

Obviation in the Algonquian Languages

I completed the Master of Arts program in Linguistics at the University of Calgary in August 2005. My master's thesis is entitled "Formalizing Point-of-View: The Role of Sentience in Blackfoot's Direct/Inverse System." It investigates a type of verb marking referred to as DIRECT/INVERSE MARKING in Blackfoot, a Plains Algonquian language spoken in Southern Alberta and Northwestern Montana. In my PhD program, I plan to build on this research in two directions. First, I will explore the relationship between direct/inverse marking and its companion marking on nouns, referred to as OBVIATION. Second, I will expand my research to other languages with direct/inverse marking, and in particular other Algonquian languages.

In English and other familiar languages, nouns or pronouns may have a distinctive grammatical marking to indicate whether they are the subject or object of the verb (e.g. **he** versus **him**). Similarly, verbs may have a grammatical marker (a suffix) that agrees with the subject (e.g. he think-**s**). In the Algonquian languages, grammatical marking is used for a completely different kind of information. Both obviation marking on nouns and pronouns and direct/inverse marking on verbs mark a type of discourse prominence.

Direct/inverse marking signals the discourse prominence of the individual carrying out the action (the actor) relative to the individual undergoing the action (the goal). Relative discourse prominence is defined as follows: FIRST PERSON ("me") outranks SECOND PERSON ("you"), which outranks THIRD PERSON ("he/she/it"). When the higher-ranking individual is the actor, a DIRECT suffix appears on the verb, but when the higher-ranking individual is the goal, an INVERSE suffix appears on the verb. For example, in the Blackfoot sentence *Nit-ááwayaki-a-a* 'I hit him,' the direct suffix *-a* indicates that first person ("I") is the actor, whereas in the sentence *Nit-ááwayaki-ok-a* 'He kissed me,' the inverse suffix *-ok* indicates that first person ("me") is the goal.

In many sentences, there is more than one third person. Obviation ranks multiple third persons on the basis of their relative discourse prominence. Within a sentence, the more prominent third person is marked PROXIMATE, and all other third persons are marked OBVIATIVE. This notion of prominence, and its role in obviation, is not well understood, but it clearly relates to the relative order of appearance of third persons, their roles in the preceding sentence(s), as well as their relative significance in the discourse.

Obviation and direct/inverse in the Algonquian languages are typically assumed to work together as a single concerted system, both marking the same type of discourse prominence (Aissen 1997; Blain 1998; Bruening 2001; Bloomfield 1962; Dahlstrom 1991). However, in my master's thesis, I demonstrate that, in Blackfoot, obviation and direct/inverse mark different types of discourse prominence. I argue that Blackfoot's direct/inverse system functions to indicate the perspective or point-of-view from which a sentence is expressed. In particular, my claim is that the individual whose point-of-view is reflected in a sentence is the higher-ranking one along the direct/inverse hierarchy. Obviation, on the other hand, is clearly shown not to mark point-of-view. The more

prominent, or proximate, third person is not necessarily the one whose point-of-view is expressed in a sentence.

An important question that remains to be explored is what type of discourse prominence obviation *does* mark. My hypothesis is that the distinction between proximate and obviative third persons is one of information structuring, or how a sentence is anchored within a discourse context. Under this view, the proximate category marks the TOPIC and/or FOCUS of the sentence (Goddard 1990; Junker 2004; Russell 1991, 1996). Generally, a TOPIC is thought of as the part of a sentence that highlights previously established information, and a FOCUS is that which highlights new information (Erteschik-Shir 1997; Pereltsvaig 2004; Rizzi 1997). Whether obviation marks topic, focus, or both, and how these notions relate to the pragmatic notion of point-of-view, are two important questions that I plan to address in my PhD research.

With respect to the first question, I intend to look at Blackfoot texts in order to explore possible correlations between proximate and obviative assignment and topic and focus. My M.A. research focused largely on controlled elicitation, whereby a native Blackfoot speaker translated isolated sentences from English into Blackfoot, and vice versa. In supplementing this type of fieldwork data with texts, I can observe the ways in which proximate and obviative assignment proceeds in a natural discourse context. Furthermore, any texts I collect will be useful for other research purposes, and will contribute to the growing body of literature on this little studied and endangered language.

Regarding the second question, my M.A. research clearly demonstrated that although direct/inverse marking in Blackfoot is sensitive to the pragmatic notion of point-of-view, obviation marking is not. Whether this is the case in other Algonquian languages is yet unclear. Blackfoot is considered to be somewhat divergent from the other Algonquian languages (Denny 1991; Sapir 1916), and a more detailed study of some of these other languages, such as Cree, Ojibwa, or Passamaquoddy, would provide insight into the question of the relationship between direct/inverse and obviation on a larger theoretical scale. My prediction is that something like point-of-view plays a role in the direct/inverse systems of all Algonquian languages, but that obviation systems may exhibit more variability cross-linguistically. The interaction between topic, focus, and point-of-view in the Algonquian direct/inverse and obviation systems is an interesting area of inquiry, which will provide insight not only into Algonquian linguistics, but into research into syntactic-pragmatic theory more generally.

I plan to study at the University of British Columbia, whose linguistics department has an international reputation for its integration of cutting edge theoretical research with fieldwork based description of Amerindian languages. In particular, this department has two faculty members who specialize in Algonquian linguistics. Dr. Rose-Marie Déchaine specializes in Algonquian languages, including Blackfoot, and Dr. Martina Wiltschko is doing very exciting comparative work on Blackfoot and Halkomelem, a Salish language of British Columbia. Not only will I benefit from the expertise of these specialists, but I will also be able to make good use of the department's fieldwork resources, such as texts, contact information for native speakers, and training in fieldwork methods.

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