The person-animacy connection: Evidence from Algonquian and Dene
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In this presentation we consider two properties of nominals: animacy and person. The term “animacy” is used in two ways in the literature, denoting either a semantic property of nominal referents or a gender feature of nominal expressions. The term “person” denotes a deictic property that may be restricted to only some nominals: third-person nominals are often analyzed as “non-person” (e.g. Benveniste 1974), as indicated in (1). Our proposal is that person and animacy are grammatically connected: in at least some languages, animate nouns have the feature [Person] and inanimate nouns do not, as shown in (2).

(1) 1st/2nd 3rd [Person] Ø
(2) 1st/2nd 3rd animate 3rd inanimate [Person] [Person] Ø

This proposal is consistent with Benveniste’s insight that nominals belonging to a certain class may pattern as though they are personless. For us, however, the class in question need not be equivalent to third persons in general. In a language that makes finer-grained person distinctions, the “personless” class will be the least-specified subset of third persons (i.e. inanimates) rather than all third persons.

To support our proposal, we discuss a variety of cases in which the person-animacy connection simplifies our understanding of the morphosyntax of the Algonquian and Dene languages, two language families in which person effects in general are particularly prevalent. In Algonquian, the “personless” analysis of inanimates sheds light on the direct-inverse person hierarchy, the inflection of Transitive Inanimate verbs, and variation in the proximate/obviative contrast on nouns. In Dene, the proposal accounts for the absence of inanimate subject agreement, the conditioning of object markers, and variation in copula insertion.

Algonquian application 1: The direct-inverse hierarchy. Algonquian transitive clauses display a direct-inverse alignment pattern that is governed (descriptively) by the hierarchy in (3). A special inverse marker appears whenever the subject is outranked by the object on this hierarchy.

(3) 1/2 > 3 animate proximate > 3 animate obviative > 3 inanimate

Following Bejar & Rezac (2009), we adopt an agreement-based model of inverse marking in which the inverse marker occurs whenever the person features of the subject are less articulated than those of the object. Under our proposal that inanimate nouns completely lack person features, it follows that any form with an inanimate subject will be inverse, since the object’s person features will always be more articulated. Our analysis thus captures the uniquely low rank of inanimates on the person hierarchy. The traditional analysis of animacy as a type of gender leaves us with the puzzling question of why gender should play a role in a hierarchy that is otherwise determined purely by person features.

Algonquian application 2: TI verbs. When an Algonquian transitive verb takes an inanimate object, the distinct Transitive Inanimate (TI) inflection must be used. In many Algonquian languages, the agreement morphology that appears on TI forms indexes only the subject and is identical to the agreement that appears on intransitive verbs. For us, the use of intransitive forms for TI agreement reflects the failure of Person Agree to target two arguments, since the object in these forms is inanimate and lacks a [Person] feature. Person-indexing morphology thus has access only to the subject.

Algonquian application 3: Variation in obviation. Some Algonquian languages (e.g. Menominee) apply the proximate-obviative contrast to animates only while others (e.g. Oji-Cree) apply it to both animates and inanimates (Bliss and Oxford 2014). The person-animacy connection allows for an elegant account of this variation. As illustrated in (4), we propose that in languages such as Menominee, the [Proximate] feature is dependent on [Person] and is thus restricted to animate nouns, since only animate
nouns have [Person], while in languages such as Oji-Cree, the [Proximate] feature is dependent on D and can thus occur on any noun.

**Dene application 1: Subject agreement.** In the Dene language Tłı̨ chǫ Yatıı̀, agreement inflection on the verb indexes animate arguments (1st, 2nd, and 3rd person) but not inanimate 3rd-person arguments. We propose that subject agreement in Tłı̨ chǫ Yatıı̀ targets the feature [Person]. The absence of a [Person] feature on inanimate nominals thus makes them invisible to subject agreement.

**Dene application 2: Object marking.** Several different object-marking prefixes can occur on the Tłı̨ chǫ Yatıı̀ verb. The availability of these prefixes depends on the animacy of the subject and/or object, as shown in (5) (based on Rice and Saxon 2005). The contexts in (5) fall into a hierarchy: non-obviative object marking can occur in a clause with two animate arguments and in a clause with one animate argument, but not in a clause with no animate arguments. To account for this hierarchy, we propose that the conditioning of all but one object marker includes the feature [Person]. The object markers vary in whether this feature must be borne by the subject, the object, or both arguments. However, when neither argument has [Person] (i.e. when both arguments are inanimate), only obviative object marking, if any, can occur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object marker</th>
<th>Context for occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>we- (3)</td>
<td>object must be animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go- (3pl)</td>
<td>object must be animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gr- (disjoint pl)</td>
<td>subject and object must be animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ye- (disjoint)</td>
<td>obviative (no animacy requirements)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dene application 3: Copula insertion.** Clauses with adjectival predicates in Tłı̨ chǫ Yatıı̀ display an asymmetry: a copula is required when the subject is animate but not when the subject is inanimate. We propose that the copula in adjectival sentences is inserted in order to host subject agreement features, akin to *do*-support in English (cf. Bjorkman 2011). Since, as argued above, subject agreement in Tłı̨ chǫ Yatıı̀ targets the feature [Person], agreement succeeds when the subject is animate and fails when the subject is inanimate. This difference accounts for the absence of the copula with inanimate subjects: since subject agreement fails, there are no subject agreement features to spell out, so copula insertion is not triggered.

**Conclusion.** The proposal that inanimate nominals lack the feature [Person] plays a crucial role in accounting for a variety of morphosyntactic patterns in Algonquian and Dene. The person-animacy connection is beneficial in two basic ways: (1) it explains why animacy can play a role in phenomena that are otherwise person-related, such as the Algonquian person hierarchy; and (2) it allows the analysis of animacy effects to follow as an automatic side-effect of existing analyses of person effects.

**References**