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).
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


