

The ergativity continuum: From Tagalog to Bahasa Indonesia, by way of Malagasy

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The question of what is an ergative language is especially pertinent within the Austronesian language family. Certain languages are uncontroversially ergative (Samoan) while others appear to be straightforwardly accusative (Bahasa Indonesia). But in between there are Tagalog, a language that a number of analyses treat as ergative (e.g. Gerds 1988) and Malagasy, a language that has rarely received an ergative analysis (but see Bittner and Hale 1996). In this paper, I discuss the arguments that have been put forward for and against ergativity and I show how they do or do not apply to three languages (Bahasa Indonesia, Tagalog and Malagasy).

As noted by Manning (1996), Tagalog shows a certain number of ergative characteristics, as summed up in the table in (1):

(1)

Absolutive Marked DP

Subcategorized element of every clause

Extraction (relativization, wh-question)

Specific/Wide scope

Actor

Antecedent of reflexives

Equi target

Imperative addressee

Turning now to Indonesian, Chung (1976) shows that this language has two different “passives”: one is more like an English passive (2a), while the other could be characterized as ergative (2b).

- (2) a. Buku itu di-baca oleh Amir b. Buku itu saya/kamu/dia baca
book that PASS-read by Amir book that 1sg/2/3 read
'The book was read by Amir.' 'That book, I/you/he read.'

If this second “passive” is indeed ergative, we expect a pattern along the lines of (1); moreover, we expect the ergative pattern to be absent in examples such as (2a). As shown by Arka and Manning (1998), however, the results are mixed. Binding, for example, does distinguish between the two passives: in the first, the grammatical subject is the antecedent, while in the second, the actor is the antecedent. Extraction, however, uniformly targets the grammatical subject (or absolutive) in both passives – the ergative pattern. Control, on the other hand, behaves uniformly accusative: only the grammatical subject can be controlled.

In sum, not only do individual languages show varying degrees of ergativity, but even particular constructions within one language can exhibit mixed ergative status. These results suggest that ergativity is not a single binary parameter, but must be sub-divided into micro-parameters (e.g. the availability of ergative case within VP). The rest of the paper explores these parameters and how they account for the ergativity continuum.

References

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