

# Dependencies in syntax and discourse: Obviation in Blackfoot and beyond

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Obviation is a hallmark trait of Algonquian, but how does it fit in a typology of natural language phenomenon? Analyses tend to focus on either its discourse or syntactic properties, and there is disagreement about whether obviation is pragmatic or syntactic in origin. I propose that pragmatic and syntactic approaches are not incompatible, but rather reflect a phenomenon I refer to as RECRUITMENT, whereby functional items in the syntax take on discourse uses. Drawing on data from Blackfoot, I demonstrate that obviation encodes syntactic dependencies, and this renders it compatible to signal dependencies in discourse. The analysis is also extended to Algonquian languages more broadly.

*Keywords: Algonquian; obviation; dependency; syntax; discourse; topic*

## 1 Introduction

Obviation, a hallmark property of the Algonquian languages, is a typologically rare phenomenon. It refers to a morphological feature that appears on nouns and pronouns to distinguish between multiple third person referents. Within a clause or stretch of larger discourse, one third person is marked PROXIMATE and all others OBLVIATIVE, with the former typically described in terms of referring to a more discourse-salient individual than the latter. Various linguistic phenomena have been compared to or equated with Algonquian obviation: languages including Tzotzil (Mayan, Aissen 1997), Chamorro (Austronesian: Aissen, 1997), Karuk (Hokan: Macaulay, 1992), Ktunaxa (isolate: Dryer, 1992), and Ojibwe (Mixe-Zoquean: Zavala, 2007) (amongst others) have been claimed to have obviation systems that are comparable to those found in Algonquian. However, with the possible exception of Ktunaxa (a language isolate speculated to have genetic or geographical ties to Algonquian), these comparisons tend to be somewhat tenuous and the similarities between Algonquian obviation and what is found in these other languages are often weak.

This leaves us with a question of how Algonquian obviation fits within a typology of natural language phenomena. Part of the reason why obviation is difficult to classify is that it operates at the interface of morphosyntax and discourse: it has clear morphological exponents and triggers syntactic reflexes such as agreement and concord, yet interpretively it signals discourse relations, which are often assumed to be extra-grammatical. Research on obviation tends to

focus on either the morphosyntactic *or* discourse properties, and there is some debate over whether obviation is syntactic or discourse-related in origin (cf. Goddard, 1990; Quinn, 2006; Rhodes, 1990; see also Zúñiga, 2006 for a similar discussion on direct/inverse, a related phenomenon also found in Algonquian). Morphosyntactic approaches are typically reductionist in nature, analysing obviation as a reflex of binding (e.g., Grafstein, 1984; Kiparsky, 2002) or case (e.g., Bruening, 2001), or as a subtype of a different morphosyntactic feature such as person (Brittain, 2001; Frantz, 1966), number (Piriyawiboon 2007), or gender (Bliss, 2005a). Discourse-based approaches, on the other hand, focus on the ways in which obviation shapes a text, or how proximate and obviative assignment proceeds through a narrative. These nuanced perspectives on obviation are invaluable for understanding its role in individual languages, but from a typological standpoint, they do little to embed obviation in a crosslinguistic context. As such, the debate between whether obviation is fundamentally is syntactic or discourse-related boils down to whether obviation can be reduced to an independently-attested principle of grammar, or whether it should be deemed a typological anomaly, a specialized marking of discourse functions found only in Algonquian.

In this paper, I discuss the obviation system of a particular language: Blackfoot (Plains Algonquian: Alberta). I demonstrate that obviation in Blackfoot must be described in syntactic terms: the proximate/obviative contrast correlates with a contrast between phrases that cannot be syntactically dependent on another phrase (proximate) versus those that must be (obviative).

I propose that the syntax of obviation in Blackfoot gives us a clear route towards understanding how it can operate at a discourse-level. I demonstrate that there is an analog between syntactic and discourse relations in Blackfoot: proximate marking signals a lack of dependency at both the syntactic and discourse levels, and conversely, obviative marking signals the presence of such a dependency. It is this compatibility between syntactic and discourse functions that facilitates the discourse uses of proximate and obviative marking: they are natural candidates for signalling discourse dependency relations because of their role in signalling syntactic dependency relations.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I give a more detailed introduction to Algonquian obviation. In Sections 3 and 4, I focus on the syntactic and discourse properties of Blackfoot obviation, respectively. In Section 5, I propose that the syntax-discourse connection suggested for Blackfoot can be applied more broadly. In Section 6 I conclude.

## **2 Obviation: an overview**

### **2.1 What is obviation?**

Throughout Algonquian, nouns are inflected for three grammatical categories: number, animacy, and obviation (cf. Bloomfield, 1946). NUMBER refers to the contrast between nouns that refer to individuals (e.g., singular *míini* ‘berry’)

versus those that refer to groups (plural *míinists* ‘berries’).<sup>1</sup> ANIMACY partitions nouns into two classes: animate and inanimate, and while these classes tend to align with ontological categories of animacy, there are some mismatches. Specifically, nouns referring to human beings (e.g., *aakii* ‘woman’) are always grammatically animate, but nouns referring to inanimate objects may be grammatically inanimate (e.g., *míistak* ‘mountain’) or grammatically animate (e.g., *isttoán* ‘knife’). OBVIATION is a third grammatical category that partitions nouns into two subtypes, referred to as PROXIMATE and OBVIATIVE. An example from Blackfoot is given below.

- (1) a. *Á-*    *yissksimaa*    **-wa**    *om*    **-wa**    *imitáá*    **-wa**  
 IMPF- *carry.load.AI*    **-PROX**    *DEM*    **-PROX**    *dog*    **-PROX**  
 ‘That dog (PROX) is a pack dog.’ (lit: it carries loads)
- b. *Á-*    *yissksimaa*    **-yini**    *om*    **-yi**    *imitáá*    **-yi**  
 IMPF- *carry.load.AI*    **-OBV**    *DEM*    **-OBV**    *dog*    **-OBV**  
 ‘That dog (OBV) is a pack dog.’ (lit: it carries loads)

In (1a), the noun *imitáá* ‘dog;’ is marked proximate, and triggers proximate agreement on the verb and the demonstrative determiner. In (1b), the same noun is marked obviative, and triggers obviative agreement on the verb and the demonstrative determiner. In some other Algonquian languages, only the obviative is morphologically marked, contrasting with a morphologically unmarked proximate category.<sup>2</sup> This is illustrated with an example from Anishnaabemowin:

- (2) a. *n-*    *waab*    **-am**    **-aa**    *moozw*  
*I*    *see*    **-TA**    **-DIR**    *moose*  
 ‘I see a moose (PROX)’

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, examples are given in Blackfoot and are from the author’s fieldwork with speakers of the Siksiká and Kaináa dialects (2003-present). The generalizations presented here reflect my consultants’ judgments, and are not necessarily consistent with Frantz’s (1991, 2009) Blackfoot Grammar. Data are presented in a four-line format, with the top line representing the surface form in the standard Blackfoot orthography (cf. Frantz, 2009, Appendix D), and the second line representing the morphemes in their underlying forms. Abbreviations are as follows: 1,2,3=1<sup>st</sup>,2<sup>nd</sup>,3<sup>rd</sup> person; ACCOMP(animent); AI=animate intransitive; BEN(efactive); CONJ(unct); DEM(onstrative); DIR(ect); IC=initial change IMPF=imperfective; INAN(imate); INTNS=intensifier; INV(erse); INVIS(ible); LOC(ative); MOD(al); NEG(ative); NOM(inalizer); PL(ural); POSS(essive); PRN=pronoun; PROX(imate); SG=singular; TA=transitive animate.

<sup>2</sup> There is variation across the family with respect to the interaction between these three features. For example, in Blackfoot the proximate/obviative contrast is neutralized with all but singular and animate nouns, but other languages display different neutralization patterns (see Bliss and Oxford, to appear for details).

- b. John o- waab -am -aa -an moozw **-an**  
*John 3- see -TA -DIR -OBV moose -OBV*  
 ‘John sees a moose (OBV).’ (Grafstein 1984: 34)

Obviation serves a reference-tracking function, disambiguating between multiple 3<sup>rd</sup> persons in a clause. Across Algonquian, it is reported that at most one 3<sup>rd</sup> person referent can be marked proximate in a clause; all others are marked obviative.<sup>3</sup> Blackfoot examples are given below.

- (3) a. Ann -wa Leo íhpok- inihkim -yii -wa  
*DEM -PROX Leo ACCOM- sing.TA -DIR -PROX*  
 ann **-yi** n- Itán **-yi**  
*DEM -OBV I- Daughter -OBV*  
 ‘Leo sang with my daughter.’
- b. \*Ann -wa Leo íhpok- inihkim -yii -wa  
*DEM -PROX Leo ACCOM- sing.TA -DIR -PROX*  
 ann **-wa** n- Itán **-wa**  
*DEM -PROX I- Daughter -PROX*  
 intended: ‘Leo sang with my daughter.’

In (3a), the subject, *na Leo*, is proximate and the object *ni nitáni* ‘my daughter’ is obviative. (3b) shows that it is ungrammatical for both to be marked proximate.

Just as number and animacy are grammatical categories that are (loosely)<sup>4</sup> correlated with ontological or “real-world” classifications, so is obviation. Although there is considerable variation across Algonquian, in all the languages proximate nominal expressions are thought to be more discourse-salient than obviative ones in some sense (e.g., the proximate nominal expression is the perspective-holder and/or discourse topic, cf. Dahlstrom, 1991; Genee, 2009; Goddard, 1984, 1990; Junker, 2004; Mühlbauer, 2008; Russell, 1991, 1996).

## 2.2 The tension: syntax or discourse

Analyses of Algonquian obviation tend to focus exclusively on either its discourse properties (e.g. Genee, 2009; Goddard, 1984, 1990; Hasler, 2002; Thomason, 1995, 2003) or its syntactic properties (e.g., Aissen, 1997; Bruening, 2001; Grafstein, 1984), and there is some debate as to whether obviation is fundamentally discourse-based or syntactic in essence and origin.

Proponents of the view that obviation is fundamentally a discourse phenomenon point to what Goddard (1990: 317) refers to as “nonautomatic discourse uses of the obviative-proximate obviation.” In most cases the choice of whether a given nominal expression is marked as proximate or obviative is at the

<sup>3</sup> In at least some languages, the ban against multiple proximate referents within a single clause is relaxed in informal contexts (cf. Thomason, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Even grammatical number does not always reflect the real-world contrast between individuals and groups. I return to this in Section 4.2.

discretion of the speaker: it is not automatically regulated by any syntactic conditions. For example, consider the contrast illustrated by example (1) above. Both (1a) and (1b) are grammatical utterances. What regulates the choice of whether *imitaa* “dog” is marked proximate (a) or obviative (b)? The choice is driven by properties of the discourse. Different languages (and different discourse contexts) seem to call for different protocols, but the general observation is that, for a nominal expression to be marked proximate, its referent is in some sense salient or foregrounded in the discourse, in contrast with the referents of all other nominal expressions, which are backgrounded by way of obviative marking.

Conversely, proponents of the view that obviation is a fundamentally syntactic phenomenon point to the fact that discourse structuring cannot account for all instances of proximate and obviative assignment. For example, there is a strict syntactic restriction on proximate/obviative assignment across Algonquian, namely that nouns possessed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person possessor are obligatorily obviative, regardless of whether the possessor is proximate or obviative, as shown below.

- (4) a. \*Ann        **-wa**        ot-        ómitaa    -m        **-wa**  
           *DEM*        **-PROX**     3-        *dog*        - *POSS*     **-PROX**  
           iyíístap-    okska’si    -wa  
           *away-*     *run.AI*     -*PROX*  
           intended: ‘Her dog ran away.’
- b. Ann        **-yi**        ot-        ómitaa    -m        **-yi**  
           *DEM*        **-OBV**     3-        *dog*        - *POSS*     **-OBV**  
           iyíístap-    okska’si    -wa  
           *away-*     *run.AI*     -*PROX*  
           ‘Her dog ran away.’

In (4a), the possessor is 3<sup>rd</sup> person, and it is ungrammatical for the possessed noun to be marked as proximate. (4b) is the grammatical alternative to (4a), in which the possessed noun is marked as obviative. This syntactic constraint on obviation trumps any discourse-level considerations: a noun possessed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person possessor must be obviative, regardless of whether the speaker wishes to foreground or background its referent in the discourse.<sup>5</sup>

In short, there are mismatches between the syntactic and discourse-based reflexes of obviation. At least some cases of proximate/obviative assignment in a discourse span appear not to be syntactically conditioned, and conversely, at least some cases of proximate/obviative assignment within a syntactic frame appear not to be discourse-conditioned.

What does this mean for a theory of obviation and its role in natural language? Typologically speaking, does obviation share an affinity with

<sup>5</sup> A second syntactic constraint that has been noted for some languages is found in ditransitive constructions: if both objects are 3<sup>rd</sup> person, the direct object is necessarily obviative (cf. Grafstein, 1984 for Ojibwe; Bliss, 2005a for Blackfoot)

discourse-level phenomena such as prosody or other means of Focus-marking, or is it more akin to e.g., Case morphology, reflecting a syntactic distribution of constituents? Or is it altogether something different, an anomaly that deserves special treatment in our models of natural language?

To frame the question differently, we can ask what constitutes the lexical entry for a proximate or obviative morpheme. Does it include a meaning component that specifies its discourse function? Is it coded to associate with a syntactic category, function, or position? What is the contribution of an obviation morpheme, and how does it fit in a typology of grammatical categories?

In what follows, I focus on obviation in one particular language, Blackfoot. I demonstrate that proximate and obviative morphemes in Blackfoot exhibit distributional differences, and I claim that this is indicative that they have different syntactic functions. I then go on to show that the discourse functions of proximate and obviative morphemes can be derived via their syntactic functions, suggesting that discourse functions do not need to be directly encoded in the lexical entries of proximate and obviative morphemes. I then span out to consider obviation across Algonquian and I demonstrate that, despite variation in both discourse and syntactic functions, there is a common thread suggesting a unified treatment.

### **3 Obviation in Blackfoot: syntactic in/dependence**

In the preceding section, we observed that not all instances of proximate and obviative assignment are syntactically regulated. However, in this section I demonstrate that, however they happen to be assigned, proximate and obviative morphemes in Blackfoot have different syntactic reflexes: proximate nominal expressions have a different syntax than obviative ones. This suggests that proximate and obviative morphemes themselves have different syntactic functions, and I argue that they differ with respect to syntactic dependency relations.

#### **3.1 Distributional differences**

Proximate and obviative nominal expressions have different syntactic properties. First let's consider proximate nominal expressions, which exhibit free word order: they can appear in various positions in the surface string.<sup>6</sup> An example with a proximate object is given in (5) below.

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<sup>6</sup> This is abstracting away from the interpretive differences associated with different word orders. In Blackfoot, the preverbal or clause-initial position is associated with a Focus (i.e., new information) interpretation, cf. Bliss, 2013; Genee and Wolvengrey, 2014. Both proximate and obviative nominal expressions are compatible with Focus interpretations, cf. Bliss, 2005b; Genee, 2009.

- (5) a. **Ann -wa n- ínsst -innaan -wa**  
*DEM -PROX I- sister -IPL -PROX*  
 nít- sspommo -a -wa  
*I- help.TA -DIR -PROX*  
 ‘I helped our sister.’

b. Nítsspommoawa **anna nínsstsinaana**.

The generalization extends to all proximate nominal expressions; regardless of their grammatical function (i.e., whether they function as a subject, object, or oblique), proximate nominal expressions can be freely ordered. In (5), the proximate nominal expression is the object, and in (6) is an example of a freely ordered proximate subject.

- (6) a. **Om -wa imitáá -wa**  
*DEM -PROX dog -PROX*  
 nit- íímmst- -omo -ok -wa -áyi  
*I- steal.food -TA. BEN -INV -PROX -3SG.PRN*  
 ‘The dog stole it from me.’

b. Nitsíímmstomokáyi **oma imitááwa**.

In addition to showing flexibility in their word order, proximate nominal expressions are also optional, again regardless of their grammatical function. This is illustrated for a proximate subject in (7). Although not shown, the same generalization applies to objects.

- (7) a. **A’páwaawahkaa -wa ann -wa Pióhkomiaaki**  
*walk.around.AI -PROX DEM -PROX far.sounding.woman*  
 ‘Far Sounding Woman is walking around.’

b. **A’páwaawahkaawa**  
 ‘S/he is walking around.’

In (7), the proximate nominal expression can be omitted, and the resulting clause is still grammatical.

Let’s compare the behaviour of proximate nominal expressions with obviative ones. First, the same freedom of word order is not found with obviative nominal expressions: regardless of grammatical function, it is ungrammatical for an obviative nominal expression to appear preverbally, unless it is resumed by an enclitic pronoun. This is illustrated in (8) below.

- (8) a. **Áókataki -yini ann -yi w- inssts -yi**  
*bead.AI -OBV DEM -OBV 3- sister -OBV*  
 ‘His sister does beadwork.’

b. \***Anni ónssts** áókatakiyini.

c. **Ann -yi w- inssts -yi** áókataki -yini **-áyi**  
*DEM -OBV 3- sister -OBV bead.AI -OBV -3SG.PRN*  
 ‘His sister does beadwork.’

In (8a), the obviative subject *anni ónssts* ‘his sister’ is postverbal, and this is grammatical. In (8b), the same nominal expression appears in a preverbal position, and this is ungrammatical. (8c) is the grammatical alternative, in which an enclitic *-áyi* appears on the verb. The generalization that enclitics must resume preverbal obviative expressions is true not only of subjects but also objects, as shown in (9).

(9) a. Kit a'páisssto -a -yini **om -yi saahkómaapi -yi**  
 2 wave.TA -DIR -OBV DEM -OBV boy -OBV  
 ‘You are waving at that boy.’

b. **Om -yi saahkómaapi -yi**  
*DEM -OBV boy -OBV*  
 kit- a'páisssto -a -yini **-áyi**  
 2- wave.TA -DIR -OBV **-3SG.PRN**  
 ‘You are waving at that boy.’

c. \***Omi saahkómaapii** kita'páisstowayini.

Just as an enclitic is required to resume an obviative nominal expression if it moves from its postverbal position, an enclitic is also required to resume an obviative nominal expression if it is omitted. In other words, unlike proximate nominal expressions, obviative ones are not optional. This is shown in (10); although not shown, the same generalization extends to obviative objects.

(10) a. **Áísokssta -yini ann -yi ot- issítsimaan -yi**  
*nurse.well.AI -OBV DEM -OBV 3- baby -OBV*  
 ‘Her baby is nursing well.’

b. **Áísokssta -yini -áyi**  
*nurse.well.AI -OBV -3SG.PRN*  
 ‘S/he is nursing well.’

c. \***Áísoksstayini.**

In summary, proximate and obviative nominal expressions have different syntactic properties. Whereas proximate nominal expressions can be freely moved or omitted, obviative ones cannot. This is summarized in Table 1.

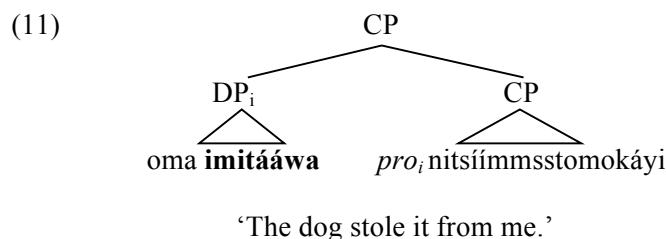


Table 1. Proximate versus Obviative Nominal Expressions

	Proximate	Obviative
Freely ordered	✓	✗
Optional	✓	✗

### 3.2 Obviation codes syntactic dependency relations

In Section 3.1, we saw that proximate and obviative nominal expressions exhibit different syntactic properties. How can we interpret this? The data indicate that proximate – but not obviative -- nominal expressions exhibit the canonical properties of adjuncts: they can adjoin to the left or the right of the clause, and they can be omitted.<sup>7</sup> Although interpreted as arguments, proximate nominal expressions don't pattern syntactically as arguments, suggesting that they are adjoined outside the clause. As for how they get interpreted as arguments, I adopt a version of Baker's (1991, 1996) model, in which argument expressions can be adjoined outside the clause, but bind a pronominal argument (null *pro*) inside the clause.<sup>8</sup> This is schematized in (11) below.



As for obviative nominal expressions, on the other hand, these do not exhibit adjunct-like properties. They show the syntactic restrictions expected of arguments: their word order is fixed and they are obligatory. Abstracting away from the question of what the relevant argument positions are in Blackfoot,<sup>9</sup> we can conclude that obviative nominal expressions are generated inside the clause, as schematized below.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that there is both right- and left-adjunction is contra Kayne (1994), who claims that adjunction is strictly on the left. However, it is consistent with Baker's (1996, 2006) claim that (many) polysynthetic languages permit both right- and left- adjunction.

<sup>8</sup> Baker's model, often referred to as the Pronominal Argument Hypothesis, is widely assumed or adopted for Algonquian languages (e.g., Brittain, 2001; Junker, 1994, 2004; Reinholtz, 1999; Reinholtz and Russell, 1995). For criticism of this widespread assumption, see LeSourd, 2006, and for alternative analyses see Bruening, 2001 (Passamquoddy), Christianson, 2002 (Odawa), and Hamilton, 2015 (Mi'kmaq).

<sup>9</sup> See Bliss (2013) for a discussion of Blackfoot's A-positions.

- (12)
- |  |                |        |
|--|----------------|--------|
|  | CP             |        |
|  | 3              |        |
|  | 3              |        |
|  | Áókatakiyináyi | DP     |
|  |                | 5      |
|  | anni           | ónssts |

‘His sister does beadwork.’

In short, whereas proximate nominal expressions are clause-external, obviative ones are clause-internal. This means that, although identical on the surface, examples such as those in (1a) and (1b) above in fact have very different structures.

The relationship of the proximate nominal expression to the clause in (1a) is different from that of the obviative nominal expression to the clause in (1b). In (1a), the nominal expression is not dependent on the clause: it is generated outside of it. In (1b), on the other hand, the nominal expression is dependent on the clause; it is generated inside of it.

The claim that the obviation in Blackfoot can be understood in terms of syntactic dependency relations is supported by the distribution of proximate and obviative suffixes in clauses. While proximate *-wa* can appear on nominal expressions that function as arguments, it can also appear on either verbs or nouns to form independent matrix clauses. Examples are given below.

- (13) *Á-* ihpiyi **-wa**  
*IMPF- dance.AI -PROX*  
 ‘S/he is dancing.’

- (14) Piitáá **-wa**  
*eagle -PROX*  
 ‘S/he is an eagle.’

In (13), the verb *ihpiyi* ‘dance’ is suffixed with the proximate suffix *-wa*, and can function as a matrix clause. Without the *-wa* suffix, the verb alone cannot be construed as a clause. Similarly, in (14), the noun *piitaa* ‘eagle’ is suffixed with *-wa* and here too it functions as an independent matrix clause. In short, the addition of the proximate suffix *-wa* to either a verb or a noun forms an independent clause. The same is not true of obviative *-yi*; nouns suffixed with *-yi* can only function as arguments, as shown in (15). Verbs suffixed with *-yi* are also construed as arguments (not clauses); the *-yi* suffix serves to nominalize the verb, as in (16).

- (15) a. \*Piitáá **-yi**

*eagle* -*OBV*  
intended: ‘S/he is an eagle.’

- b. Om -*yi* pittáá -**yi** áipotta -*yini* -áyi  
*DEM -OBV eagle -OBV fly.AI -OBV -3SG.PRN*  
 ‘That eagle is flying.’

- (16) a. \*(Ann -*yi*) á- ihpiyi -**yi**  
*(DEM -OBV) IMPF- dance.AI -OBV*  
 intended: ‘S/he is dancing.’

- b. Ann -*yi* á- ihpiyi -**yi**  
*DEM -OBV IMPF- dance.AI -OBV*  
 ákaa- omatapoo -*yini* -áyi  
*PERF- leave.AI -OBV -3SG.PRN*  
 ‘The one who dances has just left.’

In (15) and (16) we see that neither nouns nor verbs that are marked with obviative *-yi* can function as independent clauses.

Whereas proximate *-wa* can form independent clauses, it is banned from appearing on dependent (i.e., subordinate) clauses, as shown below.

- (17) a. Imáát- matt- sootaa -**wa**  
*NEG- again- rain -PROX*  
 ‘It’s not raining anymore.’
- b. Nit- íksstaa  
 1- want.AI  
 m- ááhk- saw- matt- sootaa -hs -*yi* (**\*wa**)  
 3- MOD- NEG- again- rain -CONJ -OBV  
 ‘I want it to stop raining.’

In (17a), the matrix clause is marked with proximate *-wa*, but in (17b), we see that the same verb forms a subordinate clause but here *-wa* is ungrammatical. Proximate *-wa* cannot appear in dependent clauses. Conversely, just as nominal arguments are marked with the suffix *-yi*, so are clausal arguments. In particular, subordinate conjunct<sup>10</sup> clauses require a morpheme *-yi* whose function has until now been unexplained (cf. Frantz, 1991, 2009). This is true regardless of the verb class and/or theta roles of the conjunct clause; all conjunct clauses are necessarily obviative.

<sup>10</sup> The conjunct is the default subordinate clause type. The other subordinate clause type in Blackfoot is subjunctive, which is also formed with an *-i* ending. Whether this *-i* is in fact the obviative *-yi* (with glide deletion) remains to be seen.

In summary, proximate *-wa* but not obviative *-yi* can be used to form independent (matrix) clauses, and conversely obviative *-yi* but not proximate *-wa* appears on dependent (subordinate) clauses. This is consistent with the following generalization about proximate and obviative nominal expressions: proximate nominal expressions are clause-external adjuncts, not dependent on the clause, whereas obviative ones are arguments, internal to and dependent on the clause. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Proximate/Obviative and Dependency

	Proximate	Obviative
Nominal Expressions	Clause-external adjuncts	Clause-internal arguments
Clauses	Matrix	Subordinate
	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Dependent</b>

Returning to the question of what the lexical entries for proximate and obviative morphemes contain, the data presented in this section suggests that proximate *-wa* and obviative *-yi* make clear syntactic contributions. Proximate *-wa* signals that the phrase it attaches to is banned from being in a dependency relation with a higher phrase. Obviative *-yi*, on the other hand, signals that the phrase it attaches to must appear in a dependency relation with a higher phrase. I propose that these syntactic conditions are encoded in the lexical entries for these morphemes, as follows:

- (18) *-wa* = [-DEPENDENT]  
*-yi* = [+DEPENDENT]

#### 4 Syntax/discourse compatibility

In the preceding section I argued that syntactic dependency (or lack thereof) is encoded in the lexical entries for proximate and obviative morphemes in Blackfoot. In this section I consider whether discourse functions are also encoded in the lexical entries for these morphemes.

##### 4.1 Discourse functions of obviation in Blackfoot

Obviation in Blackfoot has a clear syntactic function. However, it also has discourse function(s) associated with it. For instance, Frantz (1966) describes the proximate designation in Blackfoot as encoding the “major character” in a narrative; it focuses the audience’s attention on that character, and by extension the obviative third persons are less prominent or out of focus. Genee (2009) builds on this, claiming that the proximate designation is used for the “grammaticized topic,” and the obviative designation is used for the non-topic. Genee explicitly distinguishes the Algonquianist use of topicality (e.g., aboutness) from the topic-as-old sense, and asserts that Blackfoot’s proximate/obviative contrast cross-cuts the distinction between discourse-old and

discourse-new referents (see also Bliss, 2005b for Blackfoot, and Reinhart, 1981 for a more general discussion).

To see proximate and obviative assignment in action, consider one particular telling of the traditional story *Katoyissa*.<sup>11</sup> The story begins as follows:

- (19) amoksk omahk- Itapii -hki iihpok- aopiimm -yii  
 DEM.PL old- Person -REP ACCOMP- live.TA -DIR  
 -hk -iaawa Mi o- iss -oaawa -yi  
 -REP -3PL DEM 3- sil -3PL -OBV  
 ‘An old couple lived with **their son-in-law (OBVIATIVE)**.’

In this first line, the son-in-law is introduced as obviative, as required by the syntax because the noun is possessed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person possessor. However, this character soon after switches to proximate, presumably to highlight his salient role as the villain in the story.

- (20) lik- oka’p- Itapii -hk ma nina -wa  
 INTENS- bad- Person -REP DEM man -PROX  
 ‘**The man (PROXIMATE)** was a very bad person.’

- (21) Mi omahk- ina -y ot- aawa’komo -ok -ihk -ai  
 DEM old- man -OBV 3 hunt.for.TA -INV -REP PRN  
 iinii  
 buffalo  
 ‘The old man hunted buffalo for **him (PROXIMATE)**...’

- (22) ki maat- Aikaksiiyo -yii -hk -a  
 CONJ NEG- share.TA -dir -REP -PROX  
 mi -iksi omahk- itapi -iksi  
 DEM -PL old- person -PL  
 ‘...but **he (PROXIMATE)** didn’t share with the old couple.’

The story continues with no mention again of the son-in-law. For many lines hereafter, there is no proximate character in the story; all 3<sup>rd</sup> persons are marked obviative. For economy, only the English translation is given for this section:

- (23) *Their youngest daughter prepared a meal for her people. One day the old man found a blood clot (OBVIATIVE) on the prairie. He quickly hid it, brought it home, and told his wife to heat some water and make*

<sup>11</sup> The version of *Katoyissa* presented here is part of a larger collection of narrative texts made available through the *Niitsitapiisini: Our Way of Life* exhibit at the Glenbow Museum. Each story is transcribed in Blackfoot, with English and French translations and an accompanying audio recording. Transcriptions are presented here as in the original texts; the morphological analysis and glossing is my own.

*soup with the blood clot. As the water boiled, they heard a crying baby (OBVIATIVE). They looked at the water and they saw a child (OBVIATIVE) there. He (OBVIATIVE) told them to take him out and hold him up to each pole in the lodge. They did so, and he (OBVIATIVE) grew older. He (OBVIATIVE) became a man.*

At this point in the story, the blood clot *cum* baby *cum* man is named, and it is at point when this character becomes proximate:

- (24) Annayaok                                  Katoyissa  
       *DEM.PROX*                                  *Katoyissa*  
       ‘His name was **Katoyisa. (PROXIMATE)**’

Once named, Katoyissa is established as the hero of the story; the story continues with Katoyissa performing heroic deeds and remaining proximate throughout:

- (25) *The old couple told him (PROXIMATE) how they were abused by their son-in-law, and two of their daughters, who then Katoyissa killed. When he (PROXIMATE) brought the old couple back to safety, Katoyissa travelled throughout our territory. And he (PROXIMATE) saved our people, who were held captive by evil beings. When Katoyissa (PROXIMATE) finished, our people were no longer prevented from travelling around the land.*

In the conclusion to the story, *Ihtsipaitapiiyio’pa*, the Creator, is mentioned, and is marked as proximate as a way to signal the saliency of this referent. But this does not mean that Katoyissa is demoted to obviative; in the final line of the story, Katoyissa is also proximate, as shown below.

- (26) annomao’k    ksaahkoyi    Ihtsipaitapiiyio’p    -a  
       *DEM*                    *land*                    *Creator*                    -*PROX*  
       ihko                -kki                -wa  
       *give*                -*INV*                -*PROX*  
       ‘**The Creator (PROXIMATE)** gave us the land.’
- (27) Katoyisa    anohk    iit-            a-            yo’ka    -a            -ihk  
       *Katoyissa*    *now*        *LOC-*            *IMPF-*        *sleep*        -*PROX*        -*REP*  
       om                -istsi        Katoyiss    -iksi  
       *DEM*                -*PL*                *Katoyissa*    -*PL*  
       ‘**Katoyisa (PROXIMATE) now sleeps at Sweet Pine Hills.**’

The Katoyissa story provides a good illustration of how proximate and obviative morphology can be used for discourse purposes. Referents that function as the main characters in the story (the villainous son-in-law and the heroic Katoyissa) or are held in high esteem (the Creator) are marked proximate, and more

peripheral characters are marked obviative. Importantly, different stories and different storytellers can manipulate obviation in different ways to change the tone or perspective of the story; whichever referent(s) the storyteller wishes to highlight as central characters can be marked proximate.

I propose that this characterization of the discourse functions of obviation in Blackfoot parallels my observations regarding its syntactic functions. Just as obviative 3<sup>rd</sup> persons must be syntactically dependent, they must also be dependent at the discourse level: they refer to peripheral characters whose roles in the story are subsidiary to those of the main characters. Conversely, just as proximate 3<sup>rd</sup> persons cannot be syntactically dependent, they are also not dependent at the discourse level: they are the foundational characters upon which the story is based. This is consistent with Genee's (2009) assertion that proximate marking in Blackfoot is used for topics and obviative marking is used for non-topics. Non-topical material in a sentence is dependent on the topic(s), in the sense that the topic(s) provides the context for interpreting the rest of the sentence (cf. Reinhart, 1981). In short, then, obviatives are dependent on proximates in a discourse. This parallels the syntactic difference between obviative and proximate expressions in Blackfoot: obviative expressions are necessarily dependent (as arguments or subordinate clauses), whereas proximate ones are necessarily not dependent (as clause-external adjuncts or matrix clauses).

## 4.2 Recruitment

I suggest that that the parallelism observed between proximate and obviative suffixes is not a coincidence, but rather reflects compatibility between the two. How does this type of compatibility effect come about? I propose that the compatibility effect reflects a RECRUITMENT process; the proximate and obviative suffixes encode syntactic dependency relations, but they can be recruited to signal discourse dependency relations. Recruitment of functional items for discourse uses is common cross-linguistically. It is widely discussed in the literature on discourse particles, for example in German (Abraham, 1991, 2001; Bayer, 2012; Bayer and Obenauer, 2011; Diewald, 2011; König and Requardt, 1991). Many discourse particles (e.g., English *just*, German *ja*) are polyfunctional, having both syntactic and discourse functions (cf. Thoma, 2016).<sup>12</sup>

If recruitment were responsible for the discourse functions associated with Blackfoot's proximate and obviative suffixes, then there would be no need for the lexical entries of these suffixes to encode their discourse functions. Rather, I propose that the morphemes are specified for their syntactic properties, and by having these properties, the nominal expressions they appear on are compatible with certain discourse functions. This suggests that a proximate nominal

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<sup>12</sup> There is a debate as to whether these items are in fact polyfunctional or distinct (homophonous) lexical items (e.g., Abraham, 2001). I assume the polyfunctional view here.

expression is compatible with a topic function because of its syntactic properties, i.e., because it is syntactically independent. Conversely, an obviative nominal expression is incompatible with a topic function because it is syntactically dependent.<sup>13</sup> In short, the insight is that dependency relations that operate at the sentence level may play a role in determining dependency relations at the discourse level. (See Quinn, 2006 for a similar proposal for Penobscot.) This view differs from that of Genee's (2009), who proposes that when the topic function is to be assigned to a referent, this triggers the appearance of the proximate morpheme *-wa*. Under the recruitment hypothesis, proximate *-wa* appears on a nominal expression (or clause) in the syntax, and by virtue of being proximate, the nominal expression (or clause) is compatible with a topic discourse function.

An advantage of this proposal is that it situates obviation amongst other grammatical features that have a grounding in ontological or "real-world" classifications, but are fundamentally morphosyntactic in nature, as evidenced by mismatches. For example, we saw that Algonquian animacy is a grammatical category only loosely associated with ontological animacy classifications. A given noun (e.g., *po'táa'tsis* "stove") can be coded as grammatically animate in Blackfoot without referring to a real-world animate individual. This same pattern is observed throughout Algonquian, and is in fact rooted in Proto-Algonquian, in which nouns referring to e.g., tobacco, maize, raspberries (but not strawberries), feathers, and snowshoes are classified as animate (cf. Bloomfield, 1946: 94). There has been discussion that perhaps Algonquian animacy is indeed predictable, but from an Indigenous as opposed to Western conceptualization of what constitutes an animate being. Here I follow Dahlstrom (1995), who adopts a moderate stance, under which there are ontological motivations for animacy assignment, but it is nevertheless not entirely predictable (see also Quinn, 2004). The lack of predictability can be observed in the various ways in which Algonquian languages assign animacy to loanwords and derived nouns. For instance, in Anishnaabemowin, deverbal nouns can be animate or inanimate (Valentine, 2001), but in Arapaho, they are strictly inanimate (Cowell and Moss, 2008). Animacy assignment to loanwords in Delaware does not follow a predictable pattern (O'Meara, 1996), but in Cheyenne, loanwords are assigned animate or inanimate gender based on ontological animacy (Strauss and Brightman, 1982). In short, animacy assignment is not entirely predictable; it is a morphosyntactic feature.

The same can be said for number. Blackfoot nouns such as *Siksiká* or *Piikáni* are singular, but refer to groups of individuals, namely the collective membership of the Siksiká or Piikáni nations, respectively. To refer to an individual member of a group, an additional suffix *-ikoan* is required, as in (28).

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<sup>13</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for their inquiry about 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns. These too can be marked proximate or obviative in Blackfoot, and although I have yet to investigate the discourse properties of these pronouns, I hypothesize that they would have the same discourse properties as third person proximate and obviative nominals.



- (28) a. om      -wa      siksiká   -wa  
           DEM   -PROX    siksika   -PROX  
           ‘Siksiká nation’ (refers to the membership as a whole)
- b. om      -wa      siksiká   **-íkoan**   -a  
           DEM   -PROX    siksika   **-member**   -PROX  
           ‘a member of the Siksiká nation’
- c. om      -iksi      siksiká   **-íkoa**      -iksi  
           DEM      -PL      siksika   **-member**      -PL  
           ‘members of the Siksiká nation’

Similarly, a singular form is used to refer to one’s ancestors as a collective group. If this form is pluralized, it refers to multiple groups of ancestors (i.e., different peoples’ ancestors). This is shown below.

- (29) om      -wa      ákaa-      itapii      -wa  
           DEM   -PROX      PERF-      live.AI      -PROX  
           ‘Our ancestors (those who have lived, as a group)’
- (30) om      -iksi      ákaa-      itapii      -iksi  
           DEM   -PL      PERF-      live.AI      -PL  
           ‘Groups of our ancestors’

The existence of these types of mismatches demonstrates that, although grammatical features such as animacy or number can reflect the real-world properties of their referents, these real-world properties are not inherent to the features themselves. The features are morphosyntactic, and the lexical entries for their exponents (the morphemes themselves) reflect their morphosyntactic properties, not their ontological grounding.

I suggest that the same is true for obviation. Obviation is a grammatical feature, which can be used to reflect real-world properties of its referents, i.e., their standing in a discourse, but these real-world discourse properties are not inherent to the feature. Moreover, the same sorts of mismatches between grammatical encoding and real-world properties can be observed with obviation. For example, a noun possessed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person possessor is necessarily obviate, but one could imagine a discourse context in which this noun refers to the discourse topic. One such example was presented in the discussion of the Katoyissa story (see 27); the son-in-law was a topic or main character in the story – a villain – but the noun referring to him was initially marked as obviate because of its syntactic role: it was possessed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person. We could think of the referent of this noun as being ontologically topical (in this context), but morphosyntactically the noun is marked as obviate. In other words, just as

animacy and number are not straightforwardly predictable based on the ontological properties, neither is obviation. This lack of predictability is a hallmark property of a grammatical feature.

In sum, I have proposed that the discourse functions associated with obviation in Blackfoot – namely the tracking of topics (proximate) and non-topics (obviative) – are not inherent to obviation itself. Rather, obviation is fundamentally syntactic. Moreover, because it encodes syntactic dependency relations, it is eligible to be recruited for encoding discourse dependency relations.

## 5 Beyond Blackfoot

I now consider what the Blackfoot facts can tell us about obviation cross-linguistically. I begin with a discussion of the types of discourse functions that have been associated with obviation across Algonquian, and then I point to a common thread: namely the coding of discourse dependency relations.

### 5.1 Variation in discourse functions

There have been numerous studies on the discourse functions of Algonquian obviation systems (e.g., Dahlstrom, 1991, 1996; Genee, 2009; Goddard, 1984, 1990; Hasler, 2002; Mühlbauer, 2008; Russell, 1991, 1996; Thomason, 1995, 2003). A bird’s eye view of these studies reveals that Algonquian obviation does not have a homogeneous function across languages; its discourse properties can vary from language to language and even within languages across different discourse contexts<sup>14</sup>. What all Algonquian languages share, to the best of my knowledge, is a morphologically-encoded contrast between multiple 3<sup>rd</sup> persons, in which a “more salient” 3<sup>rd</sup> person is coded as proximate (which in many systems is morphologically unmarked; see (2) above) and all other 3<sup>rd</sup> persons are coded as obviative. Beyond this, however, the ways in which obviation contrasts are deployed for discourse purposes varies across and sometimes within languages. Importantly, my aim here is not to reconcile the various claims about the discourse uses of Algonquian obviation, or to reduce them to a single unitary function. Rather, I survey a sample of claims about the discourse uses of obviation across Algonquian, and point to a common thread that they all share: obviation is associated with discourse dependency.

The idea that the proximate/obviative contrast reflects an independent/dependent contrast in discourse is reflected in Goddard’s (1990) introduction to obviation in Fox (*aka* Meskwaki); he claims that “...if there is only one third person in a context, it can *only* be proximate. Contrasting with the proximate is the obviative, which can be thought of as a *subsidiary* third person” (p. 318, italics are mine). Thus, in Fox, an obviative third person is only licensed in the context of a proximate. This generalization is re-affirmed by Thomason

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<sup>14</sup> The idea that obviation varies across different narrative genres and/or discourse contexts has been explored by, e.g., Cook and Mühlbauer (2006) and Thomason (1995).

(2003), who also looks at Meskwaki obviation and concludes that "...obviative inflection always implies the presence of a proximate third person" (p. 203).

In a similar vein, Mühlbauer (2008) looks at the various morphological realizations of the obviative designation in Plains Cree, and argues that they all signal some type of referential dependency on proximate third persons. Mühlbauer shows that an obviative third person may be either structurally dependent on a proximate one, or perspectively dependent. Regarding the latter case, Mühlbauer argues that, in Plains Cree, proximate third persons are perspective-holders; they possess a perspective with which they can evaluate the truth of a given proposition. Obviative third persons, in contrast, cannot function as perspective holders, and can only exist by virtue of a perspective holder. Others who have argued that the proximate/obviative contrast is cued to perspectival distinctions include Oshima (2007, for a variety of languages) and Russell (1991, for Swampy Cree).

In addition to (or instead of) encoding point-of-view, obviation has also been argued to encode topicality. (This was observed for Blackfoot in Section 4 above.) The definition of "topic" varies; for some researchers, the topic is the constituent that is discourse-old, i.e., referring to something or someone that is already established in the discourse (e.g., Erteschik-Shir, 2007). For others, "topic" is used in the "aboutness" sense; the topic is what (or who) the sentence (and/or the larger discourse) is about (e.g., Reinhart, 1981). The Algonquianist tradition typically assumes this latter definition of topicality, and many have observed that the proximate designation can be used to signal the topic of the discourse. For example, Goddard (1990) tracks proximate shifts in Fox narratives, i.e., places in the discourse when a discourse referent that was not previously coded as proximate becomes proximate, and he claims that proximate shifts correspond with shifts in narrative focus. In other words, the proximate designation focuses the narrative on a particular character, or the "hero of the discourse" (cf. Goddard, 1984). Russell (1996) makes a similar claim for Swampy Cree; he analogizes a narrative to a camera, and argues that the proximate designation corresponds with "what the camera is pointed at" (p. 378).

Some researchers have noted the confluence of both point-of-view and topicality in determining the proximate and obviative designations. For example, Bloomfield (1962: 38) notes that "...the proximate third person represents the topic of discourse, the person nearest the speaker's point of view, or the person earlier spoken of and already known." Dahlstrom (1991, 1996) makes similar claims for Plains Cree and Fox, arguing that the proximate designation can evoke audience empathy or focus the audience's attention on a central character. Hasler (2002) and Thomason (2003) track proximate and obviative assignment across large stretches of discourse in Innu-aimun and Meskwaki respectively, and identify numerous different discourse determinants.

Common amongst the range of discourse functions associated with obviation across and within Algonquian languages is the idea that the proximate third persons are independent within the discourse, and obviative third persons are discourse-dependent. In at least some languages, obviatives are only licensed



topicality, whereas in others it is cued to perspectival notions. These two types of systems may encode different types of syntactic dependencies, and in comparing Blackfoot (which is cued to topic) and Plains Cree (which is cued to perspective), this appears to be the case. Whereas in Blackfoot, proximate marking can index referents that are clearly not perspective holders (e.g., inanimate referents or clauses), in Plains Cree proximate nominal expressions are necessarily perspective-holders (cf. Mühlbauer, 2008).

Moreover, it is conceivable that a range of different syntactic functions could be compatible with a single discourse function. In Blackfoot, the syntactic contrast that characterizes obviation determines whether a nominal expression can appear inside a clause (obviative) or not (proximate). However, in Passamaquoddy, obviation also encodes syntactic dependency, but in a different way. Bruening (2001, 2009) analogizes proximate marking to nominative case and obviative to accusative case. Under a dependent case model of the nominative/accusative opposition (e.g., Marantz, 1991, McFadden, 2004), accusative case is licensed in the presence of nominative case; it is dependent. As such, Passamaquoddy's obviation system encodes syntactic dependency just like Blackfoot, but in a different way.

To give another example, Quinn (2006) argues that obviation in Penobscot encodes a morphosyntactic dependency, arguing that the relationship of a proximate noun to an obviative noun is parallel of that a speaker to an addressee, or a speech act participant (SAP) to a non-SAP. All three of these relations he characterizes as “core-periphery relations,” with the peripheral members standing in a relative dependency relation to the core members. In other words, obviative nouns are peripheral to, or dependent on, proximates, in the sense that they rely on proximates for their definition and existence. Similarly, an addressee is defined by virtue of a speaker, and a non-SAP is defined by the presence of a SAP. These types of dependencies don't operate at the clausal level, as do those in Blackfoot or Passamaquoddy, but at the abstract level of the organization of grammar.<sup>16</sup> Both are fundamentally syntactic.

In sum, I have proposed that discourse functions associated with Algonquian obviation may arise via recruitment of functional items and that only functional items that are compatible with a discourse function can be recruited. I suggest that this model may allow us to make certain predictions regarding the syntax of obviation in Algonquian. The prediction is not that the syntax of obviation will be invariant across Algonquian, but rather that in the other Algonquian languages, the proximate/obviative contrast will encode a syntactic in/dependence contrast of some sort. This prediction seems to be borne out for Passamaquoddy and Penobscot; how it extends to the rest of Algonquian remains to be seen.

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<sup>16</sup> Rhodes (1976: 199) makes a similar claim for Ojibwa (*aka* Anishnaabemowin), stating that obviatives are “syntactically derived from” proximates.

## 6 Conclusions

In this paper, I have proposed a resolution to the tension between syntactic and discourse-based approaches to Algonquian obviation by examining in detail the properties of obviation Blackfoot. I demonstrated that obviation in Blackfoot is crucially syntactic: it is used to distinguish between nominal expressions and clauses that cannot be syntactically dependent (proximate) from those that must be (obviative). Furthermore, I have shown that that these syntactic dependency relations are paralleled in discourse. Just as proximate expressions are necessarily independent in syntax, they are also necessarily independent in discourse, referring to the foundational character(s). Conversely, just as obviative expressions are necessarily dependent in syntax, they are also necessarily dependent in discourse, referring to peripheral characters. I have argued that these discourse properties needn't be encoded directly in the lexical entries of proximate and obviative morphemes, but rather that their discourse properties arise because of their syntax.

Although Blackfoot is often considered the “black sheep” of the Algonquian language family, having separated from Proto-Algonquian earlier than its kin (cf. Goddard, 2015), its obviation system can inform our understanding of obviation across the family. Because Blackfoot obviation exhibits such a clear parallelism between syntax and discourse, the prediction is that this parallelism will manifest in other languages as well. Obviation across Algonquian is associated with the encoding of discourse dependency relations, and I propose that underlyingly, it encodes syntactic dependency relations as well. This may vary from language to language, but points of similarity to focus on include syntactic constraints that all languages share and that are not explained under a discourse-based model, such as the requirement that nouns possessed by a 3<sup>rd</sup> person be obviative.

In short, obviation is a morphological device for marking dependency relations. This observation de-exoticizes obviation, as the coding of dependencies is a fundamental property of natural languages. Moreover, it makes sense that Algonquian languages, which are richly polysynthetic and characterized by free word order and extensive null anaphora, would have dedicated markers of dependency relations, as these often obscured by their typological profile.

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