Theoretical Implications of C.C. Uhlenbeck's Algonquian Studies

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Introduction

Christianus Cornelius Uhlenbeck (1866–1951) belongs to that small group of European non-missionary scholars who took an active interest in American Indian languages and who made an important contribution to the linguistic characterization of these languages. In this respect, Uhlenbeck shares the stage with Peter Duponceau, Johann C.E. Buschmann, Hans C. von der Gabelentz, Raoul de la Grasserie, Victor Henry, and others. In another respect, Uhlenbeck belongs to a smaller group of well-known scholars who came from the field of Indo-European comparative grammar to that of the Algonquian languages.

Born in Holland in 1866, Uhlenbeck studied Indo-European philology at the University of Leyden with such well-known scholars as Hendrik Kern, Peter J. Cosijn, and Matthias de Vries. His doctoral thesis (Uhlenbeck 1888) was on the genetic relationships between the Germanic and the Balto-Slavic languages. It was followed by several publications, most of which were in the field of Indo-European studies: a phonetic description of Sanskrit from a comparative point of view (Uhlenbeck 1894), short etymological dictionaries of Gothic and Sanskrit, and a handful of shorter studies on the place of Sanskrit within comparative philology and on the Indo-European case system. The standard picture of the late 19th-century Indo-Europeanist then, except that in 1892 Uhlenbeck published a slim volume of Basque studies (Uhlenbeck 1892). This book, written before he was appointed to the chair of Sanskrit at the University of Amsterdam, was a rigorous application of the principles of Indo-European comparative grammar to the phonetics and word-formation of Basque. It was to be the first of a long series of publications on the Basque language: a comparative phonetics of the Basque dialects (1903), a study of the derivational suffixes in Basque (1905), and a Karakteristiek der Baskische grammatica (1907).
It was only in the 1920s that Uhlenbeck returned to his Basque interests, and in fact most of his writings on Basque published in the 1920s and the 1930s were short notes. The eclipse of Basque was due to Uhlenbeck’s new interest: American Indian languages. This shift occurred while Uhlenbeck was teaching at Leyden, where he had been appointed in 1899. Although his teaching concentrated on the older Germanic languages (Gothic, Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon) and Indo-European comparative grammar, Uhlenbeck did not confine himself to these fields. Dissatisfied with the narrow neogrammian conception of language structure then prevailing in the handbooks and reference works for the study of these languages, Uhlenbeck felt the need to broaden his linguistic horizons. As the title of his 1907 study on Basque shows, his interest was in “characteristics”, the then popular term for linguistic typology purporting to show what a language or language group is “really like”. Basque was his first interest, but after some time Uhlenbeck left it — perhaps because he failed to acquire a practical command of it — for American Indian languages. His first publications in this new field deal with Inuktitut, especially Greenlandic. His major study was the *Sketch of a Comparative Morphology of the Eskimo Languages* (1907), which was also his last major publication on these languages, the study of which he took up again in the mid-1930s. In the meantime Uhlenbeck devoted more than 25 years of intensive research to another language family, the Algonquian. Apparently these “distant Americanistic hobbies” were some kind of antidote for his teaching, which had become a burden to him.\(^1\) This interest begins with the publication of a survey article on the indigenous languages of North America north of the Rio Grande in *Anthropos* (Uhlenbeck 1908). It is largely based on Powell’s (1891) classification, on Pilling’s (1885, 1891) bibliographies, and on the literature referred to there. Although not based on firsthand materials, Uhlenbeck’s survey, while reflecting the insufficiency of data for several of the 54 families, at-

\(^1\)See Josselin de Jong (1966:258–259): “But the thing that did bore and tire him, even to a great extent, and not merely after his transition to Americanistics, was lecturing to students with whom he failed to establish personal contact, whose ignorance, to him incomprehensible, he would always be inclined to impute to laziness or an utter lack of interest. And even when it occurred to him occasionally that his teaching method was perhaps less suited to beginners, it would be of no avail to him, since he found himself utterly unable to acquire a minimum of scholastic practice that is indispensable also in academic teaching. Frequent disappointments at lectures and examinations which wore him out, over-sensitive and emotionally unstable as he was, contributed not a little to his beginning to regard all official business as a heavy burden. There may have been other factors, unknown to us, which made him feel ill at ease within himself, at times putting him into such a state of over-fatigue and depression as was unlikely to have been caused by mere strenuous work.”
tempts to provide parallel phonetic and morphological characterizations of 38 of these. With respect to Algonquian (Uhlenbeck 1908:771-779), we find some information on the following subgroupings: East: Micmac, Abenaki, Massachusetts, Mohican, Delaware, Nanticoke; North: Ojibwa, Cree; West: Menomini, Miami, Illinois, Shawnee, Blackfoot, Arapaho, Cheyenne. Uhlenbeck also discusses some structural properties of this language family: prefixation and suffixation, the animate/inanimate distinction, paralllelisms between the nominal and verbal systems, possessive inflection of nouns, conjugational types, inclusive and non-inclusive plurals, and the like. At the end of his grammatical sketch of the Algonquian family Uhlenbeck points to “characterological affinities” with other linguistic families, and concedes that perhaps “several linguistic families of the New World are genetically related.” In the second installment of this article, Uhlenbeck refers to his 1909 study of grammatical distinctions in Algonquian, with special reference to Ojibwa (for which he relied on Baraga’s (1878) Theoretical and Practical Grammar of the Otchipwe Language) a study in which he discusses several of the abovementioned features as well as vocalic ablaut. He also refers to William Jones’s work on Algonquian word-formation. In 1910, after having published a short comparative morphology of some Algonquian languages, Uhlenbeck started his field work on Blackfoot. In two consecutive trips to the Piegans in Montana he managed to gather a mass of linguistic and textual information, which was to nourish dozens of publications, of both linguistic and anthropological interest. Apart from his publications of Blackfoot texts (1911, 1912), mention must be made here of his morphological studies of Blackfoot (1913a, 1913b, 1914, 1920) and his syntactical analyses (1927, 1928). These studies were eventually incorporated into his Blackfoot grammar of 1938, written in English, which followed the lexicographical description of Blackfoot undertaken in collaboration with R.H. van Gulik (1930, 1934). In between are a few other publications on American Indian languages, dealing with specific words or with more general issues. As a matter of fact, Uhlenbeck’s interest in Algonquian (and in Blackfoot in particular) was interwoven with his interest in general linguistics, conceived as a theoretical model for characterizing languages or language groups, and for learning more about language and the history of languages. It is here that we reach the theoretical implications of his linguistic work on the Algonquian languages, in which he found a new intellectual and professional home, replacing that of the Germanic world, to which he felt less attracted after the events of 1914-1918. In what follows I will try to highlight some of the theoretical issues involved in his work on Algonquian languages.
Possessivity: A Link Between the Nominal and the Verbal Systems

One of the most pervasive typological or characterological interests of Uhlenbeck was in the interrelation between the nominal and the verbal systems. It is not clear whether this interest can be traced back to his Indo-Europeanist training, nor is it clear in what way he was influenced here by some 19th-century descriptions of American Indian languages. Uhlenbeck discovered a deep affinity between noun and verb, which went beyond the (possible) coincidence of prefixes and suffixes or their inflection as an expression of relationships. For languages without noun declensions these relationships are at first sight of a different nature: in the case of verbs, inflection is linked with the relation of the subject (and/or object) to the type/nature of the action expressed, whereas possessive inflection of nouns indicates the relationship between an object (person or thing) and its possessor. On this point Uhlenbeck ventured a bold hypothesis, namely that there was an inherent relationship between the possessive (and more specifically the inalienable possessive) suffixes on nouns and the "inert" or "passive" (or "accusative") inflection of verbs.² This view foreshadows the modern concept, proposed by Hansjakob Seiler, of "possession/possessor of a verbal act". According to Uhlenbeck this intrinsic relationship (Uhlenbeck 1916b:365, 368) can be manifest, as in Tlingit, Haida, Chimariko, Maidu, Yuki, Muskogean, Dakota, and Ponca, or covert (for "structural reasons"), as in the Algonquian languages, although such data do not affect, in Uhlenbeck's view, the validity of his claim. On the other hand, the languages that seem to contradict this principle, such as Miwok and Chumash, are said to be less primitive or archaic ("minder ouderwetsch type"), and could be, in Uhlenbeck's hypothetical view, instances of a type in which the nominative was not really an "energetic" case. This is typical of Uhlenbeck's speculative theorizing. Another example of this is his postulation of a clear-cut morphological distinction between alienable (or acquired) and inalienable (or intrinsic) possession in Algonquian. As a matter of fact, although the Algonquian languages offer no direct evidence for the intrinsic relationship between possessive inflection of nouns and the accusative inflection, they have a central position in Uhlenbeck's (1916b) article on possessive inflections in North American languages. In that work, Uhlenbeck tries to demonstrate the existence of a basic distinction between alienable and inalienable possession. The formal basis is constituted by the use of a suffix -m(i) with alienable possession (or relationship). But the demonstration has some weak points:

²For his view of the casus inertiae, see Uhlenbeck (1916a, 1916b); the accusative is seen as a specialization of the casus inertiae.
UHLENBECK'S ALGONQUIAN STUDIES

(1) Uhlenbeck cites evidence from Blackfoot, Cheyenne (based on Petter's grammatical sketch), Cree (based on Lacombe), and Fox, but none from Ojibwa, Delaware, Natick, and Micmac. Nonetheless, this insufficiency of data does not keep him from attributing the possessive -m for acquired and alienable possession to all the Algonquian languages (Uhlenbeck 1916b:357).

(2) Uhlenbeck cannot account for a number of problems, such as the use of -m in the case of inalienable possession (as is the case of Fox, where it is used with terms denoting kinship relations and body parts); this apparent exception is explained as testifying to "the loss of the logical distinction between inalienable and alienable possession in the linguistic conscience of the Fox Indians" (Uhlenbeck 1916b:356).

(3) Uhlenbeck's theory of possessivity runs also into problems in the case of Blackfoot, which is for obvious reasons the most often cited language in his survey. As a matter of fact, for Blackfoot Uhlenbeck deems it necessary to make a further distinction between body part terms which allow for the expression of indefinite possessorship: moχsokúyi 'somebody's foot trace', moχkatsis 'somebody's leg/foot', and kinship terms, which do not admit of indefinite possessorship. Once again, the distinction is not clear-cut from the formal point of view, and it is complicated by the existence of suppletive forms: e.g., nókós 'my child'. Uhlenbeck's solution is to see the suppletive forms as expressing a really intimate relationship, but then he notes that this intimate relationship would apply to inalienable possessivity: e.g., father-child relation, and to alienable possession, not only of a house, but also of objects such as a bucket.

This is not to say that Uhlenbeck's theoretical approach is worthless. Interesting and stimulating as it may be, it falls short by its exclusive focusing on the paradigmatic level (the possibility of recovering syntagmatic reflexes of the inalienable/alienable distinction does not seem to have occurred to him) and also by its insufficient diachronic foundation. On the latter point he was severely criticized by Sapir, who reviewed his two 1916 publications in the first volume of *IJAL* (Sapir 1917). In his review of the second publication Sapir, while focusing on non-Algonquian data, disagrees with "Uhlenbeck's desire to look upon separability as the most fundamental concept involved in the so-called possessive relation", replaces Uhlenbeck's speculative explanation of suppletion affecting the Blackfoot word for 'bucket' with a phonetic explanation (isk — nóχk 'bucket' — 'my bucket'), and proposes an alternative classification of possessive pronouns based on

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³On the former publication, Sapir commented (1917:85): "To Uhlenbeck's speculations as to the primitiveness of the passive verb I am not inclined to attach much importance. Such questions must be attacked morphologically and historically, not ethnopsychologically. As long as we are not better informed as to the exact distribution of types of pronominal classification and as to the historical drifts inferred from comparative linguistic research, it is premature to talk of certain features as primitive, of others as secondary."
the idea that alienability or separability and classification of relationship terms are morphologically and historically unrelated (Sapir 1917:88–89).

**Distant Relationship: Algonquian-Ritwan**

This was the Uhlenbeck-Sapir side of the discussion; there is also a Sapir-Uhlenbeck exchange, which brings us to a second type of theoretical implication, the idea of genetic relationship. A very interesting case is offered by the distant relationship between Algonquian and Ritwan (Wiyot and Yurok). In 1913 Sapir, followed by Radin, Dixon and Kroeber (1919) had claimed this relationship. While Sapir’s hypothesis met with European approval from such scholars as Alfredo Trombetti, Paul Rivet and Father Wilhelm Schmidt, Uhlenbeck found himself in agreement with Truman Michelson’s severe criticism (1914) of the hypothesis. With the hindsight of half a century of research, which saw, among others, the publication of Robins’s (1958) and Teeter’s (1964) grammars, we can say now that Sapir was right and Michelson was wrong (cf. Haas 1958; Goddard 1975). However, the matter is not as one-sided as all that. First of all, the materials on which both authors had to base their views were not as accurate as they could have been. And Uhlenbeck unfortunately relied too much on Reichard’s (1925) grammar of Wiyot. Moreover, Sapir’s lexical correspondences (by semantic and morphological class) were at times unconvincing, and even incorrect as has been shown in detail by Goddard (1986). The first of the two articles (Uhlenbeck 1927) devoted to the Algonquian-Ritwan relationship deals with the lexical evidence, for which Uhlenbeck follows Sapir’s distinction into words denoting persons, body-parts, animals, plants, natural objects, etc. Uhlenbeck is right in pointing out the unlikelihood or impossibility of some of the correspondences set up by Sapir: e.g., for W gākwiL, O akiwesi ‘old man’, or W di’wi’li ‘somebody (else)’, Cree awiyak ‘person’. He is less sceptical with respect to the words for ‘paternal grandmother’, ‘sister’, and ‘wife’, but criticizes the correspondences set up for ‘head’ (W w̱atvat ), ‘ear’ (W w̱atvelok ), ‘nose’ (W w̱at’tar), ‘tongue’ (W w̱e̱t). Those for ‘mouth’ (W velo’l) and ‘tooth’ (W w̱ap̱t) are more acceptable, although Uhlenbeck points to the problem of the morphological segmentation of the Algonquian words for ‘mouth’.

4 The forms quoted here for Wiyot (=W), and Ojibwa (=O) are in the transcription system used by Uhlenbeck and Sapir. Goddard (1986) uses a different phonemicization.

5 Goddard (1986) considers the correspondence set for ‘tooth’ convincing and that for ‘mouth’ unlikely.
other hand, the correspondences for plant names are received with skepticism. At the end of his article Uhlenbeck concludes that Wiyot is not an Algonquian language, but that it is possible that the apparent similarities in the independent pronouns, the possessive inflection, the form of some numerals, the local suffix, etc. are to be accounted for by a “very distant genetic relationship.” With respect to the lexical correspondences, he seems to favour the view that these are due to secondary language mixture or borrowing, or that they may be due to accident.

This somewhat schizophrenic handling of structural morphological and lexical parameters — the heritage of the comparative method applied to Indo-European — not only explains the strange conclusion of the first paper (1927), but also the fact that Uhlenbeck dealt with the grammatical side of the issue in a later paper (Uhlenbeck 1939). The conclusion there is again negative, although some grammatical correspondences are recognized (e.g., temporal prefixes, personal prefixes, noun composition, numerals, local case suffix) and although Uhlenbeck (p. 49) states that the lexical correspondences should certainly be seen as belonging to one “cultural trend” (“één cultuurstroming”). But the grammatical correspondences can be explained in most cases as either general Amerindian phenomena or as ethnopsychological convergences or parallels. Here Uhlenbeck points out that they are not supported by regular phonetic correspondences. He concludes that Wiyot and Yurok derive from an ancestor language which at some point of its history underwent strong Algonquian influence.

And here we touch upon a third theoretical implication: the ethnopsychological bias of Uhlenbeck’s approach to the Algonquian languages. In studying languages whose history is not very well known, the comparatist faces the problem of the choice between an explanation appealing to genetic relationship and one appealing to convergence. His characterological studies led Uhlenbeck to emphasize the latter, and to put a heavy burden of proof on those who claimed a genetic relationship. It is clear that the presence of regular sound correspondences is a somewhat misleading criterion: the more we know about the history of languages, the more the correspondences (similarities and dissimilarities) will be seen as showing a regular pattern; the less we know of them, the less regular they will seem. The demonstration of regular sound correspondences is a reasonable demand only when the languages compared are chronologically not too distant, and when their phonological history is not too obscure.

Uhlenbeck did not approach American Indian languages as he had approached Indo-European: in the latter case he started from history, in the former from typology. And his typology was basically an ethnopsychological one: hence the appeal to “convergence”. The demand of regular sound correspondences was for him the guarantee of the soundness of his
approach, and it is no wonder that in one of his last articles (Uhlenbeck 1948) he claimed that instead of assuming a more or less absolute unity of origin for American aboriginal languages, we should try to think of the evolution of languages in terms of contacts and influences. Skepticism with respect to Sapir, Radin and Rivet, and approval of the views of Boas, Jacobs, de Angulo and Freeland, is what we find in this article: the logical consequence of a devoted and also admirable attempt to historicize without a proper historical perspective.

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