

From the Nisgha speaker's point of view:
the evidential postclitics

Marie-Lucie Tarpent
Bilingual/Bicultural Center, S.D. 92 (Nisgha)

To be a good speaker of Nisgha is more than simply to control the grammatical skeleton of the language.¹ This skeleton is necessary, but not sufficient: as the sole means of expression it would result in correct but lifeless, disembodied language. The fluent and idiomatic use of Nisgha also requires the judicious use of optional postclitics which enable the speaker to add a personal touch to what he says: to emphasize his role as conversational partner, narrator or relator, and to make clear to others in what manner his words are to be taken.

Because these postclitics are optional, and have a mostly pragmatic function, having to do, in varying proportions, with the context of the speech event as well as with the speech event itself and the actual events it refers to, they are much more elusive for the analyst than the obligatory structures of the grammar.² Translation into Nisgha usually leaves them out altogether, while translation from Nisgha of sentences containing some of the postclitics is often very difficult and inadequate. Nevertheless the postclitics can be divided into five pairs on the basis of their meaning and syntactic use. The chart on p. 14 summarizes the relations between the pairs.

1. The speaker's relation to the utterance.

1.1. Conversational status of the utterance. Whether a sentence is declarative or interrogative is not a purely formal grammatical matter. Under normal circumstances, a question is a request for a reply from another person. A declarative sentence may have various pragmatic meanings depending on the context of utterance.

Two postclitics are characteristic of normal conversational exchange. The interrogative postclitic -a indicates the attitude: 'Tell me whether it's true that..' while the interactive postclitic -is(t) indicates 'I am talking to you and I mean what I say'.³ These postclitics normally occur at the end of the sentence, and may be followed only by a term of address.

1.1.1. The interrogative postclitic -a (-ya after vowel). A yes/no question ends in the interrogative postclitic -a. Such a question may be in the form of an independent declarative sentence:

Siipkw hiina?⁴
sick you- a

Were you sick?

Wayinhl andidaalaya?
you find my wallet - a

Did you find my wallet?

or, more politely, of a negative sentence:

Nihl siipgwina?
not sick-you- a

You weren't sick, by
any chance?

Ni mi Wahl andidaalaya?
not you find my wallet- a

You wouldn't have
found my wallet?

In either/or questions, -a occurs only at the end of the first clause:

Hlgu gathl hlgu beebiiya,
little man little baby - a

Is the baby a boy

oo ligii hlgu hanak'?
or for in- little woman
stance

or a girl?

1.1.2. The interactive postclitic -is(t)⁵ (-vis(t) after vowel, -as(t) after uvular, -s(t) after glottal stop) (use of final t is older, more formal). A declarative sentence, or a question beginning with a question word, is grammatically complete without -is(t), but the exclusive use of such sentences in conversation would mark a speaker as extremely abrupt if not downright rude. It seems to have a pragmatic function similar to that of English well, why, so, sure, the main function of which is to assert the interest of the speaker in participating in the conversation.

This postclitic is especially typical of short, single word answers to questions, which would sound like incomplete sentences if not rounded out by -is(t):

Naa tgusdi? -- Maryis.
who that-Q - -is(t)

Who's that?
-- Why, it's Mary!

Miin tguni? -- Nii, hlgiiwiyis.
you this-Q no my sister - is(t)

Is this you [in the
picture]?
-- No, it's my sister.

Luumaanhl kofiiya? -- Luumaanis!
in-left coffee- a in-left - is(t)

Is there any coffee
left? -- Sure!

A common exchange is this pair of comments:

Ñida? -- Ñidis! Is that so? -- Yes it is!
that's - a that's - is(t)

This postclitic can also be used when initiating a conversation, often at the end of questions beginning with a question word:

Aguhl jijabinis? What are you doing?
what you are doing - is(t)
Aguhl dim dii giigwinist? (195.15-196.1)⁶ What do you want
what FUT intensive you buy - is(t) to buy?

Such questions without the postclitic are correct and do occur, but they sound definitely more neutral, colder. A bureaucratic interview conducted in Nisgha would probably omit -is(t).

Requests and suggestions also often end in -ist:

Ji malinhl k'udats'inis! [You should] button
IRREALIS you button your coat - is(t) your coat!

Sim simihl lagwist! (130.8-9) [All of you] light
you (pl) kindle firewood - is(t) the fire!

In one of the Boas stories, the hero, Txeemsi, the Trickster, comes to a river where people are fishing on the other side; he shouts to

Sim jagammagahl k'eegwihl anwinsiñist looy!⁷ [please] put one
you (pl) put ashore one what you've got ashore for me!
(fish) -is(t) for me (16.3-4)

After asking the same thing twice in this friendly tone, Txeemsi resorts to threats--without the postclitic.

It is also added to all sorts of comments and spontaneous utterances, as in

Ts'axw ñiinis! You're really something!
considerable you - is(t)

Hlaa xsdaanist, wagiñ Logabuulaa! You've won, brother
now you win - is(t) (20.13) Logabuulaa!

The speaker's interest in the conversation is not always friendly:

Agu ma gan haksifist? (118.2) Why do you call me names?
what you reason call me names - is(t)

1.2. The speaker's stake in the information conveyed. Two pairs of postclitics come under his heading. The pair -a'a/-i)ma'a conveys the speaker's personal opinion of the reliability of his information. The pair -sin/-gat conveys the message that the utterance is not necessarily reliable. Within each pair there is again a dichotomy between personal and neutral information. Except for -sin, these postclitics are suffixed to the first contentive word or phrase of the sentence, which may be the predicate, the auxiliary or negative verb if present, or a topicalized element such as a question word.

1.2.1. The speaker claims some truth value for the utterance. Both postclitics in the pair -(i)ma'a/-a'a convey the speaker's opinion that what he says is true. However, -(i)ma'a indicates a truth value based on inference, and therefore subject to confirmation, while -a'a indicates that the speaker is absolutely sure of the fact, usually because he has verified it himself.

1.2.1.1. The probabilitive postclitic -(i)ma'a (present-day usually -ima'a, -yima'a after vowel; Boas usually -ma'a). The use of this postclitic in a declarative sentence means that the speaker thinks that what he says is probably true on the basis of what he knows or can infer, but does not want to commit himself as he could be proved wrong:

Ga'ahl wil t'uuts'kwhl laxha anuu geets', Look how dark the sky
see that black sky towards is down the valley,
(conj) downriver

yugwima'ahl haywis Gitxat'in. it's probably raining
AUX - ima'a rain Greenville in Greenville.

Ga'ahl maxmak'ay, Look at the rainbow,
see rainbow

dim amaalaxhayima'a ji t'aahlakw. it will probably be
FUT nice weather- IRR tomorrow a nice day tomorrow.
-ima'a

Dim naksgwidima'as Peter t Susan. Peter is probably
FUT he will marry- going to marry Susan.
-ima'a

Gitwinksihlgwima'a dim wil jokdiit. They will probably
Canyon City - FUT where they live live in Canyon City.
-ima'a

After many adventures, Txeemsim, now grown, arrives at the oolichan chief's house and declares that he has caught oolichans, even though oolichan season is six months away; no one believes him, but some curious youths go investigate and report:

Simuda'ast! (29.13) He's really telling the
he's correct - a'a - is(t) truth!

1.2.1.3. Like -a and -is(t) (1.1.), -(i)ma'a and -a'a can be contrasted in conversational exchange:

Nidima'a! It's probably so!
that's - ima'a

Nida'a! It is so too!

1.2.2. The speaker does not claim any truth value for the utterance. The pair -gat/-sin is probably less of a true pair than the other pairs of postclitics. Syntactically, -sin does not have the same distribution as the other postclitics in this section. Yet -sin and -gat do have common and opposite features, which qualify them for pair status. By using -gat or -sin the speaker disclaims responsibility for the truth of the utterance: with -gat, because he is only reporting information originating with others; with -sin, because what he is saying is not really meant to be heard.

1.2.2.1. The reportive postclitic -gat (t drops before the connectives -hl and -s). The use of -gat means that the information relayed by the speaker originates with others and that the speaker has no idea of its truth value. Naturally this postclitic is very useful for gossip as well as for legitimate news:

Siipkw-gat t Mary. I hear Mary is sick.
sick

Dim bingodii-gat ji t'aayuwin. I hear there's going
FUT bingo IRR tonight to be bingo tonight.

Ts'axw-gahl sils Peter They say Peter was
considerable drunk very drunk.

Dim naksgwit-gas Peter t Lilian. They say Peter is
FUT he marries going to marry Lilian.

Using -gat in questions means that the speaker is only asking about a report, not about the truth of an event, and the listener

need not feel bad if he does not know the answer; on the other hand, the reply may also include -gat:

Agu diya-gat t Mary? - What's Mary supposed
what says to have said?

Ji gaxgu-gahl dim xgo'om? - When did they say
IRR when FUT we get paid we'd get paid?

Ganuutkw tgun-gat. - They said this week.
week this

Orders and instructions emanating from legitimate authority, which are not supposed to be questioned, are reported using this postclitic. In the Boas stories, a common situation is that of moving a village to another site; the chief who makes the decision never announces it himself, but send a slave to make the announcement; as the slave merely reports the official pronouncement, he always uses -gat, as in:

Ji lukw-gat hisih ji t'aahlakw (37.9-10) You are supposed to
IRR move you (pl) tomorrow move tomorrow
IRR

A slave using -gat is naturally understood to be speaking for his master; he can sometimes turn this fact to his advantage, as in this other Txeemsim story: at a feast, Txeemsim behaves with perfect propriety in asking his slave to mention to the chief his love of a certain food; the slave says instead:

Nii-gat-gidii^t gwiixgiphl sim'oogit tgunhl I am told this chief
not (intensives) chief this never touches
always eat

anwinin what you've got
what you've got

Txeemsim is humiliated and the slave gets to eat the food instead of him, but does not get away with it for long.

1.2.2. The rhetorical postclitic -sin. The syntactic distribution of -sin is not quite clear at this point. As far as meaning goes, -sin is added to an utterance, usually a question, which from the point of view of information need not be said at all, either because it is unanswerable, as in asking of a dead person:

Agu gan daawihlt-sin?
what reason he leaves

Why did he go?

or because the speaker or hearer knows the answer only too well. Thus what is conveyed by the use of -sin is not really information but a sense that the speaker is merely relieving his feelings and that what he says should not be taken seriously: 'Don't pay attention to me, I am just talking to myself'.

For instance, your son is constantly getting into scrapes. You no longer need to ask:

Aguhl wilt-sin?
what his act

What's he done?
(you don't really need to tell me, I know the type of message you're bringing)

You think you have made a foolish remark, and you reflect aloud:

Agu niya hiiy-sin?
what I say I

What did I say!
(I should have known better)

Since -sin allows the speaker to pretend that he did not mean to be heard, it is well suited to teasing or insulting someone, as in

Aguhl anheen-sin?
what what you mean

What do you mean?
(Don't tell me, I know)

In the Boas stories, Txeemsim is frequently (and deservedly) the butt of jokes and insults using -sin; others pretend they have not heard or understood him, talking about him in the third person:

Aguhl hit-sin? Hlaa huxw hihl Wii t Txeemsim!
what he says now again that's big
(23.9-10)

What did he say?
That's big
Txeemsim all
over again!

Jaa ndahl dimt wil diwitkwhl
IRR? where FUT where get from
(Q) (conj)

So where is the big
liar going to get

Wii gwiixgalamgahl heet-sinhl anheet?
big always fibbing his saying what he's
(16.6-7) talking about

the stuff he's talking
about?

At one point, Txeemsim finds himself in a house where he is first entertained, then tricked and beaten by invisible beings; he hears women's voices laughing at him: they guess his thoughts and distort their meaning, adding

... diya-sinhl goots Wii Gat.(61.13-14) ... that's what Giant
says heart big man thinks to himself!

The postclitic -sin can be followed by the interrogative postclitic -a, as in the following examples. In the story of Sgawo, mentioned in Boas (Sqawo, 1902: 222), Sgawo's grandmother is trying to find her a suitable husband; one suitor after another answers her call and says:

Nihl hiiy dimt an nakskwhl hlgauhkhwhl hit-sina? Will I be the
not I Fut REL marry child one who one to marry
speaks the daughter of
the one who
speaks?

Here the use of -sin conveys the humble attitude of the speaker, who is ready to take back the suggestion if it is not appropriate.

2. The speaker's relation to the event.

2.1. Spatio-temporal correlates. The two postclitics -sa and -gi refer to the speaker's physical distance (in time or space) to what he is talking about. These postclitics are usually attached to the last NP in the clause, and refer to the whole of it. If there is no overt NP (e.g. if the object of a transitive verb is left unmentioned), they are attached to the predicate. In at least one case the distal postclitic -gi has become part of a noun-phrase:

Sim'oogit laxha-gi God
chief (in) sky

2.1.1. The proximal postclitic -sa. This postclitic indicates that the utterance refers to a situation in which the topic of conversation is physically close to the speaker (and usually the addressee as well):

Aguhl was gun-sa? What is this [that I
what name this hold in my hand]?

Naa ant japt-sa? Who made this ["]?
who who made it
(q) (REL)

Lip jabiŷ-sa. self I make it	I made this myself.
Hlaa sim gamkhl laxha-sa. now quite warm weather	This weather is nice and warm.
Ga'ahl anheehl gaak ahl geew-sa! (151.13-14) see what he raven at water's talks edge about	Go see what this raven is cawing about on our beach!

2.1.2. The distal postclitic -gi. The postclitic -gi indicates that the topic of conversation is remote from the speaker in place or time or both:

Lip jabiŷ-gi. self I make it	I had made it myself (I don't have it anymore).
Wii sim'oogit t nigwoodiŷ-gi big chief my father	[either] My father, who lives far away, is a great chief [or] My father, who is dead, was a great chief.

In the story of the abandoned son (1.2.1.1.), the father sends people to look for him, saying:

Ado'o, sim ga'ahl hlguuhlgiwiŷ-gi Go! you see my child (pl)	Go see my son (who is far away and may be dead)
---	--

This postclitic is used liberally in tales, which refer to the past. This is a typical story beginning from the Boas tales:

K'yoolhl hlgu tk'ihlkw-gi, one little child	There was a little boy
Ts'akhl wat-gi, ganhl hlgu nits'iits't, his name and little his grandmother	named Ts'ak, and his grandmother,
hahl k'ii hitkwhl hlgu wilpdiit-gi.. that and stand little their house	and they had a little house ... (117.1-2)

2.1.3. Although -gi indicates the past, -sa is often used for a more vivid effect in stories, once the past background is established. This use is rare in Boas, who recorded by the slow dictation method,

but very frequent in more spontaneous texts.

2.2. The speaker's control over an undesirable event. The pair of predicate-final postclitics -giŷ and -gwa indicates the control, or lack thereof, of the speaker over an event he wishes to prevent. With -giŷ, the event is prevented, with -gwa, the speaker bemoans an unavoidable fate. It may seem strange to classify -giŷ under the heading 'speaker associates self with event', since the event does not happen, and -gwa under the opposite heading, since the event does happen. The justification is that with -giŷ the speaker states that he has the power to let the event happen or not; with -gwa the speaker is the passive plaything of uncontrollable forces against his wishes and efforts.

2.2.1. The potentive postclitic -giŷ. An independent declarative sentence without the future particle dim normally means that an event occurred. Use of the postclitic -giŷ after the predicate means that the speaker is or was confident of being able to prevent this event from happening.

The speaker may have exercised self-control to prevent nature from taking her usual course:

Siipkw-giŷ hiiŷ. sick I	I didn't let myself be sick, I made sure I did not get sick.
----------------------------	--

This postclitic is appropriate to the expression of threats: the declarative form of the sentence suggests that the event would have happened already were it not for the speaker's self-control, which of course might be relaxed any time. For instance, the story of the Grizzly bear wife (1.2.1.1) ends with the bear getting angry with humans and deciding to go back to her home; her husband entreats her to stay, but she says in anger:

Ado'o, yaltgwin, jakwdiŷ-giŷ hiin! (210.1) Go! turn back I kill you	Away, go back, I could very well kill you!
--	--

Another grizzly bear gets angry at Ts'ak (2.1.2) and gets him to provoke him to carry out his threat:

Nimts'axgwiŷ-giŷ hiin, "way, gom", miya'an! I snuff it in you why go ahead you way Just say 'go ahead'! (118.5)	I could snuff you in, Just say 'go ahead'!
---	---

Ts'ak gets snuffed into the bear, but manages to kill him. When he tells his grandmother, she refuses to believe him:

Biikw'in, xha'a, huxw sidoogan-giḡ ḡiiḡ! You're lying, slave,
 your lie, slave again you fool-giḡ I you think you can
 (119.6-7) fool me again! (but
 I won't let you)

This postclitic is used most often when the speaker is involved in the sentence as subject, agent or object, but other uses are possible too. In one story a man goes up to heaven to rescue his little son who has been kidnapped by the stars. The child cries and the father says:

Gilo! Gilo! Naxḡayit-giḡ ahl ts'im wilp! Stop! Stop! We
 don't he hears it PREP inside house don't want them
 to hear in
 the house! (and
 we can make sure
 they don't)¹⁰

2.2.2. The impotentive postclitic -gwa. Finally, the postclitic -gwa, which seems to be used mostly in songs and some traditional formulæ, means that the speaker is lamenting an event which he was unable to prevent. A person beset by misfortune can bemoan his fate and disclaim responsibility by saying:

Aywaahl wiliḡ-gwa! Alas! there was nothing
 alas! my act I could do!

and similarly others may commiserate and absolve him from blame:

Aywaahl wilt-gwa! There was nothing he
 alas! his act could do!

In one of the Txeemsim stories, Txeemsim kills a deer and pretends to the deer's wife he mourns the unfortunate 'accident':

Aywaas k'ahlaaniḡ-gwa! Alas! my poor brother-
 alas! my brother-in-law in-law!

Boas (1895:56) quotes a ceremonial song sung by people who have been possessed by the spirit of sleep and are awakened by a chief. The line repeated in the song is

Aywoohl wok-gwa! Alas, that uncontrol-
 alas sleep able sleep!¹¹

Aywoo is probably a rendering of the Coast Tsimshian equivalent for aywaa. The sleepers are lamenting not their interrupted sleep, but the fact that they were put to sleep by a force beyond their control.

General meaning	Speaker associates self with utterance or event	Speaker dissociates self from utterance or event	Syntactic position
Conversational status of utterance	Speaker's interest in utterance: <u>-is(t)</u> INTERACTIVE	Yes/No question: <u>-i</u> INTERROGATIVE	Sentence or clause-final
Speaker's stake in information	Speaker vouches for not vouching for truth even against expectation	Rhetorical question or statement: <u>-gat</u> <u>-sin</u>	Report from third party contentive (except <u>-sin</u>)
Distance of speaker to event	<u>-afa</u> ASSERTIVE	<u>-(i)ma?a</u> PROBABILITY	RHETORICAL
Speaker's control over undesired event	Here and now, present: <u>-sa</u> PROXIMAL	Far in time or space, past: <u>-gi</u> DISTAL	NP- or clause-final
Speaker's control over undesired event	Speaker has power to prevent event: <u>-giḡ</u> POTENTIVE	Speaker is powerless to prevent event: <u>-gwa</u> IMPOTENTIVE	Predicate-final

Notes

1. The Nisgha language, a member of the Tsimshianic family, is spoken in the Nass Valley of British Columbia. Most of the data presented here were gathered during the course of my employment with B.C. School District 92 (Nisgha). Among the many Nisgha speakers who helped me learn their language, I especially wish to thank Mrs. Rosie Robinson and Mrs. Verna Williams, who were among my first teachers of Nisgha, and who, as members of my Nisgha Linguistics class in 1983-84, helped me clarify and confirm the use and meaning of the more elusive postclitics. The term itself was suggested to me by Thom Hess, who read an earlier version of this paper. The interpretations presented here are my own, and I alone am responsible for any errors.
2. For instance, several examples of each postclitic occur in the Boas stories, but Boas' grammar mentions only -sa and -is(t), the latter incorrectly described and glossed (see note 5).
3. I have tried to give each postclitic a suitable label and have had to make up some words. There may be better labels already in use but unknown to me.
4. Examples are given in the modern (Rigsby-designed) Nisgha alphabet, with approximate word-for-word translation underneath. Space considerations prevented a fuller analysis in this paper.
5. In Boas (1911:349) this is considered a 'demonstrative suffix' indicating 'presence and nearness'. It is definitely not demonstrative. 'Presence and nearness' is not too far from the truth if it is taken to refer to the interlocutor rather than anything talked about.
6. Quotes are from Boas 1902, referred to by page and line number. They have been (with the help of native speakers) transcribed into the modern alphabet, corrected and retranslated, as the texts contain numerous errors.
7. a. Here -is(t) is suffixed to the last stressed contentive of the sentence. Present-day speakers would put it right at the end.
b. Boas' transcription indicates a pronunciation jagamooogahl.. which is probably an attempt to reproduce a Coast Tsimshian pronunciation. Mythical characters in Boas' stories often speak--or rather, attempt to speak--the Coast Tsimshian language.
8. These two are probably morphologically related. The m of -ima'a could be the same m which appears in some compound suffixes and seems to add the meaning 'for a more or less predictable duration'. The postclitic would then mean: 'true (-a'a) for the time being', until confirmed or disproved.
9. Rigsby 1975 uses the term sentence deictics for this pair. I find the word sentence here too restrictive as the domain of these postclitics does not extend beyond the clause and sometimes even the noun-phrase.

10. In one of the Nisgha songs collected and published by Marius Barbeau, one instance of misinterpretation occurs when yajiy-giy hiin is translated 'I strike thee' (yatsdiy hiin), ignoring -giy, instead of 'I could strike thee--but I choose not to'. (p. 133)
11. In the 1895 report this is misleadingly rendered as 'Oh, how sleepy we are!' which implies a desire to sleep in peace. In fact the sleepers have no wish to sleep but have been put to sleep in spite of themselves.

References

- Barbeau, Marius. 1951 (?). Tsimshian songs. The Tsimshian, their Arts and Music, by Garfield, Viola, Paul Wingert, Marius Barbeau. 97-280.
- Boas, Franz. 1895. Report to the British Society for the Advancement of Science. Part IV: the Nisk'a.
- _____. 1902. Tsimshian Texts. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 27. Washington: Gov't Printing Office.
- _____. 1911. Tsimshian. Handbook of American Indian Languages. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no.40. Part I.287-422. Washington: Gov't Printing Off.
- Rigsby, Bruce. 1975. Nass-Gitksan: An Analytical Ergative Syntax. IJAL. 41:4.346-54.