Relative Roots: Form and Function

This paper surveys discussions of relative roots (RRs) in 40 works (1946-2023) covering 21 Algonquian languages/varieties, revealing the heterogeneity found. We suggest a novel approach to defining the category based on our results.

We describe the seven RRs reconstructed for Proto-Algonquian, and then discuss the languages which are described as having larger or smaller inventories. Consider a standard relative root inventory just for Menominee (Bloomfield 1962:443) and Ojibwe (Valentine 2001:665), below.

P-A	Menominee	Ojibwe	Brief Gloss
*ahkw-	ahkw-	akw-	so far/long
*ahpiiht-	ahpēht-	apiit-	to such intensity
*eθ-	aeN-	iN-	to there/thus
*tahθ(w)-	tahN(w)-	daS(w)-	so many
*taθ-	taN-	daN-	there
*went-	oht-	ond-	from there/therefore
*elekohk(w)-	aeNaekohkw-		so far/big
	aeNaesp-		so high
	īN-		thus (plural)
	īNaekohkw-		so big (plural)
	kaek-		with

We next show that previous characterizations of RRs fall into two main groups:
1. RRs are anaphoric ("Any word which contains a [RR] is preceded by an antecedent expression to which the [RR] refers by anaphora," Bloomfield 1962:443).
2. RRs change valence, adding an oblique ("[Ojibwe RRs] always license an extra argument in the clause they appear in," Rhodes 2005:374).

All the works examined offer (1) or (2) as the defining characteristic of RRs; none offer both. We observe that (1) is semantic, while (2) is morphosyntactic, and argue that both are criterial to the category.

Finally, we explore initials with similar meanings not identified as RRs [non-RRs], with the goal of distinguishing between them and true RRs. This is straightforward with non-RRs of degree, number, manner, and reason, but not as clear for non-RRs of deictic location and direction. We suggest that it is the general semantics of deictic RRs which distinguishes them from the more highly specified deictic non-RRs.