



Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Algonquian languages: understanding and teaching obviation

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Abstract

This paper supports the idea that theoretical concepts from the Cognitive Linguistics framework can be interesting not only to propose an analysis of linguistic data but can also be easily applied to language teaching. Our contribution is a case study: as one of the authors is currently developing pedagogical material for adult learners of Moose Cree, an Algonquian language, our discussion is focused on a grammatical phenomenon - called obviation - pervasive in this linguistic family. We suggest an analysis of obviation by appealing to concepts (such as salience and prototypes) used in Cognitive Linguistics generally, and also to the particular 'reference point ability' as defined by Langacker (1991). We then show how this analysis can be easily applied to language teaching.

Key words: obviation, reference point constructions, Algonquian languages, language teaching

The general purpose of this paper is to show that the theoretical concepts provided by Cognitive Linguistics serve not only to describe and understand linguistic phenomena, but can also be successfully applied in a teaching context. More specifically, our goal is to illustrate this idea by focusing on a particular linguistic phenomenon, which is observable in all languages of the Algonquian family. As such, it could not be avoided by one of the authors, whose current project is to develop pedagogical material for adult learners of the Cree dialect called Moose Cree.

The paper is organized as follows. The introduction presents an overview of the ongoing research project and the community of speakers it is destined to. Section 1 describes the linguistic phenomenon called *obviation* in Algonquian linguistics and the challenges it poses in a teaching context. In section 2, we propose a hypothesis showing how obviation can be accounted for by using

some of the theoretical tools available in a Cognitive Linguistics perspective. We illustrate our hypothesis by focusing on three contexts where obviation is manifest: possessive constructions, transitive clauses, and portions of discourse with proximate shifts. Section 3 shows, for each case, a possible application of this theoretical account in a teaching context.

Introduction

Algonquian languages are spoken throughout North America. Among these, Cree is a language comprising a series of dialects, spoken from Labrador to the Canadian Rockies. The Moose Cree dialect is spoken on Moose Factory Island and in Moosonee, Ontario, by approximately 200 speakers. Contrary to other Cree dialects, mostly those spoken in Quebec, it is not used anymore by children and young adults as the language of communication. Faced with this situation, the Moose Cree First Nation Band Council has undertaken some actions to develop pedagogical material for those who are interested in learning the language as a second language. First, a dictionary has been published (Brousseau & Colette, 2014) which was followed by a grammatical outline (Brousseau, Cheechoo, Colette & Terraza, 2016), and currently an online talking dictionary is being recorded. Finally, since last year, we are working on a pedagogical grammar, which covers the main aspects of the grammar of Moose Cree (obviation, animacy, verb classes, conjugations, orders, word formation, etc.) presented via narrations and turning to a user-friendly non-technical terminology. Thus, instead of presenting the grammatical concept, a story (a legend, a narration, slice of life, etc.) is used.

1. Obviation

1.1. Describing obviation

In Algonquian languages¹, obviation is a compulsory grammatical operation which ranks two third person participants in a particular context. This context may be limited to a phrase, a clause, a complex sentence or even a portion of discourse. In each context, the relation established by obviation indicates that one of the third person participants is foregrounded, while the other is backgrounded. The foregrounded participant, called the *proximate*, is morphologically unmarked. The backgrounded participant, called the *obviative*, is morphologically marked. The marking of the obviative participant occurs in the morphology of verbs, nouns and demonstratives.

Example (1) illustrates obviation in Moose Cree within a simple sentence: in (1a), obviation does not occur because the evoked situation involves a speech

¹ Our description of obviation is limited to this linguistic group not only because it includes Moose Cree, but also because obviation is highly grammaticalized in these languages and has been the object of many studies in Algonquian linguistics. We therefore draw on this vast literature dedicated to obviation to discuss the subject but we also provide examples from Moose Cree to illustrate the description. However, obviation can be found in languages outside the Algonquian family.

act participant; in (1b), the situation involves two third person participants and obviation is triggered by the participant *awâšiš* ‘child’ on the participant *pilešiš* ‘bird’. The latter bears the obviative suffix *-a*, whereas the former is morphologically unmarked.

- (1) a. ni-wâpamâw pilešiš
 1-see.1AGT.3PAT bird[PROX]²
 ‘I see a bird’
- (1) b. awâšiš wâpamew pilešiš-a
 child[PROX] see.3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT bird-OBV
 ‘the child sees (a) bird(s)’

Obviation is part of a larger hierarchical system which ranks participants according to their grammatical features (such as person and gender³) and permeates the grammar of all languages of the Algonquian family. This hierarchy can be roughly represented as in (2).

- (2) 1st/2nd person > 3d person proximate > 3d person obviative > inanimate

The most immediate manifestation of this hierarchy is in the inflection of transitive verbs, more specifically, in the combination of a person prefix and an inflectional suffix called either *direct* or *inverse*. The person prefix always indicates the participant involved in the state of affairs described by the verb which occupies the highest position in the hierarchy, independently of its semantic or syntactic role. The *direct* suffix indicates that this participant acts on another participant, whose rank is situated lower in the hierarchy. The *inverse* suffix, on the other hand, indicates that the participant marked by the prefix is *acted upon* by another participant who occupies a lower rank in the hierarchy, with the exception of inanimate participants.

A situation where an animate participant is acted upon by an inanimate participant cannot be described by a transitive verb in the inverse voice; it can only be expressed by a derived intransitive verb. Consequently, when a transitive verb expresses a relation between an animate and an inanimate participant, the animate will always be proximate and the inanimate, obviative. In Moose Cree, there is a particular obviative suffix for inanimate nouns, as shown in (3).

- (3) wâpahtam nihtâwikihcikan-iliw
 see.3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT garden-OBV.SG
 ‘he sees a garden’

However, when the participants selected by a transitive verb are both animate, the speaker may choose either one as proximate, consequently marking the other one as obviative. The following example (again, in Moose Cree) illustrates two possible ways of describing the same state of affairs, where a

² The following abbreviations are used in this article: AGT agent; CONJ conjunct; DEM demonstrative; DUB dubitative; EMPH emphatic; LOC locative; OBV obviative; PAT patient; POS possessive; PL plural; PROX proximate; SUB subordinator

³ In Algonquian languages, gender involves the features *animate* and *inanimate*.

participant referred to as ‘young girl’ acts as ‘the one who speaks’ and a participant referred to as ‘man’ has the role of ‘the one spoken to’.

- (4) a. *iskwešiš* *ayamihew* *anihi* *nâpew-a*
 young.girl[PROX] speak.3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT DEM.OBV man-OBV
 ‘the young girl speaks to that man’
- (4) b. *iskwešiš-a* *ayamihikow* *ana* *nâpew*
 young.girl-OBV speak.3OBV.AGT.3PROX.PAT DEM.PROX man[PROX]
 ‘the young girl speaks to that man’

In (4a), the speaker chose to present the actor participant ‘young girl’ in the foreground and to obviate the undergoer participant ‘the man’ in the background. Because the actor participant is chosen as the proximate, the verb is in the direct form.

In (4b), the speaker chose to present the actor as the obviated participant. Because the actor is not the proximate participant, the verb is used in the inverse form: it indicates that, instead of being in the foreground, the ‘young girl’ is obviated to the background.

Up to this point, the participants involved in obviation in the examples given above were arguments of a transitive verb. In other words, the domain of obviation has been a simple clause. However, the relation between a proximate and an obviative participant can extend to a larger linguistic unit, such as a complex clause (a participant in the matrix clause can trigger obviation in the subordinate clause, or vice-versa), or a portion of discourse (a participant in one sentence may trigger obviation throughout many sentences).

Conversely, obviation can also operate in a more restricted domain, namely, a noun phrase. This occurs in possessive constructions, such as in (5), where the dependent noun *-kâwiy* ‘mother’, inflected for its possessor *awâšiš* ‘child’, is marked by the obviative suffix *-a*. In other words, in this example, the possessor *awâšiš* ‘child’ (also coded by the possessive prefix *o-*) is the proximate participant which has triggered obviation on the possessed noun *kâwiy* ‘mother’.

- (5) *awâšiš* *o-kâwiy-a*
 child[PROX] 3-mother-OBV
 ‘the child’s mother’

More generally, the choice of the possessor as proximate and possessum as obviative is compulsory in possessive constructions. Inverting the roles, as in (5’), would yield an ungrammatical structure.

- (5)’ * *awâšiš-a* *o-kâwiy*
 child-OBV 3-mother[PROX]

We take this to be a general rule of obviation across Algonquian languages, since this restriction is found in Potawatomi (Hockett, 1939; Buszard, 2003), Blackfoot (Frantz, 1966), Cree (Wolfart, 1973; Dahlstrom, 1991; Ellis 2000), Fox (Goddard, 1990), Ojibwa (Rhodes, 1990; Valentine, 2001),

Passamaquoddy (Bruening, 2001), Penobscot (Quinn, 2006), Innu (Drapeau, 2014).

This, however, is the only generalization that can be made concerning the choice of the proximate between two animate participants in a context of obviation. In fact, outside possessive constructions, there is considerable variation across Algonquian languages as to what factors play a part in selecting the proximate participant and to what degree this choice is constrained. For instance, syntactic criteria seem to weigh more than discourse factors in Ojibwa (Rhodes, 1990), whereas in Fox (Goddard, 1990) or Plains Cree (Dahlstrom, 1996), the choice of the proximate depends on the role played by the participants at the discourse level.

Nevertheless, some tendencies can be observed. On the semantic level, the proximate participant often (but not necessarily) corresponds to an agent, a human, or a sentient participant (Thomason, 1995, 2003; Hasler, 2002) or someone possessing knowledge or information (Muehlbauer, 2007, 2008, 2012). On the discourse level, the proximate is most often the topic of discourse (Bloomfield, 1962; Dahlstrom, 1991) or the 'primary topic' while the obviative is the 'secondary topic' (Frantz, 1966), the 'higher status or more central third person' (Goddard, 1990), the 'higher ranked nominal (usually the 'hero' of the discourse)' (Buszard, 2003), the 'foregrounded referent' (Valentine, 2001). Other terms proposed to characterize the proximate participant seem to refer to a cognitive level: it is considered to be 'the person nearest the speaker's point of view, or the person earlier spoken of and already known' (Bloomfield, 1962), the 'focus of interest' (Hockett, 1966), the 'focus of the speaker's empathy' (Dahlstrom, 1991; Oshima, 2007).

1.2. Teaching obviation

As the previous section showed, obviation is manifest in a variety of contexts and is not always fully predictable.

In some cases, obviation is constrained by grammatical factors, such as gender: animates are ranked higher than inanimates. Another context where obviation cannot show variation is possessive constructions: the possessor is always ranked higher than the possessum.

In other cases, the ranking of two 3rd person participants is subject to variation; the speaker is free to choose, although semantic, syntactic and discursive factors (such as animacy, humanness, agenthood, subject function and topicality) play an important part in picking the proximate participant.

Consequently, what emerges from a broad study of obviation is that such a phenomenon cannot be explained in a uniform way using traditional linguistic concepts pertaining to a certain level of linguistic analysis, because obviation operates at all linguistic levels. In order to teach obviation, one has to go through its uses at the phrase, clause, sentence, and even discourse level, showing in each context what obviation can or cannot do. Clearly, teaching obviation would be made easier if a general principle could be presented as a guideline to understanding the general, more abstract meaning and function of obviation, from which each particular case would follow. The challenge of proposing such a general principle is taken up in the next section.

2. An account of obviation using concepts from Cognitive Linguistics

2.1. Background

Because one of the postulates of Cognitive Linguistics is that language is not an autonomous faculty and reflects other cognitive abilities, theories within this framework offer concepts (such as constructions and image schemata) abstract enough to be considered the source of linguistic phenomena manifested at different levels of analysis. Naturally, they provided an interesting field for a possible analysis of obviation; Buszard (2003) proposed an account of obviation using concepts from Construction Grammar and the theory of Mental Spaces. Here, in order to propose a general principle to account for the different manifestations of obviation, we will appeal mostly to Cognitive Grammar.

Before reviewing the concepts from Langacker's theory most pertinent to our proposal, however, a few observations concerning the relevance of some key notions in Cognitive Linguistics can be made. The first concerns the notion of salience, which characterizes a prominent entity. Importantly, this property can be applied at two different levels: inherent salience characterizes an entity according to its intrinsic properties, whereas discourse salience can be attributed to an entity according to its degree of accessibility in the mental representation of a conceptualizer. As Schmid (2007:120) puts it, the 'notion of *salience* may thus denote both a temporary activation state of mental concepts (*cognitive salience*) and an inherent and consequently more or less permanent property of entities in the real world (*ontological salience*).'

Obviation is a clear linguistic manifestation of the concept of salience in both of its acceptances. On the one hand, it marks the inherent salience of animates over inanimates, since only animates can trigger obviation. On the other hand, obviation can be used in discourse to mark a conceptual ranking of participants.

As Schmid (2007:127-8) points out, 'It is one of the most fundamental ideas in Cognitive Linguistics that grammatical structures encode and control the distribution of attention across the entities involved in a given scene' and 'such patterns of attention distribution have been explained by cognitive linguists in terms of different degrees of salience or prominence'. In other words, when a situation is conceptualized, the expression of this mental representation indicates how the conceptualizer structures the situation in question by formally marking the ranking of the participants involved according to their salience. Consequently, it is natural to assume that the most inherently salient participant has a greater chance of being selected as the most prominent participant in the 'packaging' of the situation.

To account for inherent salience, different properties may play an important role, such as animacy, humanness or agency. By clustering these properties with those of discourse salience (such as topicality or definiteness), a prototype of the most salient participant emerges. Thus, Langacker (1991:308)

suggests that the primary figure of a profiled relationship is prototypically an entity which is human, agent, and definite. (On a syntactic level, this entity is the subject.)

This leads us to the notions of prototypes and image schemata. According to Langacker (1993), prototypes and image schemata are necessary for the formation of a category. Indeed, by comparison with a prototype, elements may be included in a category; this extension of the category allows for (and is also made possible by) an abstraction of the conceptual structure defining that category. This abstraction is called by Langacker (1993) an 'image-schematic ability'. For instance, the category 'subject' is schematically defined as the clause-level primary figure and has as a prototype the conceptual archetype *agent* (Langacker, 1993:4).

Likewise, our proposal characterizes obviation as an image schema or cognitive ability which is associated to certain prototypes. The cognitive ability we appeal to is the one involving reference points, as described by Langacker (1993). This ability is the one that allows us to mentally access an entity by means of a more salient one, used as a reference point. It is 'the ability to invoke the conception of one entity for purposes of establishing mental contact with another, i.e., to single it out for individual conscious awareness' (Langacker 1993:5). The salient entity invoked as a reference point allows the conceptualizer to potentially target a set of entities forming a cognitive domain evoked by the reference point. Once the target is set, the reference point allows direct mental access to the targeted entity.

2.2. Proposed hypothesis

Our proposal is that an abstract description of obviation embracing all its uses is readily provided by the image schematic ability involving a reference point and a targeted entity: the proximate serves as a reference point that allows mental access to another participant, marked by the obviative. In each context where obviation is triggered, the prototypical proximate will correspond to a certain conceptual archetype. In the following sections, three contexts are examined and the present analysis of obviation, discussed.

2.2.1. Possessive constructions

As Langacker (1993) shows, the formal properties observed in the expression of 'possession' can be accounted for by the cognitive ability that allows us to establish mental contact with an entity relative to a reference point. Possessed nouns, kinship terms, and nouns expressing part-whole relations all refer to entities which cannot be conceptualized directly, they are conceptually reached at the end of a mental path departing from a reference point. Our claim is that obviation explicitly marks this ability in possessive constructions in Algonquian languages, by always treating the 'possessor' as the proximate participant and the 'possessum' as obviative. Recall from section 1.1. that an inversion of these roles is not permitted, as illustrated in (5'). This is characteristic of the asymmetry found in 'possessive' constructions and is due to the fact that, not only is the reference point naturally more salient than the

‘possessed’ entity but, in fact, necessarily activated in order to permit a mental access of the target in these contexts.

Accordingly, the encoding of proximate and obviative participants signals, respectively, the selection of a reference point and the target it serves to reach. Furthermore, the prototypes for the proximate and obviative participants in the context of possession correspond to the conceptual archetypes involved in relations of kinship, ownership and part-whole relations. Examples of these in Innu (Drapeau, 2014:78) are (6), (7), and (8), respectively. In all of these, a third person proximate participant is marked by the possessive prefix *u(t)-*, whereas the suffix *-a* indicates that the inflected noun is obviative. In (6), the proximate participant is used as a reference point to establish mental contact with the (obviative) participant *-kai-* ‘mother’. In our analysis, instead of viewing the obviative as a sign of ‘obviating a participant in the background’, we see it here as a mark showing that, in order to conceive of a participant defined as ‘mother’, it is first necessary to mentally access an animate participant from which the kinship may be established.

- (6) *u-kai-a*
 3-mother-OBV
 ‘his/her mother’

In (7), a parallel relation holds between the proximate participant and the possessed object *-anapi-* ‘net’, in the sense that, because an object such as ‘net’ (in Innu traditional culture) is conceived as necessarily belonging to someone, the owner must be conceptualized first so that the possessed object may be mentally accessed subsequently, as the entity targeted from a reference point.

- (7) *ut-anapi-a*
 3-net-OBV
 ‘his/her net’

Finally, example (8) shows the body part term *-shakai-* ‘skin’ in obviative form and inflected for a third person proximate ‘possessor’: the person whose skin is conceptualized has to be mentally evoked first and serves as a reference point in order to mentally access the concept ‘skin’.

- (8) *u-shakai-a*
 3-skin-OBV
 ‘his/her skin’

In other words, by observing possessive constructions in Algonquian languages and applying Langacker (1993)’s analysis to them, the grammatical categories of proximate and obviative naturally receive a cognitive explanation in the context of possession. Consequently, because both this grammatical phenomenon and the cognitive ability involving a reference point go beyond the context of possession, we posit that this analysis is valid for obviation as a whole and examine it in other contexts.

In the next section, the context examined is the transitive clause.

2.2.2. Transitive clauses

In terms of the cognitive ability involving a reference point, obviation in a transitive clause marks the relation between the participants of a transitive verb by indicating that one of the arguments (the proximate participant) serves as a reference point to mentally access the other (the obviative)⁴.

The prototype for the proximate in a transitive clause corresponds to the conceptual archetype *agent*. This is signalled by the direct voice, which, being the unmarked form of the verb, indicates that the participant chosen as proximate acts on the participant chosen as obviative. In this case, the inherently salient participant (the agent) corresponds to the cognitively salient participant (the proximate). In the following example in Nishnaabemwin, taken from Valentine (2001:631), the direct form of the transitive verb indicates (along with the nominal morphology) that the participant *kwewag* ‘women’ acts on the participant *binoojiinyan* ‘children’. Our hypothesis is that, being proximate, the participant *kwewag* ‘women’ in this sentence has been chosen as the reference point from which the participant *binoojiinyan* ‘children’ (marked as obviative) can be mentally accessed.

- (9) Giw dash kwewag wgii-gnawenmaawaan
 those.PROX then women.PROX take.care.of.3PL.PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT

 niw binoojiinyan.
 that/those.OBV child(ren).OBV
 ‘Th(os)e women took care of the children.’

The inverse form of the verb indicates a mismatch between the inherent salience and the cognitive salience of the participant chosen as reference point: in the inverse form, the proximate participant is acted upon by the obviated participant. To illustrate this, the same situation as in the last example is presented in (10) in a different perspective: the participant ‘women’ still acts on the participant ‘children’ but it is not chosen as proximate, i.e., it does not function as the reference point chosen to mentally access the participant ‘children’. Instead, it is the participant ‘children’ (marked as proximate) which functions as reference point and allows mental access to the participant ‘women’ (marked as obviative).

- (10) Niw dash kwewan wgii-gnawenmigwaan
 that/those.OBV then woman/women.OBV take.care.of.3OBV.AGT.3PL.PROX.PAT

 giw binoojiinyag.
 those.PROX children.PROX
 ‘The woman/women took care of the children.’

⁴ This is reminiscent of Culioli (1999)’s *Théorie des Opérations Énonciatives*, according to which the mental operation of *repérage* is used to locate an entity Y (the *repéré*) with respect to an entity X (the *repère*, i.e. reference point). In a transitive clause, the active voice indicates that the reference point X is chosen as starting point (the subject) for the syntactic relation between the two entities, whereas the passive voice signals that the subject is the entity Y, which is situated with respect to X.

An interesting support for our analysis of obviation in a transitive clause can be found by looking at investigations into the intricacies of semantic roles and syntactic function in a Cognitive Linguistics perspective. More specifically, our interest lies in the observations made by Langacker (1990) in order to propose an abstract definition with a cognitive basis of subject and object, the prototype of the former corresponding to the conceptual archetype of agent, that of the latter, to the one of patient. These notions are given a schematic definition as, respectively, primary and secondary figure of the profiled relation expressed in a transitive clause. These characterizations are obtained by a progressive abstraction based on the observation of a prototypical event, where an instigator provokes an action chain transmitting energy from one entity (the energy source, or head of the action chain) to another entity (the energy sink, or tail of the action chain).

Crucially, what emerges from this abstraction is an asymmetrical interaction instigated by a more salient entity towards a less prominent one, this hierarchy being provided by the conceptual content of the relation. However, Langacker (1990) observes that in ‘extreme cases where conceptual content provides no inherent directionality, this abstract flow may be entirely subjective: it reduces to *the hierarchy of prominence the speaker imposes on the participants (and thus the order in which they tend to be accessed)* [emphasis ours].’

Our proposal is that Algonquian languages use obviation to formally encode the order in which participants of a transitive clause – as entities of a profiled relation – are mentally accessed: the proximate is the participant accessed first and functions as a reference point to establish mental contact with the second most prominent participant in the relational predication expressed by a transitive clause. Because animate entities, humans and agents are inherently salient, these features are prototypically associated with the proximate. However, the salient entity mentally activated and imposed as reference point by the speaker may be prominent for other, more subjective, reasons, such as topicality.

In such cases, the manifestation of obviation goes beyond the clause and allows a ranking of participants portrayed in portions of discourse.

2.2.3. Portions of discourse with proximate shifts

Because we posit obviation as the linguistic manifestation of a cognitive ability allowing to establish mental contact via a reference point, and because this ability is so pervasive in our experience, it is not surprising to find obviation at work outside the scope of a clause and inside portions of discourse. In other words, a participant selected as proximate in one clause may continue to be treated as such in a number of subsequent sentences, regardless of the semantic role or syntactic function this participant is endowed with.

In such contexts, the cognitive prominence of the participant selected as reference point is subject to the speaker’s subjective conceptualization. As the literature points out, the proximate is usually a topic. Consequently, the reference point is naturally foregrounded, and the target consequently accessed is in the conceptual background.

This analysis provides a natural account for what is known in Algonquian linguistics as *proximate shifts*. These occur when the speaker shifts the focus of attention from one participant to another, by changing the status of a previously obviated participant and giving it proximate status. As Langacker (1993:6) points out, there is a ‘dynamic aspect’ to the relation between a reference point and its target: the activation of an entity as a reference point makes it cognitively salient and triggers the potential for accessing other entities; one specific entity is then targeted and, once reached, it is mentally activated and consequently becomes cognitively prominent. This prominence gives it the potential to become a reference point itself and subsequently target another entity. In terms of discourse obviation, this translates into a proximate participant triggering the obviation of another participant, which is subsequently promoted to proximate.

The following example, taken from Thomason (2003:133), illustrates a proximate shift in a Fox narrative. At this point of the story, the hero has shot some turkeys. This is expressed in the first sentence⁵, where the verb is in the direct form, indicating that the proximate participant is the one doing the shooting (the hero), while the obviative participant is the one being shot (the group of turkeys). In the second sentence, the turkeys could have remained in the obviative, but because the narrator chooses to focus his attention on them (in order to emphasize their large number), they are ‘promoted’ to the proximate participant rank.

(11) e:h=po:ni- pemw+a:či, e:h=na:kwa:+či
 cease **he**.shot.*them*/CONJ **he**.went.home/CONJ
 ‘**He** stopped shooting *them* and went home.

e:h=kwa:pa:kwaso+wa:či pene:w+aki, me:teno:ški =taswi =meko
they.lay.scattered/CONJ **turkeys** tremendous {that.number} =EMPH
 ‘**Turkeys** lay scattered all over, a tremendous amount of them.’

In our analysis, the hero Turkey Owner functions as a reference point from which other participants are mentally accessed. In this passage ‘the turkeys’ are mentally accessed in the first sentence, as a result of being related to the hero via the transitive verb ‘shoot’. Being an active referent, this (now salient) participant serves as a topic for the second sentence.

To conclude this section, it could be observed that, in the last context examined, the ranking of participants marked by obviation clearly has the function of indicating the focus of attention, and that this type of relative salience is explained in Cognitive Linguistics in terms of *Figure* and *Ground* alignment (Talmy, 2000:311-44). In this respect, obviation could be seen as an instantiation of the cognitive representation and organization of entities in terms of Figure and Ground. However, this would not explain why obviation is compulsory with nouns expressing kinship, ownership and part-whole relations. The reason for this, in our view, is that obviation not only marks the

⁵ The example is reproduced as written by Lucy Thomason; the proximate participant is indicated by bold characters, whereas obviative participants are marked by italic.

relative prominence of two entities, it also emphasizes the relation between the two entities. This relation, which holds between a reference point and a mentally accessed target, may connect two entities to a greater or lesser degree. In the case of kinship, ownership, and part-whole relations, the connectivity between the reference point and the target entity is the highest and constrained for cognitive reasons. When the relation between two entities is expressed by a transitive verb, the reference point and the target are highly connected, because they correspond to the arguments of the verb. In portions of discourse, this connectivity is completely subject to the speaker's conceptualization. This explains why the use of obviation may seem more like a 'grammatical' phenomenon in some languages and more 'discursive' in others, as well as the possible variation from one speaker to another in the case of the 'discursive' use of obviation.

The analysis of obviation as the manifestation of our cognitive ability to establish mental contact with an entity by means of the relation it holds with a reference point also has the merit of suggesting a unified account of the phenomenon and, consequently, offering a general guideline for teaching it.

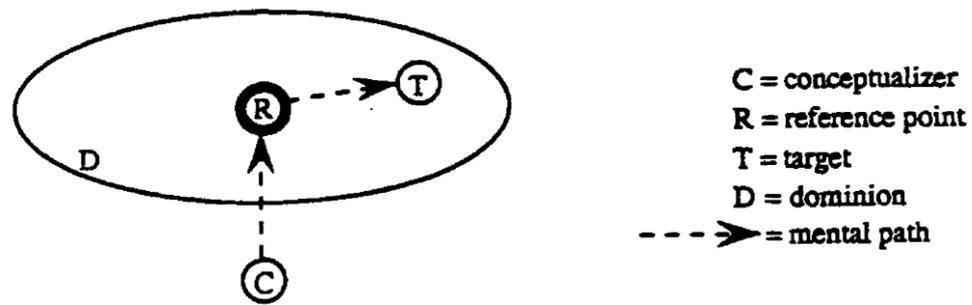
3. Teaching obviation

As mentioned above, our claim is that this unified account has an educational interest as it offers a user-friendly approach to the phenomenon of obviation. By equating the proximate with a reference point and the obviative with the target, we highlight the asymmetric relationship between a proximate and an obviative participant.

The asymmetry which is characteristic of the reference-point ability is clearly a defining property of possessive constructions and it is prototypically present in transitive clauses. We insist in the prototypical aspect of transitive clauses as there is no grammatical constraint for the actor to be always the proximate. As shown in 2.2.2, the actor is the proximate participant in the more prototypical cases. In a teaching context, we focus only on the prototypical cases. As for the proximate shifts, we also focus on prototypical cases in which the proximate participant matches the topic but we highlight at the same time the dynamic aspect of the topic position.

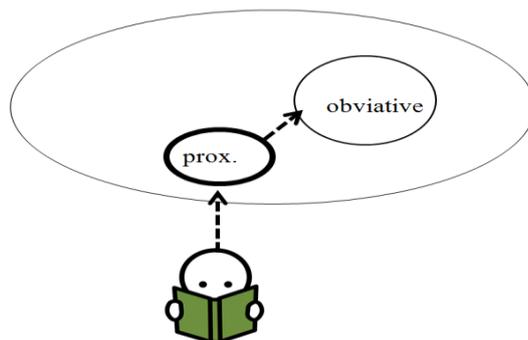
The figure proposed by Langacker (1993:6) to capture the reference-point ability is a powerful tool to teach obviation. In the following sections we will discuss its adaptation and application:

Figure 1



The four elements presented in figure 1 are interpreted as follows: the circle labeled C stands for the conceptualizer, R is the reference point, T the *target*, i.e., the entity that is mentally accessed through the reference point, and D is what the author calls the *dominion*, and is defined as the conceptual region containing the potential targets. Finally, the dashed arrow signals the mental path the conceptualizer follows to attain the target. The four essential aspects of the reference point ability can be equated straightforwardly with the essential aspects of obviation:

Figure 2



C=conceptualizer	→	the reader
R=reference point	→	proximate
T=target	→	obviative
D=dominion	→	obviation domain

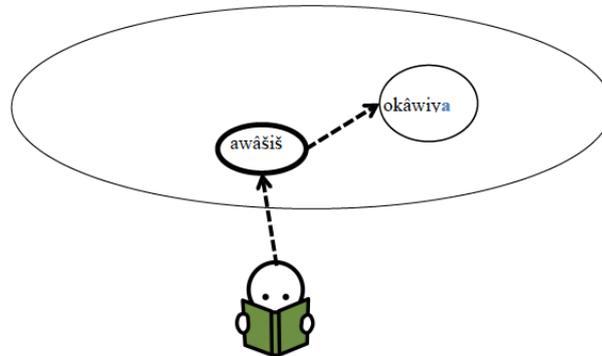
3.1. Possessive constructions

When teaching obviation, possessive constructions are a good starting point as they grammaticalize the asymmetry by requiring that the possessor be always the proximate participant and the *possessum* the obviative. For instance, in example (5) repeated here:

- (12) awâšiš o-kâwiy-a
 child[PROX] 3-mother-OBV
 ‘the child’s mother’

the participants can be naturally represented with a figure (inspired on the one proposed by Langacker (1993 : 6)) :

Figure 3



The explanation offered to students here is that ‘being a mother’ is always being ‘someone’s mother’ and thus we conceptualize this notion via the ‘child’. The ‘child’ is our reference point. The other participant, the obviative is the one which gets marked morphologically. Interestingly, Cree dictionaries list inalienable nouns in their third person possessed form, which is obligatory suffixed by the obviative marking (-*a*). For instance, the noun ‘father’ is listed as *ohtāwīya* ‘his or her father-obv’. When learning the obviative and its compulsory presence in kinship terms, students will understand why these terms always end in -*a*.

3.2. Transitive clauses

A prototypical transitive construction implies an asymmetrical relation, in which the actor acts volitionally and in which there is a transfer of energy into the goal (Kittilä, 2008). In Moose Cree this translates into a general tendency for the actor to be the proximate participant:

- (13) Aniki **nâpew-ak** misiwe pehpeyak^w kî nipah-ew-ak
 those man[PROX]-PL all one.by.one PAST kill-3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT-PL
 atihkw-a
 caribou-OBV
 ‘The men killed all the caribou, one by one’

- (14) Eko mâka **n-ôhtâwiy** kî otatâmahw-ew anihi mištikw-a
 and then 1POS-father[PROX] PAST beat-3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT DEM tree-OBV
 ‘Then, my dad started hitting that tree’

Both examples are prototypical transitive constructions with a prototypical actor and goal and can both be represented with figure 1. In (13) the proximate participant is represented by *napewak* ‘the men’ and the obviative one by *atihkwa* ‘the caribous’. In (14) *nôhtâwiy* ‘my dad’ is the proximate participant and *mištikwa* ‘the tree’ the obviative one.

The explanation offered to students here is that the tendency is for actors to be the more salient participants (humans, animate nouns) and thus to be the ones to be selected as the proximate. The connection between an actor and a proximate is based on the inherent salience of the participant. However, as this is only a tendency and not a grammatical constraint, it is important to keep in mind that salience can also be discursive, i.e. it is the context of the story and the subjectivity of the narrator that determines which participant is going to be chosen as the proximate, usually the *topic* (see section 2.2.3.) Moreover, as it was mentioned above, the same participant can be the obviative in one part of the story and become the proximate in the following one. In next section we will discuss the situation in which an obviative participant becomes the new proximate.

3.3. Portions of discourse with proximate shifts

In section 2.2.3, it was stated that the proximate ‘status’ is a dynamic one, just like the reference-point status. Admittedly the proximate participant owes to its salience to be chosen as such, but once the obviated participant is reached out it can be cognitively salient and become the new proximate. As Langacker (1993:6) puts it: ‘even as it fulfills its reference-point function, R recedes into the background in favor of T, which may itself then be invoked as a reference point for reaching another target’. Here is an example of a proximate shift in a narration:

(15) **Iliiw** nîpâ-kîwe-kopan e kî nataw-ešk-et sâkahikan-ihk.
 man[PROX] during.night-return-3DUB SUB PAST hunt-chisel-3 lake-LOC
 ‘The man must have been heading home at night after hunting beaver on the lake.’

Nimitâwakâm pimât-akâskô-pan. Ot-eškan piminikâtahamo-kopan.
 offshore walk-ice-3PAST 3POS-chisel carry.along.shoulder-3DUB
 He was walking out on the ice and must have been carrying his chisel over his shoulder.

Mištasiw-a mâka kî ohpahol-iko-w.
 giant.bird-OBV then PAST take.by.flying-3OBV.AGT.3PROX.PAT-3
 ‘That’s when the Roc plucked him from the ground.’

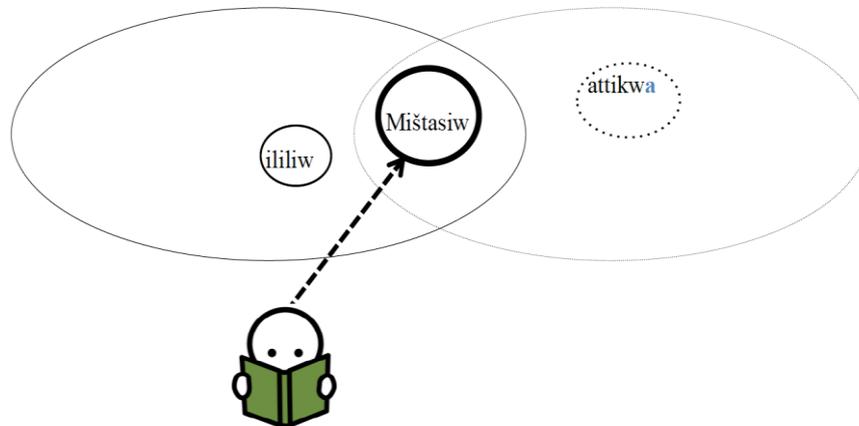
Examples (15) represent an excerpt from a story. In this portion of discourse the proximate participant is *iliiw* ‘man’ and the obviative *Mištasiwa* ‘the Roc’ (underlined). In the following sentences, the obviative *Mištasiwa* will become the new proximate *Mištasiw* (without the *-a* suffix!) and a new obviated participant will be introduced: *atihkwa* ‘the caribou’.

(16) Môšak mâka kihcihlâ-w **Mištasiw** e natawaho-t.
 always then take.off.flying-3 the.roc[PROX] SUB hunt-3
 ‘Now, the Roc would constantly fly off to hunt.’

Misiwe tôwihkân-a petahol-ew ašici atihkw-a.
 all type-OBV bring-3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT also caribou-OBV
 It would bring back all kinds of animals, including caribou.’

This proximate shift is captured in the following figure:

Figure 4



Eventually, *ililiw*, ‘the man’ – which is the main character of the story – will recover the proximate status. Actually, this happens in the following paragraph:

- (17) Ana **ililiw** nâspic kî nanâhîhkaw-ew mištašî-šîš-a.
 DEM man[PROX] really PAST take.care-3PROX.AGT.3OBV.PAT roc-DIM-OBV
 ‘The man really took care of the young rocs.’

One pedagogical strategy to teach the notion of proximate shifts is by identifying the characters in a story. Usually, the main character may lose momentarily its proximate status – when the focus shifts towards another character – but eventually it will end up recovering it.

This strategy has been tested in two different workshops with students with different backgrounds. In both cases, they would rapidly integrate the distinction between proximate and obviative. They could easily make the exercises in which they were asked to find the proximate and obviative participants. The next step will be to test if this strategy proves successful in the production of obviation.

Conclusion

In this article we have introduced the notion of obviation, a compulsory grammatical device which ranks two third persons in a specific context: one is called the *proximate* and the other, the *obviative*. This context can be a noun phrase (in possessive constructions for example), a clause (in transitive constructions) or a portion of discourse. In some contexts, such as in possessive constructions, the choice of the proximate participant is grammatically driven: the possessor is always the proximate. The same situation arises when one of the participants is of the animate gender and the other of the inanimate one: the latter will always be the obviative.

In other contexts, even though there is no grammatical constraint, some tendencies are observed. The proximate is usually the more salient participant in terms of inherent or discursive salience and in terms of semantic roles (for example actors tend to be proximates). Inversely, the obviative tends to be the less salient participant. This asymmetry is reminiscent of the reference-point cognitive ability, as proposed by Langacker (1993). This cognitive ability, allows us to mentally access an entity by means of another one, more accessible called a reference point. We have put forward that an abstract description of obviation embracing all its uses is readily provided by the reference-point ability: the proximate participant serves as a reference point which allows mental access to another participant, marked by the obviative. By equating the proximate with a reference point and the obviative with the targeted entity we can account for the asymmetric relation that holds across different linguistic levels. This unified account has not only the merit of offering a simplified analysis of obviation, which covers most of its uses, but also of being a powerful tool to teach this notion.

In a teaching context, we suggest to focus on the prototypical cases such as the ones in which the actor corresponds to the proximate participant (even if this is not obligatory) or when the proximate is the topic. For students to grab the factors that play a role in the attribution of one status or the other we introduce the notions of inherent (or ontological) and discursive salience. The figure proposed by Langacker (reproduced on page 13 and adapted in subsequent pages) is the base upon which the relationship between the proximate and the obviative participants is represented. This figure allows us to capture the different contexts in which obviation can take place in a simple and user-friendly way.

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