

OBLIQUE SUBJECTS: THE SOUTHERN TSIMSHIAN EXAMPLE

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1. The word order pattern. This paper is about languages with verb-initial, oblique-final word order, i.e., it is about languages with a word order in which the direct arguments typically stand between the verb and any indirect arguments. The ergative Tsimshianic languages (Nisgha, Gitksan, Coast Tsimshian, and Southern Tsimshian) of the North Pacific Coast of North America are of this type. Southern Tsimshian provides a particularly clear and compelling illustration: here word order is quite regular. The following sentences exemplify the basic Southern Tsimshian pattern. The verb complex (INFL V) is sentence initial, followed in intransitives by the theta-agent, theta-patient, or theta-theme argument.

(1) mɪʔ 'mæʔəsgɪ hæ 'næ'niq *The women are telling (it)*

∅ mɪʔ 'mæʔəsg i hæ 'næ' niq
T AGR₁ speak ABS [woman PLUR]₁

With transitives the order is verb, theta-agent NP, theta-patient NP.

(2) 'tXaisdi hæ 'næʔəgi gəbət 'gɥʔk *The woman accused the children*

∅ ∅ 'tXais di hæ 'næʔəG i gəbət 'gɥʔk
T PRON₁ accuse ERG woman₁ ABS children₂
AGR₂

(3) tæ wəlit 'gəpdi hætsi 'yæni 'hɔn *Maggots are eating the fish*

tæ wəl it ∅ 'gəp di hætsi 'yæn i 'hɔn
T PRON₁ AGR₂ eat ERG maggots₁ ABS fish₂

- (4) $yæg^{w}it$ 'bähəni bɔt *He is running the boat*

$yæg^{w}$ it ø 'bähən ø i bɔt
 T PRON₁ AGR₂ run NP₁ ABS boat₂

Oblique arguments stand last or right-most in the sentence, following a common prepositional connective.

- (5) $kāXdi$ 'yau^wdi lɪk 'su^gait ʔei ha 'qaxə *The man opens the door with a key*

ø ø ø kāk di 'yau^wd i lɪk'su^ga -it ʔei ha 'qaxə
 T PRON₁ AGR₂ open ERG man₁ ABS door₂ PREP key

- (6) $tsilim$ 'haitgi 'ʔəs dəʔi 'gwaʔa *The dog is standing in here*

ø tsilim 'haitg i 'ʔəs dəʔi 'gwaʔa
 T [v in stand] ABS dog₁ PREP here
 AGR₁

The regular Southern Tsimshian word order pattern, then, is *COMP-INFL-V-Agent-Patient-Oblique*. The basic word order pattern in the other Tsimshianic languages is essentially the same. See Boas 1911, Dunn 1979, Mulder 1987, Rigsby 1986, and Tarpent 1981.

2. Word order and D-structure. The traditional analysis of Tsimshianic grammar has assumed that the argument with theta-agent role, i.e., the one immediately following the verb, is the subject, and that the Tsimshianic languages are therefore VSO. An analysis which considers *subject* a grammatical category defined solely in terms of relationships of dominance and precedence in an X-bar syntax, however, must identify the second argument following the verb as the subject (See discussion below); in that case the Tsimshianic languages are VOS. Whichever definition one takes, the same result follows: the subject stands between the verb and any oblique argument. This poses a problem, especially in ditransitives, since the

common assumption has been that ditransitive oblique arguments are part of the VP.

Belvin 1985 and Rigsby 1987, in attempts to overcome this and other word order difficulties, have argued that the usual Gitksan or Nisgha word order is the product of a movement rule which places the subject (theta-agent argument) between the verb and the rest of the phrase that the verb heads. I assume, on the contrary, that typical word order is a primary datum in language acquisition and cannot therefore be the result of move-alpha application, i.e., usual word order must be the D-structure order. The opposite assumption places too heavy a burden on the language learner.

If typical word order must be the same as D-structure order, then the traditional analysis for Tsimshianic syntax must be rejected. It simply cannot be made to work short of claiming that Tsimshianic is non-configurational. While it is certainly true that these languages do indeed have many non-configurational properties (See Jelinek 1986), nevertheless the fact that they, and especially Southern Tsimshian, have a strict word order, leads to the inescapable conclusion that there is at least some configurational dimension or component in their syntax.

3. The ergative configuration. The following discussion proceeds from this presumption of configurationality and two further assumptions: (1) it is at least a logical possibility that grammatical relations, theta-roles, and case markers comprise three independently generated grammatical subsystems; (2) grammatical relations are defined/assigned solely in terms of specifier and complement relationships as in the version of X-bar syntax developed in Chomsky 1986.

Chomsky 1986 presents this general model for sentence structure: (1) S - CP (Complementizer Phrase); (2) CP dominates COMP and IP; (3) IP dominates NP and I'; (4) I' dominates I(NFL) and VP; (5) VP dominates V and NP. This model, applied to Southern Tsimshian regular word order, gives the configuration:

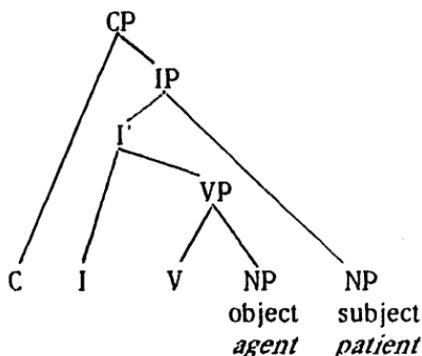
(7) [_{CP} COMP [_{IP} [_{I'} INFL [_{VP} V NP]] NP]]

This paper, following Chomsky 1986, uses the terms subject and object as pure syntactic categories, i.e., as grammatical relations defined only and entirely in terms of X-bar syntax:

- (8) Subject = the NP specifier in IP, i.e., the sister to some projection of I,
 (9) Direct Object = the NP complement/sister to V.

It follows from these X-bar definitions that the subject cannot stand between the verb and its object. It further follows from these definitions and from the Southern Tsimshian configuration that Southern Tsimshian is a VOS language whose verbs assign theta-agent role to their direct objects and compositionally assign theta-patient role to their subjects (10). This characterization of Southern Tsimshian coincides exactly with Marantz's (1984) definition of ergativity.

(10)



4. The proposed oblique case marker. In Government-Binding Theory (Chomsky 1981, 1986) verbs and adpositions theta-mark NP's they govern. A verb directly theta-marks its complement, the direct object. An adposition directly theta-marks its complement, an oblique argument; in a ditransitive the oblique argument and its adposition governor are dominated by the VP. A verb externally theta-marks the specifier argument, the subject.

The Southern Tsimshian preposition has one phonological shape (with several phonetically conditioned variants); it is a general

purpose preposition, preceding as it does theta-goal, theta-instrument, and several types of theta-locative arguments. In other words it is not a preposition at all, but rather a case-marker for all oblique arguments:

(11) theta-goal:

g^win 'ʔɔɪçɪ 'y̆aux^wdi 'ʔæʔitit ʔei ha 'naʔaX *The man threw the ball to the woman*

σ σ σ g^win 'ʔɔɪç i 'y̆aux^wd
T PRON₁ AGR₂ [v GOAL throw] ABS man₁

 i 'ʔæʔit it ʔei ha 'naʔaX
 ABS ball₂ PREP woman

(12) theta-goal:

ki 'ləmi 'y̆ax^wdi 'hɔ-nit ʔei 'ʔɔs *The man gave the dog a fish*

σ σ σ ki 'ləm i 'y̆ax^wd i 'hɔ-n
T PRON₁ AGR₂ give ABS man₁ ABS fish₂

 it ʔei 'ʔɔs
 PREP dog

(13) theta-instrument (see also (5) above):

kal 'ʔɔɪçɪ 'y̆aux^wdi ha 'naʔait ʔei 'ʔæʔit *The man threw the ball at the woman*

σ σ σ kal 'ʔɔɪç i 'y̆aux^wd
T PRON₁ AGR₂ [v INSTR throw] ABS man₁

 i ha 'naʔa it ʔei 'ʔæʔit
 ABS woman₂ PREP ball

(14) theta-locative (place *on* (see (6) above for place *in*):

'bæhənu dei laX liks 'tæ· *I run on the island*

ø	ø	'bæhə	nu	ø	dei	laX	liks	'tæ·
T	AGR ₁	run	I ₁	NP ₁	PREP	place	island	
			PRON					

(15) theta-locative (place *across*):

'batsgi 'Ganit ?ei nax stə?i 'Gaina *The tree was across the path*

ø	ø	'batsg	i	'Gan	it ?ei	nax stə?i	'Gaina
T	AGR ₁	stand	ABS	tree ₁	PREP	crosswise	path

(16) theta-locative (motion *across*):

'dzaGa 'dæ?u?i 'yæxwʔ ?ei lu 'ʔæsdɪ 'nək *The man went across the inlet*

ø	ø	'dzaGa	'dæ?uʔ	i	'yæxwʔ	?ei	lu	'ʔæsdɪ	'nək
T	AGR ₁	[v	ACROSS	go] ABS	man ₁	PREP	inlet	

5. The transparency of oblique arguments. Derivational elements affixed to the Southern Tsimshian verb theta-govern oblique arguments. A comparison of derived-verb theta-constellations with the theta-constellations of their root-verbs clearly demonstrates this fact. Compare (16) above with (17).

(17) næn ts'uga 'lɔətgɪt ?ei ?æ?gədm 'dæ?uʔn *I warned you not to go*

næ	n	ø	ts'uga	'lɔətg	ø	n	ø
T	I ₁	AGR ₂	warn	NP ₁	you ₂	NP ₂	
	PRON						
	it ?ei	?æ?gə	dm	ø	'dæ?uʔ	n	ø
	PREP	NEG	INFIN	AGR ₂	go	you ₂	NP ₂
						PRON	

- | | | | | |
|------|------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| (23) | MR2. | { γ X} | <i>becomes</i> | {Y + { γ X}} |
| | | [__NP] | | [__NP] |
| | | [__Agent, Patient] | | [__Agt, Pat, Goal] |
| | | | | |
| (24) | | 'ʔɔɪç | <i>derives</i> | kaɪ 'ʔɔɪç |
| | | V [__NP] | | V [__NP] |
| | | [__Agent, Patient] | | [__Agt, Pat, Instrument] |
| | | | | |
| (25) | MR3. | { γ X} | <i>becomes</i> | {Y + { γ X}} |
| | | [__NP] | | [__NP] |
| | | [__Agent, Patient] | | [__Agt, Pat, Instr] |

These examples indicate that oblique arguments are transparent to tautoclausal verbal proclitics, i.e., verbal proclitics theta-mark oblique arguments in their own clause. Since in current theory derived verbs are single lexical entries, it follows that Southern Tsimshian derived verbs theta-mark their oblique arguments. I assume that the oblique arguments occurring with underived ditransitive verbs (See (12) above) are transparent in exactly the same way. This must be the situation since the element prepositioned to the oblique argument is clearly not a true preposition but only a case mark. This presumed Southern Tsimshian general pattern is analogous to the English constructions:

(26) She always dresses₁ herself in black.

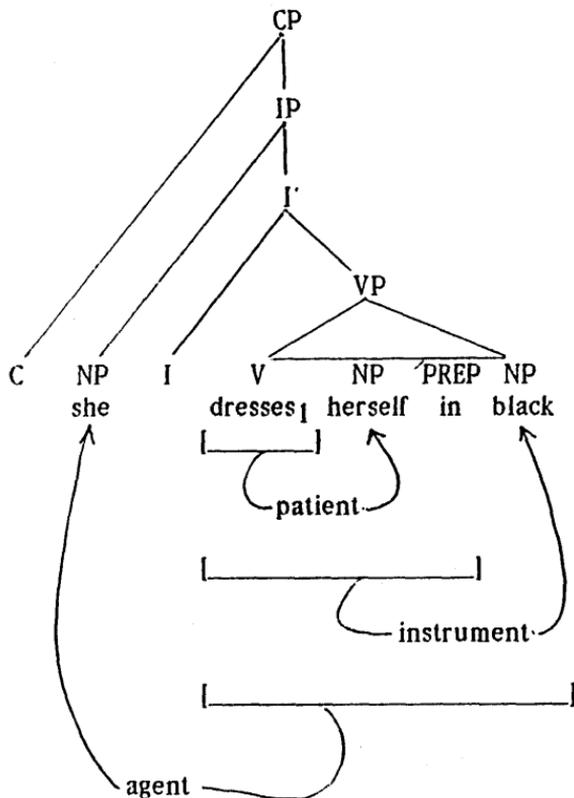
(27) She always dresses₂ herself in the dark.

The verb in (26) has the meaning "adorns with" and takes an instrumental oblique argument; the verb in (27) has a different meaning and takes a locative oblique argument. Following George 1980 and Chomsky 1986, I assume that the oblique arguments in (26), (27), and in Southern Tsimshian in general, are transparent to their same-clause verbs, i.e., the verbs rather than the "prepositions" theta-mark the oblique arguments.

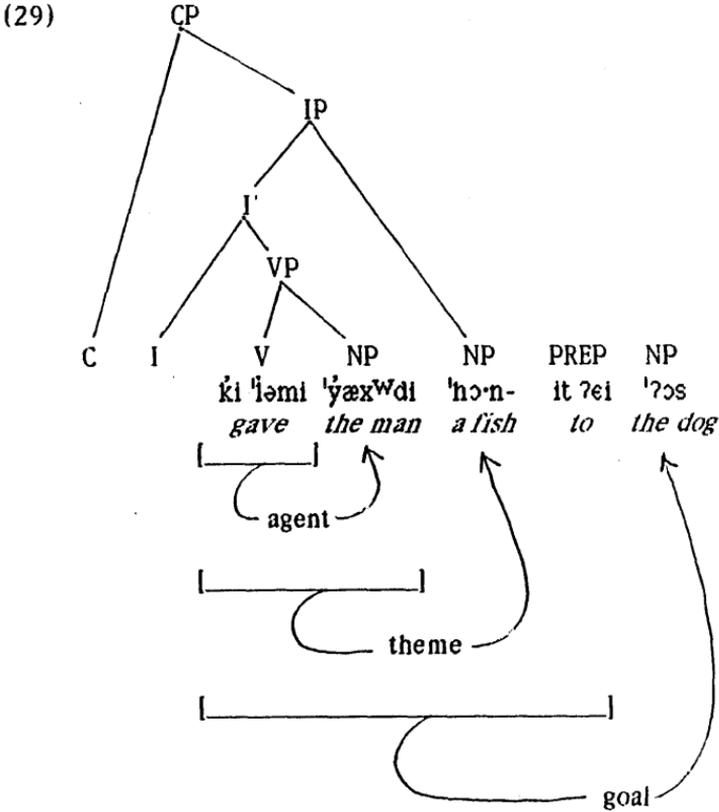
6. Theta-marking. In the English situation (26, 27) the verb compositionally theta-marks two arguments: the subject and the oblique object. The verb directly theta-marks its complement, the

direct object; the verb with its complement, the "untrue" preposition, compositionally but VP *internally* theta-marks the oblique object. Then this triple composition, verb and two objects, enters into the compositional, VP external theta-marking of the subject:

(28)



But the word order in Southern Tsimshian does not allow for the same analysis. Since the oblique argument typically (and therefore presumably D-structurally) comes at the end of the argument configuration, with the two direct arguments standing between it and the verb, the oblique argument cannot be an indirect object.



7. Oblique subjects. Let (30) represent the ditransitive configuration where the numbers represent the three NP arguments.

(30) T AGR V 1 2 3

Then the verb directly and internally theta-marks 1 as agent:

(30.1) T AGR [vp V Agent] 2 3.

The number in NP2 coindexes in AGR, thus further indicating that it is the subject of the sentence:

(30.2) T AGR_n [vp V Agent] 2_n 3.

The verb compositionally and externally theta-marks 2 with patient or theme role:

(30.3) T AGR_n [vp V Agent] Theme_n 3.

The verb also compositionally theta-marks 3; this marking must be external as well.

It is not possible that 2 is an indirect object, i.e., theta-marked compositionally but internally (30.4), because it coindexes in AGR.

(30.4) *T AGR_n [vp V Agent Theme_n] 3.

It is not possible that 3 is indirect object, theta-marked compositionally but internally, because it follows the subject.

The data clearly indicate that the Southern Tsimshian ditransitive verb compositionally theta-marks two of its three arguments; in particular it compositionally marks the third or oblique argument. At the same time the word order, because it places the other two arguments between the verb and the oblique argument, indicates that the oblique argument cannot be an (indirect) object.

One might argue that the order *I-V-Agt-Pat-Obi* is an S-structure order relating to a D-structure *I-Obi-V-Agt-Pat* as this latter pattern does occur in the data (Compare (31) with (6) above):

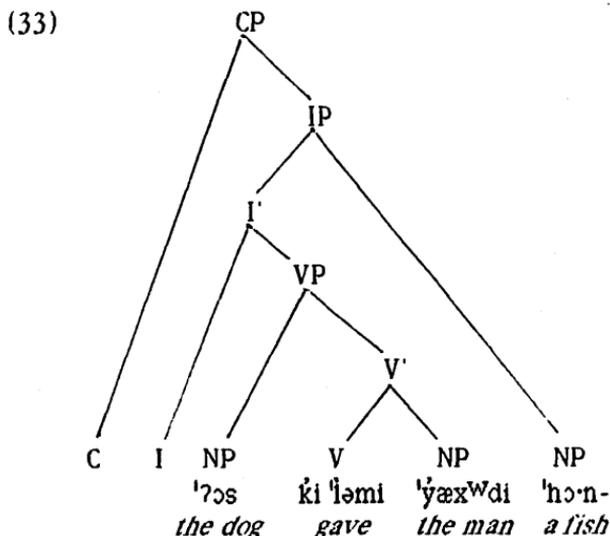
(31) 'g^waʔa tsɪlm 'haitgɪ 'ʔɔs *In here (is where) the dog is standing*

'g ^w aʔa	tsɪlm	'haitg	ɪ	'ʔɔs
here	[v IN	stand]	ABS	dog ₁
		AGR ₁		

Then (6) would be an S-structure, resulting from an adjunction that places the pre-verbal indirect object after the subject:

(32) [ɪpɪp ɾɪ tsɪlm 'haitgɪ 'ʔɔs] dæʔi 'g^waʔa₁]

Then (29) is an S-structure relating to the D-structure in (33):



A number of factors, however, make this analysis untenable. Arguments other than oblique ones can occur sentence initially:

- (34) 'ʔos tsɪlim 'haitgit ʔei 'gwaʔa *It's the dog (that's) standing in here.*

Sentences (31) and (34) are emphatic sentences which foreground the argument placed before the verb; it is they who are the S-structures created by adjunction.

Short of capitulating to non-configurationality, there is one further possibility: Southern Tsimshian is an ergative language with verbs that compositionally assign theta-patient role to their subjects (subjects being sisters to some projection (X^n) that dominates the lexical category V^0); these same verbs can also compositionally assign theta-oblique roles to their "indirect subjects," which are sisters to some higher projection ($X^{n \cdot m}$) that dominates V^0 .

Tsimshian data. There are, furthermore, parallels in the other Tsimshianic languages so close that it is probable that the same analysis holds for the whole language family. If the hierarchy of semantic functions this analysis implies just happens to be (psycho)logically more consistent than the other alternatives, then it may be that ultra-subjects are typical of ergative languages in general. If so, then the general ergative pattern in which the object takes the theta-agent role, the subject the theta-patient function, and the ultra subject an oblique function, stands as a perfect mirror image to the more familiar accusative pattern:

(36)	<u>ergative</u>		<u>accusative</u>
	<u>grammatical</u>		<u>grammatical</u>
	<u>relations</u>	<u>theta-roles</u>	<u>relations</u>
	object	agent	subject
	subject	patient	object
	ultra-subj	oblique	infra-obj

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