Ergativity in Axomiya

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Abstract

The paper surveys the principal generative syntactic assumptions that have been proposed for ergative construction and discusses the pattern of the ergative case marking in Assamese. For a language L which shows some mixed properties of ergativity and accusativity in a certain respect R, the language L is said to be split-ergative with respect to R (Comrie 1978, Dixon 1979, and DeLancey 1981). Unlike Dyirbal (which has been exemplified by Dixon's seminal work and has been considered a typical example of ergative language), where the pronouns are morphologically nominative-accusative when the agent is first or second person and ergative when the agent is a third person. And also unlike another Indo Aryan ergative language Hindi which shows TAM split (and no person based split),

Assamese exhibits the opposite pattern with person based split and no TAM split for ergativity/agentivity.

Introduction

The Indo-Aryan system of marking of case has recently caught attention from linguists with the advent of distributive morphology (for case marking on arguments) and relator nouns (for adpositions). The traditional ways of marking subjects of unaccusative, unergative and transitive had been same whereas, recent discussions have promoted the view that these might have some variation cross-linguistically. Eventually, that the categorization of verbs and the case marking on arguments are completely language-specific and somewhat context dependent, has also been of importance lately among linguistic discussions. In this paper we consider the case of Assamese subjects and try to seek for an explanation for their alignment with an ergative system in some cases and nominative case elsewhere.

Historical Background of Indo Aryan Ergativity

The new Indo-Aryan languages had inherited morphological ergativity from Middle Indo-Aryan variants of Sanskrit (Deo and Sharma 2002). The pattern of ergativity in Indo-Aryan showed aspect based split and also presented a typical instance of the passive to ergative reanalysis seen cross-linguistically (Dixon 1994, Deo and Sharma 2002). According to this view, the agent, or the logical subject with an oblique grammatical function in the passive construction is reinterpreted as the grammatical subject. And the passive subject loses its grammatical function as a subject and is eventually marked with the object function. Though OIA did not have any active ergative construction, it possessed passive and periphrastic perfect construction involving a non-finite form of the verb. The rich and complex tense-aspect system of OIA, underwent remarkable changes in the course of development to MIA and certain inflectional forms such as the aorist and inflectional perfect and non-perfect have been dropped, at least overtly (Butt 2005, 2006). The MIA languages had the agent marked with the instrumental case showing subject properties. The object of the transitive and the subject of intransitive clauses showed nominative case marking. The verb showed gender and number agreement with the nominative object with some typological variations (Old and Middle and even Modern form of Assamese language had no gender

agreement with the verb). In intransitive clauses, the verb agreed in number and gender with the argument of the clause, i.e., the subject. The NIA languages exhibit a variable case marking system for direct objects in transitive and perfect clauses, allowing both nominative and accusative marked objects. This pattern of object marking developed in the non-perfect aspects and spread to the ergative construction in the perfect. This whole picture depicts the nature of the integration of the nominal participle into the verbal paradigm (Butt 2006).

Comparative Typology of Indo Aryan Ergativity

In Hindi-Urdu, "transitive verbs pattern ergatively in perfective aspect and accusatively in the imperfective aspect". It shows tense aspect based split: perfective aspect and past tense favour ergative patterns, imperfective/present favour accusative pattern. (Mahajan 1990, Mohanan 1994).

In Nepali, the ergativity can be seen in the nominal paradigm which posits different sets of pronominal forms for ergative and nominatives. (Bhatt 2011)

Kachhi is a language which shows ergativity through different agreement in nominative and ergative structures. It has splits conditioned by person and tense/aspect agreement. (Bhatt 2011)

Marathi added person agreement and this split is morphologically conditioned both by person and tense/aspect.

In Punjabi and Marathi, ergative and nominative pronouns are distinguished only in the third person. Similarly, Gujrati lacks the ergative marker in the first and second person but retains elsewhere.

Sindhi does not have an ergative marker but the subjects of ergative constructions appear in an oblique form. Third person forms encode gender distinctions. (Bhatt 2011)

Old Bengali had an ergative construction in the perfect aspect which showed properties similar to the MIA ergative clause but, modern Bengali has lost this pattern

showing the same kind of subject case marking for its non-perfect and perfect subjects. (Deo and Sharma 2002)

The markers of ergativity in NIA are as follows: (following Butt, Bhatt 2011)

Languages	Ergative marker
Hindi-Urdu	-ne
Punjabi	-ne
Marathi	-ne/-ni
Bengali[1]	ø
Gujrati	-e
Sindhi	oblique inflection
Nepali	-le
Assamese	-e [2]

Ergativity

The generalized schema for ergative-absolutive system can be seen as follows (following Silverstein, 1976).

(i) Ergative: Subject of transitive   Object of transitive
                  (Ergative)   Subject of intransitive

(ii) Accusative: Subject of transitive   Object of transitive
                  Subject of intransitive   Accusative

The Nominative Accusative system works as in (ii).

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[1] In Old and Middle Bangla, arguments were marked with /–e/ for ergativity. Complete loss of ergative marking is correlated with subject agreement in Bangla. And this accusative language lost gender agreement too.

[2] Assamese has no gender (for nouns) and no object-verb agreement, so ergativity is non-functional with regards to agreement. (Personal conversation with KV Subbarao in JNU, 28/08/2012)

The Question

The question here is what kind of case marking system does Assamese have if we compare this with the other Indo Aryan languages such as Hindi and Bangla.

Hindi	Bangla
↓	↓
Split ergativity	Unaccusativity
(Kachru 1980)	(Bagchi 1993)

Assamese

↓

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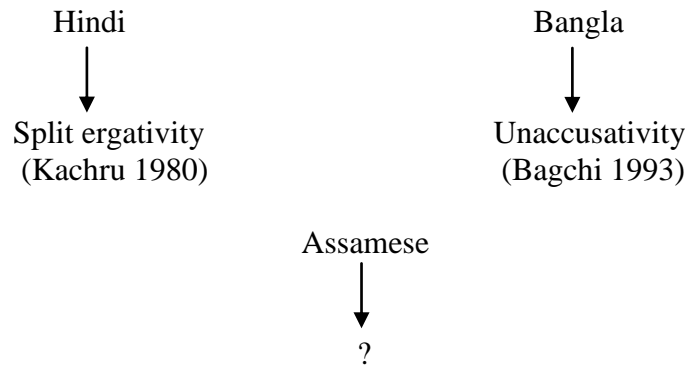
Hindi has a split ergative system and the spilt is along the line of aspects. Bangla had a history of ergativity but the modern Bangla seems to have lost it. Bangla shows a strict nominative ergative system for argument making.

Pattern of Ergativity in Assamese

In Assamese, pronouns are morphologically nominative-accusative when the agent is,

  i.   **First person singular or plural**
  ii. **Second person singular or**
  iii. **Third person singular (excluding proper nouns).**

Split in Pronominal

	singular	plural
1st person	NOM-ACC	NOM-ACC
2nd person	NOM-ACC	ERG-ABS
3rd person	NOM-ACC	ERG-ABS

But it is ergative when the agent is a second or third person plural or a proper noun. It is present even with an overt classifier in the subject NP. The absence of the ergative marker in the first person and second person or third person singular (as shown below) can have a

phonological explanation as these pronouns end with a high front vowel /i/ and hence can not take the ergative marking /-e/ for the surface realization.[3]

	SUBJECT	OBJECT
INTRASITIVE	NULL	
TRANSITIVE	**-e**	**–k, -Ok** (animate) NULL (inanimate)

In Hindi and Urdu, the ergative case is sensitive to be marked on agents in the perfective aspect for transitive and ditransitive verbs (as in 3a and 3b) and it is nominative elsewhere. However, Assamese exhibits ergativity throughout all the tenses and aspects (as in 4a and 4b) but with only certain person markings (as in 1 and 2 below). It does not possess tense/aspect based splits (Bhatt 2011[4]) like Hindi-Urdu. For example,

(1) manuh-zon   ahil.
    man.CLA   come.Pres Perf.3P
    The man has come.

(2) manuh-zon-e   lora-to-k   dekhile
    man.CLA.Erg   boy.CLA.ACC   see.Pres Perf.3P
    The man has seen the boy.

HINDI

Present/Past

(3) a. larka   kita:b   kharidta   hai/tha
        boy.NOM.M   book.NOM.F   buy.IMPF.M   be.PRES/PAST
        The boy buys a book.

Perfect

(3) b. larke-ne   kita:b   kharidi
        boy-ERG.M   book.NOM.F   buy.PERF.F

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[3] Refer to Appendix 1. Sometimes this marker appears for emphatic purpose with all the person pronouns.
[4] Bhatt, Rajesh and Trupti Nisar.2011. 'Ergativity in Katchi'. Paper Presented in SALA29, Mysore, India.

The boy bought a book.

ASSAMESE

Present/Past

(4) a. lora-to-e   kitap   kine/kinisil.

boy.CLA.Erg   book   buy.Pres.3P/ buy.Past.3P

The boy buys/bought books.

Present Perfect

(4) b. lora-to-e   kitap   kinile.

boy.CLA.Erg   book   buy.Pres Perf.3P

The boy has bought books.

Along with split on the basis of person (as in 1 and 2) for subject marking, Assamese may have a split on the basis of animacy too. However, this split is not important for the ergative marking. It only shows differential object marking for animacy. However, Assamese has no object agreement with the verb. For example,

(5) manuh-zon-e   lora-to-k   dekhile

man.CLA.Erg   boy.CLA.ACC   see.Pres Perf. 3P

The man has seen the boy.

(6) manuh-zon-e   kitap-khon   porhile

man.CLA.Erg   book.CLA   see.Pres Perf. 3P

The man has read the book.

Assamese can hence be called as a tripartite split ergative language[5] in the sense that in it, both the agent and object of a transitive clause have case forms, ergative and accusative respectively, whereas the agent of an intransitive clause bears the unmarked form (the term

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[5] Both the agent and object of a transitive clause have case forms, ergative and accusative respectively, whereas the agent of an intransitive clause is the unmarked citation form. This is occasionally called the intransitive case, but absolutive is also used and is perhaps more accurate, since it is not limited to core agents of intransitive verbs). A tripartite language seems to treat S, A and O in three different ways which is a case for Assamese. Hence the idea of treating the agent marking as agentive case is emerging.

absolutive is also used). A tripartite language treats S, A and O in three different ways. Assamese does not mark the intransitive subject (S) and the direct object (O) with the same case marking as the prototypical ergative languages (exempting Hindi-Urdu which also do not follow this) though, however, it does singles out the A (agent of a transitive clause) for special marking by adding '-e'. This is a characteristic way of distinguishing ergativity in tripartite language Basque (7):

BASQUE

(7) gizon-ak   mutil-a   ikusi du

     man.ERG   boy.ABS   saw

     The man saw the boy.

ASSAMESE

(8) manuh-zon-e   lora-to-k   dekhile

     man.CLA.Erg   boy.CLA.ACC   see.Pres Perf. 3P

     The man has seen the boy.

Issues on Argument Structure

Assamese distinguishes subjects of unaccusative and unergative verbs via case-marking and the nominal inflection /-e/ occurs only on unergative subjects (Amritavalli 2005).

Hence, it is important to see whether Assamese verb (whether main or sub-ordinate) is primarily governed by un-accusative or unergative.

- Only the unergative and transitive verbs can have subjects which can be projected as external arguments.
- The subjects of unaccusatives are underlying objects.
- The distinction between unaccusative and unergative as shown in the table below:

Unaccusative (Patient/Theme Subject)	Unergative (Agentive Subject)	Transitive
Mɔdɔn poril	Mɔdɔn-e hahe	Mɔdɔn-e kam-tu kore

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Madan.NOM	Madan.NOM	Madan.ERG work.CLA
fall.PresPerf.3P/go.Pres.3P	laugh.Pres.3P	do.Pres.3P
'Madan has gone.'	*'Madan laughs.'*	*'Madan does the work.'*

Proposed Hierarchy: Person

We propose the following hierarchy for the Assamese subject and the object case marking.
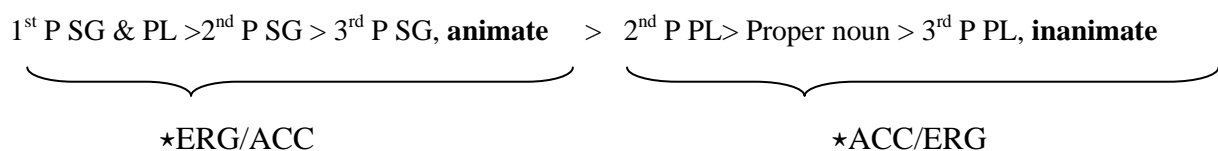
The proposed person sub hierarchy is as follows:

1st person SG & PL >2nd person SG > 3rd person SG > 2nd person PL> Proper noun > 3rd person PL

⋆ERG/ACC   ⋆ACC/ERG
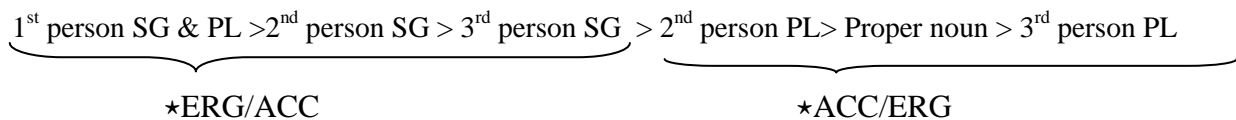
Where,   1st and 2nd person > 3rd person

The accusative system is prevalent when the subject is first person singular and plural, second person singular and the third person singular marked. The ergativity shows up when they are marked with second person and third person plural or subjects are proper nouns.

Proposed Hierarchy: Animacy

Assamese ergativity exhibits some differences with the typical ergative languages such as Hindi, Spanish and Romanian which show telicity distinction and it also distinguishes between the agentive vs. non-agentive transitives. (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2002)

1st P SG & PL >2nd P SG > 3rd P SG, **animate**   > 2nd P PL> Proper noun > 3rd P PL, **inanimate**

⋆ERG/ACC   ⋆ACC/ERG

The animacy is the second factor which plays an important role in ergative – absolutive and Nominative- accusative distinction. Accusative marking is essential when the subjects are animate and marked as first person singular and plural and second and third

person singular. If the subject is a proper noun and second or third person plural inanimate then it receives ergative case marking.

Summary

Assamese has split on 'person-animacy' scale and the /–e/ suffix which appears on the noun phrase in the subject position might be an instance of agentive case in Assamese. The motivation of calling it agentive is based on the semantics as the difference is reflected in the case of animate objects. In this paper we claim that Assamese is a split ergative language, which has a split on the basis of person and animacy but not on the basis of tense/aspect.

In Assamese, the syntax and semantics of the verbs have characteristics of both unaccusatives and unergatives. And case marking on the arguments can be interpreted as either ergative or agentive with respect to R where R is animacy and person.

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APPENDIX 1: THE PRONOMINAL PARADIGM OF ASSAMESE

		NOMINATIVE		ERGATIVE	
		Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1P		mɔi	ami	mɔi	Ami
2P	NH	tɔi	tɔhɔt	tɔi	tɔhɔt-e
	MH	tumi	tumalok	tumi	tumalok-e
	HH	apuni	aponalok	apuni	aponalok-e
3P		xi (M)	xihɔt	xi (M)	xihɔt-e
		tai (F)	xihɔt	tai (F)	xihɔt-e
		Ram	Ram-hɔt	Ram-e	Ram-hɔt-e
		Sita	Sita-hɔt	Sita-i	Sita-hɔt-e

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