Introduction to Ergativity

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Roadmap

☐ Ergative alignment

☐ Topics in ergativity

☐ Preview: Generative approaches to ergativity

1 Ergativity

(1) **Standard definition of ergativity** ≈
Subjects of intransitive verbs pattern with objects of transitive verbs, and differently from subjects of transitive verbs.

- Immediate questions:

  1. Can we also be sure if a verb is <u>transitive</u> or <u>intransitive</u>?
  2. What does it mean to be a <u>subject</u>? How can we be sure we know what the "subject" is in a language we've just started studying?
  3. What does "patterns with" mean? What kinds of patterns are we looking at?

- (Imperfect) working terms:

  ○ **transitive verb**: a verb with two *non-oblique* NP arguments
  ○ **intransitive verb**: a verb with a single *non-oblique* NP argument

○ **S** = single argument of intransitive verb

○ **A** = subject of transitive verb (most *agent-like* argument)

○ **P** = object of transitive verb (most *patient-like* argument)

Note: There is a correlation between semantic "agent"/"patient" and the syntactic opposition A/P, but the two are not identical:

(2)   <u>Annie</u> underwent <u>an operation</u>.
      A   **P**

- **Proceed with caution! More warnings...**

  "'Ergativity' is currently an 'in' term in linguistics. It is used by a wide variety of linguists, with a whole range of different meanings. As a result, much confusion exists at present about what an 'ergative' language is, and about the morphological, syntactic, and semantic consequences of such a characterization" (Dixon 1979, 59).

  "I think there is little value in studying ergativity as a thing in itself. More productive directions of research are issues such as the nature of features and structure, as discussed in Chomsky (1995) and Halle and Marantz (1993), or the theory of Case and agreement as presented in Bittner and Hale (1996)" (Johns 2000, 67).

 "A central theme is that ergativity is not one but many phenomena" (Deal 2015, 654).

  "A wide range of work across different traditions converges on the idea that 'ergativity' is not a single unitary phenomenon, and is not realized in the same way across different languages" (Coon et al. 2017, 1).

. . . .

1.1 Alignment types

- Comrie (1978) gives 5 possible alignment types, shown in (3)

(3)   Five possible alignment types (Comrie 1978)
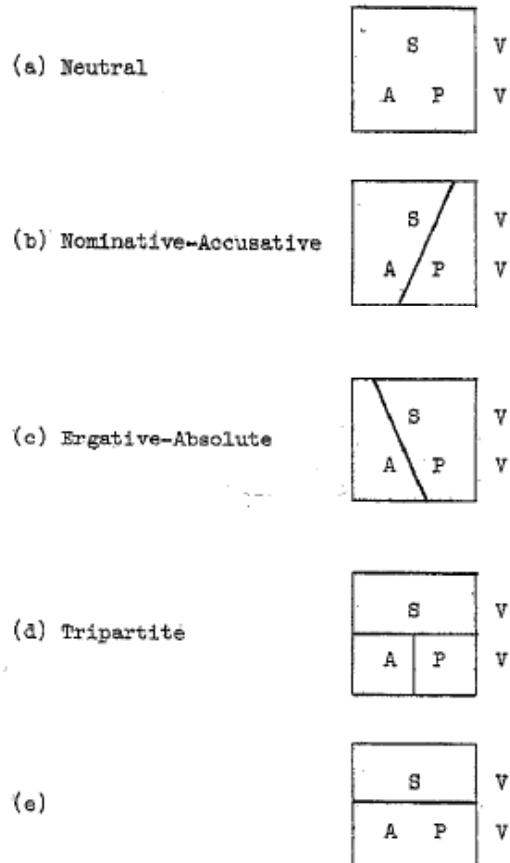
- (d) is rare, (e) is unattested—why might this be?

- **A generalization:** In types (b) and (c), nominative and absolutive are most often *morphologically unmarked*; accusative and ergative are most often *morphologically marked*

- Back to what "patterns with" means in (1): two main patterns:

  1. **morphological case marking (= "dependent marking"; Nichols 1986)**

     (4)   INUKTITUT (INUIT)

         a.   Arna-**up** niri-ja-nga   aapu.
              woman-X eat-DECL.TR-3SG.3SG apple
              'The woman is eating the apple.'

         b.   Arnaq pisuk-tu-q.
              woman walk-DECL.INTR-3SG
              'The woman is walking.'   (Compton 2017)

     ⇨ What should we gloss "X"?

  2. **morphological agreement (= "head marking")**

     (5)   CHUJ (MAYAN)

         a.   Ix-**ach**-**w**-il-a'.
              PFV-B2S-A1S-see-TV
              'I saw you.'

         b.   Ix-**ach**-way-i.
              PFV-B2S-sleep-ITV
              'You slept.'

     ⇨ What is "A"? and "B"?

- Note: not mutually exclusive — we'll come back to interactions between case and agreement.

(6)   HINDI-URDU

    a.   Kabiir-**ne** kitaab   likh-**ii**.
         Kabir-ERG book(FEM) write-PERF.FEM
         'Kabir had written the book.'

    b.   bazaar-se   taazii sabzii   aa-**yii**.
         market-from fresh vegetables(FEM) come-PERF.FEM
         'The fresh vegetables had arrived from the market.'
         (Mahajan 2017, 96)

1.2 Alignment practice!

(7) _____

  a.   misi yaku-ta   ujya-rqo-n
       cat   water-___ drink-PST-3SG
       'The cat drank water.'
  b.   misi punyu-rqo-n
       cat   sleep-PST-3SG
       'The cat slept.'

(8) _____

  a.   ram-ne   gari cala-yi   hai
       Ram-___ car drive-PERF be
       'Ram has driven the car.'
  b.   ram ga-ya
       Ram go-PERF
       'Ram went.'

(9) _____

  a.   Tyi a-mek'-e-yoñ.
       PFV 2.___-hug-TV-1.___
       'You hugged me.'
  b.   Tyi yajl-i-yoñ.
       PFV fall-ITV-1.___
       'I fell.'

(10) _____

  a.   Angute-m qusngiq ner-aa
       man-___   reindeer eat-3S.3S
       'The man is eating the reindeer.'
  b.   Qusngiq ner'-uq.
       reindeer eat-3S
       'The reindeer is eating.'

(11) _____

  a.   mey-i   tekiw'-khiʔ
       water-___ flow-STAT
       'The water is flowing.'
  b.   c'ic'-i   č'ep'iš čah-k'al-taʔ
       bird-___ worm DIR-pull-PST
       'The bird pulled out the worm.'

(12) _____

  a.   Student̩-ma ceril-i   dacera.
       student-___ letter-___ wrote
       'The student wrote the letter.'
  b.   Student̩-i mivida.
       student-___ went
       'The student went.'

(13) _____

  a.   Ehiztari-ak otso-a   harrapatu du.
       hunter-___ wolf-___ caught   AUX(have)
       'The hunter has caught the wolf.'
  b.   Otso-a etorri da.
       wolf-___ arrived AUX(be)
       'The wolf has arrived.'

(14) _____

  a.   sik'ém-nim kúnk'u pée-wewluqse timaaní-ne.
       horse-___   always 3/3-want   apple-___
       'The horse always wants an apple.'
  b.   hi-pnímse pícpic.
       3-sleep   cat
       'The cat is sleeping.'

(15) _____

  a.   Choñkol a-k'el-oñ.
       PROG   2.___-watch-1.___
       'You are watching me.'
  b.   Choñkol a-tyijp'el.
       PROG   2.___-jump
       'You are jumping.'

(16) _____

  a.   Koe tele e Sione a   Sefa.
       PRES kick ___ Sione ___ Sefa
       'Sione is kicking Sefa.'
  b.   Ne tohitohi a Sione.
       PST writing ___ Sione
       'Sione was writing.'

- Taking care with terminology: It's important to remind ourselves that glosses/labels like "nominative", "absolute", "ergative" are not primitives.

    - As an example, compare the Ch'ol morphemes *a-* and *-oñ* in (9) and (15).
    - We'll see a variety of proposals regarding the grammatical *source* of different types of morphology, including proposals which take *nominative* and *absolutive* to be the result of the same underlying mechanism
    - ⇨ It's important to distinguish a descriptive use of this morphology, from a theoretical account of what is responsible for generating it.

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1.3 Ergative properties

- Deal (2015) breaks down the common definition in (1) above into three properties

    (17)   ERGATIVITY PROPERTIES (Deal 2015, 654)
        a. *The ergative property*
            Subjects of transitive clauses behave differently from subjects of intransitive clauses for some grammatical generalization(s).
        b. *The absolutive property*
            Objects of transitive clauses and subjects of intransitive clauses behave identically for some grammatical generalization(s).
        c. *The argument-structural property*
            Subjects of unaccusative verbs behave differently from subjects of unergative and transitive verbs for some grammatical generalization(s).

    - Note, for example, that Nez Perce in (14) has *the ergative property*, but not the *absolutive property* (true of tripartite systems genreally).

- Some languages make splits *within* the class of intransitive subjects, often referred to as "Split-S" patterns—we'll come back to these.

- It's an open question how these different properties might be related to one another, but these will be useful terms to have at hand.

- ➠ **Big questions:** What grammatical principles underlie the properties in (17)? Do all ergative patterns share something in common?

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2 Topics in ergativity

2.1 Split ergativity

"It is rather misleading to speak of *ergative languages*, as opposed to *nominative-accusative languages*, since . . . it is possible for one phenomenon in a language to be controlled on an ergative-absolutive basis while another phenomenon in the same language is controlled on a nominative-accusative basis" (Comrie 1978, 350, emphasis mine)

- Main factors conditioning splits:

    1. **TAM** (past/perfective always retains ergative pattern)
   2. **NP-type** ("lower-ranked" NPs always retain ergative pattern)

2.1.1 TAM split

- Basque shows a split between non-progressive and progressive aspects:

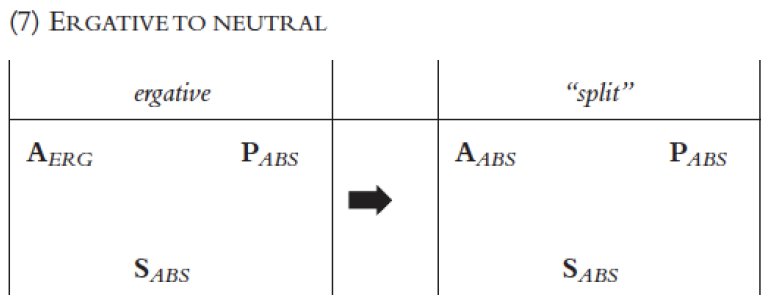(18) BASQUE

    a.   Ehiztari-ak otso-a   harrapatu du.
         hunter-ERG wolf-ABS caught   AUX
         'The hunter has caught the wolf.'

    b.   Otso-a   etorri da.
         wolf-ABS arrived AUX
         'The wolf has arrived.'   (Laka 1996)

(19) BASQUE PROGRESSIVE

    a.   emakume-a ogi-a   ja-te-n   ari da.
         woman-ABS bread-ABS eat-NML-LOC PROG AUX
         'The woman is eating the bread.'

    b.   emakume-a dantza-n ari da.
         woman-ABS dance-LOC PROG AUX
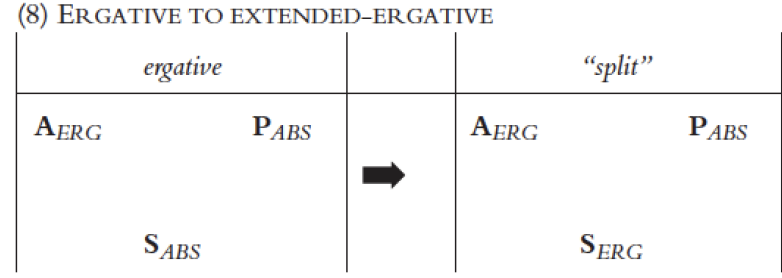   'The woman is dancing.'   (Laka 1996)

- Ch'ol also shows an aspectual split, opposing *perfective* (9) and *non-perfective* (15) aspects.

(10) DIRECTIONALITY OF ASPECTUAL SPLITS

←	ERGATIVE	‖	NON-ERGATIVE		→
perfective	≫	imperfective	≫	progressive	
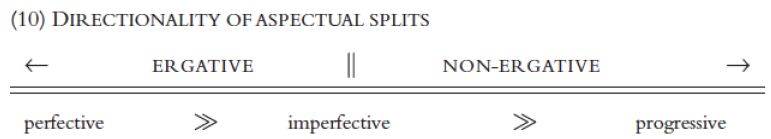
- **Note:** While splits follow the generalization above, not all splits split in the same way!

- Basque:

(7) ERGATIVE TO NEUTRAL

ergative		*"split"*	
A_{ERG}	P_{ABS}	A_{ABS}	P_{ABS}
S_{ABS}		S_{ABS}	

- Ch'ol:

(8) ERGATIVE TO EXTENDED–ERGATIVE

ergative		*"split"*	
A_{ERG}	P_{ABS}	A_{ERG}	P_{ABS}
S_{ABS}		S_{ERG}	

- Other languages with TAM splits include Hindi and Kurmanji (Indo-Aryan), Basque, Ch'ol and Chuj (Mayan), Tongan (Polynesian), Georgian (Kartvelian), Avar and Adyghe (Causasian), and Yukulta (Tangkic) (see Tsunoda 1981; Coon 2013).

- While most TAM splits are *aspect* splits, tense and mood splits have also been described, though some have questioned whether these can be recategorized; see discussion in Coon 2013

➽ **Big questions:** Why do splits follow the universal directionality generalization? What causes splits?

2.1.2 NP splits

- Halkomelem (Salish) shows a split between 3rd person and 1st/2nd person subjects. 3rd person subjects show an *ergative pattern*: only 3rd person transitive subjects trigger agreement on the verb (*-es*):

(20) HALKOMELEM 3RD PERSON SUBJECTS

    a.   q'óy-t-**es**   te Strang te sqelá:w
         kill-TRANS-3S DET Strang DET beaver
         'Strang killed the beaver.'

    b.   í:mex   te Strang
         walking DET Strang
         'Strang is walking.'

- 1st and 2nd person subjects behave alike in both transitive and intransitive clauses:

(21) HALKOMELEM 1ST PERSON SUBJECTS

    a. máy-t-**tsel**
        help-TRANS-1SG.S
        'I help him.'

    b. yó:ys-**tsel**
        work-1SG.S
        'I work.'   (Wiltschko 2006)

- Dyirbal shows a similar split:

(22) DYIRBAL 3RD PERSON SUBJECTS

    a. ŋuma yabu-ŋgu   bura-n
        father mother-ERG see-NONFUT
        'Father saw mother.'

    b. ŋuma miyanda-n^{y}u
        father laugh-NONFUT
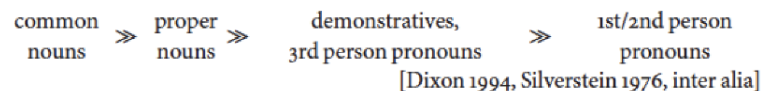   'Father laughed.'   (Dixon 1994)

(23) DYIRBAL 1ST/2ND PERSON SUBJECTS

    a. ŋana n^{y}urra-na   bura-n
        we   you.PL-ACC see-NONFUT
        'We saw you(PL).'

    b. ŋana miyanda-n^{y}u
        we   laugh-NONFUT
        'We laughed.'   (Dixon 1994)

- The implicational scale below goes back to Silverstein 1976 and is frequently cited for NP-based splits:

(32) ← *subj marked* ERG

common nouns ≫ proper nouns ≫ demonstratives, 3rd person pronouns ≫ 1st/2nd person pronouns

[Dixon 1994, Silverstein 1976, inter alia]

- "lower-ranked" NPs are the ones that will retain ergative marking

- nonetheless, the vast majority of NP splits distinguish *3rd person* from *1st and 2nd person* (Coon and Preminger 2017)

➡ **Big questions:** Why do splits follow the universal directionality generalization? Why person features? Are these splits an accident of morphology? Or is there a syntactic difference between different kinds of subjects?

2.1.3 Case~agreement split

- Languages vary in whether they have morphological case on nouns, agreement on predicates, neither, or **both**

- In languages with both, alignment may split—but it only ever splits in one direction!

AGREEMENT — CASE	nominative-accusative	ergative-absolutive
nominative-accusative	① English, Tamil	② *unattested*
ergative-absolutive	③ Nepali, Chukchi	④ Hindi, Kabardian

- Compare Hindi-Urdu in (8) above with Nepali:

(24) NEPALI

    a. maile   yas pasal-mā patrikā   kin-ē.
        1SG.ERG DEM store-LOC newspaper.ABS buy-1SG
        'I bought the newspaper in this store.'

    b. ma   thag-ī-ē.
        1SG.ABS cheat-PASS-1SG
        'I was cheated.'   (Bickel and Yādava 2000)

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2.2 Syntactic ergativity

- So far we've focused on *morphological patterns*.

- In some—but not all—morphologically ergative languages, parts of the syntax also care about the distinction between As (transitive subjects) vs. Ps and Ss (transitive objects and intransitive subjects)

- Most often, asymmetries are found in the domain of Ā-extraction (i.e. wh-questions, relativization, focus):

  ○ absolutive arguments freely extract

  ○ ergative arguments (i.e. transitive subjects) are banned from extracting, and/or require a special construction

(25) TONGAN ([Polinsky 2016](#))

    a. 'Oku fakamolemole'i 'e   Mele 'a   e   kaiha'a.
          PRES forgive   ERG Mary ABS DET thief
          Mary forgives the thief.'

    b. e   kaiha'a$_i$ ['oku fakamolemole'i 'e   Mele __$_i$]
          DET thief   PRES forgive   ERG Mary ABS
          'the thief that Mary forgives'   (ABS relativization)

    c. e   ta'ahine$_i$ ['oku *(ne$_i$) fakamolemole'i __$_i$ 'a   e
          DET girl   PRES RP   forgive   ABS DET
          kaiha'a]
          thief
          'the girl that forgives the thief'   (ERG relativization)

(26) Q'ANJOB'AL ([Coon, Mateo Pedro, and Preminger 2014](#))

    a. Max y-il   naq winaq ix   ix.
          PFV 3ERG-see CLF man   CLF woman
          'The man saw the woman.'

    b. Maktxel$_i$ max y-il   naq winaq __$_i$?
          who   PFV 3ERG-see CLF man
          'Who did the man see?'

    c. *Maktxel$_i$ max y-il   __$_i$ ix   ix?
          who   PFV 3ERG-see   CLF woman

intended: 'Who saw the woman?'
(grammatical as: 'Who did the woman see?')

- In other morphologically ergative languages, ergative arguments freely extract. Compare the Q'anjob'al above with related Ch'ol:

(27) CH'OL

    a. Tyi y-il-ä   x'ixik jiñi wiñik.
          PFV 3ERG-see-TV woman DET man
          'The man saw the woman.'

    b. Maxki$_i$ tyi y-il-ä   __$_i$ jiñi wiñik?
          who   PFV 3ERG-see-TV   DET man
          'Who did the man see?'

    c. Maxki$_i$ tyi y-il-ä   x'ixik __$_i$
          who   PFV 3ERG-see-TV woman
          'Who saw the woman?

- ➽ **Big questions:** What accounts for the ban on extracting ergative subjects in *just some* morphologically ergative languages?

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3 Generative approaches to ergativity

- Next time, we'll begin with a look at theoretical approaches to *ergativity*, which will take us into bigger topics, especially:

  ○ case and Case

  ○ agreement and Agree

  ○ . . . the interaction among these. . .

  ○ and how these have been put to work accounting for ergative patterns

Further reading:

- **Ergativity surveys/overviews**

  - Comrie (1978) – 'Ergativity'
  - Dixon (1979, 1994) – 'Ergativity'
  - Johns (2000) – 'Ergativity: A perspective on recent work'
  - Aldridge (2008) – 'Generative approaches to ergativity'
  - Deal (2015) – 'Ergativity'
  - Deal (2016) – 'Syntactic ergativity: Analysis and identification'
  - Polinsky (2017) – 'Syntactic ergativity'
  - Coon, Massam, and Travis (2017) – *The Oxford Handbook of Ergativity*

Answers to §1.2: (7): Quechua, nominative-accusative; (8): Hindi-Urdu, ergative-absolutive; (9): Ch'ol, ergative-absolutive; (10): Yup'ik, ergative-absolutive; (11): Wappo, nominative-accusative; (12): Georgian, ergative-absolutive; (13): Basque, ergative-absolutive; (14): Nez Perce, tripartite; (15): Ch'ol (progressive aspect), nominative-accusative; (16): Niuean, ergative-absolutive

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