

Abstract:

Ergativity in Chitimacha

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This talk presents the first analysis of grammatical relations in noun phrases in Chitimacha. 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 the 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 2004:1280), *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 “*-(n)k* 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 AND throw-3SG
 ‘The holy woman threw that basket at her.’ (Swadesh 1939b:A13 3.5)
- (2) We kiči nahc'ipu 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 RED 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 the 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 2018).

In this talk I present an analysis of the *hiš* nominal marker in Chitimacha, with some ancillary commentary on *-(n)k*, based on a corpus of texts recorded by the last two fluent speakers of the language with Morris Swadesh in the 1930s (Swadesh 1939b). I suggest that *hiš* is a discourse-optional ergative enclitic that appears when the agent is potentially ambiguous (i.e. when multiple agents are activated in the discourse). 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 learners. Moreover, since Chitimacha is 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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Abbreviations

3	third person
AND	andative (‘to’)
DET	determiner
DIST	distal
RED	reditive (‘returning’)
SG	singular