In this paper I treat in a preliminary fashion some aspects of the use of the famous Algonquian obviative, as illustrated by Fox texts written some 70 years ago by Fox Indians and edited and published by Truman Michelson. The inflectional morphology and formal syntactic rules involved will not be discussed, however. Rather the focus of interest here is on the functions of the use of the obviative in discourse, that is, on how connected narratives are put together. All the points I wish to make are accessible through the English translations provided. On a more general level I hope to give an idea of the richness of the forms of Algonquian narrative, and I also wish to formulate and defend some basic principles of how to edit (or not to edit) subtle and complex features of Algonquian texts.

Basically the way the obviative works is this: If there are two animate third persons (nouns or pronouns) in the same context one is marked as obviative by special inflections. The non-obviative noun or pronoun, called the proximate, is the normal unmarked form used when there is only one such entity in a given context. The proximate is the more prominent, the “hero of the discourse”, and the obviative the less prominent. Verbs are inflected to show agreement with obviative and proximate subjects and objects, as appropriate, and in this way subjects and objects are kept straight and different participants in a section of narrative may also be kept distinct. It is evident that
this, entirely traditional, formulation will not predict or specify the use of proximate and obviative inflections, since the crucial terms “section of narrative” (or “context”) and “prominent” are left undefined. The discussion that follows will shed some light on these concepts and suggest some refinements. It should be mentioned that there are also inanimate obviatives (indicated only by cross-reference in verbs), but as consideration of these would add little to the present discussion they will not be treated here.

Those who have considered the obviative as a feature of grammar, specifically of syntax, have proposed to account for it in terms of the syntactic structure of individual sentences. In these syntactic approaches, obviation across more than one sentence is taken to be a property of discourse (hence to be accounted for eventually in terms of some separate discourse component of language), with more or less of a connection to the syntactic aspects of obviation, and as being to a great extent optional, perhaps entirely optional (Grafstein 1981; Dunnigan, O’Malley, and Schwartz 1978). Essentially this paper is about those aspects of the use of obviation that have been ignored, in effect or on principle, in the syntactic approaches. In particular, in those cases in which a syntactic explanation of the obviative merely leaves its use or non-use as an option, I am interested in what the discourse function is of its use or non-use. Cases in which a syntactic explanation for the use of an obviative does not appear to be possible will also be noted. This is not to deny that there are syntactic aspects—and, even more narrowly, purely morphological aspects—to the use of the obviative, and it should be noted, furthermore, that this paper is only a preliminary survey of some of the patterns of obviation found in the Fox texts.

The examples have been re-edited from the original manuscripts in the National Anthropological Archives. Vowel length and /h/, which are not written in the Fox syllabary, have been supplied on the basis of Michelson’s phonetic transcriptions and other sources, word boundaries have been regularized, and punctuation added. The equals sign (=) sets off enclitics and procli-
tics where no word boundaries are indicated in the manuscripts, and the hyphen (-) marks prenouns and preverbs, which are phonologically independent words but only optionally, though often, so indicated by the Fox writers. In the English translations the animate third persons are marked [P], for proximate, or [O] for obviative. In one case where two degrees of obviation are distinguished by the verbal inflection, the second obviative (sometimes called the further obviative) is indicated as [O2].

To begin with we may consider two examples of complex sentences in which the apparatus of obviation may be seen to have its well known function of reducing or eliminating ambiguity of pronominal reference:


Here the inflection of the verb 'to eat' for a second obviative subject acting on an obviative object gives the unambiguous meaning 'the animals ate the dead'.


Michelson's editions of the texts used appear in Michelson (1921; referred to in citations as B 72) and Michelson (1925; referred to as AR 40). All quoted examples are from the writings of Alfred Kiyana, except for one from the anonymous author of "Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman" (AR 40:304) and one from Sam Peters (AR 40:394). Of great help in interpreting the texts have been Michelson's phonetic transcriptions of dictations by Edward Davenport (B 72), Shapochiwa ("Autobiography"), and Harry Lincoln (the other texts in AR 40), and the English translations dictated by Harry Lincoln (AR 40:422, 442 and written out by Horace Poweshiek (the other texts in AR 40 and B72). Obviously, this paper builds on the contributions of all these people.

Square brackets are used in the examples to mark emendations, twice where -e- was mistakenly written for -a- and once where no word boundary is marked at what appears to be the beginning of a sentence. Pointed brackets enclose narrow transliterations of the syllabary. In example (15) the dotted letters between square brackets indicate an uncertain restoration of the erased original.
In this sentence the first obviative refers back to a herd of buffalo mentioned in the preceding context, where it is obviative. The verb 'to kill' is inflected for a proximate plural object and morphologically could have either an obviative or a second obviative as subject, but the position of 'woman' at the end of the sentence probably rules out taking it as the subject. The verb 'to chase' is inflected for a proximate plural subject and an obviative object.

Obviation may also function to keep pronominal reference unambiguous over a series of sentences:


This segment of the text concerns the obligatory ceremonial behavior of those invited to a sacred-pack ceremony and begins with a topicalizing reference to the invited guests in the proximate. In the first verbal clause the ceremonial attendants are referred to in the obviative. Throughout the passage the guests and the attendants are kept distinct by the use of proximate verbal inflections for the former and obviative inflections for the latter. In cases like this, which are very common, there is no plausible syntactic explanation for the use of the obviative, as there is no syntactic relationship between the proximate and obviative nominals. In fact, in the text from which this passage is taken this is the very first mention of the guests. It must be clear that the inflection and cross-referencing of the ceremonial attendants as obviative can only be accounted for in terms of the discourse structure of the text. The guests are the focus, hence in the proximate. The attendants are of secondary importance, providing a context for the actions of the guests, and hence are in the obviative.

In contrast to cases like (1), (2), and (3), there are many instances in the Fox texts in which there is more than one proximate entity in the same context. Such cases cannot be brushed aside as optional non-use of the obviative, or as showing that
the concept of a single context is ill-defined—which appear to be the only interpretations available to the syntactic approach. The question is, what are the existing patterns of multiple proximates and what are their discourse or other functions?

First of all, it is well known that appositional nouns or conjoined nouns, with or without a conjunction, regularly agree in obviation status:


Here the seven conjoined nouns are all proximate. An unusual exception to this pattern is found in the fixed phrase mešihke:ha mahkwa:hke:hani ‘snapping turtle [P] (and) tortoise [O]’ in three of its four occurrences in the Owl Sacred Pack text (B 72:14.14, 20-21; 18:26); in the fourth occurrence both nouns are proximate (B 72:32.29-30).

One case has been found that pretty clearly shows the workings of the quasi-universal animacy hierarchy:


This is the last sentence in the text, and the sacred story (a:teso:-hka:kana, an animate noun) is clearly the topic and the first-mentioned animate and so is in the proximate. But the animacy hierarchy (in which people clearly rank above stories) prevents the uncle (no:sa ‘my father’s brother’) from going into the lower-status category of the obviative, since even though he is topically secondary and mentioned second he is of higher rank, and hence the uncle must be proximate also. The effects of the animacy hierarchy may also be present in example (2), where the buffalos, though the subject and more central to the narrative at that point, remain in the obviative while the Sioux go into the proximate.

There are a few examples of multiple proximates that involve a type of naming construction in which the name or designation is in effect quoted matter that stands outside the syntax of the
sentence and hence does not show concord with a co-referential obviative:

(6) me:me:čiki=ča:h=meko kehke:nemekwa maneto:wa e:nemečini... (AR 40:442.13-14.) 'Certainly the one [O] called manitou [P] knows about him [P].'

Here the proximate noun maneto:wa 'manitou' is so to speak in quotation marks and does not agree in obviation with the obviative participle e:nemečini 'the one (obv.) called (thus)' which obviously refers to the same entity. As a result the clause has two proximates referring to different third persons.

Special explanations of the sort presented up to this point will account for only a minority of the cases of multiple proximates, however. It is, in fact, not at all unusual for two distinct third person animates in the same context both to be proximate:


(8) nekoti to:hka:na, nekoti ki:$ko:ha. menehta to:hka:na ... o:ni ki:$ko:ha ... o:ni na:hhka=meko to:hka:na. o:ni ki:$ko:ha ... (B 72:14.32-16.4.) 'One is a Tohkana [P] (a member of the Tohkana moiety), and one a Kishkoha [P]. First the Tohkana [P]... Then the Kishkoko [P]... Then again the Tohkana [P]. Then the Kishkoha [P]...'


In (7), after a reference to unspecified women (ihkwe:waki), a clarification is added that it is not the women of the host group (ihkwe:waki...ki:ke:nočiki) who are meant, but the women who are the guests (wi:hkomečiki ihkwe:waki). Example (8) is from a passage describing the sequence of speeches given alternately by
the two head attendants, one from each of the two moieties. Setting aside additional special explanations—say, a parenthetical expression in (7) and a type of conjoining in (8)—we can observe that in each case the two proximates are of equal overall status as opposite members of a balanced pairing and are not interacting directly. Example (9) seems quite different. The first part is a narrative like example (3), with the proximate consistently used for the flute-bearer and his group and the obviative used for their enemies. Then, at the point indicated in the translation by a slash (/), the former obviative shifts to a proximate and the former proximate drops out of the narrative. It is clear that the proximate shift at this point has an important discourse function, shifting the focus of the narrative to the enemy warrior and describing the effect of the flute-playing from his point of view. Although proximate shifts like that in (9) exemplify a distinct discourse feature from the multiple proximates of (7) and (8), however, the way they function can be understood by noting the kinds of situations in which what might be called normal multiple proximates occur. Normal multiple proximates are those, as in (7) and (8), that are stylistically unmarked, lack a strong discourse function, and reflect a coordinate status like that of conjoined proximates, as in (4). The impact of proximate shifts on the discourse comes from their evocation of the kinds of situations in which such multiple proximates are used. A proximate shift, as it were, promotes a subordinate character to coordinate status with the former main character. It is noteworthy that in cases like (9) there is not a reversal of obviation status, with the former proximate becoming the obviative. Rather, the former obviative ceases to be a context for the actions of the earlier proximate, which drops out of the narrative at that point.

These points are reinforced by cases in which there is a sequence of proximate shifts:

2 The term ‘moiety’ is used for convenience; technically the Fox dual divisions are not moieties since they cut across the clans rather than dividing them into two groups.
In this passage, there are three proximate shifts, producing four
distinct narrative segments (marked off by slashes in the En­
glish translation) in which the character with proximate status alternates. In the second and fourth segments the previous pro­ximate drops out, just as with the proximate shift at the end of (9). The use of a passive verb (e:h=mešeneći ‘they were cap­
tured’) in the second segment is particularly significant in this connection, since it shows in a concrete way the avoidance of a reversal of obviation status for both third persons. Comparing (3) and the first part of (9) with (10) and the end of (9), the dif­ference in narrative effect of the different patterns of obviation is evident. In (3) and the first part of (9) the action is viewed as a whole from a single point of view, that of the proximate entity in each case; the obviative entities and their activities provide a context for the actions of the proximate entities. In (10), on the other hand, with the two sides in the battle being focused on alternately, and the shift at the end of (9) has the same effect.

Some cases of multiple proximates within the same sentence are in fact proximate shifts in function, constituting or foreshad­owing a shift in narrative focus:


(11) occurs in a passage in which the hero tells how the while buffalo manitou took him to the four directions under the earth
to be instructed by the manitous there (who are not referred to by nouns or pronouns), and then up above to the Great Manitou (introduced as the sole proximate in a sentence). The white buffalo Manitou explains how he has blessed the hero and how he has taken him along (to the other manitous). Then follows the sentence in (11), which introduces the account of the Great Manitou's instruction, in which, however, he is not referred to. Example (12) occurs in "The Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman" when the author is describing her isolation and instruction at the time of her first menstruation. Up to this point the narrative has concerned her training and education by her mother, but now there appears on the scene another person, an older woman she calls grandmother. The shift of focus occurs in the sentences in (12), after which the narrative continues about the author and the old woman, with the mother dropping out. In fact, in the sentence immediately following (12) a passive expression ('the reason she was brought') is used, avoiding an additional reference to the mother. In both (11) and (12) there is a shift from one proximate to another. The new proximate is introduced, the earlier proximate is mentioned again, and then the shift occurs. In the transitional section both third persons appear as proximates; they do not interact directly, but each passage has one sentence in which both occur—at the end of the transitional passage in (11) and at the beginning in (12). (Note that in the sentence in (12) the "grandmother" (no:hkomesa) is mentioned before the mother (nekya), though the English translation reverses the order.)

The examples discussed so far should make it clear that multiple proximates and proximate shifts have identifiable discourse functions in Fox narratives and cannot simply be dismissed as lapses of obviation. Even more awkward for any putative syntactic account of obviation, and apparently unrecognized even by atheoretical Algonquianists, is the obviative shift: the shift of a proximate to obviative status with no syntactic motivation:


In the narrative preceding example (13) the hero declares to his father that he will go to seek "the things that will be my arrowheads," and "In four days I will come back." He goes into a cliff behind a waterfall, and then (13) follows. The shifting of the hero from proximate to obviative in the second sentence of (13) has the effect of shifting the point of view from the hero back to his father and the rest of his people, even though they are not mentioned. It is clearly from their perspective that the hero can be said to come back after four days with his prophecy about the arrowheads fulfilled. With the return of the hero he is back in focus and the narrative continues with him in the proximate. The obviative shift in (14)3 has a similar effect. It forces the hero's statements to be seen from the point of view of the other people whom they affect, the women of the last sentence in (14)

3 The editing of (14) follows Michelson and Poweshiek, except for taking ki:moči 'secretly' with what follows rather than with what precedes. Several anomalies can be eliminated if the segment from kepye:nenepwa to ki:moči is edited as follows: ...kepye:nenepwa," imi:="na, "ni:na=ke:hi nepye:netiso," e:h=iči ki:moči. The translation from 'you here' to 'Secretly' should then be replaced by: ...you here." /Then that (man) [P] said secretly, "But I brought myself." Under this interpretation example (14) shows an obviative shift combined with a proximate shift (indicated by the slash).
and the hero's rival, the topic of a section coming immediately after this, who repeatedly used the phrase 'I also' in saying that he would have done the same thing as the hero. The obviative shift, like the proximate shift, is a good example of how the secondary associations of the core use of a grammatical category can become independent denotata through being evoked by the unconditioned use of that category in novel contexts.

It is, of course, not a new idea among Algonquianists that the use of proximates and obviatives has a discourse function of some sort. In particular, in editing the Fox texts Truman Michelson explicitly recognized that the phenomenon here called proximate shift correlated with a shift of topic, discussed by him as the beginning of a new paragraph:

The paragraphing (which is the same in both [the Fox text and the English translation]) has largely been done with a view to the English idiom. However, it has been possible often to take advantage of the well-known feature of Algonquian languages that identity and difference in third persons is carefully distinguished by grammatical devices. Thus the lack of an obviative in the first sentence of paragraphs 3, 13, and 16 of the principal text [AR 40:46.7, 48.3, 48.15] shows that from the Indian point of view new paragraphs begin. Similarly, with regard to paragraph 12 of the same text [48.1]. However, there is at times a conflict of the point of view: from the native point of view, as shown by the grammatical construction, the second paragraph should begin with the second sentence [46.2, omi...]; whereas English idiomatic usage demands that the paragraph begin with the first sentence. (AR 40:28)

Essentially the same statement appears at B 72:10. As Michelson indicates, where the appearance of a new proximate did not correlate with what he considered to be an appropriate place to begin a new paragraph his paragraphing ignored it. This is the case even in one of the examples he refers to: there is no new proximate at AR 40:48.15; the new proximate occurs at 48.10, within what Michelson punctuates as the preceding paragraph. There is also no new paragraph with the proximate shifts in examples (7), (8), (9), and (10). In other cases, however, Michelson applied his concept rigidly in ways that resulted in distortions of the text. He appears to have been particularly uncomfortable with multiple proximates and proximate shifts within the sentence. In examples (11) and (12), for example, the sentence-internal proximate shifts were avoided by starting new
paragraphs where they occur. (In fairness, though, it should be noted that in both cases the translations prepared by his Fox assistant are deficient.) In example (6) Michelson silently emended the proximate maneto:wa to the corresponding obviative maneto:wanì. In some cases Michelson's emendations have obliterated the original text as written by the native speaker:

(15) \(\text{pi:tahwa:čiki we:či- nye:woconi -pemi-wi:seniwa:či wi:h-awat[swq]či i:ni i:na aya:pa:hte:ha. (AR 40:394.43-44.)} \) 'The reason those [P] who bury them [O] feast for four days is so that that (food) will be brought to Ayapahteha (the manitou of the afterworld) [P].'

This sentence has two proximates, the first word and the last word, and clearly cannot be split in two. Michelson emended the proximate noun phrase i:na aya:pa:hte:ha (demonstrative plus name) to the corresponding obviative i:nini aya:pa:hte:hani, and he changed the preceding verb to agree with this by erasing the final part (and, unnecessarily, the following i:ni 'that') and writing over it in syllabary the corresponding obviative passive ending, to give wi:h=awatawomeči. As a result the original text can no longer be read with certainty, where the dotted letters appear in the transcription above; what is visible actually looks more like <a A> than the <a O> that would be the expected spelling of /awo/.

It should be clear from the examples discussed in this paper that an editor of Algonquian texts who emends a proximate to an obviative (apparently a much commoner urge than the reverse) runs a risk bordering on certainty of obliterating a genuine

4 In (11) the translator did not translate the first part of the sentence (up to the comma), perhaps because it is somewhat redundant from the point of view of English style. In the manuscript original of (12) a new page begins before the last syllable of wi:h=inekihkwiśina:ke '(big enough) for us to lie down', and the translator was misled into interpreting this form as wi:h=inekihkwiśina:[ni] '(big enough) for me to lie down', taking the next word (no:hkomesa 'my grandmother') as the subject of the following verb (inekihkwihto:kwe:ni 'she had seemingly made it so big'), and taking nekya 'my mother' redundantly with what follows it. This interpretation is clearly wrong in its misreading of the first verb, gives the wrong sense (note the next sentence), and is inconsistent with the normal patterns of Fox word order.
feature of discourse. Clearly any suggestion that a particular proximate is an error should be made explicitly and not in a way that obliterates the original. If we are ever to understand the subtle patterns, or even the basic patterns, of the use of proximates and obviatives (and they surely differ from language to language), we will have to be able to rely on texts in which these features have not been tampered with by well-meaning editors. It is completely unacceptable—a basic inexcusable error of scientific method—to normalize texts in accordance with our surely incomplete understanding of Algonquian grammar. Other Algonquianists besides Michelson have emended proximates to obviatives, and the defence always seems to be the same (though not always stated): only clear errors have been emended. I hope this paper shows the danger of this approach. Don’t do it.

Of course, any problems that an editor perceives in a text can be dealt with as extensively as desired in textual notes, and where an emendation is inescapable the apparatus criticus should make the facts explicit. It is certainly a good sign that the use of these well established editorial devices is gaining in popularity in the editing of American Indian texts. To cite some Algonquian texts that come easily to hand, we may mention with approval John Nichols’ editing in Kegg (1983).

Finally, in another vein, I feel I have to point out, with condolences to some of my formalist friends, that if obviation is a unitary feature (as is strongly indicated by the lack of a significant disjunction between the patterns of use within sentences and those between sentences), then the syntactic explanation of obviation, and any model of language that requires it, cannot be correct.

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