Lessons from an isolate: Chitimacha diachrony in areal perspective

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Within historical linguistics, language isolates are often viewed as a problem. Their isolate status makes it difficult to peer into their history, and internal reconstruction is generally thought to be of limited utility. Campbell (2013:170–172) briefly discusses how historical linguists might productively gain insights into the diachrony of language isolates, but notes the "frequent sentiment that it is not to be tolerated that there should be languages with no relatives" (p. 170).

Chitimacha (ISO 639-3: ctm) is one such isolate from Louisiana. It was documented extensively by Albert S. Gatschet, John R. Swanton, and Morris Swadesh from 1881–1934 (Gatschet 1881a; Gatschet 1881b; Gatschet 1883; Swanton 1908; Swanton 1920; Swadesh 1939), and its last native speaker passed away in 1939. Very little has been published on the language, and the majority of what has been published reflects the sentiment mentioned by Campbell – attempts to resolve Chitimacha's isolate status by incorporating it into this or the other language family (Swanton 1919; Swadesh 1946; Swadesh 1947; Haas 1951; Haas 1952; Gursky 1969; Brown, Wichmann & Beck 2014). None of these proposals has been widely accepted (Campbell & Kaufman 1983; Kimball 1992; Kimball 1994; Campbell 1997).

This talk attempts to view Chitimacha's status not as a problem to be solved, but as a potential treasure trove of insights into the social and linguistic history of both the Chitimacha language and the Southeast U.S. more generally. Because of the limited accessibility of the Chitimacha corpus until recently, and the prevailing interest in language classification, the precise nature of Chitimacha's participation in the Southeast linguistic area has until now remained largely uncertain. This talk uses language-internal evidence to shed some initial light onto that history and the relationship between Chitimacha and the other languages of the Southeast.

In this talk I examine the language-internal evidence for the diachrony of three major grammatical features of Chitimacha: positional auxiliary verbs, switch-reference, and agent-patient alignment. Using archival data from Morris Swadesh (1939), I show that each of these features has a clear, language-internal diachronic pathway, wherein existing lexical and grammatical material were recruited for these new functions. However, each of these features is shared by other unrelated languages of the Southeast U.S., suggesting that their development in Chitimacha was in fact motivated by contact. How then did Chitimacha borrow these structural features without borrowing any lexical or grammatical material?

Following Mithun (2012), I propose that multilingual speakers in the Southeast carried over discourse-level patterns of managing information flow into Chitimacha, and that as these discourse patterns became more frequent and routinized, they grammaticalized into major features of Chitimacha grammar. It is not grammatical structures themselves that are borrowed, but rather a preference for packaging information in discourse in ways that parallel grammatical structures in the original language.

The existence of these shared structural patterns between Chitimacha and other languages shows that Chitimacha is indeed situated firmly within the Southeast linguistic area. Chitimacha's isolate status, rather than forming a barrier to our understanding of Southeastern history, in fact provides a unique window into the history of the Southeast, as well as mechanisms of contact-induced grammatical change.

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