

CHOCTAW 'ARTICLES' IN DISCOURSE

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0. Introduction

This paper is a preliminary report on the so-called 'article' system in Choctaw¹. Byington, the nineteenth century missionary-student of the language wrote that the articles are the most 'difficult' part of Choctaw grammar, and that they are used 'for definite and distinctive specification, limitation, emphasis, and prominence, and to show the connection and relation which one word, paragraph or clause bears to another'. In spite of the modesty of his apologies for his attempt at their description, modern analysis has not succeeded noticeably better. However, the recent study by Nicklas (1974), by treating other aspects of Choctaw morphosyntax with clarity, has greatly facilitated the present work. We have also benefited from an unpublished paper by Jeffrey Heath². Mary Haas' valuable contributions to Muskogean linguistics have not been overlooked; particularly relevant are (1940) and (1948) in the present context.

Our purpose is to re-examine the fundamental dimensions of the article system with a view to establishing a core of semantic contrasts that seem to have heuristic value in the understanding of complex articles. Through compounding and other kinds of cooccurrences there are on the order of fifty articles. We consider here only a few of the forms, the morphologically simpler ones, and in so doing state a hypothesis about the structural core of the system. We anticipate changes in our view of the details as our collection of analyzed texts increases.

The data upon which this report is based consist of taped conversations between native speakers of an Oklahoma variety of Choctaw, together with the utterances of the eliciting sessions directed toward the exegesis of the conversations, and the 'intuitions' of the one of us who is a native speaker concerning the language forms and uses. While it is presently a widely shared view that conventional linguistic elicitation sessions are generally inadequate to deal with the discourse functions of linguistic forms, it is the authors' experience that in a language such as Choctaw with an intricate system of noun phrase specification, isolated decontextualized sentences

are particularly semantically opaque. It is in the nature of these forms that their functions can be appreciated most adequately in naturally occurring discourse. We have not yet been able to distinguish between linguistic aspects of discourse proper (perhaps better, textual sequencing) and linguistic consequences of the social mechanisms of speech (as is relevant, for example, to conversational analysis done by E. Schegloff, M. Moerman and others), although we are aware of the importance of this distinction. We hope to address methodological issues in a later report.

1. Case: Subjects, Non-subjects and Topics

We begin with the most clearcut of the distinctions manifested by articles. Simple NPs are marked for either subject or oblique case. This same marking distinction also serves to mark subordinate clauses according to a same-subject (where the subclause takes the subject marker) versus different-subject (where the subclause takes the oblique marker) relationship between the subjects of the subclause and the mainclause. We consider first the marking of simple NPs.

There is an underlying 'conceptual' case system which is reflected by affixes in the verb complex. In this regard at least Agent, Patient, Dative and Location are to be distinguished. However, in surface sentences the independent NPs and pronouns show only one of the two cases according to a ranking system in which Agent is the subject if it is present, and all others are oblique. If there is no Agent, then Patient is the subject, and so on, in the order Agent > Patient > Dative > others². Here we are interested only in aspects of the surface syntactic case system.

The subject is marked with -t and the oblique with -n. The -n oblique is generally manifested by nasalization (and automatic lengthening) of the previous vowel. The questions (Q) in the following examples are included to disambiguate that which is accomplished in English by contrastive stress and intonation.

- (1)(a) Q: nata čito-h 'what's a big thing?'
 what big-pred
 (b) A: čokka-t čito-h 'a house is big'
 house-subj
 (2)(a) Q: katimi holisso y9: iš-hociffo tok
 what book obliq you-read past
 'which book did you read?'

- (2)(b) A: holisso hoš hočiffo-li tok
 book topic read-I past
 'I read this book'
- (3)(a) Q: katimi iš-ata tok 'what did you do?'
- (b) A: holisso yɔ: hočiffo-li tok
 obliq
 'I read a book'
- (4)(a) Q: nata iš-pi:sa 'what do you see?'
- see
- (b) A: čokka ɔ: pisa-li 'I see a house'
 (looking at a photo not seen by Q)
- (5)(a) Q: nata mak-oš iš-pisa
 'what are you looking at?'
- (b) A: čokka oš pisali 'I'm looking at a house'
- (c) A: čokka ma: pisali 'I'm looking at the
 house' (as in a photo where there is a
 house that Q knows to be there)

(2)(b) and (5)(b) present a special problem in that the NP, which is the conceptual object of the verb *hočiffo* in the one case and *pisa* in the other, is marked with -š. Compare these sentences with (3)(b), (4)(b) and (5)(c), which show the oblique marker on what appear to be conceptual objects as expected. The problem is that this -š marker has been identified by other investigators as the variant of the subject case marker which follows the o- article core.

We propose that -š is not in fact a case marker, contrasting with -t and -n, but rather it is a topicalizer. Furthermore, it takes precedence over the case markers in that an NP, or even a clause, when topicalized, erases overt indication of its subject or oblique status. In other words, either syntactic subject or non-subject can be topicalized in this language.

Part of the problem of -š not having been recognized as topicalizer may be due to the fact that English, the first language of Byington and other investigators, is not a topicalizing language. Chafe (1976) points out that when topic is conceptualized as 'the frame within which the sentence holds', English appears as a language which sets this frame in a messy fashion by means of adverbs, prepositional phrases, etc., in contrast with a language such as Chinese where this distinction is in the morphology. Perhaps as a consequence 'topic' is not available in a highly encoded form as a meta-concept for English speakers, in contrast with, say, the notion of 'subject'.

Examples (6) through (10) illustrate the use of these markers in subordinated clauses.

- (6) č̣i:čokka išyač̣i:kat išanokfillih ḥa:
 your-house you-will go you-think ques
 -art-subj
 'do you think you'll go home?'
- (7) a:pokni iyakni m̄a:k̄o:h a:miškit
 my-grandmother her-land where-pred my-mother
 -subj
 čokka ikbi tok oš m̄a:k̄o:h
 house build past subj where-pred
 anta kiyo
 (she-)living sentence particle
 'my mother is living where she built her
 house on my grandmother's land'
- (8) čatta homba h̄o: kiyo ači tok
 Choctaw resemble obliq not (she-)said past
 'she said he doesn't look Choctaw'
- (9) nakni a:ihat alah m̄a: Tabi at impa tok
 men arrive obliq subj eat past
 'when the men (not including Tabi) arrived,
 Tabi ate'
- (10)nakni a:ihat alah mat Tabi at impa tok
 subj
 'when the men (including Tabi) arrived, Tabi
 ate'

There is a same/different-subject constraint on subordinated clauses which determines their marker. If the subject of a subclause is the same as the subject of the mainclause, the subclause is marked with -t. If the subject of the subclause is different from the subject of the mainclause, -n is its marker.

Heath suggests that same-subject subclauses are formally NPs in apposition to the subject of the following clause.⁴ Note in (10) the wide referential scope within which the 'same-subject' constraint applies.

(7) is of particular interest in that it appears to select a particular subclause as topic: a:miškit čokka ikbi tok oš 'my mother built her house'. Not surprisingly, the context of this sentence included a directly prior question asking where the other was going to live when she went home (i.e., to Oklahoma). By marking one of the subclauses with -š, the topicalizer, an appropriately sequential answer is given.

Is there justification for collapsing in this fashion the NP and subclause markers as essentially the 'same' case markers, or should we consider the

possibility that this is merely another example of the tendency of languages toward economy of morphology? We agree with Heath that they are in fact the same, and believe that such utterances as (9) demonstrating also the topicalizer on a subclause greatly strengthens the argument.

Heath cites one bit of data which might perhaps be construed as counterevidence, but which we think may be eliminated as a morphological misinterpretation, as follows: An alternative method for accomplishing subordination uses the same/different subject markers -ča: 'same' and -na: 'different'. This system seems to belong primarily to the use of a dummy verb to which ča: or na: is suffixed at the beginning of the main-clause, although it can evidently be used with at least some verbs, just like -t and -n directly on the verbs of the subclauses. (11) and (12) illustrate the latter use:

- (11) \emptyset - im - pisa - ča: \emptyset - iya tok
 he_i him_j see same he_i go past
 'he_i saw him_j and he_i went'
- (12) \emptyset - im - pisa - na: \emptyset - iya tok
 he_i him_j see diff he_j or k
 'he_i saw him_j and he_{j/k} went'

Heath tentatively equates the /č/ and /n/ of these suffixes with the case markers but finds the /a:/ inexplicable. This is not surprising, if, according to the intuitions of one of us who is a native speaker, -ča: is merely a shortened form of miča, a conjunction 'and', and -na: of another conjunction a:yi:na 'besides'. Compensatory vowel length on the truncated part is a typical process in the language.

2. Specification: -o- and -a- Article Cores

The core of the article system is based on a contrast between a and o, as in

- (13) (a) hattak a-t...
 (b) hattak o-š... 'the/a man...'
 (c) hattak a:~...
 (d) hattak o:~...

The tendency in modern treatments is to interpret this contrast in terms of the English definite vs. indefinite. This works only as a very rough approximation, however, even when the discrepancies are treated by attributing an added notion of 'focus' to the so-called 'indefinite' o forms. It would seem

that Byington's characterization of the contrast was actually closer to the reality. He said that a marked the 'definite', implying 'a certain knowledge', and o marked the 'distinctive', which 'does not make certain the objects it specifies otherwise than that they belong to one species or kind'. He also maintained that o is 'emphatic' but in this he was probably misled by the topicalizing force of -š with which it frequently combines.

The a and o can also combine, in either order, both together (separated by a case marker or -k-) and distributed over the nucleus and modifier of a NP, as in (14)

- (14)(a) hattak at natakči oš...
'the man who was/is sheriff...'
(b) natakči at hattak oš...
'the man who was/is sheriff...'

In (a) the predication is something about the man in his capacity as sheriff, but in (b) the man is merely identified as sheriff.

The following examples further illustrate the uses of a and o :

- (15)(a) Q: katimih čokka čito 'which house is big?'
(b) A: čokka pat čitoh 'that house is big'
(16)(a) Q: nata čitoh 'what's big?'
(b) A: čokka mat čitoh 'that house is big'
(c) A: čokka atq: citoh
'a house is something big'
(17)(a) čokka oš čito... 'the big house...'
(b) čokka at čito hoš... 'the big house...'

We think that o is contrastive, in Chafe's usage of the term, and this is essentially the sense of Byington's characterization. a, on the other hand, remains obscure. It may be that a is simply the 'unmarked' article and carries very little information. Here we may point out, however, that there is an article a:š, roughly, 'the aforementioned' which seems to be similar to the topicalizing oš (both contain the topicalizer -š), but which contrasts with oš. It would seem that a:š is an intensive way of referring to a 'given' item (in Chafe's sense), one which has had previous mention in discourse. oš, on the other hand, topicalizes 'new' material. It is reported that some speakers tend to use a:š on every mention of the topic throughout a discourse sequence. It is perhaps also significant that a and not o can carry the 'demonstrative' markers m- and p-.

3. Specification: ma and pa

m is an identifier by location in space or time (there are other indications in the language that space and time are treated alike syntactically as reference frames for identification of particulars). It is semantically unmarked for relative nearness, but can be distal by explicit contrast with p, a much less frequently used marker (and more specialized as it refers only to space, not time). We note here the intuitions of the native speaker that m forms are more 'predicate oriented' in that they tell you which particular the predicate is going to tell something about, whereas p forms are more 'self-contained' in their referencing. In the following examples,

- (18)(a) holisso ma... 'that book...'
 (pointing to it)
 (b) holisso ilappat 'this here (is a)book'
 (holding it up)
 (c) holisso patq: 'that there book' or
 'this here book' (pointing to it)

ma is used when the point is to talk about the title, relative importance, use, or otherwise to comment on the book. The pa forms are used when the point is to single it out relative to other objects.

4. Complex Forms

We will not treat here complex articles, except to suggest that many of these forms, although they are thought of by native speakers as single lexical items, appear to simultaneously particularize more than one NP in the sentence, in a manner that would correspond to the semantics of the constituent morphemes as we have described them. For example:

- (19) čokka at-q: čitoh 'the house is big' or
 'a house is something big'
 (20) hattak ma-k-q: sa-pisa tok
 'that man saw me'

If this interpretation is correct, at- in (19) specifies čokka as subject (the house) and -q: specifies čokka as predicate (is a big house). In (20), ma- specifies hattak, and -q: specifies 'me', which is realized by the bound pronominal sa- on the verb. It is generally the case that the articles can occur when their underlying noun or independent pronoun has been deleted (subject to certain restrictions).

5. Summary

Choctaw is a language which highly specifies noun phrases and the subordinated clauses of complex sentences. The morphological and semantic core of this contrast class of articles is

- (a) a case contrast, marked by -t subject and -n oblique
- (b) a topicalizer -š, which takes priority over case markers
- (c) a contrast between a and o, where o is contrastive and a is either unmarked or participates in some dimension not yet identified
- (d) p is an intensifier of the location of something in space, much like colloquial English 'this here' and 'that there'
- (e) m is a more general demonstrative specifier

Since it is the work of specifier systems such as the one described here to establish reference in language use, it is not surprising that understanding of the system must proceed from the study of the use of forms in discourse.

NOTES

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²Jeffrey Heath kindly provided us with the ms. (n.d.). He is not responsible for any use we have made of the paper. We understand that a revised version is included in this volume.

³The exception to this is the situation with sentences of possession, which have two subjects. This is treated in some detail by Heath (n.d.). Comments at the meeting by Margaret Langdon and others indicated that this is a rather widespread phenomenon. See also S. Steele in this volume.

⁴see note 2

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