

# An Analysis of Obviation in Mi'gmaq\*

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## 1 Introduction & Background

This paper is a descriptive account of obviation in Mi'gmaq. It will be organized roughly as follows. In the first section I provide a general background to Algonquian languages, including some central properties that differ from those of languages that are more familiar. In the second section I introduce obviation, taking note of selected existing literature. The following two sections are devoted to a more in-depth look at this literature, as well as a description of basic characterizations of obviation specific to Mi'gmaq. The last section summarizes relevant aspects of the thesis and suggests directions for additional research.

Mi'gmaq<sup>1</sup> is an Eastern Algonquian language spoken in multiple Canadian Maritime provinces, as well as in the northeast of the United States. According to the Ethnologue, there are almost 9,000 speakers of Mi'gmaq in Eastern Canada and 330 in the U.S.. The research presented in this paper is based on data collected from a speaker from Listuguj, a Mi'gmaw community on the border of Quebec and New Brunswick. I will be using the standard Listuguj orthography for all examples throughout the paper.

Algonquian languages differ from Indo-European languages in a few ways. I will address a few particular ones that are central to our discussion.

### 1.1 Nouns

Many languages distinguish between grammatical gender in adjectives, verbs, nouns, etc. as masculine or feminine. However, in Algonquian languages gender is distinguished through animacy; that is, nouns are classified as animate or inanimate. It is safe to categorize all humans and animals as animate. However, not all stationary objects are inanimate; for example, cups, shoes, and potatoes are animate, but tables, pants, and apples are not. Grafstein notes that the animacy distinction, similar to masculine and

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<sup>1</sup>Also Mi'kmaq or Micmac.

feminine systems, serves a grammatical rather than a semantic function. So, as previously described, “while all semantically animate nouns are grammatically animate, the converse is not always true.”<sup>2</sup>

However, animate and inanimate nouns exhibit different plural endings, which makes noting the gender distinction much easier. The plural ending for animate nouns is generally the suffix -aq or -g, although the latter may appear as -g, -ig, or -ug most likely due to phonological reasons. The plural ending for inanimate nouns is the suffix -l, which is also realized as -n if the preceding final consonant of the noun is /n/, or sometimes as -ul if there is a cluster word-finally. Please refer to the following table for a few examples:

Gender	Singular	Plural	Gloss
An.	tap'tan	tap'tang	potato
An.	muin	muinaq	bear
In.	wenju'su'n	wenju'su'nn	apple
In.	tuop'ti	tuop'til	window

An additional note about nouns is that they are also classified according to possession—one class of nouns has a changeable relationship to the possessor while the other has a permanent one. These are more commonly known as *alienable* versus *inalienable* nouns. Most material possessions are alienable, while parts of wholes (including body parts), kinship terms, and other items are inalienable. Such noun stems are never seen on their own (without possessor marking/affixation), which makes them dependent<sup>3</sup>. This is demonstrated in examples (3) and (4), where the noun stem ‘head’ cannot appear on its own.

*Alienable*<sup>4</sup>

- (1) n-tuop'ti-m  
1-window-POSS.SG  
'My window'
- (2) tuop'ti  
window  
'window'

*Inalienable*

- (3) n-unji  
1-head  
'My head'

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<sup>2</sup>Grafstein 7.

<sup>3</sup>Grafstein 8.

<sup>4</sup>Data from Elise McClay.

- (4) \*unji  
head  
'Head'

Just by virtue of being dependent, inalienable nouns force verbs into obviation agreement. I will expand on this in a later section.

## 1.2 Verbs

Another significant difference exhibited by Algonquian languages is the rich verb morphology. Verbs are marked for person, number, animacy, and obviation. Also, unlike English, pronouns and other arguments need not be overtly expressed. Rather they can be left implicit, the verb morphology indicating the nature of the argument.

- a. animate subjects of intransitive verbs: **AI** verbs

- (5) e'pit etlenm-it  
woman laugh-3SG.AN  
'The woman is laughing.'

- b. inanimate subjects of intransitive verbs: **II** verbs

- (6) wi'gatign nijj-aq  
book fall-3SG.IN  
'The book is falling.'

- c. animate objects of transitive verbs: **TA** verbs

- (7) nemi-g muin  
see-1SG.AN bear  
'I see the bear.'

- d. inanimate objects of transitive verbs: **TI** verbs

- (8) nemit-u ptauti  
see-1SG.IN table  
'I see the table.'

In addition, as previously mentioned, the verbs are further inflected for person, number, and obviation status of their arguments. So, any transitive verb will reflect: the animacy of the object, the person of the subject, and the number of both subject and object<sup>5</sup>. The following example displays these characterizations:

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<sup>5</sup>Although sometimes number is ambiguous in some combinations.

- (9) nemit-uti'j ptauti  
see-3PL.IN table  
'They see the table.'

### 1.2.1 Direct & Inverse Verb Forms

Many languages within the Algonquian family also have a direct/inverse verb system. In such a system verbs are marked morphologically with either a direct or inverse suffix. The person marker—usually a prefix—will agree with the most *prominent* argument in the sentence, where prominence is defined in terms of a participant hierarchy<sup>6</sup>. It may be easier to think of prominence as local (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> person) vs. non-local (3<sup>rd</sup> and further) arguments. The following is a pair of examples from Passamaquoddy taken from Bruening 2005:

- (10) K-ucem-a-k  
2-kiss-DIR-3P  
'You kissed them.'
- (11) K-ucem-ku-k  
2-kiss-INV-3P  
'They kissed you.'

In these examples, we can see how prominence plays out. The order of the morphemes is exactly the same, and the only difference is the direct and the inverse morphology. So, even though in example (11) the grammatical subject of the sentence is 'they', the prefix marks 2<sup>nd</sup> person 'you' because it is more *prominent* as a speech act participant. So, if the prominent argument is the grammatical subject as in example (10), the verb form is direct. If the prominent argument is the grammatical object as in example (11), the verb is inverse. In such systems, the direct verb form is generally considered the default. It is worth noting that direct/inverse verb forms are often confused with or compared to active/passive verb shifts. However, an important distinction separates the two: there is no loss of external argument or change in valance in direct or inverse verb forms.

Thus, the discussion here has shown that relations between constituents are primarily realized through morphology in Algonquian languages.

## 2 What is Obviation?

There have been many definitions for obviation. Some of the more prominent include Bloomfield, who stated, "In any close context, one animate third person, singular or

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<sup>6</sup>2<sup>nd</sup> person > 1<sup>st</sup> person > 3<sup>rd</sup> person; to be discussed in Section 3.

plural, is PROXIMATE, and any other animate third persons are OBLIATIVE.”<sup>7</sup> Another prominent definition comes from Wolfart (1978): “Whenever two third persons of animate gender interact within a stretch of discourse or *contextual span*, they are distinguished semantically, syntactically, and morphologically. One of them is in *focus*, the other *peripheral*...”<sup>8</sup>

Obviation refers to a grammatical system of reference tracking best known from the Algonquian language family. It is a type of third person marking used to differentiate one third person from all other third persons within a certain span. Consider the sentence in (12).

- (12) Mali nemi-at'-l                      tiam-ul  
 Mary see-3>3'AN-OBV moose-OBV  
 'Mary sees a moose.'

In (12), Mary—a third person—is the focus of the sentence, while the moose—also a third person—is a peripheral entity. This distinction is referred to as proximate and obviative; the proximate third person is more *salient* and is unmarked morphologically, while the obviative third person is less salient and receives an -l morphological marker to distinguish it from the proximate. Note the bolded obviative suffixes in example (12)—transitive animate verbs always agree with their objects, so the verb must also have an obviative suffix. Generally in Mi'gmaq, obviation is marked as variations of the -l and -n suffixes (-al, -ul, -l also possible) due to phonology. This is homophonous to the inanimate plural marker discussed above<sup>9</sup>. Phonological evidence suggests that both the plural marker and the obviative marker are underlyingly /-l/ and there is a rule that turns /l/ into a nasal when preceded by /n/<sup>10</sup>.

For a while, it was common in Algonquian literature to consider and refer to obviation as purely a morphological phenomenon that kept track of participants within a given discourse. However, obviation is, in fact, a property of the syntactic domain, as obviative marking is sometimes obligatory but only in certain syntactic contexts. Thus, obviation can be divided into two types: obligatory and non-obligatory, or optional.

## 2.0.2 Obligatory

### 1. *Possession*<sup>11</sup>

A third person animate nominal possessed by another third person animate nominal must always be obviative. This is a basic restriction and, perhaps, one of the firmest

<sup>7</sup>Bloomfield 32.

<sup>8</sup>Wolfart 1978: 255.

<sup>9</sup>This homophony holds true across many languages in the Algonquian language family, cf. Piriyawiboon 2007.

<sup>10</sup>Fidelholtz 1968.

<sup>11</sup>Data from Elise McClay.

rules in Algonquian syntax<sup>12</sup>. Consider the following examples:

- (13) 'n-tus  
1SG.POSS-daughter  
'my daughter'
- (14) 'g-tus  
2SG.POSS-daughter  
'your daughter'
- (15) ug-tus-l  
3SG.POSS-daughter-OBV  
'his/her daughter'

In examples (13) and (14) we see that there is no obviative marker at the end of the noun 'daughter'. However, as soon as there is more than one third person—example (15)—we see that the possessed noun must be obviative. Furthermore, if there was a verb, it would have to agree with the obviated noun such as in the following sentence:

- (16) ug-tus-l etlenm-ilit-'l  
3SG.POSS-daughter-OBV laugh-3SG-OBV  
'his/her daughter is laughing.'

This agreement on the verb shows up because there is an animate<sup>13</sup> third person being possessed by another third person; the sentence would be ungrammatical otherwise.

Another syntactic interaction of obviation and possession is demonstrated by the following pair of examples:

- (17) Sa'n<sub>i</sub> apaj-ignm-uat-l Pie'l-al<sub>j</sub> ug<sub>j</sub>-ti'-l  
John return-give-3>3'AN-OBV Peter-OBV his-dog-OBV  
'John gives Peter his dog (Peter's dog back to Peter).'
- (18) Sa'n<sub>i</sub> (apaj-)ignm-uat-l ug<sub>i</sub>-ti'-l Pie'l-al<sub>j</sub>  
John (return-)give-3>3'AN-OBV his-dog-OBV Peter-OBV  
'John gives Peter his dog (John's dog back to Peter).'

In example (17), 'his dog' is coreferenced with Peter, so Peter is the possessor of the dog. In example (18), 'his dog' is coreferenced with John, so John is the possessor of the dog<sup>14</sup>. Note that all arguments except for John, who is the main 'actor', are obviative. What is interesting about these examples, is that a change in word order causes a

<sup>12</sup>Rhodes 1992.

<sup>13</sup>Restrictions on animacy will be discussed as part of non-obligatory obviation.

<sup>14</sup>The preverb apaj- 'to return' is in parentheses, because it is optional. If it is John's dog in the first place, he would not be giving it back to Peter, per se, unless it is contextually specified that Peter was holding John's dog, John took it, and now he is giving it back to Peter. This does not affect the phenomena we are observing.

change in meaning. Since most Algonquian languages are ‘free order’ languages, often-times changing word order does not affect the meaning. Considering (17) and (18), it seems as if possessors must precede possessums; if ‘his dog’ precedes Peter, it cannot be interpreted as Peter’s dog.

## 2. Clause boundaries

Another context in which obviation is obligatory is within clauses. We saw instances of this above in ditransitive verbs, where there can only be one proximate within a stretch of discourse, which must minimally be a clause. So, when there is another clause, there is a new obviation span. Here is a simple example illustrating clausal obviation:

- (19) Mali nemi-a-t’-l tiam-ul aq tiam nemi-a-t’-l  
 Mary see-**DIR-3>3’AN-OBV** moose-**OBV** and moose see-**DIR-3>3’AN-OBV**  
 Mali-**al**.  
 Mary-**OBV**  
 ‘Mary sees the moose and the moose sees Mary.’

It is clear that here we have two clauses joined together with the conjunction ‘and’. In the first clause, Mary is proximate and the moose is obviative, and in the second clause we see a shift, where the moose becomes proximate and Mary obviative<sup>15</sup>.

Here are a few more complex examples involving possession:

- (20) Mali<sub>i</sub> ug<sub>i</sub>-wis-l nemi’-t’-l  
 Mary her-son-OBV see-**INV-3>3’AN-OBV**  
 ‘Mary’s<sub>i</sub> son sees her<sub>i</sub>.’
- (21) Mali<sub>i</sub> ug<sub>i</sub>-wis-l nemi-a-t’-l  
 Mary her-son-OBV see-**DIR-3>3’AN-OBV**  
 ‘Mary<sub>i</sub> sees her<sub>i</sub> son.’

These illustrate a few things about obviation. First note, that because there are no overt pronouns the two examples look very similar, but the inverse/direct verb forms change meaning<sup>16</sup>. In (20) the verb form is inverse; the rough translation is something like ‘Mary is seen by her son’. In (21), the verb form is direct, which means ‘Mary sees her son’. In both of these, the ‘her’ in ‘her son’ is coreferential with Mary. This is because within the same clause, when the possessor precedes the possessum, it is a canonical assumption that third persons are coreferenced. However, (21) is ambiguous. This is because the prefix *ug-* does not mean ‘her’ specifically; it means ‘his’ or ‘her’,

<sup>15</sup>Please note that a shift in focus does not necessarily imply a change in contextual span. For more on this refer to Grafstein 1985: 45.

<sup>16</sup>The root of the verb ‘to see’ is *nemi-*. The length of the *i*, indicated by the apostrophe mark is actually contrastive and differentiates inverse verb forms from direct ones.

since there is no natural gender distinction in Mi'gmaq. Thus, the sentence could also mean that a.) Mary sees his son (John's son) or b.) Mary sees her son (Jane's son). In both of these instances, we would have to overtly specify the possessor in one of the following ways:

- (22) Mali<sub>i</sub> nemi-a-t'-l                      Jane<sub>j</sub> ug<sub>j</sub>-wis-l  
 Mary see-DIR-3>3'AN-OBV Jane her-son-OBV  
 'Mary sees Jane's son.'
- (23) Mali<sub>i</sub> nemi-a-t'-l                      Jane<sub>j</sub>-al    ug<sub>j</sub>-wis-l  
 Mary see-DIR-3>3'AN-OBV Jane-OBV her-son-OBV  
 'Mary sees Jane's son.'

According to much of the Algonquian literature, some languages, such as Ojibwe, have a 'further obviative' marker. For example<sup>17</sup>:

- (24) John o-gike:nima:-an Mary-an    o-mise:h-ini  
 John 3-know.TA-obv Mary-obv 3-sister-f.obv  
 'John knows Mary's sister.'

Here we see that John is proximate, Mary is marked obviative with the suffix -an, and sister is marked further obviative with the suffix -ini. Thus far I have not seen any further obviatives in Mi'gmaq.

As shown by the examples above, proximate third persons can be possessors of obviatives. However, the opposite—obviative third persons possessing proximates—is not possible. Here are examples demonstrating this in Mi'gmaq. (25) is the same as (21), just repeated below for purposes of convenience:

- (25) Mali<sub>i</sub> ug<sub>i</sub>-wis-l    nemi-a-t'-l  
 Mary her-son-OBV see-DIR-3>3'AN-OBV  
 'Mary<sub>i</sub> sees her<sub>i</sub> son.'
- (26) ug<sub>i</sub>-wis-l    nemi-a-t'-l                      Mali<sub>j,\*(i)</sub>-al  
 her-son-OBV see-DIR-3>3'AN-OBV Mary-OBV  
 'Her<sub>i</sub> son sees Mary<sub>j</sub>.'

(25) is a regular case of possession. The proximate subject 'Mary' can be coreferenced with the object 'her son'. However, in (26) the obviative subject 'her son' cannot be coreferenced with the obviative object 'Mary'. The only way (26) can be grammatical is

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<sup>17</sup>Taken from Lochbihler 2011.



if ‘his/her son’ is *not* coreferenced with ‘Mary’.<sup>18</sup> In this case, ‘his/her son’ would have to be someone else’s son seeing Mary.

### 2.0.3 Non-obligatory

I will now turn to a context where obviation is optional in Mi’gmaq. Consider sentences (22) and (23), restated below:

(27) Mali<sub>i</sub> nemi-a-t’-l                      Jane<sub>j</sub> ug<sub>j</sub>-wis-l  
 Mary see-DIR-3>3’AN-OBV Jane her-son-OBV  
 ‘Mary sees Jane’s son.’

(28) Mali<sub>i</sub> nemi-a-t’-l                      Jane<sub>j</sub>-al ug<sub>j</sub>-wis-l  
 Mary see-DIR-3>3’AN-OBV Jane-OBV her-son-OBV  
 ‘Mary sees Jane’s son.’

Aside from not exhibiting the further obviative marking, these sentences are interesting for another reason. Grafstein has pointed out that it is more common for Jane in example (28), to be realized as proximate as in sentence (27). In this example, Jane is not marked as an obviative person. This seems problematic, as there should only be one proximate per clause. In this case, it would be Mary. However, it seems that Mary can be proximate as long as she is inside the DP domain, which Lochbihler 2011 posits as possibly another domain of obviation<sup>19</sup>. Thus, example (28) shows that the possessor Jane can be optionally marked with an obviative suffix<sup>20</sup>.

## 3 Discussion & Data: Selected Literature

As previously mentioned, most traditional Algonquian literature has regarded obviation either as a discourse tracking phenomenon, or a part of the syntactic grammar. These

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<sup>18</sup>(26) can also be grammatical if we use an inverse verb morphology, and indicate that Mary is the possessor. This is as in example (20), repeated below:

(a.) Mali<sub>i</sub> ug<sub>j</sub>-wis-l      nemi’-t’-l  
 Mary her-son-OBV see.INV-3>3’AN-OBV  
 ‘Mary’s<sub>i</sub> son sees her<sub>j</sub>.’

<sup>19</sup>like a clause.

<sup>20</sup>Grafstein states that this is because (relative to example (22)) Mary is an argument of the verb while Jane is an argument of the possessed noun. Since they are not arguments of the same lexical item, they don’t necessarily have to show disjoint reference. Hence, Jane must not be marked as obviative. Note that this analysis presupposes that nouns can take arguments. Grafstein 1989: 172-3.

two views are not incompatible, but I believe that placing an emphasis on obviation as part of the syntactic grammar<sup>21</sup> permits an account for its discourse properties as well<sup>22</sup>.

Aissen treats obviation as a morphological phenomenon, stating that Algonquian languages have “...systems which obligatorily rank third person nominals according to a complex function which includes grammatical function, inherent semantic properties, and discourse salience. In Algonquian linguistics, the highest ranked third person is called PROXIMATE; all other 3rd persons are OBVIATIVES.”<sup>23</sup>. This, though, is very relative and circular in the sense that the only evidence we have to say that third persons are ranked in any way *is* the proximate/obviative distinction. Most of the accounts that say proximate third persons are in focus while obviative third persons are peripheral are just restating what we are looking at. It is, of course, a very convenient and comprehensible definition for the time being, albeit there being no independent motivations.

To eliminate this problem, Quinn 2006 proposes a Core-Periphery approach, hinging on the concept of referential access dependency (RAD). Quinn defines referential access dependency as an asymmetry between the Core-Periphery relation, in which the Core is the Proximate, while the Periphery is the Obviative. The asymmetry lies in the fact that, to be able to get any obviative at all, we *must* have at least one proximate. Meanwhile, the converse is not true—we do not need an obviative to have a proximate. In other words, a Core or Proximate can always stand on its own as a default, morphologically unmarked third person, while an Obviative *relies* on the Core for its reference<sup>24</sup>.

The elegance of the idea is that the Core-Periphery structure is cyclical, and the Proximate/Obviative contrast is the third iteration or level<sup>25</sup>, as diagramed in (30).

(29) [[Core<sub>1</sub>] Periphery<sub>1</sub>]<sub>Core2</sub> [[Core<sub>3</sub>] Periphery<sub>3</sub>]<sub>Periphery2</sub>  
           3-Prox 3-Obv

According to Quinn, the Proximate/Obviative contrast is derived from two other contrasts within a discourse, the first being the speaker/addressee contrast, and the second being the speech-act participant vs. non-speech-act participant contrast. In a conversation, 1st and 2nd person are always implied. If one person is the speaker, it is likely but *not necessary* that there is an addressee. However, the inverse is not the case. So, if there is an addressee, there *must* necessarily be a speaker. This is the first iteration of the Core-Periphery; the speaker is the freestanding Core, while the addressee is the Periphery. These are regarded as Speech Act Participants (SAP)<sup>26</sup>.

Now, if we want to add a 3rd person, its establishment relies on the establishment of the 1st and 2nd person. So, in this way, the Speech Act Participants (1st and 2nd

<sup>21</sup>Or obviation as a type of a syntactic grammar—a set of structure-building rules. Quinn 151.

<sup>22</sup>Quinn 2006: 172.

<sup>23</sup>Aissen 705.

<sup>24</sup>An obviative cannot exist unless there is a proximate within the domain. Quinn 176.

<sup>25</sup>Quinn 150.

<sup>26</sup>Quinn 140.

person together) now become the Core, and the 3rd person becomes the Periphery, as its interpretation is dependent on the status of the Speech Act Participants<sup>27</sup>. This is the second iteration of the Core-Periphery; the Speech Act Participants are the independent Core, while the 3rd person status is the dependant Periphery.

In Algonquian languages, the third and final iteration of this contrast is the Proximate/Obviative distinction, where the 3rd person is split into a 3rd person Core (the Proximate) and a 3rd person Periphery (the Obviative). The Obviative crucially relies on an intermediate, non Speech Act Participant 3rd person to receive its status.

The Core-Periphery approach unifies the discourse and syntactic roles of obviation by accounting for obviation shifts within a specific span as well as providing a solid account for obligatory possession. Quinn suggests that the Proximate/Obviative shifts we find in a narrative are a result of the referential-access dependency. As the Core of their domain, Proximate referents are those that do not rely on other referents within a discourse or narrative to get their interpretation. Their only dependency is on the Speech Act Participant Core, and no other intermediate persons. Quinn states, "Proximate shifts are therefore simply cases where a referent has (is given) independent discourse status, which derives from its Core 3rd person (i.e. Core3) status"<sup>28</sup>.

The Core-Periphery approach also accounts well for obligatory possession obviation marking in Mi'gmaq. As stated in Section 1.3.1, a third person animate nominal possessed by another third person animate nominal must always be obviative:

- (30) 'n-gwij  
1SG.POSS-mother  
'my mother'
- (31) 'g-gwij  
2SG.POSS-mother  
'your mother'
- (32) ug-gwij-l  
3SG.POSS-mother-OBV  
'his/her mother'

The Core-Periphery model accounts for this by suggesting that as a non-Speech Act Participant, a third person possessor requires an intermediate step or level of interpretation to pick up the necessary referent. Thus, if 1st and 2nd person are involved in a conversation, and a 3rd person possessor phrase such as 'her mother' is introduced, we cannot interpret the meaning of it unless we know who *her* in 'her mother' is<sup>29</sup>. Thus, there is an

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<sup>27</sup>cf. Quinn 168: "...the 3rd person only (and only directly) establishes the pragmatic necessity of the *existence* of 1st and 2nd person discourse referents, and not their assignment."

<sup>28</sup>Quinn 176.

<sup>29</sup>Quinn 153.

obligatory 3rd person referent we must know first (referential access dependency) and by virtue of this, the person being possessed must be marked as obviative. Furthermore, in this sense, the interpretation is compositional.

Another account that has been proposed in the literature is that obviation is a way to mark disjoint reference<sup>30</sup>. Grafstein informally characterizes obviation as a “process whereby noncoreferential third persons are morphologically distinguished from one another when they appear in the same sentence”<sup>31</sup>, keyword being *non-coreferential*. Dechaine & Wiltschko 2002 argue that if a language displays obviation marking, an obviative-marked argument is obligatorily disjoint from a proximate-marked argument<sup>32</sup>. As Quinn 2006, Dechaine & Wiltschko want to unite ‘grammatically conditioned obviation and discourse-conditioned obviation’. To do so, they claim that obviation is a type of D-agreement, showcasing “a classical Condition C effect: DPs do not corefer”<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, the authors explain that the reason that possessed nouns are obligatorily marked obviative is because they automatically involve the presence of two DPs. So, pronominal agreement is  $\phi$ -feature agreement, while obviation is D-agreement, signaling that the discourse referent is distinct from the proximate topic<sup>34</sup>.

The difference between Dechaine & Wiltschko’s model as compared to Grafstein’s is their use of Conditions B and C of Chomsky’s Binding Theory<sup>35</sup>. Dechaine & Wiltschko claim that the aforementioned pronominal agreement is subject to Condition B<sup>36</sup>, while obviation is a case of Condition C. Grafstein claims that Condition C is completely irrelevant to the discussion, because only anaphors and pronominals must be bound in certain contexts<sup>37</sup>, so we must look at Conditions A and B. Furthermore, she states that neither Condition A nor Condition B can apply. Condition A cannot apply, because according to Grafstein, Ojibwa does not have a class of nominal expressions that can be called anaphors<sup>38</sup>. Condition B cannot apply because there are no lexical pronouns in Ojibwa<sup>39</sup>. Rather, she claims that the presence or absence of an obviative suffix determines whether a pronominal is interpreted as coreferential or noncoreferential with a third person<sup>40</sup>. Grafstein thus formulates a definition of disjoint reference with regards

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<sup>30</sup>Grafstein 1984, 1989; Dechaine & Wiltschko 2002.

<sup>31</sup>Grafstein 1989: 164.

<sup>32</sup>Dechaine & Wiltschko 432.

<sup>33</sup>Dechaine & Wiltschko 434.

<sup>34</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Chomsky 1981, 188:

A. An anaphor is bound in its governing category.

B. A pronominal is free in its governing category.

C. An R-expression is free.

<sup>36</sup>Dechaine & Wiltschko 410.

<sup>37</sup>Grafstein 1989: 167.

<sup>38</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>Grafstein 1989: 170.

<sup>40</sup>*ibid.*

to obviation in Ojibwa: “The obligatory arguments within the Argument Structure of a lexical item must be assigned distinct features for person”<sup>41</sup>. The author notes that it makes sense for obviation to be a person feature, because it works in a comparable way to other person features in that it distinguishes the referent of the argument to which it refers from other arguments in the same sentence.

A potential problem for the analysis, is that obviation does a bad job of being a disjoint reference marker. Straightforwardly, this is because we would expect that a disjoint reference marker would prevent any source of ambiguity. However, it is clear from examples we have seen before that ambiguity is very common. Moreover, some Algonquian languages exhibit a further obviative marker. For example in Ojibwa, proximates are morphologically unmarked, obviatives are marked with ‘-an’ suffix, and further obviatives are marked with ‘-ini’ suffix<sup>42</sup>:

- (33) John o-gi:-wa:bama:-an o-gosis-ini  
John 3-PAST-see.TA-OBV 3-son-FURTH.OBV  
‘John saw his son’

The example above displays the further obviative marker and successfully disambiguates the possessive pronoun ‘his’ from the noun ‘John’, so the hearer knows that the the possessed noun–‘son’–cannot be referring to John’s son; it must necessarily be someone else’s son. Grafstein also notes that correspondingly, a lack of further obviation unambiguously identifies John as the referent of the third person prefix of the possessed noun<sup>43</sup>. However, although this is a clear case of disambiguation and disjoint reference, this is *not* exhibited by every Algonquian language and some languages, such as Mi’gmaq, have lost this further obviative contrast<sup>44</sup>. If obviation were really a disjoint reference marker, it would be neither progressive nor useful for a language to lose this distinction, as the lack or loss of the further obviative creates ambiguity where none existed previously.

## 4 Concluding Remarks and Issues for Further Research

The purpose of this paper was to clearly outline the basic facts of obviation in Mi’gmaq, as well as provide some essential background to the literature in the field.

In Section 1 I outlined some fundamental differences that are exhibited in the Algonquian language family. In Section 2 I discussed key facts about obviation. In relative terms, we can say that in this grammatical system proximates are more salient or foregrounded, while obviatives are peripheral. In Section 2 I have also supported the view

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<sup>41</sup>Grafstein 1989: 171.

<sup>42</sup>Grafstein 1984: 29.

<sup>43</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>Or, perhaps, had none in the first place.

that obviation is a syntactic process and is obligatory at least clause-internally or within a possessive expression. Of course, aside from its syntactic properties, obviation can be used to keep track of third persons within a narrative, dialogue, or discourse. Section 3 presented views regarding obviation from selected literature.

Possible directions for future research may include further investigation of the person hierarchy. It is important to ask whether the person hierarchy (2>1>3) that has been assumed thus far<sup>45</sup> is necessary. Other directions may include considering the parallels between plural and obviation marking and asking what, if anything, a unifying analysis would imply. Looking at obviative inverse/direct verb forms and their interaction with scope may also be of interest.

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<sup>45</sup>Valentine 2001.

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