

A Parameter Hierarchy for Indo-Aryan Ergativity

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Known to host different case alignments (aspect-based ergative versus pure nominative-accusative), the Western Indo-Aryan/WIA and the Eastern Indo-Aryan/EIA languages must ideally sever at a macro-parametric level, with the former separately traversing down the branches of an Ergative Parameter Hierarchy (cf. Sheehan 2014, building on Roberts 2012, among others). Such a neat classification for Indo-Aryan languages is however challenged on three counts: (a) EIALs Assamese and Bengali have ergative forms (either generalized to all aspects, or mood-restricted), (b) both EIALs and WIALs optionally allow the opposing nominative system for unergatives, and (c) many EIALs and WIALs have feature-value triggered intra-language or dialectal case alignment variations. Taking these specificities into account, I suggest that Indo-Aryan ergativity involves a three-layered classification, starting with a generalized superset, going on to a more marked, aspect/mood-restricted sub-set and finally ending with a most marked, feature-value sub-set. Indo-Aryan languages also often traverse these set-boundaries, raising questions on the conventional WIAL–EIAL divide.

It is widely known that WIALs such as Hindi-Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Marathi have ergative patterns with perfective, transitive verbs (cf. Bhatt 2007). The ergative (-ne/e) marked subjects (1)-(2) can be attributed to a ‘Yes’ setting of the ergative macro-parameter (3).

(1) john-ne roTii khaayii.
John-erg. bread.f. eat.f.perf.
‘John ate bread.’ (Hindi)

(2) sita-e kaagal vaac-yo
Sita.f.sg.-erg. letter.m.sg. read-pst.m.sg.
‘Sita read the letter.’ (Gujarati)

(3) Does a transitive verb assign an ergative Case to the external argument?
No → Nominative-Accusative, Yes → Ergative-Absolutive

However, as Amritavalli and Sarma (2002) show, the EIAL Assamese has an ergative (-e) marker, which is generalized to all aspects (4). Similarly, Bengali has nominals marked with an –e morpheme in the emphatic mood (5); see Chatterji (1926). (3), therefore, cannot be a macro-parameter dividing the WIALs from EIALs, since both groups value it positively.

(4) ram-e kaam kore/korilo/koribe
Ram-erg. work do/will do/did.

(5) maanush-e kii naa kore
people-erg. what not do
‘People can do anything’

What is needed for Indo-Aryan ergativity is a superset involving all transitive, verbal heads that assign ergative case. Lower down in the hierarchy are sub-sets focused around specific properties or features. The immediately contained sub-set is built around aspect and mood features, with many WIALs selecting aspect-based ergativity and some EIALs opting for mood-based ergativity. Other WIALs, such as Nepali on the other hand, remain at the superset level – with the language also attesting ergative subjects in non-past-perfective/future constructions (Butt and Poudel 2007), on par with Assamese.

Additionally, both EIALs and WIALs display remarkable flexibility for a certain subclass of verbs in the perfective. To illustrate, Hindi-Urdu and Bengali (6)-(7) allow either a nominative or an ergative subject with unergative predicates.

(6) hum ravan-ki hasii hase/hum-ne ravan-ki hasii hasii.

1.m.pl ravan's laughter.f. laugh.perf.1.m.pl/1.m.pl.-erg ravan's laughter.f.
laugh.perf.f.sg
'We laughed like Ravan.'

- (7) onek manush/onek manush-e/onek-e ei kotha niye haashe
many people-nom/many people-erg/many-erg this issue with laugh
'Many laugh on this issue.'

This flexibility can be attributed to the ambivalent status of unergatives – they are underlying transitives in many languages, even while superficially resembling intransitives. The nominative-ergative alternation (6)-(7) emerges with the language learner grappling with the contradictory empirical data and the respective underlying representations. A separate parametric choice for unergatives is thus unnecessary.

However, a further sub-set of feature-values has to be included to account for multiple instances of feature-value driven intra-language variation. To illustrate, Marathi dialects are sensitive to person and number values. Consider (8), taken from Deo and Sharma (2002). This is an example from the Pune variety of the language, where the ergative marking fails to appear on first and second person pronominals (irrespective of number). In a second dialect, Warhadhi Brahmani, ergativity is available on all nouns/pronominals in the singular, but only on third person pronominals in the plural.

- (8) mi (*e) sita-la baghit-la
I-m(*erg) Sita-f-acc see-perf-neut-sg.
'I saw Sita.'

Marathi micro-variation emerges from the language narrowing down on feature-values, while still working within the perfective realm. Some EIALs have similar feature-value induced intra-language variation, as attested by Bengali (9) where the ergative marker goes missing on all pronominals.

- (9) *ami-e/tumi-e/o-e ki naa kori/koro/kore
I-erg/you-erg/he-erg what not do-1p/2p/3p
'I/you/he can do anything.'

In short, we have a superset-subset parameter for Indo-Aryan ergativity, with three sets, each becoming more marked than the one that contains it. The essential idea is still the same as Roberts' Parametric Hierarchy proposal – the default or initial specifications are more general than the lower, marked levels. Languages can traverse down the hierarchy, thus triggering multi-level linguistic variation.

In the end, this paper also discusses how languages move beyond the outermost set of the ergative parameter, to eventually endorse a fully nominative-accusative alignment. We witness many such instances in both WIALs (Marwari, Dharwari) and EIALs (Goalpriya, Sylheti). My contention is that these macro-parametric changes are triggered when a T head – usually associated with the nominative case – is activated/reanalyzed and generalized for all predicates, aspects and moods, in the process completely superseding the vP-related ergative-absolutive alignment.

References

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