Obviating the obviative in Nishnaabemwin

Nattaya Piriyawiboon
University of Toronto
September 6, 2007

Abstract: This paper presents a reanalysis of obviation in Nishnaabemwin under a feature geometric approach (Harley and Ritter, 2002). It is shown that obviation results from feature deletion in order to avoid coindexation conflict when two animate third persons co-occur in a sentence. It is also argued that obviation is not a discourse process and that the obviative marker is the inanimate marking on an animate noun rather than a separate morpheme. Obviation takes place in Nishnaabemwin because it is a pronominal argument language (Jelinek, 1984) that lacks overt morphological case marking.

Keywords: Obviative, Proximate, Morphology, Algonquian, Nishnaabemwin

1. Introduction

This paper presents a reanalysis of obviation, one of the most interesting morphological phenomena in Nishnaabemwin. The purpose of this study is to determine whether the ‘obviative’ is a legitimate nominal feature or merely a cover term for a more profound phenomenon which cannot be seen at first glance. The obviative marking obligatorily appears in two circumstances: 1) two animate third persons in possessive forms such as ‘Bill’s father’ and 2) two animate third persons in a transitive clause such as ‘Bill loves Mary’. In these cases, the possessum (father) and the object (Mary) are marked with the morpheme called ‘obviative’. Examples (1a) and (2a) illustrate possessive obviation and sentential obviation respectively in Nishnaabemwin:

(1)  
\[ \text{ndo-zaag-aa-n John animosh-an}^{2} \]
\[ \text{1-love AN-dir-obv John dog-obv}^{3} \]
\[ \text{‘I like John’s dog’} \]

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1 Nishnaabemwin is an Algonquian language spoken in Southern Ontario.
2 Unless otherwise stated, the data come from my fieldwork with a language consultant who speaks the Manitoulin Island dialect of Nishnaabemwin.
3 The abbreviations used in this paper are: 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; obv = obviative; dir = direct theme sign; inv = inverse theme sign; AN = animate; IN = inanimate; pl = plural; sing = singular; dem = demonstrative; loc = locative and neg = negative.
In (1), we observe that the noun possessed by a third person is marked for obviative, i.e. the suffix –an, if it is animate\(^4\) (1a) but not when it is inanimate (1c). In (2), the animate object of the sentence (2a) is obviative whereas the inanimate object of the sentence (2c) is not. The obviative marking only occurs when there are at least two animate third persons in the sentence as we see that it does not occur in the sentences (1b) and (2b) where there is only one animate third person in the sentence.

The obviative is not limited to the object of the sentence. If the subject is obviative, then the object must be proximate (the unmarked form), as shown in (3).

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\(^4\) What considered animate in Algonquian are not limited to living things like humans and animals. In Nishnaabemwin, certain objects, such as tobacco, (running) cars, sacred stones, trees, some fruit, things of nature such as the sun, the moon, etc., are animate as well. For more detail, see Goddard (2001). The animacy distinction is realized in three places: object-verb agreement, demonstratives and plural suffixes. The object-verb agreement is shown in the verb finals. For example, ‘to see an animate noun’, the verb is *waabmaad* whereas ‘to see an inanimate noun’, the verb is *waabmadang*. The demonstrative pronouns for both genders will be demonstrated on page 20. The plural suffix is *-ag* for animate nouns and *-an* for inanimate nouns.
One unbreakable rule for obviation is that there can only be one unmarked, or proximate, animate nominal per sentence, as shown in (4). In these sentences, the subject is unmarked whereas the rest of the third persons all have the obviative suffix.

(4) a. John zaag-aa-n nen Manii-an Sue-an Jane-an
   John love AN-dir-obv dem obv Mary-obv Sue-obv Jane-obv
   ‘John loves Mary, Jane and Sue’

   b. John gii-miin-aa-n gwisens-an animsh-an
   John past-gave to AN-dir-obv boy-obv dog-obv
   ‘John gave a boy(/boys) a dog(/dogs)’

Notice that the subject of the sentence is usually morphologically unmarked and the rest of the animate third persons are marked with –an.

In a complex clause, i.e. one containing a main clause and a subordinate clause, obviation is not as rigid as in a simplex clause. The subject of the main clause is always morphologically unmarked but the subject of the embedded clause may or may not be in the obviative form. The sentences in (5) illustrate this point. In (5a), the presence of the obviative marker on the subject of the embedded sentence is optional. In (5b), obviation in the embedded clause is not required and in (5c), the object ‘John’ must be obviative.

(5) a. Manii nendaan John(-an) mshkawziid
    Mary think John-(obv) be strong
    ‘Mary thinks that John is strong’

    b. Manii minoowamdan we pakowan John gaagiishknaatood
    Mary like dem IN shirt John bought
    ‘Mary likes the shirt that John bought’

    c. Manii gii-kwejm-aa-n John-an wiisaaad enakmigak
    Mary past-ask AN-dir-obv John-obv come party
    ‘Mary persuaded John to come to her party’
One thing worth noting that will be relevant to our analysis is that when an inanimate nominal is plural, it is marked with a suffix that is identical in form to the obviative –an, and the verb shows number agreement, which also has the same form as the obviative. The sentences in (6) present the plural versions of the objects in (1c) and (2c).

(6) a. n-bashkend-aan-an 1-like IN-dir-IN pl John do-wiigwaam-an John 3-house-IN pl
   ‘I like John’s houses’

   b. John gii-mowebshkaad-an nen pakwaakd-an
      John past-kick IN-IN pl dem IN pl ball-IN pl
   ‘John kicked the balls’

The examples above illustrate that there is homophony between the obviative suffix, which is marked solely on an animate noun, and the inanimate plural suffix, which is marked solely on an inanimate noun. Moreover, the verb suffix and the demonstrative occurring with the obviative also have the same forms as those occurring with the inanimate plural nouns (compare (6b) with (4a)). Furthermore, as shown in example (4b), the noun marked with an obviative may be interpreted as singular or plural. In other words, obviative singular and plural nouns have the same form.

If we postulate that -an is the inanimate plural suffix, then this suffix would have to include a singular animate obviative feature and a plural animate obviative feature in its feature specification as well, which is quite a heavy task for one morpheme to carry. The problems this paper addresses are as follows: why do the obviative and the inanimate plural have the same form? Is this coincidental or is it principled?

The main goal of this paper is to argue that -an does not represent homophony or syncretism whereby the features obviative, inanimate and plural are merged into one morpheme. The hypotheses of this paper are that there is only one morpheme -an. It is marked on inanimates for plural and on animates for syntactic inanimateness to resolve coindexation conflict between two animate nominals and one pronominal argument. Obviation is thus motivated by syntax rather than discourse. This will be further elaborated in Section 3.

To summarize, obviative marking is present when there are two animate third persons co-occurring in the same sentence. One third person is unmarked while the others are marked with a suffix called ‘obviative’. The obviative assignment is straightforward in the possessive form: the possessum is always obviative and the possessor is always unmarked. As for the sentential obviation, the subject is unmarked by default unless the subject is possessed by
another third person or it is introduced later in the story. In an intransitive clause, an animate third person does not usually take the obviative marking, since it is the only participant of the sentence. However, it may receive the obviative marking only if in the previous sentence it is marked so.

In this section, I have demonstrated the environments triggering obviation in Nishnaabemwin. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the analyses of obviation in the previous literature. Section 3 presents the proposed analysis of obviation in Nishnaabemwin under Feature Geometry, the theory I adopt in this paper. Section 4 presents the evidence supporting this analysis and Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Obviation in the literature and its problems

Analyses of Algonquian obviation can be divided into three streams: discourse-based, syntax-based and discourse/syntax-based. Each approach will be discussed and some problems will be identified.

Under the discourse-based analyses, obviation is treated as a device that distinguishes the participants in a sentence or across sentences based on their discourse functions. The marked person (obviative) is more distant, unknown, less prominent, less important and out of focus with respect to the unmarked person (proximate), which is nearer, more important, more prominent, in focus and known to the speaker. An analysis of this type can be found in Bloomfield (1946, 1962), Goddard (1984, 1990), Dahlstrom (1991), Hockett (1966), Wolfart (1978) and Thomason (2003) among others. It is the most accepted and widely-known description of obviation as it is recorded in major reference grammars of Algonquian (Valentine (2001), Bloomfield (1958), Dahlstrom (1988) to name a few). The motivation for marking an animate third person participant is to mark the main character of the story. The main character, or the topic of the story, must be distinguished from the rest of the participants by means of obviative marking on the non-topic characters. It is dependent on the speaker which animate third person character receives the topic status.

Three questions follow from this assumption. First, one might wonder why it is the non-topic that is marked instead of marking on the topic.

5 Within a stretch of a story, an obviative person may maintain its form even when it is the subject of an intransitive clause. However, this is optional and subject to the speaker’s choice to keep it marked or not. The case where an obviative becomes unmarked in the following sentence is called ‘proximate shift’.
Moreover, elicited data from a consultant demonstrate that even the focus of the sentence can be obviative, as shown in (7) and (8).

(7) gaagweya yaa-sii ezaagat Manii-an John  eta	nobody there be-neg love Mary-obv John only
‘There is no one else but Mary that John loves’

(8) John giishaa wesiins oden-ang giwaabmaan
    John went zoo there-loc saw
    gbooji gaash-an  eta
    big cat-obv only
‘John went to the zoo. He only saw tigers’

Second, in the case of possessive obviation, it is the possessum that is marked obviative, for example in John o-gaashag-an ‘John’s cat(s)’ (cf. gaashag ‘cat’, gaashag-oog ‘cats’). In this case, ‘cat’ should be the focus, not John. According to the discourse-based approach, it is the non-focused character that is marked. However, this is not the case. It is the possessum that is marked with the obviative. The discourse-based approach fails to capture obviation in the possessive form.

Third, the discourse-based accounts cannot explain why an inanimate co-occurring with an animate in a sentence never triggers obviation. Proponents of this account must resort to a hierarchy whereby the animate entities outrank the inanimate. Moreover, by assuming that obviation is discourse, those who propose this hypothesis are not able to account for why the environment triggering obviation is syntactically governed: the c-commanding person is unmarked and the c-commanded person is marked with the obviative.

The second approach to obviation is syntax/discourse-based (see, for instance, Aissen (1997, 2000, 2001), Rhodes (1990) and Buszard-Welcher (2003)). According to this approach, obviation serves both discourse and syntactic functions. Within a discourse, only one person can be prominent and it is usually linked to the subject of the sentence. Aissen (1997) claims that third persons are ranked on an obviation Scale in which the proximate outranks

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6 Some might say that an inanimate may take an obviative form if possessed by a participant who is not the subject of the sentence. This morpheme is called ‘further obviative’ or ‘inanimate obviative’. For example, in ‘John saw his house’, ‘house’ may be marked with -ini if it is not owned by ‘John’. That is, when the possessor of an inanimate noun is disjoint from the subject of the sentence, it is marked with a morpheme -ini, which is argued to be inanimate obviative. However, I argue that this is not the case of obviation but the case of disjoint marking. See page (17) for more detail.
the obviative. All third persons in the discourse must be assigned an obviative status and, within an obviation span, there can only be one proximate.

The benefit of this approach is that it combines discourse and syntactic elements and shows that they are dependent on each other. The highly ranked grammatical function such as the subject must be linked to the highly ranked discourse function such as the proximate. This approach seems to combine the best of both worlds. However, the problem with this analysis is that it is not clear why there should be a separate span for a third person and why third persons should be ranked on a scale. The scale seems to be ad hoc and lacks explanatory power. If the obviation span is universal, we would expect this span to play a role in other languages. Aissen (2000) claims that obviation is found in languages outside Algonquian such as Tzotzil and Chamorro. Her examples, however, do not illustrate the same type of obviative marking as found in Algonquian as there is no morphological marking on the overt nouns in her examples. As far as obviation is concerned, Algonquian is the only family discussed in the literature that has an obligatory distinction among overt nominals.

The third approach, which is pursued in this study, is syntax-based (e.g. Dunnigan et al. (1978), Grafstein (1984) and Dechaine and Wiltschko (2002)). According to these analyses, obviation serves for argument association and disjoint reference. Disjoint reference is required when two referents are third persons. In English, the sentence ‘he saw him’ demonstrates disjoint reference, i.e. the object is distinct from the subject; while ‘he saw himself’ demonstrates coreference, i.e. the object is the same person as the subject. The Binding Principles (Chomsky, 1981) require that a pronominal is free and an anaphor is bound within a c-commanding domain. Grafstein (1984) argues that since there are no overt pronominals for disjoint reference (such as he and him) nor anaphoric expressions (such as himself) in Nishnaabemwin, the only way the referents are interpreted as disjoint is to mark them with a disjoint marker: the obviative. In this study, I follow Grafstein’s analysis in that obviation marks disjoint reference in pronominals; however, I further propose that obviative marking on overt nominals, which was not dealt with in her analysis, serves as binding between the pronominals and the overt nominals.

In this paper, I reject that the obviative marking is motivated by a discourse function of a third person since its appearance is triggered by a syntactic environment. However, I do concur that discourse does play a role in determining the obviative status in a stretch of a story. My point is that it is not the motivation for the obviative marking to exist in a language. The environment governing obviation is syntactic: that is it occurs when two animate third persons are in a c-commanding relation. In a transitive clause, the object is c-commanded by the subject and in a possessive noun phrase; the possessum is c-commanded by the possessor. In both cases, the c-commanded
person is marked obviative. The fact that Nishnaabemwin is polysynthetic and does not make use of morphological cases is another reason why syntactic obviation is obligatory.

In this section, I have discussed three approaches to obviation. None of the previous analyses have considered the fact that the obviative and the inanimate morphemes are homophonous and are in complementary distribution. I will show that it is not a coincidence that these two morphemes are homophonous. In both cases, only one morpheme is involved. This will be discussed in the following section.

3. What is the obviative and how it is triggered?

In this section, we will answer the following questions: is ‘obviative’ a legitimate feature and if so, what mechanism triggers it? Second, how do we unify obviation in a transitive clause and a possessive form? Section 3.1 presents previous studies on the feature ‘obviative’. Section 3.2 discusses why obviation is required in Nishnaabemwin and Section 3.3 presents a new analysis on sentential obviation and 3.4 presents an analysis on possessive obviation.

3.1 Obviative as a feature

Why should we be concerned about the obviative feature? It is assumed, following Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz, 1993), that a morpheme triggering agreements is the phonological realization of a feature bundle. So, the obviative must be composed of certain features and the proximate, which is unmarked, should lack those features. First, I will discuss previous attempts to posit ‘obviative’ as a feature. Halle and Marantz (1993) discuss the obviative feature in Potawatomi, an Algonquian language, in their Distributed Morphology paper and Bliss and Jesney and Bliss (2005) posit the obviative feature on the Feature Geometry proposed by Harley and Ritter (2002). Each study is discussed briefly below.

Halle and Marantz (1993)

Halle and Marantz (1993) analyze obviation in Potawatomi under Distributed Morphology which has the basics that any type of agreement is the result of a feature. Halle and Marantz posit that the feature [±obv] appears for all persons:

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A feature is defined as the property triggering nominal and verbal agreement.
[-obv] for first and second persons and [+obv] or unmarked for third persons. Halle and Marantz propose that a third person nominal is spelled out with the obviative suffix when it is inserted under the DP that has the [+obv] feature. The feature is syntactically motivated, present when another DP is not specified with the [+obv] feature. However, they are unable to explain why the feature [+obv] does not co-occur with the feature [-obv] within a sentence. If we have a first person Agent and a third person Theme, only the feature [-obv] appears in the sentence. Therefore, there is no reason why first and second persons should have [-obv] feature when they never co-occur with [+obv] feature. In other words, [+obv] is never triggered by its counterpart but is triggered by the absence of the feature altogether. Halle and Marantz admit that this analysis poses a problem and leave this issue open for further research.

Harley and Ritter (2002)

The Feature Geometry proposed by Harley and Ritter (2002) is the background of the present study. The basic idea is that morphological features such as person, number and gender are structured (see also Noyer (1992) and Cowper and Hall (2005) for similar analyses). There is a marked and unmarked value for each feature, with the unmarked implied by the presence of the marked. The geometry employed in this study is the one developed in Bejar (2003) for Nishnaabemwin. The difference between Harley and Ritter’s geometry and Bejar’s geometry is the underspecification for an unmarked feature. For example, if within a language, plural is the unmarked feature, it will not be specified in the number node. If singular is the unmarked feature, it will not be specified (see Cowper and Hall (2004, 2005) for the notion of feature markedness). The geometries for person and number in Algonquian languages are illustrated in (9). Person features are dependent of the π node. Third persons are the default interpretation of the π node. First persons are specified with the features [π [participant]] and second persons are specified with the features [π [participant [addressee]]]. Number features are presented under # node with singular as the default interpretation and [plural] signifies plural.
As for animacy distinction, Elizabeth Cowper (p.c.) suggests that inanimate and animate nouns are distinguished in terms of the person feature. Inanimate nouns are not a person and thus lack the $\pi$ node. They only have the number node whereas animate nouns will have both the $\pi$ and number nodes. The geometries in (10) illustrate the feature composition of the animate and inanimate nouns in Nishnaabemwin.

(10)  

a. Animate nouns

b. Inanimate nouns

The inanimate and animate nouns are distinguished by the presence or absence of the person ($\pi$) node. Therefore, the inanimate noun lacks a person feature, hence not a person, and only has the number node whereas the animate noun has both person and number nodes. Evidence for the lack of a person feature in an inanimate person comes from the fact that inanimate third persons never show person agreement with the verb and the verb only agrees with their number.

How is the obviative presented in the Feature Geometry? One way is to posit a feature [obviative] and insert it somewhere in the geometry whenever needed. Bliss and Jesney (2005) propose that the obviative and proximate

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8 $\pi$ = person; # = number; part = participant; addr = addressee; plu = plural

9 This analysis is different from that in Harley and Ritter (2002)’s feature geometry where the animacy distinction is represented by the features [animate] and [inanimate] which are the subfeatures of the Class node which itself is dependent of the Individuation node (number).
features are dependents of a Stage node as shown in (11). They further argue that the obviative and proximate features are present even in first and second persons. The underlined features are the unmarked features.

(11)

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RE
Sentience| Individuation
 Participant Stage
Speaker | Addressee | Proximate | Obviative
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I will not discuss the details and the motivation behind this proposal. The reader is referred to Bliss and Jesney (2005) for more detail. The reason why the geometry in (11) is not adopted here is because it does not account for the animate/inanimate distinction. There is no reason why an obviative is relevant only to the animate persons and the mechanism that triggers sentential and possessive obviation is not addressed.

Before we determine where in the geometry the obviative / proximate features reside, we must know why obviation is called for in the first place. I argue that obviation is motivated by syntax because its occurrence is governed by the syntactic relations, i.e. two animate third persons in a c-commanding relation. We will look at the motivation of obviation in Nishnaabemwin in the following section.

3.2 Syntactic motivation of the obviative

Nishnaabemwin is a polysynthetic language. Some of its characteristics are: free word order, head-marking and pronominal arguments. In this study, I assume the Pronominal Argument Hypothesis\(^\text{10}\) (Jelinek, 1984), henceforth PAH, which accounts for the behaviours of the so-called non-configurational languages (Hale, 1983). PAH states that in some languages, the argument position is restricted to pronominals\(^\text{11}\). Overt nominals are adjoined to the clause and bind the pronominal arguments by Case matching. Since nominals appear outside the argument position, they can appear freely as an adjunct. Warlpiri is an example of this type of languages. In Nishnaabemwin, overt nouns are not marked for morphological cases. Therefore, coindexation

\(^{10}\) See also Baker (1996) for a similar analysis on Mohawk.

\(^{11}\) According to Baker (1996), this is due to the fact that the verb in polysynthetic languages does not assign Case to its argument. The Case Filter (Chomsky, 1981) bars an NP to which a Case is not assigned from appearing in the argument positions.
between the nominals and the pronominal arguments cannot be established by case matching. Following Grafstein (1984), I assume that in Nishnaabemwin, coindexation is established by feature matching between the overt nominals and the pronominal arguments. This principle is called the Principle of Argument Association, revised from Grafstein (1984) below:

(12) Argument Association Principle (revised)\(^{12}\)
In a pronominal argument language, the arguments are associated to the nominals by Case matching if the nominals are marked with morphological cases; otherwise, they are associated by matching the phi-features.

I assume that the principles in (12) apply to all pronominal argument languages. The pronominal argument is parameter active in languages where the argument positions are restricted to pronominals. The nominals are assigned a theta role by matching their phi-features with the pronominals. The coindexation can be done in two ways: first, by Case matching if nominals are marked with cases; or second, by feature matching if they are Case-less. Nishnaabemwin does not mark morphological cases on the nominals. Therefore, the phi-features of the nominals are evaluated to match those of the pronominals in order to be licensed to appear. To illustrate this principle, consider a transitive clause with overt nominals. Example (13) illustrates the coindexation between the pronominals and the overt nominals:

(13) w-waabnd-aa-n jiimaan John ‘he sees it, boat, John’
   3- see IN-dir-IN boat John

The proclitic w- represents a third person agreement and the suffix -n represents an inanimate agreement. The third person agreement w- has one person feature and the suffix -n has no person feature (see the geometry (10) on page 10). The clitic w- thus cannot link to jiimaan, which is inanimate, and link to John, which is animate and has one person feature. jiimaan links to the pronominal -n because both contain only one number node. John is assigned the Agent role by the Theme suffix –aa. The sentence is interpretable as ‘John sees the boat’.

\(^{12}\)The original version, proposed in Grafstein (1984) is “Associate a noun form with an argument position if the features of that noun form match the features attributed to that argument position”.
Now consider the case where two animate third persons co-occur as illustrated by the sentence ‘John sees a bear’ in (14). When the argument association principle applies, the features of the nominals are evaluated. Both ‘John’ and ‘bear’ have the same amount of person feature specification: one person node. We have a coindexing conflict here where both ‘John’ and ‘bear’ can be coindexed to the third person pronominal \( w \)-, as shown below:

\[
(14) \quad ^*_{w\text{-}} \text{waabm-aa} \ mkwaw \ John \quad \text{‘he sees him, bear, John’}
\]

The sentence in (14) is ungrammatical because it is uninterpretable\(^{13}\). We do not know which noun controls the person clitic, hence cannot interpret who sees whom. There is a coindexation conflict. This is the situation where obviation takes place. We will discuss how obviation solves this conflict in the following section.

In sum, I have assumed that the Algonquian argument positions are restricted to pronominals. Overt nominals appear in the adjunct and must be bound with the pronominals by feature matching in order to be interpretable. Obviation takes place in the situation where coindexation between the nominals and the pronominals runs into conflict. In the following section, obviation is analyzed as a result of feature deletion.

3.3 Sentential obviation

It has been shown that Algonquian overt nominals must be coindexed to a pronominal argument by feature matching. Once coindexation is established, nominals can be omitted. When two animate nominals co-occur, they both have the feature \([\text{person}]\) (or \([\pi]\)) and are both potential antecedents of the pronominal \( w \)- but only one nominal can be coindexed to the person proclitic \( w \)-. Compare sentence (15) and (16). In (15), ‘John’ is linked to the person clitic \( w \)- since both have the third person feature \([\pi]\). However, we cannot achieve feature matching in (16) because we have two potential antecedents for the person clitic.

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\(^{13}\) The sentence is ungrammatical not because the arguments corefer, but because the sentence does not have an element to tell who the seer is and who is seen. If the subject and the object corefer, as in ‘he sees himself’, the reflexive morpheme \(-idizo\) is used.
(15) Feature matching matches ‘John’ with the person clitic $w$-

\[
\begin{align*}
&w-\text{waabnd-aa-n} & \text{jiimaan} & \text{John} & \text{‘he sees it, boat, John’} \\
&\pi & \# & \pi
\end{align*}
\]

(16) *$w$-waabm-aa John mkwa ‘he sees him, John, bear’

\[
\begin{align*}
&w & \pi & \pi & \pi
\end{align*}
\]

Feature matching cannot be done!

Let us say that the verb complex $w$-$\text{waabmaa}$ has the meaning ‘he sees him’ without showing which noun is the one who sees and which is seen. The pronominal $w$- represents third person agreement and the direct Theme –$aa$ tells us that the controller of the verb interacts with a third person\(^{14}\). Without a distinction between the two nominals, we do not know which one is the controller of the verb $\text{waabam}$ ‘see AN’. The language does not mark a nominative or accusative case to show which one is Agent and which one is Theme. Therefore, the sentence is uninterpretable. To resolve this ambiguity, a distinction must be made between the two nominals. The subject of the sentence, which is the c-commanding participant, will be coindexed to the pronominal $w$- and the object must get rid of its person feature so that it cannot be a potential antecedent for the pronominal $w$-. In doing so, the syntax deletes its person feature and the nominal is marked with a marker –$an$\(^{15}\). The process of feature deletion is summarized in (17) for the sentence $w$-$\text{waabmaan mkwan John}$ ‘John sees the bear(s)’:

(17) Feature deletion

1. After lexical insertion (Halle & Marantz, 1993), feature matching between the person clitic and the overt nominals takes place.

2. The subject of the sentence is coindexed with the pronominal and the object cannot maintain its person feature because it will cause interpretation conflict. Thus, it deletes its person feature.

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\(^{14}\)–$aa$ is a Theme suffix indicating that no matter which person the controller may be, it interacts with a third person Theme, for example: $n$-$\text{waabm-aa}$ ‘I see him’, $g$-$\text{waabm-aa}$ ‘You see him’, $w$-$\text{waabmd-aa-n}$ ‘He sees it’.

\(^{15}\) The reason why it must be the plural form is dealt with next.
3. The bare number node signifies inanimate, thus the morphology inserts the only overt inanimate morpheme \( /-(a)n/ \). The verb agrees with it by the suffix \( /-n/ \).

4. The coindexation can be established, the nominal with the person feature links to the pronominal. The one without the person feature triggers agreement \(-n\). The sentence is interpretable.

We have just seen how the effect of obviation is created at the sentence level. It has been shown that the morpheme identified as obviative is in fact the realization of an animate whose person feature is stripped away. This suggests that the obviative/proximate distinction is in fact the animate/inanimate distinction, a type of distinction already found in the language. The obviative is not a feature but the result of a feature deletion that resolves coindexation conflict. This analysis explains the following facts about obviation:

1. There can only be one proximate per sentence.

This is because only one person can link to the only one pronominal per sentence. The subject, which is the argument in the c-commanding position, is usually the one that is coindexed to the person agreement prefix. As long as the same pair is participating in the story, their animate/inanimate statuses are kept and the overt nominals can be omitted.

2. The singular and the plural obviative have the same form.

\[16\] Here, I use \([\text{person}]\) and \([\text{number}]\) in place of \([\pi]\) and \([\#]\) in order to make the process easy to capture.
This is because the obviative person is actually marked with a plural suffix. The animate nouns marked with an inanimate plural suffix will have different interpretation from the ones marked with an animate plural suffix, which signifies plurality.

3. An obviative person may become proximate within a discourse.

This can be explained by the fact that the coindexation is done within a sentence and across sentences as long as the participants are the same. When the obviative person reappears with a new participant in the following sentence, coindexation starts all over again and it will naturally receive the proximate status if being subject.

I have shown that this analysis provides a unified account for the rule of obviation, the number interpretation and the proximate shift which at first all seem irrelevant to one another. Next, obviation in possessive forms will be discussed.

3.4 Obviation in possessive forms

Under the present analysis, we will assume that the obviative marking on the possessum results from coindexation conflict as well. In (18) below, there are two nominals: John and w-gwis-an ‘his son’. John c-commands both wgwisan and gwis. First, John is the subject and must c-commands the object wgwisan. Second, John is the possessor and must c-commands the possessum gwis. In order to ensure that John is linked to the person clitic, the c-commanded arguments ‘son’ must lose their person feature. Therefore, w-gwis-an ‘his son’ is obviative for two reasons: first, because it is c-commanded by John, the subject of the sentence and the possessor and because it is the object of the sentence.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{John w-gii-waabm-aa-n} & \quad w-gwis-an \\
\text{John 3-past-see AN-dir-IN} & \quad 3\text{-son-IN pl} \\
\text{‘John saw his, son’}
\end{align*}
\]

In (18), gwisens ‘son’ loses its person feature so that ‘John’ can be coindexed with the person clitic w- on both the verb and the noun. When the

---

\(^{17}\)This applies to Nishnaabemwin only. The situation is different in Blackfoot where the obviative is marked with the animate singular suffix ‘-yi’. In Blackfoot, the plural animate will not show the obviative status because the singular and plural animate forms are already distinctive. Thus, obviation is only relevant in the singular forms.
possessor is coindexed with the subject, the possessum is marked with the inanimate plural suffix whereas when the possessor is coindexed with a non-subject participant, the possessum is marked with a disjoint marker. When the possessor is coreferential with the subject of the sentence, the possessum is marked with -\textit{an} as in (18) where the intended meaning is ‘John saw his own son’. On the other hand, when the possessor is disjoint from the subject of the sentence, the suffix –(\textit{i})\textit{ni} is used instead of –\textit{an} as in (19), where the intended meaning is John saw someone else’s son.

(19) \begin{align*}
\text{John} & \quad \text{w-gii-waabsm-aa-\textbf{ni}} & \text{w-gwis-\textbf{ini}} \\
\text{John} & \quad \text{3-past-see AN-dir-\textit{ini}} & \text{3-son-\textit{ini}} \\
\text{‘John saw his son’} & 
\end{align*}

Below is the summary of sentential and possessive obviation.

\textbf{The parallel}

1) In a transitive clause, obviation resolves coindexing conflict between two animate third person subject and object.

2) In a possessive form, obviation resolves coindexing conflict between two animate third person possessor and possessum.

3) Both conflicts are resolved by deleting the person feature of the lower, c-commanded nominal and turning it into a (morphologically) inanimate.

(20) Transitive clause

\[ CP \rightarrow \text{NP}_{1[person]} \rightarrow \text{IP} \rightarrow \text{VoiceP} \rightarrow w-\text{VoiceP} \rightarrow \text{VP} \rightarrow \text{NP} \rightarrow \text{NP}_{2[person]} \]
possessive

\[\text{PossP} \quad \text{NP}_{1[\text{person}]} \quad \text{Poss} \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{w-} \quad \text{NP}_{2[\text{person}]}\]

The possessum is obviative because it is c-commanded by a third person. However, when the possessor itself is a c-commanded person, i.e., an obviative person, the possessum is marked with a disjoint marker. That means the /-an/ suffix also marks a coreferencing between the subject and the possessor but /-(i)ni/ marks a disjoint reference between the possessor and the subject.

In this section, I have shown that the obviative is not a feature but the result of a feature deletion that takes place in a language which has pronominal arguments and lacks morphological case marking. Obviation is the process of stripping the person feature of one animate participant so that it does not cause coindexation conflict with the other animate participant. This syntactic resolution is necessary Nishnaabemwin since it does not make use of morphological case marking. The pronominal agreement must be coindexed with the overt nominal by feature matching. Under a feature geometric approach, I have shown that there is no need to create a special node for the proximate/obviative distinction in Nishnaabemwin and that we can make use of the animate/inanimate distinction to explain the same phenomenon. In the following section, I will show the evidence supporting this analysis.

4. Evidence for monosemy -an

Some evidence supports the claim that the obviative and the inanimate markers are the same morpheme. First, there is homophony between the inanimate suffix and obviative suffix across Algonquian languages. Second, the obviative and the inanimate show the same verbal agreement and demonstrative forms. Third, the inanimate suffix and the obviative suffix are in complementary distribution. Fourth, the inanimate person can never appear in the subject position of a transitive clause because it has no features to be matched with the pronominal person agreement. Finally, gender shift also exists in the language for other morphosyntactic reasons. This is elaborated below.
4.1 Cross-language homophony

The obviative suffix and the inanimate plural suffix are homophonous in at least five Algonquian languages, as shown in (22).

(22) The obviative and inanimate plural suffixes in five Algonquian languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number/Animacy</th>
<th>Animate</th>
<th>Inanimate</th>
<th>Obviative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Proto-Algonquian (Bloomfield, 1946)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>-a</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-ali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>-aki</td>
<td>-ali</td>
<td>-ahi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fox (Goddard, 1994)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>-a</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>-ani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>-aki</td>
<td>-ani</td>
<td>-ahi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Menomini (Bloomfield, 1962)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>-ak</td>
<td>-an</td>
<td>same as sing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Plains Cree (Dahlstrom, 1991)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>-ak</td>
<td>-a</td>
<td>same as sing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nishnaabemwin (Valentine, 2001)</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>-ag</td>
<td>-an</td>
<td>same as sing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Agreement

Agreement on verbs and demonstratives shows the same pattern between the inanimate plural and the obviative. Examples in (23) illustrate person and animacy marking for the obviative and inanimate persons interacting with an animate person.

(23) a. w-waabm-aa-n ‘he (prox) sees him/them (obv)’
3-see AN -dir-obv
b. w-waabd-aa-n ‘he sees it’
3-see IN-dir-IN

(Valentine, 2001, p. 287)
Notice that the verb final is still distinctive: -m- for animates and -nd- for inanimates. Since the feature deletion takes place after object agreement, it does not affect the verb final. That means the object-verb agreement takes place in D-structure and coindexation takes place in S-structure. Whether the final /n/ is an animacy or number agreement, it confirms our hypothesis that the obviative and inanimate persons have the same agreement.

Another similarity is found in the demonstrative adjectives and pronouns. The demonstratives used for an obviative person are identical to those used for an inanimate plural person. Examples of demonstrative pronouns in Nishnaabemwin are provided below:

(24) Comparison between the demonstrative pronouns for the animate, inanimate and obviative nouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>This</th>
<th>These</th>
<th>That</th>
<th>Those</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animate</td>
<td>maaba</td>
<td>gonda</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>giwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inanimate</td>
<td>maanda</td>
<td>nanda/nonda</td>
<td>wi</td>
<td>niwi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obviative</td>
<td>nanda/nonda</td>
<td>niwi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Valentine, 2001, p. 123-124)

From (24), we observe that the obviative demonstratives are identical to the inanimate plural ones. An example of the sentence containing an inanimate object and an obviative object is provided in (25). When an inanimate plural noun is the object of the sentence, the verb agrees with its gender and number, as shown in (25a). When an obviative person appears in a sentence, the same verb agreement and demonstrative are used, as shown in (25b).

(25) a. o-gii-ganawaaband-aa-n aniw mitigoons-an
     3-past-look at IN-dir-IN pl IN pl dem. bush- IN pl
     ‘He looked at those bushes (inanimate)’

b. o-gii-bapasidiyeshka-waa-n aniw zhingibeny-an
     3-past-kick in the rump repeatedly-dir-obv. dem. helldiver-obv.
     ‘He gave that/those helldiver(s) (obv.) a couple of powerful kicks in the rump’

(The Dog’s Children, p. 18)

---

18 These forms are used in the dialect of Manitoulin Island Odawa. In other dialects, the obviative and inanimate plural demonstratives pronouns are also identical.
In (25a), the verb agrees with the inanimate object mitigoonsan in number by the suffix –(a)n and with its gender by the final –nd-. The demonstrative used with the inanimate plural noun is aniw (those). In (25b), the verb agrees with the obviative object zingibenyan by the suffix –(a)n and the demonstrative used with the obviative noun is also aniw. In this sentence, the number of the helldiver is unspecified, which can be easily accounted for if we assume that it is marked with a plural suffix. Both examples show striking similarities between the inanimate plural and the obviative persons.

4.3 Complementary distribution

The locative morpheme /-ing/ takes the same slot as the inanimate plural and the obviative, meaning the obviative /-an/ and the inanimate plural /-an/ are in the same slot. When the possessive is marked with a locative /-ing/, the locative marker occupies the same slot as the possessum number and obviative suffixes.

(26) w-jiimaan-ing ‘in his/her boat(s)’  *w-jiimaan-an-ing
     3-boat-loc 3-boat-pl-loc

w-nimosh-ing ‘on his dog(s)’  *w-nimosh-an-ing
     3-dog-loc 3-dog-pl-loc

The complementary distribution of the two morphemes supports that they are indeed the same morpheme; otherwise an obviative locative or an inanimate locative would be possible.

4.4 Inability for inanimates to be the subject of a transitive clause

If the subject is defaulted to be coindexed with an agreement morpheme representing person features, it follows that an inanimate person can never be subject of a transitive clause because it lacks a person feature. This is the case in Algonquian languages since an inanimate nominal is not allowed in the subject position if the object position is filled with another inanimate. In Algonquian, a transitive clause with two inanimate persons is simply missing. The coindexation between two inanimate nominals and pronominals cannot be done. Nishnaabemwin does not have a sentence with an inanimate Agent acting on an inanimate Theme like in English sentences in (28). These sentences are translated in Nishnaabemwin in (29).

(27) a. The rocks hit the ground.
b. The summer reminds me of my childhood.
c. The wind is blowing the papers away.
(28) a. sinin nen gindgodenon giimgisnoon rocks those fell on the ground ‘The rocks fell on the ground’

b. niibing awang makwendan giibinoojiaanh summer time I remember when I was young ‘During the summer time, I remember my childhood’

c. nodan maajiiaas jigemgat meznegenan wind blow blow away papers ‘When the wind blows, the papers are blowing away’

As shown in (28), the inanimate Agent in English is the subject of the temporal or locative clauses in Nishnaabemwin. Two inanimate nominals also cause coindexation conflict and the syntax cannot fix this problem by deleting the person feature any further since inanimate third persons do not have a person feature to eliminate. This is why the sentence with inanimate subject and object of the same sentence is missing in Algonquian languages.

4.5 Gender shift

Our present analysis shows that obviation is a type of gender shift. Therefore, an obviative may gain back its person feature and becomes proximate anytime within a stretch of a story. In a study on Algonquian grammatical gender, Goddard (2001) demonstrates that gender can be reversed in the discourse. In narratives, an inanimate noun shifts to animate when it speaks or acts like a living thing. Similarly, animate nouns can also shift gender to inanimate. The examples below come from Fox (Goddard, 2001) which is also an Algonquian language. The animate form represents the older usage.

(29) **Animate**

| manetoowa | ‘spirit, god’ |
| aamoowa  | ‘bee’ |
| O ishkodekaan | ‘fire-steel’ |

**Inanimate**

| manetoowi | ‘spiritual, sacred’ |
| aamoowi   | ‘honey’ |
| O ishkodekaan | ‘lighter’ |

(Goddard, 2001, p. 210-212)

In (29), the animate forms represent the origin and the inanimate forms represent the derived. This type of gender shift is lexicalized. Fox is an excellent source of data for gender shift due to the distinctive system of gender marking for singular nouns. Another use of gender shift is to show number
distinction. As shown earlier, a number of nouns in Fox have two genders: inanimate when having a collective meaning and animate when referring to an individual. Examples from Fox are provided in (30).

(30) **Animate**  
- shooniyaha ‘a coin, a bill’  
- owiyasa ‘a piece of meat’  
- owinenwa ‘a piece of fat’  
- anakeehkwa ‘a piece of bark’

**Inanimate**  
- shooniyahi ‘silver, money’  
- owiyasi ‘meat’  
- owinenwi ‘fat’  
- anakeehkwi ‘bark’

(Goddard, 2001, p. 210-212)

Another form of semantic contrast is specific versus generic meaning. Some pronominals are inanimate when referring to the generic or the ordinary, and animate when referring to the special or the unusual.

(31) **Animate**  
- asenya ‘stone used in sweatlodge’  
- apehkweeshimoona ‘pillow’  
- ahpishimoona ‘mattress’  
- mehtekwa ‘tree that is inviolate’

**Inanimate**  
- aseni ‘stone’  
- apehkweeshimooni ‘head support’  
- ahpishimooni ‘thing for lying on’  
- mehtekwi ‘stick, tree’

(Goddard, 2001, p. 214)

Gender shift in Fox demonstrate that where there is a gender contrast, there is also a semantic contrast. We can conclude from the examples of gender shift that the semantics of a nominal is affected when the gender is shifted. If we assume that an animate noun becomes inanimate in the case of obviation, it follows that the semantic of that noun is affected by the gender shift as well. Specifically, the animate noun in the ‘obviative’ status should be considered less specific and less powerful than the other animate noun in the same sentence. This claim is supported by the observation made by Muehlbauer (2006) that it is unusual to report the internal state of the obviative person. In terms of number, it is shown that nouns in animate gender refer to individual referents while those in inanimate gender refer to collective referents. Therefore, we can also deduce that each gender has different inherent number.
In this section, I have shown that the claim that the inanimate and the obviative persons are in fact the same item is supported by such evidence as their forms, agreement and distribution. This allows us to capture other facts such as the complementary distribution between the inanimate and the obviative morphemes, the inability for the inanimate to be an Agent of a transitive clause and the process of gender shift in Algonquian languages. The following section discusses the advantages and potential problems of the proposed analysis.

5. Summary

The advantages of this analysis are the following. First, we have a unified account for sentential and possessive obviation without having to resort to a stipulated hierarchy. Second, it gets rid of an unmotivated morpheme not found in other languages by using one simple process to explain several phenomena. There is no need to find a motivation for it since it does not exist in the first place. Finally, it explains what seems to be coincidental homophony between the obviative and the inanimate suffixes across Algonquian languages.

One question is whether we should consider the obviative person animate or inanimate. The object-verb agreement suggests that it is animate because the verb final is that of animate object. However, the number agreement and the demonstrative agreement indicate that it is inanimate. I suggest that the obviative person is semantically animate but morphologically inanimate. The only reason why an animate is marked inanimate is to be morphologically different from it so that the coindexation can be achieved and that the interpretation of the sentence can be made. One may argue against this approach in saying that the obviative can be used as a distinctive feature to solve the coindexation conflict as well. As I have shown evidence, the inanimate account is much more attractive than to posit an obviative feature which has no motivation other than to mark discourse status.

In summary, this paper suggests that obviation in Nishnaabemwin is syntactic; motivated by a coindexation conflict when two animate third persons co-occur in a sentence. To resolve this conflict, the person feature of the c-commanded participant is stripped out yielding a morphologically inanimate person in an animate meaning. This study is based on Nishnaabemwin; however, it is open to future research to evaluate this analysis with other Algonquian languages.
References


