

**Role Prominence in American Sign Language and the Proximate/Obviative  
Contrast in Algonquian Languages**

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It is well-established that only one Algonquian Proximate is permitted per transitive clause (Goddard 1990:318, inter alia). American Sign Language (ASL) similarly only allows one Role Prominent element (RP) per transitive clause (1). Since the RP marker is realized by the signer's body, two RPs are (also) phonologically precluded; the closest workaround is a biclausal, "double verb construction" (Kegl, 1985; Morgan, et al. 2002).

- (1) \**3RP*→*3RP* (ungrammatical; indeed, phonologically unproduceable)  
 \*[AT-LOC[i] [j-o-h-n]] [ATLOC[i] [RP]] [ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]] [ATLOC[j] [RP]] ...  
 John at loc[i] role prominence[i] Bill at loc[j] role prominence[j]  
 [AT-LOC[i] [CL:1↑]]# LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j] [CL:S]  
 lto(person) at loc[j] rso(fist)-goes from-loc[i]-to-loc[j]  
 \*'John (RP) hit Bill(RP).'

While Proximate has long been recognized as the default form in Algonquian, Role Prominent marking has often been misidentified as the marked case in ASL. From comparison to Algonquian Proximates, we now recognize that Role Prominent is in fact the default form in ASL, as it is a near-obligatory part of unergative intransitive and transitive clauses alike. The Role Prominence distinction is not meaningfully available in a 1→3 or 3→1 configuration: first person is obligatorily Role Prominent, such that the ASL structures look more like 1(RP)→3, 1(RP)←3, i.e. first-person-centric. This is precisely the same pattern observed in the same pronominal configurations triggering the Algonquian Inverse (*Penobscot*, Quinn 2006):

- (2) *nətihlɑ* *nə-ihl.ɑ-(W)* *Direct: 1→3*  
 'I tell h/her' 1-tell.**Dir**-W  
 (3) *nətihlək<sup>w</sup>* *nə-ihl.ək<sup>w</sup>-(W)* *Inverse: 1←3*  
 'S/he tells me' 1-tell.**Inv**-W

In both systems, the discourse contrast of Prox/RP is meaningfully available only between 3rd persons, where both ASL and Algonquian languages show transitive-verb morphology alternating to reflect which argument role is discourse-/perspectivally primary (Proximate/RP), and which is secondary/dependent (Obviative/non-RP).

In Algonquian, this is the Direct (= (2), (4)) vs. Inverse (= (3), (5)) morphological contrast:

- (4) *wətihlɑl* *wə-ihl.ɑ-(W)-al* *Direct: Prox→Obv*  
 'Prox told Obv' 3-tell.**Dir**-W-Obv  
 (5) *wətihləkɔl* *wə-ihl.ək<sup>w</sup>-(W)-al* *Inverse: Prox←Obv*  
 'Obv told Prox' 3-tell.**Inv**-W-Obv

And in ASL, the Inverse conveyed by the change in the position of the RP marker relative to the motion of the verb:

- (6) **3RP**→**3nonRP** (Direct)  
 [ATLOC[i] [j-o-h-n]] [ATLOC[i] [RP]] [AT-LOC[j]]  
 John-at-loc[i] role prominence[i] lto(person)-at-loc[j]  
 [CL:1↑]# **LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j]** [CL:S] [ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]]  
 rso(fist)-goes from-loc[i]-to-loc[j] Bill at loc[j]  
 'John (RP) hit Bill (nonRP).'
- (7) **3RP**←**3nonRP** (Inverse)  
 [ATLOC[i] [j-o-h-n]] [ATLOC[j] [b-i-l-l]] [ATLOC[j] [RP]]  
 John-at-loc[i] Bill-at-loc[j] role prominence[j]  
 [AT-LOC[j] [CL:1↑]# **LOC[i] AT+FROM-TO+ON-LOC[j]** [CL:S]  
 lto(person)-at-loc[i] rso(fist)-goes from-loc[i]-to-loc[j]  
 'John hits Bill (RP).'

In sum, the ASL Role Prominence system tracks the Algonquian Proximate along several parameters:

- being limited to one RP/Prox per transitive configuration
- being the default 3rd-person form (as against nonRP/Obv = the explicitly marked of the two)
- not meaningfully contrasting between 1st and 3rd, only 3rd vs. 3rd
- connecting to an apparent (Direct-)Inverse contrast; and to an explicitly marked Obviative.

While Role Prominence marking in ASL is demonstrably parallel to the Proximate/Obviative marking system in Algonquian, it is notable that among spoken languages, such systems are rare, and nearly unique to the Algonquian family. (Typologically ASL and the Algonquian languages also share a host of polysynthetic properties, such as being verb-centric/strongly head-marking, with extensive noun and classifier incorporation.) While uncommon in spoken languages, this Proximate/Obviative distinction may be a more common occurrence in signed languages and so a promising candidate to focus on in seeking grammatical constructions more characteristic of signed than spoken languages.

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