

Conservatism and innovation in Algonquian relative clauses  
Fernando Zúñiga, University of Bern

Summary: The Algonquian languages of North America show a remarkable homogeneity, but also a substantial and occasionally intriguing heterogeneity, in several areas of their phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures. Relative clauses are no exception to this generalization; whereas the proto-language shows a fundamental distinction between verb forms used in matrix clauses and those used in subordinate clauses, some of the present-day languages keep this --possibly robust-- division of labor intact, while others form and treat relative clauses in interestingly diverging ways. The present paper surveys the unity and diversity of form and function via three case studies. One variety of Cree is used to illustrate a situation close to the one reconstructed for the whole family, which is indeed not at all rare; here, relative-clause verb forms appear in the inherited so-called conjunct order and make use of agglutinated subordinators called preverbs in Algonquian studies. One of the deviant languages is Blackfoot, where new matrix-clause-like forms have been created to cover some, but not all, subordinate clauses, and different kinds of nominalizations play a central role in the coverage of the relative clauses. Lastly, Arapaho has probably been more innovative than most Algonquian languages in showing different waves of repurposing both former subordinate-clause forms and nominalized ones. The picture arising from this selective survey is one of formal and functional stability at perhaps a more abstract level than is sometimes assumed for close-knit language families worldwide.