# Our growing sophistication

# about the subtle relations between morphology and syntax

Marianne Mithun

(University of California, Santa Barbara

Languages indigenous to North America are known for their tendencies toward polysynthesis, a term coined by Duponceau (1819). Polysynthesis was, and in some quarters still is, considered simply a formal typological variable: what some languages express in multiple words, others express within a single, complex word. In some theoretical models the same principles are assumed to govern syntactic and morphological structures. But observation of how speakers use these structures can help us refine our understanding of the differences.

With the advent of accessible technologies for documenting spontaneous speech, it has become ever clearer that languages with complex morphologies generally have analytic syntactic alternatives. Furthermore, speaker choices between the morphological and syntactic expression of ideas are not random. The kinds of factors behind such choices are illustrated here with examples from two genealogically and areally unrelated languages, Mohawk, an Iroquoian language of the North American Northeast, and Central Pomo, a Pomoan language of Northern California. The morphological structures of the two languages are also quite different: Mohawk is fully head marking and contains noun incorporation, while Central Pomo is dependent marking and has no incorporation, but it does contain rich inventories of prefixes and suffixes. The semantic distinctions grammaticalized in the two languages differ as well. But similar principles underlie speaker choices between morphological and syntactic expression, rooted in such factors as lexicalization (items stored and processed as chunks), the activation state of the information, and the goals of the speaker.

Examples here are drawn from corpora of unscripted speech in a variety of genres, both monologue and conversation. The speaker below first mentioned 'Mohawk (language)' and 'spoke' in separate words, then incorporated the noun root 'language' into the verb 'lost'.

*Ron-tken's-è:r-e's    kén shí:ken shé:kon    ni-hs-ahrónk-ha'*    **n=onkwe=honweh=néha'**.

M.PL.AGT-examine-PURP-HAB  Q  whether  still  PRT-2SG.AGT-speak-HAB  **ART=person=real=style**

'They would come to see if you still spoke **Mohawk**.'

*Iáh ki' wáhi' ónhka' te-iako-te-**wenn**-ahtón:-ni.*

not  in.fact TAG  anyone  NEG-INDEF.PAT-MID-**language**-disappear-BEN.APPL.ST

'Nobody had lost their **language**.'                                    Dennis Stock, speaker

In sum, though polysynthetic languages differ in the distinctions grammaticalized in their morphologies, deeper cross-linguistic generalizations emerge from examination of speech in context. The morphological distinctions develop from frequencies of expression within the cultures in which they grow, but choices between the resulting morphological structures and their syntactic counterparts are governed by similar factors cross-linguistically.

**Reference**

Duponceau, Peter Stephen (1819), Report of the historical and literary committee to the American Philosophical Society, read 9th January, 1818. *Transactions of the Historical and Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society*, 1: xi-xvi.