Ergativity
When Transitivity Matters

Matthew A. Tucker

Linguistics 105: Morphology
Fall 2012

November 7, 2012
**Administrative Miscellany**

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- Should receive an email from me or Nate about HW 5 by Friday.
- HW 6 is posted and you should have started on it already.

**Others**
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Anti-Causative Thoughts

1 Anti-Causative Thoughts

2 Ergativity: Introduction

3 Tripartite Languages

4 Intransitives and Ergativity

5 “Deep” Ergativity
Terminology

Martin Haspelmath (1987:9)

Authors of descriptive grammars, in particular, have often created terms ad hoc for their individual languages, without being aware that very similar phenomena exist in other languages too.

- Terms I’ve seen or Haspelmath lists include:
  - inchoative
  - middle
  - reflexive
  - middle passive, mediopassive, pseudopassive, derived intransitive, spontaneous intransitive, passive, notional passive, pseudo-reflexive, quasi-reflexive, illogical reflexive, decausative.

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Original use attributed by Haspelmath to Soviet linguists Nedjalkov & Sil’nickii (1969).
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Anticausative Thoughts

Beyond Terminology

Knowing a Causative

When a transitivity alternation between two sentences involves addition/deletion of an agent/external argument, if the transitive is marked, it is the causative. If the intransitive is marked, it is the anticausative.

\[
(1) \ \sqrt{\text{VERB}} \ , \ V [ \ _\ _\ DP ] \\
\sqrt{\text{VERB}} + \text{Aff}_1 , V [ \ DP [ \ _\ _\ DP ]] \\
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But Reflexives are Often Correlated

Reflexives denote that both the agent and patient are identical – why say the agent at all?
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Marking Argument Relations

- A lot of what follows uses the descriptive terminology of frameworks which take grammatical relations to be primitives of the theory.

- Dimensions of transitivity (ignoring ditransitives for now):
  1. **Transitive**: two arguments
  2. **Intransitive**: one argument.

    - Unaccusative: only argument is generated as “object.”
    - Unergative: only argument is generated as “subject.”

- A different way of splitting grammatical relations:
  - **Subject** of an intransitive clause (== S).
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**Nominaive–Accusative Systems**

**Question**
Are there patterns to the case marking seen on \{S, A, O\}?

(3) English:

a. *She* laughs regularly at parties.
b. *She* has seen *him*.

\{S, A\} → **NOMINATIVE case** O → **ACCUSATIVE case**.

(4) Japanese:

a. *Tanaka ga* takushi wo tomemashita.
   "Tanaka stopped the taxi."

b. *Takushi ga* tomarimashita.
   "The taxi stopped."

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Ergative-Absolutive Systems

(5) Tongan:

a. Na’e taamate’i [‘e Teevita] [‘a Koolaiate].
   PAST kill David] Golaith]
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\{S, O\} \rightarrow \text{absolutive case} \quad A \rightarrow \text{ergative case}

(6) Basque:

a. Haurr-a ethorri da.
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Pictoral Representation

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Split Ergativity

- Not all Ergative languages are ergative all the time.

A morphological system which changes from ergative to accusative or vice versa under controlled circumstances are known as split ergative systems.

(7) Georgian (Kartvelian; Republic of Georgia), Present Tense:

a. შუბენხ-ი მიდის.
   student-nom goes
   “The student goes”

b. შუბენხ-ი ჭერილ-ს ჭერს.
   student-nom letter-acc writes
   “The student writes the letter.”
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       student-nom letter-acc writes
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Split Ergativity

- Not all Ergative languages are ergative all the time.

A morphological system which changes from ergative to accusative or vice versa under controlled circumstances are known as split ergative systems.

(7) Georgian (Kartvelian; Republic of Georgia), Present Tense:

a. Ștudent-ı midis.
    student-nom goes
    “The student goes”

b. Ștudent-ı çeril-s çers.
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- Other Languages w/ split ergativity include:
  - Hindi and other Indo-Aryan languages.
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1. Anti-Causative Thoughts

2. Ergativity: Introduction

3. Tripartite Languages

4. Intransitivés and Ergativity

5. “Deep” Ergativity
• While rare, there are languages that mark all three:

(9) Motu (Austronesian; New Guinea):
   a. Mero na e ginimu.
      boy case he stands
      “The boy is standing.
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      boy case food case he gave-me
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• Often these aren’t manifested for all nouns/verbs — Dyrbal (Pama-nyungan):
  - *wh*-Words: wan³a (S), wan³d³u (A), wan³una (O).
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4 Intransitives and Ergativity

5 “Deep” Ergativity
**Absolutive Intransitives and Ergative Intransitives**

- Most languages with ergativity *require* S to be absolutive:

  (10) Tongan:

  $\text{Tongan:}$

  \[
  \text{Na’e lea ‘a/(*’e) Tolu.}
  \]

  \[
  \text{PAST speak ABS/(*ERG) Tolu}
  \]

  “Tolu speaks.”

- Other languages allow ergative with intransitives:

  (11) Basque:

  a. $\text{Ume-a etorri da.}$

  \[
  \text{kid-ABS arrive AUX}
  \]

  “The kid arrived.”

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Split-S Systems

**Split-S**

A Split-S language has principles governing the choice between more than one case marking option on S.

(12) Basque:
   a. Hik ongi dantzatu duk.  
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- Other determining factors:
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Morphological Ergativity vs. Deep Ergativity

So far...

All our data is from morphology. What is the syntax of ergativity?

• “Syntax treats {S, O} as a natural class...”
  • for application of Passive
  • for wh-extraction
  • for the formation of Relative Clauses
  • if they have an anti-passive (Friday!)

As it turns out...

It is unclear if any truly syntactically ergative languages exist. The original popularizer of the term “ergative” only mentions a handful of possible languages (Dyirbal among them).
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