When central suffixes agree with peripheral participants

This talk discusses an underdescribed phenomenon in the TA independent inflection of several Algonquian languages: the exceptional use of the central suffix to agree with a peripheral participant, which we will call the “pseudo-peripheral” use of the central suffix. The phenomenon can be observed by comparing the Menominee indicative 1sg→3pl form in (1a) with its negative counterpart in (1b) (Bloomfield 1962). Consider how the verb form indicates the number of the peripheral participant (Goddard 1969)—that is, the lower-ranked argument ‘them’. In the indicative form in (1a), the number of the peripheral participant is expressed by the peripheral suffix (-ak ‘3pl’). In the negative form in (1b), the peripheral suffix slot is occupied by a negative marker that does not express agreement features (-an ‘neg’), and the job of expressing the number of the peripheral participant is instead taken up by the central suffix (-nowaːw ‘pl’). The use of the central suffix to agree with the peripheral participant in (1b) is surprising, since the central suffix normally works together with the person prefix to agree with the central participant, i.e. the higher-ranked argument, as in (1a) (ne-...w ‘1sg’).

(1) a. nenɛːwaːwak
   ne- nɛːw -a: -w -ak
   1- see -dir -sg -3pl
   ‘I see them’

   b. kan nenɛːwaːnowawan
      kan ne- nɛːw -a: -nowaːw -an
      not 1- see -dir -pl -neg
      ‘I do not see them’

Although the pseudo-peripheral use of the central suffix in the Menominee negative form in (1b) is unusual, it is not a special quirk of the Menominee negative: the same morphological phenomenon also occurs in Cheyenne and several Eastern languages (Mi’kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Massachusett, Delaware). We survey the pseudo-peripheral use of central suffixes across the Algonquian family, describe the conditions under which the phenomenon occurs in each of the languages listed above, and consider the implications of the phenomenon for the analysis of Algonquian agreement inflection.

References