

Case Relations in Modern Greenlandic

Author(s): Robert Underhill

Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1980), pp. 467-478

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

CASE RELATIONS IN MODERN GREENLANDIC*

Robert Underhill

San Diego State University

0. Introduction.

The question whether ergativity in languages such as Eskimo is a surface phenomenon or reflects underlying structure is a matter of considerable interest in linguistics, particularly since it relates to the question of whether notions such as "subject" and "object" can be taken to be universal. Significant recent work on this topic includes that of Comrie (1973) and Dixon (1979). In an earlier paper on Greenlandic (Underhill 1979), based on secondary sources, I showed that Eskimo syntax operates entirely in terms of the subject/object distinction, while ergativity is important only for inflectional morphology. More recently, working with a native speaker, I was able to rework and update the evidence for underlying subjectivity. In addition, I discovered that the dialect of this speaker diverged in a number of remarkable ways from the "classical" language of the standard grammars (Klein-schmidt 1851, Schultz-Lorentzen 1945, Bergsland 1955). This paper thus has two purposes: one is to review the evidence for underlying subjectivity, and the other is to look at some of these changes.

I don't know to what extent these divergences were dialectal, generational, or idiosyncratic. The speaker was a high-school exchange student from Qaqortoq, or Julianehåb, on the southern tip of Greenland (standard Greenlandic is spoken around Godthåb and further north on the west coast). Like all educated Greenlandic speakers, she was bilingual in Greenlandic and Danish; she was fluent in English and had also studied French, German, and Latin (in the course of the standard Danish education in Greenland). Many of the changes in her dialect seem to have the effect of moving toward a more English or Danish-like syntax.

This is interesting because of the light it casts on the phenomenon of language death, which I use here to mean the extensive structural changes that take place in a language when it is in the process of being replaced by another. Now, Greenlandic Eskimo is not demographically in a state of language death; on the contrary, in vitality and number of speakers it may be in the best condition of any native North American language, and with recent moves toward home rule in Greenland it is approaching the status of a national language. However we seem to see in modern Greenlandic a similar situation involving heavy influence of one language on another, and it is interesting to see just what sorts of changes happen.

The relative case in Greenlandic, which normally¹ ends in -p, is used for the subject of a transitive verb. The absolutive case, which usually ends in -q or zero,² is used for the object of a transitive verb, and the subject of an intransitive verb. These functions are illustrated in (1-2):

- (1) teriannia-p nano-q taku-vaa 'the fox sees the bear'
fox -REL bear-ABS see -TR
- (2) nano-q sinip-poq 'the bear sleeps'
bear-ABS sleep-INT

In (1) terianniap is the subject of the transitive verb and is therefore relative, while nanog is the object and is absolutive. In (2) nanog is absolutive as the subject of the intransitive verb. (Transitive main verbs with 3rd. sg. subject and object end in -vaa or -paa, and intransitive main verbs with 3rd. sg. subject end in -voq or -poq. For further discussion of Eskimo morphophonemics see Underhill 1976.) If the subject or object are pronouns, they are normally deleted, and the case of any remaining noun gives its relation to the verb, so that in (3a) nanup is relative and therefore must be the subject, while in (3b) nanog is absolutive and must be the object:

- (3) a. nanu-p taku-vaa 'the bear sees him'
bear-REL see -TR
- b. nano-q taku-vaa 'he sees the bear'
bear-ABS see -TR

In Eskimo the relative case has another function, not usually found in an ergative, that of a possessive or genitive marker, as in noun phrases like (4):

- (4) nanu-p pamiu-a 'the bear's tail'
bear-REL tail -3

where nanup is the possessor, in the relative case, and the possessed noun pamiuk 'tail' has a corresponding possessive suffix indicating the person and number of the possessor.

1. Fourth Person.

The so-called "fourth person" in Eskimo is a reflexive third person, used in possessive endings and subordinate clauses to mark a third person that is coreferential with the subject. So in (5a):

- (5) a. nanup piara-a takuvaa 'the bear_i sees his_j child'
bear-REL child-3 see -TR
- b. nanup piara-ni takuvaa 'the bear_i sees his_i child'
bear-REL child -4 see -TR

the third person possessive on piaraa refers to someone other than 'the bear', while in (5b) the fourth person on piarani refers back to the subject, so that it means 'the bear sees his own child'. There is a similar contrast in (6a-b):

- (6) a. nanoq illu -a-nut iserpoq 'the bear_i enters his_j
bear-ABS house-3 -to enter-INT house'
- b. nanoq illu-mi-nut iserpoq 'the bear_i enters his_i
bear-ABS house-4 -to enter-INT house'

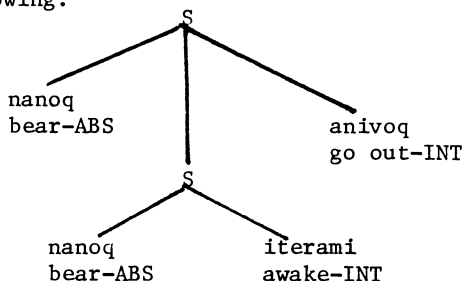
Notice that the fourth person refers to the subject in the conventional, nominative-accusative sense, so that it may refer to the relative-case subject of a transitive verb, as in (5b), or the absolutive-case subject of an intransitive verb, as in (6b).

The same distinction is made in subordinate verbs, so that we get pairs like (7a-b):

- (7) a. nanoq iter-mat anivoq 'when the bear_i awoke, he_j
bear-ABS wake -3 go out-INT went out'
- b. nanoq iter-ami anivoq 'when the bear_i awoke, he_i
bear-ABS wake -4 go out-INT went out'

In (7a) the lower verb itermat is in the Conjunctive mode, one of two modes used in adverbial subordinate clauses. It has a third person ending showing that its subject, nanoq, is not the subject of the higher verb. In (7b) iterami has a fourth person ending, showing that nanoq in this case is the subject of both higher and lower verbs.

In (7b) the noun nanoq could have originated in either sentence. I am using a reasonably traditional model of underlying structure like the following:



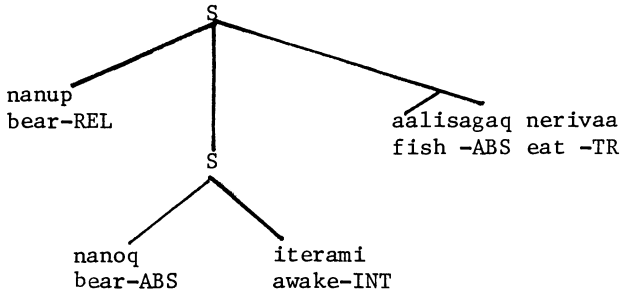
where there are two nanoq's, one in the higher and one in the lower sentence, and there is no way to know which one is deleted.

If the two verbs require different cases, however, there are interesting results. Consider the examples in (8):

- (8) a. nanoq iterami aalisagaq nerivaa 'when the bear_i awoke,
bear-ABS wake -4 fish -ABS eat -TR he_i ate the fish'

- (8) b. *nanup iterami aalisagaq nerivaa '(same)'
 bear-REL wake -4 fish -ABS eat -TR
- c. nanup intermat aalisagaq nerivaa '(same)'
 bear-REL wake -3 fish -ABS eat -TR

The underlying structure for (8a-c) is taken to be the following:



In (8a), nanuq must go with iterami because it is absolutive. The transitive higher verb nerivaa requires a relative subject nanup, while the intransitive lower verb iterami requires absolutive nanuq. Nanuq is what we get on the surface, so the higher subject was deleted. In this dialect, at least, we cannot retain the higher subject and delete the lower one; the result of that would be the ungrammatical (8b), where nanup replaces nanuq. My interpretation of why (8b) is ungrammatical is that there is a surface perception constraint that a noun must be in the right case to go with the next following verb. In this example 'bear' must be absolutive to go with the intransitive verb which follows it.

If we insist on retaining the higher subject, what we get is (8c), with relative nanup. What happens there is that the lower verb itermat goes back to third person, even though it still ought to be fourth. In this dialect there is considerable reluctance to use the fourth person unless it is preceded by a visible controller (and sometimes not even then). While nanup is semantically the subject of the lower verb, it doesn't look grammatically like the subject because it is in the wrong case. So there is no identifiable controller for a fourth person in the lower verb, and it reverts to the unmarked third person. Notice that nanup both precedes and commands intermat, so the absence of fourth person here cannot be explained in terms of precedence or command relationships, but rather seems to require a surface agreement constraint.

Another way of saying the same thing is shown in (9):

- (9) a. iterami nanup aalisagaq nerivaa 'when he_i awoke, the
 wake -4 bear-REL fish -ABS eat -TR bear_i ate the fish'
- b. intermat nanup aalisagaq nerivaa 'when he_i awoke,
 wake -3 bear-REL fish -ABS eat -TR the bear_{i,j} ate the
 fish'

Here nanup has been moved and placed in front of the main verb, which it agrees with. In this case also there is a tendency for the lower verb to revert to third person, as in (9b). (9b) is therefore ambiguous since the subject of the lower verb can be 'the bear' or someone else.

The principle that the controller of a fourth person has to closely precede it can be used to disambiguate situations of the kind illustrated by English "Peter said the bear went to his house", where "his house" could refer either to Peter or the bear. In Eskimo both higher and lower subjects can condition fourth person on possessives which they command, so the fourth person will not help with the ambiguity; but see how it is done in (10a-b):

- (10) a. Piita oqarpoq nanoq illu-mi-nut iserpoq
 Peter said bear house-4 -to went
 'Peter_i said the bear_j went to his_j house'
 b. Piita oqarpoq illu-mi-nut nanoq iserpoq
 Peter said house-4 -to bear went
 'Peter_i said the bear_j went to his_i house'

In (10a) nanoq is right in front of illumnut, so it means 'to the bear's house'; in (10b) we have switched illumnut and nanoq, so that Piita now immediately precedes the fourth person, and now it means Peter's house.

2. Infinitive.

The construction that Kleinschmidt called "Infinitiv" is actually a device for coordinating verb phrases, and in classical Eskimo the two verb phrases have to have the same subject. For example, (11):

- (11) qimmiq nikuvi-llu-ni pisuppoq 'the dog stands up and walks'
 dog-ABS stand -INF -4 walk-INT

or 'the dog, standing up, walks', with qimneq 'the dog' as the subject of both lower and higher verbs. The infinitive suffix is -lu, or -llu after vowels, and the infinitive has one-person inflection for its absolutive term, that is, the subject in the case of an intransitive infinitive and the object for a transitive one. In (11) nikuvilluni is intransitive and its fourth person ending refers to its subject, which is also the higher subject. Another example is (12):

- (12) Annap teterfik nakkaa-llu-gu-lu seqquippaa
 A.-REL pot -ABS drop -INF-3 -& break -TR
 'Anna dropped the pot and broke it'

or 'Anna, dropping the pot, broke it'. Here Annap is the subject of both verbs; the infinitive nakkaallugulu is transitive and the third person ending agrees with its object.

In (11) both verbs are intransitive, and in (12) both are transitive. If the two verbs take different cases, there is the same restriction in this dialect that a subject must be in the right case to go with the next following verb:

- (13) a. qimmeq (*qimmip) qiviar-lu-ni nanoq takuvaa
 dog-ABS -REL turn -INF-4 bear see -TR
 'when the dog_i turned his head, he_i saw the bear'
 b. qiviar-lu-ni qimmip (*qimmeq) nanoq takuvaa
 turn -INF-4 dog-REL -ABS bear see -TR
 'when he_i turned his head, the dog_i saw the bear'

In (13a) qimmeq is absolutive to go with the intransitive infinitive qiviarluni which follows it, and relative qimmip is not possible here. But if we move 'the dog' so that it precedes the main verb, we get (13b) with relative qimmip, and the absolutive is not possible here.

In this dialect, unlike the classical, the subject of the infinitive can differ from that of the main verb.⁴ This is a particularly remarkable development for Eskimo. However the unlike subject must be explicitly marked, as in (14):

- (14) Anna tikil-lu-ni Piita illumut iserpoq
 Anna come -INF-4 Peter house-to enter-INTO
 'when Anna arrived, Peter went into the house'

Another way to mark unlike subjects is by different verb endings if the subjects are different persons, as in (15):

- (15) tikil-lu-nga illumut iserpoq 'when I arrived, he went
 come-INF-1sg house-to enter-INT into the house'

where the first person ending on tikillunga shows that its subject is different from that of the main verb. If neither of these ways of marking unlike subjects is used, then the sentence must be interpreted as having like subjects:

- (16) qimmip nanoq taku-llu-gu-lu qimaavoq
 dog-REL bear-ABS see -INF-3 -& escape-INT
 'when the dog_i saw the bear_j, he_i ran away'

Even though 'the dog' is only mentioned once in (15), it has to be the subject of the main verb, since the sentence doesn't say anything different.

We saw that intransitive infinitives in the classical language normally have fourth person inflection, because they agree with their subject, which must also be the higher subject. Transitive infinitives usually have third person inflection, because they agree with the object, which may not be the same as the subject (otherwise the sentence would be reflexive). In this dialect, where the same-subject restriction is not enforced, the endings are frozen in this form, so that we always find fourth person with intransitive and third person with transitive infinitives, regardless of whether the term to which they refer is the higher subject. An example is (14), where the fourth person ending on tikilluni refers to 'Anna', which is not the higher subject. In (17):

- (17) qimmip nanoq taku-llu-gu-lu nanoq qimaavoq
 dog-REL bear-ABS see -INF-3 -& bear escape-INT
 'when the dog saw the bear, the bear ran away'

the infinitive takullugulu has third person inflection referring to its object, nanoq, even though 'the bear' is also the higher subject.

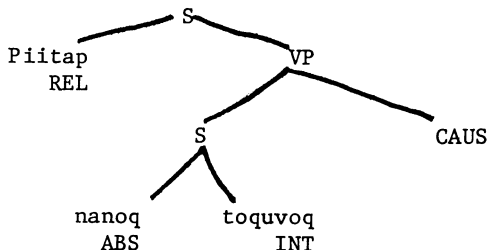
3. Causative.

Causative sentences in Eskimo are made by adding a new subject to the sentence at the same time that a causative suffix is added to the verb. While the grammars list a number of causative suffixes, only three are productive in this dialect: -tit- 'make' or 'let', -qqu- 'tell', and -sori- 'think'. Thus from (18) there are the three possible causatives (19a-c):

- (18) nanoq toqu-voq 'the bear died'
 bear-ABS die -INT
- (19) a. Piitap nanoq toqu-tip-paa 'Peter made/let the bear die'
 P.-REL bear-ABS die -CAUS-TR
- b. Piitap nanoq toqu-qqu-vaa 'Peter told the bear to die'
 P.-REL bear-ABS die -CAUS-TR
- c. Piitap nanoq toqu-sori-vaa⁵ 'Peter thinks the bear died'
 P.-REL bear-ABS die -CAUS-TR

The presumed underlying structure for (19a-c) is:

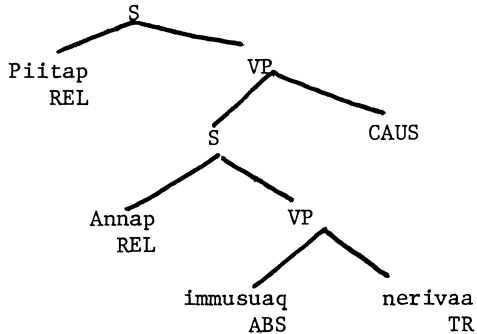
(19)



The underlying sentence is intransitive with an absolutive subject. Adding the causative makes the verb transitive, so the new subject is relative. The old subject is the new object and remains absolutive.

If the underlying sentence is transitive, things get more complicated. Suppose we take an example like (20) and try to causativize it, using the -tit- suffix.

- (20) Annap immusuaq nerivaa 'Anna ate the cheese'
 A.-REL cheese-ABS eat -TR



The interesting problem is what happens to the old subject. In this dialect, there are three possibilities, which seem to form a sequence:

- (21) a. Piitap Anna immusuaq neri-tip-paa 'Peter made Anna eat
P.-REL ABS cheese-ABS eat -CAUS-TR the cheese'
- b. Piitap Anna-mut immusuaq neri-tip-paa '(same)'
P.-REL Anna-ALL cheese-ABS eat -CAUS-TR
- c. Piitap immusuaq Anna-mut neri-tip-paa '(same)'
P.-REL cheese-ABS Anna-ALL eat -CAUS-TR

In (21a), the old subject 'Anna' cannot be relative any more because there is a new relative, and so it reverts to absolutive. In terms of relational grammar, Anna is a *chômeur*, and seems to be quite literally unemployed: she just stands around without knowing what to do. In (21b), Anna is given something to do: she goes into the allative, or dative, case. It is, of course, the standard pattern for languages with this type of causative for the subject of a transitive lower sentence to go into the dative. In (21c) Annamut is again allative and in addition undergoes a shift into the preverbal position, thereby achieving the subject - object - oblique order which seems to be preferred in Eskimo (Woodbury 1977:310). (21c) is the only one of these three possibilities which is predicted by the standard grammars.

The Eskimo causative is not an argument for underlying ergativity, even though the transitive subject, which comes out allative, is treated differently from the intransitive subject and transitive object, which remain absolutive in causativization. The pattern here is the same as in many undoubted nominative/accusative languages: such as Turkish, where the old or lower subject simply occupies the highest unoccupied slot in the hierarchy, direct object if possible, otherwise dative.

In some cases the causative has the effect of adding an unlike subject for the lower verb, and thus functions something like English *Equi-NP-Deletion* in reverse:

- (22) a. tikis-samaar-poq 'he expects to arrive'
come -expect-INT

- (22) b. tikis-samaar-tip-paa 'he_i expects him_j to arrive'
come -expect-CAUS-TR
- (23) a. Piitaaq pisik-kusun-neri-voq⁷ 'Peter prefers to go'
P.-ABS go -want -more-INT
- b. Piitap Ole pisik-kusut-tin-neri-vaa 'Peter prefers
P.-REL O.-ABS go -want -CAUS-more-TR Ole to go'
- (24) a. Piitaaq pisik-kusu-nngi-laq 'Peter doesn't like to go'
P.-ABS go -want-NEG -INT
- b. Piitap Ole pisik-kusut-ti-nngi-laa 'Peter doesn't
P.-REL O.-ABS go -want -CAUS-NEG-TR like Ole to go'

4. Passive.

There are two ways of making the passive in classical Greenlandic, both indirect. One uses the passive participle -saq, as in nerisaaq 'one which is eaten' or asasaaq 'beloved', cf. asasaa 'his beloved'. Finite verbs like nerisaavoq 'it is eaten' may be formed by adding the suffix -u- 'be' to the passive participle; the passive verb is therefore a secondary formation from the participle. The other way is by a combination of the abstract noun suffix -neq and -qar- 'have', as in nerineqarpoq 'it is eaten'. So the system of passive verbs and participles is the following:

Passive Verb	Passive Participle
'it is eaten'	'one which is eaten'
neri-saa-voq	neri-saq
neri-neqar-poq	---

Kleinschmidt (1851:138) tells us that the passive is much less common in Greenlandic than in German, and is particularly rare when an agent has to be expressed. In fact Kleinschmidt gives us no examples of passive sentences with an agent overtly expressed.

In this dialect the passive system is considerably elaborated, with the formation of a new passive out of the -tit-causative, and the creation of matching passive participles for the two forms of the passive that didn't have them, by using the normal intransitive participle -toq. So we get the following passive system:

Passive Verb	Passive Participle
neri-saa-voq	neri-saq
neri-neqar-poq	neri-neqar-toq
neri-tip-poq	neri-tit-toq

Agents can be expressed freely and are in the instrumental. Examples of the three passives are given in (25):

- (25) a. timmiaq qimmi-mik neri-saa-voq 'the bird was eaten by
bird dog -INST eat-PASS-INT the dog'
- b. timmiaq qimmi-mik neri-tip-poq '(same)'
bird dog -INST eat-PASS-INT

- (25) c. timmiaq neri-neqar-poq 'the bird was eaten'
bird eat -PASS -INT

The -neqar- construction still does not normally allow an agent; when an agent does appear it has to be indefinite or non-specific, so that 'by the dog' could not be added to (25c). If an agent is needed, one of the other patterns must be used.

It is interesting to speculate on how the new passive could have arisen out of the -tit-causative. We can get some clues by examining the difference in meaning between the -tit-passive and the others. Consider (26a-b):

- (26) a. Anna Oli-mik tigi -saa -voq 'Anna was caught by Ole'
A. O.-INST catch- PASS-INT
b. Anna Oli-mik tigi -tip - poq '(same)'
A. O.-INST catch- PASS-INT

In (26a) Ole is Anna's enemy and the sentence describes a real chase. In (26b) the gloss is the same but the situation is friendly. In the case where Anna allows Ole to catch her, only (26b) is acceptable. The -tit-passive requires a subject (patient) which is alive, animate, and aware. Returning to (25), in (25a) the bird is thought of as dead, while in (25b) it is alive (at least at the beginning). In:

- (27) a. puiseq sinil-lu-ni malersor-saa-voq
seal sleep-INF-4 hunt -PASS-INT
'the seal is being hunted while it is sleeping'
b. @puiseq sinil-lu-ni malersor-tip-poq '(same)'
seal sleep-INF-4 hunt -PASS-INT

the -tit- construction in (27b) is anomalous because, we are told, the seal can't let itself be hunted while it is sleeping. This is the crucial clue: the -tit-passive seems to derive from the notion "something lets itself be ----".

My suggested derivation for the -tit-passive therefore starts with a normal causative:

- (28) Annap timmiaq qimmi-mut neri-tip-paa 'Anna makes/lets the
A.-REL bird dog -ALL eat -CAUS-TR dog eat the bird'

The allative term becomes instrumental, probably by analogy with the instrumental agent in the -saavog passive, and we now have a sentence that is passive in meaning; this stage is attested in the notes:

- (29) Annap timmiaq qimmi-mik neri-tip-paa 'Anna lets the bird
A.-REL bird dog -INST eat -CAUS-TR be eaten by the dog'

Then we get a reflexive by the Eskimo way of making reflexives, which is simply to delete the object:

- (30) timmiaq qimmi-mik neri-tip-poq
bird dog -INST eat -PASS-TR
'the bird lets itself be eaten by the dog'
'the bird undergoes being eaten by the dog'
'the bird is eaten by the dog'

There is a parallel here with the so-called "suffering passive" of Japanese, which is translated as a passive but is syntactically a causative.

5. Conclusion.

Firstly, we have a number of processes which demonstrate that Eskimo syntax is organized according to subject and object for all significant purposes. The only process which might be evidence for underlying ergativity is the causative, and I hope to have shown that it isn't. It is important to note that this proof holds for the "classical" language as well for my informant's dialect.

Secondly, turning to the ways in which modern Greenlandic seems to be influenced by Danish or English, we can summarize this as a drift toward a more surfacy kind of syntax, depending on perception strategies and word order constraints, where the syntactic rules seem to be based more on surface structures than on underlying structures.

Footnotes.

*Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the American Anthropological Association, Cincinnati, November, 1979 and at a colloquium at U.C.S.D. I am indebted to the participants at these gatherings for many helpful suggestions. I am particularly indebted to Tove Petersen for serving as informant for my investigation of Eskimo syntax.

¹The relative suffix is -p when it is not combined with a possessive.

²The absolutive suffix is zero, but many nouns end in a -q which is apparently a vestigial singular marker, and which drops before (almost) any other suffix. For details see Underhill 1976a).

³Examples are cited in the new Greenlandic orthography. Because my informant's dialect did not distinguish single from geminate stops, there are undoubtedly errors in the spelling in this regard. Morpheme boundaries are indicated where pertinent to the discussion.

⁴The result is that sentences, rather than verb phrases, are coordinated.

⁵The combination -sori-vaa evidences morphological regularization. In the grammars this suffix is -sor-, ending in the abstract fourth vowel which combines with the transitive ending to give -soraq (Underhill 1976b).

⁶(21a) might be derived from (21b) or (21c) by some form of 3-to-2 Advancement (in Relational terms). I do not believe the derivation goes that way. In the many instances where the informant gave me more than one version of a given causative, the (21a) type tended to come first, followed by the (21b) or (21c) types after more reflection. 3-to-2 Advancement would make the old object (immusuaq) into a 2-chômeur. But 2-chômeurs in this language, which are created by the antipassive rule, are normally instrumental,

not absolute. For more on the relational grammar interpretation of the anti-passive, see Gerds (this volume).

Alert Eskimologists will have noticed dialectal pisik- for pisukg here.

Bergsland, however, has a number of examples of passives with overt agent, expressed in the ablative. Woodbury (323) claims that the agent of a passive can be ablative, allative, or instrumental depending on dialect.

Bergsland (1955:106) has one example of a -tit-causative that might be read as a passive.

Bibliography.

- Bergsland, Knut. 1955. A Grammatical Outline of the Eskimo Language of West Greenland. Mimeographed.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1973. The ergative: variations on a theme. Lingua 32:239-53.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1979. Ergativity. Lg. 55:1.59-138.
- Kleinschmidt, Samuel. 1851. Grammatik der Grönländischen Sprache. Olms reprint, 1968.
- Schultz-Lorentzen, 1945. A Grammar of the West Greenland Language. Meddelelser om Grønland 129.3.
- Underhill, Robert. 1969. The absolute and the relative in Eskimo. Read at the summer meeting of the L.S.A., Urbana.
- . 1976a. Noun bases in two Eskimo dialects.: a study in comparative morphophonemics. Papers on Eskimo and Aleut Linguistics, Chicago Linguistic Society.
- . 1976b. The case for an abstract segment in Greenlandic. IJAL 42:4.349-358.
- Woodbury, Anthony. 1977. Greenlandic Eskimo, ergativity, and relational grammar. In Cole and Sadock, eds., Syntax and Semantics, vol. 8: Grammatical Relations. Academic Press.