

Nominal alignment in Chitimacha

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This talk presents the first analysis of grammatical relations in noun phrases in Chitimacha (Glottolog: chit1248, ISO 639-3: ctm; isolate, Louisiana). Previous grammatical descriptions of the language treat Chitimacha noun phrases as uninflected for case (Swanton 1920; Swadesh 1946:319), yet describe various “postpositions” which sound suspiciously like markers of grammatical relations. For example, Swadesh (1939a:120) states that main function of the postposition *hiš* is “indicating the subject of an active verb”, and that this form also serves as an instrumental. Given Swadesh’s description, and the fact that instrumental > ergative is a well-known grammaticalization pathway (Garrett 1990; Heine & Kuteva 2004:180), *hiš* is likely an ergative marker. Another form, *-(n)k*, he describes as optional when it marks subjects (Swadesh 1939a:134), perhaps suggestive of an absolutive. He later notes that “*hiš* is a device for indicating the subject unambiguously,” but that “*-nk* is also used” (Swadesh 1939a:120). Taken together, these and other miscellaneous comments are suggestive of a system of case marking that follows an ergative-absolutive pattern.

However, this cannot be the whole story. While *hiš*, for instance, does appear in contexts that are compatible with an ergative, as in (1), it does not do so consistently, as (2), illustrates, and occasionally *hiš* and *-(n)k* co-occur, as in (3).

- (1) Kiči heč'in hiš we ša:hken hus = up hi nahw-i?i.
 woman holy CASE? DET basket 3SG = toward to throw-3SG
 'The holy woman threw that basket at her.' (Swadesh 1939b:A13 3.5)
- (2) We kiči nahc'ip'u hus ko: hi ?am-i.
 DET woman young 3SG aunt DIST see-3SG
 'The girl saw her aunt.' (Swadesh 1939b:A27 3.3)
- (3) Wetkš we siksi-nk hiš hesik'en ?apš heyšt-i?i.
 then DET eagle-CASE? CASE? again back pick.up-3SG
 'Then the eagle picked him up again.' (Swadesh 1939b:A1 3.4)

Given that Swadesh describes the appearance of both *hiš* and *-(n)k* as motivated by a need to avoid ambiguity, then if these forms are case markers, they are most likely discourse-optional or differentially-marked (McGregor & Verstraete 2010; Seržant & Witzlack-Makarevich forthcoming).

In this talk I present an analysis of the *hiš* and *-(n)k* nominal markers in Chitimacha, based on a corpus of texts recorded by the last two fluent speakers of the language with Morris Swadesh in the 1930s (Swadesh 1939b). Preliminary results suggest that *hiš* is a discourse-optional ergative enclitic that appears when the agent is potentially ambiguous (i.e. multiple agents are recently activated in the discourse), and that *-(n)k* is an enclitic that actually comprises several distinct but homophonous forms, one of which functions as an absolutive. Since Chitimacha is already known to have undergone contact-induced changes in its verbal alignment system (Hieber 2018), this talk not only provides a first description of a previously unacknowledged component of Chitimacha grammar, but also contributes to an understanding of grammatical relations from an areal perspective in the U.S. Southeast.

References

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