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Possessive and transitive in Eskimo*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to give an account of some hitherto unexplained phenomena connected with the use of the Eskimo 'relative case'. A deep structure is proposed that not only will account for the occurrence of certain surface morphemes, but also, and in a natural way, for the semantic affinities that exist between certain types of noun phrases and the transitive sentence in Eskimo. In particular, it is shown that in phrases of the type 'the man's house', there exists evidence for considering 'man' as the subject noun phrase, 'house' as the object noun phrase of some deep structure. The transformational machinery involved in deriving the correct surface structures is shown in some detail. A discussion of older terminology in Eskimo grammatical tradition provides additional, indirect confirmation of the naturalness of the proposed explanation.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the puzzling features of Eskimo syntax is the appearance of certain morphemes in seemingly disparate environments. Thus, the transitive verbs express their third person singular object using a suffix *-a*: *tiguva-a* 'he holds it' (1a); the plural object is expressed by *-i*: *tiguva-i* 'he holds them' (1b). In the noun, these two suffixes are found as so-called possessives: *-a* refers to a singular possessum: *nuna-a* 'his land' (2a), *-i* to a plural possessum: *nuna-i* 'his lands' (2b).

Similarly, we have an alternation $\phi \sim -t$, expressing the opposition between singular and plural in verbal as well as nominal forms: *tiguva-a* 'he holds it' (3a), *tiguva-a-t* 'they hold it' (3b); *tiguva-i* 'he holds them' (4a), *tiguva-i-t* 'they hold them' (4b). Compare: *nuna-a* 'his land' (5a), *nuna-a-t* 'their land' (5b); *nuna-i* 'his lands' (6a), *nuna-i-t* 'their lands' (6b).

Arguments based on phenomena like those referred to here have been used to establish identity between nouns and verbs in Eskimo. Thus Hammerich (1936: 44) claims that 'every Eskimo verbal form has to be considered as an original substantive'. The argument that suffix identity by itself is a sufficient

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condition to establish identity between nouns and verbs is, of course, rather weak. It is easily seen that the same kind of reasoning could be brought forward in support of an identification of English nouns and verbs because of the alternating $\phi \sim s$ in declension as well as in conjugation. Under such an assumption, one would have to explain, in addition, the opposite function of the suffixes in noun and verb inflection. One thus runs into a pseudo-problem that is very similar to the one described by Hammerich elsewhere in his book as 'the enigma of the apparent change of functions of the endings in substantives and verbs [in Eskimo]' (1936: 219). However, mere FORMAL identity need not imply any 'enigma', as the case of English shows; moreover, in general suffix identity by itself is not only not a sufficient condition for this kind of identification—it is not even a necessary one.

2. RELATIVE CASE IN ESKIMO

Arguments like the ones above are not the only ones that seem to favour a substantive-verb identification in Eskimo; additional evidence for this point of view is provided (or so it seems) by the language's use of the so-called 'relative case'.

The Eskimo relative case has the following endings: sg. *-p*, pl. *-t* (hence no difference in the plural from the so-called 'absolutive': sg. ϕ , pl. *-t*).¹ The relative case is found in the following environments:

1. affixed to the subject noun of a transitive verbal construction.
2. affixed to the 'non-head' of a complex noun phrase.

By contrast, the subject noun of the intransitive sentence is in the absolutive, as are the object of the transitive sentence and the 'head' of the complex noun phrase.² A few examples will clarify the issue.

Ad 1 (transitive vs. intransitive constructions):

ajuqi-p palasi akivaa 'the catechist answers the minister' (7). (subject *ajuqi*, rel. case ending *-p*; object *palasi*, abs. case ending ϕ)

ajuqi-t palasi akivaat 'the catechists answer the minister' (8). (rel. case same as abs. case in pl.)

[1] Absolutive, relative (and, to a certain degree, the instrumental in *-nik*) are often called 'functional' cases, to be distinguished from purely 'local' cases like locative (*-ni*), allative (*-nut*) etc. As I will show below, there is a good reason for this distinction in Eskimo: the functional cases are material in defining the syntactical functions (subject, object) assigned in the deep structure (see below, section 5).

[2] In the case where the complex NP becomes the subject of a transitive verbal construction, the 'head' receives the relative case marker *-ta*, not *-p*; e.g. *palasip nuliata ugalsuq tusarpaa* 'the minister's wife listens to the sermon'. Similarly in 'multiply complex' noun phrases: *tatsip sikuata gaaqut* 'along the surface of the ice' (*-gut*, prosecutive case). For details, see Mey (forthcoming 1970); cf. also below, section 5.

For an intransitive construction, cf.

palasit isirput ajuqilu anivuuq 'the ministers enter and the catechist goes out' (9).

Ad 2 (complex vs. simple noun phrases):

ajuqi-p nunaa 'the catechist's land' (10)

palasi-t nunaat 'the ministers' land' (11).

As seen from these examples, the relative (suffix *-p*) is adjoined to the 'subordinate' member of the 'junction' (to use a terminology due to Jespersen (1921) and applied to Eskimo by Hammerich (1936); 'junction' is contradistinguished from 'nexus', the former being an NP-type syntagm, the latter—roughly—a syntagm containing a verb). Also, (10) shows a suffix *φ*, used (as above in (5)) to express the sg. of the possessor (or the subordinate member of the junction); this becomes clear on inspection of (11), where the suffix *-t* in *nunaa-t* refers to the plural of the possessor: 'ministers'.

Contrasting (10) with the following example (12) shows the alternation *a~i* for sg., resp. pl., of the 'superordinate' member of the junction (the possessum):

ajuqi-p nunai 'the catechist's lands' (12).

Similarly, (13) contrasts with (11):

palasi-t nunait 'the ministers' lands' (13).

Again, in examples (12, 13) the alternation *φ~t* in *nunai~nunait* indicates the number of the possessor: 'catechist' vs. 'ministers'.

In all these cases, the parallel with the verbal constructions in (3, 4) is obvious, although still unexplained. It is worth noting that among the many sets of names for the absolute and relative cases, there are two with interesting syntactic implications. Kleinschmidt (1851) and Rasmussen (1888) call the absolute 'casus objectivus', the relative 'casus subjectivus'; Hammerich (1936) calls them 'intransitive' and 'transitive' case, respectively. In section 5, below, we will see that there is actually something in these names.³

3. AN INTERPRETATION OF THE PARALLELISM

As indicated above, the interpretation by Hammerich is that all verb forms are essentially nominal, i.e. they are substantives; he argues mainly from the point of view of the morphological identity of certain suffixes (although syntactic relations of the kind shown in section 2, above, are given a certain importance). Hammerich continually stresses the 'exact identity' of certain nominal and verbal endings (1936: 212), and consequently, wants 'to explain them in the same way' (*ibid.*: 213). Nevertheless, quite apart from this discussion, Eskimo

[3] The terms 'absolutivus' and 'relativus' are due to Thalbitzer (1911), whose nomenclature has become authoritative for those writing in English about Eskimo (e.g. Bergsland, 1955).

does have certain inflexional suffixes, like those for mood, that are exclusively verbal; also, a great many derivational suffixes are attached exclusively to verbal stems. This indicates that there is a clear distinction between nouns and verbs, and that the postulated identity between the two is insufficiently supported by the evidence. Even admitting the existence of a parallelism in morphology or syntax between the two categories, I fail to see the case for identity.

Moreover, the identity proposition is inconsistent, as I will show. We are faced with an alternative: either we accept the distinction between 'junction' and 'nexus' (as explained above), or we do not. In the first case, there is no absolute identity between nominal and verbal forms; in the second, there is no distinction and, specifically, no distinction between junction and nexus. What Hammerich is trying to do looks to me like having one's cake and eating it: junctions are different from nexus because 'there is no predicate word in them [junctions]' (*op.cit.* 210); but also, nexus like *igutsat takuvait* 'they see the bees' (14) are explained as being a sort of nominal compound: 'the bees (are) their visions' (the German text here has '*ihre gesichte*'—probably to be read as '*ihre gesehne*', in accordance with the immediately preceding '*euer gehörtes*').

According to Hammerich, the real difference between a nominal and a verbal phrase is in the absence vs. presence of the subject–predicate relation. The transition from a purely nominal to a verbal phrase is said to occur when 'the existential predicate adjoins itself to the noun' (*op.cit.* 210). Hence, e.g., *aturpuq* 'use (is)', i.e. 'is in use' (15). 'It rains' is paraphrased as 'rain is', etc. The 'adjunction of the existential predicate', however, said to FORMALLY constitute the nexus, is nevertheless conceived of as a purely mental process, since it takes place regardless of the presence of an element expressing 'is' (*op.cit.* 210; for more details on 'to be' in Eskimo, see Mey, 1968). The absence of any formal syntactical justification for the purported identity of verbs and nouns makes the 'essentially substantive', 'passive-like character' of the Eskimo verb (Hammerich, 1936: 213) an interesting, but necessarily non-testable hypothesis.

4. FORMAL UNIFICATION OF POSSESSIVE AND TRANSITIVE

Apart from the considerations mentioned in section 3, there is no immediate reason why identification of nexus and junctions (if at all desirable) should leave us with phrases that are more like the latter than like the former; why not, e.g., say that all Eskimo phrases, nominal or verbal, are nexus? This may sound like a *boutade*, and before we want to seriously consider, let alone accept, such a seemingly unmotivated proposition, we will have to consider what evidence there is in the form of syntactic justification of the proposal. This is what the present section is all about, and let it be noted that the starting point here is not the morphological identity of suffixes, but rather a similarity between syntactic structures.

More precisely, we have to do with a parallelism between some deep or underlying structures: those of the possessive 'junction' and the transitive 'nexus'. Consider again (7): *ajuqip palasi akivaa* 'the catechist answered the minister'. For this sentence, we might want to consider a deep structure like (16a):

(The constituent IND in (16a) is one of the so-called moods of Eskimo (indicative); there are no formal tenses.)

Consider now sentence (10): *ajuqip nuna-a* 'the catechist's land'. A possible deep structure for this is shown in (16b). The similarity between the two structures lies in a common phrase structure rule that operates in the base; say,

$$VP \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (NP) V \\ NP POSS \end{array} \right\} \quad (17).$$

If, in the expansion of (17), the upper line is chosen, the normal case of the (in)transitive verb will obtain; however, if the line with POSS is our choice, then we are faced with a structure that roughly corresponds to a 'condensed' sentence 'the catechist POSS the house'. The dummy element POSS could serve as a trigger for the transformations that derive the correct surface structure of (16b): *ajuqi-p nuna-a*; POSS itself would eventually be deleted in this transformational process.

Before we go further, we have to decide as to the most useful representation of the syntactic structures (16a) and (16b). From a theoretical point of view, either a constituent approach (e.g. the one outlined above) or a feature treatment is possible. Rosenbaum (1966: 9; cf. Jacobs & Rosenbaum, 1968: 109) has pointed out that this selection is arbitrary, despite a good deal of evidence in favour of the analysis by features.⁴ The reason why I prefer a feature analysis

[4] The assumption that there 'are' certain constituents in the deep structure does not imply that these things really 'exist'; deep structures are abstractions, and no question of 'existence' can be raised either in favour of, or against, one approach as compared to the other.

in the following is that the processes I want to demonstrate are easier to formalize that way, despite a certain amount of necessary machinery.

First, I will discuss the *number affix adjunction*: (18), (18a) and (18b). (The latter two transformations are added only for clarity's sake; (18) abbreviates both in a single notation.)

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 T_{\text{nraf}}: & X & [\alpha\text{SG}]_{\text{NP}} & & [_1([\beta\text{SG}]_{\text{NP}})_1] & V]_{\text{VP}} & Y \\
 & 1 & 2 & & 3 & 4 & 5 \Rightarrow \\
 & 1 & 2 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \alpha \text{ SG} \\ \text{ }_1(+\text{REL})_1 \end{array} \right] & & 1(3 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \beta \text{ SG} \end{array} \right])_1 & 4 + 1(\left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \beta \text{ SG} \\ +\text{REF} \end{array} \right])_1 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \alpha \text{ SG} \end{array} \right]_5
 \end{array}$$

Compare (18a):

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 T_{\text{nrafi}}: & X & [\alpha\text{SG}]_{\text{NP}} & & V & & Y \\
 & 1 & 2 & & 3 & & 4 \Rightarrow \\
 & 1 & 2 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \alpha \text{ SG} \end{array} \right] & & 3 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \alpha \text{ SG} \end{array} \right] & & 4
 \end{array}$$

and (18b):

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 T_{\text{nraft}}: & X & [\alpha\text{SG}]_{\text{NP}} & & [[\beta\text{SG}]_{\text{NP}}] & V]_{\text{VP}} & Y \\
 & 1 & 2 & & 3 & 4 & 5 \Rightarrow \\
 & 1 & 2 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \alpha \text{ SG} \\ +\text{REL} \end{array} \right] & & 3 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \beta \text{ SG} \end{array} \right] & 4 + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \beta \text{ SG} \\ +\text{REF} \end{array} \right] & + \left[\begin{array}{c} +\text{AF} \\ \alpha \text{ SG} \end{array} \right]_5
 \end{array}$$

The above transformations do two things: first, they 'externalize' number in the nouns in the form of affixes; second, they establish number agreement between the subject and the (in)transitive verb (αSG), and between the object and the transitive verb (βSG). In the latter case, the choice of the numbered parentheses in (18) entails the appearance of a feature [+REL] in the subject number affix. The feature [+REF] in the object number affix of the transitive verb accounts for the special suffixal forms that occur in this position. The shapes of the affixes will be discussed at the end of this section (22).

To obtain a complete understanding of what (18) does we will have to return to the deep structures (16a, b). We notice that (16a) has a node $[\text{AUX}]_s$, while (16b) has not; moreover, POSS is a node in (16b) dominated by VP, but there is no POSS in (16a). What I will propose now is to rearrange these deep structures in order to take advantage of this distributional peculiarity. The following base rules are suggested: (19)

$$\begin{aligned}
 S &\rightarrow NP \quad VP \\
 VP &\rightarrow (NP) \quad V \\
 V &\rightarrow [+V, \pm MOD, \dots] \\
 [+MOD] &\rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{c} [+IND] \\ [+PRT] \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \\ \cdot \end{array} \right\}
 \end{aligned}$$

Now, replace the deep structures (16a) and (16b) by the following: (20)

This analysis will account for (7) as well as (10); the difference between *ajuqip palasi akivaa* and *ajuqip nunaa* is in their different expansion of the symbol V. For (7), we choose [+MOD], for (10) [-MOD], the latter case corresponding to the choice of the constituent POSS in (16b). The expansion of V into [+MOD] will be followed up by the appearance of a mood suffix (in this case that of the indicative *-va-*); the origin of this suffix is no longer the constituent IND, as in (16a), but the corresponding feature [+IND] (19). Notice that the number affix transformation (18) will operate regardless of the different expansion chosen for the node V. But notice also that (18) does not delete that node, as we would have to do in the case of (10): *ajuqip nunaa*. Hence, the presence of a node V dominating a complex symbol containing a feature [-MOD] will now trigger the following 'possessive deletion' transformation: (21)

T_{pd} :	X	NP	[+AF]	[-MOD] _v	Y
	1	2	3	4	5 $\Rightarrow$
	1	2	ϕ	ϕ	5

By this transformation, not only the V-node itself, but also the number suffix

that (18) had adjoined to the object NP, is deleted. Doing so will prevent the generation of an incorrect **nuna-t-a-t* etc.⁵

The phonemic shapes of the affixes discussed so far are now given by the following combined rule: (22)⁶

$$[+AF] \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} p/ \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{---} \\ +SG \\ +REL \end{array} \right] \\ a/ \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{---} \\ +SG \\ +REF \end{array} \right] \\ i/ \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{---} \\ -SG \\ +REF \end{array} \right] \\ t/ \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{---} \\ -SG \end{array} \right] \\ \phi \end{array} \right\}$$

Before we let (22) apply, however, we have to take care of the left-over affixes from (21); the following rule, in repeated applications, will attach the affixes of the deleted V-segment to the noun immediately preceding: (23)

$$X + [+AF] \Rightarrow X [+AF].$$

5. DISCUSSION

The solution proposed here is not complete; in particular, it does not account for the agreement in person between the subject and the (in)transitive verb. It is felt that the inclusion of this feature would not affect the solution suggested for the possessive and transitive constructions essentially. Person would have to be introduced into the deep structure by a strictly sub-categorizing rule, as in the case of number; the agreement rules for person can be specified analogously, although the final arrangement of the suffixes will come out somewhat differently

[5] For those not familiar with feature notation, (21) may appear confusing. Traditionally, square brackets are employed to denote features as well as segments or nodes. (21) specifies that the segment dominated by V has to go, not just the feature inside ([−MOD]). Similarly, the segment containing the feature [+AF] is deleted, not just that feature. For this reason, it is highly desirable to have a notation that differentiates features (e.g. by including them in angled brackets) from traditionally square-bracketed elements like segments and nodes. This notation has been effectively introduced by P. Rosenbaum (1968); its only disadvantage is the possible conflict it entails with already established notations such as the use of angled brackets in phonological rules.

[6] Actually, (22) is given in a somewhat idealized form: thus not all stems practise the distinction *-i~ -i-t*. E.g., in the case of *illu* 'house', *illui* may mean 'their houses' as well as 'his houses'. For this (and other) irregularities in the declension, see Rasmussen 1888:18 fn. 1; Bergsland 1955:19.2.

(for this, see Mey, in prep.). Also (as already mentioned above, 2) the relative suffix *-ta* for 'multiple dependency' needs to be explained. Without going into particulars, let me just state the general cyclic nature of this process. A rule of the form $NP \rightarrow (S) N$ is needed; this rule will permit (left) embedding of S, and the derivation of (indefinitely long) structures like the following: *palasip inuqutaisa ilaata mulhata siutaa ajurpuq* 'the wife of one of the members of the minister's household has a bad ear'. A detailed discussion of this construction will be given elsewhere (Mey 1970, forthcoming).

A more serious omission is that of so-called 'fourth' (i.e. reflexive third) person. To account for this phenomenon, one would have to include more complex cases than the ones exemplified above, but the main trend of the present solution, to consider the possessive constructions as special cases of transitivity, would not be changed.

The main advantage of the proposed solution is that it provides a reasonable deep structure for constructions like *palasip illua* 'the minister's house' (24). The assumption that this is basically a transitive (deep) 'sentence': 'the minister (owns) the house' provides a satisfactory semantic and syntactic explanation of the occurrence of the relative case (in *-p*) and the referential number suffixes (*a*, *i*). What this amounts to is saying that in *palasip illua*, *palasi* is the deep subject, *illu* the deep object of a transitive verbal construction in exactly the same sense as in a 'normal' transitive sentence like *palasip ajuqi takuwaa* 'the minister sees the catechist' (25). The only difference is that the verbal part of the VP is marked for destruction by the lethal feature [—MOD] in the former case, but not in the latter.

It follows that the construction exemplified by (24), *palasip illua*, is really a 'condensed', or, more technically, a transformed transitive sentence; consequently, the older names for the relative and absolutive cases (suffixes *-p* and *φ*, respectively) turn out to be quite characteristic in several respects. The relative is typically used in transitive sentences (whether or not transformed by (21), the 'possessive deletion'); hence this case is named *CASUS TRANSITIVUS* by authors like Hammerich (1936: *passim*). The absolutive, on the other hand, occurs in intransitive sentences; hence it is called *CASUS INTRANSITIVUS*.

If one is allowed to speculate as to the motivation that led Hammerich to adopt these names, the explanation that comes most natural is that this nomenclature reflects his immediate (and correct) understanding of the nature of the syntactic processes discussed here; however, in the current grammatical framework this intuition had no chances of survival.

Kleinschmidt's (1851) and Rasmussen's (1888) nomenclature, *subjectivus* for the case in *-p*, *objectivus* for the morphologically unmarked one, is even more illuminating. In *palasip illua*, *palasi* is the subject of the deep structure underlying this construction, hence it is in the subjective case. *Illu* is the object of the same deep structure, and therefore it is in the objective case, with the appropriate

number suffixes as determined by (18) and (22). The parallel with *palasip ajuqi takuvaa* is self-explanatory; again, one wonders why an eminent insight in the deep structure never made it to the surface. Rather than emphasizing (with Hammerich and others) the 'substantive-like properties' of a Greenlandic verbal construction, the reasoning presented above bears out the verbal character of a particular construction commonly thought to be purely nominal. This approach has considerable consequences for the grammar of the Eskimo verbal constructions, as I hope to show in the near future.

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