A preliminary note on Tsimshian oblique subjects

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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. 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:  

1) IP INFL V-conII agent(-connIII oblique)  
2) IP INFL V-conII patient(-connIII oblique)  
3) IP INFL V-conI agent-conII patient(-connIII oblique)

The connectives (connI, connII, connIII) represent discret inflection paradigms (See Boas 1911 and Dunn 1979). AGR in INFL marks the number of the argument following connII. It follows that connII is the nominative case marker and that connI is the accusative case marker.

Standard theory assumes that verbs directly theta govern direct objects (which connI case marks in CST) and indirectly or compositionally theta govern subjects (which connII 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 (connIII) 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 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:"

In fact the CST data demand such an analysis. The theta-roles of the indirect arguments, those the connIII 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 connIII 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 ukts- heedE auta a ne- dzoga- aksE
down toward-water stand porcupine PREP possessive edge water
Then the porcupine stood AT the edge of the water

6) hla bax- axhigEt 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- iyot 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-dasdi -it 'a weipga
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 daakwdi oli xwan- it ee laX likstaa
past kill bear deer PREP PREP surface island
The bear killed a deer ON the island.

13) kaalidi yawswdi likrErga- it ee haxaXa
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 1911:360-362^4

14) IEp- hIugEreEsgE stslol- dA lax- aksEs
self happy beaver PREP surface water
The beaver himself was happy IN the water

15) holgE bAn- t- gEgA aksga
full belly his PREP water
his belly was full OF water

16) ada al li- qan- dauhida asdE nE- tIuwE nGaneestga
and but on over leave PREP possessive top mountain
but he has gone OVER the top of the mountain

17) ada hausgA auta asgA stslolga
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 asiwaal dEs nEgwastga
then say Asdiwal PREP his-father
said Asdiwal TO his father

20) dawuia hausgA auta gEs niitga
then say porcupine PREP him
then the porcupine said TO him

21) da wi-am-hausgA auta gEsga stslolga
then shout porcupine PREP beaver
then the porcupine shouted TO the beaver


22) Ada hlat wiIat hboIsga hIugilgat asga 'nastobilgE 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) dawuia hlat wiliisga mes'agos 'a nalgE, '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.

24) Ada hlat ho'an Gn'ont 'asga mes'agos
and she again fill hands-her PREP red-ochre
and she smeared her hands WITH red ochre
lines 8.9.

24) Ada hlat hana'aIsga mes'agos 'asga haGosga iyota
then rub woman red-ochre PREP back man
Then the woman rubbed red ochre ON the man's back

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^4Boas (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, gEgsa.
References:


