

Semantic Alignment in Chitimacha

Abstract

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This paper describes the alignment system for verbal person marking in Chitimacha (ctm), a language isolate of Louisiana. Using data from recently digitized versions of texts collected by Morris Swadesh in the 1930s, I show that Chitimacha exhibits a split alignment system, with agent-patient alignment in the first person, and nominative-accusative alignment in non-first persons. The agent-patient alternation is shown to cross-cut subjects of intransitives, objects and even subjects of transitives, and direct / indirect objects of ditransitives. The agent-patient system in Chitimacha is therefore not sensitive to transitivity, but rather to the semantic categories of agent and patient, making it an exemplary case of semantic alignment. I also discuss evidence for the diachronic origins of the agent-patient pattern, and show that it arose via a reanalysis of transitive verbs with impersonal subjects (“transimpersonals”) as intransitive verbs with patientive subjects.