

The Concept of Ergativity

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Ergativity is a term used in traditional descriptive and typological linguistics to refer to a system of nominal case marking where the subject of an intransitive verb has the same morphological marker as a direct object, and a different morphological marker from the subject of a transitive verb (Comrie 1978:329). In other words, a language can be characterized as an *ergative* language if the *subject* of an intransitive verb and the *object* of a transitive verb are grouped together alike with regard to case morphology i.e. both should occur in an absolutive case. This implies that all subjects are not treated in the same way in an ergative language in terms of case marking and some other grammatical relations. According to the terminology articulated by Dixon, an *ergative* language is one which groups subject of intransitive verbs (**SI**) with the direct object of transitive verbs (**DO**) with regard to a number of syntactic phenomena such as case marking, verb agreement, participialization and conjunct reduction (Butt 1995). In contrast, *accusative* languages do not make such distinction and treat subjects of intransitive and transitive verbs alike. In most of the European languages, there is one distinct nominative case that expresses the subject of the sentence irrespective of \pm transitivity of the verb, and the accusative case helps us to identify the direct object. For example, in Latin we would say:

17. puer venit
boy -3MS-Nom come-3MS -Pres
'The boy comes'.

18. puer puellam amat
boy -3MS- Nom girl-3FS-Acc love-3MS-Pres
'The boy loves the girl'. (Comrie 1973)

Unlike Latin, Basque, an *ergative* language, does not treat the subject of \pm transitive clauses in the same way and thus the expression of subject and direct object is different from that of Latin. Let us see the examples given below:

19. miren etorri da
 Mary-3FS come-3FS be-pst
 ‘Mary came’.
20. yon-ek patxi jo du
 John-3MS-Erg Bill-3MS hit-3MS be-pst
 ‘John hit Bill’.
- (adopted from Comrie 1973)

In (19), the subject ‘miren’ has no overt inflection, while in (20) the subject has an overt inflection ‘-ek’ and again the direct object ‘patxi’ has no such inflection. The examples (19-20) show that the subject of (19) and the direct object of (20) are in the same case form i.e. the absolutive case, while the subject of (20) has a distinct case i.e. an ergative case. This instance exemplifies that in Basque the subject of an intransitive verb and the direct object of a transitive verb stand in the same case, while there is an ergative case ending with the subject of a transitive verb.

Hindi-Urdu has been termed as a *split-ergative* language in the literature (Dixon 1979, Bittner and Hale 1993, Pandharipande and Kachru 1977 and Butt 1995). The term *split-ergative* is associated with Hindi as the occurrence of ergative case is conditioned by transitivity and perfective aspect. In other words, Hindi-Urdu employs *ergative* marker ‘-ne’ with the subject, (except few exceptions), when the main verb of the clause is a transitive one and it is either in perfective aspect or in simple past form. However, there are researchers who claim that Hindi-Urdu does not meet the required conditions for *ergativity* or *split-ergativity* in a ‘deeper’ sense (see Kachru 1987, Kachru and Pandharipande (1978). They have discussed various aspects of grammatical processes such as verb agreement, participialization, conjunction reduction, reflexivization, equi-NP deletion and raising etc. On the basis of their findings, they claim that subject of intransitive (**SI**) is not always grouped with the direct object of the transitive verb (**DO**); rather in some cases, the **SI** behaves more like an **A** (*agent*; i.e. the subject of a transitive verb). The bottom line of their discussion is that for some syntactic processes, the subject status of a given NP is relevant irrespective of the \pm ergativity of it, while for some other syntactic processes, the *case marking* on a given NP becomes the most relevant element

for the analysis.

The discussion in Kachru (1987), Kachru and Pandharipande (1977) is not without flaws, however, the later part of their explanation i.e. *the case marking on a given NP becomes the most relevant element*, seems to be an useful finding. This allows us to argue that when the subject of a transitive verb is marked with an overt ergative case marker, the verb agrees with the direct object which is a bare NP in the clause. Here are the examples of object-verb agreement in Hindi-Urdu:

21. kərim-ne roṭi k^hayi
 Karim-3MS-Erg bread-FS-Acc eat-perf-FS
 ‘Karim ate/had bread’.
22. səmirə-ne b^hat k^haya
 Samira-3FS-Erg rice-MS-Acc eat-perf-MS
 ‘Samira ate/had rice’.
23. sohən-ne kele k^həride
 Sohan-3MS-Erg banana-MPl-Acc buy-perf-MPl
 ‘Sohan bought the bananas’.

The examples (21-23) show that each subject of these clauses bears an overt case marker i.e. ‘-ne’. The ergative marker ‘-ne’ in Hindi-Urdu occurs with the subject of a clause when the main verb is in perfective form or in past simple form and the subject behaves or functions like an *agent*.

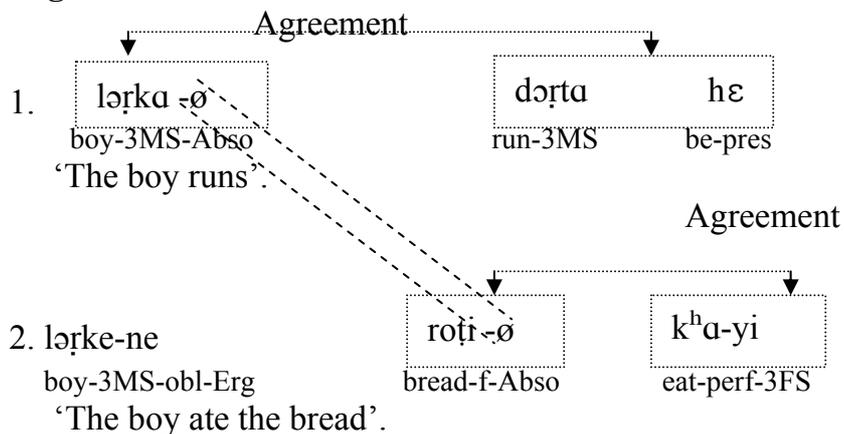
The basic understanding of the ‘agreement phenomenon’ evokes a well-established system of language typology which classifies languages into two broad types, ‘Nominative-accusative’ and ‘Ergative-absolutive’. What characterizes these language types is primarily the way languages case mark the nominals (different nominal arguments) in different kinds of grammatical constructions, which show a correlation with the ‘agreement pattern’ available in languages. Let us briefly highlight the issue of ‘Ergativity’ here. According to the terminology articulated by Dixon, an *ergative* language is one which groups subject of intransitive verbs (**SI**) with the direct object of transitive verbs (**DO**) with regard to a number of syntactic phenomena such as case marking (as both should occur in absolutive i.e. nominative

case as mentioned by Dixon 1994:1) and verb agreement (the verb should agree with either of these nominals). In other words, a language can be characterized as an *ergative* language if the *subject* of an intransitive verb and the *object* of a transitive verb are grouped together alike with regard to case morphology i.e. both should occur in an absolutive (which is also nominative in some ways) case and the agreement morphology i.e. these two nominals in absolutive case should trigger agreement on to the verb. This implies that not all the subjects in an Ergative language are treated in the same way with regard to the case marking and some other grammatical operations.

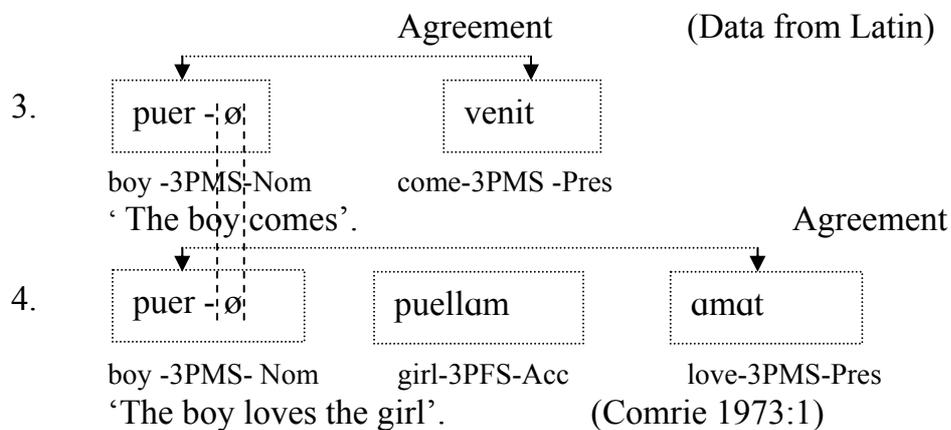
In contrast, languages which are classified as ‘*Nominative-accusative*’ (often termed as *accusative* languages) do not make such distinction between the subjects of intransitive and transitive clauses with regard to the case grammar or verb morphology. In other words, languages pertaining to this type treat subjects of intransitive and transitive verbs alike. In most of the European languages, there is one distinct nominative case that expresses the subject of the sentence irrespective of \pm transitivity of the verb, and the accusative case helps us to identify the direct object.

The diagram given below makes this clearer:

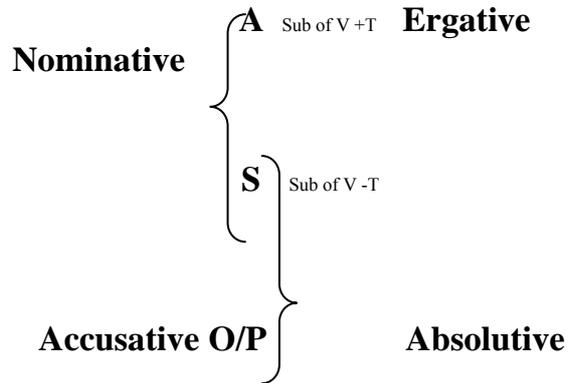
Ergative-Absolutive:



Nominative-Accusative:



Therefore,



The whole sketch looks a bit messy, but this is what we need to do if we want to explain the complexes of these two language types in an explicit way. The examples of Hindi-Urdu in (1-2) is quite clear with the help of the arrows and boxes drawn in the diagram. The verb-morphology of the language demonstrates that the subject of an intransitive and the object of a transitive verb are in absolutive case form (i.e. nominative case) as both of them trigger agreement on the verbs. We can posit a query at this point about whether a deliberate assignment of a case marker will result in attaching an accusative case marker to the object of a transitive clause. How do we justify the nature of ‘absolutive case’ in such instances? A simple answer to the query would be, we do not need to justify the nature of absolutive case in that situation, as the verb does not show agreement with the object of the transitive clause when it is overtly case marked with an accusative case marker. There would be a mismatch in the features required by the definition of ‘ergativity’ and when the definitional requirements are not met, the system does not care to explain the nature of ‘absolutive case’ with the object of the transitive clause as it does not remain ‘absolutive’ any way. It seems that the function of an absolutive case is something what ‘Generativists’ distinguish between ‘structural case’ and ‘morphological case’. The absolutive case of ‘Ergative-absolutive’ patterning seems to be ‘structural’ in nature.

The data in examples (3-4) above present the system of ‘Nominative-accusative’. It has been explained earlier that there is no difference in the case marking of the subject (SI) of an intransitive clause or the Subject (Agentive) of a transitive clause in such type. There is also no difference between the subject of an intransitive clause and that of a transitive with regard to the agreement pattern of the language. One can hypothesize based on this account that there is no object-verb agreement in the languages that pertain to the ‘Nominative-accusative’ type.