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# Switch-topic marking in Chitimacha

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines one of the uses of the {-ʃ} clitic in Chitimacha (isolate: Louisiana), a ubiquitous morpheme that may appear on any word class, and appears to operate at the level of discourse. This morpheme is almost entirely undescribed in the existing literature on the language. Researchers in the first half of the twentieth century did not treat it in any depth, saying little about either its grammatical or discourse uses. This is particularly unfortunate given that topic/focus marking appears to be an areal phenomenon of the U.S. southeast. Atakapa even shares this same {-ʃ} clitic with seemingly discourse-level functions (Swanton 1919:15, 31, 35). Data from Chitimacha would help elucidate these and other areal patterns, and this paper therefore aims to help remedy this gap in the literature.

The first description of {-ʃ} comes from Swanton's (1920:53) unpublished grammar sketch:

> -c, -ic. This which appears with nouns,[ ]personal and demonstrative pronouns, and postpositions, is probably identical with the infinitive suffix already described, which is in constant use with verbs. It should be said of its use with other parts of speech, however, that it appears to convey such different meanings in different situations that I am in doubt whether we have to deal with one or with several suffixes. Sometimes it appears to be the distinguishing mark of the nominal subject, [and sometimes] it appears with the force of a postposition, usually a locative.

Working with new data from the same consultants but twenty years later, Swadesh's unpublished grammar goes into slightly more detail:

> -š is added mainly to aorist verbs as an infrequent equivalent of ki 'when...'; occasionally also with the continuative. Added to the future, it forms the conditional. (Swadesh 1939:123)

> -š is freely added at the end of phrases except those ending in š. It is also not ordinarily added to a finite verb form; thus it is not used in positions where it might be confused with qualificative -š 'when...' The -š under discussion has little or no positive meaning. Its only function appears to be to mark the end of the phrase. We may also note here the optional -š at the end of certain particles and verb endings, e.g. participial -k(š), -(š), necessitative -ng(š). This element is essentially identically [sic] with the one under discussion, except that it is sometimes found in phrase medial. Examples of phrase terminal -š are very numerous in the texts. (Swadesh 1939:133)

Throughout his grammar, Swadesh lists /ʃ/-final free variants of every suffix and many adjectives.

The above passages constitute the sole treatment of {-ʃ} in the literature, and neither of these were ever published. What follows is a first attempt at describing a narrow subset of its uses in narrative.

## 2. Data & Methodology

The data for this study come from a collection of 88 texts dictated by Chief Benjamin Paul to Morris Swadesh between 1930 and 1934, consisting primarily of tribal legends and personal narratives, but also a few expository and procedural texts. Swadesh later typed and deposited these texts in the form of an unpublished manuscript at the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia (Swadesh 1953). For the present study, the texts were retyped digitally using the linguistic analysis software Fieldworks Language Explorer (FLEx) (Summer Institute of Linguistics 2013) and glossed at the sentence level with Swadesh's free translation.

While the {-ʃ} morpheme may occur on any word class, only its use with lexical noun phrases will be examined here. This is because {-ʃ} has taken on a specialized use in several of the syntactic contexts it occurs in. On finite verbs, for example, it has grammaticalized to become the sole marker of the conditional mood (when the verb is future tense). This paper also will not examine the use of {-ʃ} with free pronominal forms, because each pronoun already ends in either /ʃ/ or /s/ (two allomorphs of {-ʃ}), and it is generally not possible to tell whether stems ending in these segments are marked with {-ʃ}.

In fact, in order to eliminate the most variables possible, this paper limits itself not just to lexical noun phrases, but to noun phrases containing kinship terms. This is to avoid any effects arising from referents that sit at different points on the animacy hierarchy (also known as the topic hierarchy or referential hierarchy). Kinship terms were chosen because they are the most topical after pronouns, and since pronouns have the additional complication of interacting with verbal person marking. In making this choice, I also eliminated another variable, that of definiteness, because every kinship term in the corpus is made definite by the appearance of a possessor.

The result is a dataset consisting of 149 uses of kinship terms, 33 of which are marked with {-ʃ}. Since {-ʃ} attaches to phrases rather than individual words, a noun phrase was considered marked for an instance of {-ʃ} as long as {-ʃ} occurred at the end of the noun phrase, and each noun phrase was only counted once. Example **Error! Reference source not found.** shows such a case, with our mystery morpheme {-ʃ} glossed as TOP.[1]

[1] The source for each example is given after its translation, following Swadesh's system of organization and reference, which goes as follows: A02b.6 = text dictated by Ben Paul (A), text number 02, paragraph b, sentence 6. The free translations are from Swadesh, with my translations given occasionally in brackets.

(1) *was hewʔmank naːntʃ͡aːkampa-ʃ ʔam ʔoːnak nidikʃ kap tuːkˀʃ naʔa.*
your nephews brothers-**TOP** everything I believe INCH dead they.are
‘“I believe your nephews and brothers and so forth are dead,” (he said).’ (A10i.2)

Each noun phrase was coded for its grammatical role in the clause. Because Chitimacha shows agent-patient alignment in its verbal marking, the agent-patient distinction is potentially relevant for nominal marking as well. Thus each noun phrase was given a semantic role of A, P, T, or R (but not S, so as not to conflate A and P), and coded for whether the noun phrase was the subject, object, oblique, or possessor of another noun phrase (with subject and object distinguished by their syntactic position in the clause). The transitivity of the clause (intransitive, transitive, ditransitive, or copular) was also coded. The resulting distribution of grammatical roles is given in Table 1, comparing both the overall distribution and the distribution for just {-ʃ}-marked noun phrases. Combinations not listed here did not occur for kin terms in the corpus.

*Table 1. Distribution of kin terms by grammatical role*

| Grammatical Role | # of kin terms | % of kin terms | # of {-ʃ}-marked kin terms | % of {-ʃ}-marked kin terms |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A subject of intransitive | 12 | 8.05% | 4 | 12.12% |
| A subject of transitive | 41 | 27.52% | 18 | 54.55% |
| A subject of ditransitive | 10 | 6.71% | 4 | 12.12% |
| P subject of intransitive | 10 | 6.71% | 2 | 6.06% |
| P subject of transitive | 10 | 6.71% | 3 | 9.09% |
| P object of transitive | 16 | 10.74% | 0 | — |
| T object of transitive | 10 | 6.71% | 1 | 3.03% |
| R object of ditransitive | 15 | 10.07% | 0 | — |
| Subject of copula | 2 | 1.34% | 1 | 3.03% |
| Oblique | 4 | 2.68% | 0 | — |
| Possessor of NP | 14 | 9.40% | 0 | — |

As Table 1 shows, neither the semantic role nor transitivity of the verbal clause correlates with {-ʃ}-marking. However, there is a nearly perfect one-way correlation between {-ʃ}-marking and subjects. Table 2 shows the same data, this time distinguishing only subjects and non-subjects.

*Table 2. Distribution of {-ʃ}-marked kin terms by subject and object*

| Grammatical Role | # of kin terms | % of kin terms | # of {-ʃ}-marked kin terms | % of {-ʃ}-marked kin terms |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subject | 85 | 57.05% | 32 | 96.97% |
| Other | 64 | 42.95% | 1 | 3.03% |

However, while almost every instance of a kin term with {-ʃ} is a subject, only 37.65% of kin term subjects (32 of 85) are marked with {-ʃ}. Why does {-ʃ} occur with some subjects but not others? To answer this question, I examined a number of potentially contributing factors. One is the presence of the nominal marker *=(n)k*, whose function is still unclear, but may be an absolutive, patientive, or inverse marker. 58.14% (25 of 43) of nouns with *=(n)k* are marked with {-ʃ}, but only 15.52% (18 of 116) nouns without *=(n)k* have {-ʃ}. While this suggests that {-ʃ} does correlate with *=(n)k*, this correlation is probably due to the fact that both *=(n)k* and {-ʃ} occur primarily on subjects (38 of 43 instances of *=(n)k* are subjects).

The second possibility investigated is whether {-ʃ} correlates with a switch in topic.[2] For the purpose of this study, I define a switch in topic as being any time the referent of the subject of the previous clause is different from the current one. A subject is considered coreferential when there is at least partial overlap in their referents, such as 'we' (meaning 'me and my uncle') and 'my uncle'. When the subject is part of the first clause in a narrative, or the first clause in a stretch of reported speech, it was excluded from the count. This notion of topic switch is intended to examine the potential local uses of {-ʃ} as a cohesive marker, following Clancy & Downing (1987), rather than switches of topics in the broader sense of "the current topic of the discourse" or "what the current discourse is about", after (Chafe 1994; Brown & Yule 1983:71–94).

Examples (2)–(8) show the beginnings of six consecutive sentences from the corpus, where examples (4), (5), and (7) constitute switches in topic, and the subject of each sentence is emphasized in bold.

(2) ***ʔiʃ ʔintʃ͡ʔi ʔiʃ ne we kʔinkkʔank kin*** *hi teniːkʔ nakun.*
**my father I and the girls with** there sitting we.are
'**My father and I and those girls** were sitting.' (A65a.3)

[2] I use the term *switch topic* to distinguish the uses of {-ʃ} from *switch reference*, which prototypically occurs as verbal marking in serial verb constructions, rather than nominal marking on subjects.

(3) *wetk ʔapʃ ne:t͡ʃʔima:ʃ-**nakun***
then RECIP speak-**1pl.A**
'**We** were conversing.' (A65a.4)

(4) ***we k²inkk²ank ʔunk²u-ʃ** hi te:tiʔi, [...]*
**DET young.woman one-TOP** to she.said
'**One of the girls** said, [...]' (A65a.5)

(5) *wetk **ʔiʃ ko:k-ʃ** hiʃ his nujtiʔi, [...]*
then **my aunt** ERG back she.said
'**My aunt** answered, [...]' (A65a.6)

(6) *wetk ʔiʃ ʔint͡ʃʔi ni wopm-**i,** [...]*
then my father DTRZR ask-**NFsg.A**
'Then **she** asked of my father, [...]' (A65a.7)

(7) *wetkʃ **ʔiʃ ʔint͡ʃi=nk-ʃ** hi te:tiʔi, [...]*
then **my father=ABS-TOP** to he.said
'**My father** said, [...]' (A65a.8)

(8) ***ʔiʃ ʔint͡ʃʔi=nk** ni wopmiʔi, [...]*
**my father=ABS** DTRZR he.asked
'**My father** asked of her, [...]' (A65a.9)

Of the 32 {-ʃ}-marked kin terms that are subjects, 78.13% (n=25) are switch topics by the above metric. Thus {-ʃ} does appear to correlate with a switch in topic. Examples (2)–(8) illustrate this particularly well: {-ʃ} appears on subjects when the referent changes, but not when the referent stays the same (only seven instances of non-switch topic kin terms show {-ʃ}-marking). However, subject kin terms in general tend to be switch topics, regardless of the presence of {-ʃ}: 70.59% of kin term subjects (60 out of 85) are also switch topics. And while {-ʃ}-marked kin terms are typically subjects and switch topics, only 41.67% of switch-topic subjects (25 of 60) are {-ʃ}-marked.

Why are some switch-topic subjects marked with {-ʃ} but others not? One possible answer, utilizing Chafe's (1987) notion of discourse accessibility and activation, is that {-ʃ}-marked subjects are reactivating some previously-active referent in the discourse other than the most recent one. Immediately prior uses are excluded because, by the operational definition given above, switch topics will not share the same referent as the subject of the previous clause. If {-ʃ} does indeed reactivate previously semi-active referents, we would not expect to find {-ʃ}-marked subjects introducing new referents into the discourse. To test this hypothesis, I coded

for whether the subject noun phrase was the first occurrence of that referent in the discourse, regardless of how that referent had been previously referred to (e.g. *the woman*, *his mother*, and *her daughter* might all refer to the same referent at different points in the narrative), and compared this to the presence of {-ʃ} on the subject. The data appears to confirm the hypothesis: of the 17 subjects that are the first appearance of that referent in the text (regardless of their switch topic status), only 3 (17.65%) are {-ʃ}-marked. These 14 cases of subjects introducing new referents into the discourse account for account for 40% of switch-topic subjects that do not have {-ʃ}.

## 3. Discussion

It was shown (Table 2) that the use of {-ʃ} with kin terms occurs almost exclusively with syntactic subjects. Given that subjects and topics are closely related both diachronically (Shibatani 1991) and synchronically, this suggests that {-ʃ}, at least when used with nominal referents, is a kind of topic marker. Additional evidence for the analysis of {-ʃ} as a topic marker comes from the fact that {-ʃ} also serves as a conditional marker for verbs. Haiman (1978) was the first to point out that for some languages, conditionals and topics share the same phonetic shape, as is the case for Chitimacha. Haiman explains this by showing that topics and conditionals actually share similar semantics and tend to arise from a common historical origin. Part of the meaning of a conditional is to say, 'given the fact that X, then Y'. Likewise, to establish something as a topic is to take that particular discourse entity as given. It is part of the background against which the rest of the event takes place.

The analysis of {-ʃ} as a topic marker may also explain the presence of stem-final /ʃ/ and /s/ in each of the pronouns. Historically the pronouns, being the most topical, would have frequently received topic marking. Once the two forms co-occurred frequently enough, speakers may have reanalyzed {-ʃ} as part of the stem. Similar patterns can be seen for other highly topical words. Many of the most frequent nouns in the corpus, such as *panʃ* 'person' and words for common animals such as *kiʃ* 'dog', all end in a stem-final /ʃ/ or /s/. These are probably all cases of a historically lexicalized {-ʃ}.

It was also shown that not all subjects are marked with {-ʃ}. Only subjects that create a switch in topic, defined as the second of two consecutive subjects that are non-coreferential, can receive {-ʃ} marking. While this further elucidates the function of {-ʃ}, it still does not explain why some switch-topic subjects receive the {-ʃ} marker and others do not. To explain this discrepancy, it was shown that {-ʃ}-marked noun phrases by and large do not introduce new referents into the discourse, and that noun phrases which do introduce new referents explain 40% of the cases where a subject is switch topic but not {-ʃ}-marked.

Taken together, these details paint a picture of a morpheme whose function is to signal the reactivation of some prior referent in the discourse. One can see this pattern at work in examples (2)–(8) above. In sentence (4), the subject *we kʔinkkʔank ʔunkʔuʃ* 'one of the girls' reactivates the referent from (2) two sentences prior, where 'those girls' were introduced into the discourse. Sentence (5) then changes the topic to *ʔiʃ koːkʃ* 'my aunt', who can be assumed to be among 'those girls'. In sentence (6) there is no {-ʃ}-marking because there is no switch in subject. The referent ('my aunt') is already activated and on stage, so there is no need to reactivate a prior referent. Sentence (7) then switches the subject to 'my father', also introduced for the first time in (2). Here, five sentences later, he is reactivated and brought back into the discourse, accompanied by {-ʃ}. This stretch of narrative is also illustrative of one of the more common uses of {-ʃ}, marking the beginning of each new turn in a conversational exchange, and therefore frequently occurring on the subject noun phrase of verbs like *teːt-* 'say', *wopma-* 'ask', and *his nuyti-* 'reply'.

All of these facts suggest a function for {-ʃ} similar to Japanese *wa*, which Clancy & Downing (1987) show has a locally contrastive use. They note that 76% of uses of *wa* in their data involve switch subjects, but like Chitimacha {-ʃ} not all instances of *wa* are switch subjects. A switch subject is just one of the several different types of local contrast that *wa* may convey. In Chitimacha too, {-ʃ}-marked subjects occur frequently with a contrastive use, such as the subject noun phrase following *tewe* 'but' in (9).

(9) *kaːkwi kʔan ʔaʃt ʔutʃ͡iːkʔʃ panʃ ne kap natʃ͡spikminaʔa,*
to.know not how doing people even INCEP they.began
'I do not know how people started up,

*teweːʃ wejtukʔu we ʔasi-ʃ hank ʔap nenʃwiʔi.*
but that.is.how the man-TOP here to.here he.crossed.water
but that is how **the man** came over here.' (A01d.4)

It is likely that further investigation will reveal the primary function of {-ʃ} to convey local contrast in a manner similar to *wa*. The present study, however, has merely established its switch-topic use; whether {-ʃ} in fact marks the broader function of local contrast is a project left to future studies.

This paper has made progress in describing the discourse function of the ubiquitious morpheme {-ʃ} in Chitimacha, but much work still remains to be done. The results of this study should be confirmed for other types of referents on the topic hierarchy, to see if {-ʃ} follows similar distributional patterns with referents that are more or less topical than kin terms. From there, the analysis can be expanded to other word classes that sometimes function nominally,

such as participles and adjectives, to see if they too follow a similar pattern. It would also be revealing to see how {-ʃ} interacts with definiteness, or the nominal marking of grammatical relations. The ultimate goal of such research would be to provide a unified analysis, likely partially diachronic in nature, of the uses of {-ʃ} across the various parts of speech, and the grammaticalization pathways through which they developed. This paper has attempted a small step in that direction.

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