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ERGATIVITY, LANGUAGE UNIVERSALS AND TRANSITIVITY: A REPLY TO CRITICISM

I. Ergativity

In *Baltistica XX(2), 126,* we read the sentence '...meanwhile one can find no ergative language in the world with no concord between the ergative (not absolutive!) actant and the predicate'. I have discussed this sentence with colleagues of mine who are both linguists and native speakers of English and the general conclusion is that this sentence means that the ergative agent is always morphologically encoded in the transitive verb in ergative languages. Of course, if one wishes to define ergative languages as those in which the agent is obligatorily marked morphologically in the transitive verb, then the sentence is correct by definition. On the other hand I take my definition of ergativity from Comrie, 1978, 329, who wrote: "*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".

Now it is generally considered that the Australian aboriginal language Dyirbal is an ergative language. Note the following sentence from that language:

(1) *ŋuma*   *yabu-*   *ŋgu*   *burạ-*   *n*
     father   mother   (ergative   saw   (non-future
     (absolute   suffix)   marker)
     case)

'Mother saw father.'

(Dixon, 1979, 61.) The only explicit morphological marker in the verb is the non-future marker *-n*. Similarly Hindi is commonly considered to have ergative constructions. Note the following sentences from that language:

(2) *Laṛke*   *ne*   *nārangī*   *khāī*
                             |_____|
     boy   (ergative   orange   ate
           postposition)   (nom. sg.)   (nom. sg. concord)

'The boy ate the orange.'

(3) *Laṛke   ne   nāraṅgiyā̃   khāī*

boy   (ergative   oranges   ate
       postposition) (nom. pl.) (nom. pl. concord)

'The boy ate the oranges.'

(4) *Laṛkõ   ne   nāraṅgī   khāī*

boys   (ergative   orange   ate
       postposition) (nom. sg.) (nom. sg. concord)

'The boys ate the orange.'

In Hindi the number and gender of the patient (or object) is reflected in the verb, but there is no overt marker for the **ergative agent**. Similar examples could be given from Punjabi also.

The Hindi examples come from Elizarenkova, 1967, an article entitled 'Èrgativnaja konstrukcija v novoindijskix jazykax' (pp. 116–125) printed in a book entitled Эргативная конструкция предложения в языках различных типов (Ленинград: Наука). But, of course, neither Elizarenkova nor Žirmunskij could have been aware at that time Hindi would not qualify under Palmaitis' new definition of ergativity.

Comrie, 1981, 223, writes: "The typical ergative language will have a special case (ergative) to mark the subject of transitive verbs, whilst direct objects and subjects of intransitive verbs will stand in the same case (absolutive). We can illustrate this with an Avar example:

wac̄   -aš̄ šiša   b   -ekana
brother   ERG bottle-ABS CLASS-III broke
'the brother broke the bottle'
šiša b-ekana
'the bottle broke'

Incidentally, we meet here in passing another regular feature of North-East Caucasian, namely that verb roots may be either transitive or intransitive depending upon the syntax of the sentence: in the presence of an ergative subject they are transitive, otherwise intransitive; these are the so-called labile verbs".

For a similar example see also Tchekhoff, 1978, 74–75, who writes that there is no opposition between transitive and intransitive. I see no overt marker of the ergative actant in the example given above.

Modern linguistics teaches us that there is always a clever trick to extricate oneself from any factual counterexample, and in this particular case one can always claim a zero verbal marker for the agent. But, of course, if there is a zero marker there, then I can claim one for my model of the Indo-European ergative also.

Comrie, 1978, 392 – 393, writes: "There is much in the area of the internal cohesion of ergative systems that still requires explanation; the formation and testing of such explanatory hypotheses is an important task for future research on ergativity. However, much still remains to be done also in terms of gathering and processing data on ergative languages. By a combination of geographical, social, and political accidents, ergative languages have until recently been largely neglected (the major European languages have ergativity only in small parts of the derivational morphology), with information on the syntax of these languages being particularly scarce. One example will suffice to show how this scarcity of syntactic information can bias our general view on ergativity: the availability of a description of Dyirbal syntax, in the shape of Dixon's (1972) monograph, has revolutionized our view of ergativity, since for the first time it has become apparent that there is a language with near-consistent syntactic ergativity..."

It seems reasonable to suppose, however, that the aboriginal peoples of Australia may have disappeared completely under the Europeans' colonial policies.

One should read Dixon's, 1972, 34 – 37, grisly account of the treatment of the Australian aborigines at the hands of the European settlers. He writes, 34: "But, sparse as the settlement was, speakers of Dyirbal were not kindly treated. Tribes were probably reduced to less than 20% of their pre-contact numbers within twenty years of the European invasion (it is likely that each tribe originally had about 500 members). European diseases to which the aborigines had no immunity, such as measles and influenza, were responible for many deaths, but the major factor in decline of numbers was wholesale murder by the settlers. Christy Palmerston – who is portrayed as a friend of the aborigines in white histories of the area... – ambushed the Mamu tribe, gathered together for a corroboree, and shot out all he adult men but for a handful who managed to escape. Poisoned flour was a favourite trick – aborigines would be found dead all along the path from the white man's hut to their own camp. The late Lindsay Cowan told the writer that when he arrived in the Tully district in the early twenties he was informed that there were no 'bad aborigines' there – they'd all been shot".

Dixon continues, 35: 'Today, the aborigines live as barely tolerated squatters on their own lands... That they survived at all seems incredible.' If indeed they had not survived, one might reasonably have assumed that languages such as Dyirbal with a 'near-consistent syntactic ergativity' would be typologically impossible. Dixon writes, 37, that the language Bandyin, spoken on Hinchinbrook Island, is extinct. Today 'Nowhere outside the Murray Upper region are any children learning anything (as a language – WRS) but English.' Who knows what interesting linguistic features may have died with Bandyin? I would like to accept typological arguments as well as any other linguist. But common sense rules out the assumption that we know

all there is to know about the nature of possible languages. Kortlandt, 1976, 237, has shown us how wrong Kuryłowicz was to assume that the simultaneous existence of a palatovelar and labiovelar series was typologically impossible.

It is furthermore amazing that one can claim to know that the undescribed languages of the world, if they turn out to be ergative, would or would not possess a certain feature. As the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, 1955, 156, writes: "…every advance of science that further opens the truth to our view discloses a world of unexpected complications". We cannot be certain of the nature of dead undescribed languages, nor of the nature of languages which might evolve in the future. The range of the existing does not necessarily exhaust the range of the possible. Whether a language exists or not has nothing to do with the nature of the language, but rather with the ability of the population to survive. One could easily imagine a future in which the only existing languages would be Chinese, Russian and English. Would this render other languages typologically impossible?

Studies in language typology can be useful in showing what is possible, but they cannot be used to rule out a scenario which does not agree with a preconceived notion of the nature of linguistic systems or the ways in which they develop. Undoubtedly there are psychological and physiological limits to human languages, but they cannot be absolutely determined by the study of existing linguistic systems. At present I see no way of determining these psychological and physiological limits and in the foreseeable future it will be necessary for linguists to live with a certain degree of uncertainty. For a true scholar modesty about one's knowledge is more appropriate than arrogant self-assurance.

II. Transitivity

I am indebted to Dr. Pierre Swiggers of the Belgian National Science Foundation for pointing out to me that the famous French semanticist Michel Bréal had proposed that all verbs were originally *neutre* which I translate as 'intransitive'. Bréal, 1908, 194−195, writes: Comme les pierres d'un édifice qui, pour avoir été jointes longtemps et exactement, finissent par ne plus composer qu'une seule masse, certains mots que le sens rapproche s'adossent et s'appliquent l'un à l'autre. Nous nous habituons à les voir ainsi accolés, et en vertu d'une illusion dont l'étude du langage offre d'autres exemples, nous supposons quelque force cachée qui les maintient ensemble et les subordonne. Ainsi s'établit dans les esprits l'idée d'une "force transitive" résidant en certaines espèces de mots. Tout le monde connaît la différence entre les verbes dits neutres et les verbes dits transitifs, les premiers se suffisant à eux-mêmes, exprimant une action qui forme un sens complet (comme

courir, marcher, dormir), les autres prenant après eux ce qu'on a appelé un *complément*. La question a été soulevée de savoir lesquels, de ces verbes, étaient les plus anciens. Pour moi, la réponse n'est pas douteuse: non seulement les verbes neutres sont les plus anciens, mais on doit admettre une période où il n'y avait que des verbes neutres. Je crois, en effet, que les mots ont été créés pour avoir une pleine signification par eux-mêmes, et non pour servir à une syntaxe qui n'éxistait pas encore.

I cannot claim credit, therefore, for the notion that the active transitive verb of such a collocation as *pater pek^{w}et ovim* 'father cooks the sheep' reflects an earlier antipassive (although expressed by Bréal in different terms). Quite possibly the notion predates Bréal, but it clearly makes sense and has not lost its validity over the years.

It seems to me, however, that the best recent work on transitivity is that of Hopper and Thompson, 1980, in which transitivity is considered as a clausal scalar phenomenon depending upon a number of features. Hopper and Thompson identify the following features for transitivity. (I have slightly modified their diagram from p. 252 of their article substituting the word *agent* for A and replacing their O (object) with the term patient.)

<div align="center">Transitivity</div>

	HIGH	LOW
A. PARTICIPANTS	2 or more participants, agent and patient	1 participant
B. KINESIS	action	non-action
C. ASPECT	telic	atelic
D. PUNCTUALITY	punctual	non-punctual
E. VOLITIONALITY	volitional	non-volitional
F. AFFIRMATION	affirmative	negative
G. MODE	realis	irrealis
H. AGENCY	Agent high in potency	Agent low in potency
I. AFFECTEDNESS OF PATIENT	Patient totally affected	Patient not affected
J. INDIVIDUATION OF PATIENT	Patient highly individuated	Patient non-individuated

They write further: "It is easy to show that each component of Transitivity involves a different facet of the effectiveness or intensity with which the action is transferred from one participant to another:
(A) PARTICIPANTS: No transfer at all can take place unless at least two participants are involved."

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Thus probably I should use the description 'low in transitivity' to denote an expression such as *I bake*, whereas 'high in transitivity' to denote such an expression as *I bake bread*. The question is clearly terminological. In the theory presented in 1982 I have in mind the shift from antipassive (in which the agent is in the absolutive case and the patient in an oblique case (Hopper and Thompson, 262)) to active (in which the agent is in the nominative case and the patient in the accusative case). In other words I propose an increase in transitivity for the clause. Thus transitivity is not to be considered an all or nothing characteristic of a verb, but a scalar characteristic of a clause.

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