Aspects of the Historical Evolution of Obviative Marking in Ojibwa

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In this paper, I would like to examine and illustrate some aspects of the form and use of the obviative in Father Louis Nicolas's account of mid-17th-century Algonquin. At the same time, I will attempt to compare these facts with available data on contemporary Ojibwa and Algonquin dialects. The data are taken from the manuscript grammar of Algonquin prepared by Father Louis Nicolas, a French Jesuit working probably in what is today northern Wisconsin. The manuscript, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (No. 1, catalogue 327), was probably prepared between 1672 and 1674. I have prepared a critical edition of this grammar (Daviault 1988). Hanzeli (1969:117–121) published several excerpts from the grammar.

Noun Obviation

Nicolas distinguishes between singular and plural obviative markers on the noun, in contrasting to contemporary dialects which generally seem to have neutralized this distinction. He also makes a distinction between true and further obviation in the case of animate nouns.

For animate nouns the markers are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sing.</th>
<th>Plur.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>true obviative</td>
<td>-er</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>further obviative</td>
<td>-irir</td>
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</tbody>
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For animate nouns, if we allow for discrepancies in transcription where Father Nicolas writes e for short a, and for the historical change from r

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1 I would like to thank Alan Ford for his generous help in the preparation of this article. All errors remain my own.

2 The terms “true obviation” and “further obviation” are also referred to in Algonquian grammar as “first obviation” and “second obviation”. Cf. Clarke (1982:32).
to $n$, these markers correspond to what we find in contemporary dialects. The plural obviative marking is marked by dropping the final -r. True obviative markers are to be found in old Algonquin in exactly the same syntactic contexts as characterize their use today.

The further obviative form is -irin for the singular and -iri for the plural. It appears in Nicolas's manuscript in sentences where an understood obviative is the possessor of an animate noun, i.e., in cases where, according to the syntactic structure, the possessor should have been marked as obviative. However, it is to be noted that in none of Nicolas's examples does the possessor bear a true obviative marking. It should also be noted that in all his examples, the possessor is expressed by a proper noun, but this in itself cannot constitute an adequate constraint on obviative marker suffixation since proper names do take obviative marking in other syntactic structures, as is shown by example (1):³

(1) [92] ounkima ousakihar Pauler
le capitaine ayme Paul

'The captain likes Paul'

Nicolas's grammar thus offers cases of possessed animate nouns in apparently identical contexts, i.e., possessed by approximate animate noun, that differ in their morphology: some bear true obviative markers, others bear the further obviative markers as in examples (2) and (3):

(2) [91] Pierre ousakitoûouan ouseienser  oumokmaniri
Pierre ayme de son frère ayné le couteau

'Pierre likes his older brother's knife.'

(3) [91] Pierre ousakitououaner ouseienser oumokmaniriouar
Pierre ayme de son frère ayné les couteaux

'Pierre likes his older brother's knives.'

The use of one or the other of the obviatives is a function of the syntactic structure of the whole sentence in which it occurs as in examples (4) and (5):

(4) [97] ousimenser Pierre tiberindamour
le cadet puisné de Pierre gouverne

'Pierre’s younger brother is in charge.'

(5) [100] Pierre outapiouan Paul ounipaganiring vel hech niparitch
Pierre est assis de Paul sur le lict ou là où il dort

'Pierre is sitting on Paul’s bed’ or ‘there where he’s asleep.’

³The number between square brackets indicates the page number in the manuscript where the example is found.
In related present-day dialects speakers who still use the further obviative only do so when the overt lexical possessor bears a true obviative marker. The latter form is neutral with respect to number and is always marked by the suffix -ini.

Of cases where the possessor is pronominal, the manuscript furnishes only examples where the referant has to be interpreted as proximate, and the possessed noun consequently takes the true obviative marker, as illustrated in example (6):

(6)  [63] Pierre ousakiha.r. oukouississer
     Pierre ayme son fils propre

     ‘Pierre loves his own son.’

There is no example in the text of a pronominal possessor which must be interpreted as obviative, i.e., that requires that the possessed noun bear the mark of the further obviative. There is, however, no reason to believe that the language described by Nicolas explicitly excluded such constructions. On the contrary, several facts lead us to consider it quite plausible that they were used. First, such a structure would have required the same grammatical mechanisms as the one that already operates for nouns possessed by an overt obviative lexical item. The grammar would hence acquire a certain symmetry. Furthermore, the French translation he gives for example (6) ‘son fils propre’ (his own son), is probably opposed to ‘le fils de quelqu’un d’autre’ (someone else’s son). As we shall see a little later, this fact is parallel to the one he gives for the inanimate possessed noun. This also characterizes the grammar of some contemporary dialects. Let us consider a case like ‘John sees his son’: contemporary Algonquin dialects have only one possible translation for this sentence, which is: \textit{john wàbamàn ogosisan}, where ‘son’ is obviative. The ambiguity that results is the same as that of the corresponding French or English sentence. Indeed, here the possessor of the ‘son’ could either be co- or dis-referential with ‘John’.

This is completely different for Ojibwa which distinguishes the two interpretations using the true obviative for co-referentiality, \textit{(ogosisan)} and the further obviative for dis-referentiality, \textit{o-gosisini} with an understood obviative possessor.

For inanimate nouns, the obviative marker \textit{-iri} is used throughout for the singular and we find it, or alternatively \textit{-iriouar}, for the plural. See examples (2) and (3) above, and (7):

(7)  [100] ni tiberindamirin Paul ouseiensirir oumokmaniri
     je gouverne de Paul du frère ayné les couteaux

     ‘I keep the knives of Paul’s older brother.’
The inanimate obviative is triggered if it is possessed by an animate obviative. If, however, the possessor is proximate the possessed inanimate object is not obviative. As is the case for the animate, the inanimate obviative is equally as easily triggered by an unmarked obviative possessor as by an explicitly marked one. Thus, two seemingly parallel cases of inanimate nouns possessed by a third person will be morphologically different depending on whether or not the possessor is a constituent of the syntactic structure requiring obviation, as in examples (8) and (9):

(8) [103]  oumassinahigan Pierre  
            Le livre  de Pierre
            ‘Pierre’s book.’

(9) [100]  oumokman Pierre  matchikatchiouaniri  
            le couteau  de Pierre ne vaut rien
            ‘Pierre’s knife is no good.’

The same phenomenon is observable in structures with a pronominally possessed inanimate noun:

(10) [92]  Pierre ousakitoun oumokman  
            Pierre ayme son propre couteau
            ‘Pierre likes his own knife.’

(11) [92]  Pierre ousakitououan oumokmaniri  
            Pierre ayme d’iceluy et d’iceux le couteau
            ‘Pierre likes the knives of others.’

It also turns up in coordinate structures, which have never generally been considered to trigger obviatives:

(12) [103] ouchimagan Louys dach ouchimaganiri Auguste  
            L’espée de Louys et l’espée Auguste
            ‘The sword of Louis and the sword of Auguste’

It should be noted that there is also an example of a genitive coordinate structure with an obviative in the context of a TA verb, but exactly what triggers the obviative marking in that case is not clear. Examples (13) and (14) illustrate cases of two simple animate nouns in a coordinate construction. Neither takes an obviative, unless it can be imagined that one of them is not marked explicitly:

(13) [46]  Pierre ouabamarour ouseienser, gaié ouseiensirir Jean  
            Pierre voit son aîné et celuy de Jean
            ‘Pierre sees his older brother and the older brother of Jean.’
It must be noted that the text provides at least one example of an inanimate noun possessed by a non-obviative and for which the \(-\text{iri}\) suffix is optional:

(15) \[100\] ki pittaoutisouan ouchimagan uel ouchimaganiri Pierre
Tu te blesse par mégarde avec l'espée de Pierre

‘You accidentally hurt yourself with Pierre's sword.’

The mechanisms involved in inanimate obviation remained the same in Algonquin and in Ojibwa. Furthermore it should be noted that there is a difference between the type of structure triggering the obviative at Lac Simon and that characterizing the process in all other Algonquin and Ojibwa dialects that I have been able to check. In most dialects the complement of a TI verb is never obviative with a third person subject:

(16) \[90\] Philippe oupiton chimagan
Philippe porte l'espée

‘Philippe carries a sword.’

Compare this with example (17) from Lac Simon:

(17a) niwâbadân jîmân
 je vois le canot
‘I see the canoe.’

(17b) owâbadân jîmânîni
 il voit le canot
‘He sees the canoe.’

The Lac Simon dialect is held to be archaic when compared with other Ojibwa dialects. As far as the dialect described in Nicolas’s grammar is concerned, the data from over 300 years ago is parallel to that of the majority of Ojibwa dialects but not that of Lac Simon. We must, in the light of these facts, consider the Lac Simon dialect as innovating rather than archaic.

Verb Obviation

AI verbs

Nicolas does not give any examples of an AI obviative in the independent mood in his conjugation tables. Elsewhere in his grammar however,
on pages 97, 98 and 104, there are four examples, all triggered by a genitive subject. The form given for the marker can be represented as \(-(V)r\) where the form of the vowel is determined by the phonological environment. There is no example that suggests a distinction between singular and plural forms. Example (4) serves as an illustration. The suffix is the one found in contemporary Algonquin and Ojibwa and arises under identical conditions.

(4) [97] ousimenser Pierre tiberindamour
   le cadet puisné de Pierre gouverne
   
   'Pierre's younger brother is in charge.'

For the conjunct mood, the manuscript makes a distinction between singular and plural markers. The suffix \(-ir\) marks the singular, appearing after the conjunct/person suffix. Another infix \(-iri-\) is also regularly present before the conjunct inflexion. I will return to this \(-iri-\) infix a little later. The obviative plural is marked by the absence of the final \(-r:\)

(18) [93] Louys ouabamar manitour ka=ourichichiritch vel ir
   Louys regarde le génie qui est beau et bon
   
   'Louis looks at the spirit who is handsome and good.'

(19) [93] Laurans ouabama manitour ouerichichiritchi
   Laurans regarde les génies bons et beaux
   
   'Laurans looks at the good, handsome spirits.'

Present-day related dialects have all dispensed with the obviative singular/plural distinction. We also note that there are two strategies for marking the obviative in the conjunct mood. In northern Algonquin, the suffix \(-an\) follows the conjunct person inflexion; cf. example (20a). Note however in this example that the \(-iri-\) infix has completely disappeared. In the Ojibwa dialects, (Bloomfield 1958:51; Piggott 1971) and the Algonquin dialects at Maniwaki and Golden Lake (Jones 1977; Aubin 1984:222) the conjunct obviative is marked by an infix \(-ini-\) which appears before the conjunct/person inflexion:

(20a) dagoshig-an
   qu'il arrive
   'that he arrives' (Lac Simon)

(20b) niminij
   qu'il danse
   'that he dances' (Golden Lake)
Inanimate Intransitive

There is a different singular and plural obviative for the independent order of verbs. The singular affix is -iri and the plural -iriouar. These markers are the same as those found on inanimate nouns. In the conjugation tables no reference is made to the obviative, but there are examples in the text. One of them is illustrated in example (9).

(9) [100] Pierre oumokman matchikatchiouaniri
de Pierre le couteau ne vaut rien

‘Pierre’s knife is no good.’

We could assume that the independent obviative markers are prefixed to the personal inflexion. The structure of the whole affix -iriouar is thus: -iri- (obv.) -w- (3rd person) -ar (plural). Contemporary dialects have similar reflexes. At Maniwaki, the obviative marker is -ini- which appears before the following person suffixes, taken from Jones (1975:47):

(21) proximate obviative
    sing. ozáwā + w ozáwā + ini + w
    plur. ozáwā + w + an ozáwā + ini + w + an

The same form characterizes Odawa (Piggott 1971:104). Bloomfield (1958:53) gives -(i)ni as the suffix; but he does not give the corresponding plural, which would allow us to verify its location with respect to the person marker.

In the conjunct, the manuscript forms make no distinction between singular and plural. The obviative form is -iri- appearing before the conjunct/person suffixes as is illustrated by examples (22) and (23) below. This is exactly as it is in present-day dialects, insofar as I have been able to check. Note that there is no other obviative marker, (under a suffix form), as it is the case for the AI. The infix -iri- is to be interpreted here as the real obviative marker.

(22a) [93] Pierre katagochin ouabanirig
    Pierre viendra demain

‘Pierre will come tomorrow.’

(22b) katatagochinouk ouabanirig
    viendront demain

‘they will come tomorrow’

(22c) nigatagochin ouabang
    Je viendrai demain

‘I will come tomorrow.’
(23) [98] Pierre  oumokman  ka pikouchkarik  
  de Pierre le couteau  qui s’est rompu  

‘C’est le couteau de Pierre qui s’est rompu.’

Transitive Inanimate

There is no obviative inflection for the TI independant. Arguments in potential obviative position seem to be marked by the so called “benefactive” suffix. The presence of this affix correlates with the presence of a third argument referred to by the verb, and certainly not with the usual benefactive interpretation. In the plural, the verb stem is immediately followed by this benefactive morpheme, and then by the plural suffix -in. See examples (10) and (11):

(10) [92] Pierre ousakitoum  oumokman  
  Pierre  ayme  son propre couteau  

‘Pierre likes his own knife.’

(11) [92] Pierre ousakitououan  oumokmaniri  
  Pierre  ayme  d’iceluy et d’iceux le couteau  

‘Pierre likes the knives of others.’

On page 100 of the manuscript, there is a TI verb with a further obviative complement and the marker is the infix -iri- in this case, instead of the benefactive morpheme. This is the only such example in the grammar. Compare examples (3) and (7):

(3) [91] Pierre ousakitououanner  ouseienser  oumokmaniriouar  
  Pierre  ayme  de son frère ayné les couteaux  

‘Pierre likes his older brother’s knives.’

(7) [100] ni tiberindamirin  Paul  ouseiensirir  oumokmaniri  
  je gouverne  de Paul du frère ayné les couteaux  

‘I keep the knives of Paul’s older brother.’

Within present-day dialects, the reaction of TI verbs to obviative arguments differs widely. In northern Algonquin, the -ni suffix can appear on the verb, but its use is on the decline and varies considerably from one speaker to the next. In southern Algonquin the TI never takes an obviative marker in the independant. Piggott (1971:64) gives -nini as the corresponding suffix in Odawa.

It is interesting to note that the way of marking the presence of a supplementary argument on the verb, i.e., with the benefactive, is not only found in Nicolas’s grammar. In his Cree grammar, Father Albert Lacombe’s use
of the benefactive suffix is identical. In constructions where in Ojibwa one would use the obviative, Lacombe uses the benefactive for TA verbs. Nicolas gives examples with TI and AI verbs. Consider example (24) (Lacombe 1874:49):

(24) ni sākihimâwa sakihew
  'j'aime son fils' il l'aime
  'I love his son' 'he loves him'

For the conjunct mood, the infix -iri- occurs, followed by the conjunct markers, and an optional obviative suffix. The latter is identical to the suffix used for AI both in the manuscript and in present day northern Algonquin. The problem of interpreting Nicolas's use of et in Latin prevents me from saying with any certainty if this last suffix is obligatory or not. Consider the example in (25):

(25) [92] ouikaniser Jean ka tiberindamiritch et ir chimagan
     c'est le frère de Jean qui gouverne l'espée
  'It is Jean's brother who keeps the sword.'

As for the other dialects, southern Algonquin and Odawa use -ini- followed by the conjunct, while northern Algonquin adds -an as a suffix to the conjunct.

Transitive Animate

For the independent, Nicolas distinguishes between singular and plural obviative. The suffixes are -(V)r respectively with and without the final -r (for forms 3/4). These markers correspond to what is to be found in present-day Ojibwa dialects, except, of course, for the plural which is universally neutralized:

(26) [92] Paul ousakihar pireouer
        Paul ayme la perdrix
  'Paul likes the partridge.'

(1) [92] ounkima ousakihar Pauler
        le capitaine ayme Paul
  'The captain likes Paul.'

(27) [92] Anselme ousakiha pireoué
        Anselme ayme les perdrix
  'Anselme likes the partridges.'
les hommes ayment les perdrix

'The men like the partridges.'

The manuscript also gives an obviative form for a verb with a first person subject and an obviative complement. Such forms are very rare in the literature. The example is identical to what is to be found today in northern Algonquin:

(29) nitiberimimar ouseienser
    je gouverne son ayné

'I keep charge of his older brother.'

There is also a case of a TA independent obviative, better, according to Nicolas, with a morpheme -ni- before the -r of the obviative:

(30a) Paul ousakiha=ni=r manitour
      Paul ayme le génie

'Paul likes the spirit.'

(30b) Paul ousakihani manitoué
      Paul ayme les génies

'Paul likes the spirits.'

The role of this -ni- is unclear. There is only one such example in the grammar. One possibility would be to consider this as a case of the -iri- infix, and that the author wrote -n- for -r-, but the syntactic structure is not one that normally gives rise to the use of the -iri- infix.

In the conjunct, there are no examples indicating a distinction between singular and plural obviatives. We still find the infix -iri-, followed by the conjunct/person inflection, and optionally, by the obviative marker:

(31) Pierre ousamitaouar manitour ka=sakiharitch= et ir
      Pierre obéyt au génie qui aymé les hommes

'Pierre obeys the spirit who loves mankind.'

(32) Louys ouseienser Louys ka=i=entaritch et ir pireouer
      c'est le frère ayné de Louys qui a une perdrix

'It is Louis's older brother who has a partridge.'

The latter corresponds to what one today finds in northern Algonquin to mark the obviative on the TA conjunct for 3/4. Odawa uses the suffix -ad and southern Algonquin the palatalized version -adj. Western Ojibwa makes a distinction between singular -âd and plural -ânid for the obviation (Grafstein 1981:125–126).
The most striking feature of the obviative as reconstructed from Nicolas's data is the stability of the system. Three hundred years or more ago, the triggering devices and the morphological forms generated were very similar to what one finds today in related dialects. There are, however, a few differences some of which are particularly interesting. The first is the distinction between singular and plural obviatives. This distinction, even if it has almost completely disappeared, is still marginally reflected today. The second is the apparent functional parallelism between the obviative and the benefactive. The latter seems to be used today to indicate the addition of an element to the argument structure of the verb. Nevertheless, this morpheme does not specify the grammatical role played by the additional argument, as demonstrated by Dahlstrom (1985). In Nicolas's grammar, the benefactive is used in exactly the same way, except that today some of the benefactive uses have been passed on to the obviative, which, in addition, identifies the grammatical role played by the additional argument its presence reveals. The exact status of the relationship between obviative and benefactive is still to be explored, and the result of such work will open the way for theoretical consideration that, even at this stage, look particularly promising.

The most striking aspect of obviation in 17th-century Algonquin is the infix -iri-. This affix occurs with all four classes of verbs, and seems generally to signal the presence of a supplementary obviative argument. In Nicolas's grammar, in all cases of a conjunct verb having an obviative argument -iri- is always present. It appears systematically between the verb stem and the conjunct/person markers. Furthermore, it also occurs with some verbs in the independent; the inanimate intransitive for example, assuming, of course, that it is the same morpheme. In this case it is an obviative marker; the Inanimate intransitive is the only class of verb not using another suffix to mark the obviative, in conjunction with the -iri- infix. For the inanimate intransitive we can say that -iri- is the standard obviative marker. It is also found in the independent on a TI verb, (cf. examples 3 and 7 above), where it seems to be in complementary distribution with the benefactive morpheme. In this example, it seems that -iri- should be analysed as marking the presence of an additional and obviative argument.

Nevertheless, the exact grammatical role of -iri- is difficult to determine, since its presence in the conjunct is not always sufficient to systematically block the suffixation of an obviative marker. Thus for AI, TI and TA verbs in the conjunct that have at least one obviative argument, the -iri suffix is often seen to be simultaneously present with the obviative marker. Since, however this presence of the obviative is always noted to be optional, it is possible to imagine that its role and that of the infix -iri- may have begun to be considered redundant.
It seems that historically, the particule -iri- has been, in many cases, re-analysed as the obviative marker properly so called, and that this reanalysis process is at the origin of a seemingly lack of uniformity in the form of obviative markers in the different Algonquin and Ojibwa dialects. In the AI independent, the -an suffix is identical everywhere, but for the conjunct, southern Algonquin and Odawa use an infix -ini- that appears before the conjunct inflection whereas northern Algonquin uses the -an suffix after the inflexion. In Nicolas’s grammar, a conjunct AI obviative takes -iri- and -ir on either sides of the inflexion: stem -iri- conjunct suffix -ir.

We can say that for most Algonquin and Ojibwa dialects, the -iri- has been reanalysed as an obviative marker in its own right, and that in these cases the obviative suffix has completely disappeared. In northern Algonquin, on the other hand, the obviative suffix has been retained, but the -iri- particle, having been re-analysed as redundant, has disappeared. Grafstein (1981:126) quotes an example from a dialect that has retained both morphemes with the consequent obviative marker -inijin in the AI conjunct.

We can see that different re-analysis of the same grammatical structure have given rise to conflicting diachronic changes, but that it is possible, given the 17th-century data, to find a common origin for seemingly dissimilar morphological structures. The same phenomenon accounts for similar differences between TI and TA obviative forms in the conjunct.

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