Morphological Ergativity, Accusative Syntax and Voice in Djambarrpuyŋgu[1]

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It is not always easy to assess the degree of syntactic
ergativity (Dixon 1979a : 115 and ff., 1979b, 1980; Heath 1979,
1980) of a language, or, on the contrary, its accusativity.
This paper will examine some facts of coordination, subordination
and voice in Djambarrpuyŋgu (Yolngu), a language of Arnhemland,
Australia, from this point of view.

1. As in most Australian languages (Dixon 1980), verbs in
Djambarrpuyŋgu fall into two distinct categories, transitive
and intransitive. Indeed, with a transitive verb, both Agent
and Patient N or Pron. Participants must generally be expressed.
With an intransitive verb, only one of these participants is
acceptable. Djambarrpuyŋgu has ergative morphology for construc-
tions involving inanimates and non-totemic[2] or lower (henceforth
N.T.) animates (Tchekhoff and Zorc 1984 forthcoming); this means
that the Subject of an intransitive verb has the same form as
the Patient of a transitive one. On the contrary, higher and totemic
animates (TO.) and humans have a three-way construction: the

Subject of a transitive verb construes differently from the Subject of an intransitive, and differently again from the Object of a transitive verb. As for pronouns of all persons, they construe according to an accusative construction, i.e. the Subject of a transitive and of an intransitive verb both show the same formal case, a different one from the Object. If we equate Agent with S_t, and Patient with O_t, the above relations can be diagrammed as in Chart I.

Inanimates and N.T. animates: $\quad S_t \parallel S_i = O_t \quad$ (ergative)

Humans, personal names, kin terms $S_t \parallel S_i \parallel O_t \quad$ (3-way)
and also higher or TO. animates:

Pronouns: $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad S_t = S_i \parallel O_t \quad$ (accusative)

Chart I. Grammatical Relations

Inanimates etc.	Erg	Abs	Abs
Humans, etc.	Erg	Abs	Acc
Pronouns	Abs	Abs	Acc

Chart 2. Ergative and Accusative Marking

The middle column (S_i) in Chart I and their identical
(=) forms are unmarked phrases. All other forms are marked
phrases. All unmarked NPs will be said to be in the Absolutive
(henceforth Abs.). I prefer this name to nominative, for Abs.
covers all unmarked cases including Subject of an accusative-
type construction, as it does for pronouns in Djambarrpuyŋgu,
whereas the reverse does not have to be true.[3]

Here are some examples of each of these constructions:

(1) Dirramu-y   bumar   weti

    man-Erg   kill-past wallaby-Abs

    'The[4] man killed a[4] wallaby (N.T.).'

(2) Dirramu   marrtji-n   guya-lil

    man-Abs   go-past   fish-Ablative

    'The man went towards fishing.'

(3) barpurru linyu nhäma dirramu-ny

    yesterday we-du. saw boy-Acc

    'Yesterday we saw a boy.'

Now weti 'wallaby' is a Totem animal for some speakers;
they will consequently give the word an accusative case ending,
when it is Object of a transitive verb:

(4) D̲i̲r̲r̲a̲m̲u̲-̲y̲ b̲u̲m̲a̲r̲ w̲e̲t̲i̲-̲n̲y̲

    man-Erg   kill-past Acc

    'The man killed a wallaby (TO.).'

Interestingly, my informant gave me two sentences as follows:

(5) ŋ̲a̲r̲r̲a̲ b̲u̲m̲a̲r̲ w̲e̲t̲i̲   'I killed a wallaby.'
and added 'to eat', but

(6) *ŋ̲a̲r̲r̲a̲ b̲u̲m̲a̲r̲ w̲a̲t̲u̲   'I killed a dog'
is unacceptable 'because, he said, you don't eat dog'. The proper
way to say' I killed a dog' is:

(7) w̲a̲t̲u̲-̲n̲y̲ ŋ̲a̲r̲r̲a̲ b̲u̲m̲a̲r̲

with dog in the Acc. This shows us that dogs belong to higher

or Totemic animates. It has a tripartite construction just as

kin-terms do:

(8) napipi-ny[5] d̲h̲a̲r̲p̲u̲ŋ̲a̲l̲ y̲u̲k̲u̲'̲y̲u̲k̲u̲-̲y̲, muka?

    uncle-Acc speared   yg.bro.- Erg question

    'Was it Uncle whom Younger Brother speared?'

(9) y̲u̲k̲u̲'̲y̲u̲k̲u̲-̲n̲y̲ d̲h̲a̲r̲p̲u̲ŋ̲a̲l̲ n̲a̲p̲i̲p̲i̲-̲y̲

    yg.bro.-Acc   speared   uncle-Erg

    'Younger Brother, Uncle speared (him).'