

Trees, waves, and the classification of the Algonquian languages

Joseph Salmons

University of Wisconsin – Madison

Much current comparative linguistic research wrestles with the nature of familial relationships, often framed in the traditional terms of trees vs waves. Established as a family in the 18th century, we have a rapidly growing body of synchronic data and diachronic analysis of Algonquian languages, and remarkably detailed reconstructions of Proto-Algonquian, albeit based overwhelmingly on only four geographically central languages. Yet the last broad assessment of relationships for the family was over a quarter century ago, in Goddard (1994). Most research follows his view that internal relationships almost entirely reflect an areal cline rather than subgroups, with only one subgroup widely accepted, Eastern Algonquian. I report on work to reassess Algonquian classification by a set of linguists at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and specialists from across North America, with a focus on subgrouping vs. areal patterns. Three distinct areas highlight distinct aspects of how Algonquian languages are interconnected historically:

1. Lexical datasets. Lexicostatistical approaches have been used for most (proposed) families of the world, but not for Algonquian, due to complexities of especially verbal derivation. An adapted dataset suggests that even seldom-borrowed words from the Leipzig-Jakarta list correlate with historical geographical distributions rather than proposed subgroups, so that Menominee patterns with Central languages where some other proposals suggest that it would not.
2. Shared phonological innovations. This longstanding, core criterion for subgrouping has not been widely applied to Algonquian but doing so points to likely subgroups. The Plains languages Cheyenne, Arapaho and Atsina share glide mergers and further merger with *n, as well as complex developments in their vowel systems, though it parallels Eastern Algonquian but not Central (Oxford 2015).
3. Stress and tone. Previous researchers have often declined to reconstruct Proto-Algonquian prosody, but the traditional comparative method leads us to conclude that the language had an iambic system. Several languages across the family have developed tone systems, likely rooted in the widespread use of pitch as a cue to stress, and further supported by language contact in the Plains.

On each point, the emerging picture differs from current views and shows how much progress is possible with the application of both established and new approaches. We see historical deep tree-like patterns, overlaid with clear wave-like ‘cline’ patterns. Together, these three examples paint a significantly new picture of Algonquian linguistic history and I close with new directions this work suggests.