MINIMALIST INQUIRIES, LARSON SHELL VP, AND OBJECT AGREEMENT, WITH REMARKS ON ERGATIVITY AND UNERGATIVE 'TRANSITIVE' CLAUSES IN LAI CHIN

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I propose here to extend the argument from my paper (in press) dealing with Chin and Lushai verb stem alternation on the basis of a Larson-shell treatment of Chin-Lushai transitive verbs, to an account of why there is object agreement as well as subject agreement. Chomsky (in his recent MS 1998: 37; 39-46) argues, at least tentatively, that we can best account for agreement as strictly subject agreement by saying that verbs with verb-internal arguments are predicating only an EVENT type, made into a proposition by relating to an External Argument (though he does not use the Montague terminology or framework here); and that the reason for a verb bearing agreement features (presumably from TNS, but maybe already in VP) has to do with the functional category, IP/TP, with which V features have to be associated) while either the verb-phrase-internal subject argument moves to Specifier of IP/TP (because of the Extended Projection Principle, EPP), i.e., in order to specify an event over the field of an event structure (this, too, he does not say in these terms, of course, though he does associate TNS with ‘event structure’ — p. 15), or else is associated with an expletive in Specifier of IP/TP. The point is that verbs show the relation this way between event type and event token (note that it may therefore be that the features of agreement are indeed acquired only at IP since putting an event structure in the context of a specific 'time' or modality and aspectual state turns it into a specified event).

Well, what of object agreement morphology. If we suppose, classically, that objects are inherently complements of verbs, then object agreement certainly seems not to have any such requirements to motivate it. Chomsky (MS 1998, 46; cf. 14-15) does refer to ‘object agreement’, but his treatment somewhat obscure. Still, it clearly presupposes his general adoption of the Hale-Keyser/Larson (Hale and Keyser 1993; Larson 1988) shell treatment of transitive verbs, and it is this foundation that I propose to use to really explicate object agreement in a language which has it morphologically.

As I have shown elsewhere (cf. Lehman 1996), there is independent, morphophonological evidence favouring this view
of transitivity in Lai Chin (and a whole series of related Kuki-Chin languages). If so, then at some appropriate 'level' of representation, e.g., within the Larson shell of Max VP, the surface direct object is in fact the lone, subject argument of a lower v, the 'heavy' v, which in Chin-Lushai is in fact an intransitive passive-adjectival stative verb. If so, then object agreement is effectively triggered and explained by what amounts to underlying subject agreement, since the surface subject is the subject of the light higher v of the Larson shell VP, and the surface object is the subject of the lower, 'heavy' v, the stative adjectival one.

If so, then TNS itself has got to bear double 'subject' features, which, when the raised v-complex moves to TNS, 'checks' the features of both arguments because these need to be morphologically spelt out as clitic agreement affixes on the resulting verb in the correct verb-stem. Alternatively (perhaps more directly in accord with what Chomsky does say (MS 1998 46)), the light verb, 'v', itself has a double specifier: the upper one containing a raised DP from the complement of v, the lower one, the underlying subject of v. Then it is the latter motivating agreement at TP/IP and it moves directly to the Specifier of TP on the basis of the EPP; the verb complex as a whole, including the remaining 'object' argument in its remaining specifier, moves itself moves to adjoin to the head of TP/IP, producing the correct SOV surface word order. Schematically at least, considering a Lai Chin equivalent (regarding word order and so on) 'John hit Bill', we get something like

1. VP
   
   spec VP
   
   spec v' =>
   John
   
   v VP
   CAUSE
   
   spec V
   Bill hit
with the surface output roughly
This, however, is not going to work because with a ditransitive it is the *indirect* object that the surface verb agrees with and not the *direct* object. But if IO also has a light verb in the shell and it is higher than that of the DO, then we may be home free after all, provided that we can semantically motivate treating IO as underlying subject of a light verb. E.g., we might say that with 'John gave a book to Max' we have in fact the following very approximately

with 'Max' raising to spec$_1$ of the maximal VP, and 'book to spec$_2$ (giving the right Lai Chin default word order of S>IO>DO) and where light v CAUSE may be thought of as some sort of abstract entity and GET, meaning that Max is in a receiving relation and *give* means something like 'is given' as in 'a book is given' (is in the state of a patient, undergoing transfer).

In itself, of course, this will not work unless we have an independently motivated way of accounting for the Lai ergative