ALGONQUIAN OBVIATION REANALYSIS[*]

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Obviation refers to the process of distinguishing the animate third persons in the discourse when they co-occur by marking one or more with an obviative suffix. This paper adopts the idea proposed in Piriyawiboon (to appear) that obviation in transitive clauses is simply the process of gender shift that turns an animate into inanimate noun to solve co-referencing conflict. In this paper, I apply this analysis to obviation in possessive forms in Nishnaabemwin and demonstrate that an animate possessum must also be inanimate when possessed by another animate noun. This study supports the elimination of the so-called 'obviative' morpheme and argues that obviation is motivated by syntax.

1.   Introduction

Algonquian languages exhibit a morphological distinction between two or more animate third persons participating in the same sentence. One animate third person is unmarked while the rest is marked with an 'obviative' suffix. This phenomenon, particular to Algonquian languages, is known as proximate / obviative distinction. Example (1) illustrates obviation in a transitive clause in Nishnaabemwin.

(1)   John o-gii-waabam-aa-<u>n</u>   mkwa-<u>n</u>
       John 3-past-see AN-dir-obv.   bear-obv.[1]
       'John saw a bear/bears'   (Grafstein, 1984, p.21)

(2)   John w-waabnd-aa-n   jiimaan
       John 3-see IN-dir-IN   boat
       'John sees a boat'   (Valentine, 2001, p. 311)

In (1), *mkwa* (bear) is marked with an obviative suffix *-(a)n* because it co-occurs with another animate third person *John*, which is unmarked. The verb is also marked with the same suffix. Notice that when a noun is obviative, its number is neutralized. In (2), none of the referents is marked obviative because the sentence consists of only one animate noun (John) while the other referent 'boat' is inanimate. The obviative has been analyzed as a discourse marker of

[1] The abbreviations used in this paper are: AN = animate; IN = inanimate; sing. = singular; pl. = plural; obv. = obviative; prox. = proximate; dir = direct Theme; inv = inverse Theme; dem. = demonstrative; 1 = first person; 2 = second person; 3 = third person; incl. = inclusive and excl. = exclusive.

prominence (Bloomfield, 1962, Hockett, 1966 and Wolfart, 1973). However, it seems to have a status only in Algonquian languages. In Piriyawiboon (to appear), I propose that the obviative morpheme in a transitive clause is in fact the inanimate plural morpheme and that the obviative is not a separate grammatical category as usually assumed in the Algonquian grammar. I also argue that the motivation for obviation is syntactic rather than discourse although it is used in many discourse situations. In this paper, this analysis is applied to two phenomena related to obviation: the possessive form and further obviation in Nishnaabemwin, an Algonquian language spoken in Southern Ontario. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the analysis proposed in Piriyawiboon (to appear). In section 3, this analysis is applied to the possessive form and further obviation in Algonquian. Section 4 concludes the paper.

2.   Reanalysis of Obviation

Obviation refers to a process of marking one of the two animate third persons in the same sentence with an obviative suffix. If there are more than two animate third persons, then all are marked except one. In Algonquian, nominals are divided into two grammatical genders: animate and inanimate.[2] Only the animate noun is marked obviative in a non-possessive construction. The obviative person is marked with the suffix /–an/ in Nishnaabemwin. In a transitive clause, obviation is obligatory when two animate persons participate in the sentence. The obviative suffix appears on the nominal as well as the head verb. An example is illustrated in (3). The nominal *binoojiinyan* 'child / children (obv)' is obviative whereas the nominal *kwewag* 'women' is proximate. The number of the obviative person is ambiguous as it can be singular or plural.

(3)   giw kwewag w-gii-gnawenmaawaan   niw binoojiiny-<u>an</u>
       dem. women 3-past- take care of AN   dem. child-obv.
       'Those women took care of the child(ren)'   (Valentine, 2001, p. 631)

In (3), if the nominals have been introduced in the previous sentence, they can be omitted and the sentence is simply *w-gii-gnawenmaawaan*, which means 'they took care of them' where the obviative person (child) is the one taken care of. No matter in which order the nominals appear, the obviative marker will keep track of the referents involved in the event without changing the meaning of the sentence.

     In a reference grammar of Nishnaabemwin, obviation is described as discourse marking of prominence of the referents. From this point of view, the unmarked referent is the primary person and the focus of the sentence and the marked referent is the secondary person. This function of obviation has been widely accepted among Algonquian grammarians such as Bloomfield (1962), Hockett (1966) and Wolfart (1973). One might question why inanimate third persons need not be marked to indicate a backgrounded status. An example of a

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[2] See Goddard (2001) for an extensive analysis on Algonquian gender.

sentence consisting of an animate and an inanimate third person is illustrated in (2). A hierarchy is proposed to account for this. This hierarchy is known as the Participant Hierarchy (see Valentine 2001). According to the participant hierarchy the inanimate persons are ranked the lowest; therefore, it is not necessary to obviate them since their status is already lower than the animate persons. This hierarchy is also a mechanism prevalent in determining Algonquian person agreement (Payne 1997). However, stipulating an extra-linguistic mechanism such as the participant hierarchy or animacy hierarchy is not an attractive solution since it does not play any roles in other languages and its role in Algonquian is still dubious.

To account for why obviation in Algonquian is only relevant to the animate third persons, I propose that obviation turns an animate noun into inanimate by marking an animate noun with an inanimate suffix. In brief, a sentence cannot consist of two animate nouns because they cause co-indexing ambiguity. Since the verb is only marked with one third person prefix /w-/, only one overt nominal can be linked to it. When two overt animate nominals co-occur, one must be made inanimate in order that the sentence is correctly interpreted. Evidence comes from the fact that the form of the obviative and the inanimate plural suffix are the same and the verbal agreement and the demonstratives for obviative nouns and inanimate plural nouns are also identical. This is illustrated in (4):

(4) a. o-gii-ganawaaband-aa-n   aniw   mitigoons-an
         3-past-look at IN-dir-IN pl IN pl dem.   bush- IN pl
         'He looked at <u>those bushes</u> (inanimate)'

     b. o-gii-bapasidiyeshka-waa-n   aniw
         3-past-kick in the rump repeatedly-dir-obv. dem.
             zhingibeny-an
             helldiver-obv.
         'He gave <u>that / those helldiver(s)</u> (obv.) a couple of powerful kicks in the rump'

(The Dog's Children, p. 18)

In (4a), the object *mitigoonsan* 'bushes' is inanimate plural. In (4b) the object *zhingibenyan* 'helldiver' is obviative. We know that the object of (4a) is inanimate from the verb stem *ganawaaba<u>nd</u>* 'look at IN', which has the /-nd/ final marking. This final only appears when the verb has an inanimate object whereas the final /-m/ appears when the verb has an animate object as in *ganawaaba<u>m</u>* 'look at AN'. Comparing (4a) to (4b), we see that there are at least three similarities: first, both verb complexes end with /-n/ which only appears with an inanimate object; second, the demonstrative *aniw* which only appears with the inanimate plural person also occurs with the obviative person and finally, both nominals are suffixed with the same marker /-an/.
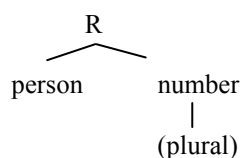
The obviative morpheme has the same form as the inanimate plural morpheme across all Algonquian languages. This leads to a proposal that they are the same item. Under the Feature Geometry Theory (Harley and Ritter 2002

and Cowper and Hall 2004), I propose that obviation is a syntactic process of feature deletion. This is elaborated in 2.1.
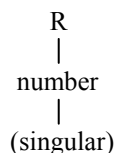
2.1   Feature Geometry

Within the Feature Geometry Theory, phi-features such as person, number and gender are organized into a hierarchical geometry. The difference between animate and inanimate noun, under this account, lies in the fact that an animate noun has a person feature while an inanimate noun lacks it. [3] (5) summarizes the proposal:

(5)   a. Animate third person

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                        R
                      /   \
                person      number
                              |
                           (plural)
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           b. Inanimate third person
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                        R
                        |
                      number
                        |
                    (singular)
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The inanimate and animate nouns are distinguished by the presence or absence of the person node.[4] Therefore, the inanimate noun lacks a person node, hence not a person, and only has the number node whereas the animate noun has both person and number nodes. The number specification is also different between the two genders.[5] The animate noun has singular as its default number and the inanimate noun has plural as its default number. Evidence for the lack of a person feature in an inanimate person comes from the fact that inanimate third persons never show person agreement with the verb and the verb only agrees with their number. Evidence for the different default number between two genders comes from the fact that in Algonquian languages when a noun has two genders, it has collective or mass interpretation when it is inanimate but individual or countable interpretation when it is animate. Examples in (6) from Fox illustrate this point:

(6)   ANIMATE   INANIMATE
        shooniyaha   'a coin, a bill'   shooniyahi   'silver, money'

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[3] This is proposed by Elizabeth Cowper (personal communication).

[4] This analysis is different from that in Harley and Ritter (2002)'s feature geometry where the animacy distinction is represented by the features [animate] and [inanimate] which are the subfeatures of the Class node under the Individuation node (number).

[5] Suggested by Elizabeth Ritter (personal communication).

| owiyasa | 'a piece of meat' | owiyasi | 'meat' |
| owinenwa | 'a piece of fat' | owinenwi | 'fat' |
| anakeehkwa | 'a piece of bark' | anakeehkwi | 'bark' |

(Goddard, 2001, p. 210-212)

From (6), we observe that different genders are used for different inherent numbers. An inanimate noun has mass interpretation, which suggests that in this language, if the number of an inanimate noun is unspecified; it is plural by default and is singular when specified with [sing] feature. On the other hand, the animate side of the same noun suggests that it has singular as a default feature. Therefore, the difference between an animate and inanimate noun is that an animate person has a person feature and the number feature is defaulted to be singular while an inanimate person only has one number feature and it is defaulted to be plural.

2.2   Co-indexing between the prefix and nominal

It was suggested in Piriyawiboon (to appear) that obviation occurs in a language where the argument structure is restricted to pronominals (Jelinek 1984, Baker 1996 and Reinholtz 1999) and where the overt nominals are not marked for morphological Cases. When two animate nominals co-occur in the same clause, both of them are the potential antecedents of the pronominal because both have the same amount of the person feature which leads to an ambiguous interpretation. To avoid this ambiguity, the syntax deletes the person feature of the person to be linked to the lower argument so that it is distinct from the higher one in order to prevent mismatched linking.

The pronominal argument is a parameter active in the languages where the argument positions are restricted to pronominals. The co-indexing between the pronominal and the nominal can be achieved in two ways: first, by Case matching if nominals are marked with a morphological Case; or by feature matching if they are Case-less. Algonquian languages do not mark Case on the nominals. Therefore, the phi-features of the nominals are evaluated to match those of the pronominals in order to be licensed to appear. To illustrate this principle, consider a transitive clause with two overt nominals. Example (2), repeated below, illustrates the linking between the pronominals and the overt nominals:

(2)   **w**-waabnd-aa-**n**   jiimaan   John   'he sees it, boat, John'

3- see IN-dir-IN   boat   John
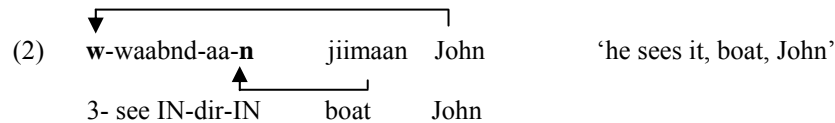
In (2), the third person proclitic *w-* has one person feature and the suffix *–n* represents an inanimate agreement, thus has no person feature.[6] The clitic *w-* is thus linked to *John* which also has one person feature and *jiimaan* is linked to the pronominal *–n* because both contain only one number node. *John* is

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[6] For an analysis of person agreement in Algonquian, see Bejar (2003).

assigned the Agent role by the Theme suffix –*aa*. The sentence is interpretable as 'John is the one who sees the boat'.

2.3   Feature Deletion

It has been shown that Algonquian overt nominals must be linked to a pronominal argument by feature matching. Once the co-indexing relation is established, nominals can be omitted. When two animate nominals co-occur, they both have the feature [person] and are both potential antecedents of the pronominal *w*-. But only one nominal can be linked to the person proclitic *w*-. Assuming that the subject is the topic of the sentence, the subject nominal must have a feature [topic]. This feature gives the subject the priority to be linked to the pronominal. However, the pronominal does not 'see' the feature [topic], and only looks for a matching [person] feature. Thus, the nominal lacking the feature [topic] must delete its [person] feature in order to be featurally distinct from the one with the feature [topic]. To illustrate the process of feature deletion, let us take a look at the sentence in (7):

(7)   *w-waabm-aa   John   mkwa   'John sees a bear'
         3-see AN-dir   John   bear

Let us say that the verb complex *w-waabmaa* has the meaning 'he sees him' without showing which noun is the one who sees and which is seen. The pronominal *w-* represents third person agreement and the direct Theme –*aa* tells us that the controller of the verb interacts with a third person[7]. Under our analysis, (7) is ungrammatical because there are two animate nominals that can be linked to the pronominal *w*-. Without a distinction between the two nominals, we do not know which one is the controller of the verb *waabam* 'see AN'. The nominals are not marked for a nominative or accusative Case to show which one is Agent and which one is Theme. Therefore, the sentence is uninterpretable. To resolve this ambiguity, a distinction must be made between the two nominals. The nominal without the feature [topic] must lose its person feature so that it cannot be a potential antecedent for the pronominal *w*-. In doing so, the syntax deletes its person feature and the nominal is marked with an inanimate marker –*an*. (8) illustrates the process of obviation for *w-waabmaan mkwan John* 'John sees the bear(s)':

(8)   Feature deletion

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[7] -*aa* is a Theme suffix indicating that no matter which person the controller may be, it interacts with a third person Theme, for example: *n-waabm-aa* 'I see him', *g-waabm-aa* 'You see him', *w-waabnd-aa-n* 'He sees it'.

1. The nominal that is not the topic of the sentence deletes its person feature

<u>w</u>-waabm-aa   mkwa   John [topic]
| ∧   ∧
[person]   [~~person~~][number]   [person][number]
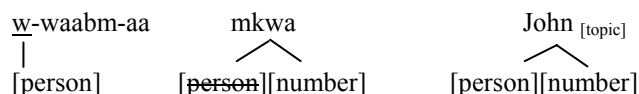
2. The bare number node signifies inanimate plural, thus shows number agreement /-*an*/. The verb agrees with it by the suffix /-*n*/.

<u>w</u>-waabm-aa-*n*   mkwa-*n*   John
| | ∧
[person]   [number]   [person][number]
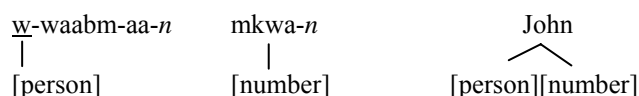
3. The linking can be established, the nominal that keeps the person feature links to the pronominal. The sentence is interpretable.

<u>w</u>-waabm-aa-<u>n</u> mkwa-n John   'he sees it/them, bear(s), John'
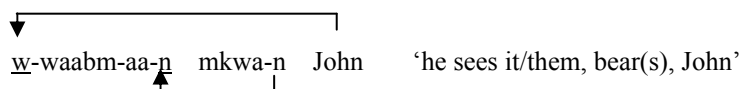
2.4 Why plural?

In this section, I will deal with the number interpretation of an obviative person. As shown previously, the plural marker arises when the number node is unspecified. However, when the nominal is singular as in 'John sees Mary', the obviative 'Mary' must also be marked with the plural marker –*an*.[8] How should we interpret the obvious number of Mary and its co-occurrence with the plural marker? One possibility is that the plural morpheme /-*an*/ gives different interpretations to different types of nouns.[9] To illustrate, we see the same discrepancy in English determiner 'some'. When modifying an uncountable noun, 'some' signifies 'a certain amount of' that noun. In contrast, when modifying a countable noun, 'some' signifies 'an indeterminate individual or object'. This contrast is shown below:

(9)   a. I bought <u>some</u> sugar.
       b. <u>Some</u> guy called.

The different interpretations are also expressed in the stress pattern. An indeterminate 'some' bears stronger stress than a quantifier 'some'. By the same token, if –*an* indicates plurality on an inanimate noun, it should have a different interpretation when appears with an animate noun. I will posit that –*an*

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[8] The Nishnaabemwin sentence is *w-waabm-aa-n John Mani-in* 'John sees Mary'.
[9] This is suggested by Alana Johns (personal communication).

signifies *plurality* when appears with a nominal that only has the number node and the default number is plural.   On the other hand, –*an* signifies *indeterminate number* when appears with a nominal whose default number is singular. This is formulated below:
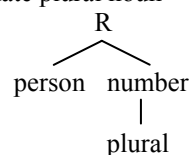

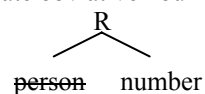(10) Plural vs. Indeterminate
      a.   Inanimate plural noun

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                R
                |
             number
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          Ex: mitikoons-*an* 'sticks'
                 stick-IN pl

      b.   Animate plural noun

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                 R
               /   \
         person    number
                      |
                   plural
```

          Ex: kwew-*ag*   'women'
                 woman-AN pl

      c.   Animate obviative noun (animate lacking the person feature)

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                 R
               /   \
        ~~person~~    number
```

        Ex: kwew-*an*   'woman/women'
              woman-IN pl

Let us assume that –*ag* is attached to the nominal that has the [number[plural]] specification and –*an* is attached to the nominal that only has the [number] specification.[10]   In (9c), the animate noun only has one number node left because the syntax deletes its person feature to resolve co-referencing conflict. –*an* is attached to a bare number node. However, an animate noun has singular as its default number.   Therefore, the nominal is semantically singular but morphologically plural, which yields uninterpretable or ambiguous number. This is why an obviative person can be interpreted as both singular and plural.
     In this section, I have shown that the obviative morpheme in a transitive clause can be analyzed as the inanimate plural morpheme. In the following

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[10] In other words, -*ag* is attached to a more complex number and –*an* is simply attached to a less complex number (-*an* is the default morpheme for [number]). Hence, -*ag* is more marked than –*an*. An inanimate singular noun will have the feature [singular] under the number node, preventing –*an* from appearing.

sections, this analysis is applied to obviation in other environments: the possessive forms and the further obviative.

3.   Obviation in Possessive Forms

In this section, I will account for obviation in possessive forms under the gender shift analysis.   In Nishnaabemwin, an animate noun possessed by another animate noun is obligatorily marked obviative and its number is also neutralized. The examples in (11) illustrate the possessive form of an animate noun. The examples in (12) illustrate the possessive form of an inanimate noun.

(11) a.   n-gwiiwzens   'my boy'
             1-boy
      b.   g-gwiiwzens   'your boy'
             2-boy
      c.   w-gwiiwzens-<u>an</u>   'his boy(s)'
             3-boy-obv.
      d.   *w-gwiiwzens   'his boy'
              3-boy

(12) a.   n-jiimaan   'my boat'
             1-boat
      b.   g-jiimaan   'your boat'
             2-boat
      c.   w-jiimaan   'his boat'
             3-boat

<div align="right">(Valentine, 2001, p. 196)</div>

The possessive construction consists of a person prefix, indicating the possessor, and a head noun. In (11c), *gwiiwzens* (boy) is possessed by a third person. Therefore, it must be marked obviative. The absence of the obviative marking results in ungrammaticality (11d). In (12c), *jiimaan* (boat) is possessed by a third person. However, it is not marked obviative because it is inanimate. The possessor clitics are the same as the person agreement in the transitive clause: *g-* for the second person, *n-* for the first person and *w-* or *o-* for the third person, as illustrated in (13).
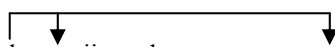
(13) a.   g-noondaw-aa   'You hear him'
             2-hear AN-dir
      b.   n-noondaw-aa   'I hear him'
             1-hear AN- dir
      c.   w-noondaw-aa-n   'He hears him/them (obviative)'
             3-hear AN-dir-obv.

<div align="right">(Valentine, 2001, p. 282)</div>

From (11) to (13), we observe that both transitive and possessive constructions have the same structure, representing a c-commanding domain where one

argument c-commands the other. In the possessive construction, the possessor c-commands the possessum. In the transitive construction, the subject c-commands the object. The c-commanded person is always obviative in the direct transitive clause.[11]

If we assume that in a transitive clause, two animates cannot co-occur because they would be the potential antecedents of the pronominal *w-*, then why must the animate possessum become inanimate? In (14), there are two nominals: *John* and *w-gwis-an* 'his son'. John c-commands both *wgwisan* and *gwis*. First, *John* is the subject and must c-commands the object *wgwisan*. Second, *John* is the possessor and must c-commands the possessum *gwis*. In order to assure that *John* is linked to the pronominals *w-*, the c-commanded arguments must lose their person feature and become inanimate. Therefore, *w-gwisan* is inanimate for two reasons: first, because it is c-commanded by *John* because *John* is the possessor who is in the c-commanding position and second, because it is the object of the sentence.

(14)   John *w*-gii-waabm-aa-n   *w*-gwis-an
          John 3-past-see AN-dir-IN   3-son-IN pl
          'John$_i$ saw his$_i$ son'

When the possessor is coreferential with the subject of the sentence, the possessum becomes inanimate plural as in (14) where the intended meaning is 'John saw his own son'. On the other hand, when the possessor is disjoint from the subject of the sentence, the suffix *–ini* is used instead of *–an* as in (15), where the intended meaning is John saw someone else's son.

(15)   John w-gii-waabm-aa-ni   w-gwis-ini
          John   3-past-see AN-dir-*ini*   3-son-*ini*
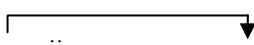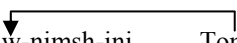   'John$_i$ saw his$_j$ son'

In (15), the possessor of *wgwisini* does not co-refer with the subject of the sentence but with a person appearing outside the clause. This is shown by the ending *–ini*, which is called 'further obviative' in the Algonquian grammar. *–ini* also appears on an inanimate noun. In (16a), the possessum is already inanimate thus the possessum need not be obviative. The possessor of *boat* is *John*. In (16b), *boat* belongs to someone else; thus the head noun *jiimaan* is marked with *–ini*.

(16)   a.   John   w-gii-waabnd-aa-n   w-jiimaan
              John   3-past-see IN-dir-IN   3-boat
              'John$_i$ saw his$_i$ boat'
     b.   John   w-gii-waabnd-aa-ni   w-jiimaan-ini
              John   3-past-see IN-dir-*ini*   3-boat-*ini*

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[11] When the obviative argument moves up to a higher position and c-commands the non-obviative argument, the syntax shows this inversion by suffixing the inverse Theme suffix to the verb stem, for example: w-waabm-<u>ig</u>-on 'He (obv) sees him (prox)'.

‘John$_i$ saw his$_j$ boat’

Example (16b) illustrates that the further obviative is also marked on an inanimate noun. Our analysis states that in a transitive clause, two nominals must be featurally distinct so that they can be linked to the appropriate pronominals. This distinction is made in syntax by feature deletion. In the possessive form, co-referencing ambiguity is in the pronominal possessor which can be linked to any third persons in the sentence. To avoid this ambiguity, the possessum is marked with an inanimate plural suffix as in (14) if the possessor pronominal is linked to the person linked to the c-commanding pro in the sentence. When the possessor pronominal is linked to other persons, the possessum is marked with –*ini*, as in (15) and (16b). I will leave for further research to determine the nature of –*ini*. For now, we only observe that –*ini* dissociates the possessor from the subject of the sentence and associates it with the person in the non-subject position, which may or may not be obviative. Examples in (17) summarize the difference between the so called possessive obviative and further obviative.

(17) a.   John   w-miin-aa-n   <u>w</u>-nimsh-<u>an</u>   Tom-an
            John   3-give AN-dir-IN   3-dog-IN pl   Tom-IN pl
            ‘John$_i$ gives Tom$_j$ his$_i$ dog’

       b.   John   w-miin-aa-n   <u>w</u>-nimsh-<u>ini</u>   Tom-an
            John   3-give AN-dir-IN   3-dog-*ini*   Tom-IN pl
            ‘John$_i$ gives Tom$_j$ his$_j$ dog’

(17a) indicates that the owner of the dog is John, which is the subject of the sentence whereas (17b) indicates that the owner is Tom, the indirect object. In (17a) *w-nimshan* (his dog) is c-commanded by the subject of the sentence, John. Therefore, it must not have a person feature. In (17b) the owner, *Tom* is c-commanded by *John* but *w-nimshini* is not.

     In this section, obviation in the possessive form is explained as the process of co-referencing the possessor with the argument in the sentence. If the possessor is linked to the subject of the sentence, the possessum deletes its person feature because it is c-commanded by the subject, which has a person feature.

4.   Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the so-called obviative morpheme in the possessive form can be analyzed as the inanimate plural morpheme. It has a different status from the further obviative morpheme –*ini* and should not be treated as the same morpheme. The morpheme –*ini* can be marked on both inanimate and animate nouns whereas the so-called obviative morpheme is only relevant to the animate nouns. This study provides a unified account for

obviation in both transitive and possessive constructions and supports the elimination of the morpheme obviative from the Algonquian grammar.

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