A curious case of conflation: SAP status and conflated argument marking in three languages of the American Southwest

Laguna Keres, Maricopa, and Seri are unrelated languages from southwestern North America. In their strategies for marking verbal arguments, they each employ, in a restricted portion of their argument-marking paradigms, conflated morphemes (also called portmanteau morphemes by Siewierska 2003 and others). Conflated morphemes occupy single morphological “slots” or argument positions while at the same time encoding features of both arguments of a transitive verb.

In this talk, I examine the conflated argument marking properties in the three languages and identify several characteristics: (1) induction of the conflated pattern is always tied to status of an argument as a speech-act participant (SAP); (2) conflation is sensitive to the number of argument positions permitted on a verb and whether or not the language allows double-zero marking of transitives; and (3) two of the languages provide counter-examples to the claim that the conflated pattern tends to be restricted to +SAP arguments, as described in Georgi (2011).

I argue that the conflated pattern is best not viewed as an areal phenomenon even though the languages are close geographically, because the Yuman languages (of which Maricopa is a member) do not share traits of the Southwest Pueblo linguistic area (Sherzer 1976), and Seri is situated too far south. Rather, a structural explanation is sought in terms of the characteristics (1) and (2) noted above.

References
