Will the Real Proto-Austronesian Please Stand up?

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Was Proto-Austronesian an Ergative language or an Accusative one?
That's the way the question has always been asked. It's a categorial question, with only two categories and hence only two possible answers. But is the Erg-Acc quality continuous or discrete?
My position is that as a language changes in this quality, it does so in a series of small steps that are perhaps discrete for the individual and fairly close to discrete in the population. Eventually there is a discrete change that lets us say that the language has moved from Ergative syntax to Accusative syntax or from Accusative to Ergative.
The answer also depends on the stage of PAN in which we have an interest. The earliest reconstructable stage of PAN (or pre-PAN if you wish?) had Accusative syntax, while the final state of PAN achieved a fairly high degree of ergativity.
Perhaps the most revolutionary statement I am making is that ergativity is not a is not a dichotomous black-or-white classification. It is a movement around the Accusativity-Ergativity cycle in a series of very small steps. While on a forced choice I will call Atayal an ergative language, I sympathize with the ambivalence shown by Rau and by Huang. Like the philosopher Whitehead I contend that it is more fruitful to view the world as consisting of processes and not of discrete categories of things.

This is a study in diachronic syntax of the Austronesian (AN) languages. We shall be concerned with the casemarking (syntactic case) and the quasi-semantic Case relations (argument structure) of the core terms of the verb, in all its voices. (Nor need the syntactic case always agree with the casemarking.) We aim at clarifying the laws of Diachronic Universal Grammar.

We shall examine the ergativity of PAN and of some AN languages whose ergativity or accusativity has been questioned.
In this work, the terms 'agent' and 'patient' designate basic roles that can be called doer and undergoer. Experimenters are included in the 'agent' term because they are usually human and are taken to be in some way in charge of the situation, as in the 'veni, vidi, vici' situation.

AN is a good family in which to analyze the diachronic changes of ergativity, because for at least one living group, East Polynesian, reconstructions show two complete ancestral
cycles (four one-way changes), from PAN down: Accusative to Ergative to Accusative to Ergative to Accusative. This paper deals mostly with the earliest of the four.

I intend to show (1) that the earliest reconstructable PAN had Accusative syntax; (2) that before moving toward ergativity PAN had to develop passive voice(s) and developed at least three of them, much like the passive voices that English has; (3) that through a series of small, identifiable steps, the passive voices became ergative voices (the Accusative syntax became Ergative syntax); and (4) that the end stage of PAN, ancestral to most (if not all) primary branches of AN, had become essentially Ergative.

Properly speaking, of course, we should speak of Nominative-Accusative (or Nom-Acc) syntax, and Absolutive-Ergative (or Ab-Erg) syntax; though we'll also call them simply Accusative syntax and Ergative syntax.

The accusativity of earliest PAN is shown by the fact that the ergative case marker arose from an old space preposition ‘from’. The showing that the nominative casemarkers arose from markers of topic and markers of specificity (referentiality) suggests that in older PAN the nominative case marker may have been zero, as it is in English. On somewhat different grounds, Reid (1994) reached the same conclusion. “In PAN, Nominative noun phrases may have been unmarked for case.” (Reid went on to note that PAN had a locative marker i and that it became a nominative marker in Philippine languages. That part is not so. Workers including Li and Huang notice a PAN glottal (lost in PMP) on the left of the nominative [old topic] particle and not on the locative.)

Usually I shall gloss the ergative phrases as agents in English passive; that's the way to see the ancestral passive clauses from which they derive. Occasionally I may gloss the ergative phrases as nominative subjects in English. That's the way to foresee what the sentences promise to become in the future when the ergative agent case comes to be reanalyzed as the new nominative. Despite what can be done with certain verbs, making ‘ergative’ constructions in English (“I dropped the ball. The ball dropped to the ground.”), there is no generally applicable way to gloss AN ergative sentences into English.

Abbreviations: Language Groups

The following abbreviations will be used for language groups: AN Austronesian, MP Malayo-Polynesian, CEMP Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian, PN Polynesian, EPN East Polynesian. All may be preceded by P for Proto-. Standard abbreviations such as NP, DP, and VP are used. PCM means preposition or casemaker.
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![Image of a page from a document with text about abbreviations and language groups.](image-url)

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the syntactic pivot and adds, 'If subject is defined syntactically as the primary grammatical relation, the absolutive NP in Sama Bangingi may rightly be called the subject, regardless of its semantic role.

Gault gives an excellent example of antipassive in this language; and the construction in this languages is more convincing than antipassives that have been described in some other AN languages (to which Blust, pers. com., has objected). In an accusative language such as English, a passive is formed when the patient (or other non-nominative element) is promoted to nominative subject, and the agent is demoted to a prepositional phrase which is not a core term, and so is easily deletable. In Sama Bangingi an anti-passive is formed when the ergative agent is promoted to an absolutive subject and the patient is demoted to a prepositional phrase which is not a term, and so is easily deletable. Here are examples of Gault’s:

Angallang iya
INTRANS.shout 3sg.ABS
'He is shouting.'

Angallang iya ma - aku.
INTRANS.shout 3sg.ABS OBL 1sg
'He is shouting at me.'

Anaggaw aku ma- iya
ANTIPASSIVE.capture 1sg.ABS OBL 3sg
'I will (attempt to) capture him.' (AF)

Despite the difference in labeling the verb, and her showing "shout" as a simple intransitive, she says that the morphology and syntax of the last two sentences are precisely the same. The one labeled antipassive is a transformation (AF) of an ergative transitive (NAF) sentence. In both sentences the morpheme (word?) 'ma' (marked OBL as if it were a casemarker) needs to be considered a preposition if we consider an antipassive to be analogous to a passive. This is one of the situations that makes me regard preposition and casemarker as something less than distinct categories and leads me to use the designation PCM.

Some others have applied the term Antipassive to the Agent-Focus constructions which were ancestrally Nom-Acc active transitives before PAN moved into ergativity. Those examples have been less convincing because no preposition was inserted and free deletion has not been shown. Blust was right to doubt them. But the antipassive concept is clearly valid in Gault’s example.

The language has five voices (ergative and four NAF: patient, recipient, instrument, and locative). Gault regards the patient focus as the basic transitive construction in ergative languages, from which the other four focuses are derived.