

The role of polysynthesis in Nuuchahnulth morphosyntactic structure Toshihide Nakayama

This paper examines the distribution and function of polysynthesis in Nuuchahnulth (Wakashan; British Columbia, Canada). Nuuchahnulth shows a prototypical example of polysynthesis in that it involves holophrasis, i.e., the verbal predicate can stand alone as independent clause. The language does not exhibit compounding and is almost exclusively suffixing. The basic structure of a Nuuchahnulth verbal word can be schematized as follows: root–lexical suffix–aspect–derivation–inflection. Numerous (over 500) lexical suffixes provide a mechanism for bringing multiple lexically heavy morphemes into a word. However, the complexity of actual polysynthetic words in Nuuchahnulth seems rather limited: it is very rare to find words containing more than three lexical suffixes.

There are interesting cases where similar semantic content can be expressed either synthetically using a polysynthetic word or analytically as separate words, which reveals important aspects of the function of polysynthesis in Nuuchahnulth. Typical cases of this are transitive events where the semantic object can be expressed either within the polysynthetic predicate or as a separate word. In such cases, discourse-pragmatic considerations, particularly the referential properties of the object, play a major role in the choice of construction.