

Ergativity / accusativity revisited

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1. Introduction

Historically, two different kinds of observations on language structure have contributed to the emergence of the notion of ergativity / accusativity:

- In some Eurasian languages such as Basque or Avar, the asymmetry in the case marking of the two core terms A and P of the transitive construction is the opposite of that observed in languages more familiar to traditional grammarians, with A in a case form different from the quotation form of nouns – ex. (1), whereas in the transitive constructions of all European languages with the sole exception of Basque, the core term in a case form different from the quotation form of nouns is P – ex. (2).
- In Amerindian languages having perfectly symmetric transitive constructions with no case contrast between A and P and obligatory indexation of both A and P, S may be indexed by means of the same set of person markers as A, or by means of the same set of person markers as P (Sapir 1916). Ex (3) & (4) illustrate these two possibilities.

(1) Avar

a. *was* (M) ‘boy’, *ebel* (F) ‘mother’ (quotation forms)

b. *wasas̄ ebel j-it’-ana.*

boy.ERG mother F-send-PF

‘The boy sent his mother.’

c. *ebelal̄ was w-it’-ana.*

mother.ERG boy M-send-PF

‘The mother sent the boy.’

(2) Russian

a. *muž* (M) ‘husband’, *žena* (F) ‘wife’ (quotation forms)

b. *Muž poslal-Ø ženu.*

husband send.PST-M wife.ACC

‘The husband sent his wife.’

c. *Žena poslal-a muža.*

wife send.PST-F husband.ACC

‘The wife sent her husband.’

(3) Nahuatl (Launey 1981)

- a. \emptyset -*C-āna* *in* *cihuātl* *in* *tetl*.
 A3SG-P3SG-catch DEF woman DEF stone
 ‘The woman is catching the stone.’
- b. *Ni-c-āna*.
 A1SG-P3SG-catch
 ‘I am catching him/her/it’
- c. \emptyset -*Nēch-āna*.
 A3SG-P1SG-catch
 ‘(S)he is catching me’
- d. *Ni-cochi*.
 1SG-sleep
 ‘I am sleeping’
- e. \emptyset -*Cochi*.
 3SG-sleep
 ‘(S)he is sleeping’

(4) K’ichee’ (López Ixcoy 1997)

- a. *X- \emptyset -qa-chap* *ri* *ak’aal*.
 PF-P3SG-A1PL-catch DEF child
 ‘We caught the child.’
- b. *X-**oj**-u-chap* *ri* *ak’aal*.
 PF-P1PL-A3SG-catch DEF child
 ‘The child caught us.’
- c. *X- \emptyset -tzaaq* *ri* *ak’aal*.
 PF-3SG-fall DEF child
 ‘The child fell down.’
- d. *X-**oj**-tzaaqik*.
 PF-1PL-fall
 ‘We fell down.’

In languages having asymmetric transitive constructions of the type illustrated above by Avar, the coding characteristics of S and P tend to be identical, whereas languages having asymmetric transitive constructions of the type illustrated above by Russian tend to encode S in the same way as A – ex. (5) & (6).

(5) S aligned with P in Avar

- a. *wasas̄* *ebel* *j-it’-ana*.
 boy.ERG mother F-send-PF
 ‘The boy sent his mother.’
- b. *ebel* *j-ač’-ana*.
 mother F-come-PF
 ‘The mother came.’

(6) S aligned with A in Russian

- a. *Muž* *poslal- \emptyset* *ženu*.
 husband send.PST-M wife.ACC
 ‘The husband sent his wife.’

- b. *Muž prišel-Ø.*
 husband come.PST-M
 ‘The husband came.’

However, this correlation is very far from perfect. Recent works on ergativity / accusativity operate with a definition that refers exclusively to the possible relationships between the characteristics of the core terms of transitive and intransitive constructions (see among others Dixon 1994). The main motivation of this choice is probably that a definition of ergativity / accusativity in terms of alignment is at first sight less problematic, since it does not imply previous considerations on the significance of the coding properties of A and P, and more general, since it can be applied to languages that have no asymmetry in the coding properties of A and P. However, the notion of alignment turns out to be a typical example of a notion quite straightforward from a strictly logical point of view, but very difficult to use consistently in linguistic typology, due to the complexity and heterogeneity of the linguistic phenomena involving variations in alignment.

2. Some shortcomings of the current approach to ergativity / accusativity

In this section, I briefly comment some contradictions to which the current approach to ergativity / accusativity has led, before putting forward an alternative approach in the following sections.

2.1. Marked-nominative languages

In marked-nominative languages, nouns have the same form in A and S roles, but this form is different from the quotation form of nouns, whereas the quotation form of nouns coincides with the form of nouns in P role, as illustrated by ex. (7).

(7) Oromo (Griefenow-Mewis & Bitima 1994)

- a. *Tulluu* (proper name), *makiinaa* ‘car’ (quotation forms)

- b. *Tulluu-n makiinaa bite.*
 Tulluu-SBJ car buy.PF.3SG.M
 ‘Tulluu bought a car’

- c. *Tulluu-n gammada.*
 Tulluu-SBJ be glad.PRS.3SG.M
 ‘Tulluu is glad’

Typologists are clearly reluctant to consider marked-nominative languages as ‘normal’ accusative languages. However, in terms of alignment, there is no difference between such languages and ordinary accusative languages. Definitions based exclusively on alignment cannot capture the specificity of marked-nominative languages, since this specificity lies in the uncommon combination of a given type of asymmetry in the transitive construction and a given type of alignment.

2.2. ‘Hierarchical alignment’ and other terminological inconsistencies

In the definition of ‘ergative alignment’ and ‘accusative alignment’, ‘alignment’ refers to possible similarities between the behavior of S and that of A or P, and from a strictly logical point of view, this definition of alignment leaves just two possibilities: either $S = A \neq P$, or $S = P \neq A$. Consequently, the proliferation of terms including ‘alignment’ as one of their components cannot be justified on the basis of this definition, and implies an indiscriminate use of ‘alignment’ with meanings that at best have only an indirect connection with it, which can only obscure the comprehension of the phenomena to which such terms are applied.

For example, ‘hierarchical alignment’ (Nichols 1992) refers to a *type of coding of transitive clauses* in which the coding characteristics of A and P are determined by their *relative* ranking with respect to some hierarchy, and could be designated more adequately as ‘relative hierarchical type of transitive coding’ (Mallison & Blake 1981 speak of a ‘relative hierarchical marking’). Moreover, from a strictly logical point of view, the very notion of alignment in the sense of similarities between the properties of S and those of A or P is problematic in languages with transitive constructions of the relative hierarchical type, because relative hierarchical coding presupposes the presence of two core arguments, and one may therefore argue that the coding of the single core argument of intransitive clauses in such languages cannot strictly speaking put into play the same rules as the coding of either A or P in a transitive construction of the relative hierarchical type.

Similarly, ‘tripartite alignment’ is not a type of alignment, but rather the absence of alignment resulting from a tripartite pattern of core term coding, and ‘active (or semantic) alignment’ is not a type of alignment, but rather a type of alignment variation resulting from the existence of two classes of intransitive verbs differing in the coding properties of S.

2.3. Pragmatically-driven fluid-intransitivity

It is commonly assumed that ergativity is typologically marked. Transitive constructions in which A shows coding properties of the type commonly found with obliques (i.e., the kind of transitive construction expected in an ‘ergative’ language) are unquestionably much less common than transitive constructions in which A shows coding properties cross-linguistically typical of core syntactic terms. But on the basis of a definition referring exclusively to alignment, it is impossible to maintain that approximately 70 % of the world’s languages are devoid of ergative features (Dixon 1994), because full consistency in intransitive alignment is not a very common situation, and the vast majority of the world’s languages have *some or other form* of split or fluid intransitivity. This is not surprising, since split intransitivity and fluid intransitivity may have a variety of functional motivations and/or historical sources, and in particular may develop as the mechanical consequence of unrelated types of historical changes (Creissels 2008a). But in practice, the adoption of a definition of ergativity / accusativity including no reference to the intrinsic characteristics of the transitive construction has led typologists to minimize the importance of split intransitivity and fluid intransitivity in languages having transitive constructions of the type expected in ‘accusative’ languages, in order to maintain the claim that ergativity concerns a minority of the world’s languages, whereas they never forget to identify the slightest manifestations of accusative alignment in ‘ergative’ languages.

For example, French intransitive verbs have an impersonal construction, illustrated by ex. (8b), in which the S argument appears in postverbal position (i.e., in the position canonically occupied by P in the transitive construction), does not govern verb agreement, and more generally shows no evidence of having any of the properties that, in the transitive construction, distinguish A from P.

(8) French

a. *Une femme viendra*
 INDEF.SG.F woman.SG come.FUT.3SG
 ‘A woman will come’

b. *Il viendra une femme*
 3SG.M come.FUT.3SG INDEF.SG.F woman.SG
 lit. ‘It will come a woman’, same denotative meaning as (a), but with a different perspective (something like ‘There will be a woman coming’)

In this construction, the postverbal NP representing the core argument of an intransitive verb patterns with P with respect to a range of properties that are not shared by A, and there is to my knowledge no convincing evidence against the analysis according to which the postverbal NP fulfills the same *syntactic* role as the postverbal patient NP in the prototypical transitive construction, but the *discourse* value of the construction blocks the manifestation of object properties implying a topical status of the object (for a more detailed discussion, see Creissels 2008b).

The theory according to which the postverbal NP in the French impersonal construction of intransitive verbs fulfills the *syntactic* role of object, in spite of being assigned the same *semantic* role as the subject of the same verb in a canonical predicative construction, is not new. It was explicitly advocated by Brunot (1926), and it has been re-discovered recently by formal syntacticians. For example, Cummins (2000) concludes her analysis of this construction by stating that French has “two basic types of intransitive clauses: subject-verb and verb-object”. Although she does not state it explicitly, this implies recognizing the impersonal construction of French intransitive verbs as an instance of ergative alignment.

The functional motivation of this alternative construction of French intransitive verbs can be analyzed as follows: in the transitive construction, A is typically more topical than P, and new referents are typically introduced in P position; consequently, in a language in which accusative alignment predominates, it is natural to de-topicalize S by means of a construction in which S is aligned with P (Lambrecht 2000).¹ In other words, French is a *fluid-S* language, but with a pragmatic rather than semantic conditioning of fluid intransitivity. Pragmatically-

¹ “S[entence] F[ocus] marking involves cancellation of those prosodic and/or morphosyntactic subject properties which are associated with the role of subjects as topic expressions in P[redicate] F[ocus] sentences ... One natural way of achieving non-topic construal (though not the only logically possible one) is to endow the subject constituent with grammatical properties which are conventionally associated with FOCUS arguments. Since in a P[redicate] F[ocus] construction the unmarked focus argument is the OBJECT, topic construal can be cancelled by coding the subject with grammatical features normally found on the object of a P[redicate] F[ocus] sentence.” (Lambrecht 2000:624-5)

driven fluid intransitivity is not rare (it is found among others in many Bantu languages). Formal syntacticians and linguists working on information structure have devoted a number of studies to it, but typological accounts of ergativity / accusativity do not even mention its existence, although nothing in the definitions put forward in the typological literature justifies this rejection.²

2.4. Conclusion of section 2

DeLancey 1981 advocated a notion of ergative construction defined on the basis of the coding properties of the agent NP only, arguing that the intrinsic characteristics of the transitive construction may be more relevant to some questions than the alignment between transitive and intransitive constructions.³ The interest of this suggestion has not been acknowledged so far, but the growing interest in the relative-hierarchical type of transitive coding, marked-nominative languages, various types of split or fluid intransitivity, etc. should perhaps lead to accept that, in order to achieve a satisfactory typological account of the phenomena commonly considered as involving ergativity / accusativity, transitive coding should not be treated as an epiphenomenon which is not worth being mentioned in the basic definitions. Transitive coding and intransitive alignment are two logically independent but typologically related domains, and my proposal is that ergativity / accusativity should be explicitly re-defined in terms of correlations between types of transitive coding and types of intransitive alignment.

3. A sketch of transitive coding typology

3.1. Hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical encoding of A and P

In a typology of the encoding of the core terms of the transitive construction, the higher distinction is between hierarchical and non-hierarchical encoding of A and P.

The question of the possible subtypes of hierarchical coding is not developed here.

3.2. Symmetric vs. asymmetric encoding of A and P

Transitive constructions characterized by a non-hierarchical encoding of A and P (i.e., transitive constructions in which the coding characteristics of A and P do not depend on their relative ranking according to indexability hierarchy) may show more or less symmetry in the characteristics of A and P with respect to coding properties that, cross-linguistically, tend to correlate with the contrast between core syntactic terms and obliques: core syntactic terms are often indexed on the verb, whereas the indexation of obliques on the verb is cross-linguistically uncommon, and the use of nouns in a form identical to their quotation form,

² Maslova (2006) identifies this type of fluid intransitivity in Tundra Yukaghir, but her comments and references show that she was not aware that she was dealing with a particular case of a phenomenon widely attested in much less exotic languages.

³ “For our purposes, and perhaps in general, a definition of ‘ergative construction’ based solely on transitive agent-marking is more useful than the standard definition in terms of identity of marking for patient and for intransitive subject.” (DeLancey 1981:628)

without the addition of any adposition, is cross-linguistically more common in core syntactic roles than in oblique roles.⁴

In order to avoid the confusions that may result from the use of the same labels for types of transitive constructions and alignment types, I propose to characterize asymmetric transitive constructions as *A-centered* or *P-centered*: in *A-centered* transitive constructions, A shows more coding characteristics typical of core arguments than P, whereas in *P-centered* transitive constructions, P shows more coding characteristics typical of core arguments than A.

3.3. Symmetric transitive constructions

In symmetric transitive constructions, A and P do not differ in the degree to which they show properties that, cross-linguistically, tend to distinguish core arguments from obliques, with four logical possibilities:

- (consistent head-marking type) both A and P occur in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns, both are indexed (K’ichee’, Abkhaz, Nahuatl, Lakota);
- (consistent dependent-marking type) both A and P occur in forms different from the quotation form of nouns (or combined with an adposition), none of them is indexed (Japanese, Tongan);⁵
- both A and P occur in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns, none of them is indexed (Bambara, Chinese);
- both A and P occur in forms different from the quotation form of nouns (or combined with an adposition), both are indexed (“innovative” Basque).⁶

3.4. Fully asymmetric transitive constructions

In asymmetric transitive constructions, A and P differ in the degree to which they show properties typical for core arguments (use of a form identical to the quotation form of nouns and indexation). In fully asymmetric transitive constructions, the asymmetry is manifested both in case marking and indexation, with two logical possibilities:

- (consistent A-centered type) A occurs in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns and is indexed, P is in a syntactically marked case form (or accompanied by an adposition) and is not indexed (Latin, Turkish);

⁴ A presentation less sketchy than what is allowed by the time limits imparted to this talk should develop the distinction between unconditioned and conditioned (or “differential”) marking of core arguments, as well as between unconditioned and conditioned indexation. In this paper, I only have excluded from indexation bound forms referring to arguments that have a strictly pronominal behavior in the sense that, in their presence, co-referent NPs are possible in dislocated position only.

⁵ Like other types involving the use of forms different from the quotation form of nouns for both A and P, this type seems to imply a conditioned (or ‘differential’) marking pattern for at least one of the two core arguments of the transitive construction.

⁶ In “traditional” Basque, P invariably occurs in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns, but (probably under the influence of Spanish), the speech of young speakers shows a tendency to develop a differential marking of P leading to a transitive construction in which A is in the ergative case (as in “traditional” Basque) and P in the dative case, at least in certain conditions. Since Basque obligatorily indexes not only absolutive and ergative, but also dative NPs, this leads to a (rare) type of transitive construction combining obligatory indexation of both A and P with the use of syntactically marked case forms both for A and P.

- (consistent P-centered type) P occurs in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns and is indexed, A is in a syntactically marked case form (or accompanied by an adposition) and is not indexed (Avar).

3.5. Partially asymmetric transitive constructions

In partially asymmetric transitive construction, the asymmetry is manifested in one coding property only, with eight logical possibilities:⁷

3.4.1. Partially A-centered transitive constructions

- both A and P occur in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns, A only is indexed (Italian, Wolof, Hausa);
- both A and P occur in forms different from the quotation form of nouns (or combined with adpositions), A only is indexed (?);
- both A and P are indexed, P only occurs in a form different from the quotation form of nouns (or combined with an adposition) (Georgian, depending on the tense of the verb);⁸
- neither A nor P is indexed, P only occurs in a form different from the quotation form of nouns (or combined with an adposition) (Mongolian).

3.4.2. Partially P-centered transitive constructions

- both A and P occur in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns, P only is indexed (?);
- both A and P occur in forms different from the quotation form of nouns or combine with adpositions, P only is indexed (?);
- both A and P are indexed, A only occurs in a form different from the quotation form of nouns or combines with an adposition (Basque);
- neither A nor P is indexed, A only occurs in a form different from the quotation form of nouns or combines with an adposition (Lezgi, Dyrbal);

3.5. Conflicting asymmetries

It may also happen that, from the point of view of the distinction between coding properties typical of core arguments and coding properties typical of obliques, the case marking properties of A and P contradict their indexation properties. Logically speaking, there are two possibilities:

- A occurs in a form different from the quotation form of nouns but is indexed, whereas P occurs in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns but is not indexed (Oromo);

⁷ In this enumeration, question marks signal logical possibilities for which I have no illustration to propose. It may be interesting to observe that the logical possibilities for which I had difficulties in finding illustrations involve, either the indexation of P only, or the use of syntactically marked case forms (or the addition of an adposition) for both A and P.

⁸ In Georgian, verb tenses divide into three groups triggering different coding patterns for A and P.

- A occurs in a form identical to the quotation form of nouns but is not indexed, whereas P occurs in a form different from the quotation form of nouns but is indexed (?).

3.6. Conditioned asymmetries

In current accounts of ergativity / accusativity, conditioned asymmetries in transitive coding are dealt with under the heading of *split ergativity*. TAM-driven asymmetry with an A-centered transitive construction in the present/imperfective, and a P-centered transitive construction in the past/perfective, is particularly common.

4. Some remarks on intransitive alignment typology

4.1. A terminological point

The proposal according to which ergativity / accusativity is a complex notion the definition of which should take into account the possible correlations between transitive coding typology and intransitive alignment typology is incompatible with the current terminology that (at least in principle) treats *ergative* and *accusative* as labels attached to types of intransitive alignment. Consequently, I propose to use the transparent and non-committal labels of *P-alignment* and *A-alignment* for the types of intransitive alignment currently labeled ‘ergative’ ($S = P \neq A$) and ‘accusative’ ($S = A \neq P$).

4.2. The typological relevance of intransitive alignment

As already mentioned, the main problem with the approach according to which ergativity / accusativity boils down to the distinction between P-alignment and A-alignment is that, if consistently developed, it leads to grouping together a heterogeneous set of phenomena, quite obviously diverse from the point of view of both their historical origin and possible functional motivations. Consequently, no significant typological generalization can be expected to emerge from such a grouping.

In some areas of morphosyntax (for example: imperative clauses, reflexivization), A-alignment tends to appear even in languages in which the predominance of P-alignment is at first sight striking, and conversely, in some other areas (for example: nominalizations, presentational sentences), P-alignment tends to appear even in languages in which the predominance of A-alignment is at first sight striking. Consequently, in any investigation of typological correlations involving intransitive alignment, it is important to put aside manifestations of A- or P-alignment that frequently occur in languages in which the opposed type of intransitive alignment is clearly predominant. Such manifestations of A- or P-alignment are interesting for their functional motivations, but from a typological point of view, putting them on a par with other manifestations of A- or P-alignment can only be an obstacle to the recognition of correlations.

5. Correlations between asymmetries in transitive coding and intransitive alignment

As mentioned in the introduction, it has long been observed that the type of asymmetry in transitive coding found for example in Latin or Russian tends to correlate with A-alignment,

whereas the type of asymmetry in transitive coding found for example in Avar tends to correlate with P-alignment, and this correlation seems to constitute the basis of the notion of accusativity / ergativity that most linguists have in mind, in spite of the commonly accepted definition that makes no reference to asymmetries in the transitive construction. My proposal is to explicitly re-formulate the definition of prototypical accusativity and prototypical ergativity as follows:

- a prototypical accusative language is a language with A-centered transitive constructions, and in which P-alignment is limited to areas of morphosyntax in which P-alignment is typologically unmarked;
- a prototypical ergative language is a language with P-centered transitive constructions, and in which A-alignment is limited to areas of morphosyntax in which A-alignment is typologically unmarked.

An interesting consequence of explicitly including asymmetries in transitive coding in the definition of accusativity-ergativity is that this permits a better account of the so-called ‘active’ or ‘semantic’ type of alignment variation (Van Valin 1990, Mithun 1991, Donohue & Wichmann (eds.) 2008), i.e., a type of split intransitivity in which the choice between A- and P-alignment correlates with the degree of agentivity implied by the semantic role assigned to S in intransitive predications – ex. (9).

(9) Galela (Holton 2008)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>a. <i>No-wi-doto</i>
A2SG-P3SG.M-teach
‘You are teaching him’</p> | <p>b. <i>Wo-ni-doto</i>
A3SG.M-P2SG-teach
‘He is teaching you’</p> |
| <p>c. <i>No-tagi</i>
2SG-go
‘You are going’</p> | <p>d. <i>Ni-kiolo</i>
2SG-go
‘You are sleeping’</p> |

Unsurprisingly, languages with symmetric transitive constructions do not show a clear preference for a given type of alignment. Among languages with symmetric transitive constructions, there are both languages with a clear predominance of A-alignment (Nahuatl, Japanese) and languages with a clear predominance of P-alignment (K’ichee’, Tongan, Abkhaz), and it is also mainly (if not exclusively) among such languages that uncontroversial instances of active/semantic alignment can be found. By contrast, in languages in which the transitive construction consistently shows a given type of asymmetry, split intransitivity is generally limited to minor classes of intransitive verbs contradicting the predominant type of alignment.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show the advantages of an approach to ergativity / accusativity in terms of possible correlations between transitive coding and intransitive alignment. The notion of intransitive alignment is at first sight simpler and less controversial than the notion

of asymmetry in transitive coding, since it necessitates no preliminary considerations about the significance of the coding properties of core syntactic terms. It is also more general, since instances of A-alignment or P-alignment can be identified in languages that have no asymmetry in transitive coding. This is probably what suggested to identify ergativity and accusativity with P-alignment and A-alignment respectively. However, many (most?) languages have complex and heterogeneous systems of alignment variations involving various types of intransitivity splits and/or fluid intransitivity that do not lend themselves to a straightforward characterization. In other words, the alignment properties of individual languages, taken as a whole, are not easily amenable to a limited number of types, in spite of the apparent simplicity of the definition of alignment types. It is much easier to classify languages according to the intrinsic characteristics of their transitive constructions, in spite of the fact that the number of logical possibilities is a priori much higher in this domain than in the domain of alignment. This is why prototypes the definition of which includes reference to asymmetries in transitive coding and to the degree of markedness of alignment phenomena can be expected to provide a better basis for a typological approach to the phenomena the recognition of which led to the emergence of the notion of ergativity / accusativity.

Abbreviations

A: agent
 ACC: accusative
 DEF: definite
 ERG: ergative
 F: feminine
 FUT: future
 INDEF: indefinite
 M: masculine
 P: patient
 PF: perfective
 PL: plural
 PRS: present
 PST: past
 S: single core argument of monovalent verbs
 SBJ: subject
 SG: singular

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