

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).

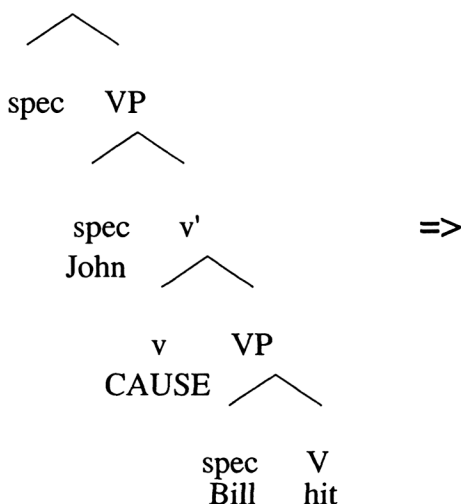
Well, what of object agreement morphology. If we suppose, classically, that objects are inherently complements of verbs, then object agreement certainly seems not to have any such requirements to motivate it. Chomsky (MS 1998, 46; cf. 14-15) does refer to 'object agreement', but his treatment somewhat 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.

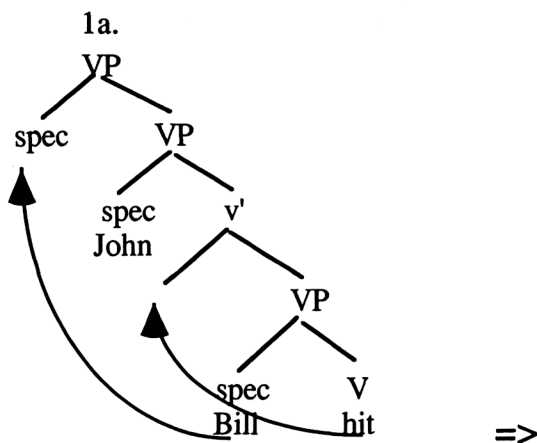
As I have shown elsewhere (cf. Lehman 1996), there is independent, morphophonological evidence favouring this view

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.

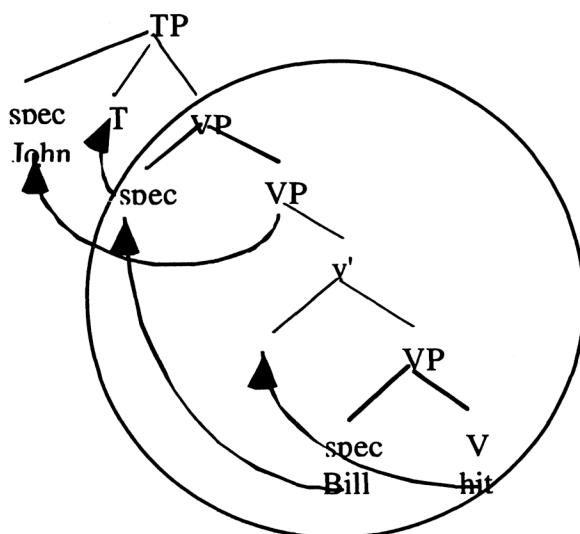
If so, then TNS itself has got to bear double 'subject' features, which, when the raised *v*-complex moves to TNS, 'checks' the features of both arguments because these need to be morphologically spelt out as clitic agreement affixes on the resulting verb in the correct verb-stem. Alternatively (perhaps 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



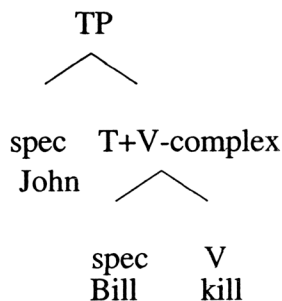


1b.



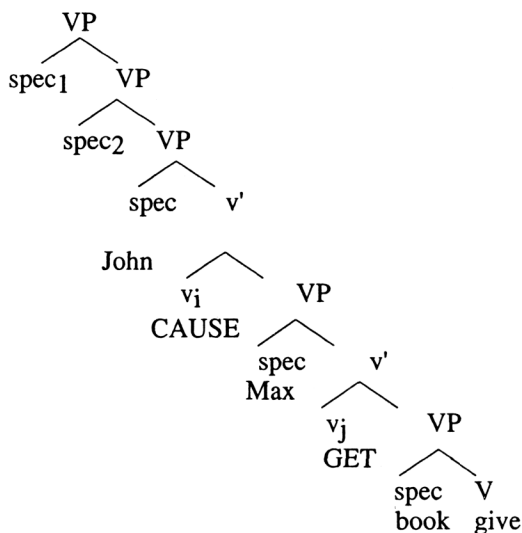
with the surface output roughly

2.



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

3.



with 'Max' raising to spec₁ of the maximal VP, and 'book to spec₂ (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

case marking. This now becomes very simple. It is enough in this paper to say that we let case marking be sensitive to the position of the foot of the Chain of which the head is a specifier of TP: that DP is marked with ergative case whose Chain is in the highest specifier of the maximal VP — equivalently, the DP is in the maximal specifier of TP/IP.

What favours all this strongly is (a) that the default, unmarked order of arguments is in fact S, IO, DO

4. John nih Max ca-uk cu a-peek
 J erg. M B abs 3sg give

And (b), a transitive verb commonly has two Stems, I and II, where the ordinary declarative stem (Stem I) is used in a relative clause when the head of the relative construction is coreferent with the subject of the clause, but (Stem II) when the head of the relative construction corefers with the object (the direct object in case the verb of the clause is monotransitive, the indirect object if the verb is ditransitive as in the case of *peek*, above. Furthermore, Stem I, used in the declarative clauses with transitive verbs is demonstrably a derivative form (e.g., *velh*, 'give', in the paradigm below, where /h/ is used for the glottal stop,

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 5. | I | II |
| | ka-velh (I hit [someone]) | ka-vel lo (I don't hit [someone]) |
| | ka-velh lai (I shall hit ...) | ka-val lai lo (I shan't hit ...) |
| | ka-velh ah-cun (if I hit ...) | |
| | velh-naak (hitting)/ velh-mi | |
| | (the one hit) | |
| | [a-velh-mi pa (the man [pa] who hits) | |

but

[a-vel mi pa
 (the man who is hit),

where *mi* is in C, the head of CP, and means 'one'.

I now assume, on the foregoing evidence, that, if V raises to v_j and then this complex raises again to v_i , in some sense at least, Stem I of a transitive verb is (etymologically, at any rate)

derived in consequence of the raising of *v* to its light verb counterparts as above. And I can conclude that overt 'object' agreement in these languages in fact does reduce to what amounts to subject agreement, in line with suggestions in Chomsky (MS 1998).

There is an obvious similarity between the present treatment and the treatment of ergativity in Johns (1992). In both instances, the arguments turn upon the fact that, on way or other, the transitive verbs (Inuktitut, and secondarily Dyirbal and Basque, in Johns) are based upon a passive-adjective, or passive participle form. In Inuktitut (an Eskimo language of Canada) the surface transitive verb is itself such a form, while in Lai and its relatives the form in question surfaces only in such constructions as object relativisation; but, either way, it can be claimed that it is this form that is 'basic' lexically (?semantically): it is the *only* transitive verb form in Inuktitut, and in Chin it is clearly the etymologically original form (for, say, 'to kill' one is obliged to reconstruct a proto Tibeto-Burman root with a final /t/ (* that), and yet Stem I for this verb in Lai Chin has a final glottal stop (*thah*), whilst *that* is retained in Stem II, the passive-adjective stem.

Now it is possible of course to try and argue that ergativity arises *because* of the fact that in such languages the transitive verb is fundamentally a passive adjective (or passive participle). However, there is a potential circularity in such an argument. Thus, one might equally argue, assuming the Hale-Keyser generalisation (Larson-shell treatment) of syntactic transitivity, that in some deep sense *all* transitive verbs are underlain by such a form, abstractly, and that, if so, perhaps it is the choice of ergative case marking itself, or what I have argued that this amounts to, namely, the option of distinguishing between the two verb roots in the shell and thus having to have their respective arguments treated as subjects under 'agreement' (it is hardly an accident that in Inuktitut as in Chin there is morphological agreement for both subject and object) that itself accounts for the morphological facts about transitive verbs.

Moreover, John's analysis turns, in addition, upon the fact that the passive participle form can also surface as a nominal form, as in such expressions as 'the kissed [one] is sick' (her example (2b), 1992: 59), but this fact need not, as she wants it to, require one to claim that such verbs simply are not verbs at all (equivalently, that in such languages 'V' does not project (I shall not reproduce her further argument that has only NPs and functional AgrPs in the syntax of transitive clauses, although this

is itself incompatible with current Minimalist syntax). After all, we can consider such ordinary English expressions as 'the stabbed' meaning 'the stabbed *ones*', or, for the matter of that, the similar use of intransitive participles as nominal forms, as in 'the hearing [ones]', and thus realise that it is preferable to claim that such forms have a **pro** head, an idea Johns does not even envision. From this vantage point, it becomes difficult to accept John's associated claim that the so-called ergative case marking in Inuktitut etc. (there known as the 'relative' case) is merely a special sort of genitive or dependency case, such that, in effect at least (cf. Johns 1992: 61) 'the man stabbed the bear' amounts to 'the bear is the man's stabbed-one' (with very convoluted head-movement operations added to ensure that the 'agent' appears in first (surface subject) position — operations now found incompatible with a (revised) Minimalist syntax as in Chomsky MS. In addition, it has to be noticed that (unlike Chin or most Tibeto-Burman languages, by the way), Inuktitut, Dyirbal and so on have a true passive, distinct from the ergative-transitive clause construction, so that it cannot be thought that ergativity is nothing but a sort of passive construction.

In short, it seems that we have after all to claim that transitive sentences are universally constructed in the usual VP (V-max) syntax, that such functional phrases as Agr cannot be justified, and that, in any event, the underlying syntax of transitive VP's is the same (a Larson-shell syntax for V-max) regardless of whether a language be ergative or accusative. And it is at least altogether likely that it is the fact of ergativity itself (the choice or parameter setting that renders the Larson-shell V-max 'visible' for agreement at IP/TP) that leads to the morphological phenomenon that, one way or other, preserves the underlying passive-adjective verb form (across the board in Inuktitut, in object relativisation in Lai Chin) in declarative transitive predicate clauses. And again, the difference between syntactic ergativity (Inuktitut, like Dyirbal, disallows transitive subject relativisation) and mere morphological ergativity, has got to be seen as simply the difference between taking the lower subject or the higher subject argument in the Larson shell V-max as most basic. In fact, the distinction is even more trivial, and certainly less sharp or diacritical, than may seem the case: for, whilst Dyirbal and Inuktitut seem unable to relativise ergative arguments (cf. John's 1992: 83 discussion of similar distinctions as between Dyirbal and Inuktitut, having regard to which argument or arguments is either show surface agreement and hence themselves surface as raised to TP/IP), Lai Chin is itself not entirely *just* morphologically ergative in as much as object relativisation

requires the verb to be in the form of the root in the lower V of the Larson shell. Apparently, in languages like Lai Chin, the transitive verb is base upon an analytically transparent V-max shell, whilst in, say, Inuktitut, there is no 'visible' composite of V+light v available, so that only the lower V is accessible for purposes of a distinguishable element with its own subject argument available for relativisation. (In nominative-accusative languages, of course, one need claim only that only the 'higher', head of V-max is visible, i.e., only after composition (raising of V to v), so that there is visible for such purposes only a single form with composed arguments, both (all) available alike for relativisation and other operations relating to the 'accessibility hierarchy' of Keenan and Comrie (1977, 1979).

Likewise, one can compare the present analysis with that of Wechsler and Wayan Arka (1998) with regard to syntactic ergativity in Balinese (where one can also find a fairly complete reference to the literature on syntactic ergativity as such). The chief point of comparison is the fact that Balinese transitive verbs are morphologically complex (with a specially inflected stem) when there is an ergative agent-subject, whilst, when the syntactic subject is the argument that would otherwise be the object (the terminology is confusing, without doubt), the verb takes its apparent root form. I take that to indicate that, as in Lai Chin, a transitive verb is underlyingly, in the first instance, what amounts to a 'passive' adjective. It is also worth considering that in Balinese it is always possible have the 'object' argument as the (pre-verbal) syntactic subject, with the verb in root form and the agent argument post-verbal, in non-subject position. Wechsler and Wayan Arka show that this cannot be a passive construction (for instance, this other argument is obligatory and is not an oblique, or PP, expression). For various reasons, but especially by comparison with an apparently similar situation in Lai Chin, I suggest that this is a case of what amounts to subject-incorporation. Thus, their example (34 a),

6. I Wayan gugut cicing
 art NAME bit dog (indef)
 'a dog bit Wayan'

with the verb in root form (their 'OV'), ought to be construed as equivalent to something like

- 6'. Wayan was dog-bitten

with I Wayan as the syntactic subject (as they show it to be), and with the post-verbal 'subject' obligatorily indefinite, a restriction explainable best on the subject-incorporation hypothesis.

Lai Chin also has a way of making a transitive declarative sentence non-ergative, and in Lai that is done by *object-incorporation*. For instance, Instead of saying

7. Khar Mang nih caw (cu) a-thah

KM erg cow (abs)3sg kill(stem I Intrans)

'Khar Mang killed a/the cow.'

one can instead say

8. Khar Mang (cu) caw a-that

KM (abs) cow 3sg-kill[ed] (Stem II/pass.adj. stem)

'Khar Mang is cow-killing.'

where the verb is in its passive-adjective stem (stem II).

It may be worth adding here that the treatment of objects in this paper is similar to that outlined in Basilico (1998), with however the considerable difference that I find no need to posit anything as ad hoc and cumbersome as his functional category 'Trans', a functional category which, like the 'AGR' categories of pre-Minimalist syntax, seems to perform no independently required work except to get round a problem in analysis. One consideration arises however, from comparing the present work with Basilico's paper. It is necessary to make it clear that the present proposal preserves the idea that agreement is essentially a specifier-head licensing relationship: here the agreement clitics are licensed by the highest two specifiers of TP, themselves, in turn, heading chains to VP-internal argument positions, such that Case is assigned *on the basis of* the chain-determined fact that there is more than a single subject argument position within the V-max shell, but most directly within TP itself, i.e., from the top downwards amongst possibly more than one specifier of TP. Case assignment, then, remains local, as it were. And the sense in which TP bears 'uninterpretable' case features needing to be checked and erased is made dependent upon the morphological transparency of the complex transitive verb: TP, then, has to bear, in such instances, one case feature for each segment of the V-max verb complex!

Finally, it behooves me to elaborate the data¹ on which I based my claim, above, that apparent split ergativity² in Lai Chin — transitive sentences where a subject is marked for the absolutive case — is in fact an instance of object incorporation. I add this without much commentary, however.

If one possibly does *not* mark an apparent transitive subject with the ergative case marker, *nih*, (8) is the result (repeated now with additional commentary).

8. Khar Mang (cu) caw a-that

KM (abs) cow 3sg-kill[ed] (Stem II/pass.adj. stem)³

‘Khar Mang is cow-killing/ KM cow-kills (as a profession)’⁴

This is object incorporation and hence creates in effect an *intransitive* verb, of which Khar Mang is the (absolutive) subject. It is *not* a topicalisation, for if Khar Mang *and* Lian Bawi both kill a cow (even the same cow, jointly, we get evidence from subject agreement that the conjoined DP is the actual subject.

9. Khar Mang le Lian Bawi (cu) caw an-that

KM and LB (abs) cow 3pl-kill

‘Khar Mang and Lian Bawi are cow-killing/
cow-kill (professionally)’

showing proper plural subject agreement. In any event, object incorporation here lets the predicate express simply a class of types of killing, wherewith, moreover,

9'. Khar Mang a-that

‘s/he is KM-killing/killing KM)’

I.e., there is not even a **pro** object syntactically present.

But, we *can* topicalise the subject, and then it remain ergative, because there is an independent syntactic object (overt or not), as

10. Khar Mang nih (cun), caw (cu) a-thah

KM erg (deic-obl) cow (abs) 3sg-kill

‘(As for KM/ The said KM) /KM, (he) kills a cow/the cow’

where *cun* conflates the use of *cu* as a deictic marker of discourse anaphora ('the said KM') with the oblique case proper to adverbials and such.

Tentatively at least, I think that the object-incorporation (a semantic category, as used here) amounts syntactically to an adverbial use of the apparent object but not a manner adverbial, thence lacking oblique case marking, and without possible discourse anaphoric deictic marking, hence neither *cu* nor *cun* following *caw* in (8), (9), or (9').

Endnotes

¹I am indebted to my graduate student, A. Ceu Hlun for the insights on which this analysis is based.

²On the difficulties with the way 'split ergativity' has been used in the Tibeto-Burman literature, see Nishi 1995: 9)

³*cu* clearly serves as demonstrative, head of DP, deictically serving to focus on the NP as one mentioned previously or understood beforehand. E.g., (2) is best translated as 'That Khar Mang ...'

⁴This goes along with the pervasive distinction in Lai, Mizo and so on, and Burmese, between inherent and contingent attribution. Consider, e.g., in Mizo, the difference between *hei mi paak hi* and *hei paak hi*, both meaning 'this park', but where the first really contrasts this thing that *happens* to be a park with all manner of other things, whilst the second contrasts only with other parks. In Lai, there is a corresponding distinction between, say, *mi-ṭha* and *a-ṭha mi*, the first meaning an *inherently* good person, the latter meaning one who is at this moment, or in some particular context, good (Burmese: *lu-kaung*: လူကောင်း as against *kaung:te.lu* ကောင်းတယ်လူ).

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