

Aspectual Ergative as Perfective Oblique*

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1 Introduction

- Ergative systems often exhibit **splits** in case alignment
- Such splits are often based on clausal **aspect** (Silverstein, 1976; Moravcsik, 1978)
- Recent proposals link such splits to special properties of **imperfective** syntax (Laka, 2006; Coon, 2010)
- I argue instead that at least some ergatives are directly licensed by **perfective** syntax (partially returning to Mahajan (1997)’s analysis).
- Such “ergatives” are obliques licensed by a prepositional Asp^0 head, **not** by either T^0 or v^0 .

2 Background

- Aspect-based ergative splits occurs along a fixed hierarchy cross-linguistically (Moravcsik, 1978; Dixon, 1994).
- While languages vary in the point at which the split occurs, perfect/perfective aspect is associated with ergative/absolutive patterns, while imperfective and progressive are associated with nominative/accusative patterns.

ERG/ABS alignment ←

→ *NOM/ACC alignment*

PERFECT \gg PERFECTIVE \gg IMPERFECTIVE \gg PROGRESSIVE

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Hindi exhibits such a pattern of split ergativity, as exemplified in (1):

(1) Raam-ne vah kitaabē paṛ^hū hē
Ram-**ERG** those books read-**PERF** be-PRES
“Ram has read those books.”

(2) Raam vah kitaabē paṛ^htaa thaa
Ram.**NOM** those books read-**IMPF** be-PRES
“Ram used to read those books.”

[Mahajan 1997: (5), (9)]

Two types of accounts have been offered for aspect-based ergative splits:

1. **Perfective is special**
2. **Imperfective is special**

2.1 Perfective is Special

On this type of account, split ergativity arises because perfective syntax contains a special licenser for “ergative” case.

Mahajan (1994, 1997) analyzes Hindi split ergativity on these lines.

- Following Kayne (1993), Mahajan proposes that perfect/perfective syntax contains a P^0 .
- This P^0 is involved in licensing external arguments.
- In languages with auxiliary HAVE, P^0 incorporates to (what would otherwise occur as) auxiliary BE.
- In languages like Hindi, this same P^0 surfaces as ergative (=adpositional oblique) case.

Drawbacks: Following the analyses of HAVE in Freeze (1992) and Kayne (1993), Mahajan proposes that oblique P^0 originates as the sister of the subject in the perfect.

It is unclear why the subject should be base generated as the sister of P^0 in the perfect and perfective, but not in other aspects.

2.2 Imperfective is Special

In these approaches, split ergativity arises because imperfective syntax disrupts the otherwise-general processes of ergative case assignment.

Laka (2006) proposes this kind of account for the absence of ergative in Basque progressives.

- Laka argues that the Basque progressives marker *ari* is an embedding verb:

(3) emakume-a ogi-a jaten **ari** da
woman-DET bread-DET eating **PROG** is
‘The woman is eating (the) bread’ *[Laka 2006: (1b)]*

- As a result, Basque progressives are biclausal, with the subject and object surfacing in difference clauses.
- The “transitive” subject in progressives is actually the intransitive subject of an embedding verb, and thus has no reason to trigger ergative agreement.

Coon (2010) extends this proposal to split ergativity more generally.

- Coon proposes that imperfective aspect is uniformly associated with larger/more marked structures than the perfective.
- These larger structures disrupt ergative case assignment by dividing clauses into two separate case domains.
- Coon argues that perfect/perfectives never disrupt ergative alignment because they are **never** associated with locative or prepositional syntax

Drawbacks: Though this approach accounts well for languages like Basque, where ergative disappears in contexts that clearly involve additional overt structure, broader typological claim is unjustified.

Perfectives – and certainly perfects – are **not** universally less marked than imperfectives (Comrie, 1976; Dahl, 1985)

Furthermore, they are widely argued to include prepositional structure (Kayne, 1993, et seq.)

3 Oblique Perfects

This section lays out the evidence that the syntax of the perfect/perfective is associated with some prepositional element, contra the claims of Coon (2010).

- Mahajan (1997): the Hindi perfective-linked ergative is adpositional, i.e. **oblique** (as are many ergative markers: Anderson, 1976; Dixon, 1979, a.o.)
 - Can be separated from DP by an emphatic particle
 - Appears after both members of coordinated DP

- Kayne (1993): auxiliary HAVE reflects the presence of a prepositional element in the perfect.
 - Much evidence that possessive HAVE corresponds to BE + P⁰ (Benveniste, 1966; Freeze, 1992; Levinson, 2011, a.o.)
 - The fact that HAVE alternates with BE as a perfect auxiliary argues that the same P⁰ occurs in the syntax of the perfect
- **Yet More Striking:** Oblique subjects in “possessive perfects”

Periphrastic perfects in Estonian and several Balto-Slavic languages require oblique marking on the clausal subject.

- (4) *Estonian* *[Lindström and Trigel 2010:381]*
- a. Mu-l on auto pes-tud.
 I-ADE be.3SG car wash-PASS.PTCP
 ‘My car is/has been washed.’/‘I have washed the car.’
- b. Mu-l on juba maga-tud.
 I-ADE be.3SG already sleep-PASS.PTCP
 ‘I have already slept.’

- (5) *North Russian* *[Kuz'mina and Nemčenko 1971:27]*
- U lisicy uneseno kuročka.
 at fox:GEN carried-off-NO chicken:NOM.F
 ‘A fox has carried off a chicken.’

- Further evidence that perfect/perfective syntax provides a source for oblique case.
- These oblique subject perfects resemble the “ergative” pattern of Hindi, but lack its sensitivity to transitivity (i.e. its ergativity).¹

Converging evidence that perfect/perfective syntax includes a prepositional element P⁰, realized variously as HAVE (Kayne, 1993) and as oblique subject marking (Mahajan, 1997).

¹This parallel is developed in Jung (2011).

4 Asp⁰ Itself Licenses Oblique Subjects

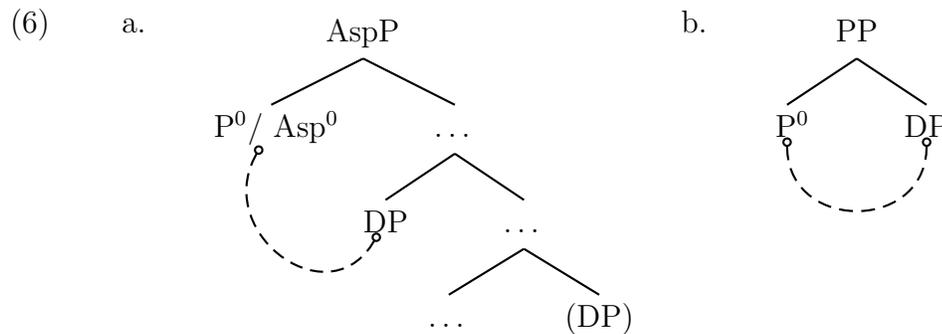
Still to be answered: Where does P⁰ occur in perfect/perfective syntax?

How does ergative alignment arise in languages like Hindi?

Proposal: P⁰ is itself the head that contributes the semantics of perfect/perfective²

$$P^0 \approx Asp^0$$

- In “possessive perfects” Asp⁰/P⁰ licenses oblique on the highest DP in its complement—i.e. the surface subject—just as some prepositions license oblique marking on their DP complement.



- Thus the aspectual **split**: oblique licensed only by perfect/perfective Asp⁰.
- What gives rise to ergative alignment of oblique in languages like Hindi?
- Back to Mahajan (1997): striking parallel with HAVE/BE alternations

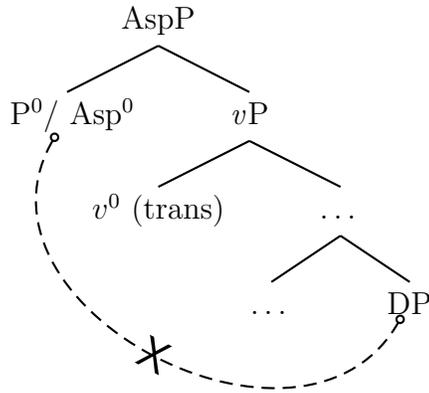
A Four-Way Typology:

	Aux HAVE	ERG/OBL for Subj
Uniform	<i>English, Spanish</i>	<i>Estonian, North Russian</i>
Only in Transitive	<i>Italian, Dutch</i>	<i>Hindi</i>

- Bjorkman (2011): alternation between HAVE and BE arises because transitive syntax blocks relationship between Asp⁰/P⁰ and some lower element.
- Extension to Hindi ergative/oblique: transitive syntax blocks relationship between Asp⁰/P⁰ and an internal argument.

²cf. proposals of deep identity between temporal and locative relations: Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria, 2000; Ritter and Wiltschko, 2009, a.o..

(7)



5 Conclusion & Implications

Core of the Proposal: Perfect/perfective Asp⁰ can directly license oblique subject marking.

- In some languages (e.g. Hindi) the same mechanisms that result in HAVE/BE selection give rise to a split ergative pattern for this oblique marking.

However, this cannot be the **only** source of aspect-based splits: fails if ergative is clearly non-oblique, or if split falls between progressive and imperfective.

Some Remaining Issues:

- What is the relationship between Asp⁰/P⁰ and possessive P⁰?
- Why is Asp⁰/P⁰ realized sometimes via HAVE and sometimes via oblique?
- If the sources of split ergative are heterogenous, why do they give rise to the same hierarchy?

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