

# ERGATIVITY

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# 1 *Introduction*

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The term ‘ergativity’ is, in its most generally accepted sense, used to describe a grammatical pattern in which the subject of an intransitive clause is treated in the same way as the object of a transitive clause, and differently from transitive subject. The term was first used to refer to the case marking on constituents of a noun phrase: ‘ergative’ is the case marking transitive subject, contrasting with another case – originally called ‘nominative’ but nowadays ‘absolutive’ – marking intransitive subject and transitive object.

Ergativity is thus complementary to the familiar grammatical pattern of accusativity, in which one case (nominative) marks both intransitive and transitive subject, with another case (accusative) being employed for transitive object.

Use of the terms ‘ergative’ and ‘absolutive’ has been extended to the marking of syntactic functions by particles or adpositions, by pronominal cross-referencing markers on a main or auxiliary verb, and by constituent order. The term ‘ergative’ has been used in a further, syntactic, sense to apply to coreferentiality constraints on the formation of complex sentences, through coordination and subordination; if these constraints treat intransitive subject and transitive object in the same way the language is said to have ‘ergative syntax’, and if they treat intransitive subject and transitive subject in the same way there is said to be ‘accusative syntax’. Preliminary exemplification is given in §§1.1, 1.2. Some writers have used ‘ergative’ in further ways, that are sometimes confusing and even contradictory; these are mentioned in §1.3 below.

Chapter 2 draws a critical distinction between languages where grammatical marking *directly* reflects the meaning of a particular sentence in an instance of use (e.g. whether the action is purposeful or accidental), and languages of familiar type where grammatical marking relates to the *prototypical* meaning of the verb used (e.g. the subject of ‘hit’ will always be marked in the same way, irrespective of whether the hitting was done

accidentally or on purpose). Languages of the first type can be said to have *semantically based marking* of the arguments of a verb, and those of the second type *syntactically based marking*. Case labels – such as ergative, absolutive, nominative and accusative – are only properly applicable to languages with syntactically based marking.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the marking of core syntactic relations within a simple clause – what is often called ‘morphological ergativity’. Many languages have a mixture of ergative and accusative systems, with these splits being conditioned by the semantic nature of any one or more of various types of obligatory sentence components – verb, noun phrases, aspect/tense/mood – or by the distinction between main and subordinate clauses.

Chapter 5 discusses the category of ‘subject’ and how this applies to languages of ergative character. The following chapter considers ‘valency-changing’ operations such as passive and antipassive, and the categorisation of a language as syntactically accusative, syntactically ergative, a combination of the two, or none of these.

Chapter 7 surveys the ways in which an accusative system can develop into an ergative one, and vice versa, paying attention to the different types of factor which condition these two directions of change.

The final chapter asks why some grammatical systems are accusative and others ergative, finding a partial basis in the organisation of discourse. After discussing ideas that have been put forward concerning the mental, social and linguistic correlates of ergativity, there is a summary of the main conclusions of this work and then a statement of the implications of this study for an integrated theory of language. A short appendix refers to the treatment of ergativity in some recent theoretical models.

The purpose of this volume is, then, to survey the different ergative properties that human languages show, describing and explaining how these interrelate, their grammatical and semantic conditioning and their role in the organisation of discourse.

Ergativity (as the term is used here) is not a phenomenon encountered in the familiar languages of Europe. It does occur in – at a rough estimate – about a quarter of the languages of the world:

**Basque**, the language isolate spoken in the Pyrenees, is fully ergative at the morphological level (see N’Diaye 1970; Brettschneider 1979; Bossong 1984; Ortiz de Urbina 1989; among many other sources).

Ergative characteristics have been reported for each of the three language families spoken in and around the Caucasus – **North-east Caucasian** (with Nakh and Dagestanian subdivisions), **North-west Cau-**

**casian**, and **South Caucasian** (or Kartvelian). Note that no genetic links between these three Caucasian families are generally accepted. It seems that the first use of the term ‘ergative’ (based upon the Greek *ergon* ‘work, deed’) was by Dirr (1912) in a description, written in Russian, of the Dagestanian language Rutul. However, the term did not come into general circulation until the publication of Dirr’s (1928) survey, written in German, of thirty-five Caucasian languages.<sup>1</sup>

Ergative characteristics are apparent in a number of languages of the ancient Near East (all were extinct well before the beginning of the Christian era) – **Sumerian** (Michalowski 1980; Thomsen 1984: 49–51; Foxvog 1975), **Hurrian** (Speiser 1941), **Urartian**, **Hattic** and **Elamite** (see Steiner 1979, and further references therein). (Urartian is related to Hurrian, and it has been suggested that Elamite may be related to the Dravidian family from south India (McAlpin 1974) – whose modern languages are entirely accusative – but no other genetic links involving these languages appear plausible.)

There have been various suggestions, of different kinds, that proto-Indo-European had ergative characteristics (e.g. Uhlenbeck 1901); none stands up under detailed scrutiny (see Rumsey 1987a, b). However, it does appear that various branches of the Indo-European family developed ergative features. This happened in Hittite and other languages of the **Anatolian** branch (Garrett 1990) which were spoken in the Near East during the second and first centuries BC. It seems that in this part of the world, at that time, there was a ‘linguistic area’, consisting of a number of language isolates and small subgroups, not known to be genetically related, all of which showed some ergative characteristics – the Anatolian subgroup of Indo-European, Sumerian, Elamite and Hurrian-Urartian, and perhaps the proto-languages for some or all of the three modern Caucasian families.

Comrie (1981a: 181) mentions that **Classical Armenian** had some ergative characteristics. And, as is well known, an ergative pattern has developed in past tense/perfective aspect for some languages from the **Iranian** subgroup (e.g. John Payne 1980), and also for some from the **Indic** subgroup (e.g. Klaiman 1987; Allen 1951).

**Burushaski**, a language isolate spoken in inaccessible mountain valleys of the Karakoram Range on the border between Kashmir and Tibet, also shows ergative inflection in past-based tenses (Lorimer 1935; Tiffou and Morin 1982).

<sup>1</sup> See Seely (1977) for an exemplary historical account of the use of ‘ergative’ and related labels.



It has been suggested that the Vakh dialect of **Khanty**, a Uralic language, shows a modicum of ergativity (Comrie 1981a: 130; Perrot 1986, 1989).

Many languages from the **Tibeto-Burman** family have ergative characteristics, and it is generally considered that proto-Tibeto-Burman may also have had these (DeLancey 1987, 1989; Regamey 1954).

The wide-ranging Austronesian family contains a number of pockets of ergativity. Some Polynesian languages, including **Tongan** (Churchward 1953) and **Samoan** (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992), show ergative marking on NPs although other Polynesian languages have an accusative system; and scholars are divided as to whether the proto-Polynesian system was accusative or ergative – see §7.1 below. Ergativity has also been reported for the **Tamanic** subgroup, on the island of Borneo (Adelaar forthcoming) and for the **South Suluwesi** subgroup (Friberg 1991; Mithun 1991b). There has been much discussion of the most appropriate grammatical characterisation of **Tagalog** and other Philippines languages, with a number of scholars arguing for an ergative interpretation (see note 28 to Chapter 6 and Cena 1977, 1979; Blake 1988; Gerdtts 1988; De Guzman 1988; Kroeger 1991a, b; Mithun forthcoming).

'**Papuan**' is used as a cover term for the non-Austronesian languages spoken on New Guinea and neighbouring islands, which fall into perhaps sixty distinct language families. Superficial ergative features are found in a number of Papuan languages, including Enga (Li and Lang 1979), Hua (Haiman 1980), Yimas (Foley 1991), Yawa (Jones 1986), Koiari (Dutton, personal communication), Kaluli (Schieffelin 1979, 1985 – and see Chapter 5), Ku Wara (Merlan and Rumsey 1990) and Kanum (Boelaars 1950: 37), all from different families (see Foley 1986: 106–10).

The **Australian** language family can be divided into the Pama-Nyungan group, including almost 200 languages, and a number of smaller groups collectively known as non-Pama-Nyungan (containing perhaps sixty languages between them). The great majority of modern Pama-Nyungan languages show ergative features, which appear to have a considerable time-depth; and there are ergative features in a number of non-Pama-Nyungan languages (see Blake 1987a: 187).

There are a number of small language families and language isolates grouped together, on geographical grounds, as Paleo-Siberian. Of these **Chukotko-Kamchatkan** (which includes the Chukchee and Alutor languages) and **Yukagir** show ergative grammar (Comrie 1981a: 246–52, 261).

Ergativity occurs in only a small number of the language families of North America. The best known is **Eskimo-Aleut**, which extends from Greenland to Alaska and across the Bering Strait, where it is contiguous with Chukchee. It may be that the first informed discussion of the ergative construction was Fabricius (1801: 78–9) on Greenlandic Eskimo; he used the term ‘nominativus transitivus’ for what would nowadays be called ‘ergative case’ (see Seely 1977: 192). Ergativity is also reported for **Tsimshian** from British Columbia (Boas 1911; Rigsby 1975; Mulder 1989a, b) and **Chinook** from Oregon (Silverstein 1976). (These two languages were classed as Penutian by Sapir 1929, but it has not been possible to sustain a genetic relationship between them – Campbell and Mithun 1979.)

In Central America, languages of the **Mayan** family have strong ergative characteristics, which can also be seen in the language of Mayan hieroglyphs (Bricker 1986), and has been posited for proto-Mayan (see, for instance, Larsen and Norman 1979).

South America shares with New Guinea the distinction of having the greatest linguistic diversity, and also the largest number of languages in need of description. There are in this continent the most complexly conditioned types of ergative splits (see Chapter 4). Ergative structures have been reported for languages from at least the following families: **Jê** (e.g. Urban 1985), **Arawak** (e.g. Aikhenvald-Angenot and Angenot 1991), **Tupí-Guaraní** (e.g. Jensen 1990; Seki 1990), **Panoan** (see §§4.2, 4.3 below), **Tacanan** (Camp 1985), **Chibchan** (Constenla 1982), **Maku** (Helen Weir, personal communication) and **Carib** (Franchetto 1990; Thomas Payne 1990). There is currently debate as to whether or not proto-Carib had an ergative character – see §7.1. There are a number of further language families in Amazonia and in the southern part of the continent, for some of which little information is available, and there are a number of language isolates; of the latter, ergative features are found in **Trumai** (Guirardello, 1992) and **Jabuti** (Pires 1992), for instance.

Ergativity is remarkably rare among languages of the African continent. However, it is found in a number of **Western Nilotic** languages, from the southern Sudan, including Pāri (Andersen 1988). A trace of ergativity has also been reported by Frajzyngier (1984a, b) for **Mandara** and other languages from the Chadic branch of the Afroasiatic family (see note 3 to Chapter 3).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There is a further very marginal example of an ergative-type pattern reported for Loma, from the Mande subgroup of Niger-Congo. Rude (1983) explains how in an earlier stage of the language there was a nasal prefix *N̄-* on each NP, and the clitic *N̄-* also served as

### 1.1 S, A and O: the universal syntactic–semantic primitives

All languages distinguish between clauses that involve a verb and one core noun phrase (intransitive clauses) and those that involve a verb and two or more core NPs (transitive clauses, including ditransitive as a subtype). In some languages almost every verb is strictly classified as intransitive or transitive – Latin<sup>3</sup> and the Australian language Dyirbal are of this type. In other languages the transitivity of verb roots is more fluid – in English, for instance, some verbs (e.g. *go*, *shudder*) can only be used in intransitive clauses, some (e.g. *hit*, *take*) only in transitive clauses, but there are many verbs that may be used either intransitively or transitively (e.g. *eat*, *knit*, *help*; *walk*, *bend*, *spill*). And there are languages in which almost every verb root may be used in either type of clause, although often with an appropriate morphological marking; most verbs in Fijian may be used transitively, and then take a transitive suffix e.g. *la'o-vi* 'go for', *dola-vi* 'open', or they can be used intransitively and then take no suffix, e.g. *la'o* 'go', *dola* 'be open' (Dixon 1988a: 200–19).

It is a premiss of this book that all languages work in terms of three primitive relations:<sup>4</sup>

S – intransitive subject

A – transitive subject

O – transitive object

In languages with a nominative--accusative grammar, S and A naturally group together. Languages of the absolutive--ergative type link S and O. Many languages have some accusative and some ergative characteristics, linking S with A for certain purposes and S with O for other purposes. For

third person object marker. Constituent order is fixed: AOV, SV. Then consonantal lenition occurred on the first syllable of a word, but this lenition was blocked by an immediately preceding *N̄*-. Then *N̄*- was dropped. What we have now is that a verb does not show initial lenition when O is unexpressed, i.e. when the verb is immediately preceded by A (this lack of lenition is a reflex of the original third person object marker *N̄*-); but the verb does show lenition when immediately preceded by S or O. The net result is that S and O are treated (in this respect) in the same way, by an accident of phonological change. As Rude says, this has no grammatical significance. One could almost say that Loma has 'phonological' (rather than morphological or syntactic) ergativity. (See also note 30 to Chapter 4.)

<sup>3</sup> Feltenius (1977) discusses the relatively small number of transitive verbs which developed an additional intransitive use during the history of Latin.

<sup>4</sup> A survey of the literature shows that the letters S, A and O (which were first used in Dixon 1968, then Dixon 1972) are the most common symbols used for the three primitives. However, some scholars use P (for patient) in place of O (e.g. Comrie 1978) while Lazard and his colleagues employ X, Y and Z for A, O and S respectively (e.g. Lazard 1986, 1991).

any discussion of universal grammar, it is most useful to take S, A and O as the basic grammatical relations, and to define 'subject' (and 'pivot' – see §6.2) in terms of them. There is further discussion of this in Chapter 5.

The single core argument of an intransitive clause will always be mapped onto the S basic relation. This applies both for verbs that involve volition (e.g. 'jump', 'speak', 'wink', 'stand') and those that do not (e.g. 'fall', 'grow', 'die'). For transitive clauses with two core arguments, one will be mapped onto the A relation and the other onto the O relation. If there are three (or more) core arguments, then two will be mapped onto A and O, with the remainder being marked in some other way (e.g. by prepositions or postpositions). There is always a semantic basis for the assignment of A and O relations, and it relates to the prototypical meaning of the verb used.

Words belonging to the verb class, in any language, refer to a wide range of actions and states. It is convenient to recognise a number of what I call 'semantic types', each being a class of verbs which has a common meaning component and shared grammatical properties. (There is a fuller introduction to, and justification of, the theory of semantic types, in Dixon 1991a; see also Dixon 1982: 9–62.)

There are a number of 'semantic roles' associated with each semantic type. Some of the semantic types of verbs which appear in all languages are (with example members from English):

SEMANTIC TYPES	Semantic Roles
AFFECT, e.g. <i>hit, cut, burn</i>	Agent, Manip (thing manipulated), Target <sup>5</sup>
GIVING, e.g. <i>give, lend, pay</i>	Donor, Gift, Recipient
SPEAKING, e.g. <i>talk, tell, order</i>	Speaker, Addressee, Message <sup>6</sup>
ATTENTION, <sup>7</sup> e.g. <i>see, hear, watch</i>	Perceiver, Impression

<sup>5</sup> Reasons for preferring the labels Manip and Target over, say, Instrument and Patient are given in Dixon (1991a: 102–4). As can be seen from the examples given in the next paragraph but one, either Manip or Target can be the thing most affected by the activity (and is then in O function).

<sup>6</sup> There is a fourth, less central, semantic role associated with the SPEAKING type: Medium, e.g. language or style used (as *French* in *He asked a question in French, They don't speak French here*). See Dixon (1991a: 140ff.).

<sup>7</sup> In some languages the ATTENTION type is not associated with the main grammatical class of transitive verbs but enters into a different construction type, e.g. in the Polynesian language Tongan, the Perceiver is marked as intransitive subject and the Impression with dative case (Churchward 1953) and in Dagestanian languages such as Avar the Perceiver is marked with locative and the Impression with absolutive case (Černý 1971). See the discussion in §5.1.

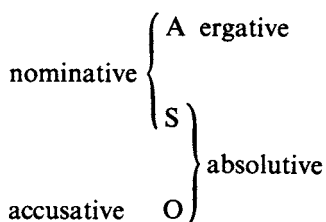
For transitive verbs, one semantic role is mapped onto the A syntactic relation. What has always seemed to me remarkable is that different languages, from all over the world, show a fair consistency in the way this is done. It is almost always the Agent for AFFECT verbs, the Donor for GIVING, the Speaker for SPEAKING and the Perceiver for ATTENTION that are identified as A. The underlying principle appears to be: that role which is most likely to be relevant to the success of the activity will be identified as A. This can be something inanimate (as in *The wind wrecked the house*, *The midday sun melted the butter*); most often, the role mapped onto A will be human and ‘most relevant to the success of the activity’ then equates with ‘could initiate or control the activity’.

If a verb has just two core roles then that role which is not mapped onto A will be identified with O syntactic relation, e.g. *the nuts* in all of *John fetched the nuts*, *Mary noticed the nuts*, *The squirrel ate the nuts*. Where there are three roles there may often be two constructions available, so that either of the two non-A roles may be coded as O, according as it is most saliently affected by the activity, e.g. *John (Agent:A) hit the vase (Target:O) with a stick (Manip)* (with the vase breaking), and *John (Agent:A) hit the piece of chalk (Manip:O) against the table (Target)* (with the chalk breaking). Sometimes there are two verbs with similar meanings and the same set of semantic roles but different conventions for mapping these onto syntactic relations. *Mention* and *inform* both belong to the SPEAKING type, requiring Speaker, Addressee and Message, but *mention* has Message as O and *inform* has Addressee as O, e.g. *John mentioned the decision to Mary*, and *John informed Mary of the decision*.

It will thus be seen that there is a semantic basis to the mapping of semantic roles (for a given verb, from a particular semantic type) onto A and O syntactic relations. The basic relation S, in contrast, relates to the single core NP of any intransitive verb, whatever the meaning of the verb. In §3.3 there is discussion of ways in which S groups with A, and ways in which it groups with O; in §5.1 a definition of ‘subject’ is provided, that links together A and S; and in §4.1 we examine languages that distinguish two subtypes of S, one related to A and the other related to O.

## 1.2 Introductory exemplification

The three basic syntactic relations are grouped together in different ways for nominative–accusative and for absolutive–ergative grammatical systems:



Nominative–accusative case systems can be illustrated for Latin:

- (1) *domin-us veni-t*, the master comes
- (2) *serv-us veni-t*, the slave comes
- (3) *domin-us serv-um audi-t*, the master hears the slave
- (4) *serv-us domin-um audi-t*, the slave hears the master

The same case inflection, nominative singular *-us* (for the second declension, to which the two nouns used here belong) is used for S in (1–2) and for A in (3–4), while a different inflection, accusative *-um*, is used for the O NPs in (3–4). In Latin the ending on a verb indicates tense, voice and mood (present, active, indicative in these examples) and also the person and number of the S constituent in an intransitive clause, as in (1–2), or of an A constituent in a transitive clause, as in (3–4). The verbal ending *-t* indicates third person singular S or A (for the fourth conjugation, to which the verbs ‘come’ and ‘hear’ belong). If the verb endings were changed to third person plural *-unt* (*veni-unt* and *audi-unt*) this would indicate a plural S or A, but convey no information about the O in (3–4). We would then have to mark the S or A NP with nominative plural case inflection *-ī*, e.g.

- (1′) *domin-ī veni-unt*, the masters come
- (4′) *serv-ī domin-um audi-unt*, the slaves hear the master

If the O NP is plural it must take accusative plural ending *-ōs*, e.g.

- (4″) *serv-us domin-ōs audi-t*, the slave hears the masters

We explained that a nominative–accusative system is one in which S is treated in the same way as A, and differently from O. It will be seen that Latin is nominative-accusative both in its case marking and in verb agreement.

Contrast this grammatical system with that in Dyirbal, from north-east Australia:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Each NP in Dyirbal generally also contains a ‘noun marker’ that agrees with the head noun in case, shows its noun (gender) class, and indicates whether the referent is ‘here’, ‘there’ or ‘not visible’. To simplify the discussion here, noun markers – which have a

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- (5) *numa banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*  
 father + ABS return-NONFUT  
 father(S) returned
- (6) *yabu banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*  
 mother + ABS return-NONFUT  
 mother(S) returned
- (7) *numa yabu-ŋgu bura-n*  
 father + ABS mother-ERG see-NONFUT  
 mother(A) saw father(O)
- (8) *yabu numa-ŋgu bura-n*  
 mother + ABS father-ERG see-NONFUT  
 father(A) saw mother(O)

Here a noun occurs in plain form, with no affix, when it is in S function, in (5–6) and also when in O function, in (7–8). This is said to be absolutive case, which has zero realisation. Transitive subject function, A, is marked by ergative case ending, here *-ŋgu*. (Noun inflections in Dyirbal show case but, unlike Latin, they do not indicate number.) The verb inflections here indicate non-future tense, *-n<sup>y</sup>u* for *banaga-*, which belongs to the *-y* conjugation and *-n* for *bura-*, from the *-l* conjugation; in Dyirbal the verb does not cross-reference the person or number of any of S, O or A.

Each of (1–8) was given in the normal constituent order for that language. Looking at transitive clauses, in Latin an NP in nominative case (A function) will generally precede one in accusative case (O) whereas in Dyirbal, for NPs whose heads are nouns, the absolutive (O) constituent will generally precede the ergative (A) one. However, since for both Latin and Dyirbal syntactic function is fully specified by case ending, the words from any sentence can potentially be rearranged into any order, without a change of meaning. This contrasts with English, where syntactic function is shown by constituent order (S or A before the verb, O after) and a change in constituent order does change the meaning (compare *The master hears the slave* and *The slave hears the master*).

slightly irregular paradigm – have been omitted; they do not in any way affect the grammatical points being made. The ‘there’ (and unmarked) forms of the masculine noun markers are ABS *bayi*, ERG *baŋgul*, DAT *baŋul*; of the feminine marker, ABS *balan*, ERG *baŋgun*, DAT *baŋun*. Full forms of the Dyirbal sentences are thus: (5) *bayi numa banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*; (6) *balan yabu banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*; (7) *bayi numa baŋgun yabu-ŋgu bura-n*; and so on. Similarly for later examples – (12) *bayi numa bural-ŋa-n<sup>y</sup>u baŋun yabu-gu*; etc. An NP can consist of just a noun marker, which is then functioning like a third person pronoun.

That case which includes S function is most often the unmarked term in the system – absolutive in Dyirbal and nominative in Latin. This will be the case form used for citation,<sup>9</sup> and it is most likely to be the left-most NP in a clause. It may also be the pivot for various syntactic operations, such as coordination and relativisation; syntactic derivations may be applied to bring an NP into a derived function in which it is in the unmarked case, as will be illustrated below.

In any system of case inflection there is often one case that has zero realisation (as absolutive in Dyirbal) or else a zero allomorph (nominative in Latin has zero ending with some nouns, e.g. *puer* ‘boy’). In an ‘ergative’ system the unmarked case, absolutive, almost always has zero realisation or at least a zero allomorph. Similarly, it is nominative that most frequently has zero realisation, or a zero allomorph, in an ‘accusative’ system. Note, though, that the parallel between absolutive and nominative is not complete here. There are a few well-attested instances where accusative has zero realisation, while nominative involves a positive affix (see §3.4.3), but none where ergative has zero form and absolutive is non-zero.

Moving on to another grammatical level, languages can be said to have ‘accusative syntax’ – i.e. some rules of coordination and/or subordination will treat S and A in the same way, and O rather differently – or ‘ergative syntax’ – where these sorts of rules treat S and O in the same way, and A differently. If a language treats S and A in the same way for rules of clause combining, it will be said to have an ‘S/A pivot’; if S and O are treated in the same way, we will talk of an ‘S/O pivot’. The term ‘pivot’ corresponds to what has been called ‘surface subject’ by earlier writers. In Chapters 5 and 6 I explain the difficulties associated with using traditional terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’ for ergative languages and suggest that ‘subject’ be employed to link together S and A relations in underlying structure, while ‘pivot’ be used to describe syntactic equivalence (of S and A, or of S and O) in clause-linking operations that work in terms of derived structures. The idea of pivot will be briefly illustrated here; it is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

English is an example of a language with accusative syntax. Any two clauses may be coordinated, and if there is a shared NP it can be replaced by a pronoun whatever the function of the common NP in each clause. But a common NP can only be omitted, from its second occurrence, if it is in S or A function in each clause. Thus from *Father(S) returned* and *Father(A) saw mother(O)* can be obtained *Father returned and saw mother* or *Father*

<sup>9</sup> Hence the Latin label ‘nominative’.



*saw mother and returned*. If the common NP is in O function in one of the clauses then NP omission is not possible; from *Father(S) returned* and *Mother(A) saw father(O)* we cannot obtain \**Father returned and mother saw* or \**Mother saw father and returned* (with the meaning: ‘father returned’).

One function of passive is to put an underlying O NP into derived S function so that this coreferential omission (according to the syntactic rule of English) can take place. Instead of the active clause *Mother(A) saw father(O)* we may use the corresponding passive, *Father(S) was seen by mother*. This may now be linked with *Father(S) returned*. Since the common NP (*father*) is in S function in each clause it can be omitted from the second clause in a coordination, yielding *Father returned and was seen by mother* or *Father was seen by mother and returned*. We say that English operates with an S/A syntactic pivot, i.e. that it has accusative syntax.

Dyirbal, in contrast, has ergative syntax, working in terms of an S/O pivot. For this language two clauses may only be joined in a coordinate structure if they share an NP which is in S or O function in each clause. The occurrence of the common NP in the second clause is then usually omitted and the whole biclausal construction can make up one intonation group (note that there is no overt coordinating particle in Dyirbal, similar to English *and*). Thus, from (5) and (7) we can derive:

- (9) *ɲuma banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u yabu-ŋgu bura-n*  
 father + ABS return-NONFUT mother-ERG see-NONFUT  
 father(S) returned and mother(A) saw him(O)

There is no O NP stated for *buran* ‘saw’ in (9) and so – in terms of Dyirbal’s S/O pivot – it is taken to be identical to the S NP of the preceding (intransitive) clause in the coordination. Similarly, (7) and (5) can be combined as:

- (10) *ɲuma yabu-ŋgu bura-n banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*  
 father + ABS mother-ERG see-NONFUT return-NONFUT  
 mother(A) saw father(O) and he(S) returned

There is no S NP stated for the verb of the second clause, *banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u* ‘return’ and so – in terms of the pivot – it is taken to be identical with the O NP of the first clause.

If we wish to conjoin (5) and (8), we find that the syntactic condition on coordination is not met. The NP *ɲuma* ‘father’ is common to the two clauses but although it is in S function in (5) it is in the non-pivot function,

A, in (8). This is similar to the English examples with *Father returned* and *Mother saw father*, where ‘father’ was not in pivot (here S/A) function in the second clause. This was overcome by using a passive construction, *Father was seen by mother*, where ‘father’ is now in a pivot function (S). In Dyirbal a transitive construction can be recast into a derived intransitive form, called ‘antipassive’. Underlying A becomes S of the antipassive, underlying O goes into dative case (which is *-gu* with nouns and *-ngu* with pronouns),<sup>10</sup> and the verb bears an antipassive derivation suffix, *-ŋa-y*, between root and inflection:

- (11)        NP<sub>A</sub><sup>1</sup> NP<sub>O</sub><sup>2</sup>    V + tense  
               ⇒ NP<sub>S</sub><sup>1</sup> NP<sub>DAT</sub><sup>2</sup>    V + *ŋa-y* + tense

The antipassive version of (8) is:

- (12)    *ŋuma*            *bural-ŋa-n<sup>ɣ</sup>u*            *yabu-gu*  
           father + ABS see-ANTIPASS-NONFUT mother-DAT  
           father(S) saw mother

Note that (8) and (12) have the same cognitive meaning, in the same way that an active and the corresponding passive do in English.

Now (5) and (12) have a common NP, *ŋuma* ‘father’, which is in S function in each clause, and they can be coordinated together in either order (see also §6.2.2):

- (13)    *ŋuma*            *banaga-n<sup>ɣ</sup>u*            *bural-ŋa-n<sup>ɣ</sup>u*            *yabu-gu*  
           father + ABS return-NONFUT see-ANTIPASS-NONFUT mother-DAT  
           father(S) returned and he(S) saw mother

- (14)    *ŋuma*            *bural-ŋa-n<sup>ɣ</sup>u*            *yabu-gu*            *banaga-n<sup>ɣ</sup>u*  
           father + ABS see-ANTIPASS-NONFUT mother-DAT return-NONFUT  
           father(S) saw mother and he(S) returned

Many languages which have a wholly or partly ergative morphology do not have ergative syntax; instead, syntactic rules operate on an accusative principle, treating S and A in the same way (see §6.2). Dyirbal is unusual in that all major syntactic operations – those of relativisation and complementation, as well as coordination – treat S and O in the same way.

<sup>10</sup> Instrumental (= ergative) is possible here as an infrequent alternative to dative, just on nouns. See Dixon (1972: 66, 170ff.).

I shall (in §3.3 and in Chapter 5) discuss certain universal characteristics through which S and A are linked together in some ways and S and O are linked in other ways, in all languages (whatever their grammatical orientation). Leaving these aside, there are some languages that appear to be fully accusative, in both morphological marking and syntactic constraints. However – and this is a most interesting and significant fact – no language has thus far been reported that is fully ergative, at both morphological and syntactic levels. There are languages which have an ergative pattern for marking syntactic function within a simple clause (by case inflections and/or verbal cross-referencing, etc.) but then work in terms of an S/A pivot, i.e. they have accusative syntax (see §6.2.3). Dyirbal has ergative syntax and ergative case marking on nouns (and on adjectives) but its pronouns inflect in an accusative paradigm. At the morphological level Dyirbal is like many other languages in being what is called ‘split-ergative’ (i.e. part-ergative and part-accusative).

The contrasting case systems for nouns and for pronouns in Dyirbal are shown in Table 1.1. (This uses plural pronouns simply because they have a more regular inflection than singular forms.)<sup>11</sup>

Whereas nouns use the simple root for absolutive (S and O functions) and show ergative case (A function) by *-ngu*, pronouns employ only the root for nominative case (S and A functions) and add an affix *-na* for accusative (O). Sentences involving pronouns are:

- (15) *ɲana*            *banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*  
 we all + NOM return-NONFUT  
 we(S) returned
- (16) *n<sup>y</sup>urra*        *banaga-n<sup>y</sup>u*  
 you all + NOM return-NONFUT  
 you all(S) returned
- (17) *n<sup>y</sup>urra*        *ɲana-na*    *bura-n*  
 you all + NOM we all-ACC see-NONFUT  
 you all(A) saw us(O)
- (18) *ɲana*            *n<sup>y</sup>urra-na*    *bura-n*  
 we all + NOM you all-ACC see-NONFUT  
 we(A) saw you all(O)

<sup>11</sup> The pronoun class in Dyirbal only covers first and second persons. There are no third person singular pronouns as such, although ‘noun markers’ (see note 8) can have a pronominal function; these inflect on an ergative-absolutive pattern, like nouns and adjectives.