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THE OBVIATIVE SUFFIX -ni- IN ALGONQUIAN

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Abstract: The obviative category in Algonquian languages
serves to disambiguate subject and object nominals in
transitive relations where both have third person anim-
ate referents.It has been claimed (Dunnigan, O'Malley &
Schwartz 1978) that in Ojibwe the marker -ni- is used
specifically when an argument has been established as
obviative earlier in the discourse. By tracing -ni- in
the morphology of Fox and Kickapoo and in Bloomfield's
comparative Algonquian work (Bloomfield 1946), the pres-
ent paper establishes the internal syntactic function of
this element and the non-relevance of a discourse based
description of it.

In their paper A functional analysis of the Algonquian obviative,
Dunnigan, O'Malley and Schwartz (henceforth, DOMS 1978) show how the ob-
viative in Southwestern Ojibwe can be described as having a purely syn-
tactic function, namely that of preventing subject-object role ambiguity
in transitive relations where both arguments are third person and anim-
ate. Thus the verbal suffixes encode the information that the subject or
object of a transitive verb is obviative and the nouns, when overtly ex-
pressed, are marked as proximate and obviative respectively. A noun can
only be marked as obviative when it arises in a relation where another
third person animate noun is the other argument.

The crucial cases for testing role ambiguity are those sentences
where both the subject and the object are obviative (including critically
the semantically reversible predicates). It is generally agreed that ob-
viation is a derived syntactic category in the sense that a noun can only
be marked as obviative if another noun or argument has previously been
marked as proximate. Thus in any sentence where both arguments are obviat-
ive, one of the arguments must have been established as obviative earlier
in the discourse. DOMS's claim that such a sentence is unambiguous in Al-
gonquian revolves around their understanding of the function of the af-
fix -ni-, which they claim

indicates that one of its arguments is an obviative ar-
gument of another transitive relation (p.10)

It appears in fact that their claim elsewhere in the paper is that
-ni- marks the subject of that verb as being obviative by dint of being
obviative in another transitive relation, and I shall take that as their
intention.

In order to shed some light on the function of this sequence, I
shall trace the occurrence of -ni- in Bloomfield's "Sketch" (Bloomfield
1946) and in descriptions of Fox (Bloomfield 1927, Voorhis 1971) and in
Kickapoo (Voorhis 1967).

We should first clarify that the sequence -ni- referred to here is
attached at the beginning of the suffix complex on nouns and verbs and

though categorical statements about the origin of this sequence cannot be made here, it is not to be confused in the languages under discussion with the obviative singular inflection -ani (*-ali) which always occurs word finally. Bloomfield himself notices the similarity of the two forms (Bloomfield 1927, §88) and remarks simply that -ni- "resembles the noun inflection".

It is fairly clear in Bloomfield 1946 that the function of -ni- is problematic for the reconstruction of Proto-Algonquian. Its occurrence in the language's reconstructed form is well-attested. In Bloomfield's reconstructions, we find *-li- marking obviative throughout the intransitive (AI, II) and transitive with inanimate object (TI) paradigms in verb inflection. The relevant examples are:

§34   Independent AI 3rd person *-w-
                        Obviative *-liw-

§35   II 3rd singular (sg.) *-wi   plural (pl.) *-wali
                        Obviative sg.*-liwi   Obviative pl.*-liwali

§46   Conjunct   AI 3rd person *-t
                        Obviative *-lit

§47   II 3rd person *-k
                        Obviative *-lik

§49   TI Obviative-it *-amilit

In addition:

§45   Conjunct participle   3rd animate sg. *-ta
                             3rd inanim. sg. *-ti
                             3rd animate pl. *-ciki
                             3rd inanim. pl. *-cili

                             Obviative sg.   *-licili
                             Obviative pl.   *-licihi

Finally, in §30 Bloomfield notes that a possessed animate noun with third person animate possessor is necessarily obviative, but in addition if the possessor is also obviative this is further indicated by *-eliw-, e.g. §30 Cree otihkom-iyiw-a 'the other's louse'.

It is clear that *-li- signals the obviative in all these cases but the exact function of this sequence is not identified. In addition, no explanation is given for the fact that this marker is not used in the suffixes on transitive verbs with animate objects (TA) when these have obviative arguments, e.g. §45 Fox neesaata 'he who killed the other', nor why it is specifically used to indicate obviation on the possessor but not on the possessed in possessive constructions, cf. Cree otihkoma 'his louse (lice)' otihkomiyiwa 'the other's louse (lice)'.

If we go back to Bloomfield 1927, we note first (§87) that in Fox verb inflection permits obviative marking only on a transitive verb when its other argument is third person. Bloomfield then notes that "the only element (in verb inflection) that appears with any consistency is -ni- for obviative", and the observation already mentioned that "this resembles the noun inflection (for obviative)".

In the following list of inflectional suffixes involving the obviative from Bloomfield 1927, we find that -ni- is used systematically in Fox to encode the subject as obviative in the intransitive verb forms in all the modes.

§97 Independent AI 3rd sg. -wa   pl. -wagi
                    Obv sg. -niwani pl. -niwahi

§99   II 3rd sg. -wi   pl. -wani
                    Obv sg. -niwi   pl. -niwani

§110 Potential AI 3rd sg. -sa   pl. -wāsa
                    Obv/Obv pl. -nisa

§111 Conjunct AI/II 3rd sg./pl. -t
                    Obv/Obv pl. -nit

If we look at the TA and TI paradigms, we find the following:

§101 Independent TA 3rd sg.-Obv/Obv pl.   -äwa
                    3rd pl.-Obv/Obv pl.   -äwagi
                    Obv - Obv/Obv pl.   -äniwani
                    Obv pl.- Obv/Obv pl. -äniwahi

§102   Obv/Obv pl.- 3rd sg. -egwa
                    Obv/Obv pl.- 3rd pl. -egōgi

                    it/they - Obv/Obv pl. -egwiniwani

§105   TI (from Voorhis 1971)

                    Obv-it   -aminiwani
                    Obv pl.-it -aminiwahi

§109 Prohibitive TA 3rd sg.- Obv/Obv pl.   -iyähkitci

§110 Potential TA 3rd sg.- Obv/Obv pl.   -āsa
                    3rd pl.- Obv/Obv pl.   -āwāsa
                    Obv/Obv pl.- 3rd sg.   -egusa
                    Obv/Obv pl.- 3rd pl.   -eguwāsa

§111 Conjunct TA Obv - 3rd sg.   -egut
                    Obv - 3rd pl.   -eguwat
                    Obv - Obv   -ānit
                                    -egunit

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TI  Obv - it      -aminit
    it - Obv      -egwinit
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In these forms -ni- is sometimes associated with obviative subject, sometimes with obviative object, and both subject and object obviatives occur that are not marked by -ni-. A pattern emerges immediately when we notice that all obviative subject forms which do not have -ni- in the suffix complex are the so-called inverse forms and all the obviative object forms that do have -ni- are also inverse forms. These inverse forms are marked by the sequence -eg-. The cases where both arguments are obviative all contain -ni-. In the independent mode these are apparently direct forms (i.e. do not contain -eg-) but in the conjunct can be either inverse (with -eg-) or direct (without -eg-). The temptation to conclude that -ni- has a unified function marking specifically the logical subject as obviative becomes irresistible. The following additional forms from Voorhis 1967 fall into the same pattern.[1]

§6.30	Dubitative AI/TI		3rd sg.	-toke
			3rd pl.	-iniitoke
§6.31		TA	3rd sg.- Obv/Obv pl.	-eetoke
			3rd pl.- Obv/Obv pl.	-eetokeehiki
§6.33	Conjunct	II	it/they	-k
			Obv/Obv pl.	-inik
§6.38		TA	3rd sg.- 1st sg.	-it
			Obv/Obv pl.- 1st sg.	-init
			3rd sg./pl.- 1st pl.	-iamet
			Obv/Obv pl.- 1st pl.	-iamenit
§6.41	Interrogative	AI/TI	3rd sg.	-kween
			Obv/Obv pl.	-inikween
§6.42		II	it/they	-kween
			Obv/Obv pl.	-inikween
§6.44		TA	3rd sg.- Obv/Obv pl.	-aakween
§6.45			1st sg.- Obv/Obv pl.	-emaãkeen
§6.46			Obv/Obv pl.- 3rd sg.	-ekokween
			Obv/Obv pl.- 3rd pl.	-ekokweehiki
§6.47			3rd sg.- 1st sg.	-ikween
			Obv/Obv pl.- 1st sg.	-inikween
			3rd sg./pl.- 1st pl.	-iamekween
			Obv/Obv pl.- 1st pl.	-iamenikween

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6.55   Potential TA    3rd sg./pl.- 1st sg.      -iza
                       Obv/Obv pl.- 1st sg.      -iniza
                       3rd sg./pl.- 1st pl.      -iameza
                       Obv/Obv pl.- 1st pl.      -iameniza
```

We have now accumulated fairly powerful evidence that -ni- is iden-
tified with a subject obviative role, including uncontroversial cases not
reconstructible by Bloomfield where first persons act on obviatives and
vice versa. Note that example 6.45 above is crucial in that it contains
an obviative that <u>must</u> derive from earlier in the discourse, yet does not
contain the -ni- marking.

It is perhaps necessary at this stage to look at some of the con-
sequences of this argument. If -ni- marks the subject of a verb as ob-
viative, the inverse paradigms have to be seen as 'passives'[2] in the sense
that the subject is the goal and the object is the actor. This in itself
may be no more than a problem of translation, since within the language
the verb is marked morphologically along exactly these lines. However,
the problem of obligatory 'passivization', implied in this analysis, is
a very real one. There is one immediate benefit. Bloomfield 1927, (§100)
describes the sequence -eg- as an element that is added to the stem in
the inverse forms involving third person, and defines inverse form by
list. It is the present claim that -eg- can be defined in terms of the
contribution it makes to the meaning of the sentence, for example as a
subject-goal or object-actor (i.e. passive) marker. The question of whet-
her a language ought to have a subject-goal construction in the absence
of a corresponding subject-actor construction for a given relation is
left for further study.[3]

Further evidence that -ni- specifies a subject as obviative func-
tion is found in the formation of the conjunct participles in Fox (Bloom-
field 1927, §128). The relevant examples are:

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        Subject of verb nominalized    sg. -nitcini
                                       pl. -nitcihi

        Object of verb nominalized     sg. -ātcini
                                       pl. -ātcihi
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In §111, Bloomfield identifies -ā- as obviative object marker and
-eg- as obviative and inanimate subject marker in the conjunct form. It is
by now clear that these markers are the same -ā- and -eg- that specify
the semantic role of the subject where they occur throughout the verb
paradigms, and that -ni- remains even in the participles as the obviative
subject marker.

If we return to the questions raised in the discussion of Bloom-
field 1946 above, we can now shed some light on them. We recall that al-
though Bloomfield noted the existence of *-li as an obviative marker,
there was no explanation of why this marker did not occur in obviative TA
forms. It is now clear that this absence coincides with the absence of
obviative subject forms in the reconstructions. The element -ni- does oc-
cur in the TA paradigms in Fox and Kickapoo when the subject is obviative.

The other loose end was the use of *-eliw- as the obviative marker
on a noun possessor. Assuming that possession can be viewed as a transit-
ive relation on a par with transitive verbs (an assumption made by, among
others, DOMS 1978), the possessor would be interpreted as subject-actor
of the relation. Again then it is no surprise to find that an obviative
possessor is marked with the Algonquian obviative subject marker. (I am
also assuming that *-eliw- is the same element as *-li-, i.e. connective
e + li + 3rd person -w-.)[4].

Now returning to the original discussion about the function of -ni-
in Ojibwe, we find that the situation is potentially simplified. Our -ni-
occurs in their examples 17, 19 and 22 precisely when the subject of the
verb is obviative.[5] The relation between the Ojibwe case and the Fox/Kic-
kapoo case may be obscured by the fact that the -ni- has apparently been
lost in the independent mode of intransitive verbs, a fact attested by
Bloomfield 1946 §34.

Unfortunately, the choice in DOMS 1978 of Fred as the obviative pos-
sessor in their examples prevents us from comparing the appropriate suf-
fixes with our data on that question.

In order to prove the relative merits of my thesis - that -ni- marks
the logical subject of a relation as obviative - against that of DOMS -
that -ni- identifies the subject as obviative by dint of being obviative
in another transitive relation - we need more data than they present.
Specifically, we should start with a sentence like I kicked the dog that
the cat (obv.) bit, where the predicate bit should have a non-referential
obviative subject and a non-obviative object. More carefully chosen pos-
sessive structures would also help in the analysis of this item.

In conclusion, we do not wish to suggest that the analysis of -ni-
presented in DOMS 1978 is incorrect. In fact, it would be most interesting
to find that loss of a morphological marker in one paradigm enabled that
morpheme to acquire a totally different and more significant syntactic
function in another. Neither is there any guarantee that the function of
-ni- in Algonquian is not as a marker of obviation derived from another
transitive relation. We hope merely to have provided some comparative
data which may throw a different light on the specific questions raised
in DOMS 1978 and on the more general questions of obviation marking and
semantic role interpretation in the Algonquian verb. The question of prec-
isely how the obviative functions at the discourse level is apparently
still open.

Footnotes:

1 For the present purpose we are assuming fairly close identity of
Fox and Kickapoo. Bloomfield does just that in 1927 §97 when he uses a
form from Jones' Kickapoo Tales to fill a hole in the paradigm. The trans-
cription used by Voorhis differs considerably from that used by Bloomfield.

2 The term passive has traditionally been reserved by Algonquian-
ists to refer to the indefinite actor form "someone does x".

3 We had hoped to be able to unify the role of the personal prefix

as subject marker within this argument, but it is clearly not possible. One possibility is that diachronic study would uncover a stage where -ni- marked a unified syntactic subject now obscured by the pronominal prefix system.

4 See Proulx 1977 and further references there for discussion of connective i vs. e.

5 Actually #19 does not contain -ni-, but I assume that to be a typographical error in view of the extensive discussion which follows it.

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