

Them Fred:

Factors in the evolution of a Tsimshianism

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Note: At the 1980 Salish conference, Jean Mulder presented some examples of Tsimshianisms in the English spoken by the Coast Tsimshian people. The expressions she mentioned were all very familiar to me from my work among the Nisghas (who speak the Nass River dialect of Nass-Gitksan). One of these examples was the expression them So-and-So, which we both found particularly puzzling since it is not a direct calque of a Tsimshian structure. My analysis of the origin of this expression and of the evolution of its meaning is based on Nisgha only, as I have no direct evidence on how far it is applicable to the other Tsimshian languages. However, I believe that it also has more general interest as an example of what happens to languages in the course of the change from a bilingual to a monolingual situation.

The brand of English spoken by persons whose linguistic background is one of the Tsimshian languages includes an expression consisting of them followed by a name, as in them Fred. This normally means 'the group including Fred, Fred and those with him, Fred and his group (e.g. his fishing crew, his family)', Fred being considered the most important person or the relevant representative of the group. For some younger speakers it can also mean simply Fred.

The Tsimshian source of this expression includes a particle, dim in Coast Tsimshian, dip in Nass-Gitksan, which has several pluralizing functions, none of which however corresponds to those of Standard English them. The clues to the use of English them in them Fred and to the rise of a singular meaning for the expression can be found in the interaction of various factors:

1. the meanings and uses of the Tsimshian particle;
2. the local, Tsimshianized English equivalents of the Tsimshian structures containing the particle, and of structures related to it;
3. the functional or pragmatic context of usage of the English expression.

When these factors are considered, them Fred turns out to be, for bilinguals, the most effective way to translate the corresponding Tsimshian structure; but among those who have lost contact with the language, this expression has acquired a life

of its own and a new singular meaning; an alternative plural expression is also based on a Tsimshian structure.

I Nisgha equivalent of them Fred:

The Nisgha equivalent of them Fred is dip Fred, the meaning of which is always plural: it does not designate Fred, but the group of which Fred is the salient representative. The expression can be expanded to include the other member or members of the group, for instance

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| dip Fréd qans Máry ¹ | Fred and Mary |
| dip Fréd qans nákst | Fred and his wife |
| dip Fréd qans huwákk ^w t | Fred and his brothers |
| dip Fréd qan ¹ laqac'ú.t | Fred and those with him (lit. the rest of him) |

However, such specification is rarely necessary in a society where people are all familiar with each other's habits and the company they usually keep. So dip Fred means Fred and whoever is usually associated with him. Dip means that a group is referred to, Fred specifies the representative membership of the group.

II Other uses of dip:

Dip is associated with the plural in two other kinds of structures.

1. with demonstratives:

Dip pluralizes the demonstratives gun 'this' and gus 'that': thus dip gun 'these', dip gús 'those'. These demonstratives may be adjectives or pronouns. When used pronominally, dip gun and dip gus always refer to a group of people: 'these people, those people'. They are often used where English would use they or them, especially with some emphasis. For instance, suppose a group of strangers arrives in a village: reactions might be

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ná'yima [?] as dip gúsdi | I wonder who <u>they</u> are |
| háwíndi ^{ki} ni g'á [?] as dip gús | I've never seen <u>them</u> before |

Here again, the use of dip implies the existence of a group, the demonstrative gun or gus specifies the membership of the group.

2. with independent pronouns: (non-clitic pronouns):

Dip is also used optionally as a kind of reinforcement of the plural or group meaning, before the second and third person plural independent pronouns ńísim 'you (pl.)' and ńídi.t 'they, them'. (I am not sure whether it can be used with the first person plural). Here dip does not add grammatical meaning and seems purely pleonastic. But the addition of dip here means that all groups may be referred to by an expression consisting of dip and a second element specifying group membership, whether a name, a demonstrative or a plural pronoun. The structure dip + specifier element provides an easy and economical way to designate groups.

III Fitting English words into the Tsimshian structural framework:

Standard English does rather poorly at expressing these regularities. There is no single structure which can be used conveniently for the designation of groups, and especially there is no ready way to translate dip Fred.

Perhaps the easiest expression to translate is dip gus, as those people or those guys. The principal lexical meaning here is carried by those, the word people or guys adding little except an emphasis on the plural meaning. Similarly, in dip gus, the lexical meaning is carried by gus, the plural meaning by dip.

Dip gus 'those people', once mentioned, can be replaced by ńídi.t or dip ńídi.t 'they, them'. If dip gus is those guys, then dip ńídi.t is them guys, an expression which is also used by many native speakers of English to mean 'those guys' and can therefore be considered interchangeable with it.

The addition of the word guys to reinforce the plural meaning of a plural pronoun also provides a convenient way to differentiate between the singular and plural uses of English you: Nisgha has ńi.n for the singular and ńísim or dip ńísim for the plural. The Nisghaized English paradigm them guys, you guys is completed with us guys.

In this new paradigm, the word guys is used as a slightly emphatic plural particle, adjunct to the ordinary English plural pronouns; this corresponds to the use of dip with the Nisgha plural pronouns:

| | | |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| (dip?) ńú.ń | (dip) ńísim | (dip) ńídi.t |
| ús (guys) | yóu guys | them (guys) |

We might say that guys is the functional equivalent of dip in this paradigm. However, this is not true in all cases. In the third person, there is another paradigm intersecting with this one. Dip ńídi.t can be translated as them guys or them, but so can dip gus. In both cases, dip indicates the plural, and so does them. In dip ńídi.t, or in them guys, both elements refer to a group, and it is difficult to tell which element best embodies the lexical as opposed to the grammatical meaning of the expression, or which English element corresponds to which Nisgha element. In dip ńídi.t, the second element ńídi.t does not add much in specificity to the group reference of dip; similarly, in them guys the first element them is enough to express the group meaning, and guys does not add much. If them guys is used to translate dip gus, the demonstrative meaning of gus is lost in the translation, but not the group meaning expressed by dip. Therefore, in these third person expressions, them, not guys, can be interpreted as the equivalent of dip. If then dip ńídi.t or dip gus are them guys, designating a group with a rather vague specification, dip Fred will naturally be them Fred: dip or them designate the group, the second element specifies its membership, in the following paradigm:

| | | | |
|-----|--------|------|------|
| dip | ńídi.t | | |
| | gus | them | guys |
| | Fred | | Fred |

IV From plural to singular meaning through contextual ambiguity:

The use of them Fred as a translation of dip Fred is standard local Nisgha English, even for people who do not use us guys or them guys. Like dip Fred, them Fred for most speakers has the plural meaning 'Fred and his group.'

The singular use of this expression--them Fred meaning simply 'Fred'--also occurs, but it is my impression that it is restricted to children and very young people, who do not themselves speak Nisgha and therefore do not relate them Fred to dip Fred, and dip Fred to dip gus, dip ńídi.t and dip ńísim. When them Fred is no longer anchored

available to children are in the context of usage of the expression, and there are many opportunities for misunderstanding. Since them Fred refers to a group by mentioning a single representative individual, many utterances can be interpreted as referring to this single individual where in fact the speaker means a group:

Don't play with them John

I am going to phone them Sally

Go over to them Granny's house

Them Fred's having a party tonight

In the speech of some younger people, then, them Fred has become at least ambiguous, if not fully singular. But the need to express dip Fred still exists, even if them Fred no longer serves the purpose, and Tsimshian structure again provides a solution. We saw above that the expanded form of dip Fred, as in dip Fred qans Mary, is easily translated as Fred and Mary. Similarly, dip Fred qan̄̄ ʔaqac'ú.t 'Fred and those with him' becomes the unambiguously plural Fred and them.

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