

Problems of Ergativity Theory

Akhundova Nigar

(Corresponding author)

Department of General Linguistics,
Baku State University,
23, Z.Halilov str., Baku AZ 1143, Azerbaijan
E-mail: akhundovanigar@rambler.ru

Jafarov Nizami

Department of General Linguistics,
Baku State University,
23, Z.Halilov str., Baku AZ 1143, Azerbaijan
E-mail: nizamiceferov@mail.ru

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Abstract

The problems of deep and surface structure, topological analysis of ergative and nominative languages, conceptions of passive and active in ergative construction of the sentence are considered.

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1. Introduction

The ergative construction was in the center of attention of the linguists in the past. However, the modern stage of the investigation of the problem allows us to contribute the significant corrections in this definition. The conception of this sentence typology was firstly exactly formed in the last works of I.I. Meshaninov [1] in the following terms: “the ergative structure of the sentence”, “the ergative system of the sentence structure”, “the ergative construction of the sentence”. Finally, the investigation of the all context of the language structure, in which the sentence is characterized by the ergative typology, leads to the formulation of one more fundamental perception for the theory of ergativity - the perception of the ergative structure of the language in whole. In the works of N.Chomsky, M.Joos, U.L.Cheif [2-4] dedicated to the descriptive analysis of the separate languages of the ergative structure, the definitions of the ergative constructions of the type: “the ergative construction is the sentence construction, characterized by the subject position at the transitive verb in the ergative case and the direct addition in the nominative case” were dominated.

2. The Ergative Categories

2.1. The Problem of the Deep and Surface Structure

The surface structure of the sentence consists of its concrete syntactic form - the form in which constituents occur in actual utterances. But there is more to the syntax of a language than surface structure. The surface organization and arrangement of constituents are the result of complex processes that convert meanings into expressions, and all of these processes must be investigated in the study of syntax.

When people speak, they start out with a set of concepts they wish to express; they then convert these abstract concepts into a form suitable for expression in speech. When people listen, they hear the sounds produced by another; they then attempt to convert those sounds into the meanings the speaker has tried to convey. The same linking of expression and meaning takes place in writing or reading, except that the concrete form of expression is writing rather than sound. The syntactic system of a language is the set of principles that link the meaning of sentences with the form in which they are expressed.

Meaning originates in the mind, and syntax is the study of the relationships between meaning and form. The mind is not directly observable, so there is no reason to assume that every aspect of syntax will be directly observable. The surface structure of a sentence is only the form in which that sentence is expressed. By examining surface structure, one investigates only a single side of syntax. The other side, pertaining to meaning rather than to surface form, is not available for direct examination. Yet, it does exist, for, unless the study of syntax involves meaning as well as form, there is no way to explain how speakers of a language understand the meanings of sentences.

Earlier the analysis of the sentences was inadequate in many respects. First of all, they failed to take into account the difference between surface and deep levels of grammatical structures. This distinction was made by Chomsky's [2] generative grammar, which is sometimes referred to as universal grammar. According to Chomsky [2], the deep structure of a sentence is the abstract, underlying form, which determines the meaning of the sentence. It is present in the mind, but not necessarily represented directly in the physical signal. At the surface level such sentences as "John is eager to please" and "John is easy to please" can be analyzed in an identical way, but from the point of view of the deep underlying meaning, the two sentences diverge. In the first, John wants to please someone else, in the second someone else is involved in pleasing John. The main purpose of generative grammar is to provide a means for analyzing sentences at the deep structural level. To achieve this aim, Chomsky [2] drew a fundamental distinction between a person's knowledge of the language and its use in real situation. The first was "language competence", the second was called "language performance". This was similar to Saussure's distinction between language and speech. Chomsky [2] argued, that linguistics should be concerned with the study of competence and not restrict itself to the performance. Chomsky's [2] proposals were intended to discover the mental realities, underlying the way people use the language. Competence is seen by him as an aspect of our general psychological capacity. For example, if we compare the following two pairs of sentences:

- 1) *I persuaded a specialist to examine John.*
- 2) *I persuaded John to be examined by a specialist.*

- 1) *I expected a specialist to examine John.*
- 2) *I expected John to be examined by a specialist.*

The first impression may be that these sentences receive the same structural analysis. In fact no English grammar has pointed out the fundamental distinction between these constructions. However, the relationship between the members of the first pair isn't the same as the relationship between the members of the second one. In the first pair both sentences can be characterized as independent sentences, which don't derive from each other, but in the second pair, the second sentence is generated from the first one, because in the first three sentences the direct logical object of the action

is the object of the first position. But in the fourth sentence the real logical object is the object of the second position.

Nominative languages	Ergative languages
Subject is always the same	Subject changes in order to transiting words
<i>I see you</i>	<i>I see you</i>
<i>I walk</i>	<i>Me walk</i>

- 1) Grammar is generating from deeper to surface through transforming.
- 2) At the deep structure all languages are identical, the same.

2.2. Elimination and Ellipsis

a) The treatment of the constructions with the subject-patience from the point of view of the nominative-ergative relationships.

How the constructions with subject-patience are considered by J.Layonz [5]? Firstly note that Layonz [5] identifies the given constructions with the single-act constructions of the type “*Bill died*”, where the verb has only intransitive application. By Layonz [5] opinion in such cases “we can’t say, that relation of the transitivity is “lexicalized”. According to the author, syntactic and semantic relationships between verbs “*die*” and “*kill*” are similar with the relationships between transitive and intransitive applications of the one and the same verb (of “*to move*” type). The sentences “*John killed Bill*” and “*Bill died*” can’t be opposite as successfully as the constructions “*John moved the stone*” and “*the stone moved*”. The sentences “*Bill died*” and “*the stone moved*” can’t be treated equally at all. “*Bill*” is the agent, whereas “*the stone*” is the object, so-called action purpose. Semantically identifying the constructions “*Bill died*” and “*The stone moved*”, John Layonz [5] inclines to the representatives of the lexical approach to the voice interpretation, where the activity and passivity of the verb is determined by its lexical meaning.

From the semantical point of view, Layonz [5] divides the constructions of the investigated type on two groups: in the one constructions the semantic object isn’t designated on syntactic level, but it can be proposed (these constructions Layonz [5] calls the pseudotransitive ones), in the other constructions the agent existence (or the reason) is proposed, but it doesn’t included in the lexicographical interpretation of the verb. The agent or the reason is entered from the side. Such constructions Layonz calls “ergative” ones.

The pseudotransitive construction as “*John house is building*”, “*Detergents sell well*” (Layonz [5] examples) assimilate to the passive constructions, i.e. that the element in these and other constructions, having the supercomplement position can’t take participation itself in the committed action. The existence of the agent on semantics level is obligatory.

By Layonz [5] opinion the semantics of the verbs, forming the ergative constructions (*to charge, to open, to move*), is so, that the object takes part in the committed action.

By the following example J.Layonz [5] illustrates the ergative relation, taking place between the transitive and intransitive constructions:

The stone moved - John moved the stone.

The element, having the subject position in the first sentence (*the stone*) is not only the action purpose, but also is its producer. (John is causator, which causes the stone motion, but the stone itself takes part in the motion and role of action producer is related mainly to the stone). Hence, according to Layonz [5] the construction “*the stone moved*” receives the status of the semantical initial structure..

The subject, which is entered from the side in the derived construction, Layonz [5] calls “ergative” one. Thus Layonz [5] identifies the agent perception with causator one.

In the syntactic interpretation of the constructions the scholar follows to the same semantical principle: by his opinion, the transitive construction is syntactically formed from the intransitive one with the help of the ergative one, or of the causative transformation. The object position, which has the subject of the initial intransitive construction, is introduced as the new position in the derived construction. The ergative subject or the causator has the free position after subject leaving.

Huddleston has another interpretation in the attitude of the initial derivation of the given constructions. According to Huddleston, [6] it is possible to achieve the deep semantic structure with

the help of the transformation, which is the initial one and thus to restore the indeed subject of the action.

Huddleston [6] considers the construction “*Somebody opened the door*” in the capacity of the initial one for the structure “*the door opened*”. With the help of the transformation, he achieves the deep structure and restores the eliminated participant, doing the action in the forepassive construction. Thus, restored the initial subject, it is possible to determine, that the construction is initially transitive one. Here the first of the two mechanisms mentioned by Huddleston [6] is carried out: the derivation of intransitive form from initial one by the means of elimination of initial subject and increase of initial object level.

The constructions of “*the door opened*” type are determined by Huddleston [6] as the “ergative” ones. By scholar opinion, if the one-place verb combines with the element to which the action is related in the capacity of the subject, then such sentence arrangement can be called “ergative” one.

b) The attempt of the consideration of the ergative conception in general voice category.

Not only verbal forms but whole constructions are opposite to the voice since “voice” term is out of limits of definition of verb morphological category. (In traditional linguistics the voice oppositions are formed by the means of verbal forms). There are active and passive voices. But Silnitsky [7] mentions about another form: “decausative” and “metonymical” transformations.

So, in the different cases the voice is the derivational correlation of the constructions of the different characters. The disparity of the subject to supercomplement position, the difference in the presuppositional verb meaning, the difference in the verb valent paradigms and etc. can be included into content of derivation relation.

The ergative constructions also are in the derivational relationship with the nominative structures. At the ergatization, the action subject is also noted in all voice transformations between active and passive as in all voice transformations.

However, at the passive transformation the subject doesn't eliminate on the syntactical level. It moves into the syntactical position of more low level. However, the subject can be not expressed on the syntax level. This is the case of the ellipsis.

In the case with the ergatization it is not enough to say about the disparity of the subject to the supercomplement position. This is relationship of another character. At the ergatization the semantic subject eliminates on the syntactic level. It isn't reducible in the syntactic structure. In the result of another semantic actant possessing the more high position in the participants' hierarchy has its position. After the subject the position of that actant, which possess the supercomplement position (or sirconstant) eliminates.

The subject syntactical position, on which the content of nominative-ergative relations is build, is enough important criteria in order to include the ergatization into system of voice relations. Moreover, it is possible to use terms: “nominative” and “ergative” voices.

3. Topological Analysis of Nominative and Ergative Languages

Ergative Languages

Why and how does a language become ergative? Before we try to answer this question, let us consider what be called the typological background of ergativity - that is, those characteristics which tend frequently to occur together with ergative constructions. These are all well known:

- 1) Ergative languages nearly always have the basic word order SOV (subject-object-verb), occasionally VSO, but virtually never SVO.
- 2) Apparently all languages that manifest ergativity at all (outside of certain derivational processes) show morphological ergativity, while very few exhibit syntactic ergativity.
- 3) In languages with ergative case -marking, the ergative case is always overtly marked, while the absolutive case is usually morphologically unmarked.
- 4) It is very common for ergative languages to index direct objects in the verb.
- 5) It is very common for ergativity to be confined to certain tenses or aspects of the verb; in such cases, it is always the past tense or the perspective aspect which is ergative, while non-past or imperfective verb forms show accusative constructions.

- 6) Few ergative languages have a fully developed passive voice.
 7) In case marking languages, the ergative case is often identical with another case, most often the genitive or instrumental, sometimes the locative or dative.
 8) It is very common for ergative constructions to be used only when certain types of NPs, or certain combinations of NPs, appear in the subject and object positions.

In connection with point (8), Silverstein (1974) [8] has shown that virtually all of these languages can be fitted into a hierarchy of NP types, ranging from the most agent-like NPs (first and second person pronouns) to the least agent-like NPs (inanimate and abstract nouns). In each case the ergative is used either when the agent lies below a certain (language-specific) out-off point in the hierarchy, or else whenever the patient NP outranks the agent.

Relatively few ergative languages appear to be entirely free of the two types of split ergativity mentioned in points (5) and (8); among these few are Basque and the Mayan language Tzeltal (Kaufman, 1971) [9]. On the other hand, hardly any languages appear to show both types of split. The only examples known to me are the Tibeto-Burman languages Jirel and Sherpa and the Australian language Yukulta (Keen, 1972) [10]. These three languages, however, are only marginally exceptional. Essentially, they show straightforward Silverstein [8] NP splits together with ergativity in all tenses and aspects, except for a handful of idiosyncratic cases in which the ergative isn't used. (For example, in Jirel and Sherpa, the ergative is used with all transitive verb forms except with (a) first person subjects in future statements and (b) second person subjects in future questions.) There are apparently no languages exhibiting a clear NP split together with a clear tense/aspect split. This absence of doubly-split systems is striking; much will be made of it in what follows. A historical account of the origins of ergativity should be able to explain most of this correlation.

Ergative languages are: Sumerian, Bask, Georgian, Chechen and etc.

Nominative Languages

The nominative sentence is characterized by the special type of subject, predicate and object. The subject is put in that new case the meaning of which is come to the answers: who? What? That's why here the nominative case is the expression of that subject about which is said in the sentence. Who does or makes something is that question on which the nominative case and subject in these cases answer.

Nominative languages: Russian, Latin, English, German and etc.

4. The Conception of Active and Passive in the Ergative Constructions

4.1. The Expression of the Passive in the Ergative Structures

The Grammar of Latin language has only two voices: "active" and "passive" ones. It is considered that from following sentences:

(1a) John killed Bill.

(1b) Bill was killed by John.

(2a) Bill killed John.

(2b) John was killed by Bill.

The sentences (1a) and (2a) are active ones, and (1b) and (2b) are passive ones. Moreover, it is also considered that active sentences are more "basis" ones, that's why sentence (1b) is considered as passive version of sentence (1a) and sentence (2b) is considered as passion version of sentence (2a).

This relationship between the corresponding active and passive sentences is traditionally characterized in such terms:

(i) The object of the active sentence has become the subject of the corresponding passive sentence. So, *Bill* is the object in the sentence (1a) and the subject in the sentence (1b); *John* is the object in the sentence (2a) and subject in the sentence (2b).

(ii) The verb on its “form” is the “active” in more basis (active) “variant”, and the verb on its form is “passive” in less basis (passive) “variant”. So, *killed* (“active”) vs. *was killed* (“passive”).

(iii) The subject of the active sentence not necessarily should be “expressed” by the passive “variant” of the “same” sentence, but if it is “expressed” by this “variant”, then it is expressed in the addition or adjunct forms, marked by the sign of the “agentivity” with the help of the case ending or the definite preposition. Such are the expressions *by John* and *by Bill* in the sentences (1b) and (2b). The “nonagent” passive sentences, corresponding to the sentences (1b) and (2b), are *Bill was killed* and *John was killed*.

The relationship between corresponding active and passive sentences in English can be formalized in the terms of the transformational rules, operating by the same “nuclear” chain, lying in the base of these sentences.

4.2. The Expression of the Causative in the Ergative Constructions

Traditional determination of the voice as the grammatical category says: “The voice category means the relationship between subject of the action (the producer of the action) and the object, finding its expression in the verb form” (A.N.Balandin) [11]. In other words, the voice is determined as the “expression of the relationship of the action to its subject and object in the verbal form”. Thus according to these definitions the relations between subject and the object of the action or relations between action and subject and action object directly reflect in voice grammar category, i.e. it is established that the meaning of voice grammar category is formed on the base of such logical categories of the action, subject and object of the action. None of these definitions is correct, i.e. only taking into consideration the character of action relation to its object and subject or relation between action object and subject doesn’t give possibility to divide the separate verb types from each other. For example, in Russian there are two types: active and passive voices. “Real action object is expressed in the sentence as subject in the form of nominative case, and real action producer is expressed in the sentence as object in the form of instrumental case without preposition...” [12,13].

5. Conclusion

In English there are constructions formed by many verbal lexemes in which the subject doesn’t correspond to supercomplement position. However, the verb is in voice-unmarked form. They are in ergative relation with corresponding initial nominative constructions. The ergativity meaning in English is that subject doesn’t receive the representation on the syntactic level, i.e. eliminates. The given character of ergative constructions is enough essential criteria in order to include the nominative-ergative relations in common system of voice category.

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