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-iʔi.
   woman holy hiš DET basket 3SG=toward AND throw-3SG
   ‘The holy woman threw that basket at her.’ (Swadesh 1939b:A13 3.5)

(2) We kiči nahec’ipu hus koː hiʔ 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-iʔi.
   then DET eagle-CASE? hiš 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

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