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 constructions 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) <u>Dirramu-y   bumar   weṯi</u>

    man-Erg   kill-past wallaby-Abs

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

(2) <u>Dirramu   marrtji-n   guya-lil</u>

    man-Abs   go-past   fish-Ablative

    'The man went towards fishing.'

(3) <u>barpurru linyu nhäma dirramu-ny</u>

    yesterday we-du. saw boy-Acc

    'Yesterday we saw a boy.'

Now <u>weṯi</u> '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) Dirramu-y bumar weṯi-ny

    man-Erg   kill-past Acc

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

Interestingly, my informant gave me two sentences as follows:

(5) ŋarra bumar weṯi   'I killed a wallaby.'

and added 'to eat', but

(6) *ŋarra bumar waṯu   '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) waṯu-ny ŋarra bumar

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] dharpuŋal yuku'yuku-y, muka?

    uncle-Acc speared   yg.bro.- Erg question

    'Was it Uncle whom Younger Brother speared?'

(9) yuku'yuku-ny dharpuŋal napipi-y

    yg.bro.-Acc speared   uncle-Erg

    'Younger Brother, Uncle speared (him).'

(10) yuku'yuku   dharpunha-wuy   ŋapipi-wuŋ

     yg.bro.-Abs spear-Assoc   uncle-Productive

     'Younger Brother was speared by Uncle.'

The next example shows the same tripartite construction for personal names:

(11) John-dhu   dharpuŋal   Gurryala-ny

     John-Erg   speared   Gurryala - Acc

     'John speared Gurryala.'

With pronouns the construction is accusative, as in the next examples:

(12) ŋarra ga Lewukaŋ marrtji-n store-lil

     I   and Lewukaŋ go-past   store-Allative

     'Lewukaŋ and I went to the store.'

(13) ... yurr ŋarra-ny nhäŋal gatabana-y

     but   me-Acc   saw   buffalo-Erg

     '...but the buffalo saw me'[5]

(14) ŋarra bumar weṯi

     I   kill-past wallaby

     'I killed a wallaby (N.T.).'

In example (12) ŋarra, S_i, is formally the same as S_t of (14). This indicates morphological accusativity.

Morphological ergativity is thus present only on a small scale in Dj. Syntactically the language appears to be predominantly accusative, as will be borne out in some instances of the following constructions: coordination, subordination and voice. We shall examine each of these structures in turn, starting with coordination.

2. Coordination.

I have argued elsewhere (Tchekhoff and Zorc 1984 forthcoming) that change of Subject (Austin 1981) in Dj. is achieved through suffixation of the Subject-pronoun of the second, coordinated clause, if this Subject is not coreferential to the Subject of the first clause. Here S_i and S_t are treated alike; together they are opposed to O_t. Consider the following examples:

(15) <u>John-dhu bumar   Bill-nha bala ŋayi wandi-n-an</u>

John-Erg. hit-past Bill-Acc then   he   run-past-Discourse[6]

'John hit Bill, then ran (away).'

(16) <u>John-dhu bumar   Bill-nha bala ŋayi-ny[7] wandi-n-an</u>

John-Erg   Bill-Acc   he-Foc Opp

'John hit Bill, then he (Bill) ran away.'

Nothing in (16) is different from (15), except the Focus/OPPosition suffix -<u>ny</u> (see Tchekhoff and Zorc forthc.). Its presence is obligatory in (16) because Bill is O_t of the first sentence and S_i of the second. The same S/A syntactic pivot (Dixon 1979:120 ff.) obtains in

the following pair of examples:

(17) ŋunha dirramu-ny wutthurr miyalk-thu, bala ŋayi

   that man-Acc   hit-past woman-Erg   then 3sg.pron

   marrtjin-an nhokal-nha.

   go-past-Disc. to-you-Disc.

   'The woman hit that man, then she came to you.'

(18) ŋunha dirramu-ny wutthur miyalk-thu, bala ŋayi-ny[7]

       man-Acc   woman-Erg.   3sg.pron-

   marrtjinan

   Foc Opp

   'The woman hit that man, then he came (to you).'

There is no male--female opposition[8] in Dj.; here only the Focus/ Opposition suffix indicates switch-reference from one Subject to the other.

In (15) and (17) the S_t/S_i coreferential point, an accusative-type linkage, is an unmarked pronoun. But in (16) and (18) the O_t/S_i coreferential pivot, an ergative-type linkage, is a marked pronoun. Thus the unmarked construction links S_t with S_i.

3. Subordination.

Having examined simple coordination in Dj. and found it to follow an accusative type of syntax, we shall go on to an instance

of subordination. Subordination operates much as coordination does.

as will be shown from the following pair of purpose clauses:

(19) bäpa -mirri-ŋu-y   märra-ŋal ŋändi -mirri-ŋu-ny,

Father-relation-human-Erg get-past   mother-rel.-hum.-Acc

märr ga   ŋayi-n   dhu   dhä-gir'-yun

so   that   3sg.pron-Disc   fut.   punish

djamarrkuli'-nha - ny.[7]

children-Acc-Foc Spec 'here'

'Father fetched Mother so she would punish the children.'

This can be opposed to:

(20) ..... märr ga ŋayi dhu   dhä-gir'-yun djamarrkuli-ny'.

              3sg.pron   children-Foc Spec 'here'

'.... so that he could punish the children.'

Here in (20) Mother would be a witness or bystander approving of

Father's action. In (19) O_t of the first clause is coreferential

to S_t of the second clause; hence the discourse suffix -n to indicate

that the two Subjects are not coreferential. But in (20) both clauses

have the same Subject; hence the unmarked personal pronoun. Clearly

the syntactic pivot here is the one Subject S_t, rather than the two

Objects with two different referents, one for the main clause, and

the other for the subordinate clause. Consequently, one can infer

the general rule that subordination in Dj. has S_i / S_t for syntactic

pivot, which is accusative in type, rather than S_i / O_t, which

would be ergative in type.

4. Relativization.

As could be expected, relativization operates in the

same way as purpose clauses. I shall examine some instances of

it. In order to relativize a clause to another, there must be a

N or Pron P that is common to both the main and the relative clause.

In Dj., if this common NP -whatever its case in the main clause-

is S_i or S_t of the relative clause, it is deleted in the relative

clause:

(21) <u>dirramu-y dharpuŋal weṭi'   ŋunhi barpuru</u>

　　　man-Erg   speared   wallaby-Abs Deic.3 yesterday

　　　<u>ga   dhiyal   nhina</u>

　　　Progr here   was-sitting

　　　'The man speared the wallaby which was sitting

　　　here yesterday.'

In the above example, <u>weṭi'</u> 'wallaby' is O_t (Patient) of the main

transitive verb and S_i of the subordinate clause; compare this

with the next example:

(22) <u>bili ŋarra bumar</u>   <u>ŋunhi weṯi'</u>

Acc. I   kill past Deic   wallaby-Abs.

<u>ŋatha li - ga   ḻuka</u>

food Habit.-Cont. eat

'I killed the wallaby which was eating the food.'

Here as in (21) the relative sentence is attached directly
to the Patient morpheme of the main sentence. But in (22) the relative
sentence has a transitive verb and deleted Subject, S_t. In (21)
the relative verb is intransitive but it also deletes its Subject,
S_i. Both S_t and S_i are deleted: they are treated alike. They are
opposed to the following example:

(23) <u>dirramu-y dharpuŋal weṯi-ny'   ŋunhi   ŋayi</u>

man-Erg   speared   wallaby-Acc Deic.3 he

<u>nhäma barpuru</u>

saw   yesterday

'The man speared the wallaby he saw yesterday.'

Here the NP common to the main and subordinate clauses
is in Object function in the relativized clause; therefore the
Subject pronoun of the relative clause must be expressed. For
relativization, as for general subordination and coordination,
S_i and S_t are treated alike, as in any syntactically accusative
language. In other words, the Subject, whether S_i or S_t, of a

relative clause need not be expressed if it is coreferential to
the NP that is common to both clauses. If this NP stands in any
other function in the relative clause, the latter's non-referential
Subject must be expressed. Here again, Dj. shows syntactic
accusativity (Dixon 1979 : 121).

5. Voice

The last point I shall take up is that of voice. Here
is another trait that tends to show syntactic accusativity in
Djambarrpuyŋgu: if a transitive verb is needed with only one
participant, Agent plus Verb is perfectly acceptable:

(24) ŋayi ga ḷuka   'He is eating'

       he   cont. eat

(25) dirramu ga ḷuka   'The man is eating'

But a sentence with only verb + Patient NP alone is not allowed:

(26) *garrtjambal nhäŋal   'saw the/a kangaroo' (N.T.)

       kangaroo   saw

(27) *garrtjambal-nha nhäŋal 'same meaning (TO.)

       kangaroo-Acc   saw

If a sentence is needed that does not express the Agent,
then the verb must first be turned into a noun through the -nha-[6]
deverbative suffix; then it takes the associative case-ending
-wuy; the whole phrase now means 'is associated with (Verb)'. (26)
just above becomes:

(28) <u>garrtjambal nhä-nha-wuy</u>

  kangaroo   see-Devb-Ass

  'The/a kangaroo has been seen.'

Again:

 (29) <u>ŋatha-dhakal ḻuka-nha-wuy</u>   'The fruit has been eaten.'

 (30) <u>batha-nha-wuy warrakan</u>   'The meat has been cooked.'

This construction has been named <u>voice</u> here for lack of a better term. Here the absolutive NP remains unchanged, its referent is still the Patient of the nominalized verb; only the Agent becomes optional. When it is included, it takes the Productive case; this indicates the origin of the verbal operation. (For a discussion of the semantics of Patient O_t transformed into S_i, see Tchekhoff forthcoming 1984 'pseudopassives'.) It appears in short that this <u>-wuy</u> construction is used in order to intransitivize verbs that are normally transitive. The same functional necessity has been noted for Basque (Tchekhoff 1978 a: 88 foll.) and for Hindi (ibid.: 150).

In Djambarrpuyŋgu, as elsewhere, the plain straightforward sentence with basic verb and its two nominal (or pronominal) participants does not have the same functional use in discourse as the 'passive' voice in <u>-wuy</u>. Even if both its participants are expressed, the latter construction is used in order to emphasize

the Patient just as it would in English. Consider the two next
sentences:

(31) ŋapipi-y   dharpuŋal   yuku'yuku-ny

Uncle-Erg.   speared   yg.bro.-Acc.

'Uncle speared Younger-Brother.'

(32) Yuku'yuku   dharpu-nha-wuy   ŋapipi-wuŋ

yg.bro.(Abs)   spear-nom.-Assoc.   Uncle-Prod.

similar meaning

(31) is the unmarked 'flat' sentence. There are several
means of highlighting the various items of such a sentence and
they will be used in appropriate contexts (Tchekhoff and Zorc
forthc.). As for (32), it comes from a specific story and context:
its background is that a big fight took place involving several
members of the family, some of whom are now talking about this fight
with people who did not see it. (32) answers the following question:

(33) ŋapipi-ny   dharpu-ŋal   yuku'yuku-y,   muka?

uncle-Acc   speared   yg.bro.-Erg   question

'Was it Younger Brother who speared Uncle?'

The answer to this question is emphatic; both participants are
expressed, but an appropriate translation would express the choice
of the Productive case here, rather than the Ergative, and it

could go something like: 'No, Younger Brother was the speared

one, courtesy of Uncle!'

It would thus be more accurate to say that deverbative

nominal predicates in -wuy are used in order to intransitivize

verbs that are normally transitive.. This gives them exactly the

same functional use as the discourse value of so-called 'antipassives'

elsewhere (see for example Dixon 1972 : 65, 1977 : 282, Austin

1981 : 75, Breen ms 198).

In complex sentences made of verbs such as 'want' etc..+

infinitive, the syntax is typically accusative also. But I agree

with R.Dixon (1979a:115) where he writes that this characteristic

belongs to the very semantics of these verbs. Hence it does not

constitute a factor for accusative syntax. However, I will qualify

Dixon's statement about the universality of Deep Subjects: when

the Agent (or Deep Subject) is present in a sentence (as Surface

Subject), it predominates over other NP participants; but such

is not the case when it is the by-Agent of a passive verb.

6. Conclusion

We have seen that Djambarrpuyŋgu is a language with a limited

span of ergative morphology, and an accusative type of syntax.

This does not come as a surprise; when a language does show some

ergativity, the latter tends to be more extensive in morphology

than in syntax. This can be partly explained by the semantic

factual preponderance of agentive over other NPs. Nonetheless

if, however limited, morphological ergativity there is, it always

centers around the lower (Silverstein 1976) hierarchical Patients,

Agents notwithstanding.

Languages have different ways of expressing the basic

referential fact that inanimates are incapable of activity. (For

Hittite see Tchekhoff 1978b). It is thus a fact that there is

always more ergativity on the inanimate side of the hierarchical

scale of animacy. In the same way, in languages with different

constructions, ergativity generally goes with past or accomplished

Tense/Aspects (Tchekhoff 1978a : 133-191). Both these factors

can be put together: if a process/verbal operation is past,

accomplished, the doer (Agent) may have gone away, while the

affected partner, the Patient, remains present in its affected

state, as a result or witness of the past verb.

Morphological ergativity can be very limited; but the very

regularity of its domain precludes its being brushed aside

(Anderson 1976) as meaningless or futile. Even then, it forms

a hinge between man's logic and his language.

Footnotes

1. I would like to thank Dr.Frances Morphy and Prof. Bernard Comrie for their valuable comments on a previous version of this paper. However, I alone remain responsible for any mistakes or misinterpretations found here.

2. In Djambarrpuyŋgu, as in other Australian languages, each section of the tribe is represented by a different sacred animal who is ancestrally related to each member of the section. It follows that some native speakers of the same tribe may have a Totem-animal that is non-totemic to others of the same group. Ex. (4) was given by a speaker whose Totem-animal was the wallaby, (5) by another to whom wallaby was just meat. Djambarrpuyŋgu tribesmen do not eat their Totem-animal.

3. Indeed, many animate nominatives in various Indo-European languages are thought to be marked cases, left over from an earlier period where their mark was that of the Agent of an ergative construction (See Tchekhoff 1980).

4. There is no opposition (see further fn. 8) between a definite and an indefinite NP in Djambarrpuyŋgu. Hence the translation; it is more natural to have definite Subjects and indefinite Objects.

5. The order of units is not syntactically relevant in Dj. In a 'flat' sentence it is SVO. But order is relevant for discourse (Tchekhoff and Zorc 1984). Fronting an item is a discourse strategy as in many other languages (for French, see Tchekhoff forthc.).

6. -an and -n are allomorphs of -nha, a discourse suffix that indicates a SEQuence in a developing story (See Tchekhoff and Zorc op.cit.). -Nha SEQ. is homophonous to, but distinct from, -nha Accusative case, and from -nha nominalizing suffix.

7. -ny is another of these discourse suffixes (ibid.) It also has a number of allomorphs. It indicates FOCus, OPPosition, SPECificity, and is homophonous with -ny Acc. after a vowel. But if the Acc. case mark is followed by a suffix with an initial consonant, the Acc. goes to -nha- as it does in ex. (19).

8. OPPosition here means what can also be called contrast. But I prefer to keep the words contrast for syntagmatic, and opposition for paradigmatic differences.

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