Acknowledgements
The editors would like to express their thanks to the faculty and staff of the Linguistics Department for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this volume. Funding for this journal is provided by the Graduate Student Council from the Student Activity Fee.

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THE OBIATIVE SUFFIX -ni- IN ALGONQUIAN

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Abstract: The obiative category in Algonquian languages serves to disambiguate subject and object nominals in transitive relations where both have third person animate 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 obiative earlier in the discourse. By tracing -ni- in the morphology of Fox and Kickapoo and in Bloomfield's comparative Algonquian work (Bloomfield 1946), the present 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 obiative, Dunnigan, O'Malley and Schwartz (henceforth, DOMS 1978) show how the obiative in Southwestern Ojibwe can be described as having a purely syntactic function, namely that of preventing subject-object role ambiguity in transitive relations where both arguments are third person and animate. Thus the verbal suffixes encode the information that the subject or object of a transitive verb is obiative and the nouns, when overtly expressed, are marked as proximate and obiative respectively. A noun can only be marked as obiative 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 obiative (including critically the semantically reversible predicates). It is generally agreed that obivation is a derived syntactic category in the sense that a noun can only be marked as obiative if another noun or argument has previously been marked as proximate. Thus in any sentence where both arguments are obiative, one of the arguments must have been established as obiative earlier in the discourse. DOMS's claim that such a sentence is unambiguous in Algonquian revolves around their understanding of the function of the suffix -ni-, which they claim indicates that one of its arguments is an obiative argument 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 obiative by dint of being obiative 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 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 obliative singular inflection -ni (-nil) which always occurs word finally. Bloomfield himself notices the similarity of the two forms (Bloomfield 1927, 188) 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 languages reconstructed form is well-attested. In Bloomfield's reconstructions, we find *-ll- marking obliative throughout the intransitive (AI, II) and transitive with inanimate object (TI) paradigms in verb inflection. The relevant examples are:

| 34 | Independent | AI | 3rd person *-x<sub>W</sub> | Obliative *-li<sub>W</sub> |
| 35 | II | 3rd singular (sg.) *-w<sub>W</sub> | plural (pl.) *-w<sub>W</sub> | Obliative sg. *-li<sub>W</sub> | Obliative pl. *-li<sub>W</sub> |
| 36 | Conjunct | AI | 3rd person *-t | Obliative *-lit |
| 37 | II | 3rd person *-k | Obliative *-lik |
| 38 | TI | Obliative-TI *-amilit |

In addition:

| 345 | Conjunct particle | 3rd animate sg. *-ta | 3rd inanim. sg. *-t<sub>L</sub> |
| | 3rd animate pl. *-ci<sub>L</sub> | 3rd inanim. pl. *-ci<sub>L</sub> | Obliative sg. *-li<sub>L</sub> | Obliative pl. *-li<sub>L</sub> |

Finally, in $320$ Bloomfield notes that a possessed animate noun with third person animate possessor is necessarily obliative, but in addition if the possessor is also obliative this is further indicated by *-el<sub>L</sub>-, e.g. $330$ Cree othikom-lyiw-a 'the other's louse'.

It is clear that *-ll- signals the obliative 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 obliative arguments, e.g. $345$ Fox neqqanta 'he who killed the other', nor why it is specifically used to indicate oblation on the possessor but not on the possessed in possessive constructions, cf. Cree othikoma 'his louse (lice)' othikomiyiw-a 'the other's louse (lice)',
If we go back to Bloomfield 1927, we note first (187) that in Fox
vert inflection permits obliective marking only on a transitive verb when
its other argument in third person. Bloomfield then notes that "the only
element (in verb inflection) that appears with any consistency is -ni-
for obliective", and the observation already mentioned that "this resem-
bles the noun inflection (for obliective)". In the following list of inflec-
tional suffixes involving the ob-
liective from Bloomfield 1927, we find that -ni- is used systematically
in Fox to encode the subject as obliective in the intransitive verb
forms in all the modes.

§97 Independent Al 3rd sg. -wa pl. -wagl
Obv sg. -niwani pl. -niwali

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

§100 Potential Al 3rd sg. -sa pl. -wasa
Obv/Obv pl. -nasa

§111 Conjunct Al/II 3rd sg./pl. -t
Obv/Obv pl. -nlt

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

§101 Independent TA 3rd sg. -Obv/Obv pl. -bwa
3rd pl. -Obv/Obv pl. -awagl
Obv - Obv/Obv pl. -nliwani
Obv pl. - Obv/Obv pl. -nliwali

§102 Obv/Obv pl. -3rd sg. -egwa
Obv/Obv pl. -3rd pl. -egwal
It/they - Obv/Obv pl. -egwiniwani

§105 TI (from Voorhis 1971)
Obv-ft -aminliwani
Obv pl.-ft -aminliwali

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

§110 Potential TA 3rd sg. -Obv/Obv pl. -áag
3rd pl. -Obv/Obv pl. -awasa
Obv/Obv pl. -3rd sg. -egusa
Obv/Obv pl. -3rd pl. -egwusa

§111 Conjunct TA Obv - 3rd sg. -egut
Obv - 3rd pl. -egwát
Obv - Obv -snlt
egunl
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 node 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.

| 56.30 Dubitative A1/TI | 3rd sg. | -toke | 3rd pl. | -initoke |
| 56.31 TA | 3rd sg. | -teo | 3rd pl. | -seetoke |
| 56.33 Conjunct I | lt/they | -k | Ovb/Ovb pl. | -ink |
| 56.38 TA | 3rd sg. | -lt | 1st sg. | -init |
| 56.41 Interrogative A1/TI | lt/they | - tradeen | Ovb/Ovb pl. | -inkTradeen |
| 56.44 TA | 3rd sg. | -nok | 1st sg. | -nokOkken |
| 56.45 | Ovb/Ovb pl. | -nokOkken |
| 56.46 | 3rd sg. | -nokOkken |
| 56.47 | 1st sg. | -nokOkken |
| 3rd sg/pl. | -nokOkken |
| 3rd sg/pl. | -nokOkken |
6.55 Potential TA

3rd sg./pl. - lst sg. - liza
0bv/0bv pl. - lst sg. - läniza
3rd sg./pl. - lst pl. - länomza
0bv/0bv pl. - lst pl. - länêniza

We have now accumulated fairly powerful evidence that -ni- is identified with a subject obviative role, including uncontroversial cases not reconstructible by Bloomfield where first persons act on obliatives and vice versa. Note that example 6.45 above is crucial in that it contains an obliative that must 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 consequences of this argument. If -ni- marks the subject of a verb as obviative, the inverse paradigms have to be seen as 'passives' 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 whether 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.

Further evidence that -ni- specifies a subject as obviative function is found in the formation of the conjunct particles in Foxt (Bloomfield 1927, §126). The relevant examples are:

Subject of verb nominalized

sg. -nîtcli
pl. -nîtcli

Object of verb nominalized

sg. -gîtcli
pl. -gîtcli

In Sihl, Bloomfield identifies -s- 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 -s- and -eg- that specify the semantic role of the subject where they occur throughout the verb paradigms, and that -ni- remains even in the particiles as the obviative subject marker.

If we return to the questions raised in the discussion of Bloomfield 1946 above, we can now shed some light on them. We recall that although Bloomfield noted the existence of *-ll 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 occur in the TA paradigms in Fox and Kickapoo when the subject is obviative.
The other loose end was the use of "-elikw" as the obliative marker on a noun possessor. Assuming that possession can be viewed as a transitive relation on a pair with transitive verbs (an assumption made by several others, DOMS 1978), the possessor would be interpreted as subject-actor of the relation. Again then it is no surprise to find that an obliative possessor is marked with the Algonquian obliative subject marker. (I am also assuming that "-elikw" is the same element as "+1", i.e. connective e + 11 + 3rd person w-.)

Now, turning 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 obliative. The relation between the Ojibwe case and the Fox/Kickapoo 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 1946:534.

Unfortunately, the choice in DOMS 1978 of red as the obliative possessor in their examples prevents us from comparing the appropriate suffixes 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 obliative - against that of DOMS - that -ni- identifies the subject as obliative by dint of being obliative in another transitive relation - we need more data than they present. Specifically, we should start with a sentence like I kicked the cat (dyb.) bit, where the predicate bit should have a non-referential obliative subject and a non-obliative object. More carefully chosen possessive 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 obliative 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 obliation marking and semantic role interpretation in the Algonquian verb. The question of precisely how the obliative 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 1927:597 when he uses a form from Jones' Kickapoo Tales to fill a hole in the paradigm. The transcription used by Voorhies differs considerably from that used by Bloomfield.

2. The term passive has traditionally been reserved by Algonquianists 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. s.

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.

References:


Voorhis, Paul H. 1967. Kickapoo Grammar. Yale University Ph.D.

Voorhis, Paul H. 1971. New Notes on the Mesquakie (Fox) Language. IJAL