

DLLL, Lecture Series in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics

Thursday, March 13, 2014

5:15 pm

Room Ross S 562

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On the notion of “word”: the case of noun incorporation

It is often claimed that polysynthetic or aboriginal languages have very long words. The aim of this talk is to show that this is a myth. Like the myth “Eskimo languages have 50 words for snow”, the proposition that such languages have very long words is either false or needs qualifying: it really depends what one means by “long words”!

I will be arguing on the basis of Ojibwe, an Algonquian language spoken in parts of Canada and in parts of the United-States, and work by myself and colleagues, Michael Barrie and Bethany Lochbihler, that very long words are long words phonologically only; otherwise, they are regular, independent, free (not bound) words as found in English or French (see also Branigan et al. 2005). Most of the polysynthesis that we see in Algonquian languages is thus just an illusion.

I focus on noun incorporation. Noun incorporation involves the morphological fusing of a complement noun with a verb (as in English “moose-hunting”). I show/argue that while it is traditionally thought that incorporated nouns are simplex nouns, much evidence points to the conclusion that incorporated nouns are complex. I show that they can surface with possessive, number, gender, pejorative, diminutive morphology as well as modifiers. Thus, they are XPs (phrasal elements) rather than heads and could not have possibly have been created via the incremental merging of heads. Complexity of incorporated material also arises in other so-called polysynthetic languages, Inuktitut (Compton 2013), Halkomelem Salish (Gerds & Marlett 2008), Nuu-chah-nulth (Wojdak 2008).

I conclude that the proposition that polysynthetic languages necessarily have many derivations that involve “lots of morphology” is false. Such languages have a regular syntax, but ubiquitous cliticization (as in Italian and spoken French, see Déchaine 1999 for a similar idea).

Reception to follow in the DLLL lounge