Verbal Morphology in the Early Grammar of Innu
by Fr. Jean-Baptiste de La Brosse (1768)

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Missionaries who initially described North American languages faced methodological challenges reminiscent of those faced by contemporary field linguists. They grappled with the task of integrating new data into an established descriptive framework. Specifically, when documenting Algonquian languages, they confronted the difficulty of describing grammatical structures that diverged significantly from those found in European languages. This study explores the ways the practical orientation of early missionaries was reflected in the treatment of verbal morphology, and the ways the methods of description adopted interacted with the level of analysis of the language they were describing. We focus, in particular, on the early grammar of Innu, an Algonquian language spoken in Northeastern Quebec and Labrador in Canada (previously called Montagnais), *Montanica lingua elementa*, written in Latin by French Jesuit missionary Jean-Baptiste de La Brosse (1768). This grammar heavily draws from the Greco-Latin tradition, exemplified for example by the organization of Innu's Tense-Aspect-Mood constructions into paradigms. Simultaneously, *Montanica lingua elementa* showcases diverse approaches for elucidating unfamiliar linguistic patterns. In this talk, we discuss what de La Brosse calls "verba acquisitiva,"and "verba vicarialia," two different types of applicative derivations that he categorizes as verb classes, along with "verba simplicia," or *simple* verbs. While the *acquisitive* applicative, aka *benefactive*, is still in use today, the *vicarial* applicative has disappeared from modern usage. In (1), the verb is of the acquisitive type, with the suffix -*au* adding a participant who benefits the action; in (2), the verb illustrates the vicarial suffix -*atit* that appears jointly with the acquisitive morpheme to indicate the presence of an additional argument that acts in place of another, i.e., in a vicarial relationship with the subject.

(1)　　*ni tiberitamauau*
　　　　ni=　　tiberitam　　**-au**　　　-a　　　　-u
　　　　1=　　govern.TI　　**-ACQ**　　-DIR.TA　　-3.PRES
　　　　'I govern this thing for him.'

(2)　　*ni tiberitamauatitau*
　　　　ni=　　tiberitam　　-au　　　**-atit**　　-a　　　　u
　　　　1=　　govern.TI　　-ACQ　　**-VIC**　　-DIR.TA　　-3.PRES
　　　　'I govern this thing for him in his stead.'

While de La Brosse does not segment these verbs morphologically, he recognizes the transitivizing character of these constructions. In addition to explaining how these two verbal derivations work in Innu, this talk aims to demonstrate how on the one hand the Greco-Latin tradition has shaped the analysis of Innu by de La Brosse, and on the other, how awareness of the particularities specific to Innu testifies to the great intellectual effort of missionaries to describe as accurately as possible the languages they encountered.