

The status of syntactic ergativity in Kaqchikel

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Abstract

This study investigates the nature of syntactic ergativity in the Mayan language Kaqchikel. Drawing on data from two production tasks, one designed to elicit relative clauses and the other to elicit *wh* questions, we show that despite its portrayal in the literature, Kaqchikel is not uniformly syntactically ergative with respect to A-bar extraction. Rather, its *wh* questions have ergative syntax, while its relative clauses exhibit nominative-accusative syntax. These findings contribute not only to the study of Mayan languages, but also to an understanding of the typology of ergativity in general.

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1. Introduction

It is frequently observed that ergativity can manifest itself in a variety of ways. An obvious example of this involves the familiar distinction between morphological ergativity, which is manifested in a language's system of case marking and/or agreement, and syntactic ergativity, whose effects are observed in phenomena other than inflection (e.g., Dixon, 1979, 1994; Comrie, 1989; Aldridge, 2008, inter alia). As noted by Aldridge (2008), a very widely manifested feature of syntactic ergativity is the restriction against 'A-bar movement'¹ of the subject of a transitive clause. The effect of this constraint can be most directly observed in relativization and *wh* movement, which cannot apply directly to the subject of a transitive verb. Instead a detransitivization strategy must be employed, converting the ergative agent into an absolutive. In the Mayan language Tz'utujil, for instance, relativization of the subject of a transitive verb almost always requires use of the 'agent focus' construction illustrated in (1). (We use a gap [] to indicate the underlying position of the moved argument; the underlying order in Kaqchikel (as in Tz'utujil) is VOS; see Koizumi et al., 2014 and Duncan, 2003).

(1) Relativization of the agent argument after detransitivization:

Jar aachi [ja x-Ø-ch'ey-ø Aa Keel _] x-Ø-b'e
FOC² man REL COMPL-3SG.ABS-hit-AF CL Miguel _ COMPL-3SG.ABS-go
'The man who hit Miguel left'

(Dayley, 1985:231)

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¹ Descriptively speaking, A-bar movement is an operation that moves an argument (e.g., a subject or a direct object) to a non-argument position. In Principles-and-Parameters theory, that position is located outside the minimal clausal projection, usually in the projection of the complementizer (CP) or some other higher functional head.

This construction is morphologically intransitive since it cross-references a single argument via absolutive agreement prefixes; however, it does not require the demotion or omission of the theme argument, as would an antipassive (e.g., Aissen, 1999). By contrast, no detransitivization of any sort is necessary for the relativization or questioning of the object of a transitive verb, as shown in (2), which maintains ergative agreement for its subject and absolutive agreement for its direct object.

- (2) Relativization of the theme argument (no detransitivization necessary):

Jar aachi [ja x-Ø-uu-ch'ey _ Aa Keel] x-Ø-b'e
 FOC man REL COMPL-3SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-hit _ CL Miguel COMPL-3SG.ABS-go
 'The man who Miguel hit left'

(Dayley, 1985:231)

Recent work suggests the need for a further refinement in the typology of ergativity, as some syntactically ergative languages are reported to treat relativization and *wh* movement in different ways. One such language is Chukchi (Paleo-Siberian), in which the agent argument of a transitive verb can be directly questioned, but can be relativized only with the help of antipassivization (Polinsky, in press).

- (3) a. Relativization (antipassivization required)

[_ məlgr-epə **ine**-kune-lʔ-ən] ənpənaɔçg-ən
 _ gun-ABL AP-buy-PTCP-ABS old.man-ABS
 'The old man that bought a gun'

(Polinsky, in press, ex. 24)

- b. *Wh* movement (no antipassivization)

Mikəne [_ milger kun-nin]?
 who.ERG _ gun.ABS buy-AOR.3SG.SUBJ.3SG.OBJ
 'Who bought a/the gun?'

(Polinsky, in press, ex. 16)

Based on facts such as these, Polinsky suggests that relativization is the most reliable test of syntactic ergativity.

A possible challenge to this proposal comes from the K'ichean Mayan language Kaqchikel. Uncontroversially ergative, Kaqchikel has long been assumed to require detransitivization (in the form of agent focus) in contexts that call for the agent argument of a transitive verb to be relativized or questioned (García Matzar and Rodríguez Guaján, 1997; Dayley, 1981:16–17). As illustrated below, the agent focus pattern employs absolutive agreement morphology, signaling detransitivization.

- (4) a. Relativization with agent focus³:

Ri retal k'o pa ruwi' ri ala' [ri n-Ø-q'et-**en** ri xtän _]
 DET sign be PREP top DET boy REL INCOMPL-3SG.ABS-hug-**AF** DET girl _
 'The arrow is above the boy who is hugging the girl'

- b. *Wh* movement with agent focus:

Achike [n-Ø-q'et-**en** ri xtän _]?
 WH INCOMPL-3SG.ABS-hug-**AF** DET girl _
 'Who is hugging the girl?'

However, observations by the first author suggest that, contrary to the traditional view, direct relativization of the agent argument of a transitive verb may in fact be possible, even though no such option is available for *wh* movement. Thus the relative clause in (5a) differs from the *wh* question in (5b) in being acceptable, even though both are fully transitive, as shown by the presence of ergative agreement morphology (boldfaced) for the subject and of absolutive agreement for the direct object.

- (5) a. Relativization without detransitivization:

Ri retal k'o pa ruwi' ri ala' [ri Ø-**ru**-q'et-**en** ri xtän _]
 DET sign be PREP top DET boy REL 3SG.ABS-**3SG.ERG**-hug-PERF DET girl _
 'The arrow is above the boy who is hugging the girl'

² 1 = 1st person; 2 = 2nd person; 3 = 3rd person; ABL = ablative; ABS = absolutive; AF = agent focus; AOR = aorist; AP = antipassive; CL = animate gender/animacy/age classifiers; COMPL = completive aspect; CONT = continuous; DET = determiner; DIM = diminutive; DIR = directional; ERG = ergative; FOC = focus particle; IMP = imperative; INCOMPL = incomplete; OBJ = object; OBL = oblique; PASS = passive; PERF = perfect; PL = plural; POS = possessive; PREP = preposition; PTCP = participle; REL = relative marker; SG = singular; SUBJ = subject; TV = transitive verb suffix; WH = *wh* word.

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