

# Obviation in Tsotsil

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## Language focus:

- ▶ Tsotsil (Western Mayan  $\gg$  Tzeltalan)
- ▶ Similar patterns found in Tzeltal and possibly Tojolab'al and Ch'ol

## Outline:

- ▶ recoverability problem in 3–3 clauses
- ▶ role of voice in resolving this problem
- ▶ what this has to do with obviation



- ▶ VOS order

- (1) *Isk'opon Petul li Xun=e.*  
spoke.to(3-3) Pedro DET Juan  
'Juan spoke to Pedro.'

- ▶ No case marking on S or O (=e is not a case marker).

- ▶ Agreement distinguishes S and O when one or both is 1st/2nd person

- (2) *I-ø-j-k'opon li Petul=e.*  
CP-B3-A1-speak.to DET Pedro  
'I spoke to Pedro.'

- (3) *L-i-s-k'opon li Petul=e.*  
CP-B1-A3-speak.to DET Pedro  
'Pedro spoke to me.'

- ▶ There is a problem in 3–3 clauses if only one NP is pronounced:

(4) *I-ø-s-k'ophon*        *li*    *Petul=e*.  
CP-B3-A3-spoke.to DET Pedro

'S/he spoke to Pedro.' OR 'Pedro spoke to him/her.' [Tsotsil, based on Haviland 1981, p. 254]

- ▶ There is a fundamental difference between transitive 3–3 clauses and other transitive clauses with respect to recoverability.
- ▶ To address this, Tsotsil observes the following basic principle:

*In a transitive clause with two 3rd person arguments, the more prominent 3rd person is interpreted as S (agent) and the less prominent as O (patient).*

- ▶ Prominence is assessed along two dimensions
  - ▶ Animacy: Human  $\gg$  Non-human
  - ▶ Topicality: Topic  $\gg$  Non-topic
- ▶ The typical association of humans and topics with S is well-known cross-linguistically. In Tsotsil, the association is more than a bias, it is required.

- ▶ *In a transitive clause with two 3rd person arguments, the more prominent 3rd person is interpreted as S (agent) and the less prominent as O (patient).*
- ▶ **Human** ≫ non-human

Active transitive	S	O
✓	HUMAN	NON-HUMAN (default)
*	NONHUMAN	HUMAN (marked)

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- (5) a. I-s-man pox li Xun=e. ACTIVE 3-3  
 'Juan bought medicine.'
- b. \* I-x-poxta Xun li poxe. ACTIVE 3-3  
 Intended: 'The medicine treated/cured Juan.'
- c. I-poxta-at ta pox li Xun=e. PASSIVE  
 'Juan was treated with/cured by (the) medicine.'

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BUT: the marked configuration is fine in active voice as long as the human O is 1st or 2nd person!

- d. L-i-x-poxta li poxe. ACTIVE 3-1  
 'The medicine cured me.'
- e. Mi I-a-x-poxta li poxe? ACTIVE 3-2  
 'Did the medicine cure you?'

- ▶ *In a transitive clause with two 3rd person arguments, the more prominent 3rd person is interpreted as S (agent) and the less prominent as O (patient).*
- ▶ **Topic**  $\gg$  **Non-topic**

Topic: the individual we're talking about, the individual in the spotlight.

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- (6) *I-ø-s-k'ophon li Petul=e.*

CP-B3-A3-spoke DET Pedro

'He spoke to Pedro' or 'Pedro spoke to him' ?

ACTIVE (3-3)

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 'He spoke to Pedro' or 'Pedro spoke to him' ?

- (7)
- a. *A li Xun=e, ilok' ta sna ja' o i-s-k'opon li Petul=e.* ACTIVE (3-3)  
 TOP Juan left home 'then he<sub>TOP</sub> (Juan) spoke to Pedro'  
 not: 'then Pedro spoke to him<sub>TOP</sub> (Juan)'.
- b. ..... ja' o ik'oponat yu'un li Petul=e. PASSIVE  
 'then he<sub>TOP</sub> (Juan) was spoken to by Pedro'

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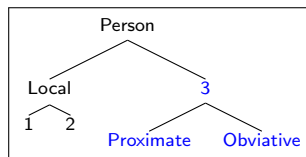
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 not: 'then Pedro spoke to him<sub>TOP</sub> (Juan)'.
- b. ..... *ja' o ik'oponat yu'un li Petul=e.* PASSIVE  
 'then he<sub>TOP</sub> (Juan) was spoken to by Pedro'
- c. ..... *ja' o i-j-k'opon.* ACTIVE (1-3)  
 'and then I spoke to him<sub>TOP</sub> (Juan)'

- ▶ Voice in Tsotsil is sensitive to relative topicality and animacy of agent and patient *but only when both are 3rd person*.
- ▶ In fact, numerous languages have morphosyntax which is sensitive to the relative topicality and animacy of agent and patient *but only when both are 3rd person*.
- ▶ This has been described in terms of 'obviation', best known from the Algonquian languages.



(8) Kutenai obviation suffix, found only in 3–3 contexts

a. *Maʔi wu·kat-i nuʔkiy-s.*

Mary see-IND rock-OBV

'Mary (prox) saw a rock (obv).'

b. *Hu wu·kat-i nuʔkiy-□.*

1 see-IND rock

'I saw a rock.'

Dryer 1991

'Direct' verb	Agent	Patient	
✓	PROXIMATE	OBVIATIVE	<i>default</i>
*	OBVIATIVE	PROXIMATE	<i>marked</i>

Table: Obviation and voice in Kutenai

- (9) *wu·kat-i paʔkiy-s titqat'.*  
 see-IND woman-OBV man  
 'The man (prox) saw the woman (obv).'

Dryer 1991

If the *patient* is proximate, the 'inverse' verb is required:

- (10) *wu·kat-aps-i titqat'-s paʔkiy.*  
 see-INVERSE-IND man-OBV woman  
 'The man (obv) saw the woman (prox).'
- ~ 'The woman (prox) was seen by the man (obv).'

Dryer 1991

- ▶ Obviation provides a single dimension which ranks 3rd persons. It generalizes over the various dimensions which determine prominence (topicality, animacy) and it mediates between that prominence and clause structure.
- ▶ Obviation rank is expressed in different ways in different languages.
  - ▶ suffix on obviative NP (Kutenai, Algonquian lgs)
  - ▶ verb agreement with the proximate (Takelma) or the obviative (Kutenai, Algonquian lgs)
  - ▶ voice alternations conditioned by obviation (Kutenai, Algonquian,

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  - ▶ voice alternations conditioned by obviation (Kutenai, Algonquian, Tsotsil)
- ▶ Although Tsotsil does not have morphology which marks proximate or obviative NPs, it behaves like languages with do.
- ▶ If Tsotsil ranks 3rd person on the obviation dimension, we can reduce the 'basic principle' to:

Active transitive	S	O
*	OBVIATIVE	PROXIMATE (marked)

- ▶ This generalizes over the various sources of prominence in Tsotsil which restrict transitive voice in Tsotsil and limits those restrictions to contexts with multiple 3rd persons.
- ▶ It relates the effects found in Tsotsil to those found in languages with richer obviation morphology.



- ▶ Topicality and voice
  - ▶ Givón, T. 1994. *The pragmatics of de-transitive voice*. Voice and inversion, ed. T. Givón. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 3-44.
  - ▶ Haviland, J. 1981. Sk'op sotz'leb: El tsotsil de San Lorenzo Zinacantán. Mexico City: UNAM. 357-361. [Notes on voice and topicality in Tsotsil.]
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  - ▶ Dryer, M. 1991. *Subject and inverse in Kutenai*. Papers from the American Indian Languages Conference, UC Santa Cruz, 1991.
  - ▶ Dryer, M. 1992. *A comparison of the obviation systems of Kutenai and Algonquian*, Papers of the Twenth-Third Algonquian Conference, ed. William Cowan. Ottawa: Carleton University.
- ▶ Obviation in Tsotsil
  - ▶ Aissen, J. 1997. *On the syntax of obviation*. Language 73(4).
  - ▶ Aissen, J. 1999. *Inverse and agent focus in Tsotsil*. Language 75(3).
- ▶ Typology of obviation
  - ▶ Zavala, R. 2007. *Inversion and obviation in Mesoamerica*. In *Endangered Languages*, ed. P. Austin and A. Simpson. Linguistische Berichte Sonderheft 14. 267-305.
- ▶ Formal approach to obviation within Minimalism
  - ▶ Work in progress by Justin Royer and Amy Rose Deal