Optional subject marking in Chitimacha

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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   heːčt-iʔi
    eagle-**??**   RESP call-NF;SG
    'an eagle met him'   (Swadesh 1939b: A1b.1)

(2) ʔiš-**k**   kuː   keta=nki   ʔap ni-ːkʼ-šhi-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) šeːni-**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)

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[1] Abbreviations are provided at the end of this abstract.

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) huyk'i   we   panš   niːk-ma-**nk**   ʔuča-ːš-naʔa
    well   DET   people   be.sick-PLACT-**??**   do-PRES:IPFV-NF;PL
    'they made sick people well'   (Swadesh 1939b: A3g.3)

(6) ʔiš-k   we   piya   wiš-ma-**nk**   kin   ni   waːč'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.

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Abbreviations

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