

Proximate DP, obviative KP: Balancing the morphosyntax and pragmatics of obviation

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Context. Algonquian languages display a well-known system of OBVIATION in which third-person nominals are marked as either PROXIMATE or OBVIATIVE. Within a clause, there can be at most one proximate referent (normally the most topical third person); all other third persons must be obviative. The basic patterning of obviation is illustrated by the Oji-Cree examples in (1), from the author's fieldwork. In (1a), 'the child' is proximate because it is the only third person in the clause. In (1b), however, there are two third persons, so one must be obviative (here the object 'child', but it is equally possible to instead obviate the subject 's/he').

- (1) a. *ni-waapam-aa awaasihs*
1-see-DIR child.PROX
'I see the child.PROX.'
- b. *o-waapam-aa-n awaasihs-an*
3-see-DIR-OBV **child-OBV**
'S/he.PROX sees **the child.OBV**.'

Problems. Despite much descriptive and theoretical work (e.g. Grafstein 1984, Goddard 1990, Rhodes 1990, Branigan & MacKenzie 1999, Brittain 2001, Muehlbauer 2012), there is little consensus regarding the nature of obviation. Some of the key empirical problems are:

- (2) a. Obviative is more marked than proximate, both morphologically and distributionally.
b. When given a choice, agreement always targets a proximate rather than an obviative.
c. Proximates in a clause must corefer: 'she' and 'her' must corefer in 'She.PROX saw her.PROX shoes' and must be disjoint in 'She.PROX saw **her.OBV** shoes'.
d. Obviation is obligatory for clausemate third persons (e.g. in transitives such as (1b) and possession structures such as 'her.PROX **dog.OBV**') but is optional for non-clausemates.
e. Obviation can be triggered purely for discourse reasons: in 'I will leave you behind when **he.OBV** arrives' (from an Innu text in Hasler 2002), 'he' is obviative despite the absence of other third-person referents in the sentence. This is because a different referent has already been established as proximate in the preceding discourse.

Proposal. I propose, following Richards 2010, that proximates are DP while obviatives have an additional KP layer (i.e. [KP [DP ...]]). Unlike Richards, however, I do not take the DP/KP difference to follow from a linearization constraint on adjacent DPs, since obviation can occur even when a sentence contains only one third-person DP, as in (2e) (cf. Fry 2014). Instead, following Branigan and MacKenzie 1999 (B&M), I take the key to be the coreference requirement in (2c): all proximate nominals in a clause must corefer. Building on B&M's work, I propose that Algonquian clauses have a null topic operator in CP that binds all third-person DPs (cf. the topic operator that Huang (1984) proposes for radical pro-drop languages). This means that all third-person DPs in a clause will, by default, corefer. To escape this obligatory coreference, a DP must be bound by a closer operator. This, I propose, is the function of the KP layer of an obviative: K introduces an operator that binds its DP complement, thus preventing binding by the topic operator in CP. Under this analysis, obviation is essentially "protection" against coreference.

Consequences. The KP analysis accounts for both the morphosyntax and the pragmatics of obviation. The presence of the extra KP layer explains why obviatives are more marked and are disfavoured in agreement (2a-b). Binding of DPs by the operator in CP explains the obligatory coreference of clausemate proximates (2c) and the obligatory occurrence of obviation with disjoint clausemates (2d). The relationship with the null topic operator in CP explains the optional obviation of non-clausemates: in a sentence like (2e), I propose that the null topic operator in CP continues to refer to the previously-established proximate referent, so 'he' must be made obviative to escape coreference with this referent even though it is not an argument in the clause.

References

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