

## Ergativity, ergative splits and pragmatic considerations

### 1. Definitions

- Lazard's schemata:  $Y = Z$  (and  $X \neq Z$ ) (or  $O = S$  and  $A \neq S$ )

"It is legitimate simply to take *action sentences* as the semantic basis for definitions of the *dominant structure of actancy*." (p.40). Thus we take the comparison of two-actant action sentences with one-actant sentences as the basis for the definition of the dominant actancy structure in any language. More precisely, we posit the action sentence as the *major two-actant construction* and we compare it with the (major) one-actant construction, and we say that the actancy structure that emerges from this comparison is the dominant actancy structure of the language. If this structure is accusative, we call the language an "accusative language"; if the structure is ergative, we say the language is an "ergative language", according to common practice (p.40).

- In terms of alignment, as in Creissels:

The alignment of the unique argument of a monovalent verb with the agent of the basic transitive construction is commonly designated as *accusative alignment* (or *nominative-accusative alignment*):  $A = U \neq P$  whereas the alignment of the unique argument of a monovalent verb with the patient of the basic transitive construction is commonly designated as *ergative alignment* (or *absolutive-ergative alignment*):  $A \neq U = P$

- Haspelmath (2010:673): *Ergative case*

GENERALIZATION: In all languages with an ergative case, it has at least some overt allomorphs.

DEFINITION: An ergative case is a morphological marker that has among its functions the coding of the agent of typical transitive clauses, when this is coded differently from the single argument of intransitive clauses. 'Ergative' may have a different meaning as a descriptive category (ergative case may have additional functions (instrumental, locative, possessive, general oblique, cf. Dixon 1994:57) but the comparative concept and the generalization are not affected.

### 2. Different kinds of ergative "split"

#### 2.1. Australian languages

Wargamay (from Lynch, 1998:199-200)

- ergative pattern with 3rd pronouns and nominals

1. *maal gagay*  
man.ABS go  
"The man is going."
2. *maal-ndu ganal ngunday*  
man-ERG frog.ABS see  
"The man is looking at the frog."
3. *ganal-ndu maal ngunday*  
frog-ERG man.ABS see  
"The frog is looking at the man."

- accusative pattern with non-singular 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns:

4. *ngali gagay*  
1DU go  
"We two are going."

5. *ngali ganal ngunday*  
 1DU frog.ABS see  
 "We two are looking at the frog."

6. *ganal-ndu ngali-nya ngunday*  
 frog-ERG 1DU-OBJECT see  
 "The frog is looking at us two."

Dyirbal (Dixon 1972:59-60)

- the two arguments are 3rd person nominals, the structure is ergative:

7. *Balan ugumbil ba gul ya a gu balgan.*  $O_oA_aV_o$  (a= ergative)  
 ART.ABS woman.ABS ART.ERG man.ERG hit  
 "The man hits the woman." (man is hitting woman)

8. *Bayi ya a bani u.*  $S_oV_o$   
 ART.ABS man.ABS come  
 "The man comes." (man is coming)

- the two arguments are 1st and 2nd person pronouns, the structure is accusative:

9. *a a inuna balgan.*  $A_oO_bV_o$  (b= accusative)  
 I.NOM you.ACC hit  
 "I'm hitting you."

10. *inda bani u*  $Z_oV_o$   
 you.NOM come  
 "You're coming."

- if A is a 1st or 2nd person pronoun, and O a 3rd person term, the structure is neutral:

A = S and O = S (or X = Z and Y = Z):

11. *a a bayi ya a balgan.*  $A_oO_oV_o$   
 I.NOM ART.ABS man.ABS hit  
 "I am hitting (the) man."

- if A is 3rd person and O 1st or 2nd person, the structure is disjoint:  $A \neq S$  and  $O \neq S$ :

12. *ayguna ba gul ya a gu balgan.*  $O_bA_aV_o$   
 me.ACC ART.ERG man.ERG hit  
 "(The) man is hitting me."

## 2.2. Papuan languages

According to Foley (1986), a great number of Papuan languages indicate both the actor and the undergoer of transitive verbs by verbal affixes, showing a nominative-accusative pattern (oVa or Voa being the most common orders). Only a handful of languages show other patterns, as for instance Yimas which treats A, O and S differently. But this tripartite marking is rare cross-linguistically.

In Papuan languages, the ergative-absolutive verbal case marking schema is unattested, in spite of the fact that nominal case-marking along an ergative pattern is rather common (in languages of the Highlands areas of both Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya). According to Foley, this has resulted from the spread of a peripheral case marker (for the ablative, causal and instrumental) to the actor, in order to avoid the potential confusion between actor and undergoer when they are both animate.

Dani (Highlands of Papua New Guinea)

- no possible ambiguity, the ergative case marker is largely omitted:

13. *ap wekki wat-n-an-h-e*  
 man charcoal hit-1sgO-put-REALIS-3sgA  
 "The man smeared charcoal on me." (Foley, 1986:107)

- potential ambiguity (especially with two animate nominals), then the ergative marker (formally an instrumental/ablative marker: ABL/INSTR→ERG (A[+control])) is present:

14. *wam-en Øna-sikh-e*  
 pig-ERG 3SG.O-eat-REMOTE PAST-3SG.A  
 "The pig ate him." (*id.*)

### 2.3. New Caledonian (Kanak) languages

Nemi (Ozanne-Rivierre, 1979)

15. *yelu fe vi hyaok ru maali hnook.*  
 3DU take DEF child AGT DUEL woman  
 "The two women take the child."
16. *ye teve-ek ru vi davec.*  
 3SG take away-3SG.O AGT DEF flood  
 "The flood takes him away."
17. *ye ta-me ru vi hnook.*  
 3SG go.up-come AGT DEF woman  
 "The woman is coming up."
18. *ye ta-me vi davec*  
 3SG go.up-come DEF flood  
 "The flood is increasing."

Drehu (Moyse-Faurie, 1983)

- progressive aspect:

19. *kola cia la hnitr e koilo tröne uma*  
 PROG grow DEF bush LOC there behind house  
 "The bush is growing behind the house." (Lercari *et al.*, 2001:411)
20. *kola humuth la puaka hnen la sinelapa*  
 PROG kill DEF pig ERG DEF servant  
 "The servant is killing the pig."
21. *kola hmahma hnei Hetrue*  
 PROG be ashamed ERG Hetrue  
 "Hetrue is ashamed."
22. *kola hnyiman la utr hnen la aji*  
 PROG laugh.TR DEF octopus ERG DEF rat  
 "The rat is laughing at the octopus."
23. *kola xen la koko la nekönatr*  
 PROG eat DEF yam DEF child  
 "The child is eating the yam."

- perfective aspect:

24. *mec asë hë angatr*  
 die all PERF 3PL  
 "They are all dead." (Lercari *et al.*, 2001:372)
25. *iji hë la melek hnen la nekönatr*  
 drink PERF DEF milk ERG DEF child  
 "The child drank the milk."

- past tense:

26. *hnen la uma hna mel*  
 ERG DEF house past burn.INTR  
 "The house has burnt." (Lercari *et al*, 2001:353)
27. *hnen la aji hna hnyiman la utr*  
 ERG DEF rat PAST laugh.TR DEF octopus  
 "The rat has laughed at the octopus."
28. *hna mel la uma*  
 PAST burn DEF house  
 "The house has burnt." (Lercari *et al*, 2001:353)
29. *hna öni asë la mitr hnei angatr*  
 PAST eat entirely DEF meat ERG 3PL  
 "They have eaten all the meat."
30. *hnei Hetrue hna hmahma* ( $\cong$  *hna hmahma hnei Hetrue*)  
 ERG Hetrue PAST be ashamed  
 "Hetrue has been ashamed."

- non-past tense (present/imperfective/future) S/A V O word order: accusative structure

31. *angeic a mec*  
 3SG IMPERF sick  
 "He is sick."
32. *angeic a xen la koko*  
 3SG IMPERF eat DEF yam  
 "S/he eats the yam."

## 2.4. Polynesian languages

### East Futunan

a) The absolutive argument of an intransitive verb may refer to an agent ( $S_a$ ) as in (33); the intransitive verb may be transitivized (34), the structure is then ergative.

33. *e kava le toe (i le niu)* ABS = agent  
 NPST climb SPC child (LOC SPC coconut palm)  
 'The child climbs up (the coconut palm). $\emptyset$
34. *e kava-'i le niu e le toe* ABS = patient, ERG = agent  
 NPST climb-TR SPC coconut palm ERG SPC child + derived verb  
 'The child climbs to the top of the coconut palm. $\emptyset$

With agent-oriented bivalent verbs:

35. *e kai le toe* ABS = agent  
 NPST steal SPC child  
 'The child steals.' / 'The child is a thief. $\emptyset$
36. *e kai le f fal e le toe* ABS = patient, ERG = agent  
 NPST steal SPC money ERG SPC child no derivation  
 'The child steals the money. $\emptyset$

b) The sole argument of some intransitive verbs expresses a patient ( $S_o$ ) as in (37):

37. *kua foa le tili* ABS = patient  
 PFV be pierced SPC net  
 'The net has a hole. $\emptyset$

38. *kua foa-'i le tili e le ika* ABS = patient, ERG = agent  
 PERF pierce-TR DEF net ERG DEF fish + derived verb  
 -The fish has made a hole in the net.∅

Ergative verbs in an intransitive construction with S = patient:

39. *E valu le niu.* (ABS = patient)  
 NPST grate SPC coconut  
 -The coconut is grated.∅
40. *E valu le niu e le tagata.* (ABS = patient, ERG = agent)  
 NPST grate SPC coconut ERG SPC man no derivation  
 -The man is grating the coconut.∅

c) Ergative verbs with two arguments obligatorily expressed

41. *E sele le niu e le tagata.*  
 NPST cut SPC coconut palm ERG SPC man  
 -The man made a cut in the coconut palm.∅
42. *E ma-sele le niu.* O > S, derived verb, A > ∅ (≈ passive)  
 NPST PREF-cut SPC coconut palm  
 -The coconut palm has a cut (made in it).∅
43. *E 'ofa le pusatu'u e Muni.*  
 NPST take apart SPC cupboard ERG Muni  
 -Muni takes apart the cupboard.∅
44. *Kua ma-'ofa le pusatu'u (i Muni).*  
 PFV PREF-take apart SPC cupboard (OBL Muni)  
 -The cupboard has been taken apart (owing to Muni).∅

d) "Indirect" transitive constructions ABS/OBL

With verbs of perception, of feeling or of speech (so-called middle verbs):

45. *E loi le toe ki lona tinana* ABS=experiencer, OBL=recipient  
 NPST lie SPC child OBL its mother  
 -The child lies to its mother.∅
46. *E loi-'i le tinana e lona toe* ABS=patient, ERG=agent  
 NPST lie-TR SPC mother ERG its child  
 -The child submits its mother to its lies.∅

On the basis of verb agreement, most of coreferential contexts, nominal and 3<sup>rd</sup> singular pronominal argument marking, East Futunan exhibits a syntactic ergative structure; in imperative clauses and with middle verbs, by contrast, the language shows an accusative structure.

### 3. Pragmatics

In Papuan languages, we have seen that the ergative marker is largely omitted (as in example (13) from Dani), except when there is possible ambiguity.

According to Foley (1986:108), the ergative marker has another, though related, function: It also expresses the actor's control, i.e. the actor is a volitional performer. "The ergative suffix indicates that the actor is acting independently, is self-motivated, and exerts his personal control over the situation; while its lack indicates that the actor is performing according to his set social obligations, not according to his own independent will, and does not assert his personal control over the situation [í ] For verbs expressing commands or requests, the ergative case is used if the actor's social position is such that it is appropriate for him to address commands or requests to the addressee. The ergative asserts his right to do so. If the actor does not have this right, then the ergative suffix should not be used."

Ergative case avoidance/backgrounding of the agent: Duranti and Ochs (1990) and Duranti (1994:130-132) in relation to communication strategies and social structure.

**a) Omission of the ergative argument**

In Western Polynesian languages, a transitive verb is not obligatorily associated with a two-argument structure (see examples above)

**b) Genitive noun phrase construction**

- two argument construction:

47.           *E feave'aki e Atelea ana fakapaku i lamatu'a.*  
 NPST peddle       ERG Atelea his doughnut   LOC road  
 ÷Atelea peddles his doughnuts along the road.∅

- agent expressed as the possessor in a genitive noun phrase.

48.           *E feave'aki a fakapaku a Atelea i lamatu'a.*  
 NPST peddle       ABS doughnut   POSS Atelea   LOC road  
 ÷Atelea peddles his doughnuts along the road.∅  
 (lit. Atelea's doughnuts are peddled on the road)

49.           *Na ta'o lana puaka lasi ke ma'iloga ai lona tagata*  
 PST cook his pig big so that show       ANAPH his manhood  
  
*i le fakatasi.*  
 OBL SPC feast  
 ÷He baked a big pig for the feast to show what a fine man he is.∅  
 (lit. his big pig is cooked for the feast in order to show his manhood)

The agent expressed as a possessor rests on the conceptual link between an object and a process that the possessor is very likely to have conducted on it. This natural link underlines a potential but low and involuntary agentivity, which is socially acceptable.

On the contrary, the agent marked as an ergative argument expresses above all the effectiveness of the process and the high responsibility of the agent.