

The meaning of *-w*

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Many Algonquian languages have TA verb forms that include a person prefix and a suffix *-w*:

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| (1) | Plains Cree | ni-wa:pam-a:-w | ‘I see him/her’ | (Wolfart 1973:41) |
| | Menominee | ne-na:n-a:-w | ‘I fetch him/her’ | (Bloomfield 1962:152) |
| | Munsee | nə-mi:l-a:-w | ‘I give to him/her’ | (Goddard 1969:172) |

This *-w* suffix is often regarded as an **animate third-person object** marker, as in (2a) (e.g. Bloomfield 1962:152; Wolfart 1973:49), but some authors instead regard it as a **singular subject** marker, as in (2b) (e.g. Goddard 1967:89, 2007:209; Nichols 1980:184).

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| (2) | a. | ni- wa:pam -a: -w | b. | ni- wa:pam -a: -w -Ø |
| | | 1- see.TA -DIR -3AN | | 1- see.TA -DIR -1SG -3SG |
| | | ‘I see him/her ’ | | ‘ I see him/her’ |

Neither analysis appears to have been given a full justification. This presentation argues for the analysis in (2b). This analysis is motivated by minimal pairs like (3), where the meaning differs only in the number of the subject and the form differs only in the use of *-w* versus *-na:n*.

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| (3) | a. | ni-wa:pam-a:-w | ‘ I see him/her’ |
| | b. | ni-wa:pam-a:-na:n | ‘ we see him/her’ |

Authors who favour the analysis in (2a) likely have a different minimal pair in mind: the contrast between the TA form in (4a) (with *-w*) and the TI form in (4b) (with *-n*).

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| (4) | a. | ni-wa:pam-a:-w | ‘I see him/her ’ |
| | b. | ni-wa:paht-e:-n | ‘I see it ’ |

The comparison in (4) is spurious, however, because in addition to the difference between the suffixes *-w* and *-n*, these forms also involve different stems and theme signs. We are dealing here with two distinct paradigms of verb inflection: the TA paradigm in (4a) and the TI paradigm in (4b). Since the *-w* and *-n* suffixes belong to different paradigms, they do not directly contrast with each other, and so the meaning of *-w* cannot be inferred from a putative contrast with *-n*.

This point, though seemingly minor, has various implications for our understanding of Algonquian verb forms, including the distribution of zero morphemes, the patterning of unspecified actor forms, and the definition of the direct and inverse agreement patterns. I argue that in all cases the analysis in (2b) allows for a simpler understanding of how the grammar works.

References

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