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Obviation, Coreference and Relational Verb Forms in East Cree

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It is usually claimed in the Cree linguistic literature that “any third person possessor automatically causes [a possessed] noun to be obviative” (Wolfart 1973:28; Dahlstrom 1991:13, 97; Ahenakew 1987:33; Ellis 1983:452). Such claims often extend to other Algonquian languages (Voorhis 1974:30, Aissen 1997, to cite a few). We show that the above claim is only valid for animate nouns. East Cree offers evidence that there exist cases where nouns possessed by a third person possessor do not bear overt obviative marking. These are inanimate nouns in coreference constructions. We also show that the use of relational or regular verb forms depends on the disjoint reference or coreference status of the verbal arguments.¹

Eastern James Bay Cree is a variety of Cree where inanimate nouns bear obviative marking. This is shown in the paradigm table in (1). This obviative marking is distinct for the singular only. The inanimate obviative plural looks like the proximate plural.

(1) INANIMATE ‘knife’

	PROXIMATE (0)	OBVIATIVE (0’)
SINGULAR	<i>mûhkumân</i>	<i>mûhkumân-iyû</i>
PLURAL (P)	<i>mûhkumân-h</i>	<i>mûhkumân-h</i>

The paradigm for animate nouns is illustrated in (2) and follows the same pattern as Western Cree languages in marking the obviative singular and plural in the same fashion:

(2) ANIMATE ‘man’

	PROXIMATE (3)	OBVIATIVE (3’)
SINGULAR	<i>nâpeu</i>	<i>nâpeu-h</i>
PLURAL (p)	<i>nâpeu-ch</i>	<i>nâpeu-h</i>

Normally, obviation takes place between an animate subject and inanimate object in East Cree. This is shown in (3). If we fail to inflect the object for obviative, and leave it in the unmarked proximate form, like in (4), the sentence becomes ungrammatical.

- (3) *Wâpahtam mûhkumân-iyû.*
see.TI-3>0’ knife-OBV
‘S/he sees a knife.’
- (4) **Wâpahtam mûhkumân.*
see.TI-3> 0’ knife(-PROX)

Now, contrast (3) with (5), where the object is possessed:

- (5) a. *Wâpahtam u-mûhkumân.*
see.TI-3 >0 3-knife-(PROX)
‘S/he sees his/her own knife.’
- b. *Wâpahtam u-mûhkumân kâ pîkipay-iyich.*
see.TI-3 >0 3-knife-(OBV) be.broken.II-0’
‘S/he sees his/her own broken knife.’

In (5), the possessor of the knife is the same as the subject or agent of the sentence: the one who sees. There is coreference between the object’s possessor and the subject of the sentence and there is no obviative marking on *umûhkumân*, ‘knife’. However, agreement with an embedded verb like in (5b) shows that *umûhkumân* is not proximate and that obviation is covert.²

If, instead of sentence (5), we want to say that she sees someone else’s knife, we have to use a special verb form, called “the relational”, as in (6)³:

2. Compare the embedded verb forms in (5b) with that given below:

mûhkumân kâ pîkipay-ihch
knife-(PROX)is.broken.II-0
‘a broken knife’

In (5b), there is an obviative subject ending *-iyich*, while here the verb indicates a proximate subject (*-ihch*). John Nichols (p.c.), who brought the notion of covert obviation to our attention, indicates that the facts are similar in Severn Ojibwe.

1. We would like to thank the Cree speakers we interviewed in the Summer of 2000 in Mistissini: Mr. Albert Coon Come, Ms. Harriet Coon Come, Ms. Hattie Trapper, Mr. Isaac Trapper, Ms. Emma Shecapio and Mr. Johnny Shecapio. Thanks to Marguerite MacKenzie for comments on the draft, and to Bill Jancewicz for his help with the syllabics. This work was partially funded by SSRHC grant # 410-1998-0350.

- (6) *Wâpahtam-uw-eu u-mûhkumân-iyû.*
 see.TI-REL-3>0' 3'-knife-OBV
 'S/he sees his/her (someone else's) knife.' ('Peter sees John's knife.')

For such disjoint reference between the possessor and the subject of the sentence, we could not use the regular verb form, as in (7):

- (7) **Wâpahtam u-mûhkumân-iyû.*
 see.TI-3 > 0' 3'-knife-OBV
 'S/he sees his/her (someone else's) knife.' ('Peter sees John's knife.')

According to Clarke (1982), a sentence like (7) is acceptable in Montagnais⁴, but it is not in East Cree, where when you wish to express disjoint reference between a 3rd person subject and the 3rd person possessor of the object, you must use a sentence like (6), with a relational verb form. The relational verb form is found in the transitive inanimate verb paradigm, i.e. for verbs that take an inanimate object. Note that it cannot be used for coreference, as (8) shows:

- (8) **Wâpahtam-uw-eu umûhkumân.*
 see.TI-REL-3>0' 3-knife-(PROX)
 'S/he sees his/her own knife.'

Further evidence that relational verb forms are prohibited for coreference comes from animate intransitive verbs (which also have relational verb forms). For 3rd person coreference between the subject and a possessed locative for example, the regular verb form must be (9). The relational is only available with disjoint reference interpretation, as in (10).

3. Southern speakers write the relational morpheme *-uw-* for TI verbs ending with a consonant. In the Northern dialect it is just *-w-*, like for AI verbs. (Marguerite MacKenzie, p.c.).

4. Clarke (1982:31) observes for Montagnais: "an expected obviative does not occur when the 3rd person possessor of the noun object is identical to the subject of the sentence." She contrasts the following examples:

Miskam u+mashineikan.
 'He finds his own book.'

Miskam u+mashineikan+nu.
 'He finds his (i.e. someone else's) book.'

Note that her verb forms are regular verb forms and that the equivalent of the second is not acceptable in East Cree.

- (9) *Nipâu u-nipewin-ihch.*
 sleep.AI-3 3-bed-LOC
 'S/he sleeps in his/her (own) bed.'
- (10) *Nipâ-w-eu u-nipewin-ihch.*
 sleep.AI-REL-3 3'-bed-(OBV)LOC
 'S/he sleeps in his/her (someone else's) bed.'

Observe the lengthening of the vowel on the locative NP in (10). This indicates that the possessor is obviative, different from the subject of the sentence⁵.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

In Eastern James Bay Cree, inanimate nouns in coreference constructions do not bear overt obviative marking, unless the possessor itself is obviative. When there is coreference between the subject and the possessor of the object (TI verbs) or the subject and the possessor of a locative (AI verbs) the regular verb form is used. When there is disjoint reference between the subject and the possessor of the object (TI verbs) or the subject and the possessor of locative (AI verbs), the relational verb form is used for 3rd person possessors and the regular verb form is used for other person possessors.

APPENDIX

Corresponding examples for TI verbs

To give a complete picture of all possible cases, we illustrate our findings with all the corresponding examples for TI verbs.

COREFERENCE: REGULAR VERB FORMS.

Possessed Noun is proximate with 2, 1 possessors, and bears no overt obviative for 3 possessors:

- (11) *Niwâpahten ni-mûhkumân (kâ pîkupay-ihch).*
 1-see.TI-1>0 1-knife-(PROX) (preverb be.broken.II-0)
 'I see my own (broken) knife.'

5. Marguerite MacKenzie (p.c.) suggested to us that this form might be the obviative morpheme *-iy-* found elsewhere on nouns and verbs as *-iyû*.

- (12) *Wâpahtam u-mûhkumân (kâ pîkupay-iyich).*
 see.TI-3>0 3-knife-(OBV) (preverb be.broken.II-0')
 'S/he sees her/his own (broken) knife.'

Possessed Noun bears an overt obviative in one case only: when the subject/possessor itself is obviative (3'):

- (13) *Wâpahtamiyû u-mûhkumân-iyû (kâ pîkupay-iyich).*
 see.TI-3'>0' 3'-knife-OBV (preverb be.broken.II-0')
 'S/he (the other) sees his/her own (broken) knife.'

DISJOINT REFERENCE: WITH 3RD PERSONS POSSESSORS, RELATIONAL VERB FORMS:

Subject is 3 → Obviative object

- (14) *Wâpahtam-uw-eu u-mûhkumân-iyû (kâ pîkupay-iyich).*
 see.TI-REL-3>3' 3'-knife-OBV (preverb broken.II-0)
 'S/he sees his/her (someone else's) (broken) knife.'

Subject is 2 or 1 → Covert obviative object

- (15) *Chiwâpahtam-uw-ân u-mûhkumân (kâ pîkupay-iyich).*
 2-see.TI-REL-2>3 3-knife (preverb broken.II-0)
 'You see his/her (broken) knife.'

DISJOINT REFERENCE: WITH 1,2 POSSESSORS, REGULAR VERB FORMS.

Subject is 3 → Obviative object

- (16) *Wâpahtam ni-mûhkumân-iyû (kâ pîkupay-iyich).*
 see.TI-3>0' 1-knife-OBV (preverb broken.II-0)
 'She sees my (broken) knife.'

Subject is 2 or 1 → Proximate object

- (17) *Chiwâpahten ni-mûhkumân (kâ pîkupay-ihch).*
 2-see.TI-2>0 1-knife (preverb broken.II-0)
 'you see my (broken) knife.'

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(6) .<C>V .<V> >J"dlσ<x

∇° > (7) > ΛΓ"U< <JΔ <C > > Δ·U° <·∇° > > <x
<JΔ Δ<·< > >·∇" <JΔ Δ"Cd° <° >·∇° > ΔN"U<
<σC <° <·<"C< > ΔC"U<.

(7) *·<"C< >J"dlσ<x

<σC <° >·∇° > ΔC"U< ∇d< ∇ σ<J"Cd" dC< <·∇<
∇ <Γ< <ΓJLb< < < <Γ·< ∇ <Γ< <σ<" <·∇<" ∇
NΛ·∇Γ<.

(8) *·<"C>V .<V> >J"dl°<x

<° >·∇° > V"Cd" Δ"·Δ° <Γ·Δσ" Γ° ∇< ΛLC"·<°
<Γ·Δσ" <<C° J< <σC <° (6) > ΔNΓ<U< <
ΛΓ"U< <JΔ ΛLC° J"dl°<x

>C > (9) > ΔNΓ<U< ∇ ΛΓ"U< σ<° ΔC"U° <σC
∇° <σC <° (10) > ΔNΓ<U< σ<·∇° ΔC"U°< <σC (9)
> ΛΓ"U< ·Δ< <° <·∇° <σ< >σV·Δσ" σ<° ∇° <σC
(10) > ΔCΓ<U< dC< <·∇<" >σV·Δσ" σ<·∇°< ∇>° < <
>·∇" <·∇° ΔCΓ<U< <σC L"r"CD <° σ<·∇° > <
ΔC"U<.

(9) σ<° >σV·Δσ"°<x

(10) σ<·∇° >σV·Δσ"°<x

b<·<"C" <° >σV·Δσ"° < ΔC"U< Δ" V"Cd° <σC
L"r"CD<x

> > ΔΓ <ΓJU< >C LΓ<·Δbσ" σ<·Δ <·<"N·∇<°
C° ∇ Δ<·<" ∇ Δ< <ΓΓ<·< ∇ > > b<·<"C<" ∇
·∇Γ<N<° <ΓΓ<·< ∇ ·∇Γ<N<° <ΓΓ<·< > ∇
Δ<·<" 'he sees his knife', <JΔ σ"·<° σ<J"Cd° <·∇° <σ<
>J"dl°<x <JΔ σ<J"Cd° ·Δ< >J"dl° <·Δ<"C>·q< ∇ Δ< <
<ΓΓ<·< L< Δ< L< >·∇° V"Cd° <σC L"r"CD ∇d<
·∇" σ<J"Cd" <·∇° <σ< >J"dl° J< <·<"C>V .<V>
>J"dlσ< ∇ Δ<·<" σ<J"Cd° dC< <·∇<" >J"dlσ< ∇
·<"C>V·< <·∇°<x

·<° >C σ<"C" dC< ∇ ΛΓ"U·<° < > b<·<"C<°<x
·Δ< <° <·∇° > <ΓJLb< ∇ NΛ·∇Γ< <·< Γ°
·<"C< L< σ<° Δ<·<, < <σ< <·< < NΛ·∇Γ< <JΔ
Δ< L"r"CD V"Cd° L< ", L< Δ" <Γ V"Cd" Γ° L< (13)
b<·<"C" <Γ< <Γ·Δ° dC< <·∇° ∇ <ΓJLb<.

(11) σ<·<"U° σ<J"dl°<x

(12) ·<"C< >J"dl°<x

(13) ·<"CΓ< >J"dlσ< <x

$dC^b \triangleleft \nabla^a \nabla \triangleleft \text{JLb} \dot{f}^c \text{ } \eta \cdot b \dot{r} \nabla \Delta'' \text{J} C''^b \text{ } L^\circ \text{ } \eta \text{ } \Delta \text{J}$
 $\triangleleft'' \text{r} \triangleleft \text{r}''^u \triangleleft^a \Delta'' \text{J} \cdot \Delta^a \triangleleft \text{r} \text{J} \cdot \Delta^a :$

$\bullet \quad dC^b \triangleleft \nabla^a \nabla \triangleleft \text{JLb} \dot{f}^c : \text{D} \cdot \nabla^\circ \text{ } L^b \cdot \nabla^\circ \text{ } bC \text{ } V'' \dot{C} d^a$
 $L'' \text{r}''^u C \Delta \text{ } \text{J} \dot{r} \text{ } \sigma \triangleleft \cdot \nabla^\circ \nabla^d \text{ } L^b \cdot \triangleleft'' C \text{J} \cdot \nabla^\circ x$

(14) $\cdot \triangleleft'' C \text{J} \cdot \nabla^\circ \text{ } \text{D} \text{J}'' d \dot{L} \sigma \dot{r} x$

(15) $\text{r} \cdot \triangleleft'' C \text{J} \cdot \triangleleft^a \text{ } \text{D} \text{J}'' d \dot{L}^a x$

$\bullet \quad \sigma \dot{r} \nabla \triangleleft \triangleleft C''^u \text{ } \dot{\sigma}''^u C^L \text{ } L^b \text{ } \text{r} \dot{r} \text{ } \text{e} \text{J} \Delta \triangleleft'' \text{r} \triangleleft \dot{r} \triangleleft^a$
 $\Delta'' \text{J} \cdot \Delta^a \triangleleft \text{r} \text{J} \cdot \Delta^a x$

(16) $\cdot \triangleleft'' C^L \text{ } \sigma \text{J}'' d \dot{L} \sigma \dot{r} x$

(17) $\text{r} \cdot \triangleleft'' C''^u \text{ } \sigma \text{J}'' d \dot{L}^a x$

² Terminology we used:

- $\nabla b \text{ } \Delta \dot{L} C''^u$: (that which is not alive) inanimate noun
- $\nabla \text{ } \Delta \dot{L} \text{r} \dot{r}^c / \Delta \dot{L} C''^u$: (that which is alive) animate noun
- $V \dot{r}^d$: (one) singular
- $\text{r}'' \text{r} \text{J}$: (many) plural
- $\nabla b \nabla \triangleleft \text{r}^u \triangleleft \text{r} \text{J} \text{U}^u$: (0) proximate inanimate
- $\nabla \triangleleft \text{r}^u \triangleleft \text{r} \text{J} \text{U}^u$: (0') obviative inanimate
- $\nabla b \triangleleft \text{r}^u \triangleleft \text{r} \text{J} \text{Lb} \dot{f}^c$: (3) proximate animate
- $b \triangleleft \text{r}^u \triangleleft \text{r} \text{J} \text{Lb} \dot{f}^c$: (3') obviative animate