1. Introduction  Ojibwe is a member of the Algonquian language family. These languages are known for their complex verbal agreement morphology. The syntax of this system has been the focus of much research (e.g. Bruening 2005; Béjar & Rezac 2009; Lochbihler 2012; Oxford 2013), but its semantics has been mostly ignored. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining the effect of a particular verbal agreement morpheme, the theme signs, on the semantics of argument structure in Ojibwe.

2. Background  The theme sign is a morpheme that gives information about which argument is to be interpreted as the subject, and which as the object. (Valentine, 2001, p. 270) It spells out the direct/inverse system by which Ojibwe does verbal agreement. The theme signs work together with the topicality hierarchy to determine with pronouns are spelt out overtly (as a pronominal proclitic).

   In monotransitive sentences, the theme sign refers to an Agent and a Theme, but in ditransitive sentences, the theme sign refers to an Agent and a Goal. (Valentine, 2001, p.136) This is known as a secundative ditransitive pattern (Malchukov, Haspelmath & Comrie, 2010). In Ojibwe, this results from ditransitives having a multiple vP structure (whereas monotransitives have only one vP). I argue that the higher v introduces the Goal argument, as per Pylkkänen’s (2008) high applicative.

   (1)  \( \lambda x . \lambda e . x \) is the Goal of e  
       (Pylkkänen, 2008, p. 15)

   The theme sign refers to the highest internal argument, which is the Goal in ditransitive sentences, but the Theme in monotransitive sentences. Therefore, we need a semantics of theme signs that puts constraints on argument structure in a way that is sensitive to syntactic structure. I propose to do this with a semantics of theme signs that target arguments via syntactic features.

3. Theme Signs as Event Modifiers  In this paper, I show that the theme sign put constraints on argument structure based on the saliency of arguments to the discourse. My proposal assumes speech act participants are always more salient than non-participants, and that obviation modifies a third person argument to mark it as less salient. I propose that instead of referring only to semantic roles, the denotation of the theme signs refer to bundles of syntactic features. In this way, the theme sign will impose conditions on the two highest DPs in a sentence, regardless of their semantic role. This lets the same denotation target the Theme in monotransitive sentences, and the Goal in ditransitive sentences.

   I use \( \alpha \) to refer to a specific set of syntactic features, in this case, the set of features that is shared between the theme sign and the highest internal argument. Following Riccomini (2015), I assume the theme signs agree with both the external argument, and highest internal argument. This set of syntactic features identifies the DPs to be targeted without having any other effect on the semantics. In this way, monotransitive and ditransitive sentences will have the same theme sign denotations.

3.1 Local Theme Signs  The local theme signs indicate that both the Agent and the Theme (or Goal in ditransitives) are first and second persons, i.e. they are both speech act participants.

   The local direct form signals that the Agent is second person, and the Theme (or Goal) is first person. I propose that its denotation is as follows.

   (2)  \([P^o]\) = \( \lambda e . \) the Agent of e is the addressee and \([DP^o] \) is the speaker

   The local inverse theme sign is used when the Agent is first person, and the Theme (or Goal) is second person. I propose that it has the following denotation.
(3) \([\text{in}^\alpha] = \lambda e . \text{the Agent of } e \text{ is the speaker and } [\text{DP}^\alpha] \text{ is the addressee}\)

The result is that, in monotransitive sentences, the theme sign puts constraints on the Agent and the Theme, but on the Agent and Goal in ditransitives, due to its sensitivity to syntactic features.

3.2 Non-Local Theme Signs  The non-local theme signs indicate that at least one argument is not a speech act participant. If both arguments are third persons, one of them must be spelled out with an obviative marker. The theme sign gives information about which argument should be read as the Agent, and which should be read as the Theme (or Goal in ditransitive sentences).

Grammatically, obviation distinguishes between two third persons in order to track the roles of third person arguments, i.e. any sentence can only have one 3rd person proximate argument. In discourse, the obviative marks one (or more) arguments as less salient. Thus, there is a grammatical requirement for obviation, but the choice of which arguments to make obviative is based on the discourse context. (Valentine, 2001, p. 623) I propose to treat obviation as a feature on pronouns using the Heim & Kratzer (1998) paradigm.

(4) \([\text{obviative}] = \lambda x : x \text{ is less salient . } x\)

“The less salient” is shorthand to indicate that saliency has fallen below some contextually established threshold, namely, the salience of the proximate argument.

The non-local direct theme sign specifies that the Agent is more salient in discourse than the Theme (or Goal). I propose the following denotation for it.

(5) \([\text{aa}^\alpha] = \lambda e . \text{the Agent of } e \text{ is more salient than } [\text{DP}^\alpha]\)

The non-local inverse theme sign is used when the Agent is less salient than the Theme (or Goal). For it, I propose the following denotation.

(6) \([\text{igw}^\alpha] = \lambda e . \text{the Agent of } e \text{ is less salient than } [\text{DP}^\alpha]\)

The local and non-local theme signs appear to be different; however, this is not really the case. Both first person and second person are participants, and as a consequence, both are equally salient. Therefore, the semantics must specify directly which of the speaker and addressee is the Agent, and which is the Theme (or Goal), rather than appealing to salience relations.

4. Conclusion  The direct/inverse system of Ojibwe, as spelled out via the theme signs, has a direct impact on the semantics. I have proposed that the theme signs provide information about the relative salience of arguments in relationship to each other by imposing constraints on event argument structure. In my proposal, theme signs and obviation work together to establishing an explicit link between event participants and more general discourse features.

References


