Morphological Ergativity, Accusative Syntax and Voice in

Djambarrpuyŋgu

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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 inanimes 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.

\[
\text{Inanimates and N.T. animates: } S_t \parallel S_i = O_t \quad \text{(ergative)}
\]

\[
\text{Humans, personal names, kin terms } S_t \parallel S_i \parallel O_t \quad \text{(3-way)}
\]

\[
\text{and also higher or TO. animates: } S_t = S_i \parallel O_t \quad \text{(accusative)}
\]

Chart I. Grammatical Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inanimates etc.</th>
<th>Erg</th>
<th>Abs</th>
<th>Abs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Humans, etc.</td>
<td>Erg</td>
<td>Abs</td>
<td>Acc</td>
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<td>Pronouns</td>
<td>Abs</td>
<td>Abs</td>
<td>Acc</td>
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Chart 2. Ergative and Accusative Marking
The middle column (S₁) 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 Djambarrpuyŋŋu, whereas the reverse does not have to be true.³

Here are some examples of each of these constructions:

1. \textbf{Dirramu-y} \textbf{bumar} \textbf{weti}
   \begin{align*}
   &\text{man-Erg} \quad \text{kill-past wallaby-Abs} \\
   &'\text{The}^4 \text{ man killed a}^4 \text{ wallaby (N.T.)}.'
   \end{align*}

2. \textbf{Dirramu} \textbf{marrtji-n} \textbf{guya-lil}
   \begin{align*}
   &\text{man-Abs} \quad \text{go-past} \quad \text{fish-Ablative} \\
   &'\text{The man went towards fishing}.'
   \end{align*}

3. \textbf{barpurru linyu nhäma dirramu-ny}
   \begin{align*}
   &\text{yesterday we-du. saw boy-Acc} \\
   &'\text{Yesterday we saw a boy}.'
   \end{align*}

Now \textit{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) Dirramu-ŋ bumar weti-ny
   man-Erg kill-past Acc
   'The man killed a wallaby (TO.).'

Interestingly, my informant gave me two sentences as follows:

(5) garrā bumar weti    'I killed a wallaby.'
and added 'to eat', but

(6) *garrā bumar watu     '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) watu-ŋy garrā 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-ŋy dharpŋal yuku'yuku-ŋy, muka?
   uncle-Acc speared yg.bro.-Erg question
   'Was it Uncle whom Younger Brother speared?'

(9) yuku'yuku-ŋy dharpŋal napipi-ŋy
   yg.bro.-Acc speared uncle-Erg
   'Younger Brother, Uncle speared (him).'
(10) yuku'yu ku dharpunha-wuy ŋapi-pi-wuy
   yg.bro.-Abs spear-Associ 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) ɲarra ga Lewukaŋ marrtji-n store-lil
    I and Lewukaŋ go-past store-Allative
    'Lewukaŋ and I went to the store.'

(13) ... yurr ɲarra-ny nhāŋal gatabana-y
    but me-Acc saw buffalo-Erg
    '...but the buffalo saw me.'

(14) ɲarra bumar weti
    I kill-past wallaby
    'I killed a wallaby (N.T.).'

In example (12) ɲarra, $S_i$, 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) John-dhu bumar Bill-nha bala ñayi wandi-n-an

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

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

(16) John-dhu bumar Bill-nha bala ñayi-ny wandi-n-an

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 -ny (see Tchekhoff and Zorc forthcoming). 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) **gunha dirramu-ny wutthurr miyalk-thu, bala nayi**

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) **gunha dirramu-ny wutthur miyalk-thu, bala nayi-ny**

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 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 $S_i$.


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-qu-y märра-qal qändi -mirri-qu-ny,
      Father-rel-human-Erg get-past mother-rel-hum-Acc
mär r r ga ḳayi-n dhu dhā-gir'-yun
      so that 3sg.pron-Disc fut. punish
djamarrkulì'-nha - ny. 7
      children-Acc-Foc Spec 'here'

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

This can be opposed to:

(20) ..... mär r r ga ḳayi dhu dhā-gir'-yun djamarrkulì-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) Ōt of the first clause is coreferential to Șt 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 Șt, 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) dirramu-y dharpumal we'i' nhuni barpuru
man-Erg speared wallaby-Abs Deic.3 yesterday
gyi dhiyal nhina
Progr here was-sitting
'The man speared the wallaby which was sitting here yesterday.'

In the above example, we'i' 'wallaby' is $O_t$ (Patient) of the main transitive verb and $S_i$ of the subordinate clause; compare this with the next example:
(22) **bili ŋara bumar ŋunhi weti**

Acc. I kill past Deic wallaby-Abs.

ŋatha li - ga 1uka

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) **dirramu-y dharpugal weti-ny' ŋunhi ŋayi**

man-Erg speared wallaby-Acc Deic.3 he

ŋhama barpuru

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) ḡayi ga luka 'He is eating'
      he   cont. eat
(25) dirramu ga luka 'The man is eating'

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

(26) *garrtjambaŋal nhänal 'saw the/a kangaroo' (N.T.)
      kangaroo saw
(27) *garrtjambaŋal-nha nhänal '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-
 deverbative suffix; then it takes the associative case-ending
-wuy; the whole phrase now means 'is associated with (Verb)'. (26)
just above becomes:
(28) garrtjambal nhä-nha-wuy
kangaroo see-Devb-Ass
'The/a kangaroo has been seen.'

Again:

(29) natha-dhakal luka-nha-wuy 'The fruit has been eaten,'

(30) batha-nha-wuy warrakan 'The meat has been cooked.'

This construction has been named voice 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 -wuy 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 Djambarrpuyngu, 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 -wuy. 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) ᵇapipi-ʸ dharpuŋal yuku'yuku-ny
Uncle-Erg. speared yg.bro.-Acc.
'Uncle speared Younger-Brother.'

(32) Yuku'yuku dharpu-nha-wuy ᵇapipi-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 forthcoming). 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) ᵇapipi-ny dharpuŋal 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 Djambilarrpuyŋŋu 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 Djambrarrpyungu, 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. Djambrarrpyungu 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 Djambrarrpyungu. 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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