Recent developments in (the theory of) ergativity

BLOCK A

Omer Preminger, MIT

EGG 2010, Constanța
Course Basics

- This is a Topics class
  - which, in principle, means you should be coming into this with some background on things like Case and agreement
  - HOWEVER, I would like us all to err on the side of “over-asking”
    - i.e., if you have a question, ask it —
      - I’ll be in charge of “filtering”
        - after all, I know what I have planned for our 5 meetings, and how our pace compares to that

I wouldn’t say that I am an “ergativity expert”:  
- there are some parts of the ergativity landscape (and associated theory) that I know very well
- and other parts that I have only basic knowledge of
  ⇒ it is quite likely that someone in the audience might know more than me—or perhaps even correct me—regarding some issue or another
  ➤ SPEAK UP!

Also:
- Not everything you will be shown here has a satisfactory explanation, yet
  - which is part of what makes ergativity such an exciting area of linguistic investigation

Just for my knowledge —
- Who was at last year’s EGG (2009, Poznań), and took one of the following 2 classes:
  - David Pesetsky’s class on Case
  - my class on agreement
What is ergativity?

- Ergativity is a kind of argument alignment

  (1) “S verbed.”

  (2) “A verbed P.”

  where S stands for the SUBJECT of an intransitive verb; and A and P stand for the AGENT and PATIENT, respectively, of a transitive verb

- the term argument alignment refers to any situation where some linguistic phenomenon treats a subset of \{S, A, P\} the same way
  - the phenomenon in question could be:
    morphology, agreement, word-order, etc.

What is ergativity?

For example:

(3) [s he] arrived.

(4) [A he] met Mary.

(5) Mary met [p him].

- This kind of alignment—grouping together S and A, to the exclusion of P—is known as a nominative/accusative alignment

- But across languages/constructions, we also find another alignment pattern —
  - grouping together S and P, to the exclusion of A
  - which is known as an ergative/absolutive alignment

- Pioneering work on ergative alignment, in generative linguistics:

What is ergativity?

For example:

(6) [A Ehiztari-ak ] [p otso-a ] harrapatu du
    hunter-ARTsg wolf-ARTsg caught AUX(have)
    ‘The hunter has caught a/the wolf.’

(7) [s Otso-a ] etorri da.
    wolf-ARTsg arrived AUX(be)
    ‘The wolf has arrived.’

⇒ the morphology of the Basque article (or “determiner”) treats S and P the same (e.g., -a in the singular), to the exclusion of A (e.g., -ak in the singular)
What is *ergativity*?

**DISCLAIMER:**
- in what follows, there might be a disproportionately large number of Basque examples; this is quite arbitrary
  - of the languages relevant to this course, Basque happens to be the one I am most familiar with, and for which I have the easiest access to data

Some remarks about terminology

- Despite what we’ve said so far: people often say “ergativity” when what they really mean is “ergative alignment in the Case-morphology system”

- Also: people sometimes refer to an entire language as “ergative”, when what they really mean is that the language “has an ergative alignment (somewhere) in its Case-morphology system”
  
  *(And by “people”, I unfortunately mean “people including myself”…)*

  ➤ so keep this in mind when someone says/writes these terms
  - and make sure you (and the person speaking/writing) understand what they really mean

Kinds of ergative alignments

**Ergative alignment in Case systems**

(8) a. *[p yabu ]*[ŋuma-ŋgu ] bura-n
    mother(ABS) father-ERG see-NONFUT
    ‘Father saw mother.’

b. *[s ŋuma ] banaga-n’u
    father(ABS) return-NONFUT
    ‘Father returned.’

[Dixon 1994:10, annotations mine]

- In Dyirbal:
  - *absolutive* (ABS) Case-marking is null
  - *ergative* (ERG) Case-marking is overt (-ŋgu)

  ➤ This state of affairs is quite common
Ergative alignment in Case systems

• Similarly, in nominative-accusative Case-marking systems, it is not uncommon to find the following pattern:
  o nominative (NOM) Case-marking is null
  o accusative (ACC) Case-marking is overt

\[(9)\] a. \[\text{A woman}(\text{NOM}) \text{cat-ACC} \text{eat-CAUS-3sg}\]
   ‘A/the woman feeds the cat.’

b. \[\text{cat}(\text{NOM}) \text{sleep-3sg}\]
   ‘The cat sleeps.’

[\text{Gillian Gallagher, p.c.}]

Ergative alignment in Case systems

• Though these tendencies are not without exceptions:
  o There are languages with ERG/ABS Case alignment in which ABS cannot be construed as unmarked or less marked
    – e.g., NW Caucasian languages, Nias
  
• Similarly:
  o There are languages with NOM/ACC Case alignment in which NOM cannot be construed as unmarked or less marked
    – e.g., Baltic languages, Aymara

• There is (much) more to say about ergative Case alignments
  ➤ but first, let’s talk a little bit about other kinds of ergative alignments

Ergative alignment in agreement systems

• Recall: ergativity is a kind of argument alignment
  o and “argument alignment” can refer to any phenomenon that distinguishes some clausal arguments from others
  
• We’ve been talking about Case-morphology —
  ➤ but another phenomenon that is known to pick out certain clausal arguments but not others is agreement
  o by which I mean agreement in \(\phi\)-features, between a verb or Tense/Aspect/Mood-marker and a nominal argument
Ergative alignment in agreement systems

- In English, for example:

  (10) [\_John\_] arrives (tomorrow).
  (11) a. [\_John\_] eats [\_apples\_].
      b. [\_The guests\_] see [\_John\_].

\[\Rightarrow\] we could say that English has \textit{nominative/(accusative) alignment} in its agreement system

- This might strike you as a trivial or circular statement
  - perhaps you have been told things like:
    - “agreement always targets the subject”,
    - “agreement always targets the nominative noun-phrase”,
    - etc.

\[\Rightarrow\] but as we will see next, things are not so simple…

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Ergative alignment in agreement systems

(12) a. [\_g@m-nan\_] [\_p\_y@t\_] t@-{\_1\_u-\_y@t\_}
    1-ERG you.sg(ABS) 1sg.SUBJ-see-2sg.OBJ
    ‘I saw you.’
  b. [\_g@-nan\_] [\_g@-\_y@m\_] ne-{\_3\_u-\_y@m\_}
    3pl-ERG me(ABS) 3.SUBJ-see-1sg.OBJ
    ‘They saw me.’
  c. [\_g@\_y@m\_] t@-k@t\_g@ntat-G\_Pak\_]
    1sg.SUBJ-run-1sg.SUBJ
    ‘I ran.’

\[\text{[Skorik 1977, via Bobaljik and Branigan 2006]}\]

\[\text{annotations mine}\]

- Chukchi clearly exhibits ERG-ABS alignment in Case-marking
  - grouping together S (in intransitives) and P (in transitives), to the exclusion of A

\[\Rightarrow\] but the verb prefix co-indexes S and A, to the exclusion of P

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⇒ we now see that having a given \textit{argument alignment} in a language’s Case system does not automatically entail the \textit{same argument alignment} in its agreement system

- So, are all combinations of \textit{Case-} and \textit{agreement-alignments}
  (i.e., \{\text{NOM, ERG}\}_\text{Case} \times \{\text{NOM, ERG}\}_\text{agr.}) attested…?
Ergative alignment in agreement systems

(13)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOM agr. alignment</th>
<th>ERG agr. alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOM Case alignment</td>
<td>✓ (e.g., German)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERG Case alignment</td>
<td>✓ (e.g., Chukchi)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“When case-marking and agreement diverge, agreement runs on a nominative-accusative basis.” [Corbett 2006:58]

⇒ going back to English, the fact that it has a NOM/ACC agreement alignment is predictable, in a sense
  o given the typology in (13), and given that English has (remnants of) a NOM/ACC alignment in its Case-morphology
    – namely, in the pronominal system

Other ergative alignments

Greek event nominals:

(14) a. i katastrofi [P tis polis ] [A apo tus varvarus ]…
    the destruction the.GEN city.GEN by the barbarians …
    ‘the destruction of the city by the barbarians …’

b. i sinehis ptosi [S ton timon ]
    the constant fall the.GEN prices.GEN
    ‘the constant fall of prices’

c. to kolimpi [S tu Jani ]/*[S apo to Jani ]
    the swimming the.GEN John.GEN by the John
    ‘John’s swimming’ [Alexiadou 2001:78]

NOTE: For those of you familiar with the behavior of event nominals in a language like, e.g., English—note the different behavior of (14c)
Other ergative alignments

(One kind of) French causatives:

(15) a. Luc a fait lire [p un livre ] [a aux étudiants ]
Luc has made read.INF a book(ACC) DAT.the students
‘Luc made the students read a book.’
b. Luc a fait travailler [s les étudiants ]
Luc has made work.INF the students(ACC)
‘Luc made the students work.’

(16) a. Luc leur/*les a fait lire un livre
Luc 3pl.DAT/*ACC has made read.INF a book(ACC)
‘Luc made the students read a book.’
b. Luc les/*leur a fait travailler
Luc 3pl.ACC/*DAT has made work.INF
‘Luc made the students work.’

[Polinsky 2007]

Other ergative alignments

NOTE:
• the relevant Case-markings in the Greek/French data we’ve just seen have not been labeled “ERG” and “ABS”, of course
• but remember: Case-morphology doesn’t come with labels “in the wild”
  ◦ labels are a matter of theory
  ➤ we could have called these ERG and ABS, if we wanted to
    ◦ the empirically significant part is once again the argument alignment

Other ergative alignments

Here’s the part that’s important to consider, with respect to this Greek/French data:
• In “core” clauses—i.e., mono-clausal, finite environments—
  ◦ Greek and French both have an unambiguously NOM/ACC agreement alignment
  ◦ Greek has an unambiguously NOM/ACC Case alignment, as well
    – and, to the extent that clitics provide a window into the Case-marking of all French DPs, so does French

Other ergative alignments

• and yet we’ve just seen sub-parts of Greek and French which manifest bona-fide
  ERG/ABS Case-marking alignment
  ➤ This reinforces what we said earlier:
    Ergativity is not generally a property of languages, but of constructions/configurations.

Which leads us to our next topic…
Split ergativity

Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

Dyaabugay:  
(Hale 1976, Patz 1991)

(17) a. yaburu-nggu warruwarru mangarril  
girl-SUF boy laugh  
‘The girl ridicules the boy.’  
b. yaburu warruwarru-nggu mangarril  
girl boy-SUF laugh  
‘The boy ridicules the girl.’

(18) a. nyurra nganydji-ny mangarril  
2sg 1pl-SUF laugh  
‘You(sg.) ridicule us.’  
b. nganydji nyurra-ny mangarril  
1pl 2sg-SUF laugh  
‘We ridicule you(sg.).’

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Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

⇒ So far, we could say of Case alignment in Dyaabugay —
   o for nominals: ERG/ABS
   o for pronouns: NOM/ACC

(19) a. nyurra warruwarru mangarril  
2sg boy laugh  
‘You(sg.) ridicule the boy.’  
*‘The boy ridicules you(sg.).’  
b. nganydji yaburu mangarril  
1pl girl laugh  
‘We ridicule the girl.’  
*‘The girl ridicules us.’

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Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

(20) a. * warruwarru-nggu nyurra(-ny) mangarril  
boy-SUF 2sg-SUF laugh  
b. * yaburu-nggu nganydji(-ny) mangarril  
girl-SUF 1pl-SUF laugh  

(21) a. warruwarru nyurra-nda manggang  
boy 2sg-NDA laugh.AP  
‘The boy ridicules you(sg.).’  
b. yaburu nganydji-nda manggang  
girl 1pl-NDA laugh.AP  
‘The girl ridicules us.’

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Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

- “AP” = antipassive
  - similar to passive in NOM/ACC alignments
  - while passive demotes the A argument, antipassive demotes the P argument
    - where “demotes” means forces it to appear as a PP
      (More on the antipassive, later on)

(22) DYAABUGAY CASE ALIGNMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P is a nominal</th>
<th>P is a pronoun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A is a nominal</td>
<td>ERG/ABS</td>
<td>X (must use AP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A is a pronoun</td>
<td>“neutral”</td>
<td>NOM/ACC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(23) GENERALIZED ANIMACY HIERARCHY

1/2 ⇒ 3sg ⇒ 3pl ⇒ proper names ⇒ human-denoting nouns ⇒ animates ⇒ natural forces ⇒ inanimates

• Person Split refers to the situation where:
  - a language exhibits ERG/ABS alignment for one side of the Silverstein hierarchy
  - and NOM/ACC for the other

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Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

- the point in the hierarchy (and perhaps, the features relevant to the hierarchy) vary, cross-linguistically
  - what doesn’t seem to vary is the “directionality”:
    - no languages has been documented which exhibits a NOM/ACC alignment for, e.g.,
      inanimate nominals, but an ERG/ABS alignment for pronouns

(23) GENERALIZED ANIMACY HIERARCHY

1/2 ⇒ 3sg ⇒ 3pl ⇒ proper names ⇒ human-denoting nouns ⇒ animates ⇒ natural forces ⇒ inanimates

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Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

- Recall the “neutral” configuration:
  - where there are two arguments, one on either side of the split
    - e.g., a nominal and a pronoun, in Dyaabugay
    - as in (19a–b), repeated below:

(19) a. nyurra warruwarru mangarril
  2sg  boy     laugh
  ‘You(sg.) ridicule the boy.’
  *‘The boy ridicules you(sg.).’

b. nganydji yaburu mangarril
  1pl  girl    laugh
  ‘We ridicule the girl.’
  *‘The girl ridicules us.’

Person Splits, and the Silverstein Hierarchy

- This configuration has an unambiguous reading:
  - the “higher” of the two (i.e., closer to the NOM/ACC side of the hierarchy) is interpreted as the A argument
  - the “lower” of the two (i.e., closer to the ERG/ABS side of the hierarchy) is interpreted as the P argument

➤ This, it has been argued, sheds light on the true nature of the GENERALIZED ANIMACY HIERARCHY:
  - the higher on the hierarchy (i.e., closer to the NOM/ACC side), the better-suited the element is as a “prototypical AGENT”
    - the most prototypical: 1st-person pronouns
  - the lower on the hierarchy (i.e., closer to the ERG/ABS side), the better-suited the element is as a “prototypical PATIENT”
    - the most prototypical: inanimate nominals

T/M/A Splits

(24) a. PERFECTIVE
    [A Raam-ne ] [p roTii ] khaayhii thii
    Raam.M-ERG   bread.F  eat.PRFF.V.FEM was.FEM
    ‘Raam had eaten bread.’

b. IMPERFECTIVE
    [A Raam ] [p roTii ] khaataa thaa
    Raam.M  bread  eat.IMPF.MASC was.MASC
    ‘Raam (habitually) ate bread.’ [Mahajan 1990:72–73]

(Note: ABS/NOM/ACC are unmarked in Hindi)
T/M/A Splits

- Just like with person splits, there is a typological universal with respect to Tense/Mood/Aspect (T/M/A) splits:
  - ERG/ABS is always on the past/perfective/indicative side,
    NOM/ACC is always on the non-past/imperfective/irrealis side
    - though the point of the split varies —
      - sometimes imperfective is grouped with progressive (Chol)
      - sometimes imperfective is grouped with perfective (Basque)

(25) \[ \text{erg} / \text{abs} \iff \text{nom} / \text{acc} \iff \text{perfective} \gg \text{imperfective} \gg \text{progressive} \]

[Coon 2010, following Dixon 1994]

➤ We will devote a class to the Laka (2006)/Coon (2010) theory of T/M/A splits

Mahajan’s Generalization

Ergativity and word-order


(26) All ergative languages [languages with ergative Case-alignment in (at least some of) their “core” clauses; O.P.] are verb-peripheral, or have free word order

- “verb-peripheral”: ✔VSO, ✔VOS, ✔OVS, but not ✔SVO, etc.

- as noted by Mahajan himself, (26) as stated is not completely correct
  - e.g., Kashmiri, which has a split-ergative Case-marking system similar to the one we saw for Hindi, is a V2 language

Ergativity and word-order

- If we assume, however, that Kashmiri V2—like many other instances of V2—comes about by A-bar movement of an XP to some left-peripheral position:
  - it still might be that the highest A-positions of S(subject) and O(bject) are still both on one side of the base-position of V(erb) (i.e., V0)
  - cf. German, for example — where we can discern verb-finality, despite the existence of V2
    - note, of course, that German does not generally have ergative Case-alignment —
    - showing us that (26) is by no means a bi-conditional
Ergativity and word-order

Note, however, that Mahajan’s generalization seems quite robust, in at least one direction:
- in those languages that have a fixed or highly preferred order among \{S, V, O\}, it is very rare to find an ergative language that is not verb-peripheral
- and—not unrelatedly—ergative languages are more rare among verb-medial languages than they are among any other fixed-word-order group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(27)</th>
<th>V-initial</th>
<th>V-medial</th>
<th>V-final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>total # of L’s</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ergativity found in</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[WALS + Polinsky 2009]

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Ergativity and Syntax

Is ergativity “skin-deep”?

Claim: At least in some cases, ergativity is a “superficial” phenomenon, restricted to the language’s morphological system; the syntax, on the other hand, behaves just like it would in a NOM/ACC language

- For example — Condition A:

(28) a. šuru uć̄ o uurē o nu
daughter.ERG self.ABS beat
‘The daughter beat herself up.’

b. uć̄ o šuru uurē o nu
self.ABS daughter.ERG beat
‘The daughter beat herself up.’

(29) a. * čav riš uurē o nu
self.ERG daughter.ABS beat

b. * riš čav uurē o nu
daughter.ABS self.ERG beat

[Polinsky 2007]
Is ergativity “skin-deep”?

- Condition C:

  (30) a. Na'e tafitafi'i pē 'e Mele, (a) ia,
    PAST groom REFLV ERG Mary ABS 3sg
    'Mary groomed herself.'
  b. Na'e tafitafi'i pē (a) ia, 'e Mele,  
PAST groom REFLV ABS 3sg ERG Mary
    'Mary groomed herself.'

  (31) a. * Na'e tafitafi'i pē 'e ia,
    PAST groom REFLV ERG 3sg ABS Mary
  b. * Na'e tafitafi'i pē (a) Mele, e ia,
    PAST groom REFLV ABS Mary ERG 3sg

[Polinsky 2007]

Is ergativity “skin-deep”?

- Control:

  (32) miiqqat-up Juuna iku-p-a-a
    children-ERG Juuna.ABS help-INDIC-TRANS-3sg
    'The children helped Juuna.'

  (33) miiqqat, [EC Juuna iku-ssa-llu-gu ] niriursipput
    children.ABS Juuna.ABS help-FUT-INF-3sg promised
    'The children promised to help Juuna.'

  (EC = empty category)

[Polinsky 2007]

Is ergativity “skin-deep”?

- Passive:

  (34) Piita-up Maali kunik-paa
    Piita-ERG Maali(ABS) kiss-IND.3sg.3sg
    'Piita kisses Maali.'

  (35) Maali Piita-mit kunik-ta-u-vuq
    Maali(ABS) Piita-ABL kiss-PASV-AUX-IND.3sg
    'Maali was kissed by Piita.'

[Boëtius Bennema 1991:29,48]

Also:

- pro-drop:
  targets the ABS in intransitive clauses, and the ERG in transitive ones (Chukchi, Tsez)
Is ergativity “skin-deep”?

⇒ it looks like the ERG DP asymmetrically c-commands the ABS DP
  o which is exactly what we would expect, if ergativity was restricted to the morphological component, and did not alter the syntax

But . . .

The Antipassive

(36) a. ʔaaček-ə kimitʔ-ən ne-ŋɘtët-ən
   youth-ERG load-ABS 3pl.SUBJ-carry-AOR.3sg.OBJ
   ‘The young men carried away the/a load.’

b. ʔaaček-ət iŋe-ŋɘtët-gɘ-t kimitʔ-e
   youth-ABS AP carry-AOR.3SUBJ-pl load-INST
   ~ ‘The young men carried away the/a load.’

• As mentioned earlier, the antipassive (AP) is an argument demotion construction
• in the passive, the A is demoted, having to appear as an oblique/adpositional phrase, if at all
  ➤ in the antipassive, it is the P that is similarly demoted
    o hence the oblique (in this case, instrumental) status of the P in (36b)

NOTE: Under antipassivization, what was previously the ERG argument (ʔaaček ‘youth’) surfaces as ABS

The Antipassive

• If the antipassive is a property of languages that have an ERG/ABS alignment, then it certainly looks like a non-“superficial” consequence of ergativity
  ➤ However, while the antipassive is more common among languages that exhibit ERG/ABS alignment, it is also found in some languages that do not
    o e.g., Kiowa

Syntactic ergativity

➤ In some languages, A-bar operations cannot target the ERG DP, only the ABS one

(37) a. əŋpənaçiler-ən wiri-gʔi
   old.man-ABS descend-AOR.3sg
   ‘The old man came down.’

b. [ ECi wiri-lʔ]-ən əŋpənačə-ŋən
   descend-PART-ABS old.man-ABS
   ‘the old man that came down’

[Polinsky 2007]
Syntactic ergativity

(38) a. anponačq-e kimit?-on näl?eteta-nen
   old.man-ERG load-ABS carry-AOR.3sg,3sg
   ‘The old man carried away the load.’

b. [ (anponačq-e) EC₁ näl?eteta-l?]⁻on kimit?-on
   old.man-ERG carry-PART-ABS load-ABS
   ‘the load that the old man/someone carried’

c. * [ EC₁ kimit?-on näl?eteta-l?]⁻on anponačq-an
   load-ABS carry-PART-ABS old.man-ABS
   Intended: ‘the old man that carried the load’

[Polinsky 2007]

**QUESTION:** What does a Chukchi speaker who wants to express something like (38c) do...?

Syntactic ergativity

➤ Antipassive!

(39) a. anponačq-on ine-näl?eteta-g?e kimit?-e
   old.man-ABS AP-carry-AOR.3sg load-INSTR
   ‘The old man carried away the load.’

b. [ EC₁ kimit?-e ine-näl?eteta-l?]⁻on anponačq-an
   load-INSTR AP-carry-PART-ABS old.man-ABS
   ‘the old man that carried the load.’

[Polinsky 2007]

• Similar pattern found with *topicalization* (also A-bar, of course)

Syntactic ergativity

• Other things that look like syntactic ergativity:
  
  o Dyirbal:
    - coreference under coordination
    - control: ABS can only control ABS
  
  o Austronesian, Mayan:
    - control: only intransitive ABS can be controlled
      *(transitive ABS, transitive ERG)*

It is not entirely clear that there is robust evidence for syntactic ergativity beyond A-bar movement

• in particular, the coordination/control data might be amenable to a range of alternative explanations (center-embedded participial clauses, ergative=passive + antipassive=active, etc.)
References


Polinsky, Maria. 2009. Ergativity Revisited. Talk given at the University of Chicago Linguistics Colloquium.


This is svn-revision 1553.

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