Reconstructing archaic relationality patterns in Eastern South America

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Keywords: historical morphosyntax, long-range comparison, relationalizing and absolutizing morphology, Eastern South American indigenous languages

A prominent typological feature of many indigenous languages of Eastern South America is the rigidity with which selection for a complement is specified for individual lexemes. In most languages of the region, stems are divided into **relational stems**, a class of bound stems that require an overt complement in a specific position in order to constitute a well-formed phrase, and **absolute stems**, which disallow the expression of such a complement. Stems where the presence of the complement is optional are **relationally labile** (hereinafter simply **labile**). The distinction between relational, labile, and absolute stems is applicable to nouns, words that head adverbial phrases (adpositions are relational, whereas adverbs are absolute), and verbs. A number of morphological devices (**relationalizing and absolutizing morphology**, or **RAM**) exist to convert absolute stems to relational stems and viceversa.

Relational rigidity may be seen in the following words from Manjui, a Mataguayan language of Paraguay (Carol 2018; in these examples, * marks ungrammaticality): **wo'* 'worm' / *ji-wo'* 'her/his/its worm', *kijl* 'flu' / **ji-kijl* 'her/his flu', *tusa* 'smoke' / *ji-tusa* 'its smoke' (*ji-* is a third-persin prefix). The first of these is obligatorily relational, and thus may not appear without the indexing of a possessor; the second is obligatorily absolute, while the last is labile. Conversion from absolute to relational is effected in Manjui by the prefix *w-* in *alasa* → *-w-alasa* 'caraguatá'. The inverse process of absolutization may be seen in the following example from Maká (< Mataguayan; Paraguay): *-aqfinet* → *n-aqfinet* 'pestle' (Gerzenstein, 1994, 147, fn. 41).

Languages vary considerably with regard to their **relationality patterns**: in different languages, different lexical classes have different shares of relational, absolute, and labile stems, and different mechanisms with differing degrees of productivity are employed for altering the relationality value of stems. As one could expect, genetically related languages often exhibit similar relationality patterns, and in many cases it is possible to reconstruct them to the respective protolanguages. In fact, RAM devices are so diachronically stable that similarities across languages have prompted authors such as Rodrigues (1985, 1992, 2009), Payne (1990), Ribeiro (2002), and Meira et al. (2010, 512–5) to posit long-range connections between a number of language families in Eastern South America, with RAM-related similarities as the central piece of evidence of their common origin. Although some of these RAM-related similarities are recurrent throughout South America, the extant long-range proposals have limited themselves to comparing pairs or triples of major language families (such as Tupian–Macro-Jê, Tupian–Cariban, and Cariban–Arawakan).

In this study, we make an attempt at a systematic comparison of the relationality patterns in the languages of Eastern South America, which we define as those that belong to language families that have a presence east of 60° W: Warao, Arawakan, Cariban, Tupian, Macro-Jê, Karirian, Yaathê, Trumai, Mỹky, Nambikwara, Bororoan, Guató, Zamucoan, Enlhet–Enenlhet, Mataguayan, and Guaicuruan. In language families that include at least two languages, we look at patterns and morphemes that reconstruct to their respective protolanguages, informed by recent scholarship on the historical phonology and morphology of these languages. For isolates, our survey relies on published descriptive works. We proceed to identifying lookalikes among RAM devices with similar functions, which seem promising as evidence of long-range relationship.

Among the striking similarities in RAM across different language families we can point to the following (in these examples, * is used for reconstructed forms): (1) Proto-Mataguayan **qa-* 'alienizer', Yaathê **k* 'genitive postposition', Mỹky *k-* 'relationalizer'; (2) Proto-Tupian **j-* 'relationalizer' (before vowel-initial stems), Proto-Macro-Jê **j-* 'relationalizer' (before vowel-initial stems), Proto-Cariban **j-* 'relationalizer' (before vowel-initial stems), Mỹky *j-* (before vowels) / *C* --> *C^{j}-* (in consonant-initial stems) 'relationalizer'; (2) Bororoan **õ* 'genitive postposition', Macro-Jê **ñũk* 'genitive postposition', Karirian **u-* 'genitive postposition'; (3) Tupian **ep-* 'relationalizer', Macro-Jê **ñĩp-* 'relationalizer'; (4)

Cariban *-*ɾi*, *-*ti*, *-*i* ‘relationalizer’, Arawakan *-*re*, *-*te*, *-*e* ‘relationalizer’; (5) Yaathê *e- ‘absolutizer’, Macro-Jê *ap- ‘absolutizer’, Arawakan *V- ‘absolutizer’, and similar forms in Tacanan and many languages of the Mamoré–Guaporé linguistic area; (6) Mỹky *m*- ‘absolutizer’ (before vowels), Kari’ña (Cariban) *mɨ*- ‘absolutizer’.

We identify a number of pathways for the diachronic evolution of RAM. There are many cases where a relational (or absolute) stem spontaneously becomes absolute or the other way round; this may affect specific lexemes or an entire class of stems (for example, an innovation may convert all absolute stems into labile ones). An peculiar kind of change is the transformation of a relational stem into an absolute one by means of a fossilization of a person prefix as a part of the stem.

We close by discussing how certain patterns of relationality and RAM serve to identify an Eastern South American morphosyntactic type. One notable finding is that in almost all language families of Eastern South America relationality is specified with regard to the left edge of the stem: relational stems require a complement immediately before them (rather than after them or, say, in the second position). This is so irrespective of word order typology and is compatible with the hypothesis whereby all these languages are ultimately inter-related.

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