

Slots or Scope? Preverb Ordering in Mi'gmaq

A preverb is a morpheme that attaches before an initial in an Algonquian language in order to modify its meaning. Multiple preverbs may attach to a single root, but not all possible combinations of preverbs are grammatical. Two primary hypotheses have been proposed to account for this.

1. Slot Hypothesis: Preverbs occupy fixed slots that determine their order with respect to each other, e.g. Severn Ojibwe (Todd 1970), Odawa (Piggott 1974), Nishnaabemwin (Valentine 2001), Menominee (Cook 2003).

2. Scope Hypothesis: Preverb position is flexible and determined by scope, e.g. Oji-Cree (Slavin 2005).

Neither of these hypotheses fully accounts for the preverb data in Mi'gmaq (Eastern Algonquian).¹ The Slot Hypothesis explains why certain preverbs, such as modals, or *poqji*- 'start' and *gaqi*- 'finish', cannot co-occur at all in either order, as shown in (1).

- (1) ***poqji-gaqi**-lugwet / ***gaqi-poqji**-lugwet
start-finish-work.3sg / finish-start-work.3SG
(intended) 's/he begins to finish working / finishes starting to work'

However, the Scope Hypothesis explains the many Mi'gmaq examples showing multiple possible preverb orderings with predictable scope effects, as shown in (2).

- (2) **me'si-poqji**-lugwet ≠ **poqji-me'si**-lugwet
fail-start-work.3SG ≠ start-fail-work.3SG
's/he has difficulty starting to work' ≠ 's/he starts to have difficulty working'

To account for this, I suggest an alternative hypothesis which combines the fixed number of categories from the Slot Hypothesis with the flexibility of ordering from the Scope Hypothesis.

3. Flexible Category Hypothesis: Preverbs belong to particular fixed categories, the number of which is limited, but the positions of which are flexible and can have scope over each other.

I then explore two structural approaches for this hypothesis: 1) Preverbs are generated in default positions, and may optionally raise; 2) Preverbs are generated in any position before the root but there are external conditions on their co-occurrence.

References

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¹Mi'gmaq examples are from my own fieldwork and are written in the Listuguj orthography. Many thanks to Janine Metallic, MaryAnn Metallic, and Janice Vicaire for consultation on Mi'gmaq. Any errors are mine.