

### A preliminary note on Tsimshian oblique subjects<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sentence word order in Coast and Southern Tsimshian (hence CST) is quite regular when full nominals express all arguments. There is by now an extensive literature dealing with this matter in CST and related languages. The basic CST facts, which are not at all controversial, are these: the verb complex is sentence initial, followed in intransitives by the theta-agent or theta-patient argument. In transitives the order is verb, theta-agent NP, theta-patient NP<sup>2</sup>. Sentences with oblique arguments place them last, following a common prepositional connective. Verbs that incorporate the theta-patient are the result of lexical word formation rules; they are D-structure intransitives with a [\_\_\_\_ theta-agent] semantic function frame. Connectives tie the verb complex and its arguments into readily identifiable **INFL PHRASE (IP)** units:<sup>3</sup>

- 1) [IP INFL V-conn<sup>II</sup> agent(-conn<sup>III</sup> oblique) ]
- 2) [IP INFL V-conn<sup>II</sup> patient(-conn<sup>III</sup> oblique) ]
- 3) [IP INFL V-conn<sup>I</sup> agent-conn<sup>II</sup> patient(-conn<sup>III</sup> oblique) ]

The connectives (**conn<sup>I</sup>**, **conn<sup>II</sup>**, **conn<sup>III</sup>**) represent discreet inflection paradigms (See Boas 1911 and Dunn 1979). **AGR** in **INFL** marks the number of the argument following **conn<sup>II</sup>**. It follows that **conn<sup>II</sup>** is the nominative case marker and that **conn<sup>I</sup>** is the accusative case marker.

Standard theory assumes that verbs directly theta govern direct objects (which **conn<sup>I</sup>** case marks in CST) and indirectly or compositionally theta govern subjects (which **conn<sup>II</sup>** case marks in CST). Chomsky (1981:145) notes that George (1980) claims that "prepositional particles that are transparent to selectional features of the verb (i.e., the verb selects the object of the particle) are Case-markers, not prepositions in the *X*-bar system." In such a situation the verb and the prepositional particle/Case-marker compositionally determine the theta-role of the object of the latter (Chomsky 1981:93). The CST data indicate that Tsimshian prepositions (**conn<sup>III</sup>**) are of this type. CST verbs then compositionally theta-govern their transitive subjects and oblique arguments. A particular composition, e.g., a predicate, consisting of a V and its object, normally assigns only one theta role (See e.g., Marantz 1984:22; Chomsky 1986:3). *X*-bar theory allows for and, in the circumstance under discussion, demands the participation of the V in more than one theta-marking composition. Since strict CST word order is V + agent + patient + oblique, and since word order is a paramount datum for the language acquirer, it follows that (1) the CST verb directly theta marks its NP complement, its object, with theta-agent role, (2) the CST verb along with its object compositionally theta marks the subject of the

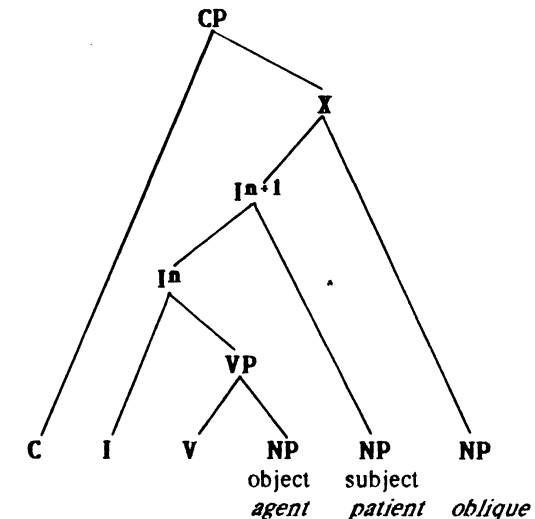
<sup>1</sup>The author has presented earlier versions of this paper to the Western Conference on Linguistics (Dunn 1985) and to students and faculty at the University of Western Ontario (Dunn 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Theta-patient here refers to both patient and theme arguments.

<sup>3</sup>After Chomsky 1986.

sentence with theta-patient role, (3) the verb, along with the direct object and **subject** compositionally theta-marks the oblique argument. It further follows that the oblique argument has the status of specifier not complement and is therefore a subject rather than an object. If a projection of **INFL** which includes V and its complement can compositionally theta-govern its sister, the subject, one must allow that VP and subject, dominated by some higher node X, might compositionally theta-govern a NP sister to X. In other words *X*-bar theory must allow for the possibility of "indirect subjects:"

4)



In fact the CST data demand such an analysis. The theta-roles of the indirect arguments, those the **conn<sup>III</sup>** case marks, cannot be determined by their prepositions alone since CST has one, general-purpose preposition. Proclitics to the verb clearly play a necessary part in the assignment of theta-roles to oblique arguments. These facts lead inevitably to the conclusion that in CST the verb and **conn<sup>III</sup>** compositionally theta-govern the oblique argument at an *X*-bar projection level above that of the subject. The marking that this analysis gives to CST may be only apparent, an epiphenomenon of the current level of theory development. At any rate it is far less than the marking burden imposed by an analysis that characterizes CST as having

accusative syntax with ergative case marking and a universal subject movement rule into a language unique (or at least highly marked) empty category.

2. Examples from Boas 1911:360-362:

5)  
**da uks- heetgE auta a nE- dzoGa- aksEt**  
 then toward-water stand porcupine PREP possessive edge water  
 Then the porcupine stood **AT** the edge of the water

6)  
**hla bax- axhlgEt a nE- miyaan wii- samEnga**  
 past up arrive PREP possessive foot-of-tree great spruce  
 he came **UP TO** the foot of the great spruce tree

In both 5) and 6) the **PREP** is **a**. Yet in 5) its object names the place of porcupine's **orientation toward** the water as specified by the verb's proclitic **uks-**, while in 6) its object names the place **up to** which (from the proclitic **bax-**) the agent has moved.

3. Examples from the Beynon manuscripts, Story of Git'anmaks, volume 1, number 6.

p. 2, line 6:

7)  
**ahga demdi qahl- iyet 'a spaGa-get**  
 not will about walk-she PREP midst people  
 She was not (allowed) to walk **AMONG** the people

page 3, line 11:

8)  
**ada ksa-daohl -t 'a welpga**  
 and out go he PREP house  
 And he went **OUT OF** the house

In both 7) and 8) the **PREP** is again **a**. Yet the theta-role of the oblique argument in 7) is defined at least in part by the proclitic **qahl-**, while the proclitic in 8), **ksa-**, names the semantic function of the house.

4. Coast Tsimshian examples from Dunn 1979:135 :

9)  
**gwin- oy yuuta hlati- da hanaq**  
 goal throw man ball PREP woman  
 The man threw the ball **TO** the woman.

10)  
**kal- oy yuuta hanaqa- da hlat**  
 instrument throw man woman PREP ball  
 The man hit the woman **WITH** a ball

In 9) and 10) the same inflected form of the **PREP** precedes a theta-goal NP or a theta-instrument NP where the different verb proclitics name these functions in a simple and straightforward fashion.

5. Examples from Southern Tsimshian (Dunn 1979:135):

11)  
**kilamsimi hlat- it ee kabatgErhik**  
 you-give ball PREP PREP children  
 You gave a ball **TO** the children

12)  
**nah dzakwdi oli xwan -it ee laX likstaa**  
 past kill bear deer PREP PREP surface island  
 The bear killed a deer **ON** the island.

13)  
**kaXdi yawiwdi liksErga- it ee haqaXa**  
 open man door PREP PREP key  
 The man opened the door **WITH** a key.

The **PREP' -it ee** precedes a goal, a locative, and an instrument.

The theta-role assigned to the NP following the common preposition is clearly determined by the verb and proclitics to the verb. This means that the theta-roles of the objects of the preposition are assigned compositionally by the verb and preposition together. The preposition merely identifies its object as the one having some theta-role (other than agent or patient) that the verb and its proclitics require.

## 6. Additional examples.

6.1 Examples from Boas 1911:360-362:<sup>4</sup>

14)

**IEp- higusgErEsgE stsol- dA lax- aksEt**  
 self happy beaver PREP surface water  
 The beaver himself was happy **IN** the water

15)

**holtgE bAn- t- gEgA aksga**  
 full belly his PREP water  
 his belly was full **OF** water

16)

**ada al Ili- qlan- dauhlda asdE nE- ts!uwan sGaneestga**  
 and but on over leave PREP possessive top mountain  
 but he has gone **OVER** the top of the mountain

17)

**ada hausgA auta asgA stsolga**  
 then say porcupine PREP beaver  
 then porcupine said **TO** the beaver

18)

**ada haut naks- t as neet**  
 then say wife his PREP him  
 then his wife said **TO** him

19)

**da- yat astiwaal dEs nEgwaatga**  
 then say Asdiwal PREP his-father  
 said Asdiwal **TO** his father

20)

**dawula hausgA auta gEs niitga**  
 then say porcupine PREP him  
 then the porcupine said **TO** him

21)

**da wi-am-hausgA auta gEsgA stsolga**  
 then shout porcupine PREP beaver  
 then the porcupine shouted **TO** the beaver

6.2 Examples from the Beynon manuscripts, Story of Git'anmaks, volume 1, number 6, p. 2, line 4f.

22)

**Ada hlat wilat habolsga hlguhlgat asga 'nastobelsga welpga**  
 and past-he keep child PREP back house  
 And he kept his child **IN** the rear of the house

page 3, lines 4,5.

23)

**dat wiliilsga mes'aos 'a naget, 'a laX- Gaik- t,**  
 then-she rub red-ochre PREP her-body PREP surface breasts her  
 Then she rubbed red ochre **ON** her body, **ON** her breasts,

**adat gik ho'an Ga'anont 'asga mes'aos**  
 and-she again fill hands-her PREP red-ochre  
 and she smeared her hands **WITH** red ochre

lines 8,9.

24)

**da'alt hliita hana'aXga mes'aos 'asga haGosga iyota**  
 then rub woman red-ochre PREP back man  
 Then the woman rubbed red ochre **ON** the man's back

<sup>4</sup>Boas (1911:360-362) gives this paradigm for the prepositional connectives:

common nouns: a (indefinite)  
                   da (present indicative)  
                   asda (present subjunctive)  
                   gA (absent indicative)  
 proper nouns: as (indefinite)  
                   dEs (present)  
                   gEs (absent)  
 contracted with demonstrative d- and g-  
                   dEda, dEsda, gEgA, gEsga.

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