Investigating the Syntax of Blackfoot’s Demonstratives

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In this talk, I discuss some proposals and some puzzles regarding the internal and external syntax of demonstratives in Blackfoot, a Plains Algonquian language spoken in Southern Alberta. Regarding their internal syntax, Blackfoot’s demonstratives are morphosyntactically complex, consisting of up to six morphemes, and yielding 900 unique demonstrative forms (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Demonstrative template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Root</th>
<th>diminutive</th>
<th>restricted</th>
<th>inflection</th>
<th>post-inflection</th>
<th>verbalizing suffix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am</td>
<td>-sst</td>
<td>-o</td>
<td>-wa</td>
<td>-ma</td>
<td>-o’k(a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ann</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-yi</td>
<td>-ya</td>
<td>-(a)yi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>om</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-iksí</td>
<td>-hka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-istí</td>
<td>-ka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outlining the various morphological slots in the demonstrative template, I claim that each is associated with a different syntactic position. Cases of concordial and non-concordial inflection are discussed, and I argue that the non-concordial cases in particular indicate that inflection maps onto a syntactic head. I suggest that the post-inflectional suffixes can be analogized to reinforcers in Germanic and Romance languages, which are argued to form a phrasal constituent with the demonstrative base (Bernstein 1997; Leu 2008; Roehrs 2010).

Although it is clear that demonstratives indeed have internal structure, it remains a puzzle precisely what that structure is. Part of the challenge is in identifying the syntactic category of the demonstrative root. As a closed class lacking in lexical content, demonstrative roots pattern as functional items. However, under the assumption that UG makes available a fixed set of functional categories (Wiltschko to appear; Wiltschko & Déchaine 2010), “demonstrative” is not a feasible category, as demonstratives do not form a homogeneous class, either within or across languages (Diessel 1999).

Regarding their external syntax, Blackfoot demonstratives have a distribution much like D(eterminers); they convert NPs from predicates into arguments (Longobardi 1994; Stowell 1989). However, I argue that, like demonstratives in e.g., Modern Greek and various other languages (Giusti 1997; Panagiotidis 2000), Blackfoot demonstratives are not D heads but adnominal modifiers in Spec, DP. This is evidenced by their internal structure, and is supported by diachronic and cross-Algonquian patterns.

I conclude with a discussion of discontinuous DPs, i.e., cases in which the demonstrative is not string-adjacent to the noun it modifies. I demonstrate that, unlike in Swampy Cree (Reinholtz 1999) and Ojibwe (Lochbihler 2009), discontinuous DPs in Blackfoot are not amenable to a focus movement account, and I speculate on alternative analyses for discontinuous DPs.
References


