CHOCTAW CASES

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Choctaw is a Muskogean language spoken by some three thousand persons in Mississippi (where I worked in 1972-73) and by a larger group in eastern Oklahoma. One of its chief interests for theory is the coexistence of two quite distinct systems of case categories, one similar to Fillmorean 'semantic' cases and the other partly similar to English-type nominative/accusative systems. I will refer to the two systems as 'bound' and 'free', respectively.

The bound system applies to pronominal affixes in the verb. There are three distinct case-specified series: agentive (A), patientive (P), and dative (D). An intransitive verb may have any one of the three; a transitive verb may have any pair of them (A-P, P-D, A-D); a doubly-transitive verb has all three.

A is used for the TS (transitive subject) of most transitive (and doubly-transitive) verbs, such as -pisa- 'to see' and -abi- 'to kill'. It is also used for the IS (intransitive subject) of intransitive verbs describing active or voluntary activity, including motion verbs like -iya- 'to go' and stance verbs like -hiki:ya- 'to stand', as well as a few others like -illi- 'to die'.

P is used for the TO (transitive object) of most transitive (and doubly-transitive) verbs such as those mentioned above. It is also used with the IS of most inactive or involuntary intransitives, particularly statives (including the translation equivalents of many English adjectives) such as -abi:ka- 'to be sick' and -ačokma- 'to be good'. It is also used for the 'experiencer' of intransitive or transitive verbs of emotional state and the like, e.g. -nokšo:pa- 'to be afraid (intr.); to be afraid of (tr.)'.

D is used chiefly for indirect (including benefactive) object. It is also used for the TO of transitive verbs of emotional state like -nokšo:pa- 'to be afraid of'. A tiny handful of statives intransitives which might have been expected to take IS in P case instead put them in D case. The stem -ačokma-, which with P means 'to be good', means 'to feel good' with D IS. Other intransitives taking D (never P) include stems meaning 'to be lazy' and 'to be clever or capable'.

The categories IS, TS, and TO are used here only for convenience and do not necessarily correspond to valid categories in this language.

Examples are given in (1) of the various types of intransitive (1a-c), transitive (1d-f), and doubly-transitive (1g) clause types.

1. a. **iš-iya-h** 'You are going'
   2SgA-go-Pres
   b. **si-(y)abi:ka-h** 'I am sick'
   1SgP-be sick-Pres
   c. **im-ačokma-h** 'He feels good'
   3D-feel good-Pres

d. čʸi-pɨ:sa-li-h 'I see you'
2SgP-see-1SgA-Pres

e. čʸɨ:-hikɨ:ya-li-h 'I am waiting ("standing") for you'
2SgD-stand-1SgA-Pres

f. ɨ:-sa-nokšʸo:pa-h 'I am afraid of him'
3D-1SgP-be afraid-Pres

g. im-Ø-ano:li-li-h 'I am telling it(P) to him(D)'
3D-3P-tell-1SgA-Pres

The principal allomorphs of the 1Sg, 2Sg, and 3 (not differentiated for number) are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

	A	D	P
1Sg	-li	am- ɨ:- -sam- -sɨ:-	sa- si-
2Sg	iš- is-	čʸim- čʸɨ:-	čʸi-
3	Ø-	im- ɨ:-	Ø-

All nonzero affixes are prefixed, except for the 1SgA suffix -li. The allomorphs shown are phonologically conditioned. Note that 3A and 3P (both zero) are not distinguished. Another interesting neutralization (not shown in the table) is that expected 2SgP/1SgD *čʸi-sam- (*čʸi-sɨ:-) turns up instead as is-sam- (is-sɨ:-), as in is-sɨ:-nokšʸo:pa-h 'You are afraid of me'. Here the 2Sg prefix is formally A rather than P. One could attempt to account for this as some kind of transformational rearrangement (cf. Silverstein 1976), but the motivation for the shift may be ultimately phonological (the 1SgD forms are normally preceded either by a word-boundary or by a morpheme ending in a consonant--not a vowel--, such as negative ik-, and using is- rather than čʸi- preserves this distributional pattern).

The order of prefixes (this excludes 1SgA -li) is A-D-P, though of course we cannot really locate the Ø- prefixes.

All examples in (1) can function as complete sentences without independent nominal or pronominal adjuncts.

Looking at the verb complex (verb plus preverbs) as a whole, we can say that the bound case system includes some marking of five (rather than just three) categories. Instrumental relationships are expressed by means of a preverb išt or išʸit, which is actually a specialized gerundial (subordinated) form of -iši- 'to take, to pick

up' (i.e. 'Taking a stick, he hit her' now meaning 'He hit her with a stick', now best taken formally as a single clause). Pronominal specification of the instrumental referent is taken care of by P pronominal prefix before ist (e.g., 1Sg sa-st), but since this is normally 3P Ø- it usually looks as though there is no pronominal specification.

There is also a locative prefix -a:- (-ya:-) in the verb itself, indicating that some (overt or covert) nominal referent in the clause is semantically locative. There is no pronominal specification within the verb, and there are some complications in the use of this prefix which we will not go into here.

Minimal sentences like those in (1) can, of course, be expanded by adding independent nouns or pronouns (though such pronouns are normally used only for emphasis). In this event the verb complex retains its pronominal elements, which thus have a cross-referencing role with respect to the independent adjuncts. Since nominal and pronominal adjuncts are marked for case, one would expect that the categories of the bound case system (A/P/D/instrumental/locative) would also be expressed in the free case system associated with independent adjuncts.

This is not the case, however. Instead of a simple 'agreement' rule, the relationship between the two case systems is problematic. Instead of a sizeable number of more-or-less semantic categories, the free case system basically has a single binary opposition between subject and oblique. These categories are marked by suffixes added to the substantive (noun or pronoun) or to an immediately following postposition. The subject endings are -t and -s, the oblique ending is /-n/ (often realized phonetically as nasalization of the preceding vowel). The oblique ending is optionally omitted in many instances, while the subject ending cannot be omitted. The subject/oblique opposition is cross-cut by what can be described very roughly as a definite/indefinite opposition, but although there are some tendencies for the latter categories to align themselves with case (e.g., semantically instrumental NP's are often in the 'indefinite' form) they are only marginally and unreliably involved in expressing case categories.

Basically, one NP in the clause is chosen as subject, while all other NP's become oblique. (We will see below that there is one clause-type with two subjects.) Therefore the sole NP of an intransitive clause automatically becomes subject, whether it is cross-referenced in the verb by an A, P, or D pronominal. For example, if the subjects in the clauses (1a-c) are replaced by hattak 'man', we get hattak+at Ø-iya-h 'The man goes', hattak+at Ø-abi:ka-h 'The man is sick', and hattak+at im-ačokma-h 'The man is feeling good', all with subject-marking at attached to hattak.

In transitive and doubly-transitive clauses the rule determining which NP is subject is more interesting since a choice has to be made between two or three candidates. The rule is that if an A NP (i.e. a NP whose cross-referencing pronominal in the verb complex is in the A series) is present, it becomes the subject and other NP's become oblique; if no A NP is present but a P NP does occur,

the latter becomes subject (in preference to a D NP if one of these is also present). Therefore a D NP can become subject only in the uncommon D intransitive type (1c), while lower-ranking categories (instrumental, locative) can never become subject. In (1d-g), then, the subject is always the 1Sg element, because it is A (the highest-ranking case) in (1d-e) and (1g), and because in (1f) it is P and thus outranks the D NP (there is no A NP in that example).

Suppose, therefore, we replace the NP's in these examples with hattak 'man' and oho:yoh 'woman'. This substitution produces the following sentences:

2. a. hattak+at oho:yoh(+ę:) Ø-Ø-pisa-h 'Man sees woman'
   man+Subj woman(+Obl) 3A-3P-see-Pres

   b. hattak+at oho:yoh(+ę:) Ø-į:-hikį:ya-h 'Man waits for woman'
   3A-3D-stand-Pres

   c. hattak+at oho:yoh(+ę:) į:-Ø-nokšo:pa-h 'Man is afraid of woman'
   3D-3P-be afraid-Pres

   d. hattak+at oho:yoh(+ę:) Ø-im-Ø-ano:li-h 'Man tells it to woman'
   3A-3D-3P-tell-Pres

Note that hattak, corresponding to 1Sg in (1d-g), always takes subject case-marking, while oho:yoh takes oblique case-marking (which, as noted above, may be omitted). In doubly-transitive (2d), if an independent NP (e.g., 'story' or 'words') is added, corresponding to the P pronominal in the verb, it too goes into the oblique category in the free case system. NP's corresponding to instrumental or locative elements in the verb, or not cross-referenced in the verb complex at all, likewise go into oblique case.

There are no productive passivization rules or the like which would affect free case-marking, though there are the usual intransitive/transitive (mediopassive/causative) derivational doublets for verbs meaning 'to be broken/to break (tr.)' and the like.

It is possible to derive the free case-system's categories from those of the bound system by a simple rule based on an ordered ranking (hierarchy) of the latter, as follows:

3. Main Subject-Selection Rule.
   Given a descending rank-order A > P > D > others, the highest-ranking NP in a clause is marked as subject.

Observe that it would be much more difficult to derive the bound system from the free system. This could only be done by ad hoc devices such as loading each verb with 'lexical features' and then deriving the three (or five) categories of the bound system from the two categories in the free system plus the lexical features in the verb (even at that, there would be technical problems whenever more than one oblique NP was present). If we

insist on taking one of the two systems as logically and structurally primary, there is little doubt that the bound system should be preferred to the free system; this also conforms to the evident fact that the categories of the bound system are closer to semantics than are those of the free system. Of course, there will always be linguists anxious to preserve the universal validity of the 'subject' category in deep structure, and I am sure that they will indulge in any ad hoc devices necessary to show that the subject/oblique free system in Choctaw is somehow deeper than the semantically-based bound system.

We are not quite finished with the subject-selection rules, however. Rule (3), along with a residual rule that all non-subject independent substantives are oblique, works fine for nearly all sentence types, but there is one special type (possessive predications) which require, in addition, a second subject-selection rule.

In the simple type (2b) we find two NP's, one A and the other D (here perhaps benefactive in function). By rule (3), the A NP becomes subject.

Possessive predications (translatable 'X has Y'), which are quite distinct from predicate-genitive constructions ('Y is X's'), are superficially similar in structure to (2b). These predications are formally elaborated versions of existential sentences, which involve a stance verb ('sit, stand, be right-side-up, etc') since there is no purely existential verb. Thus to say 'There is a car' (existential, not locational) we have to use the intransitive type (4):

4. ka:h+at Ø-hikį:ya-h 'There is a car'
   car+Subj 3A-stand-Pres

Focussing exclusively on the verb complex for the moment, to convert this into a possessive predication ('X has a car') we simply add the appropriate D pronominal; thus with 1Sg possessor we get (5):

5. Ø-ę:-hikį:ya-h 'I have it (car)'
   3A-1SgD-stand-Pres

Literally, this is 'It (car) stands for me', and the structure seems to be indistinguishable from the simple A-D transitive type exemplified by (1e) and (2b). However, the possessive predication type (5) differs from the simple A-D type in the case-marking of independent NP's. Consider (6a-b).

6. a. ka:h+at Ø-į:-hikį:ya-h 'He has a car'
      car+Subj 3A-3D-stand-Pres

   b. hattak+at Ø-į:-hikį:ya-h 'Man has it (car)'
      man+Subj 3A-3D-stand-Pres

In (6a), the A NP ('car') is marked as subject, as expected in

the light of rule 3. However, (6b) shows a D NP ('man') marked as subject, although there is a (higher-ranking) A NP present in the same clause.

On the basis of the data presented so far, some readers might assume that 'man' in (6b) becomes surface subject only because the (higher-ranking) A NP is not realized as an independent NP. In other words, it might be thought that the rule is that only one overt NP is marked as subject, so that if the highest-ranking NP is realized only as a pronominal affix it is possible for the next-highest NP (if realized as an independent NP) to get subject-marking. However, this is not the case, and if hattak+at is omitted in any of the examples of (2) the other NP, oho:yoh(+a:), remains in its usual oblique form. The mere surface omission of the subject NP does not permit another NP to acquire subject-marking (or the syntactic functions of subject, cf. below). So we need a special rule, applicable only to possessive predications like (6b), permitting the D NP (the possessor) to function as subject.

The most interesting case of all is seen when both the A (possessed) and D (possessor) NP's are realized as independent NP's in the possessive predication type. My informants appeared uncomfortable with such constructions, and two outputs appeared:

7. a. hattak+at ka:h+at Ø-i:-hiki:ya-h 'Man has car'
   man+Subj car+Subj 3A-3D-stand-Pres

   b. hattak+at ka:h Ø-i:-hiki:ya-h 'Man has car'
   car

In (7a), both NP's are marked as subject; this is the only sentence type which permits this. In (7b) the only difference is that the A NP ('car') has lost its surface case-marking. It would appear that in (7) the D NP ('man') is the primary subject, since it never loses its case-marking while the A NP can lose its, and since it always appears in left-most position, which is regularly reserved for the subject (cf. 2).

It is interesting to speculate whether ka:h in (7b) is a surface oblique NP (recall that an oblique case-marker can be omitted, while a subject case-marker cannot). However, this does not seem to be an appropriate analysis, mainly because ka:h cannot take an overt oblique case-marker, while other oblique NP's always have this option. The loss of case-marking for ka:h in (7b) probably just reflects the fact that speakers are uncomfortable with two overt subject NP's. The type (7a) seems to occur chiefly when there is a slight pause after the first NP (here hattak+at); this gives the following NP (ka:h+at) at least a bit of breathing space.

What I find particularly interesting about the Choctaw data is that they appear to show direct manifestations of what might be referred to as two different 'levels' of case-marking--one of them fairly close to semantics in the Fillmorean sense, another closer

to the surface and derived from the former by simple rules. Just as the basic subject/oblique system is derived from the bound system by rule (3) (which closely matches a hierarchical rule posited on purely abstract grounds by Fillmore for English), the special case-marking features of possessive predications such as (6-7) can be accounted for by a rule converting a special kind of D NP into surface subject, paralleling analyses of 'to have' predications in languages like English which have been put forth by many linguists (especially generative semanticists). This rule can be formulated as (8), which can then be followed by a minor rule (9) to differentiate (7b) from (7a), and finally the residual rule (10) marking all nonsubject NP's as oblique.

8. Possessive Subject-Selection Rule.
   In a possessive predication of the type 'X has Y' (literally 'Y sits/stands/... for X'), the D NP ('X') is marked as subject and is positioned to the left of the other NP ('Y').

9. Subject-Marker Deletion Rule.
   In a possessive predication affected by rule (8), if both the A and D NP's are realized as independent NP's (both marked as subject after rules 3 and 8), the A NP ('Y') optionally loses its subject-marker.

10. Oblique Case Rule.
    Any NP which is not marked as subject is optionally marked with an oblique ending.

In order to prevent (10) from applying to ka:h in (7b), we can either slightly complicate the formulation of (10), or else simply order (10) before (9).

Thus in Choctaw two 'levels' of case-marking seem to stare us in the face on the surface, whereas for most other languages we have only one overt system of case-marking, so that any deeper levels can only be discerned by indirect or abstract arguments. Linguists who have not accepted the validity of Fillmorean (or other) levels of case-marking, or who relegate them to the semantic interpretation component, have tended to argue (and not without justification) that the direct evidence for such levels is weak or nonexistent. Here, however, we have a situation where both levels occur quite overtly, and where it seems quite clear that the more-or-less Fillmorean (bound) system is logically primary and the free system derived from it.

In a sense, Choctaw permits (indeed requires) us to analytically isolate two phenomena which in many languages (such as English) are interwoven. In English, many of the minor case categories (by 'case' I here include categories indicated by prepositions, etc.) have a fairly clear semantic basis--e.g., allative, dative, even accusative (though I do not insist that any of these is truly unitary). On the other hand, there is one category (subject) which is obligatory, so that each clause (disregarding, perhaps, a few minor exceptions) has exactly one such NP. Such an obligatory, one-per-clause category cannot possibly even approach being semantically unitary.

I would argue that this lack of semantic uniformity is to be expected rather than wondered at. For the minor case categories in a language like English, the grammatical oppositions seem to have been fashioned over time mainly by a single structural principle: the necessity of connecting particular NP's (i.e., in general the real-world referents which they indicate) to specific semantic role functions in the situation being predicated. In the complex of structural factors which have combined to create (and maintain) the English subject case, this factor is only one element. Other easily identifiable factors are a) markedness principles, and b) correlations with syntactic functioning.

The basic markedness principle I have in mind is that languages tend to neutralize superfluous oppositions (by 'superfluous' I mean, for example, a semantically significant opposition whose opposed members occur in different syntactic contexts and are thus unlikely to be confused when their overt marking is neutralized). This, more than anything else, explains why most languages fail to distinguish different kinds of intransitive subjects (Choctaw is one of the few that differentiates agentive, patientive, and dative types, and even Choctaw merges these categories in its free system), and why the single category thus formed is also usually conflated with either the TS category (nominative-accusative languages) or the TO category (ergative-absolutive languages) in transitive clauses. Thus it is quite possible for languages to make maximal use of a broad, obligatory nominal category (subject or nominative in English, absolutive in ergative languages like Basque). As long as there is an explicit criterion for selecting just one NP per clause to go into the broad obligatory category (e.g., a hierarchical rule like 3), the language can satisfy the need for unambiguous linking of referents to role functions and simultaneously avoid unnecessary use of highly marked (semantically unitary) case categories.

Secondly, in at least some languages it appears that the complex syntax joining clauses into strings of conjoined and/or subordinated clauses is based so heavily on a syntactic category coinciding with (English-type) subject that there is pressure on the morphology to explicitly mark the subject category. This concept should not be overworked, especially when we notice that we can have morphologically ergative languages like Basque sharing the same basic syntax with morphologically accusative languages like Spanish and French. In these languages, as in English, the 'subject-orientation' of the syntax is moderately weak; although these languages have some rules (such as EQUI in one form or another, rules for using the subjunctive, etc.) which involve a subject-like syntactic category, these rules cannot be said to genuinely dominate discourse structure, and it is therefore not enormously surprising to find variation in the morphological case systems. However, in a few languages the syntactic 'subject-orientation' is indeed pervasive--one of these is Choctaw.

Discourse in this language is generally organized into strings of formally subordinated clauses terminated by a single main clause; there are several types of subordination (conjunction, temporal sequencing, protasis of conditional clauses, etc.), but all share one

crucial feature: the subordinated verb in clause S_n in the chain is specified as having same (Sa) or different (Di) subject with respect to the next clause S_{n+1} or some later clause of reference.[2]

The final matrix clause must have full pronominal specification in its verb, but a subordinated Sa clause may omit such pronominal (and other) specification for its subject; the speaker then relies on the Sa marker to enable the addressee to deduce the reference of the clause's subject (by linking it to that of another clause).

The Choctaw pronominal system is weak in distinctions (the sole third person category shows neither gender nor number, though there is some--unreliable--expression of number by indirect means such as stem-suppletion for some verbs).

Because the pronominal system is weakly developed (the single third person category lacks number and gender marking, though there is limited indication of number by some indirect means such as stem-suppletion for some verbs), Choctaw relies heavily on the Sa/Di opposition to maintain referential clarity. Consider (11).

11. a. (Ø-)Ø-pi:sa-ča: , Ø-iya-h 'He$_i$ sees him$_j$, and he$_i$ goes'

(3A-)3P-see-Sa 3A-go-Pres

b. Ø-Ø-pi:sa-na: , Ø-iya-h 'He$_i$ sees him$_j$, and he$_{j/k}$ goes'

3A-3P-see-Di ?? 3A-go-Pres

First we compute the subjects in each clause. By rule (3) the subject of the first clause is 3A (He$_i$) in both examples, and the sole NP (also 3A) in the second clause is its subject. The Sa marker in (11a) shows that 3A is coreferential to 3A; the Di marker in (11b) provides the negative information that 3A is not coreferential to the other 3A. We suspect, but are not certain (without further contextualization), that 3A in the second clause is probably coreferential to 3P in the first clause of (11b).

In my judgement, the fact that such subordination (and hence the syntactic category 'subject') is so pervasive in Choctaw discourse is an important factor in explaining why the language has a subject/oblique system (the free system)--the morphology has (partially) aligned itself with the prevailing syntactic categorization. Of course, the subject/oblique system also has the other (more direct) function of helping to link particular independent substantives with particular pronominal affixes in the verb complex (and hence with semantic role functions), though it is not exactly ideally designed for this function. So far as I can see, simple markedness factors seem not to have played much of a role in Choctaw, except perhaps in neutralizing all non-subject NP's into oblique case, and perhaps assisting the neutralization (as subject) of possessed and possessor NP's (normally nonhuman and human, respectively, hence rarely confusable) in predications of possession.

What can we learn from this discussion? The main point I want to make is that there are several kinds of functional and structural factors involved in the historical evolution of case systems. The beauty of Choctaw is that it has two distinct systems, each carrying

out its own particular functions and designed accordingly, so that by looking at Choctaw we can make analytical distinctions which are more difficult to make in studying English, for example.

By developing a dynamic theory of case systems, recognizing the richness and diversity of the functional and structural factors which shape them, perhaps we can achieve a more satisfactory understanding of what lies behind the existence in a given language of a category like 'subject' or 'accusative'. Syntactic theories which simply take 'subject' and the like as givens which thus do not require explanation are doomed to sterility. Even Fillmore's valiant efforts to probe deeper can be criticized for merely shifting the point of departure from surface categories like 'subject' to somewhat more semantically based ones whose existence is taken for granted (it is doubtful that any system assuming the existence of a fixed set of discrete, universal semantic categories can stand up to close scrutiny).

Even if two languages share a category like 'subject' it does not automatically follow that it occurs in both languages for the same reasons. In Choctaw, I suspect that the principal motivation for this category is aligning the morphology with the syntax, which needs a corresponding category (obligatory, one-per-clause) to make the Sa/Di system work with maximal efficiency. If some clauses lacked a syntactic subject, they would be unable to participate in the Sa/Di system; if many clause types had more than one subject the Sa/Di markers would frequently be ambiguous. (Indeed, possessive predications can create ambiguities, but because possessors are normally human and possessed NP's inanimate there is unlikely to be much referential confusion.) In another language, markedness principles might be chiefly responsible.

footnotes:

[1]It is a pleasure to contribute to a volume dedicated (in part) to Mary Haas, whose work on Muskogean linguistics has greatly benefited others working on this group. My fieldwork in Mississippi was supported by the American Philosophical Society in 1972-73. My principal informant was Nick Bell of Pearl River.

[2]In possessive predications it appears that either of the two NP's can function as subject in the operation of the Sa/Di system, but this matter could not be cleared up by direct elicitation and my limited textual corpus is insufficient to shed light on all the nuances.

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