

Aggressively ergative agreement in Gitksan

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OVERVIEW: This paper presents a minimalist account of the agreement system in Gitksan (Tsimshianic, BC), a head-marking ergative language. In Gitksan, two major syntactic splits affect agreement: a clause-type split, and, within just one of the clause types, an atypical nominal-type split. The split by clause type exhibits a clear ergative alignment on both sides, and so does not itself qualify as a ‘split-ergative’ division. I focus on the nominal-type split, which if anything can be characterized as ‘split-absolutive’: secondary agreement alternates between a nominative and an absolutive alignment, with the nominative pattern being triggered by third plurals and DPs. I show that—contra recent proposals about nominal-type splits in case-marking ergative languages (Legate 2014)—the Gitksan system cannot be successfully accounted for with reference to the notion of a morphological default. Instead, I demonstrate that it is the features of the ergative argument which crucially determine the agreement pattern for the whole clause, including the absolutive argument. This stands in contrast to models which reduce the role of ergatives, or refer primarily to features of the absolutive, when determining case/agreement patterns in ergative or split-ergative systems.

DATA: Gitksan is a VSO language which distinguishes between *independent* clauses (predicate-initial) and *dependent* clauses (where some operator or auxiliary precedes the predicate). One of the characteristic properties of each clause type is the function of agreement paradigms in each. The main type of agreement, a set of suffixes on the predicate (bolded below), marks ergatives in independent clauses (1), but absolutives in dependent clauses (2).

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| <p>(1) Independent (suffix = ERG)</p> <p>a. Bax 'nit.
run 3.III
'S/he ran.'</p> <p>b. Yaj-i-t 'nit.
hit-TR-3.II 3.III
'S/he hit him.'</p> | <p>(2) Dependent (suffix = ABS)</p> <p>a. Nee=dii bax-a'y.
NEG=FOC run-1SG.II
'I didn't run.'</p> <p>b. Nee=dii=n yats-t.
NEG=FOC=1.I hit-3.II
'I didn't hit him.'</p> |
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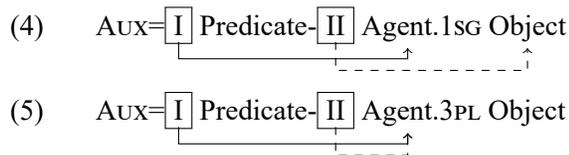
In independent clauses, where the agreement suffixes are ergative, absolutive arguments surface as full pronouns ('nit in (1a,b)). In dependent clauses, a specialized pre-predicate paradigm marks the ergative (boxed in (2b)), and the suffixal series switches focus to mark the absolutive. This pattern can be referred to as *pivoting ergative*, or *agreement switch* (Kalin and van Urk 2015). Crucially, the ergative nature of agreement does not change across clause-types; there is merely a second locus of agreement available in dependent clauses to realize this alignment.

The nominal-type split occurs in dependent clauses, where there are two agreeing heads. Ergative arguments are reliably marked by the pre-predicative agreement paradigm, and absolutive by the suffixal paradigm, in a classic *ergative/absolutive* alignment (3a). However, if the ergative argument is a DP or third-person plural pronoun, it is targeted by both pre-predicate and suffix agreement, resulting in a *double ergative* pattern (3b). If this happens, the unindexed absolutive surfaces as a full pronoun. As the intransitive subject receives this agreement in any case, the resulting alignment of suffixal agreement can be described as nominative.

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| <p>(3) a. Nee=dii=t yats-t.
NEG=FOC=3.I hit-3.II
'S/he didn't hit him/her.'</p> <p>b. Nee=dii=t yats-diit 'nit.
NEG=FOC=3.I hit-3PL.II 3.III
'They didn't hit him/her.'</p> | <p><i>Ergative/Absolutive</i></p> <p><i>Double Ergative</i></p> |
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This pattern holds in direct contradiction of Silverstein’s (1976) hierarchy of nominal-type splits, which suggests that participants would be more likely to trigger a nominative/accusative alignment than elements lower in the hierarchy. Most recent proposals on the subject of nominal-type splits capitalize upon this hierarchy, utilizing structural superiority for participants (Coon and Preminger 2012) or featural markedness for participants and/or plurals (Legate 2014) to allow these arguments to escape from an ergative configuration. Neither of these approaches suffice in the Gitksan case, as an ergative configuration is essential on both sides of the split. Further, against the predictions of Legate’s (2014) feature markedness approach, the most ergative nominal type in this system is not the type with the most unmarked features.

PROPOSAL: Within the dependent clause type, I propose that pre-predicate ergative agreement on a transitive *v* probes first (Round I), consistently finding its ergative target. Once agreed with, the features of the ergative argument are deactivated, and become inert to future Agree operations that attempt to target them. That is, once the ergative has entered into an Agree relation with the pre-predicate agreement head, it becomes invisible to subsequent probing by the suffixal agreement head (Round II). Suffixal agreement aggressively seeks the highest target in its c-command domain with active features. An ergative argument which is fully inert, such as 1SG in (4), is not a viable target, allowing suffixal agreement to target the lower absolutive argument. By contrast, a 3PL ergative remains active, and is a target for both agreement probes as in (5).



The crux of the proposal lies in the relativization of each of the two agreement probes to a particular set of features. Pre-predicate agreement, I argue, is relativized to seek ϕ -features (person and participant number), while suffixal agreement seeks a larger set of D-features. Pre-predicate agreement targets the third-person features of ergative third-plurals or DPs, but these arguments contain additional D-features and are therefore not left inert after Round I of agreement. Under this analysis, therefore, it is the ergative argument which is able to control the agreement pattern in the clause, but not by virtue of different nominal types varying in their structural position or spillover. The absolutive plays no role in the split; even the most marked absolutive object may only control suffixal agreement if the features of the ergative have been fully deactivated.

This solution utilizes a feature geometry which relies on a division between third person and participant plurals. This is well-motivated when considering the recent diachronic development of third-person plurality in Interior Tsimshianic. The success of the proposal thus stands as an argument in favor of emergent, rather than universal, feature hierarchies. Furthermore, the language itself serves as a case study in support of the increasingly common claim that ‘absolutive’ is not a syntactic primitive, while simultaneously highlighting the primacy of ergativity and ergative agreement across a structural split. ‘Ergative’ is a foundational notion, while ‘absolutive’ agreement can be visibly reanalyzed as a leftover class: the remnants of a generic agreement process which has been robbed of potential ergative targets.

References

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