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Ergativity and Accusativity in Nisgha Syntax¹

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0. Introduction

In this paper I propose an analysis of the Tsimshian language Nisgha using a variant of the Government and Binding model of grammar (henceforth GB). The basic model is that found in Chomsky (1981), but modifications of that model are drawn from several sources, most importantly Koopman and Sportiche (1988) and Kuroda (1985). I will assume some familiarity with the most basic tenets of the GB framework, but nothing more. Nisgha is spoken in the Nass River area of western British Columbia. It is closely related to Gitksan, and more distantly to Coast Tsimshian and Southern Tsimshian.²

The primary purpose of this paper is to address the question of whether Nisgha is syntactically ergative under a very specific definition of that concept. A second important question which is considered is whether Nisgha should be identified as non-configurational. A larger question which is really the backdrop for this discussion is whether the concepts of the GB framework can provide much explanatory power in the analysis of languages which are typologically very different from those they were formulated to explain. It seems clear that the basic premises of GB have an impressive explanatory value when they are applied, for example, to many Indo-European languages; but can the same premises be applied to so-called exotic languages in a natural way? And if the concepts must be modified, can they be modified in principled ways, or must we introduce an arsenal of ad-hoc devices?

The organization of this article is as follows. I first outline some very basic features of Nisgha syntax in pretheoretical terms. In section two I introduce the so-called Ergativity Hypothesis of Marantz (1984), briefly discussing certain features of his model which will be directly relevant for the analysis I develop. In spite of the fact that there are syntactically ergative patterns in the language, I propose a syntactically accusative analysis of Nisgha's deep-structure, employing the theoretical tools of the GB framework to make the case. In section five I consider data which argues against a non-configurational account of Nisgha.

1. Some Basics of Nisgha Syntax

The reader should note that, although I am presenting the following sketch of the syntax as the syntax of NISGHA, most of the features discussed are also found in the other Tsimshian languages.

Word order in Tsimshian is essentially VSO. In independent sentences having no overt tense/mood/aspect marker (henceforth TMA), the order is almost invariant, with one or two exceptions which are of no great consequence to the analysis I propose. In DEPENDENT-ORDER sentences, which include both true dependent sentences and also simple sentences containing a TMA or negative element, we typically find the order TMA-VSO, although if the Subject is pronominal we usually find the order TMA-SVO (as in (6) below),

although the Subject in this case will be a pronominal clitic. The organization of Nisgha syntax is essentially ergative, thus, the labels Agent, Patient and Subject will be used in the sense familiar from studies in ergativity when there is a need to uniquely identify an argument. Examples of the basic sentence types are given below in phonemic transcription (@ = schwa, ? = glottal stop):

Intransitive

- | | | |
|---|---|-------------------|
| 1 | ta:wá- t Mary
leave - DM Subject | 'Mary left.' |
| 2 | ta:wá ni-y'
leave pron-1s | 'I left' |
| 3 | yuk ^W -í paḡ-(t)-s Mary
prog-NC run.s-3 _i -DC Subject _i | 'Mary is running' |

Transitive

- | | | |
|---|---|------------------------|
| 4 | í@mo:m-@(t)-s John - t Mary
help-TR-3 _i -DC Agent _i -DM Patient | 'John helped Mary.' |
| 5 | yuk ^W -t í@mo:m-(t)-s John - t Mary
prog 3 _i help-3 _j -DC Agent _i -DM Patient _j | 'John is helping Mary' |
| 6 | yuk ^W m@-í@mo:m-y'
prog 2s-help-1s | 'You are helping me' |

Possessive

- | | | |
|---|---------------------|-------------|
| 7 | noḡ-y'
mother-1s | 'My mother' |
|---|---------------------|-------------|

The morpheme-by-morpheme glosses mean the following: DM = determinate marker, prog = progressive aspect, TR = transitive, 3_x = 3rd person agreement marker, DC = determinate case; 1s, 2s, etc. = 1st person singular, 2nd sing, etc.. The DC and DM morphemes are part of a class of morphemes which are traditionally called 'connectives'. They are phonological suffixes, but are semantically and grammatically connected with the following word or phrase.

Notice that, although I have called the order of elements in dependent sentences TMA-VSO, there is a person-marking morpheme between the aspect marker and the verb in transitive sentences. The precise status of this element is not obvious. I propose that when it is third person it is agreement, but when it is first or second person it is actually a pronominal argument.³ Where an agreement morpheme appears in parentheses, this indicates that it is phonetically null in speech, due to a deletion rule which is strictly phonologically conditioned. This is an important

observation and is due to Tarpent (1988). Tarpent interprets what I am calling agreement as the actual argument, analyzing the lexical NP's as adjuncts. Although I reject this interpretation, the importance of her actual observation should become apparent.

In addition to this 3rd person agreement morpheme, however, there is another type of agreement which holds between verbs and nominals. This agreement indicates only number, (i.e. singular or plural) and obtains only between the verb and absolutive arguments. The morphology which indicates agreement is either reduplicative or suppletive, and for some words there is no difference in singular and plural forms. Examples follow (ND = Non-determinate):

Intransitive

- 8 $\text{\textit{t}a}$: k'atsk^W-(t)- $\text{\textit{t}}$ po:t 'The boat has arrived'
 ASP arrive-3_i-ND boat_i
- 9 $\text{\textit{t}a}$: k'is-k'atsk^W-(t)- $\text{\textit{t}}$ p@-po:t 'The boats have arrived'
 ASP RED-arrive-3_i-ND RED-boat_i

For an account of how this type of agreement can be explained within an Accusative Deep-structure analysis of Nisgha see Walsh (1989).

2. The Problem

As just indicated, the Tsimshian languages are basically VSO. In this respect the Tsimshian languages present the usual problem which other VSO languages present for a GB theory of syntax. That is, the verb is separated from the Object by the Subject, and yet the verb needs to be a sister of the Object at D-structure in order to assign the Object the Objective (Patient) theta-role, assuming there is a configurational D-structure.

The usual solution to this problem in the GB literature is verb-fronting. That is, VSO word order is derived from an underlying SVO or SOV order. The verb moves to sentence-initial position for reasons of Case or theta-role assignment and/or to provide bound inflectional morphemes with a verbal host, thus yielding the surface VSO order (e.g. Koopman (1984), Sproat (1985), Travis (1984), Mohammad (1989) and many others).

The Tsimshian languages present an additional puzzle for standard GB theory though, in that they all display a variety of syntactic ergative phenomena. In fact the Nisgha language has often been cited as a paradigm case of syntactic ergativity. Tarpent, e.g. describes the language as having a 'pure' ergative syntax, while Livingston (1989) states that the language 'exhibits a wholly ergative-absolutive syntax'. Thus, ergative patterns can be seen in the syntax of causative constructions, conjunction reduction, number agreement between the verb and one of its arguments, and even imperative sentences. Tarpent (1982) catalogues a variety of Nisgha constructions (including, but not limited to the above) exhibiting ergative patterns.

The combination of VSO word order and syntactic ergativity led Rigsby (1975) to propose that the underlying structure for Nisgha and Gitksan had a verb phrase which consisted not in the usual verb plus Patient argument, but rather in the verb plus the Agent argument (p.347). That this type of verb phrase should exist as an option in Universal Grammar is argued for in the GB context by Marantz (1984). Marantz proposes that the alignment of theta-roles with grammatical relations is parameterized, such that in a syntactically accusative language we have the Agent theta-role assigned by predicates and therefore aligned with syntactic Subjects, while the Patient theta-role is assigned by verbs and therefore aligned with syntactic Objects. (So Subject and Object are defined using the notion of internal and external argument.) In a syntactically ergative language, it is the Agent theta-role which is assigned by verbs and therefore associated with the syntactic Object, while the Patient theta-role is assigned by predicates to the syntactic Subject (1984:196).

Note that this parameter is intended to capture the distinction between deep or syntactically ergative languages and syntactically nominative/accusative languages. Morphological ergativity is considered a separate phenomena (following Dixon's original dichotomy), which does not play an important role in Marantz's account. I will henceforth refer to this notion of ergativity (i.e. the notion of Rigsby and Marantz) as S-ERGATIVITY, and the corresponding notion of accusativity as S-ACCUSATIVITY for convenience of reference. I will continue to employ the term SYNTACTIC ERGATIVITY to indicate the more traditional notion of deep ergativity.

There is an assumption which is implicit in this explanation of syntactic ergativity which is that the languages in question have syntactic Subjects or Objects at the point in the derivation where theta-roles are assigned, presumably Deep-structure (henceforth D-structure). Although the existence of asymmetric grammatical functions has been questioned for the Tsimshian languages, and it has been argued that Nisgha is a so-called W*-TYPE non-configurational language, a thorough treatment of this issue would take us beyond the scope of this short essay. I will present some evidence for considering Nisgha configurational, however, it should be considered preliminary rather than conclusive (see section 5).

3. Evidence of S-accusativity in Nisgha

In this section I propose that Nisgha is not, in fact, S-ergative, but S-accusative, in spite of its variety of surface syntactic ergative patterns.

There are a number of diagnostics which Marantz suggests for determining if a language is S-ergative or S-accusative, most of which do not have a clear application to Nisgha. However, there does appear to be at least one test which can be applied, the so-called reflexive-passive ambiguity test. This diagnostic is based on the assumption that lexical reflexives are formed by the addition of a morpheme whose basic function is to disallow a normally transitive verb from assigning a theta role to its D-structure

Subject or Case to its D-structure Object. Although Marantz does not state categorically that lexical reflexive morphology always functions in this way, he strongly implies this is the unmarked case (1984:159).

In some of these languages, the same morphology is used in other types of intransitive sentences, in particular either passives or sentences with an unspecified Object. If this type of lexical process is found in a language the ergativity hypothesis makes clear predictions, argues Marantz, for both S-ergative and S-accusative languages. Whereas in an S-accusative language the ambiguity is between passive and reflexive, in an S-ergative language we expect to find an ambiguity between a reflexive and an unspecified Object, since there is no external argument theta-role assigned. An example of this type of ambiguity in an S-accusative language can be seen in the following Albanian sentences, which have both a reflexive and a passive interpretation (from Marantz 1984:162):

- 10 I burgosuri lahet dy herë në javë
the prisoner wash-REFL-3sg two times in week
'The prisoner washes himself twice a week'
'The prisoner is washed twice a week'
- 11 Prostitutat u veshen përpara darkës
the prostitutes REFL dress before dinner-the
'The prostitutes were dressed before dinner'
'The prostitutes dressed themselves before dinner'

Examples of this type of ambiguity in what are claimed to be S-ergative languages are seen in the following sentences, from Dyrbal (12) and Yidin^y (13)⁴:

- 12 ngayu pampi:jinyu
I-ACC cover-APASS-PST
a. I covered myself.
b. I covered someone/something.
(from Dixon, as in Levin 1983:107)
- 13 bayi yaɾa buybayirɾu
man-ABS hides-REFL
'Man hides himself' or 'Man hides (something)'
(from Dixon, 1972 as in Marantz 1984:212)

The pattern which is found in Nisgha is the S-accusative; that is, the same morphology is employed for both the lexical reflexive and the passive.

One typical way of expressing a reflexive action in Nisgha is to employ an intransitivizing suffix (accompanied usually, but not always, by an adverbial proclitic indicating 'back'). Examples are shown below:

- 14 kwilks ka?-tk^w niy^ʔ
back see.s-MED 1s
'I saw myself' (Tarpent 89:2)

- 15 (l@p)kwilks titalq-s-ɨ kʏat
 (self)back talk.to-MED-NC man
 'The man is talking to himself'
- 16 pc'ay-tkʷ 'to comb one's hair'
 comb.s-MED (Tarpent 89:36)

The morpheme labelled MED (for 'medial' - [tkʷ]/[s]) is the affix of interest. The labelling I have borrowed Tarpent (1989).⁵

In (14-16) the verb is rendered intransitive by the MED affix. As stated, the proclitic [gʷilks] indicates the nature of the action, which Tarpent glosses as '(going) back (to where one came from)'. Thus, a very meticulous gloss of the sentence in (14) might be 'I looked back at myself'.⁶

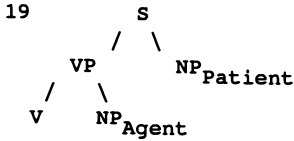
The MED morpheme is also found in passive sentences, as illustrated by the following:

- 17 kʏaʔ-tkʷ-ɨ kʏat kʏ'oc
 see.s-MED-NC man yesterday
 'The man was seen yesterday'
- 18 ɨ@mo:m-tkʷ-ɨ k'up@-tk'iɨkʷ-m-ʔi:ʔuxʷ
 help-MED-NC small-child-attr-men
 'The boys were helped'

The fact that Nisgha employs this morphology for both reflexive and passive constructions then, provides an indication that at the point in the derivation of a sentence where theta-assignment takes place, we need to characterize Nisgha argument structure as S-accusative, not S-ergative, assuming the correctness of Marantz's explanation of lexical reflexives.⁷ For this argument to really be conclusive for Nisgha, we will need evidence that the lexical reflexive indeed operates along the lines stated above (i.e. that the surface Subject has the Objective theta-role but Subjective Case). I do not have this kind of evidence at the present time, so again, this argument should be considered somewhat tentative.

It is not irrelevant to the discussion, I might add, that Nisgha does have other intransitivizing morphology, one which creates a typical Antipassive sentence, and another one which just creates a sentence with an indefinite Object. However, in neither case does any reflexive sentence that I am aware of employ this morphology, such as it does in the case of passives.

A second reason for claiming Nisgha is not S-ergative has to do with the surface position of prepositional phrases. If we assume Nisgha is S-ergative, then by the Ergativity Hypothesis we would expect the simple transitive sentence to have the D-structure in (19) (which is also Rigsby's (1975) proposal), assuming that Nisgha has standard configurational structure. This seems the most plausible S-ergative D-structure considering Nisgha's surface ordering is Verb-Agent-Patient and in an S-ergative language the Agent is the internal argument while the Patient is the external argument.



When there is a PP or Indirect Object in the sentence, it usually appears sentence-finally; and although there are operations which can position indirect or oblique arguments in S-initial position (though the preposition is absent), the PP can never appear between the verb and either of the other arguments (i.e., one cannot have V-PP-Agt-Pat or V-Agt-PP-Pat). For example:

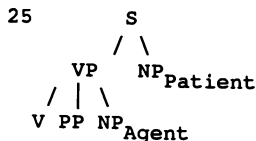
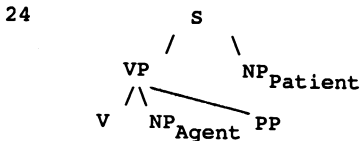
20 nimaxt-@-(t)-s John- $\dot{\text{a}}$ buk lax hañit^hoxq^w
 put.on-TR-3_i-DC Agent_i-ND Patient on place-eat
 'John put the book on the table'

21 ??nimaxt@s John $\dot{\text{a}}$ buk
 Verb Agent Patient

22 *nimaxt@s John lax hañit^hoxq^w buk
 Verb Agent PP Patient

23 *nimaxt@s ?@ $\dot{\text{a}}$ lax hañit^hoxq^w John buk
 Verb PP Agent Patient

But now note we have a contradiction of structures. If we assume (19), the S-ergative analysis D-structure, a subcategorized PP should appear in that structure as either (24) or perhaps (25):



However, unless the PP were extraposed, the above D-structure would yield Verb-Agent-PP-Patient or Verb-PP-Agent-Patient S-structures. But these are ungrammatical, as shown by (22,23) above. Thus, to maintain D-structure (19) we must maintain that some factor forces PP's always to extrapose. In fact, we would have to show that some factor can force multiple PP extraposition, as seen by the position of the PP's in a sentence like (26) below:

26 kw@n nimaxt-@-(t)-s Donna- $\dot{\text{a}}$ laqalt@mmacaqale
 Jussive put-TR-3_i-DC Agent_i-ND vase

lax hañit^hoxq^w ?@-s Mary
 on table prep-DC Agent
 'Donna had a vase put on the table by Mary'

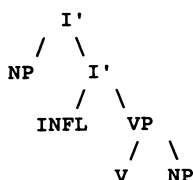
There is no obvious factor for explaining the facts in this way that I am aware of, however. Although there is the possibility of arguing the PP's extrapose because of something like Stowell's Case Resistance Principle, I have not explored this possibility for two reasons: first, it would not bear on the other arguments for S-accusativity discussed in this paper. Secondly, there are many examples of phenomena which appear to violate the CRP coming to light in the literature, so I am leary of relying on it heavily.

4. An S-Accusative Account of Nisgha Syntax

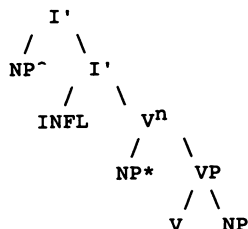
Since there appears to be motivation for rejecting (19), and therefore the S-ergative account of Nisgha, we are led back to the possibility that verb-raising is, after all, perhaps the better solution. In this section I propose that verb-raising from a SVO D-structure is the preferable solution of the two hypotheses. Verb movement, it will be seen, easily explains the reflexive/passive ambiguity and the position of the PP as well.

Koopman and Sportiche (1988) and Sportiche (1988) propose that the underlying structure of sentences in configurational languages is not, as previously supposed, as in (27), but rather is as in (28) (order is variable):

27

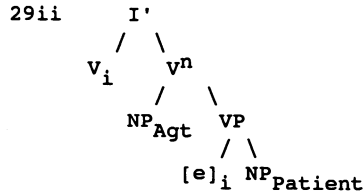
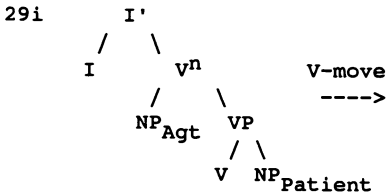


28



The NP marked NP* is the so-called 'internal Subject' position, while that marked NP^ is the surface Subject position of the Subject in a language like English. It is argued that Subjects are always generated in the internal Subject positions. The Subject raises from NP* to NP^ because INFL, it is argued, is a raising category in English; NP^, being in the SPEC of IP, agrees with INFL, and it is via this agreement that NP^ gets its Case. In some languages, however, it is argued that NP* does not raise to NP^. In these languages, if the verb raises to INFL, we get VSO surface order. Koopman and Sportiche give a variety of arguments for this proposal, based on data from many different languages. Rather than repeat their arguments here, I refer the reader to the work cited. Kuroda also assumes this structure in some recent work, arguing that it is, in fact, the null hypothesis if we assume complete regularity of the X-bar schema (Kuroda 1985).

I will accept this proposal as essentially correct. Verb movement could then be depicted roughly as follows:

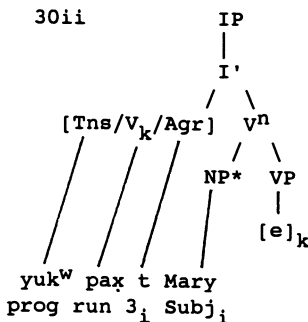
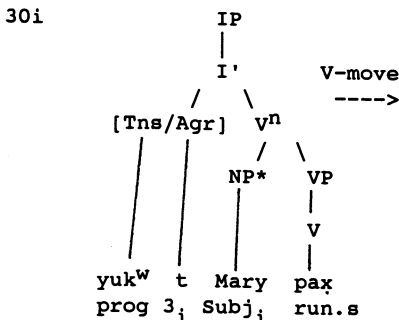


There are essentially two types of explanations currently circulating for why verb raising should be forced to obtain in a given language. One type of explanation has to do with directionality parameters, that is, direction of Case and theta-role assignment (Koopman 1983, Sproat 1985), and direction of predication (Travis 1984), and the interactions of these grammatical subsystems with X-bar theory.

A second type of explanation concerns obligatory movement of verbal elements to positions containing functional inflectional categories (the dismantled INFL positions) such as T(ense), Agr(eement), Neg(ation), and perhaps others, for purposes of supporting bound affixes (Pollock 1989, Chomsky 1988, and the No-Free-Affix Principle of Lasnik (1981)).

Either of these types of explanations could potentially be employed in arguing for verb raising in Nisgha. Since this issue is not the main focus of the paper, I will not attempt to resolve the problem. However, I think it can be shown that if the second kind of explanation is embedded within a rich enough theory of inflectional morphology, it can in some cases obviate the need to employ notions of directionality. For an explanation of Nisgha syntax in these terms, see Belvin (to appear). For the time being, simply note that in most cases the verb must raise either to join with inflectional morphology generated in the I(nflection) position, or else so that the verb can get to a position from which it can assign Case to the Agent NP.

Thus, the derivation of a dependent-order intransitive sentence will be roughly as shown in (30) below:



In the above derivation, the verb could be argued to move for two reasons. One is to provide a host for the bound agreement morpheme [t], and the other is to move the verb into a position from which it

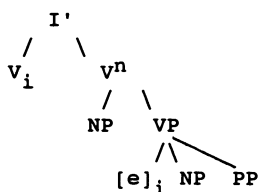
can assign Case to the Subject. (The verb cannot assign Case to the Subject from its D-structure position, presumably because it does not c-command the Subject.) Other sentence types will have similar derivations. For lack of space I must defer the presentation of further derivations to work in preparation.

If (29i) is approximately the correct phrase marker for a Nisgha D-structure, then we can account for the reflexive/passive morphology, and the position of PP's straightforwardly. There are a number of other features of Nisgha syntax which can be accounted for in a rather natural way as well; for an account of some of them see Belvin (to appear).

To begin with, consider the 'reflexive/passive ambiguity' (though it is really just shared morphology, and not necessarily ambiguity). If we accept (29i) as the underlying structure for a Nisgha sentence, then following Marantz's definition, Nisgha is S-accusative, (so the syntactic Object will get the Patient theta-role, while the syntactic Subject will get the Agent theta-role). This means that when the verb appears with the intransitivizing /-tk^w/ suffix (either the REFL or the passive suffix), the external argument will get the theta-marking normally associated with the internal argument, namely the Patient role. As can be seen from (17,18) above, this is correct. Thus, regarding the reflexive/passive morphology, the verb-movement analysis makes the correct predictions.

Next, consider the position of PP's in the language. Again, if we accept the verb movement analysis, the explanation of PP's is straightforward. The S-structure of a sentence with a subcategorized PP in Nisgha (which would be the structure after verb movement) would be roughly as follows:

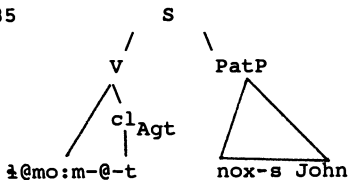
31



The order V-S-O-PP found in Nisgha is thus accounted for.

5. A Further Argument for a Configurational Accusative D-structure

One further kind of evidence that an S-accusative D-structure is preferable to an S-ergative D-structure is based on Condition C violation facts. Condition C of the binding theory states that a R(efering)-expression must be free (i.e., it must never be c-commanded by a coreferent element). It is widely assumed in the literature that the reason pronouns can sometimes be coreferent with an R-expression in the same simple sentence, and sometimes cannot be is due to this principle of binding. If the pronoun is in a position to bind the R-expression (i.e. it c-commands it), then they cannot be coreferent, because in that case the R-expression will be bound. This principle is presumed to account for the difference,

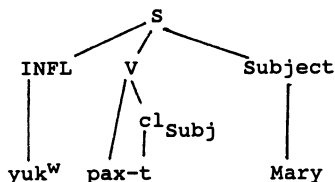


In Jelinek's framework, pronominal clitics comprise the true arguments of a sentence, while any nominal expressions are adjuncts, associated with the true arguments by a linking rule. She has argued Nisgha is non-configurational in this sense (1986), and Tarpent (1989) has accepted this analysis and attempted to extend the argumentation. (Patient Phrase (PatP) and Subject identify nominals in the tree but are not intended to convey any grammatical import.)

In order to explain why no coreference is possible, we could say that the c-command domain of the pronominal clitic Agent is the c-command domain of the verbal host. If we make this assumption, then with the non-configurational account we can still explain the ungrammatical reading as a Condition C violation.

However, if we make this assumption, we also immediately encounter a problem accounting for even the simplest Nisgha sentences. Consider (36), for example, which depicts the non-configurational D-structure for (3) above:

36



In this sentence, if we assume that the pronominal element /-t/ has as its c-command domain the c-command domain of the verb, then it c-commands Mary. But if it c-commands Mary, it should not be able to be coreferent with Mary. But the /-t/ in this context is always coreferent with a lexical Subject nominal expression. Thus, the assumption that that the /-t/ c-commands whatever the verb c-commands must be incorrect, and this in turn means the non-configurational account cannot rely on the binding theory to explain the ungrammatical reading of (32).

One might argue that the real condition which allows or prohibits coreference is simply that the R-expression must linearly precede the pronominal element. However, this is not the case, as shown by the possibility of sentences like (37):

37 1@p-nox-t ?an-t-ɪ@mo:-(t)-s John
 self-mother_j-3_i AREL-3_j-help-3_i-DC Patient_i
 'It was his_i own mother that helped John_i'

The S-accusative analysis of Nisgha, one should note, easily circumvents this problem by identifying /-t/ in (32) as a true pronoun, generated in an argument position, but /-t/ in (3) as an agreement suffix, and therefore not a potential binder of the R-expression. It seems unlikely that this option should be open to Jelinek's non-configurational account, which assumes as its defining criterion for non-configurationality that the pronominal clitics on the verb are arguments and the lexical nominals adjuncts.

Therefore, the S-accusative D-structure analysis has a ready explanation for something the non-configurational account of Nisgha does not. Although these facts in themselves do not mean that the non-configurational account is untenable for Nisgha, they do pose a challenge for the W*-type non-configurational analysis.

To conclude then, there is evidence that Nisgha should be analyzed as configurational, and that it should be analyzed as having an S-accusative D-structure. The outstanding question to be answered, if this conclusion is correct, is the following: what is the source of the many syntactic ergative patterns in the language. I think the answer to this question is largely the result of a different system of Inflection and Case marking than Nominative/Accusative languages employ. Perhaps it will turn out that whereas Nominative/Accusative languages rely primarily on Spec/Head Agreement for assigning Case to the external argument, Ergative/Absolutive languages rely primarily on structural (direct) Case assignment by a governing verb or inflectional element. Moreover, if there is a different type of agreement morphology in these languages, such that there is a syntactically active Object Agreement morpheme as well as a Subject Agreement morpheme, this could potentially account for certain syntactic ergative patterns in, e.g., deletion under identity. I can only mention these as general approaches to the problem in this paper, but in work in preparation I show how such approaches can account for a variety of ergative patterns.

In concluding that Nisgha is not S-ergative (i.e., is not syntactically ergative as Marantz defines the term), I am not claiming that Nisgha is not syntactically ergative in any sense of the term. This is clearly incorrect, as demonstrated by the long list of constructions that one could compile for the language which show ergative patterns. Rather, I am concluding that the meaning of what it is to be syntactically ergative in the GB framework may be something very different from what Marantz claimed it to be. From my perspective Nisgha is syntactically ergative. This is the result of the interaction of several core properties of the grammar of Nisgha, specifically (as just mentioned) the way that Case is assigned to the external argument and the verbal agreement system. Thus, although what Marantz calls 'THE Ergative Parameter' may be a feature we will want to include in our characterization of Universal Grammar, it will at most have the status of 'AN Ergative Parameter', insofar as it may be only one of several options which can result in syntactic ergative patterns.

Notes

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² The Nisgha language is encompassed by Rigsby's 'Nass-Gitksan' designation (1975), along with Gitksan. Gitksan and Nisgha for the most part are mutually intelligible. According to Tarpent (1982), Nisgha is the most conservative of the languages, while Coast Tsimshian is the most innovative.

³ This idea is almost identical to a proposal by Jelinek (1986:8). She nonetheless concludes that Nisgha is non-configurational.

⁴ Note that under the theory as Marantz and also Levin (1983) develop it, the indefinite Object construction is just a passive, in the sense that the syntactic Subject of the sentence receives the semantic role usually associated with the syntactic Object.

⁵ The MED morpheme has allomorph /-s/ after velar and uvular stops. Also, the t of the [tk^w] allomorph does not appear in certain (phonologically conditioned) environments, specifically, after non-resonant consonants (following Tarpent 1989:3). Tarpent actually uses the label MED.I, indicating 'indefinite medial', by which I assume she means to indicate that no agent can be expressed in constructions employing this morpheme.

⁶ An even more meticulous (although awkward to the point of ungrammatical) gloss of the sentence might be: "The man was looked back at by himself in the mirror".

⁷ It should be noted that there may be problems with Marantz's explanation. First of all, there appear to be cases where there are three interpretations of some reflexive/passive morphology rather than two, where the third possibility is indefinite Object (B.Comrie, p.c.). Although I do not know how common this type of ambiguity is, it could potentially seriously undermine Marantz's claim. Secondly, there is, by Marantz's own admission, no reason to exclude in principle a lexical reflexive formed by the addition of an affix which takes away a transitive verb's ability to assign a Patient theta-role to its internal argument, rather than an Agent role to its external argument. If this were the case then we might

expect to find S-ERGATIVE languages in which there was a reflexive/passive ambiguity, in addition to finding the ambiguity in S-accusative languages. Tarpent, in fact, appears to assume this to be the case for Nisgha, insofar as she states that 'morphological similarity of Passives and Reflexives is what is expected under ergative syntax' (1989:16). She does not explicitly state why this is what is expected, but I assume it is for something like the reason just discussed. Marantz deduces, based on the languages for which he has some evidence for deciding between the analyses, that languages always choose the option of forming lexical reflexives by taking away the verb's ability to assign an external theta-role. (This is a simplified (and perhaps somewhat distorted) account of what Marantz calls the 'clitic' versus 'non-clitic analysis' - see Marantz (1984:152-165) for details.)

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