

ON ERGATIVITY IN FORE AND OTHER PAPUAN LANGUAGES

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Following on from Li and Lang's paper (1979), this paper outlines uses made of the so-called ergative case marker in some of these Papuan languages. While the marker may be used to separate subject from object in typical ergative fashion, its main purpose is related to the animacy hierarchy. It is used to raise noun phrases to the top of the animacy scale where they may function, *inter alia*, as agents. This ergative marker, then, functions as an indicator of control in a semantic (derivational) role, rather than as a syntactic (inflectional) case marker *per se*.

Some authors in recent years have been classifying Papuan languages as ergative in terms of their morphology.

Deibler (1976:10), for example, states that the Papuan language, Gahuku, 'may be considered an ergative-type language: the subject of intransitive verbs and the object of transitive verbs are unmarked for the largest class of nouns'. He supplies the following Gahuku data:

- (1) Ovakeni venala vitive.
Ovake's wife (subject) she will go
Ovake's wife will go.
- (2) Ovakeni venala apilimo'.
Ovake's wife (object) she hit her
She hit Ovake's wife.
- (3) Ovakeni venala-'mo apilimo'.
Ovake's wife-ergative she hit her
Ovake's wife hit her.

Haiman (1979:61), in discussing the equivalent marker in the Hua language, states that 'the subject of an intransitive verb, like the object of a transitive verb, can never occur with -bamu'; this suffix is reserved for the subjects of transitive verbs alone'. He concludes then, that 'in respect to the construction with -bamu', Hua is an ergative language'. He gives the following among his examples:

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- (4) Busa' baie.
 Busa (subject) *he is*
 Busa *is here.*
- (5) Busa' ebgie.
 Busa (object) *he hit him*
 He *hit Busa.*
- (6) Busa'-bamu' ebgie.
 Busa-ergative *he hit him*
 Busa *hit him.*

Li and Lang (1979:309) make the claim that 'those Papuan languages which have case systems are mostly ergative', and illustrate from five further Papuan languages: Kewa, Kiwaian, Moni, Duna and Enga. (Waffa and the Angan languages are listed as rare exceptions.) They contend that Enga, the main language of their research, 'may be described as a typical ergative language of the Trans-New Guinea Phylum' (p.311), the largest grouping (67.9%) of Papuan languages (see Wurm 1975:21).

In contrast with this claim of morphological ergativity, Li and Lang maintain that 'almost all the ergative Papuan languages have subject-verb agreement which shows a nominative-accusative pattern' (p.310). (Duna, which does not mark agreement, is an exception.) They categorically state: 'Our investigation of Enga shows that the language is syntactically accusative' (p.311), and proceed to elucidate this claim through a discussion of surface codings and referentiality.

Similarly, it may be claimed that Fore, the main language to be discussed in this paper, is syntactically accusative but morphologically ergative.

It shall be shown, however, that this 'ergative' morphology is best regarded as derivational (a semantic notion) rather than as a pure case inflection (simply a syntactic marker). (In examples (7)-(8), Fore's -ma has been glossed as 'ergative' in keeping with previous examples.)

- (7) wa wáye.
 man *he went*
 The man *went.*
- (8) wá-ma mási tára isiýegúye.
 man-ergative *two boys he hit them.*
 The man *hit two boys.*

The use of -ma in transitive clauses is by no means entirely obligatory in Fore, but neither is it totally optional. The -ma seen in example (9) may be omitted (10), without any change to the roles the referents are playing. ('3sg' indicates third singular reference, irrespective of gender or function. Seeming inconsistencies in accent are a result of independent accent rules - see Scott 1978:20.)

- (9) wá-ma wáya: 'áegúye.
 man-ergative *woman 3sg hit 3sg*
 The man *hit the woman.*
- (10) wa wáya: 'áegúye.
 man *woman 3sg hit 3sg*
 The man *hit the woman.*

Conversely, *-ma* is obligatorily present in (11) so that the same semantic roles as in (9) and (10) may be maintained, once topicalisation has invoked a change in word order. The omission of *-ma* here would have caused a reversal in roles (12).

(11) wáya: 'wá-má aegúye.
woman man-ergative 3sg hit 3sg
The man hit the woman.

(12) wáya: 'wá aegúye.
woman man 3sg hit 3sg
The woman hit the man.
 **The man hit the woman.*

In (13), however, we find that although the order is the same as in (12), the meaning of the pig attacking the man is not the usual reading. (There may, of course, be such strong contextual clues that the speaker has felt it unnecessary to distinguish formally between the two noun phrases, with the listener forced to interpret the sentence according to the starred gloss.)

(13) yaga: wá aegúye.
pig man 3sg hit 3sg
The man killed the pig.
 **The pig attacked the man.*

What, then, is the basis of *-ma*'s presence or absence? We find an answer in (14)-(15).

(14) Animacy hierarchy:
 Personal > Human > Animate > Inanimate

(15) Grammatical hierarchy:
 Subject > Indirect Object > Direct Object

In Fore these are two interacting hierarchies. At the top of the animacy hierarchy in Fore are the *Personal* referents. These include pronouns, proper nouns (names of people), and very close kin terms. Next on the scale in (14) are the (non-personal) *Human* referents; then come (non-human) *Animates*; then *Inanimates*. This hierarchy is in accord with the 'potentiality of agency' scale given by Dixon (1979:85). We shall shortly see that the addition of the suffix *-ma* raises a noun phrase to the top of this animacy scale.

Grammatically, as seen in (15), the highest rank is *Subject*, followed by *Indirect Object*, followed by *Direct Object*. Where more than one unmarked noun phrase could occur, that which is higher in animacy will be read higher grammatically. Thus, in (16)-(19), where each of the noun phrases differs from the others in animacy, their respective roles are held constant, even though word order has changed. The only changes are in terms of topicality.

(16) aebá yaga: naninta: amiye.
he pig food 3sg gave to 3sg
He gave food to the pig.

(17) aebá naninta: yaga: amiye.
he food pig 3sg gave to 3sg
He gave the pig food.

- (18) yaga: áebá naninta: amiye.
pig he food 3sg gave to 3sg
To the pig he gave food.
- (19) naninta: áebá yaga: amiye.
food he pig 3sg gave to 3sg
Food he gave to the pig.

Only when two noun phrases are equal in animacy does word order (S O IO V) assist in determining roles. We saw this earlier in (12) where 'woman' was interpreted as the agent, or subject, and in (10) where 'man' is agent.

In terms of the animacy scale given in (14), the ergative suffix *-ma* may not occur with personal referents (20)-(21), but it must occur with inanimates if they are to be considered as agents, and therefore as subjects (22)-(24). In between, its usage is much more likely with non-human animates than with human referents. (The *n > nt* change in (24) follows regular phonological rules.)

- (20) Aegayá: naegúye.
Aegaya 3sg hit me
Aegaya hit me.
- (21) *Aegayá:-ma naegúye.
Aegaya-ergative 3sg
Aegaya hit me.
- (22) kasó-'tasa naegúye.
club-with 3sg hit me
He hit me with a club.
- (23) kasó-nkama naegúye.
club-ergative 3sg
The club hit me.
- (24) kasó ntaegúye.
club 3sg hit me
He clubbed me.
**The club hit me.*

(22) illustrates a common non-agentive occurrence of an inanimate referent, *kasó club*. To promote this to agentive status, (23) demands the presence of the ergative marker *-ma*, which here appears as *-nkama* in one of its allomorphic forms. We cannot, as seen in (24), omit the ergative marker with an inanimate referent and still maintain an agentive reading. (24) reads literally as a compound: *He club-hit me*.

On the other hand, up at the other end of the scale in (20), *Aegayá:* is a proper noun and cannot be raised further on the animacy scale, but is already classified as having agentive qualities. Consequently (21) is considered unacceptable.

But note what happens when we want to use a personal referent in a non-agentive manner, for example as a direct object as we have in (25)-(26).

- (25) Aegaya:-nk aegúye.
Aegaya-oblique 3sg hit 3sg
He hit Aegaya.

- (26) náe-' naegúye.
I-oblique 3sg hit me
He hit me.

At this stage 'oblique' marking comes into effect. Here a grammatically conditioned phonological change related to non-subject (and non-vocative) usage appears (27)-(28).

- (27) yoga-ri waye.
garden-to 3sg went
He went to the garden.

- (28) ae-'-tí waye.
he-oblique-to 3sg went
He went to him.

In (27) the inanimate yoga *garden* simply takes the allative *to*. However, when a noun phrase from the top (or 'personal') end of the animacy hierarchy is to take a non-agentive role (28), it must first be marked as oblique. Then the relevant case marking is added.

For direct and indirect objects there is no further case marking. Objects are not distinguished from each other formally. Usually the object higher on the animacy scale will be the indirect object, but the situational context is the final arbiter.

Oblique marking is used optionally for human and animate referents - optional in the sense that its use is determined by external (contextual) factors. The marker itself is a phonological change (PC), details of which have been given previously (Scott 1978:106).

Occurrence of the ergative (-ma) and oblique (PC) markers is summarised in (29), where single brackets indicate heavier optional use than that given in double brackets.

(29)	Personal	Human	Animate	Inanimate
ergative	-	((-ma))	(-ma)	-ma
oblique	PC	(PC)	((PC))	-

The apparent reverse parallelism of -ma and PC in (29) is an illusion. They differ in kind.

Firstly, oblique marking may never occur on noun phrases used either as the subject of a transitive or as subject of an intransitive. Oblique marking thus is syntactic: a part of the case system of Fore, using a nominative-accusative dichotomy. This means that to posit an absolutive case for Fore is not a viable analysis. Consequently, the concept of syntactic ergativity is becoming less attractive.

Secondly, the ergative marker in Fore may co-occur with oblique marking. Compare (30)-(32).

- (30) pi ntágara-má-ba agaye.
that man-ergative-focus 3sg saw 3sg
That man saw him.
- (31) pi ntágara-má-'-pa agaye.
that man-ergative-oblique-focus 3sg saw 3sg
He saw that man.

- (32) pi ntágara-bá agaye.
that man-focus 3sg saw 3sg
He saw that man.
That man saw him.

In these examples it is clearly the presence of the oblique's phonological change (indicated by the glottal stop in (31)) which causes the meaning change between (30) and (31). (32), in which neither ergative nor oblique marking occur, is quite acceptable, but ambiguous, and would depend on external linguistic or social context for interpretation.

The meaning difference between (31) and the first reading of (32) is much more subtle. Out of context, but with the meaning 'He saw that man', native speakers asked to repeat (31) generally revert to (32). This is in spite of the fact that (31) in context is considered grammatical. It appears that (31) indicates some sort of agentive involvement by 'that man', in much the same sense as English's 'get' passives: e.g. 'He got shot' as opposed to 'He was shot'.

Thirdly, the ergative marker may be used with subjects of certain intransitive verbs (33). -ma is used on occasion with verbs in which the subject may be considered to have some sort of control over the action (e.g. 'come', 'laugh'), but not with others (e.g. 'cough', 'be'). Limits and probabilities of such usage have yet to be determined.

- (33) pi ntágara-má-ba kanaye.
that man-ergative-focus 3sg came
That man came.

There are also two constructions in which presence of the ergative marker is syntactically obligatory. The first is where a relative clause takes the place of a noun phrase.

- (34) na:má kiyí ntagara kánaye.
house 3sg built man 3sg came
The man who built the house came.
- (35) na:má kiyí-'ma kanaye.
house 3sg built-ergative 3sg came
The one who built the house came.
- (36) na:má kiyí-'ma-'-ti kanaye.
house 3sg built-ergative-oblique-to 3sg came
He came to the one who built the house.

In (34), na:má kiyí is a relative clause which qualifies the head noun ntagara *man*. If the head noun is omitted, the ergative marker must take its place (35)-(36). This may occur only when a subject noun phrase is relativised, and usually only with transitive subjects, although for some speakers, (37) is acceptable.

- (37) ?kanáí-'ma aboráye.
3sg came-ergative 3sg appeared
The man who came appeared.

The second obligatory usage is in non-personal genitive formation (38)-(39).

- (38) wasaná-ma- ntamáne.
 person-ergative-oblique house
 It is a house for persons.
- (39) naba:né-mpá- ntamáne.
 my father-ergative-oblique house
 It is my father's house.

Here the genitive is formed using the combination of ergative plus oblique, followed by a second noun phrase. The oblique in (38) and (39) is shown by the phonological change on the word for *house*, which is normally na:máne but has undergone an n > nt change plus vowel shortening, to give ntamáne. (39) shows kin term occurrence where an optional possessive suffix (-né *my* on the end of naba:) has placed the kin term into the general human grouping. Consequently, the -ma marker is obligatory to genitive formation here.

In (40)-(41), the kin term naba: and the name Aegayá:, both of which are *Personal* in the animacy hierarchy, do not take -ma. Only the oblique is necessary to form the genitive. It would be unacceptable to use -ma in either of these.

- (40) naba:- ntámáne.
 my father-oblique house
 It is my father's house.
- (41) Aegayá:- ntámáne.
 Aegaya-oblique house
 It is Aegaya's house.

SUMMATION

In ascertaining the function of the so-called ergative marker in Fore, and potentially also in other Papuan languages, the following points have been made:

- (i) In Fore there is quite an amount of optionality in the usage of -ma when attached to the subject of a transitive verb. Haiman (1979:56, 59) gives examples showing such optionality in Hua, where it leads to potential ambiguity, stating that 'very often Hua tolerates this ambiguity, but Hua also has a possible means of eliminating this ambiguity' (the ergative marker -bamu').

On the other hand, Dixon (1979:72-73) claims that 'in most languages in which the ergative occurs, it is obligatory', but he does allow that 'it is not uncommon to find an ergative case inflection described as 'optional''. Fore, which allows optionality, ties its optionality to the human/animate portion of the animacy hierarchy - a semantic rather than a syntactic function.

- (ii) It has also been mentioned that in Fore, the ergative marker may be used with noun phrases when they function as subject of certain intransitive verbs. Renck (1975:35), who worked in the Move dialect of Yagaria, of which Haiman's Hua is also a dialect, reports a similar occurrence. He has labelled the marker (which varies between -ma' and -ba' in Move) a 'pivotal' marker because of its wide and sometimes obligatory usage. He states that while it may occur 'as agentive marker in transitive clauses...

the pivotal marker may also occur as subject marker in intransitive clauses, but that marking is optional'.

- (iii) We saw earlier in (31) the use of Fore's -ma in object position. Payne and Drew (1970:74) observe that Kamano's equivalent morpheme -mo' may be appended to an indirect object. This non-subject usage, along with its obligatory absence from personal names in Kamano (which was illustrated earlier from Fore in (21)), caused Payne and Drew to label the morpheme 'personaliser'. This lends support to the claim that the morpheme in question is not a simple syntactic mechanism marking subjects of transitives, but primarily marks a participant's ability to control or to be an agent. This marker, being a semantic indicator, acts then as a derivational type morpheme which changes the subcategorisation of noun phrases so that they may function, among other things, as subjects of transitives.

The concept of an ergative marker indicating control has been outlined by Dixon (1979:80-81). He states that, where ergative marking of subject noun phrases occurs with certain intransitive verbs, 'the use of ergative or absolutive on a subject noun phrase appears to be semantically determined', with the ergative marker being used only when the noun phrase referent 'actually is the controller'; otherwise intransitive subjects are (un)marked in the same way as objects which have no control over the activity.

Dixon adds that this scheme is found in just a few languages. It appears that Fore is one of those rare gems. It may well be, on closer scrutiny, that this pattern is to be found in many Papuan languages. I would like linguists to test their particular Papuan languages to see whether this is so.

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