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LOCATIVES AND OBLIVIATION IN CREE

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Wolfart has observed that the Cree locative suffix /-ehk/ “is mutually exclusive with the suffixes of the number-obviation paradigm. Thus, number and obviation are not expressed in locative forms; obviation would also be excluded on semantic grounds.”

Wolfart is mainly concerned with morphology, specifically with the nonoccurrence of obviative endings on locative nouns, but his statement implies that locatives, as a category, are systematically excluded from the dimension of obviation. Indeed, in a more recent paper on obviation in Cree, Wolfart has claimed that “the locative . . . stands outside the proximate-obviative dimension and never interacts with it in any way,” adding that in a string such as:

(1) okimâw o-kosis=a o-têm-iy(i)-ihk
   chief/PROX his1-son1-OBV his2-horse-OBV. POSS-LOC
   on the chief’s son’s horse
   the noun otêmiyihk “as a locative . . . itself takes no part in obviation.”

1 This work is based on research carried out at the University of Alberta and supported by a postdoctoral fellowship awarded by the Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholarship Committee of the University of Alberta. Thanks are due to those members of the Edmonton Cree community who willingly gave their time to help me with Cree. All responsibility for the interpretation and analysis of these facts, naturally, is my own.


Wolfart’s assertion regarding locatives and obviation is certainly correct so far as the morphology of Cree is concerned—locative nouns never are overtly marked with obviative suffixes. However, with regard to the syntax of Cree, it can be shown that locative nouns do participate in the obviation process and, moreover, do so in exactly the same way as inanimate nouns, the other noun class with no morphological marking for obviation.

Wolfart has noted that inanimate nouns are “covertly” obviative—although they show no markings for obviation, a verb which depends on them must itself be obviative in form, if the conditions for obviation, that is, the presence of another third-person referent in the same sentence or contextual span, are met. Thus, in:

(2) okimâw wâpahtam cîmân ê-misâ-yi-k
   chief/PROX sees (it) canoe/INAN PVB-be
   big-OBV-3SG(CONJUNCT)
   The chief sees the canoe which is big

the subordinate verb ê-misâyik is inflected for an obviative subject, even though that subject, cîmân, is not overtly marked for obviation (being inanimate). This contrasts with the situation in (3), in which the conditions for obviation are not met (there being only one third-person noun in the sentence) and the subordinate verb is inflected for a (proximate) third-person subject:

(3) ni-wâpahten cîmân ê-misâ-k
   1sg-see (it) canoe bebig-3SG
   I see a canoe which is big.

The same distribution of obviative and proximate verb forms is found with verbs dependent on locative nouns. In a sentence

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4 Ibid.
such as (4), in which the conditions for obvation are met:

(4) cān wīk̓i wakwānikamikohk ʔ-miśā-yi-k
   John/PROX lives tent/LOC be big-OBV-3SG

   John lives in a tent which is big

the subordinate verb ʔ-miśā-yik, which depends upon the locative noun pakwāni-kamikohk, is the same form as in the inanimate covertly obviative sentence (2).\(^5\) Furthermore, if the conditions for obvation are removed, the subordinate verb referring to the locative must be third-person proximate and cannot be third-person obviative (cf. 3):

(5) ni-wīkin pakwānikamikohk ʔ-miśāk/
     *ʔ-miśā-yik

1SG-live tent/LOC PROX OBV

   I live in a tent which is big.

Thus, the facts of (4) and (5) show clearly that locative nouns in Cree can participate in the proximate-obviative dimension, although their participation is “covert,” in the manner of inanimate nouns. The claim, then, that locatives do not interact with obvation in any way is falsified by these sentences. The mutual exclusiveness of the locative and obvation endings is to be viewed, therefore, as essentially a morphological restriction, with no syntactic implications.

\(^5\) Moreover, a proximate verb form in such a sentence, according to one consultant, does not clearly refer to the tent at all:

(i) ??cān wīk̓i wakwānikamikohk ʔ-miśāk

   John lives in a tent which is big (Intended Reading).