

Transitivity mismatches at the syntax-semantics interface:
Disappearing object markers in Nez Perce

Phenomena surrounding transitivity present an excellent opportunity to study the interrelations between the semantics of argument structure and the morphosyntax of case-marking and verb inflection. In this respect, the Nez Perce language (Penutian; northwestern US) provides a fertile testing ground for theories of the syntax-semantics interface. Most importantly for this paper, Nez Perce presents an interesting alternation between clearly transitive “ergative” clauses, which present full case-marking and verbal inflection for both subject and object (1), and a class of apparently intransitive “antipassive” clauses, which show clear hallmarks of argument-structural transitivity despite a purely intransitive morphological encoding (2).¹ This alternation in the morphosyntactic expression of 2-participant events allows us to explore the complex interfaces (semantics-syntax-morphology) that the notion of transitivity unites.

This paper presents the first detailed investigation of a class of Nez Perce antipassives which contain no overt case-marking and only subject verbal inflection in spite of an underlyingly transitive argument structure and LF. This mismatch between transitive semantics and intransitive morphosyntax occurs when the subject of a verb is the possessor of the verb’s object, as in (3) (cf. *She_i asked her_i father*). Interestingly, the transitivity mismatch hinges not on features, but on indices: it is *coreference* between the subject and the possessor of the object that brings about detransitivization, not inherent features of any particular nominal. Furthermore, since the co-indexation is between the subject and the object’s *possessor*, not the object itself, we are not seeing binding effects of the standard type.

Scope phenomena in a distributive morpheme test show that these “possessive antipassives” fully represent the object at LF, unlike both true intransitives and non-possessive antipassives (cf. (4)). However, in contrast to apparently similar English cases (e.g. *He never fails to impress*), we cannot plausibly account for these clauses with a null pronoun or null topic analysis, as the null allomorphy must extend to at least four non-adjacent syntactic terminals.

I propose that the operation causing morphological intransitivity can be accounted for via a post-syntactic morphological process. Two candidate processes are considered. The Deletion Analysis proposes that after the person, number, and index of subject and object are morphologically computed, a deletion rule eliminates two verbal object-marking nodes (object person and number). This precludes the late insertion of case-markers, which are demonstrably tied to the object nodes. The Incomplete Raising Analysis, on the other hand, draws on evidence that Nez Perce verbs contain incorporated adverbials, meaning that, following Cinque (1999), the verb-word might extend to the level of IP. On this analysis, the mysterious disappearance of possessed object markers can be accounted for via incomplete raising to object position. Since the object fails to obtain IP-level object position, the trigger for case-marking is not activated. Given these relatively simple mechanisms, then, both the Deletion Account and the Incomplete Raising Account derive the two hallmarks of PF intransitivity: object marking is not found on possessive antipassive verbs, and argument case-marking is not found in the clauses containing them.

Either suggested analysis of the transitivity mismatch in possessive antipassives produces the same complex picture of operational ordering along the interfaces from semantics to morphology. Indices must be present both before and after Spell Out, as they are active both in LF and at PF. At PF, index-triggered morphological processes may bleed Vocabulary Insertion environments, blocking the late insertion of case-markers. This casts doubt on analyses of Nez Perce case as a “four-way system” involving two null cases (Woolford 1997, Carnie and Cash 2005); it seems much simpler to claim that blocking the expression of the two morphological argument cases results in no case at all, not a third or fourth morphologically null case. The proper analysis of the possessive antipassive thus results in a better understanding of case-marking, transitivity, and Nez Perce morphosyntax as it draws us closer to a full model of the procession from semantics, through morphology, into sound.

¹ Note that the category “antipassive” in Nez Perce might be a misleading designation, given that no antipassive morpheme is found in clauses of this type; the label follows Rude (1985, et seq.).

(1) ERGATIVE clauses: full case-marking, verbal prefixes for subject and object (portmanteau)

- a. picpíc-nim laqáas-na pée-cepeqick-see
 cat-ERG mouse-OBJ 3/3-catch-ASP
 ‘The cat is catching the mouse’ (Crook 1999: 237)
- b. 'ip-ním pée-qn'i-se qeqíi-ne
 3SG-ERG 3/3-dig-ASP edible.root-OBJ
 ‘He digs qeqíit roots’ (Crook 1999: 238)

(2) ANTIPASSIVE clauses: no case-marking, only subject prefixes

- a. 'ipí hi-qn'ii-se qeqíit
 3SG 3SUBJ-dig-ASP edible.root
 ‘He digs qeqíit roots’ (Crook 1999: 238)
- b. wéet'u kii háama 'itúu hi-wéewluq-se
 not this man what 3SUBJ-want-ASP
 ‘This man wants nothing’ (Crook 1999: 225)

(3) POSSESSIVE ANTIPASSIVE clauses: like antipassive, subject possesses object

- a. ka hi-nkáa-hol-ksa 'ip-nim=nix tít
 and 3SUBJ-pull-loosen-ASP 3SG-GEN=EMPH tooth
 ‘And he pulled off his very own tooth’ (Aoki 1994: 174)
- b. píst hi-séepn'i-ye
 father 3SUBJ-ask-ASP
 ‘She asked her father’ (Aoki and Walker 1988: 419)

(4) The transitivity continuum

Clause type	Case-marking and object agreement	Transitive scope of distributive	2-participant argument structure
intransitive	NO	NO	NO
antipassive	NO	NO	YES
possessive antipassive	NO	YES	YES
ergative	YES	YES	YES

References.

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