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

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To be a good speaker of Nisgha is more than simply to control the grammatical skeleton of the language. 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. 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.' 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noot</th>
<th>Yaat'ay a</th>
<th>Sipkw Anina4</th>
<th>Were you sick?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sick you- a</td>
<td>-a</td>
<td>Were you sick?</td>
<td>Did you find my wallet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nayinh bandidaalaj a</td>
<td>you find my wallet- a</td>
<td>or, more politely, of a negative sentence:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nihli siipgwa</td>
<td>You weren't sick, by any chance?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not sick-you a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nii ni gahl bandidaalaj a</td>
<td>You wouldn't have found my wallet?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not you find my wallet- a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

| Hlgu gathl hlgubeebiya, | Is the baby a boy |
| little man little baby- a |
| oo ligii hlgahanyik | or a girl? |
| or for in- little woman stance |

1.1.2. The interactive postclitic -is(t) (ya after vowel, -as(t) after vowel, -is(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, no, 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):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naa tgsul?</th>
<th>Maryis, who that-Q -is(t)</th>
<th>Who's that?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>who my sister -is(t)</td>
<td>-- Why, it's Mary!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nii tguwi?</td>
<td>Nii, hlgigxi. you this-Q no my sister -is(t) picture?</td>
<td>Is this you [in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- No, it's my sister.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumaanih kofiiya?</td>
<td>Lumaanish! in-left coffee- a in-left -is(t)</td>
<td>Is there any coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>left? -- Sure!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A common exchange is this pair of comments:

\[ \text{\$ida?} \quad \text{\$idis!} \]

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:

\[ \text{Aguhl jijabinis?} \quad \text{What are you doing?} \]

\[ \text{Aguhl dim dii giigwinst?} \quad \text{(195.15-196.1) What do you want} \]

\[ \text{FUT intensive you buy} - \text{is(t)} \quad \text{to buy.} \]

Such questions without the postclitic are correct and do occur, but they sound definitely more neutral, colder. A bureaucratic interview conducted in Nisg̱a’a would probably omit -is(t).

Requests and suggestions also often end in -is(t):

\[ \text{Ji Malinh k’udats’inis?} \quad \text{[You should] button} \]

IRREALIS you button your coat - is(t) your coat!

\[ \text{Sim simih lagwist!} \quad \text{(130.8-9) [All of you] light} \]

you (pl) kindle firewood - is(t) the fire!

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

\[ \text{Sim jagamagahl k’eeqwhl anwinsimist loog} \quad \text{[please] put one} \]

you (pl) put ashore one what you’ve got me:

(fish) -is(t) for me (16.3-4)

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

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

\[ \text{Ts’amx åfinis!} \quad \text{You’re really something!} \]

considerable you - is(t)

\[ \text{Hlaa xysdaanist, wagi} \quad \text{You’ve won, brother} \]

Logabuulaa! now you win - is(t) Logabuulaa!

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

\[ \text{Agu ma gan haksa} \quad \text{Why do you call me names?} \]

\[ \text{\textit{(118.2)}} \quad \text{\textit{Is(t)}} \]

1.2. The speaker’s stake in the information conveyed. Two pairs of postclitics come under his heading. The pair -\textit{a’a/-(i)ma’a} conveys the speaker’s personal opinion of the reliability of his information. The pair -\textit{sin/-get} 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 -\textit{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)\textit{ma’a/-a’a} convey the speaker’s opinion that what he says is true. However, -(i)\textit{ma’a} indicates a truth value based on inference, and therefore subject to confirmation, while -\textit{a’a} indicates that the speaker is absolutely sure of the fact, usually because he has verified it himself.

1.2.1.1. The probabilistic postclitic -(i)\textit{ma’a} (present-day usually -\textit{ma’a}, -\textit{vim’a} after vowel; Boas usually -\textit{a’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:

\[ \text{Ga’ahl wil t’outs’kwil lagha anu geets’,} \quad \text{Look how dark the sky is down the valley,} \]

see that black sky (conj) downriver

\[ \text{yugima’ahl haywis Gitxat’in.} \quad \text{it’s probably raining} \]

AUX - \textit{ma’a} rain Greenville

\[ \text{Ga’ahl maxmak’ay,} \quad \text{Look at the rainbow,} \]

see rainbow

\[ \text{dim amaa laghahayima’aj t’anhlakw.} \quad \text{it will probably be} \]

FUT nice weather- IRR tomorrow -\textit{ma’a}

\[ \text{Dim naksgwidima’as Peter t Susan.} \quad \text{Peter is probably} \]

FUT he will marry- \textit{ma’a}

\[ \text{Gitwinksihlguima’as dim wil jokidit.} \quad \text{They will probably} \]

\text{Canyon City - FUT where they live} -\textit{ma’a}
In one story, Txeemsim, who is continually hungry, notices people fishing for halibut and thinks:

Hildima'ahl haxa dip gusdi
many-im'a bait those
a ni dim gipt! (50.14)
(goal) I FUT eat it

Those people probably have lots of bait that I can eat!

In another story a Grizzly bear woman is living in a village with her human husband; one day in the spring she says:

Hlas ūkwdima'ahl hli wil wiilij!(206.6-7) The berries are now it’s ripe- the where I am probably ripe now
where I come from!

As this postclitic does not commit the speaker, it is especially useful in situations requiring diplomatic restraint. In another story, a chief’s son has been abandoned years before; one day the father decides to send for him, but the son refuses to have anything to do with the family that abandoned him and instructs the messenger to say he is dead. When the chief asks for news of his son, the messenger can reply without disloyalty to either father or son:

Hlas ūkwhl daa ūktsma'a.(182.8) He’s been dead a long now long since he died - (im'a)
time, probably.

It is polite to use this postclitic when asking a question, since in doing so the speaker is only talking about himself and does not imply that he requires an answer; Nisg̱a’a people usually use ‘I wonder’ as the English equivalent of -im'a in a question:

Naayima'a dip gusdi? Who are those people, who - im'a those-Q I wonder.

The addressee may be wondering the same thing, and reply

Naayima'a. I wonder who they are.
who = im'a

For the same reason, -im'a is used in polite requests:

Aamima'ahl dim jagamayxwił loosima? Would it be all right
good - FUT I ride across with you if I got a ride across
-im'a (pl) - a with you?

1.2.1.2. The assertive postclitic -a'g. The postclitic -a'g on the other hand indicates that the speaker can vouch for the truth of the utterance, even against his own or others' expectations. For instance, you may think that you locked your car, but in fact:

K'anno'a'ahl pdo'on! Your door is unlocked!
-ajar- a'g your door (I bet you didn’t know)

It does not usually snow in May, but I just looked out the window:

Yugwa'ahl maadim! It’s actually snowing!
AUX - a'g snowfall (believe it or not)

The voice on the phone sounds familiar, but turns out to belong to someone else:

Hahăgoodišh Oscarł heheet, I thought it was Oscar
my thought speaking
ahl k’ii Huberta’al; but - a'g Hubert!

Some people may be afraid of an eclipse (hūwhl hloks, 'the sun dies') but:

Niiya'ahl dim k'ap hūwhl hloks I can assure you that
no - (ya)’a for die sun
FUT sure the sun is not really
going to die

In one story from Boas, a toddler (who is actually Txeemsim, the Trickster) cannot make himself understood: he something, but no one can tell what he is whining about; someone makes the right guess:

"Maxa'ahl anheetsa! (22.3) "Light", that’s what
- a'g what he means- an light - a'g
(old word)
PROXIMAL

This postclitic may be combined with the interactive postclitic -ima’a, as in the following examples: Baby Txeemsim is given the ball of light to play with and finally runs away with it as he intended to do all along; but others ignorant of his true identity are surprised:

Ksidibaayis Txeemsihl maxa’ast! (23.3) Would you believe that
- a'g - iga(t) Txeemsim actually ran
light- a'g - iga(t) out with the light!
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 truth!

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

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

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 (it drops before the connectives -h 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:

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

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

Ta'axw-gahl s'is Peter considerable drunk
They say Peter was very drunk.

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

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 gorxa-gahl dim xgo'od? - When did they say we'd get paid
IRR when FUT we get paid

Ganukw tshun-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 sends a slave to make the announcement: as the slave merely reports the official pronouncement, he always uses -gat, as in:

Ji lukw-gat hinid ji t'ashlakw (37.9-10) You are supposed to 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 the chief his love of a certain food; the slave says instead:

Ni-gat-gidili'wilixigiphl sim'ogit tgunhl I am told this chief not (intensives) chief this never touches
always eat

amwini 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 daakht-sin? 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:

Aguh wilt-sin? What's he done?
what his act (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:

Aguh niya Aiiř-sin? What did I say?
what 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:

Aguh anheen-sin? What do you mean?
what you mean (Don't tell me, I know)

In the Boas stories, Tqeemsim 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:

Aguh hit-sin? Hlaa huwx hiil wi t Tqeemsim! What did he say?
what he says now again that's big Tqeemsim all over again!
(23.9-10)

Jaa ndahl dimt wil diwitkwhl So where is the big IRR? where PUT where get from (Q) liar going to get (conj)

 lié gwiixgalamgahi heet-sinhl anheet? the stuff he's talking about?
big always fibbing his saying what he's talking about?
(16.6-7)

At one point, Tqeemsim 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:

... dira-sinhl goots Wi Gatl.(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 Sgqo, mentioned in Boas (Sqaw0, 1902:222, Sgqo's grandmother is trying to find her a suitable husband; one suitor after another answers her call and says:

Nihl Aiiř dimt an nakskwhl higuwkwhl hit-sina? Will I be the not I Fat 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 NPin 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'ooqit lagha-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):

Aguh was gun-sa? What is this [that I hold in my hand]?
what name this
Nas ant japt-sa? Who made this [" ]?
who who made it (q) (REL)
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 jabij-gi.
self I make it
I had made it myself.

Wii sim'oogit t nigwoodij-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 hlguuhlgwij-gi
Go see my son (who is) far away and may be dead (p1)

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

K'yoohl hlgu tk'ihlkw-gi,
one little child
There was a little boy

Ts'akhl wat-gi, ganhhl hlgu nits'ilits't.
his name and little his grandmother
named Ts'ak, and his grandmother

Ahl k'is hitkwhl hlgu wilpdiit-gi.
that and stand little their house
and they had a little house ...

2.1.3. Although -gi indicates the past, -ma 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 -gi and -wa indicates the control, or lack thereof, of the speaker over an event he wishes to prevent. With -gi, the event is prevented, with -wa, the speaker bemoans an unavoidable fate. It may seem strange to classify -gi under the heading 'speaker associates self with event', since the event does not happen, and -wa under the opposite heading, since the event does happen. The justification is that with -gi the speaker states that he has the power to let the event happen or not; with -wa the speaker is the passive plaything of uncontrollable forces against his wishes and efforts.

2.2.1. The potentive postclitic -giY. An independent declarative sentence without the future particle dim normally means that an event occurred. Use of the postclitic -gi 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-giY Aiiij, I didn't let myself
sick I 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 home; her husband entreats her to stay, but she says in anger:

Ado'o, yaltgwin, jakwdiy-giY Aiiij! Away, go back, I turn back I kill you 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:

Nints'axgwi-giY Aiiij, "way, goh", miya'an! I could snuff you in, I snuff it in you why go ahead you say 'go ahead'! (118.5)

Ts'ak gets snuffed into the bear, but manages to kill him. When he tells his grandmother, she refuses to believe him:
Biik'in, zha'a, huwx sidoo-gi! Aii! You're lying, slave, your lie, slave again you fool-gi! I you think you can 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! MaxAyit-gi! 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)

2.2.2. The impotentive postclitic -gwa. Finally, the postclitic -gwa, which seems to be used mostly in songs and some traditional formulae, 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 wili-gwa!
Alas! there was nothing my act I could do!

and similarly others may commiserate and absolve him from blame:

Aywaahl wilt-gwa!
There was nothing he 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'ahlaani-gwa!
Alas: my poor brother-in-law, my brother-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

Aywooh wok-gwa!
Alas, that uncontrollable

Aywooh is probably a rendering of the Coast Tsimshian equivalent for Aywaas. The sleepers are lamenting not their interrupted sleep, but the fact that they were put to sleep by a force beyond their control.
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 -an and -is(t), the latter incorrectly described and glossed (see note 5). 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. In one of the Nisgha songs collected and published by Marius Barbeau, one instance of misinterpretation occurs when yatsit gid Ain is translated 'I strike thee' (rutsit Ain), ignoring -ill, instead of 'I could strike thee—but I choose not to'. (p. 133)

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 jasumugah, 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) for the time being', until confirmed or disproved.

9. Rigsby 1975 uses the term sentence delictics 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.

References


