

Optional subject marking in Chitimacha

Keywords: Chitimacha, isolate, endangered languages, language revitalization, optional argument marking, Southeast US, areal linguistics, language contact, grammaticalization, language change, syntax

This paper presents a first analysis of subject marking in Chitimacha, and argues that Chitimacha exhibits a discourse-optional nominative marker. The form of this nominative is however shared by several other functions, and in this paper I distinguish those functions and suggest a diachronic pathway whereby these functions – including the nominative – emerged from a single original form. I also discuss evidence for the idea that the nominal alignment system of Chitimacha may be the result of contact with other languages of the U.S. Southeast.

Previous grammatical descriptions of Chitimacha treat noun phrases as uninflected for case (Swanton 1920: 75; Swadesh 1946: 319), yet describe various “postpositions” that sound suspiciously like markers of grammatical relations. For example, Swadesh (1939a: 26; 134) states that the form *-(n)k* is a marker of “general relationship” that “indicates mild contrast or emphasis” and optionally marks subjects, perhaps suggestive of a nominative or absolutive. Examples of this function are in (1) and (2).¹

- (1) siksi-**nk** his he:čt-iʔi
eagle-**??** RESP call-NF;SG
‘an eagle met him’ (Swadesh 1939b: A1b.1)
- (2) ʔiš-**k** ku: keta=nki ʔap ni:kʔ-š hi-ki
1SG-**??** water side=LOC VEN to_water-PTCP-PERF AUX(NEUT)-1SG
‘I have come to the water’s side’ (Swadesh 1939b: A1b.3)

However, Swadesh also describes an andative ‘to, towards’ meaning for this form, shown in (3) and (4).

- (3) še:ni-**nk** hup hi ničw-iʔi
pond-**??** to AND move_to_water-NF;SG
‘he came to a pond’ (Swadesh 1939b: A1a.2)
- (4) we ʔasi=š ha-**nk** ʔap nenšw-iʔi
DET man=TOP DEM(PROX)-**??** VEN cross_water-NF;SG
‘the man came over here’ (Swadesh 1939b: A1.d4)

Moreover, there are additional examples in the Chitimacha corpus that do not seem to fit either of the above functions. Two such examples are in (5) and (6), where the *-(n)k*-marked word cannot be considered either a nominative / absolutive or an andative.

- (5) huykʔi we panš ni:k-ma-**nk** ʔuča-:š-naʔa
well DET people be.sick-PLACT-**??** do-PRES:IPFV-NF;PL
‘they made sick people well’ (Swadesh 1939b: A3g.3)

¹ Abbreviations are provided at the end of this abstract.

- (6) ʔiš-k we piya wiš-ma-nk kin ni wa:č'iki-puy-ki
 1SG-?? DET cane burn-PLACT-?? with DEF play-PAST:IPFV-1SG.AGT
 'I used to play with the burnt cane' (Swadesh 1939b: A36d.8)

Using a corpus of texts recorded by the last two fluent speakers of Chitimacha with Morris Swadesh in the 1930s (Swadesh 1939b), I show that *-(n)k* is a polysemous form with six separate functions. These functions are diachronically related but synchronically distinct. I provide synchronic evidence for a historical pathway whereby *-(n)k* was used first as a locative nominalizer, and later developed into an agent nominalizer (a common diachronic pathway; cf. Heine & Kuteva 2004), and then finally into a nominative case marker. Each of these functions was retained in the language, however, giving rise to the polyfunctionality exhibited by *-(n)k* today (a classic example of polygrammaticalization; cf. Craig 1991; Hopper & Traugott 2003: 114). I then show that nominative *-(n)k* appears only when the topic is unexpected (i.e. lower in animacy, agency, or definiteness). Finally, I briefly discuss the possibility that the development of the nominative function may have been due to contact with other languages of the U.S. Southeast.

This work is a valuable contribution to language revitalization efforts being undertaken by the Chitimacha tribe, since these markers appear frequently in archival materials, but their functions have previously been opaque to modern language learners. This talk therefore not only provides a first description of a previously unacknowledged component of Chitimacha grammar, but also contributes to Chitimacha revitalization efforts, as well as an understanding of grammatical relations from an areal perspective in the U.S. Southeast.

References

- Craig, Colette G. 1991. Ways to go in Rama: A case study in polygrammaticalization. In Elizabeth Closs Traugott & Bernd Heine (eds.), *Approaches to grammaticalization, Vol. II: Types of grammatical markers* (Typological Studies in Language 19.2), 455–492. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Heine, Bernd & Tania Kuteva. 2004. *World lexicon of grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hopper, Paul J. & Elizabeth Closs Traugott. 2003. *Grammaticalization*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1939a. Chitimacha grammar. In *Chitimacha grammar, texts and vocabulary* (American Council of Learned Societies Committee on Native American Languages Mss.497.3.B63c G6.5). Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society Library.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1939b. Chitimacha texts. In *Chitimacha grammar, texts and vocabulary* (American Council of Learned Societies Committee on Native American Languages Mss.497.3.B63c G6.5). Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society Library.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1946. Chitimacha. In Cornelius Osgood (ed.), *Linguistic structures of Native America* (Publications in Anthropology 6), 312–336. New York: Viking Fund.
- Swanton, John R. 1920. *A sketch of the Chitimacha language* (Numbered manuscripts 1850s-1980s (some earlier), MS 4122). Suitland, MD: National Anthropological Archives.

Abbreviations

1	first person	DET	determiner	PAST	past	PTCP	participle
AGT	agent	IPFV	imperfective	PERF	perfect	RESP	responsive
AND	andative	LOC	locative	PL	plural	TOP	topic
AUX	auxiliary	NEUT	neutral / sitting	PLACT	pluractional	SG	singular
DEF	definite	NF	non-first	PRES	present	VEN	venitive
DEM	demonstrative		person	PROX	proximal		