CHAPTER ELEVEN

COGNATES VERSUS COPIES IN NORTH AMERICA: NEW LIGHT ON THE OLD DISCUSSION ON DIFFUSION VERSUS INHERITANCE

Peter Bakker

This paper deals with the possibility of copying morphological structures between polysynthetic languages. This is argued to be undocumented. It has not been observed that languages change their order of morphemes under the influence of other languages, or take over complex morphological structures from neighboring languages. This is applied to the case of the Salish, Ritwan and Algonquian language families and the Kutenai isolate. Archaeological evidence suggests that all families were once represented in the same region of the Columbia Plateau. The language families share several so-called unborrowable traits, such as hierarchical alignment and similar morphological verbal structures. Even though it is unprovable according to established methods, a deep connection of a genealogical nature is argued for, rather than a diffusion between the families.

1 THE CHALLENGE IN THE AMERICAS

In North America, almost all languages are polysynthetic. Polysynthetic languages are, roughly, languages where most of the information is clustered in the verb, including, in many cases, adverbial and nominal information.

Some 60 distinct families and isolates can be identified in North America alone (and an even higher number in South America: 114 in South America, 15 in Central America, according to Hammarström 2010). The Americas are thus amazingly diverse for the continent that was last settled on our planet, being home to 186 of the world’s 419 language families and isolates (according to Hammarström’s 2010 careful count). This, however, does not mean that polysynthetic languages form a typologically homogeneous grouping: there are several types of polysynthetic languages.

Even though polysynthesis is often associated with the languages of North America, the type, or set of types, is neither universal in North America, nor limited to North America (Mithun 1990). The language families, however, or the ancestral languages, must have influenced one
another, and the study of areal traits has a long history in the Americas (e.g. Sherzer 1976). The enormous lexical diversity suggests a wide range of independent stocks, whereas the propensity towards polysynthetic typology suggests some level of common origin, either through common descent, or through contact—in other words, cognate or copy.

The question “copy or cognate” is therefore one that is interesting to apply to the languages of North America: do we find these typological similarities because structures were copied from other languages, or are they signals of a common origin? In this paper I will focus on two language families, Salish and Algonquian, but I refer also to other languages and language families in the same region. Despite the important differences in their phonological inventories and in their vocabularies, the families appear to share a number of morphological traits with one another, distinct from most other genealogical groupings. These similarities have led researchers to the question of a possible connection between the two families—and possibly other ones as well. In fact, one radical proposal (Greenberg 1987) posits only three superphyla for all of the Americas, but this has not found acceptance among Americanists.

A connection between Salish and Algonquian was already suggested in the 1800s, but it became only well known after Sapir (1929) lumped the Algonquian, Ritwan, Salish, Wakashan, Chimakuan families and the Kutenai and Beothuk isolates in one superstock, the Almosan languages (Algic and Mosan, where Mosan stands for a proposed supergrouping containing the Salish, Wakashan and Chemakuan families). His classification of all of the languages of North America into six superstocks was solely backed up with a modest set of typological similarities. For a genealogical connection to be accepted, however, also lexical evidence has to be provided, and Sapir did not give any in this article, neither did he in later work. Typological similarities, according to critics, could have diffused. Only several decades later, a few suggestive potential cognates involving Salish and Algonquian were proposed in work on the Kutenai isolate (Haas 1965; Morgan 1992).

In the past, the polysynthetic nature of the languages of North America was most often taken to be the result of diffusion. However, to my knowledge no concrete cases were ever presented backed up by historical evidence, either direct or indirect, in which wholesale morphological patterns were proven to have been transferred between languages or language families in North America. This lack of proof is still true today for polysynthetic languages.

In this paper I will take up the connection between Salish and Algonquian, and suggest ways that can explain some of the similarities, in the