3 challenging Algonquian language points (and helpful solutions) for learners and teachers

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Three points are persistently difficult for teachers and learners alike in most Algonquian languages: what in technical terms are called *animacy(-matching)*, *obviation*, and *pronominal marking*. Here we offer practical, *non-technical* solutions to presenting and learning each of these core language patterns.

Since Algonquian languages generally share more than they do not in how these patterns work, we will present parallel solution-examples in multiple Algonquian languages (incl. Proto-Algonquian) for broadest possible audience access (and discuss details for other Algonquian languages upon request):

(1) Via the [*Who is that?*] and [*What is that?*] questions (+ their answers), we gently introduce how the *THAT*-word is typically different if it refers to a *WHO* vs. to a *WHAT*. From there, instead of technical "(in)animate", we can just call each kind of noun by its distinct *THAT*-word: e.g. *NA*-words (*ANA*-words, *A'AW*-words, etc.) vs. *NI*-words (*ANIMA*-words, *I'IW*-words, etc.). From there, learning verbs first and always as *whole phrases together* w/each *THAT*-word, i.e. [*THAT-NA tastes good*] vs. [*THAT-NI tastes good*], the fact that verbs *match* (in ending) for each type becomes automatic: each match is directly associated in experience, and needs no grammatical rule to follow. What decides which words are *NA*- vs. *NI*- varies across languages (and has other complications): helpfully, this approach still works regardless of the explanation (here we might tentatively suggest a "family-based" approach as per Quinn 2018, etc.).

(2) Via the [*Whose grandmother is that?*] and [- *That is ___'s grandmother*] exchange, we show learners that the special *THAT*-word (*ANIHI*, *INIW*, etc.—plus its matching ending) used therein has a straightforward meaning: the person *THAT-ANIHI* (etc.) points to is being talked about <u>only</u> as *InRelationTo* a **Main Person**. I.e. the question/attention in [***Who**se grandmother is that?*] is not who the grandmother is, but **WHO** that grandmother is *InRelationTo*. Because that **Main Person** is literally who the question+answer is about, learners quickly see that the *THAT-ANIHI* (etc.) person is only *InRelationTo* that **Main Person**. This meaning follows right into its use in [*A sees B*] expressions, which are again still about one **Main Person**: the other person is again just *InRelationTo* them—regardless of which does and which is done to.

(3) Introducing just [***You** are happy?*] and [- ***I** am happy*], plus *WHY*-versions thereof, sticking strictly to just **YOU** vs. **ME**, learners can in only four phrases quickly learn the use of *Whole Event* (*Independent*) vs. (focus on) *Part of Event* (*Conjunct*) patterns for languages that distinguish them. Then, starting with two simple requests [*Give **me** that*] and [*Give **h/her** that*], and the corresponding OR-question [*You're giving **me** that, OR you're giving **h/her** that?*], with only one more OR-question [***I**'m giving you that, OR **s/he**'s giving you that?*], learners can (again in just four phrases!) learn exactly the four core patterns that are each only one or two basic pattern-steps away from nearly every possible combination of who acts on whom.

Through these and related strategies—what we might call a *Relational Approach* (following Leonard 2023), where how to express a meaning-relation is itself learned relationally, in small phrase-pairs—both teachers and learners can find that seemingly intractable core Algonquian language patterns, if presented in accessible, detechnicalized terms, are now far easier to learn and use with confidence.