just about there.



What if I said of C, "That's my mother?" Would we have to go through anybody outside, anybody outside of you+me to get to C? Nope: all the information you need is right here at the core of \*you and me\*.

What about "That's your mother"? Same story?

[give this some time, go over this]

Here we are at the core: for 'your mother' we can go straight through you, for 'my mother' we can go straight through me. No middleman.

But for 'her mother', we have to go through 'her': we have to go through someone in between, a middleman, to get to the person.

So "her" brings in something special, this extra step.

Again, this may look exciting only to linguists.

But this special difference is precisely where the uniqueness of Algonquian languages comes in. In fact, I never noticed this about English until Algonquian languages made me see it.

It just so happens that just about every Algonquian language expresses 'my mother', 'your mother', in a fairly straightforward way. From before, you actually already know how to do it, right? Just add my-, or your-:

my mother	n-ee-gah-w'ss
your mother	g-ee-gah-w'ss

[pause]

So now we're talking about "her", as in "her mother", so we add one new word, the word for 'her'. Which is w'-.

Now following the pattern of 'my mother', 'your mother', you'd think, 'her mother' is

w-ee-gah-w'ss

Logical, right?

my mother	n-ee-gah-w'ss
your mother	g-ee-gah-w'ss
her mother	w-ee-gah-w'ss

But that's not how Penobscot speakers say it. They say

her mother      w-ee-gah-w'ss-al

Suddenly this extra little ending crops up: this -al stuck on the end.

So in Penobscot you basically say 'her-mother-al'. You say 'my-mother', 'your-mother', pretty much like English. But then you don't say 'her-mother', you say 'her-mother-al'.

Any speakers of Algonquian languages comfortable with backing me up on this? It sounds pretty much the same in Passamaquoddy; in other languages it'll be something like 'her-mother-ah' [repeat], or 'her-

mother-un' [repeat].

[r]

So what's this ending doing here?

We're back to a sort of "what does "the" mean?" question.

Now we could just memorize it as a rule: 'my-mother', 'your-mother', but 'her-mother-al'. That's the answer #1 response, the "that's just the way it is" response.

But then we would have no kind of sense of knowing what we're doing this for: we'd be speaking the language, but missing the meaning. Missing what we're using the language to do.

So let's try to push further. I'm going to suggest that -al gets used whenever we have to "go through someone else" to get to the person you're talking about.

When you "go through" her [B] to get to C.

When there's a middleman, somebody else along the way.

So when you go through 'her' (B) to get to C, any word referring to C will have this -al.

Like her-mother-al.

Since you went through the middleman of B.

'My mother' and 'your mother' don't have this happen, because there's no middleman there: we're just going through ourselves. This core, this youandme, just goes straight to here.

Notice also here, that you have options here:

you can call (C) 'her mother', and then you have to bring in the -al, since you're going through 'her' [indicate B].

Or you can always just call C C, or call C 'my friend', and then there's no B in the way, no "her" to go through.

This is "spotlighting", all over again. Only instead of with events (read vs. eat), we're doing it with people (B vs. C), participants.

If I choose to go straight to C, I say her name, plain and simple. Or go through one of us, you or me [my friend, your friend].

Plain, just like spotlighted "I read" is plain.

It's only if we have B in mind first, like she's who's the center of attention for the moment, that I'd even say, regarding C, "That's B's mother".

Right? B has to be primary in some way: familiar, or important, or I wouldn't introduce C by going through her, through B?

[r]

[Okay, thank you, you very patient volunteers....

[Go over a couple more times, then thank volunteers and send them back]

[Go over a couple more times, then thank volunteers and send them back]

[Go over a couple more times, then thank volunteers and send them back]

[Go over a couple more times, then thank volunteers and send them back]

[Go over a couple more times, then thank volunteers and send them back]

So that's the basic sense of Penobscot -al (as I understand it): it's a bit like "while": it shows that somebody else on stage, somebody is also there, but just not quite in the spotlight, just a hanger-on. Someonewe only see because of the light shining off of whoever's in the spotlight---on other words, by going through the spotlighted person to get to them.

That's how it all comes together.

So you're probably wondering how this is more broadly useful. Right now we just have an explanation for why you say 'her-mother-al' in Penobscot. Which you could just memorize.

So here it is: here's the unique, and wonderful capacity that this Algonquian system gives you, something extra, something you can't easily do in English. [SLOWLY] This system...of spotlighting...means a simple sentence like "A told B" can always be said two different ways in an Algonquian language:

A told B-al.

[or]

A-al told B.

Both ways, they tell the same story: A did the telling, B did the being told to.

But in Algonquian, you can see \*perspective\*; it's different in each version. In each, the plain one has the spotlight, and then the other one, the one with an -al, is a hanger-on.

This can seem a little counter-intuitive at first: the one in the spotlight is the special one, right? But it's the \*other\* ones, the ones not in the spotlight, who get this special little ending. Seems like the opposite of what you'd expect.

[r]

We actually already expect this from languages, though. Plain old "I eat" is in the spotlight. Whereas "while I read" is not: it's the hanger-on. And \*hanger-on\* gets the extra word "while...".

This actually makes a lot of practical sense: somebody's always in the spotlight; a statement's always about somebody. Whereas there may not even be any other hangers-on around them. So why add a special ending for what's always going to be there? That, I suggest, is why the spotlighted one has no special ending: it's the plain word, while the hangers-on who do happen to show up have a special ending. Because there's always a spotlight. I don't think Elvis ever needed a backstage pass. But everybody in his entourage did.

That's the basic idea. Nothing more.

[pause]

But why is it beautiful? Why is it amazing? Why is always being able to say things in two different ways,

with two different emphases of perspective, so beautiful?

Am I just a linguist, too deep in love with grammar?

I think half the audience kind of thinks that.

But it is more important than that. Because I want to answer the real question: how does this pattern bring beauty and strength into the life of an Algonquian language speaker, to the life of anybody who learns to speak an Algonquian language?

This is how.

The spotlighting system is one part of what makes Algonquian-language literature, traditional literature, oral literature, unbelievably vivid to read or listen to. The system of choosing which character in a story to be the plain one, the one in the spotlight---making everybody else hangers-on [solar system hand gestures]---and then always being able to switch that status, switch it to another character and back again---the feeling, for me at least [and I've checked this with some native speakers, but want to know from you, too], is like watching camera angles change on a movie, or again, like watching the spotlight hop from player to player on the stage. You just can't do this in English...at least not so easily and directly and naturally. In an Algonquian language, we, you and me, we can actually pick a perspective, the perspective of a certain character, and make their perspective the center for that moment, make them the one we're with. And then switch it. And do all of this quite easily: just using the plain word for spotlighted one, and then just adding -al onto everything else. It's that simple. So simple, and yet I know of no richer and more compelling a system for showing relations and viewpoints in such a subtle yet elegant way.

[elegant: and simple: to get the pattern, we just need to recall our instincts about relations "I read while I eat" and "her mother"]

It's because of this, that to me, revitalizing Algonquian languages is not just about recovering the past. It's about the recovering and using of \*tools for the future\*: tools and techniques of expression, ones that you can use to reshape the way you organize your thinking and especially your expression of ideas and your expression of how you see relations between people.

This to my mind, is one of the great riches of the Algonquian languages: a non-material wealth, a wealth of the mind and of perspective: something anyone with Algonquian-language heritage has much right to be proud of. Taapat ni.