The Problem of the Ergative Case in Hittite

As established by Laroche (1962), a grammatically neuter noun cannot function in Hittite as the subject of a transitive verb, but must be replaced by a special form in 
-anza (/-ants/) in the singular and -anteš in the plural.¹ Thus the regular neuter nominative-accusative singular kī tuppi ‘this tablet’ in (1) is replaced by kāš tuppianza in (2):

(1) kāša=kan kī tuppi kuedani UD-ti parā neḫḫun
    ‘On the day on which I sent you this tablet’
(2) mahḥan=ta kāš tuppianza anda wemiyazzī
    ‘When this tablet reaches you’

Likewise the regular neuter nominative-accusative plural uddār ‘words’ in (3) is replaced by uttanānteš in (4):²

(3) kēl=kan tuppiyaš uddār waḫnuši
    ‘(And if) you alter the words of this tablet’
(4) namma=ya ammel ŠA DUM.LÚ.U₁₀.LU.MEŠ uttanānteš ⁴ Telepinui karpin  
    kardimmiyattan šāwar QATAMMA arandu
    ‘Further may my, the mortal’s, words likewise halt the ire, anger and resentment of Telipinu.’³

All synchronic analyses of this phenomenon known to me take one of two basic approaches: (1) the forms in -anza and -anteš are nominatives of animate stems derived from the neuters with a suffix -ant- ; (2) they are case forms of the underlying neuter nouns themselves. There are two versions of the derivational analysis. The first and most popular proposal claims that the -ant- suffix “animatizes” or “personifies” the concept expressed by the base noun: see among others Benveniste (1962 : 47-48), Neu (1989 : 1-3), and Tchékoff (1978 : 229).

² Neuter nouns also appear in their regular nominative-accusative form as the subjects of intransitive verbs. Illustrations seem unnecessary.
³ There are also matching forms in Luvian (singular -antiš, plural -antinzi) and in Lycian (plural -etii). I know of no evidence in Palaic or Lydian to suggest that this feature is not already Proto-Anatolian.
As already argued by Garrett (1990: 268-71), this analysis is patently false, because it makes wrong predictions in two directions. First, if the function of -anza and -anteš were to imbue with “active force” nouns with semantically inanimate referents, then all such nouns should appear in this form when functioning as agents. This is falsified by numerous examples such as (5):

(5) parmanza=at tarnau ištarniyaš=at annašnanza tarnau GIŠ luttanza=at tarnau… ištarniyaš =at ḫilaš tarnau

‘May the house release it, may the inner a. release it, may the window release it,…may the inner courtyard release it.’

All four subjects of the transitive verb tarnau ‘let release’ refer to inanimate objects, a house and various parts of the house. If the function of -anza were personifying, then it should appear on all four, and we would expect *ḫilanza for the last. In fact, however, only grammatically neuter nouns appear in the form -anza when they are the subject of a transitive verb, while the grammatically animate noun ḫila- appears as an ordinary nominative singular.

The claim that the function of the suffix -anta is to make a noun semantically animate, “active”, or “personified” also predicts that nouns with animate referents should not require the suffix, since they are animate already. However, we find antuštannanza to antuštatar ‘populace’, MUNUS.MEŠ ḫazkara(ya)anza to the collective MUNUS.MEŠ ḫazkara(i) (female musicians), and LÚ.MEŠ walwalla(n)anza to the collective LÚ.MEŠ walwalla ‘lion-men’ (see for the last two Hoffner 1998: 38-40). These examples confirm that it is the grammatical gender of the noun that is the determining factor, not the animacy of the referent (see the correct observation of Patri to appear: 226). For an additional argument that the forms in -anza and -anteš cannot be animate see immediately below.

Sporadic use of the -anza/-anteš forms for genuine personification is an entirely distinct matter which does not alter their fundamental grammatical status. The difference was quite clear to the Hittites. The word lingāi- ‘oath’ (animate gender) was written Akkadographically as NIŠ DINGIR-LIM and had an ordinary nominative plural lingāeš ‘oaths’. However, oaths as deities that pursue those who break an oath were linkiyanteš, written NIŠ DINGIR.MEŠ, a combination that makes no sense in Akkadian, but reflects the Hittites’ sense that the linkiyanteš were personified deities, thus DINGIR.MEŠ (see Güterbock and Hoffner 1980: 67-68). As expected, grammatical animate gender is also used for the same purpose: GIŠ patalkiša ‘hawthorn’ (neuter) is replaced by GIŠ patalkišnaš (animate) when addressed as an actor in a myth. I stress that neither of these uses is obligatory (see KUB 43.62 ii 5-7 where ‘fire, son of the Sun-god’ appears as neuter paḫḫur), nor are they limited to the role of subject of transitive verb. These two features clearly distinguish such examples from the grammatically required substitution being analyzed here.

A further difficulty with the derivational analysis is that if the -anza/-anteš forms built to neuter nouns belong to a derived stem, then that stem should reflect freely in all
cases and occur in all environments expected of a grammatically animate noun. Compare fully inflected *utne(y)ant-* ‘population’ or names of seasons like *zenant-* ‘autumn’. The latter may reflect the same suffix *diachronically* (see the references in note 1 above), but they cannot be equated synchronically due to their totally different behavior, contra Laroche (1962 : 35-36), Benveniste (1962 : 46) et al. Such forms in *-anza/-anteš* built to neuters occur only as subjects of transitive verbs. Furthermore, they are in strict complementary distribution with all (other) forms of the paradigm of the neuter noun. The putative derived animate nouns would thus have a suspiciously defective paradigm. See Patri (to appear : 23-25) for similar arguments.

The second version of the derivational analysis claims that the suffix *-ant-* seen in *-anza/-anteš* alters the grammatical gender of the base noun from neuter to animate. In the traditional terminology of Indo-European linguistics, it is thus a “motion-suffix”. Despite his use of the term “ergative”, this is clearly the analysis of Laroche (1962 : 41) : “le suffix *-ant-* est le marque du transfert d’un inanimé dans la classe animée” (emphasis in the original). See likewise Luraghi (1997 : 79). This analysis is false for the same reason as the first proposal : a true animate gender noun should fully inflect as such (compare Latin *dea* ‘goddess’ < *deus* ‘god’ and other genuine motion suffixes). Once again there is no explanation for the complementary distribution with all other forms of the neuter noun.

There is a further argument against the claim that the transitive subject forms in *-anza* are animate gender. The only relevant examples of anaphoric reference affirm that the grammatical gender of the noun remains neuter. Garrett (1990 : 291) cited one instance :

(6) *šuhṭa=ma=kan A-až ūrri n=at=kan GAM GšEN-až ūršzi*
‘The water washes the roof, and it flows from the drainpipe.’

*A-až* is a writing for *wetena(n)*, the transitive subject form of neuter *wātar* ‘water’, which is resumed by *-at*, neuter nominative-accusative singular of the enclitic anaphoric pronoun ‘it’. Garrett expressed regret that he could provide only a single example, but in fact there is at least one other that he overlooked (KUB 14.14 Vo 10-12) :

(7a) *nu=kámn Duthaliya kuičš kuenner nu ēšīr apūš šarn[č] inker*
‘Those who killed Tuthaliya have made restitution for the bloodshed.’

(7b) *nu KUR Ḥatti=ya (Ḫattišaš utnē*) apūš ištpananza arḫa namma zinn[č] ii*
‘That *bloodshed* further finished off the land of Hatti too,’

(7c) *n=at KUR Ḥatti=ya (Ḫattišaš utnēyanza*) karū šarnikta*
‘so that the land of Hatti too has made restitution for it.’

Any attempt to discount this example by claiming that the *-at* of clause (7c) is directly resuming the neuter form ēšīr of (7a) is refuted by the overall rhetorical

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4 The contrary claim by Luraghi (1997 : 8) is patently false and is due to her failure to distinguish the examples restricted to the role of transitive subjects from the truly derived type.
structure of the text. The repetition of the phrase KUR Hatti=ya ‘and also the land of Hatti’—with fronting of the direct object occurrence in (7b) so as to achieve a precise match in word order with the subject occurrence in (7c)—makes it absolutely clear that (7c) is resuming (7b). Furthermore, since the Hittite would have read Ḥattušaš utnē*išhananza* in (7b) and Ḥattušaš utnē(y)anza* ēšhar in (7c), the two clauses would also have been reciprocal in form as well as content.

Neither version of the derivational analysis is viable: however we are to explain the formal resemblance between the special transitive subject forms of neuter nouns and the nominatives of regular animate stems in -ant-, the former are neuter, not animate!

We turn now to the second alternative: -anza/-anteš in the forms under discussion are inflectional endings, marking a case of the neuter nouns. Here again we have two competing proposals. The first is that of Patri (to appear: 34-49), who argues that -anza is an allomorph of the ablative-instrumental ending. He cites extensive cross-linguistic evidence for the presumed syntax: i.e., where one might expect an inanimate noun to appear as the subject of a transitive verb, it appears instead in the ablative-instrumental. This analysis is quite compatible with the Hittite facts in syntactic terms, but it is wholly impossible on formal grounds.

First, -anza is an allomorph of the Hittite ablative ending for only a handful of neuter nouns (securely less than ten). Patri’s claim that -anza is the preferred ablative ending for Hittite neuter nouns is simply false. The vast majority of Hittite neuter nouns are attested only with the regular ending -az. The fact that due to “nasal reduction” the transitive subject ending -anza ([ants]) occasionally appears as -az in no way alters the fact that its underlying form is /-ants/, while that of the regular ablative ending, including for almost all neuter nouns, is /-ats/.

Second, the Hittite ablative is indifferent to number. The plural is also only -az, never -anteš. Hence a plural like uttanānteš in example (4) above cannot possibly be an ablative. The attempt of Patri (to appear: 57) to treat such forms in -anteš as belonging to

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5 I am immensely grateful to Sylvain Patri for generously making available to me in advance of publication the complete text of his forthcoming monograph that treats the present topic among other aspects of alignment in Hittite and the other ancient Indo-European languages of Anatolia. He also patiently tried to explain to me in e-mail correspondence certain details of his analysis that I found puzzling. I regret that I cannot remotely accept his analysis and that despite his best efforts I still do not fully understand some aspects of his proposal. Fortunately, those interested will soon be able to read his work in full for themselves.

6 Nasal reduction in Hittite affects /n/ before all stops and the affricate /ts/. It may reflect a pronunciation with a nasalized vowel (in the present instance [ãts]) or total loss ([ats]). In either case, the underlying form remains unaffected. Compare the case of the present indicative active third plural ending /-antsi/, which sometimes appears as -Ca-zi, in some stem classes homonymous (or merely homographic?) with the present third singular ending /-atsi/. No one would on this account seriously propose that the singular and plural endings are the same.
derived stems in -ant- is not remotely credible. All belong to neuter nouns that show no other case forms in -ant-. The relationship of regular neuter nominative-accusative plural widār ‘waters’ to the exclusively transitive subject form witenantes is absolutely parallel to that of regular nominative-accusative singular wātar ‘water’ to transitive subject form witenanza. Any viable analysis of this phenomenon must treat them alike.

Third, the true Hittite ablative always shows regular agreement with pronominal and other modifiers. Contrast ablative kēz tuppiyaz ‘with/from this tablet’ versus kāš tuppianza in (1) and ištarniyaš annašnanza in (4) above. I find Patri’s attempt (to appear : 52-53) to explain the latter pattern entirely circular. See further below on the agreement pattern of the transitive subject forms of neuter nouns.

Finally, as indicated above (note 3), the appearance of special transitive subject forms for neuter nouns is a feature shared with Hittite by Luvian and Lycian. The only attested form of the ablative-instrumental in Luvian is */-adi/ and in Lycian -e/adi. It is quite impossible that the neuter transitive subject forms -antis/-antinzi of Luvian and -ēti of Lycian are synchronic ablative-instrumentals. This fact and the others just cited definitively exclude Patri’s analysis in terms of an ablative-instrumental.

We come finally to the analysis of Garrett (1990), by which the Hittite transitive subjects in -anza/-anteš and the matching forms in Luvian and Lycian are ergative case forms of neuter nouns—as part of a system of “NP split ergativity”. In spite of widespread but specious arguments to the contrary, all attested Hittite facts are fully compatible with such an analysis. First, neuter nouns do show the expected behavior of ergative alignment : they appear in one form in the role of transitive object and intransitive subject (“O” and “S” functions), but in another in the role of transitive subject (“A” function). One may without harm retain the traditional label nominative-accusative for the former, but Hittite forms like singular wātar ‘water’ and plural widār ‘waters’ are properly absolutives (with Garrett 1990), contrasting with the ergative singular and plural witenanza/witenantes.7

Second, the Hittite alignment system follows the well-established animacy hierarchy of Silverstein (1976) for NP split ergativity, by which the lower on the animacy scale, the more likely a nominal will follow an ergative-absolutive pattern, the higher the animacy, the more likely it will follow a nominative-accusative pattern (see also Dixon 1979 : 86, repeated 1994 : 85, and Lazard 1998 : 194-195, contra Benveniste 1962 : 45). As noted by Rumsey (1987 : 31212), the Hittite pattern is thus typologically trivial. Hittite/Anatolian is unusual only in making the split at the very lowest possible point on the scale, with only neuter nouns taking ergative-absolutive alignment, while all other nominals take nominative-accusative alignment. Nevertheless, the Australian language

7 The contrary claim of Patri (to appear : 17, 21, 26-27, 30-32) is based entirely on his presumption (for which he offers no explicit arguments) that the -anza/-anteš are grammatically animate, which we have seen above is false.
Sangarayi furnishes a close parallel, likewise showing ergative-absolutive alignment only for inanimate nouns. Patri (to appear: 27) denies the validity of this comparison, claiming that in Hittite the basis for the split is grammatical gender, while in Sangarayi the split reflects the semantic animacy/inanimacy of the noun. The validity of the latter claim is belied by the fact that in Sangarayi dogs and wind are grammatically animate, while children, dead people, wallabies and kangaroos are not (I cite these examples at random from Merlan 1982). It is true that in Hittite, as in most Indo-European languages, the number of nouns with inanimate referents that show animate grammatical gender is unusually high, but the difference versus a language like Sangarayi is merely a matter of degree.

Mangarayi also confirms that a language can easily show NP split ergativity without any ergative verbal morphology (see the examples cited below). The absence of ergative verbal morphology in Hittite is thus not a valid argument against assuming NP split ergativity (contra Carruba 1992: 65).

Although few scholars have made the point explicit (apparently finding the matter self-evident), there can be little doubt that the key factor contributing to the widespread view that the transitive subjects in -anza are animate nominatives (despite the clear evidence to the contrary cited above) is the attested agreement pattern with demonstratives and adjectives. In kāš tuppianza ‘this tablet’ in example (1) the form of kāš ‘this’ is that of an animate nominative singular—likewise that of ištarniyaš ‘interior’ in ištarniyaš annašnanza in example (5). I follow Garrett (1990: 289-290) in regarding this agreement pattern as suppletive, reflecting paradigmatic gaps. Despite the protests of Patri (to appear: 54) there is nothing problematic in this interpretation. One may compare for similar suppletion within Hittite itself the system of Old Hittite enclitic possessive adjectives, where the instrumental is used for the ablative and the neuter nominative-accusative singular for the plural: iššaz=(s)mit ‘from their mouths’ (there being no ablative possessive singular *-šma) and šākuwa=šmet ‘their eyes’ (for non-occurring *šākuwa=šma). There is no basis for claiming that iššaz meaning ‘from the mouth’ is an instrumental because the agreeing possessive -šmit is an instrumental (in Old Hittite the instrumental never means ‘from’). Nor for supposing that šākuwa ‘eyes’ is singular because -šmet is a formal singular. Likewise, then, there is also no justification for interpreting the neuter ergative tuppianza as animate noun because of the agreeing demonstrative kāš.

In a language with NP split alignment it is normal that each class of nominal follows its own alignment system, including mixing the two alignment systems in the same clause. That is, in a transitive sentence we expect to find all four logical combinations: animate subject (nominative) + animate direct object (accusative);
animate subject (nominative) + neuter direct object (absolutive), neuter subject (ergative) + animate direct object (accusative), neuter subject (ergative) + neuter direct object (absolutive). Since in my experience some colleagues appear to find this unnatural, I cite Mangarayi parallels for the respective Hittite constructions. I include also intransitive sentences, in part to show that in both languages the verbal morphology is the same for both nominative and ergative subjects. The Mangarayi facts are taken from Merlan (1982: 56-57 and passim):

S-function

Animate (Nominative)

Hittite: Telipinuš lēlaniyanza uet
‘Telipinu came in a fury.’ (lit. ‘Telipinu, furious, came.’)

Mangarayi: ŋa-gadugu 0-ya-j
FNom-woman 3sg-go-PP
‘The woman went.’

Inanimate (Absolutive)

Hittite: BÀD-eššar=ma ŠA ISSI 40 gipeššar katta uet
Neut.Abs.Sg.=part. of wood measure down Pret.3Sg.
‘The fortification of wood came down (i.e. fell) 40 g.’

Mangarayi: /uE06F-wumbawa /uE06F- /u1E37andi jir /uE06F-jaygi-ni wuburga /u1E47a-bundal-an
NAbs-one NAbs-tree stand 3Sg-Aux-PC halfway NLoc-billabong-NLoc
‘One tree was standing in the middle of the billabong.’

A-function and O-function

Animate Subject and Animate Object (Nominative and Accusative)

Hittite: nu kuitman mēyawaš=teš halkin karippanzi
‘And while your four (horses) devour the grain…’

Mangarayi: ŋa-na ŋa-la-bugbug wuran-jirag malam-gara-pan
FNom-Dis FNom-oldperson 3Sg/3Du-eat-PP man-Du-Acc
‘That old woman ate the two men.’

Animate Subject and Inanimate Object (Nominative and Absolutive)

Hittite: nu=za lti patiliš wātar İ.DÜG.GA dāi
‘The patili-priest takes water (and) fine oil for himself.’

Mangarayi: 0-landi mod 0-may ŋa-malam
NAbs-tree cut 3Sg/3Sg-Aux-PP MNom-man
‘The man cut the tree down.’
Inanimate Subject and Animate Object (Ergative and Accusative)

Hittite : \( nu \quad \text{mKeššin} \quad \text{idālalawanza} \quad \text{GIG-anza} \quad \text{ḥarzi} \)
\[
\text{conj. Anim.Acc.Sg. Erg.Sg. Neut.Erg.Sg. Pres.3Sg}
\]
‘An evil sickness holds Kessi.’ (NB adj. also shows ergative ending)

Mangarayi : no example cited in Merlan (1982), but see comment on p. 148 and compare examples with animate pronominal objects:

\[
\text{na-bada} \quad \text{ŋan-ga-giñ} \quad \text{na-nugu} \quad \text{̣nim} \quad \text{ŋan-ga-giñ}
\]
\[
\text{Nom-father 3Sg/1Sg-take-PP NErg-water submerge 3Sg/1Sg-Aux-PP}
\]
‘My father took me.’                             ‘The water covered me.’

Hittite : \( nu=\text{wa=tta} \quad \text{kuedani mē/u1E2Buni} \quad \text{LÚ.SEŠ-} \quad \text{anda} \quad \text{wemiyazi} \)
\[
\text{conj. Neut.Erg.Sg. Neut.Abs.Sg. back Pret.3Sg.}
\]
‘When the messengers reach you…’

\[
\text{maḥhan=tta} \quad \text{kāš tuppianza} \quad \text{anka} \quad \text{wemiyazzi}
\]
\[
\text{when=thee(Asg) this tablet ErgSg preverb find Pres3Sg}
\]
‘When this tablet (erg. sg.) reaches you…’

Inanimate Subject and Inanimate Object (Ergative and Absolutive)

Hittite : \( nu \quad \text{ḥannišnanza} \quad \text{DI-eššar} \quad \text{EGIR-} \quad \text{anda} \quad \text{wemiyazi} \)
\[
\text{conj. Neut.Erg.Sg. Neut.Abs.Sg. back Pret.3Sg.}
\]
‘The lawsuit brought a lawsuit in return.’ (i.e. a countersuit)

Mangarayi : \( na\text{-}\text{landi} \quad \text{jaΘ-gidba} \quad \text{Ø-man} \)
\[
\text{NErg-tree 3-3Sg/3Sg-have NAbs-gum}
\]
‘The tree has gum.’

(NB : prefix \( na\)- in Mangarayi marks MascNom, NeutErg, and NeutInstrumental !)

In sum, of the analyses presented thus far for Hittite transitive subjects in \(-anza/-anteš\) built to neuter nouns only the NP split ergativity analysis of Garrett (1990) is compatible with all the attested facts.

References


