MOTIVATED SYNCRETISM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the sharing, by two distinctively different functional elements, of a common morphology, and to show how such syncretism is sometimes motivated, and is, in a sense, iconic, since the sharing of a common morphology is a reflexion of important features the two functional elements have in common. More particularly the syncretism of the animate singular obviative and inanimate plural markers that is found throughout the Algonkian languages is examined, and parallels drawn with similar syncretism in Indo-European languages between feminine singular and neuter plural.

1. Introduction

Syncretism is the exploitation by two different systemic elements of a common morphology. One of the most commonly quoted examples is the syncretism of the dative and ablative plurals in Latin, which occurs in all five conjugations of the Latin noun, and which we illustrate here with puella, 'girl,' a first declension (i.e. feminine) noun:

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	puella	puellae
Accusative	puellam	puellās
Genitive	puellae	puellarum
Dative	puellae	puellīs
Ablative	puellā	puellīs

The fact that the dative and ablative plural forms are identical in all five Latin conjugations quite naturally obliged linguists to raise the question as to whether this case distinction was in fact operative in the plural: how can one claim a case distinction that is not marked in the morphology? This problem led to a fundamental principle in morphology, the argument from the paradigm (see, for example, Lyons 1968:292) which goes as follows: a

distinction found at one level in a coherent paradigm is to be considered operative throughout the whole paradigm, unless there is good evidence to the contrary. Consequently because four of the Latin noun declensions show morphological distinctions between dative and ablative in the singular, dative and ablative plural are everywhere distinguished in these paradigms, even in the second declension, where there is syncretism in both singular and plural, as in taurus, 'bull':

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	taurus	taurī
Accusative	taurum	taurōs
Genitive	taurī	taurōrum
Dative	taurō	taurīs
Ablative	taurō	taurīs

Syncretism, it may be noted, is also found elsewhere in these paradigms: genitive singular and nominative plural share a common morphology, and in the first declension this set would also include the dative singular.

2.   Syncretism in French and the Question of Motivation

In French there is syncretism in the regular verbal paradigms: je/il/elle parle, je/tu finis/fais, and so on, whereas one finds in the irregular paradigms of être, avoir, and aller distinctive forms for first, second and third person singular, although in its spoken and popular forms the language has more or less eliminated these distinctions (Hewson 1988). There is also syncretism in the forms of the definite article, le, la, les, and the forms of the third person direct object pronouns that are cliticised to the verb, which have identical shapes: je le/la/les/ vois.

When one finds the same syncretism of definite article and direct object pronouns in other Romance languages, we are entitled to ask whether this identity of morphology is motivated: since it is such a common pattern, is there a reason for it? In French the le of le livre and that of je le vois are functionally two quite different elements: the former cannot be used apart from a noun, and the latter cannot be used with a noun, and must be used with a verb. If they are functionally quite different, why would they share a common morphology?

Indications as to how this question should be answered are to be found in Spanish and Portuguese. In these languages the

article can be independent of the noun, and function as a suppletive
(i.e. replacive) pronoun:

(1) A educação portuguesa, como a da maoria dos paises...
     La educación española, como la de la mayoria de los paises...
     English education, like that of the majority of countries...

Being independent of the noun, in fact replacing the noun, this same
pronoun can also be used as the direct object of the verb, as in the
following Portuguese and Spanish examples:

(2) Maria tirou-lhe a carta da mão, mas não a abriu.
     Maria tomó la carta de su mano, pero no la abrió.
     Maria took the letter from his hand, but she did not open it.

In Spanish and Portuguese, in fact, it is possible to treat articles
as the <u>completive</u> forms of these pronouns (requiring to be
complemented by a noun) and the free and cliticised pronouns as
the <u>suppletive</u> forms of this same set (whose function is to replace
article plus noun).

     In French, where this continuum of function is lacking, it
would be very difficult to claim that the articles and the direct
object pronouns are the same functional element. They appear as
different functional elements that share a common morphology because
there is sufficient resemblance of function to make such sharing
of a common morphology profitable.

     In an interesting article on iconicity Haiman points out that
motivated sycretism is itself a factor in the iconicity of language
(1980:517):

>   '... neutralization is itself iconic. In much
>   recent work, it has been a fruitful article of
>   faith that systematic syntactic homonymy is
>   semantically motivated: similar morphological
>   shape or syntactic behavior of (apparently
>   disparate) categories may be an icon of their
>   underlying semantic homogeneity.'

3. Motivated Syncretism in English

     In the history of English we can also trace the emergence of
identical morphology for items that were once distinctively
marked. This process has, in fact, gone so far that it has become
a joke that one can count the regular inflections of English, a language
that belongs to a flexional typology, on the fingers of one hand.

We can see, for example, that the weak verbs have forged a syncretism between preterit and past participle, whereas the strong verbs still maintain a difference of morphology: saw/seen, gave/given, sang/sung, took/taken, versus talked, stopped. This syncretism is also found in the irregular weak verbs (brought, thought, kept, spent), and has also eroded the strong verbs. The movement towards a complete syncretism of preterit and past participle is especially notable in popular English, where I done, I seen, are heard wherever English is spoken, and where the frequency of I should have went seems to be growing daily.

There is also a derivational adjectival suffix -ed, as in a four-footed animal, that also originally had its own distinctive morphology (in Old English -ede). This suffix is used to mark derivations that are used adjectivally to denote attributes: a four-footed animal is an animal with four feet; a verandahed bungalow (Hirtle 1970) is a bungalow with a verandah. These are derived from nouns (foot, verandah) not from verbs, but since past participles have an adjectival function, and since the original morphology was similar, it is quite easy and quite profitable to forge an identical morphology for a similar function, so that we now have syncretism of three items that are functionally distinct: a preterit, a past participle, and a derived adjective.

What is even more striking is that the -s that we write to mark a noun plural in English (the cats and dogs) is identical morphologically to the -s that we write as a third person inflection on the present tense of the verb (she knows he thinks it works), since this -s was only one of the plural markers in Old English, and the Old English inflection for the third person singular of the verb was -eþ. This means that historically the noun plurals have all been levelled to -s (phonologically /-(V)z/) and this same -s in the later 16th and early 17th centuries totally replaced the original inflection for third singular on the verb, so that one finds both the old and the new side by side in Shakespeare, as in Portia's famous speech from the Merchant of Venice:

(3) The quality of mercy is not strained.
     It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
     Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
     It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

When two inflections that were originally quite distinct become identical through linguistic change that is not a regular sound change, the most obvious conclusion is that this new syncretism must be motivated.[1]

In examining the possible motivation for these changes, in fact, we have to take into account (just as with the -_ed_ suffix) a third element, namely the -_s_ that is cliticised to the Noun Phrase to mark possessive forms: the boy's book, the man over there's hat. This is not an inflection, since it can be attached to elements that are not nouns; it marks a derivation that operates on the whole noun phrase. Here again we have two inflections and a derivation marker that share a common morphology.

We do not have to go far to seek the common cognitive element that they share: -_s_ in modern English is a transcendence marker; that is, it indicates that which lies outside or transcends an already established unity. Linguistic number is frequently simply binary, whereas mathematical number is multiple: 1,2,3,4,5...n. Singular vs. Plural in linguistic number is the simple binary choice between the unit on the one hand and any transcendence of the unit on the other. We do not need to have two in order to have a plural: one and a half feet. We even, curiously, use a plural with zero: zero feet, zero inches, because one is not simply denying the existence of one inch, but of any inches at all, of all inches.

In similar fashion the -_s_ of the third person singular of the verb in standard English marks this person as being distinct and separate from the conversational relationship of speaker and hearer that determines the status of first and second persons. First and second person, as we know, are necessarily not only animate but human, since only humans can utter and understand coherent and articulated speech, to fill the roles required of the pronouns _I_ and _you_. We can of course address inanimate things; Wordsworth could address castles, skylarks, cliffs and islands, and Lamartine address time:

(4)   I was thy neighbour once, thou rugged Pile! (Peele Castle)

      O temps suspend ton vol! Et vous, heures propices,
      Suspendez votre cours! (Le lac)

but here we recognize personification, a familiar figure of speech. It does not alter the fact that first and second persons share something from which third person is excluded, a relationship to which the third person is transcendent. The distinction is emphasized by the fact that first and second person pronouns are never replacive; only third person pronouns can replace nouns.

As for the -_s_ that marks the English possessive, at least one grammarian of English has suggested that 'the central idea of this case is in a sphere' (Curme 1931:110), which might be expanded to read sphere of influence, that which lies within the scope of the

possessor.   My brother's possessions are those things that lie
within the scope of my brother, which includes an extension of his
person.   Nouns and gerunds of action may also be attributed to
this sphere, so that the possessive may be represented as the patient
or agent of an action represented by an ordinary noun:

(5)   Napoleon's defeat of the Prussians at Austerlitz..
      Napoleon's defeat by Wellington at Waterloo..

whereas, since a verbal gerund is normally active in force, the
possessive normally represents the agent:

(6)   Napoleon's defeating the Prussians at Austerlitz...
      *Napoleon's defeating by Wellington at Waterloo...

The genitive, in short, can cover a wide range of meaning, but it
is normally employed only with so-called count nouns, which
necessarily have unit reference.   One can have an hour's work for
the work of an hour, but one cannot have butter's pound or
generosity's instance for the pound of butter or the instance of
generosity.

     In dealing with this kind of motivated syncretism, where two
functionally distinctive morphs are levelled, and come to share a
common morphology, the term synapsis was used by Hirtle in commenting
(1967:21, 1970:25) on the common morphology of preterit and past
participle in English.   This is, in fact, an adoption and translation
of the term synapse as used by Gustave Guillaume (1973:267).   As
with certain other terms (e.g. allomorph) the original use of the
term is in biology; it refers to the functional conjunction between
two neurons that makes conduction of nervous impulses continuous
from one to the other.   In the following discussion the term synapsis
will be used to replace the phrase motivated syncretism.[2]

4.   Synapsis of Obviative Singular and Animate Plural in Algonkian

     I wish to turn now to a very interesting example of a synapsis
that is commonly found in Algonkian languages, and which may be
compared with certain data found in Indo-European languages, and
particularly in Romance.   It concerns the identical morphology
shared by a marked animate (obviative singular in Algonkian, feminine
singular in IE) and by inanimate plural (neuter plural in IE).

     Nouns in Algonkian languages belong to one or the other of two
gender classes (the animate and the inanimate) and each gender has
a distinctive plural morphology.   For animate nouns the distinction
of proximate (3rd person in focus) and obviative (3rd person out

of focus) must also be made, the obviative being the dependent or secondary category and therefore the marked form (i.e. only one 3rd person may be proximate at a time and all other animate 3rd persons are automatically made obviative by adding an inflection). The following paradigm from Micmac shows typical inflections of animate and inanimate nouns in an Algonkian language:

	Singular	Plural
Animate Proximate	ji'nm	ji'nmuk
Animate Obviative	ji'nmul	ji'nmu
Inanimate	puksuk	puksukul

(Here we see two nouns, ji'nm, 'man (male),' and puksuk, 'fire log,' that both happen to add the vowel /u/ before the normal inflections of obviative (-l) and plural (-k, -l), so that the formation of the obviative plural can be seen as the product of a deletion of the obviative singular marker).

It is notable that in the Algonkian languages the animate singular obviative of nouns and the inanimate plural share a common morphology, so that Bloomfield (1946) reconstructs the following paradigm of noun inflections for Proto-Algonkian (PA):

	Singular	Plural
Animate Proximate	-a	-aki
Animate Obviative	-ali	-ahi
Inanimate	-i	-ali

where once again the synapsis of obviative singular and inanimate plural is notable in the paradigm.

Many Algonkian languages have collapsed the distinction between obviative singular and obviative plural. As Siebert notes (1975:419): 'Among those that do not distinguish number in the obviative, Menomini ... Ojibwa ... Delaware have generalized the original obviative singular inflection PA /*ali/. On the other hand Cree, Western Abenaki ... have generalized the inflection of the obviative plural PA /*ahi/.' Consequently the obviative form of Cree nite:m 'my dog' is nite:ma, the final /-a/ being a reflex of PA /*ahi/, and the single undifferentiated form can mean either 'my dog' or 'my dogs.'

It is notable, consequently, that in Cree the final /-l/ has also been lost from the inanimate plural, so that in Moose Cree (an /l/ dialect, which has /l/ as a reflex of PA */l/) the plural of či:ma:n 'canoe' is či:ma:na, where one is entitled to expect *či:ma:nal. Bloomfield (1946:93) thought this loss was purely

phonological, but as I have shown elsewhere (Hewson 1983) the evidence does not support the claim, and there is significant counter evidence. No other consonant is lost in Cree in this position, and it is obvious that we are confronted with an analogical change whereby the inanimate plural has been reshaped on the model of the new levelled obviative in order to maintain the original synapsis that had existed with the obviative singular.

5. Reduction of Morphological Contrasts

This reduction of the obviative forms in certain Algonkian languages is worthy of comment under two headings: (a) the loss of contrasts in marked categories[3], and (b) the apparently different pattern shown by Cree in contrast to Menomini and Ojibwa.

As far as concerns the first heading, this kind of levelling is, as is well known, a reasonably common phenomenon. French, for example, which distinguishes gender in the singular articles le/la, has eliminated the distinction gender in the common plural article les, although there is nothing in the historical phonology of French which requires such a levelling. (Portuguese, by contrast, has singular articles o/a and plural articles os/as). It is normally concluded that such levelling has the purpose of reducing complexity in elements that carry more than one marked feature, and indeed there are many instances where distinctions that are found in the singular are not found in the corresponding plural (e.g. English he/she/it vs. they).

The obviatives in Algonkian languages are marked forms not only in expression (i.e. the observable morphology) but also in terms of their cognitive content since the notion of obviative does not arise until the notion of proximate has been established. The obviative is that which is beyond the proximate: without the proximate there can be no obviative. The obviative is therefore notionally dependent on the proximate in much the same way that a normal plural is dependent on its singular: the establishment of a notional singular is a pre-requisite for the establishment of a notional plural. (Put in terms of a simple analogy, you cannot make copies when you do not have an original). An obviative plural is therefore, in terms of its notional content, a doubly marked form (obviative and plural), and since the obviative element could not be eliminated without eliminating the distinction between direct and inverse forms, on which the whole structure of the transitive verb depends, a tendency to reduce the singular/plural contrast in the obviative forms is a normal development that is to be expected. In short, the singular vs. plural contrast carries much less of a functional load than the proximate vs. obviative distinction.

To take up the second heading, the different pattern that this levelling takes in Cree, as opposed to Menomini and Ojibwa, raises the interesting question of the normal or expected pattern of levelling. Is it the marked or the unmarked form that survives in the morphology? And is the determining factor content or expression?

It is normal that the notionally marked form (in content) will also be the morphologically marked form (in expression). In such cases it may be observed that it is the morphologically unmarked form that survives when the notional markedness is reduced, as one might expect: OE cwic 'alive' had a plural cwice; both are reduced to quick in Modern English with the loss of number distinctions in adjectives. This is, of course, not an absolute or mechanical law: as always in morphology there are the expected irregularities. The principal of the arbitrary nature of the sign is just as applicable to inflections as it is to lexical elements. An equal and opposite principle, that linguistic signs are normally motivated, is the determining feature that lies behind the parallelism of notional and morphological marking.

Sometimes, however, a notionally marked form is not a marked form in expression. Neither of the English forms ye/you could be described as morphologically marked in relation to the other. Of the two, however, ye was notionally marked, being a subject clitic and vocative, restricted in use, whereas you enjoyed considerable syntactic independence. Of these two, it is of course you that survives: since they are equivalent morphologically, it may be presumed that the factor which determines the levelled form is in this case the notional marking.

As far as concerns the Proto Algonkian obviative forms, both obviative singular (-ali) and obviative plural (-ahi) are marked forms, the former marking only obviation, singular being an unmarked element, and the latter marking a cumulation of obviation and plural (i.e. a portmanteau morph). Since the reflexes of PA */l/ and PA */h/ survive in both Menomini and Ojibwa, this situation would have been perpetuated in the pre-history of these two languages. When the singular/plural distinction was levelled in these languages, therefore, the fact that the singular marks only obviation would seem to be the determining factor in favour of the obviative singular form as the levelled form.

The situation was quite different in Cree. Although the reflex of PA */h/ survived elsewhere in Cree words, it had become non-contrastive and purely phonetic in final position. As a result, after the loss of final vowels the inflection */-ali/ would be reduced to */-al/, whereas */-ahi/ would be reduced to */-a/. When one compares */-al/ and */-a/ it is the latter that is seen

to be the less marked form morphologically, although the former, as we have seen, is the notionally unmarked form. (This is still the situation in Micmac, as may be seen in the example in section 4). When levelling occurred it appears that preference was given to the form that was morphologically less marked; this would, of course, be quite suffficient to mark the new obviative in which number is no longer distinctive.

6.   The Cree Reshaping

This satisfactory clarification of the Cree obviative form, however, creates a further problem requiring resolution: the origin of the /-a/ marking inanimate plurals in Cree, since this form can no longer be explained as a regular phonological formation and it too must be the result of morphological levelling or reshaping.

It is obvious that if there has been analogical reshaping in the inanimate plural, the basis for the analogy must be the obviative plural inflection, since of all the inflections of the noun this is the only one that can yield Cree /-a/ by regular phonological derivation. The problem, in this case, becomes one of the discerning the motivation for such a reshaping.

Firstly, it should be observed that this congruence of the morphology of animate obviative and inanimate plural is no mere accident: it is not an isolated phenomenon. Not only does it occur in the morphology of the noun throughout the Algonkian languages and also in the protolanguage, but it also shows up in the quite irregular demonstrative paradigms, as the following data from Cree (Ellis 1962) shows:

		THIS	THAT
An.	Sg.	awa	ana
An.	Pl.	o·ko	aniki
An.	Obv.	o·ho	anihi
In.	Sg.	o·ma	anima
In.	Pl.	o·ho	anihi

In fact this congruence is complete throughout the grammar of Cree, as Wolfart observed (1973:14), and he further comments: 'That the identity cannot be reduced to historical accident... is evident from the inflectional paradigm of pronouns.... If we rule out accident as the cause of the identity of the animate obviative and the inanimate plural,, we have to look for that semantic feature of Cree which these categories have in common. This feature is yet to be found....'

In dealing with synapsis of this kind, there are two pitfalls which must be carefully avoided: (1) the assumption that the identity of signs is perfectly fortuitous when there is good evidence to the contrary, and (2) the assumption that identity of morphology entails identity of significate. In this latter regard, since both animate and inanimate in Moose Cree have both plural and obviative categories, in no way can the inanimate plural be equated notionally with the animate obviative.

Nevertheless, when morphs that clearly represent different grammatical entities become alike in spite of a phonological history that should differentiate them, it is necessary to conclude that in the underlying significates of these two separate items there is something elemental in common that makes a common morphology not only possible, but in some curious way profitable. In what way, then, does the notion that is marked by the obviative morphology resemble that marked by the plural morphology? And why the _inanimate_ plural, but the _animate_ obviative?

The first of these questions is easily answered. The underlying notion of plurality, as we have seen, is one of transcendence: plural is that which is notionally beyond the singular. And the contrast between proximate and obviative in the Algonkian languages is also a contrast of immanence vs. transcendence: the obviative is the 3rd person which is beyond the proximate; the obviative only becomes a representational possibility after the proximate position has first been established. Consequently the obviative, like the plural, is the notionally marked form of the proximate/obviative pair.

A relationship between animate obviative and the category of inanimate may also be discerned. In Cree, when an animate 3rd person possesses another animate, the possessee is necessarily obviative and is so marked, but when the possessor is 1st or 2nd person, the possessee remains proximate as the following Cree data show (the Cree obviative is indifferent to number):

nite·m(ak)	'my dog(s)'
kite·m(ak)	'thy dog(s)'
ote·ma	'his dog(s)' (obv.)

When the possessee is inanimate, however, the obviative is not marked, and the possessee may be marked for number:

nimasinahikan(a)	'my book(s)'
kimasinahikan(a)	'thy book(s)'
omasinahikan(a)	'his book(s)'

The hierarchy of persons in the Algonkian languages pointed out by
Bloomfield (1946:95), Hockett (1966) and others shows that proximate
is precedential to obviative just as first and second person are
precedential to the third person. We may note, therefore, that
possessed nouns in Cree follow these hierarchies (1 = 1st person;
2 = 2nd person; 3P = 3rd proximate; 3O = 3rd Obviative):

<div style="text-align:center">

nite·m   (1 -> 3P)   'my dog'
kite·m   (2 -> 3P)   'thy dog'
ote·ma   (3P -> 3O)   'his dog(s)'

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The fact that an inanimate possessed by an animate is not marked by
obviation and may consequently be marked for number indicates that
another hierarchical feature, namely animate -> inanimate is
operating here, making the proximate -> obviative relationship
redundant, and consequently left unmarked. There is obviously, in
fact, a categorical requirement in the grammar of possession in
Algonkian that possessee must be hierarchically subservient to
possessor. This requirement is satisfied by distinctions from
either the hierarchy of persons or the hierarchy of gender.

What the inanimate gender and the animate obviative share,
therefore, is a common level of hierarchical subservience, which
shows up very clearly in the paradigms of possession.[4] Consequently,
the inanimate plural and the animate obviative share three
fundamental notional features: (a) third person, (b) a common
function as transcendence markers, and (c) a common level of
hierarchical subservience. In fact, since the obviative is
subservient in the person hierarchy, and the inanimate is similarly
subservient in the gender hierarchy, the two of them are sometimes
interchangeable in the same functional position, e.g. as
possessee: ote·ma 'his dog' (obv.) vs. omasinahikan 'his book' (inan.).

7.   Marked Animate and Neuter Plural in Indo-European

This synapsis of the marked animate with the inanimate or neuter
plural is, furthermore, not an isolated or extraordinary phenomenon;
similar correspondences are to be found in other language
families. Much has been written, for example, on the interplay of
feminine singular and neuter plural in both the prehistory and
history of Indo-European languages. For example, Latin grānum
'seed' (neuter singular) gives French le(s) grain(s) 'the
seed(s),' while Latin grāna 'seeds' (neuter plural) gives French
la graine 'grain' - a feminine singular collective. Latin lignum
'wood' gives Spanish leĭo(s) 'stick(s),' while its Latin plural
form ligna gives Spanish leĭa 'firewood.' The neuter of Indo-
European, it should be noted, represents the inanimate, and the

feminine is normally the marked form of the animate, just as the obviative is the marked form of the animate in Algonkian. (Consider, for example, Russian Tsar/ Tsaritsa, Latin victor/victrix, German Fuchs 'fox'/Füchsin 'vixen').

It is curious, in fact, that such Latin neuter plurals become feminine singulars in the modern Romance vernaculars, since Meillet (1903:291-2) traces the neuter plural morphology of IE languages to an ancient collective singular in Proto Indo-European (which is why, for example, verbs in Ancient Greek and occasionally elsewhere are singular in agreement when the subject is neuter plural). Inanimate plurals, of course, in that they represent collections of inanimate objects, normally differ cognitively from animates by their inertness. It is an easy step, therefore, to treat inanimate plurals as singular collectives, and likewise to treat singular collectives as plurals (e.g., How a People Die (from Hirtle 1982:10) - title of a book - or French la plupart sont partis). The collective, therefore, although singular, is a singular which is different from the regular neuter or inanimate singular, and may consequently be given a different or special hierarchical status. Likewise the inanimate plural, being largely interchangeable with the collective, may also come to be associated with this special singular status.

Another cognitive difference between animate and inanimate is that animates are essentially agentive, and can fulfill the role of agent, whereas inanimates are naturally patientive, best suited to fill the role of patient. When we consider the categories of proximate and obviative in terms of agentive and patientive roles, it is clear that the proximate is the agentive animate, the obviative the patientive animate: in the transitive verb, the proximate is the agent and the obviative the patient in the direct forms, which follow the hierarchies. Likewise the proximate is always the possessor, the obviative the possessee, in the grammar of possession. Notionally, therefore, the obviative, like the inanimate, is patientive.

In terms of their semantic features, therefore, both the inanimate plural and the animate obviative tend towards a synaptic middle ground between the two genders. Firstly, the common level of hierarchical subservience, seen most clearly in the grammar of possession, shows the obviative as a 'reduced' or patientive animate. Secondly the inanimate plural, by its nature, tends towards the collective, a new and special 'singular' quite different from the regular inanimate singular; it is in this way a marked singular or 'promoted' inanimate. This 'promoted' inanimate may then be associated with the animate gender, but not with the ordinary unmarked animate, only with an animate of a

special marked kind (in Algonkian the obviative, in Indo-European
the feminine).

For a similar kind of example one need look no further than
modern English, where inanimates are referred to by the personal
pronoun it, animates by he and she. Machinery, transtlantic liners,
and other inanimate objects that resemble animates in that they
move and function on their own may, however, be treated as
animates. The gender that is normally assigned in such cases is
that of the special, marked animate, the feminine. Here we are
dealing with different features in that the feminine is not a hierarchical
category like the obviative, and the inanimate here is a 'mobile'
singular not an 'inert' plural, but the end result is the same:
the association of a 'special' inanimate with the marked category
of the animate gender.

We conclude, therefore, that the original PA obviative plural
form *-ahi became /-a/ in Cree by regular evolution and was then
generalised as a unique obviative marker (with the consequent loss
of the obviative singular maker); and that the regular inanimate
plural marker was then analogically reshaped to /-a/ in order to
maintain the synapsis of the inanimate plural and animate obviative
categories found in varying forms throughout the Algonkian languages
and in Proto-Algonkian.

8.   The Identification of Synapses

A synapsis is only properly demonstrable if three conditions
are fulfilled: (1) there must be some kind of analogical reshaping,
so that the forms are not justifiable by normal phonetic evolution,
(2) there must be some significant semantic feature that both
elements forming the synapsis share in common, and (3) the two
elements must in some way be demonstrably distinct, as noun plural
and genitive singular are in English, for example. Most languages
will be found to have some synaptic elements, and linguists have
tended to notice these and comment on them: a most interesting
instance, for example, may be found in Kendall's article 'The -K/,
/-M/ problem in Yavapai syntax' (1975), which reports synaptic
elements not only in Yavapai, but also similar elements in Yuman
languages in general. Kendall does not propose synapsis as the
cause of the peculiarities in the data, but she does reject a
solution of simple homophony, and comments (1975:9) 'The question
as to whether there is some overriding semantic unity to these
formatives still arises.'

9.   Conclusion: The Functional Role of Morphology

    Saussure, in his famous analogy of the game of chess, pointed
out that a material chess piece, a knight, for example, was not a
fundamental element of the game, but could in fact be replaced by
any material entity to which the same value (valeur) was attributed
(1916:153-4); what is fundamental to the game is the valeur of the
piece, not the piece itself, which may well be replaced. In like
fashion, says Saussure, it is the notional structure of a linguistic
element, not its morphological shape, that is fundamental: '...la
valeur, ... c'est son aspect primordial' (1916:154). The morphology,
consequently, may be irregular or even suppletive, but the notional
contrast marked by the morphology remains the same: mice represents
the same kind of plural notion as do such regular plural forms as
cats, dogs, horses[5]. In this view, the purpose of a morphological
shape is to provide an element of perceivability to that which is
itself inherently not perceivable. Consequently, in spite of the
arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign (which means in Saussure's
explicit terms (1916:101) only that the morph has no natural or
necessary link with its significate), the choice of a morphological
shape is nevertheless normally motivated: according to a dictum
of Guillaume, 'La sémiologie fait flèche de tout bois.' Sometimes
the motivation is obvious, as in the frequent formation of definite
articles from demonstratives, sometimes less obvious, as in the
equally frequent formation of indefinite articles from the numeral
one, and sometimes not obvious at all but only to be discerned
when the valeurs, or notional relationships of a whole content
system, are made explicit in their totality, as in the example of
the interplay of number, gender and obviation in the Algonkian
languages.

    Haiman, writing on iconicity, also stresses this point
(1980:518):

>   Much progress in semantic analysis has resulted
>   from the commitment to the iconic assumption
>   that neutralization is motivated; this attests
>   at least to the usefulness of the assumption.
>   So widely is it held that, when cross-linguistic
>   similarity between apparently unrelated
>   grammatical categories cannot be explained by
>   an appeal to some underlying semantic
>   homogeneity, the formal similarity remains as
>   a puzzle and a challenge. In the absence of
>   such explanations, Allen's demonstration that
>   the categories of transitivity and possession
>   are formally similar in many unrelated languages
>   (1964) continues to haunt linguists.

Finally, returning for one brief moment to Saussure's game of chess, we may find in it excellent examples of synapsis. Each side, for example, has two bishops which are identical in shape (morphology), because they move in identical fashion (similar potentialities), but which are nevertheless quite different because one moves only on black squares, the other only on white squares (demonstrable difference of function). Since the two bishops are always distinguishable in terms of their function, they do not need to have distinctive shapes. In fact, since they are similar in potentialities, it is profitable, in terms of perceivability, to have them identical in shape.

FOOTNOTES

[1]For a more extensive discussion of this question see Hewson 1975.

[2]Perhaps it should be noted in passing that the term _syncretism_ is itself borrowed, but from theology. It was used of early attempts in the Greco-Roman world to simplify and unite the various pagan religions, and later to blend elements of paganism and Christianity.

[3]A succinct resume of one approach to markedness theory is given by Matthews (1974:150-3). As Matthews notes 'For marked/unmarked oppositions the leading references are two of Jakobson's pre-war papers' (1932, 1936). Matthews uses the term 'semantic marking' where I have used 'notional marking.' For an alternative, very brief introduction see also Lyons 1968:79-80; generative approaches to markedness are contained in Belletti, Brandi and Rizzi (1981).

[4]Algonkianists will also appreciate the point (too elaborate to fully explicate here) that in the Transitive Animate verb a common inverse marker is used for (a) an obviative acting on a proximate, (b) an inanimate acting on an animate, and (c) a third person acting on first or second person. The inclusion of the animate <- inanimate relationship in this morphology clearly shows its hierarchical status.

[5]Gustave Guillaume (1971:140, 150) takes this further, noting that the _psychisme_, or notional system (or content system, in Hjelmslev's terms) is subject to the _Loi de cohérence_ (law of rigorous coherence), whereas the _sémiologie_, or morphology (expression system in Hjelmslev) is subject only to the _Loi de simple suffisance_ (law of simple expressive sufficiency) What irregularities there are, in short, are found in the morphology,

not in the notional contrasts which form the true grammatical systems, as in the singular vs. plural contrast, for example: from the point of view of notional contrast the 'irregular' plurals of English are not irregular.

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