

BETWEEN ERGATIVE AND ACCUSATIVE SYNTAX:
LESSONS FROM NISGHA/ENGLISH SYNTACTIC INTERFERENCE*

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Which of transitive subject (Agent) or object can be deleted under identity with a previously mentioned nominal is a crucial test of syntactic accusativity or ergativity. In this respect, English, which is syntactically accusative, and Nisgha, which is syntactically ergative, behave as textbook illustrations, with no common ground. This fact creates problems, both for bilingual speakers in trying to translate from one language into the other, and for the unwary investigator, who has to be able to distinguish between what is true language, and what can be attributed to interlanguage phenomena arising from interference between two incompatible systems.

The subject of this paper is therefore twofold: its major purpose is to provide a description of an aspect of Nisgha, thereby contributing to linguistic knowledge about a language with syntactic ergativity. The persistence of Nisgha syntactic patterns alien to English, when clothed in English words, confirms that the basic principle underlying Nisgha syntax is not the same as that underlying English syntax. Secondly, this paper also illustrates how 'the presence of the observer affects the outcome of the experiment'--how an investigator's method may unwittingly but crucially affect the data. Eliciting through translation is fraught with pitfalls if the sentences to be translated do not mean the same to the translator as to the investigator.

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to define ergativity: in the past few years this formerly obscure though well-defined term has emerged into the limelight, with very confusing results as different definitions vie for acceptance. The definition used here is the traditional one according to Kurylowicz, Comrie, Dixon, and several other specialists in ergative languages. The term 'ergativity' is applied to a precise linguistic complex, the central element of which is the marking of the transitive Agent differently from, and usually more strongly than, the transitive Object and the Intransitive Subject, which are marked by the same means. This contrasts with the identification of transitive Agent with intransitive Subject, contrasting with the specially marked transitive Object, in the accusative languages, a group which includes most European languages. These morphological phenomena usually have deeper syntactic repercussions as well, one of them being which of Agent or Object is deleted under identity

with an item in a previous clause: a syntactically accusative language deletes the less marked Agent, but not the specially marked Object; a syntactically ergative language deletes the less marked Object, but not the specially marked Agent.

A very different model has been recently proposed by Marantz as 'the Ergativity Hypothesis' (1981); unlike the traditional definition which gave a name to a complex of facts observed in a number of languages, this model derives a new definition of what ergativity *should* mean, from the Government and Binding framework. Having redefined the term on theoretical grounds, Marantz then decides whether a language fits his definition. As it turns out, very few of the languages hitherto considered ergative fit the new criteria.

That Nisgha is syntactically ergative according to the traditional definition was first shown by Rigsby 1975, and the identification was confirmed in more detail by Tarpent 1982, which briefly mentions deletion under identity as part of a review of the traditional criteria of syntactic ergativity, showing that they apply to Nisgha. The conclusions in both these papers have been criticized by Belvin (1984, 1985) as showing that Nisgha is *not* syntactically ergative--according to Marantz. Actually, Belvin confirms Tarpent's traditional interpretation by default,¹ except in the case of deletion under identity--one of the few traditional criteria retained by Marantz--for which he gives (1984) countering data which are, as will be shown, unacceptable as evidence (see below p. 9).

Here I propose to give two kinds of data as proof that Nisgha does delete according to any definition of ergativity: first, spontaneous Nisgha data (as opposed to those elicited by translation), and second, interlanguage data which show bilinguals' attempts to cope with the differences between the two languages. It will be shown that Nisgha-influenced English continues the ergative syntactic pattern of Nisgha.

1 Conditions of deletion under identity:

In an accusative language, such as English, the transitive Agent (A) is deleted under identity with the transitive Agent or intransitive Subject (S) of a previous clause.

In an ergative language, such as Nisgha, the (transitive) Object (O) is deleted under identity with the O or S of a previous clause.

11 Agent deleted in English. Agent pronoun in Nisgha:

Where English deletes the second clause Agent (A₂) if identical to the first clause Agent (A₁) or Subject (S₁), the Nisgha equivalents must include an ergative (Agent) clitic pronoun in the second, dependent clause, whether or not a noun Agent is present as well.² Note that the Nisgha transitive clauses with the verb in initial position have primary stress on verb and nominal Object, secondary stress on nominal Agent. The stress pattern for verb and nominal Object does not change if there is no nominal Agent, only the clitic pronoun.

111 English A₂ deleted if identical to A₁:

- (1) **Mary** loves fish and hates meat.
*χlii't'ins Maryhl hoon iit qask'anh! smax.*³
χlii'-(t)?n-[ə]=s [t] **Màry**=χ hó:n ?i:-t qásq-?n=χ smáx⁴
sweet-CAUS-[CTL]=DC [DM] M.-NC fish and-3ERG bitter-CAUS=NC meat⁵
- (2) What is **Lucy** doing? -- Washing out the big pot.
Aguhl jijabis Lucy? -- Yukwt luuyo'okshl wii anjam.
?akú=χ cə) cáp-ə=s [t] **Lùcy** -- yukw-t lu:=yó?oks=χ wí: ?ancám
what=NC PROG)do.s.-CTL=DC [DM] L. -- AUX-3ERG in=wash.s.=NC big pot

112 English A₂ deleted if identical to S₁:

- (3) **Mary** went in and saw Lucy (inside the house).
Ts'in t Mary iit ga'as Lucy (ts'im wilp).
čín t **Màry** ?i:-t kYá?=s [t] **Lúcy** čim wíp
enter DM M. and-3ERG see.s.=DC [DM] L. in house
- (4) **Mary** was afraid to meet a bear.
χbits'axw t Mary dimt saa luudaltkwhl smax.
χpicáx^w t **Màry** tim-t sa: lu:táltk^w=χ smáx
afraid DM M. FUT-3ERG possibly meet.s.=NC bear

12 Object deleted in Nisgha. Object pronoun in English:

Where Nisgha deletes the second clause Object (O₂) if identical to the first clause Object (O₁) or Subject (S₁), the English equivalents must include an accusative (Object) pronoun in the second clause. The Nisgha stress pattern of primary stress on the verb, secondary stress on the Agent noun does not change if there is no nominal Object. This is true of both dependent and independent Nisgha clauses.

121 Nisgha O₂ deleted if identical to O₁:

- (5) *χlii't'ins Maryhl hoon iit qask'ans Lucy loot.*
Mary loves **fish**, but Lucy hates **it**.
χlii'-(t)?n-[ə]=s [t] **Màry**=χ hó:n ?i:-t qásq-?n=s [t] **Lùcy** lo:-t⁶
sweet-CAUS-[CTL]=DC [DM] M. fish and-3ERG bitter-CAUS=DC [DM] L. IND-3
- (6) *Nigit χlii't'ins Lucyhl hoona? -- Nii, k'ap qask'ant.*
Does Lucy like **fish**? -- No, she absolutely hates **it**.
ni:-kYi:-t χlii'-(t)?n=s [t] **Lùcy**=χ hó:n==a -- ni: qap qásq-?n-[ə]-t⁷
not-INT-3ERG sweet-CAUS=DC [DM] M. fish==Q -- no absolutely bitter-CAUS-[CTL]-3
- (7) *Niihl aam ni dim hooxhl wii anjamina?*
--K'ax hawín, yukwt luuyo'oks Lucy.
Can I use **your big cooking pot**?
--Just a minute, Lucy is washing it.
ni:=χ ?á:m nà tim hó:x=χ wí: ?ancám-n==a
not=NC good 1S.ERG FUT use.s.=NC big pot-2S==Q
*-- kYax hawín -- yuk^w-t lu:=yó?oks=[s] [t] **Lùcy***
-- just.a.minute not.yet -- AUX-3ERG in=wash.s.=[DC] [DM] L.

122 Nisgha O₂ deleted if identical to S₁:

- (8) *Ts'in t Mary iit gibas Lucy (galk).*
Mary went in and Lucy waited for **her** (outside).

čín t **Màry** ʔi:-t kʲipá=s [t] Lúcy (kʲàlq)
enter DM M. and-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] L. outside

- (9) *Hawínhl ksaxws Marya?*
--*Hawín, k'ay hiyukwt gibas Lucy (galk).*
Did **Mary** come out yet?
--Not yet; Lucy is still waiting for **her** (outside).

hawín=ʔ ksáx^W=s [t] **Màry**==(y)a
not.yet=NC go.out=DC [DM] M.==Q

-- hawín -- ʔay hí)yùk^W-t kʲipá=s [t] Lúcy (kʲàlq)
-- not.yet -- still PROG AUX-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] L. (outside)

- (10) *Ndahl wils Mary? -- Hats'dihl wii us.*
What happened to **Mary**? -- A big dog bit **her**.

ntá=ʔ wíl=s [t] **Màry** -- háč-t-ə=ʔ⁷ wí: ʔùs
which.way=NC do=DC [DM] M. -- bite.s.-CTL-CTL=NC big dog
act

- (11) *Sim xbits'axw t Mary hlaat hats'ihl wii us.*
Mary was really scared when the big dog bit **her**.

sim xpíčáxw t **Màry** ʔa:-t háč-ə=ʔ⁷ wí: ʔùs
really afraid DM M. now-3ERG bite.s.-CTL=NC big dog

2 Resolving the potential ambiguity of a single noun in the second clause:

In the examples in 11 above, the Agent in the second clause (which is a dependent clause) is the 3ERG pronoun **t**, and the following noun is the Object. In the examples in 12, (except (11) where the second clause is independent), the second clause Agent is represented both by this pronoun and by a noun⁸, and there is no overt Object. In both cases, then, the dependent clause includes both a 3ERG pronoun, and a single noun, which may or may not corefer with the pronoun.

For instance, given the complete sentence:

- (12) *Yukwt gibas Mary t Lucy.*
Mary is waiting for Lucy.

yuk^W-t kʲipá=s [t] **Màry** t Lúcy
AUX-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] M. DM L.

one can omit either the Agent noun (though not the pronoun), thus:

- (13) *Yukwt gibas Lucy.*
She is waiting for Lucy.

yuk^W-t kʲipá=s [t] Lúcy
AUX-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] L.

or the Object noun:

- (14) *Yukwt gibas Mary.*
Mary is waiting for her.

yuk^W-t kʲipá=s [t] **Màry**
AUX-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] M.

This means that there could be ambiguity as to whether the single noun in a dependent transitive clause⁹ should be interpreted as the Agent or the Object of the verb.

This ambiguity is mostly a theoretical possibility: In normal spoken Nisgha, there is very little cause for ambiguity, first because the stress pattern gives stronger stress to Object than Agent, and also because these sentences occur in discourse where surrounding utterances, or internal details, make the interpretation clear. However, ambiguity can indeed occur especially under artificial conditions such as writing, which does not indicate differential stress, or elicitation by a linguist, where a speaker's deliberately slow and careful delivery of sentences often devoid of meaningful context may interfere with the normal stress patterns and produce ambiguous results. The linguist from an accusative language background also has a built-in bias towards interpreting the single noun as the Object.¹⁰ The question therefore must be addressed. There could be ambiguity in the written sentence

- (15=14) *Yukwt gibas Mary.*

which could mean either:

- (a) S/he is waiting for Mary,
or (b) Mary is waiting for him/her.

In normal spoken Nisgha, there is no ambiguity, even out of context, since the Agent noun has weaker stress than the verb and the Object:

- (15a) yukw-t kYipá=s [t] Máry (Mary is the Object)
AUX-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] M.

- (15b=14) yukw-t kYipá=s [t] Máry (Mary is the Agent)

In written Nisgha, the sentence is indeed ambiguous, but improbable as it seems to a person used to the accusative pattern, it is more likely to be interpreted as (b) than (a): If animate, the single noun following the verb is more likely to be taken as the co-referring Agent than the Object. (The appendix below gives a sample of sentences from a story, showing the relative frequency of the two interpretations).

Where the Object is Inanimate, ambiguity is rarely possible, even in writing. For instance, starting from the complete sentence

- (16) Yukwt luuyo'oks Lucyhl wii anjam.
Lucy is washing out the big pot.

yuk^W-t lu:=yó'oks=[s] [t] Lúcy=χ²wi: ?ancám
AUX-3ERG in=wash.s.=[DC] [DM] L.=NC big pot

It is obvious that it is the Agent noun that is omitted in

- (17) Yukwt luuyo'okshl wii anjam.
She is washing out the big pot.

yuk^W-t lu:=yó'oks=χ²wi: ?ancám
AUX-3ERG in=wash.s.=NC big pot

and the Object noun in

- (18) Yukwt luuyo'oks Lucy.
Lucy is washing it.

yuk^W-t lu:=yó'oks=[s] [t] Lúcy
AUX-3ERG in=wash.s.=[DC] [DM] L.

but even an inanimate noun can be Agent, as in:

- (19) xho'okshl an'uníy² wilt mihlihl sdatx.
I have a rash on my hand from stinging nettles. (lit. ... where nettles burned it).

xhó'oks=χ²?an?ún-y² wil-t mǎ-ð=χ²stàtx
with.rash-NC hand-1S where-3ERG burn-CTL-NC nettles

Yet another source of disambiguation which does not depend on stress is number agreement between the verb and the Object, not the Agent.¹¹ For instance Belvin (1984:44) gives the following example as supposed proof that Nisgha, like English, deletes the Agent, not the Object:

- (20) Mimk' t Mary iit sayt luudimda²hl k'ubatk'ihikw. (= B's (52))
Mary smiled and hugged the children.

mímq² t Máry ?i:-t sayt lu:=tim)tám=χ²kupa:-tk²Yík^W 12
smile DM M. and-3ERG together in=PL)press.s.=NC little.PL-child

First of all, the Agent is not deleted, since it is the 3ERG pronoun. Second, the verb has the plural form *luudimda²hl* *lu:=tim)tám*, not the singular form *luuda²hl* *lu:=tám*, agreeing with the plural noun *k'ubatk'ihikw* *kupa:-tk²Yík^W*, which is therefore its Object.

With the singular form of the verb, the sentence would also be unambiguous, since the plural noun *k'ubatk'ihikw* *kupa:-tk²Yík^W* could only be the Agent:

- (21) Mimk' t Mary iit luuda²hl k'ubatk'ihikw.
Mary smiled and the children hugged her.

mímq² t Máry ?i:-t lu:=tám=χ²kupa:-tk²Yík^W
smile DM M. and-3ERG in=PL)press.s.=NC little.PL-child

Note again the difference in stress pattern, which is obvious in a normal conversational tone, but may not be apparent with artificially slow delivery. In (22) as in (15) above, the stress pattern is the only difference between sentences with a singular Agent or Object; however, a Nisgha speaker reading aloud a sentence like the following line would be more likely to read it as (a) (with Agent noun) than (b) (Object noun):

- (22) Mimk' t Mary iit luuda²hl hlgutk'ihikw.
Mary came in ... (a) ... and the child hugged her.

mímq² t Máry... ... ?i:-t lu:=tám=χ²ku-tk²Yík^W
smile DM M. ... and-3ERG in=PL)press.s.=NC little-child

... (b) ... and hugged the child.
... ?i:-t lu:=tám=χ²ku-tk²Yík^W

With a plural animate noun in the first clause, there would be no ambiguity either, since the 3ERG Agent pronoun in the second clause is matched by a 3PL suffix only when under identity with a noun in the first clause, as in (23b):

- (23) *Mimk'hi haanak'* (a) ... *iit luudimda'mhi k'ubatk'ihikw.*
The women smiled ... and the children hugged them.
- mímq=χ ha:nàq* ... ?l:-t lu:=tim)tám=χ kupa:-tkʷɪkʷ
smile=NC woman.PL ... and-3ERG in=PL)press.s.=NC little.PL-child
- (b) ... *iit luudimda'mdiithi k'ubatk'ihikw.*
... and hugged the children.
- ... ?l:-t lu:=tim)tám-ti:t=χ kupa:-tkʷɪkʷ
... in=PL)press.s.-3PL=NC ...

To summarize: unless there is a contextual indication to the contrary, the single noun following a verb preceded by a 3ERG clitic pronoun will most likely be interpreted as co-referring with this pronoun and indicating the Agent, rather than the Object. This is in keeping with the ergative syntactic pattern, which deletes the Object but not the Agent.

3 Interlanguage phenomena:

The brand of English spoken by most persons of Nisgha background contains strong elements of an interlanguage (here called N-English) mediating between English and Nisgha, trying to fit English words into Nisgha grammatical structures and modes of thought. Similarly some bilingual speakers asked to translate an English text into Nisgha tend to stick very close to English surface structure, resulting in strange sentences if not in misunderstandings: these can be called instances of E-Nisgha.

31 N-English follows Nisgha in omitting Object pronouns:

Since Nisgha does not always require Object pronouns, N-English does not either, hence sentences such as¹³

- (24) They ran after him and picked up (= picked him up).
(25) They heard him, but couldn't see (= couldn't see him).
(26) He heard women giggling beside him and made an attempt to grab (= to grab them).
(27) The children like bright colors, so I like to wear (= wear them).

Using an English Object pronoun in the second clause would sound emphatic to a speaker of N-English, especially since there are cases where English does not use such pronouns: witness written instructions such as recipes, and newspaper headlines and captions, which delete more than the normal range of both nouns and pronouns. Nisgha syntax and English telegraphic style converge in sentences such as

(28) The method of preserving this fruit was to cook until tender, strain, and mix in a mixture of oolichan grease and water.

32 E-Nisgha follows English in adding Object pronouns:

Asking for Nisgha translations of English utterances containing pronouns frequently results in Nisgha sentences containing overt pronouns, as the Nisgha speaker strives to approximate the English utterance: to a speaker of N-English, which often does not use such pronouns, the Object pronoun obligatorily present in a Standard English sentence seems an emphatic addition, which must be specially translated.

For instance, asked to translate *Ga'ay' kʷáʔ-ə-ŷ*, a bilingual speaker will most likely say 'I saw', even though when the word is placed in a context such as (29), it is obvious that an O is implied and that the proper English translation requires an O pronoun:

(29) *Nii mi ga'as Marya?* -- *Ga'ay'.*

Have you seen **Mary**? --Yes. (lit. I saw **her**)

ni: mə kʷáʔ=s **Máry**==(y)a -- kʷáʔ-ə-ŷ
not 2S.ERG see.s.=DC M.=Q -- see.s.-CTL-1S

Conversely, asked to translate **I saw her** (especially out of context), a bilingual speaker is likely to interpret this as emphatic: **I saw her**, and to add to the sentence the third person singular pronoun *ñft*, thus

(30) *Ga'ay' ñft*

kʷáʔ-ə-ŷ ñft
see.s.-CTL-1S h.

even though this sentence would not be uttered spontaneously.¹⁴ In normal Nisgha discourse, *ñft* is emphatic and used almost only in initial, focused position,¹⁵ as in

- (31) *Nithl ga'ay*
That's who I saw, that's the one I saw, I saw him/her
- ńít=ɣkʷǎʔ-ə-ŷ*
h.=NC see.s.-CTL-1S

Similarly, asked to translate **Lucy is waiting for her**, a bilingual speaker is likely to say

- (32) *Yukwt gibas Lucy ńit.*
- yuk^w-t kʷipá=s [t] Lúcy ńít*
AUX-3ERG wait.for.s.=DC [DM] L. h.

rather than *Yukwt gibas Lucy* which would be the spontaneous utterance, for instance in answer to a question (as in (9) or (15)).

The major differences between the two languages, and the interlanguage phenomena, can be summarized in the following chart:

Standard Nisgha ===== Standard English	
<i>Ga'ay</i>	I saw him/her
<i>Nithl ga'ay</i>	I saw <u>him/her</u> (emphatic), that's who I saw
Standard English -----> E-Nisgha	
I saw him/her	<i>Ga'ay ńit</i>
Standard Nisgha -----> N-English	
<i>Ga'ay</i>	I saw

33 N-English follows Nisgha in deleting S₂ under identity with O₂:

The major characteristic of the ergative syntactic pattern is the identification of intransitive Subject and transitive Object in opposition to the transitive Agent. This is carried over in N-English, which deletes the Subject of the second clause under identity with the Object, not the Subject or Agent, of the previous clause. Consider the following Standard English

examples:

- (33) He washed and dried the dishes.
A₂ omitted (=A₁), O₁ omitted (=O₂)
- (34) He washed the dishes and dried them.
A₂ omitted (=A₁), O₂ (=O₁) is a pronoun
(English O₂ cannot be omitted)

Both these sentences are equivalent to the single Nisgha sentence¹⁶

- (35) *Yoo'aksithl no'ohl iit limlimkt.*
- yó:ʔoks-ə-t=ɣ nóʔoɣ ʔi:-t limlimkʷ-t*
wash.s.PL-CTL-3=NC dishes and-3ERG wipe.s.PL-3

where the Object noun is obligatorily in the first clause. A₂ and O₂ are both indicated by pronouns, but the O₂ pronoun is a suffix, not a separate word: there is no single word referring to the Object in the second clause.

It is not possible to omit the O₁ noun or replace it by a coreferent pronoun: the sentence

- (36) *Yoo'aksit iit limlimkhl no'ohl.*

is only grammatical if it means:

- (37) He washed them_i and (he) dried the dishes_j.

where *them* is understood to refer to another object than *dishes*

In N-English, as in Nisgha, only one sentence is possible as a translation of (35):

- (38) He washed the dishes and he dried (= he dried them)

which omits the English O₂ pronoun, but not the A₂ pronoun, as is normal in ergative syntax (see 12 above).

Now consider the following sentence:

- (39) He washed the dishes and they dried.

To a speaker of Standard English, the Subject pronoun *they* in the second clause (S₂) can only refer to the Object noun in the first clause (O₁): the dishes dried. But to a speaker of N-English, the use of *they* in the second clause indicates, not co-reference with O₁, but a second clause Agent (A₂): the meaning of (39) is interpreted as:

(39a) He washed the dishes and they [other people] dried them.

The N-English equivalent of (39) is

(40) He washed the dishes and dried (= and they dried)

which omits the S₂ pronoun under identity with the O₁ noun, as is normal in ergative syntax.

The same deletion of S₂ under identity with O₁ is displayed in the following examples:

(41) Ask for it and will be given to you (= and it will be given ...).

(42) Huge log jams piled on the rock, but remained put (= it remained put).

(43) The other children were acquainting him with his new surroundings and felt accepted (= and he felt accepted).

4 Concluding remarks:

The evidence of deletion under identity in both spontaneous Nisgha utterances and Nisgha-influenced English shows that Nisgha follows syntactic patterns characteristic of ergativity, patterns which persist when using English words. However, various factors both in the standard Nisgha language and in the interlanguage may obscure the significance of these patterns for the casual observer, and isolated data, especially those obtained by translation, may give the appearance of accusativity. Decisions about how to characterize the language cannot be made on the basis of a few sentences of the linguist's own choosing. It is necessary to work with many, larger samples of Nisgha speech uninfluenced by English structure, especially from older speakers.¹⁷

Ergativity (according to its traditional definition) is not an easy concept for most linguists to get into. In many respects, it is the mirror-image of accusativity, the pattern considered 'natural' by most Western linguists because of the biases of their own linguistic background¹⁸. As with an actual image in a mirror, the concept of reversal may be easy to grasp

intellectually, but working with it in practice is much more difficult: most people have little trouble with the reversal of one dimension, such as with right becomes left, or front becomes back, but having to reverse the other dimension *at the same time* can take a lot longer to get used to: the mirror image seems to insist on going in the wrong direction. Similarly, most Western linguists have no trouble dealing with some of the manifestations of ergativity, usually the morphology, but find others very puzzling, even aberrant, and try to reduce them to a familiar pattern; this is especially true of syntax.

Nisgha speakers have had to face the opposite problem when trying to square accusative English structures with their familiar ergative patterns. How they have solved this problem makes perfect sense when considered from the Nisgha language point of view, however unusual the solutions may seem to English speakers. To anyone investigating not only the Nisgha language, but ergativity in general, this point of view deserves to be heard.

APPENDIX

A single noun in a dependent transitive clause may be interpreted as either Agent (the most likely case, especially if it is animate) or Object. To show the relative frequency of these two interpretations, I give all the relevant examples from one short legend (Boas 1902:102-107). (The beginning of this story is also presented at the end of Boas 1911, with a detailed morphemic analysis which the reader can compare to mine). The story is summarized as follows:

A group of children were in the habit of playing inside a huge hollow log on the beach. One day an exceptionally high tide carried the log far off to sea. Becoming hungry, the children were able to catch seagulls by smearing the log with their own blood, to which the gulls' feet got stuck. One day they found themselves caught in a whirlpool, but they were rescued by Only-One-Leg, a seal hunter who harpooned the log and continued to look after them. When they expressed a desire to go back to their families, he lent them his magic canoe, which he kept well-hidden under a cover of little trees; this was a wise precaution since the canoe was actually *Laax'woosa'a la:xwó:sa?*, the cannibalistic monster with a voracious mouth at each end. The children were able to return safely home.

Passages relevant to the discussion are given in brief contexts in Modern Nisgha orthography and in translation; only the crucial portions, indicated in

bold type, are given in morpheme-by-morpheme transcription as well. Object pronouns necessary in English but not in Nisgha are underlined. References are to page and line number.

102.8-9 *Ñihl k'ii huxw pdalks, ñihl k'ii gigyookshl wii gan, ñihl k'ii ukws'ulkskw; nigit wilaaxhl k'ubatk'ihlkw.*

Then it was high tide again, and the huge log floated and drifted out to sea; **the children did not realize it.** (Clausal O)

ni:-kʷi:-t wilá:x=ʔ kupa:=tkʷiʔkʷ
not-INT-3ERG know.s.=NC little.PL=child

104.2-3 *Nigit di'akhkw diithl dim liibaykw diit-gi: tk'algwilgwalkwhl gats'uubeek'diit ahl gan. Ñihl k'ii dokhl k'yoolhl hlgutk'ihlkw.*

They [the seagulls] were unable to fly away: their webbed feet had dried stuck to the log. **Then one child took them.**

ñi=ʔ kʷi:-t tóq=ʔ kʷi:-t ʔku=tkʷiʔkʷ
that's=NC and-3ERG take.s.pl.=NC one.person=NC little=child

104.11-12 *Hlaa luut'iphitkwhl wii gan ahl dimt hlok'kwhl antk'ulibikskw.*

The huge log was up-ended, about to be swallowed by a whirlpool (lit. so that a whirlpool was about to swallow it)

ʔa=ʔ tām-t ʔóqkʷ=ʔ ʔantkuʔipikskʷ
PREP=NC FUT-3ERG swallow.s.=NC whirlpool

105.1 *Nigil daxwhl k'ubatk'ihlkw: dillmootgwihl gat-gi.*
The children did not die: **the man had rescued them.**

tā-lā-mó:tkʷ-ā=ʔ kʷiʔat==kʷiʔ
COM-PL-saved-CTL=NC man==DISTAL

105.2-3 *Wiihilhl k'ubatk'ihlkw, ñihl k'ii yukwt txook'ans K'am-K'iim-Asay.*

There were many children, and **Only-One-Leg was feeding them.**

ñi=ʔ kʷi:-t yukʷ-t txó:qan=s [t] qam-kʷiʔ-m ʔasáʔ
that's=NC and AUX-3ERG feed.s.pl=DC [DM] only-one-ATTR leg

105.2-4 *Hlaa iskwhl gageewit ahl ilx: ganit wilaa gahikwhl gat-gi.*

Now the area between his house and the beach reeked of seals; **the man kept on spearing them.**

qani:-t wila: kʷiʔkʷ=ʔ kʷiʔat==kʷiʔ
continuing-3ERG how spear.s.=NC man==DISTAL

105-9-10 *Ñihl k'ii ganit wilaa gahikws K'am-K'iim-Asayhl ilx, ñihl k'ii ganit wilaat baxwilgahl k'ubatk'ihlkw.*

Only-One-Leg kept on spearing seals, and the children kept on carrying them up [to his house].

ñi=ʔ kʷi:-t qani: wila:-t paʔ=wíq-ā=ʔ kupa:=tkʷiʔkʷ
that's=NC and continuing how-3ERG uphill=transport.s.pl.-CTL=NC
little.PL=child

106.2 *Tk'algyoohl maaliy duuw; dim hooyisim.*

My canoe is moored just over there; you will use it.

tām hó:x-ā-sām⁷
FUT use.s.-CTL-2P

106.7-8 *Ñihl k'ii gidaxs K'am-K'iim-Asay: "ñi mi sim wada?" Ñihl k'ii nittkwhl k'ubatk'ihlkw.*

Then **Only-One-Leg asked them:** "Did you find it?" and the children said no (lit. ... denied it). (Clausal O)

ñi=ʔ kʷi:-t kʷiʔtax=s [t] qam kʷiʔ-m ʔasáʔ
that's=NC and-3ERG ask.s.o.=DC [DM] only one-ATTR leg

ñi=ʔ kʷi:-t ní:tkʷ=ʔ kupa:=tkʷiʔkʷ
that's=NC and-3ERG deny.s.=NC little.PL=child

107.1-2 *Nigit moot'inh dim sqayeet loot: jidaat sqayoxkwhl gat, ñihl k'ii gipt.*

It did not spare anyone who went in front of it: **if a person went in front of it, it ate him.**

cāta:-t sqa=yóxkʷ=ʔ kʷiʔat
if-3ERG in.the.way=follow.s.=NC man

In 6 pages, there are 9 instances of dependent transitive clauses with

understood nominal Object, where the single noun in the clause co-refers with the ERG clitic pronoun, and 2 instances with understood clausal Object.

In contrast, there are only 3 instances where the single noun is the Object, and does not co-refer with the ERG pronoun: in each case, the Object noun refers to an Inanimate:

104.3 *Nihl k'iit luuhahlt'uxwt'akwhl t'imlanxt.*

Then he wrung **their** [the seagulls'] **necks**.

ni=χ k'Yi:-t lu:=haχ=tux^W t'ak^W=χ t'amlánx-t
that's=NC and-3ERG in-parallel-PL) wring.s.=NC neck-3

101.13 *Nihl k'iit gahikwhl wii gan ...*

Then he speared **the huge log** ...

ni=χ k'Yi:-t k'Yáχ^W=χ wí: qán
that's=NC and-3ERG spear.s.=NC big tree

106.12-13 *Nihl k'iit saat'ahlhl higu gan-gl.*

Then he removed **the little trees** [that concealed the canoe].¹⁹

ni=χ k'Yi:-t sa:=táχ-ə=χ χku qán==k'Yi
that's=NC and-3ERG off=place.s.pl.-CTL=NC little tree==DISTAL

Where an animate or a human Object is mentioned (in 2 instances), the singular Agent is indicated by an overt noun (in bold type) as well as by the clitic pronoun, preventing ambiguity:

105.12-13 *Nihl k'iit amqoohl k'ubatk'ihikwhl hla galaandiit.*

Then **the children** remembered those they had left behind.

ni=χ k'Yi:-t ?amqó:=χ kupa:=t'k'Yiχ^W=χ χ qalá:n-tl:t
that's=NC and-3ERG remember.s.=NC little.PL=child the behind-3P

106.3-4 *Nihl k'iit hashits K'am-K'iim-Asayhl k'ubatk'ihikw.*

Then **Only-One-Leg** sent the children [on their way].

ni=χ k'Yi:-t has)h'c=χ [t] qam k'Yiχ-m ?asáy=χ kupa:=t'k'Yiχ^W
that's=NC and-3ERG PL) send.s.=χ [DM] only one-ATTR leg=NC
little.PL=child

There are also 4 instances of an overt Object noun where the ERG clitic pronoun is reinforced by the Animate plural suffix showing plural Agent²⁰. As this pronoun cannot co-refer with a noun in the same clause, the single noun is unambiguously the Object.

NOTES

* Nisgha /nisqá?/ [nisGá?á] is one of the Tsimshianic languages, spoken in the Nass valley of British Columbia. The data presented here were collected during the course of my employment with the Bilingual/Bicultural Centre of B.C. School District #92, in 1977-80, in the summer of 1982, and in 1983-87. Analytical work on the language was supported by SSHRC doctoral fellowships held at the University of Victoria in 1981-82 and 1982-83. I have had the privilege to learn what Nisgha I know in its natural environment, from excellent speakers. I especially wish to thank, in alphabetical order, Mrs. Audrey A. Gosnell, Mrs. Nita Morven, Mrs. Rosie Robinson, Mrs. Verna Williams, all present or former teachers of the Nisgha language, and Mr. Harold Wright, who is an elder and a hereditary chief in the Eagle clan. Mr. Bert McKay, coordinator of the Bilingual/Bicultural Centre and a hereditary chief in the Frog/Raven clan, arranged for me to have access to these and other resource persons. The conclusions in this paper are my own, and I alone am responsible for any errors.

¹ As for instance in the following quote (Belvin 1985:60):

... most of Tarpent's arguments either show an intransitive agent [=Subject] patterning with a transitive patient [=Object] or else show that the transitive agent is treated differently from any other type of argument. But notice that this does not really establish Nisgha as [syntactically]-ergative *as Marantz and Levin have defined it*. [Italics mine].

² My interpretation of this fact is that the pronoun is the grammatical Agent, and the noun is an adjunct which indicates the semantic referent of the pronoun. Jelinek 1986 discusses whether the co-referent noun is Agent or adjunct, and follows Belvin in considering that the pronoun functions as an agreement marker. I believe this is incorrect and derives from Belvin's misunderstanding of a statement in Tarpent ms [1981]. In any event, which interpretation is correct does not affect the conclusions in this paper. I use the term 'Agent noun' or 'nominal Agent' instead of the more cumbersome 'Adjunct-to-Agent noun', since the noun is the semantic Agent.

³ Data are given both in the standard Nisgha orthography (initially developed

by Bruce Rigsby), which is a broad phonetic transcription, and in a basically phonemic morpheme-by-morpheme transcription, ignoring the morphophonemic changes which are represented in the standard orthography. This second transcription also includes primary and secondary stress. English names are not transcribed, but stress on them is indicated.

⁴ Deletion of elements between square brackets is phonologically conditioned. I did not recognize the deletion of the singular determinate marker *t* after /s/ until my 1986 paper, where it was mentioned in a footnote but not incorporated into the morpheme-by-morpheme description.

⁵ Abbreviations: ATTR attributive; AUX auxiliary; CAUS causative; CTL control (two different but associated suffixes); COM comitative; ERG ergative; DC determinate connective; DM determinate marker; FUT future; IND indirect pronoun; INT intensive; NC non-determinate connective; PL plural; PROG progressive; Q question. (The verbal suffix *-ə-* identified here as Control was erroneously called Ergative in my previous papers written between 1982 and 1986).

Morpheme separators: *-* separates most morphemes, including pronominal clitics; *)* follows a reduplicated syllable; *=* separates a proclitic (adverbial) from the following element, or a connective from a preceding element; *==* separates a postclitic (evidential) from the preceding element.

⁶ The sentence would be grammatical without the 3rd person indirect pronoun */oot lo:-t*, but not idiomatic; its presence here has a contrastive role and indicates the change from one participant to another.

⁷ The second clause in this example is an independent one, in which there is no ERG pronoun. The use of verbal suffixes also differs between dependent and independent clauses, cf. (11).

⁸ See note 2.

⁹ In an independent clause, there cannot be ambiguity, because the Agent pronoun does not cooccur with a noun:

Hlimoomit t Peter/Hlimoomithl gat
S/he helped Peter/S/he helped the man

λimó:m-ə-t t Péter / ...=χ kʸát
help.s.-CTL-3 DM P./ ...=NC man

Hlimoomis Peter/Hlimoomihl gat
Peter helped him/her/The man helped him/her

λimó:m-ə=s [t] Péter / ...=χ kʸát
help.s.-CTL=DC [DM] P. / ...=NC man

¹⁰ A translation error in Boas 1902 (123:12) can be partially traced to the SAE (Standard Average European) speaker's expectation that the noun following the verb is its Object: in one of the stories, the hero, Ts'ak, makes a grand first entrance as a shaman, surrounded by various little birds; he is carrying one bird, and...

...h̥ihl k'iit walxhl k'eegwihl higu ts'uuts'hl andahaseeks Ts'ak.
h̥i=χ kʸi:-t wálx=χ kʸè:kʷ-ə=χ χku čú:č=χ ?antə-hasè:q=s [t] čákʸ
that's=NC and-3ERG carry.s.=NC one[animal]-CTL=NC little bird=NC container-rattle=DC [DM] Ts'ak

The meaning is:

...and one of the little birds carried Ts'ak's rattlebox.

Instead, Boas interprets *k'eegwihl higu ts'uuts' kʸè:kʷ-ə=χ χku čú:č* 'one little bird' as the object of the verb; the other noun *andahaseek ?antə-hasè:q* 'rattlebox' has to find a place in the sentence: Boas' interpretation (which leaves aside the noun Ts'ak) is

... and he carried a little bird named Rattlebox.

To be fair to Boas, he collected the tales under very difficult conditions. They were slowly dictated in Nisgaha, and translated through the medium of Chinook. Faced with having to translate 'rattlebox', the translator may have said something like 'that's what it's called', meaning the name of the object, while Boas thought he meant the name of the bird.

¹¹ Number agreement is not always automatic, as the verb stem usually indicates the number of actions performed rather than the number of objects the actions apply to. Usually these numbers agree, as in (19), and also in

(a) *qúć-ə-t=χ qís-t* *k'ojithl gest*
cut.s.-CTL-3=NC hair-3 S/he cut h. hair

(b) *qas)qúć-ə-t=χ xáqs-t* *k'ask'ojithl hlaqst*
PL) cut.s.-CTL-3=NC nail-3 S/he cut h. nails

but they may differ, as in

- | | |
|---|---|
| (c) ǵas)ǵúć-ǵ-t=ǵ ʔaná:x
... bread | <i>k'ask'ojithl anaax</i>
S/he sliced the bread |
| (d) ǵa:=ǵis)ǵís-ǵ-t=ǵ ptóʔ
In.one.spot=PL)hit.s.-CTL-3=NC door | <i>ǵaat'ist'isithl pdo'o</i>
S/he knocked at the door
(gave several knocks) |

where the plural verb stem indicates a plurality of actions, performed on a single object.

¹² The transcription and morpheme description have been corrected where needed.

¹³ The N-English data here come from written work by young students (who are largely monolingual in the local variety of English) and utterances and translations by older persons. Some sentences have been slightly edited, but their use of deletion has been maintained. Not all speakers of N-English would consider all of these sentences well-formed, but they occur often enough to illustrate a tendency that can only be explained with reference to underlying Nisgha syntactic patterns.

¹⁴ But the linguist beginning the study of Nisgha is unaware of this fact: thus Tarpent ms. [1981] and Jelinek 1986 both give this sentence type as normal. In fact it is only normal for sentences elicited under artificial conditions, not for natural speech.

¹⁵ The third person singular pronoun *ǵíft* is one of six independent personal pronouns (*ǵíft*-pronouns); the other five pronouns all appear obligatorily in sentences with the structure of (30), e.g. *Ga'ay' ǵiin kyáʔ-ǵ-ǵ ǵíft:n* 'I saw you', *Ga'ay' ǵidiit kyáʔ-ǵ-ǵ ǵíft:t* 'I saw them', as well as (31). Only *ǵíft* is normally absent from unfocused sentences, as in (30). The addition of *ǵíft* under the influence of English structure then fills a gap in the pattern of use of these pronouns.

¹⁶ Actually, (34), which considers the two actions as more separate than (33), could also be translated by two independent clauses, without an equivalent for the word 'and', thus

- (34a) *Yoo'oksithl no'ohl; limlimgit.* He washed the dishes; he dried them.

yó:ʔoks-ǵ-t=ǵ nóʔaʔ -- limlimkY-ǵ-t
wash.s.PL-CTL-3=NC dishes -- wipe.s.PL-CTL-3

In either case, the Object noun occurs only in the first clause.

¹⁷ Boas 1902 is an excellent source for the researcher who is in a position to understand and restore the original text, but numerous errors of transcription and interpretation make it too unreliable for self-study.

¹⁸ Cf. Tarpent 1982:50-55.

¹⁹ It is not clear from the text whether one little tree is meant, or more; *ǵigu gan ǵku qán* 'little tree' is singular, but the verb stem *t'ahl táx* implies a plural object in modern Nisgha. Alternately, it could have an older singular meaning in this text. The meaning of *saat'ahl sa:=táx* could then be something like 'to peel sth off'.

²⁰ cf. (23b) p. 10.

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