Applications of the Notion of Ergativity to the Indo-European Languages

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I will begin with Comrie's, 1978, 330 definition of *ergativity*. According to the latter: 'Ergativity is a term used in traditional descriptive and typological linguistics to refer to a system of nominal case-marking where the subject of an intransitive verb has the same morphological marker as a direct object, and a different morphological marker from the subject of a transitive verb.' As an example of this I use the Australian language Dyirbal as described by Dixon, 1979, 61. In this language the transitive *subject* is marked by an ergative case -ŋgu on disyllabic stems ending in a vowel, whereas the functions of the transitive *object* and the intransitive *subject* have no marking at all. Thus for example:

(1) ŋuma banaga+nŋu
    Father returned.

(2) yabu banaga+nŋu
    Mother returned.

(3) ŋuma yabu+ŋgu bura+n
    father mother (+ergative case) saw 'Mother saw father'

(4) yabu ŋuma+ŋgu bura+n
    mother father (+ergative case) saw 'Father saw mother'

The *subject* ŋuma in sentence (1) has the same form as the *object* ŋuma in sentence (3). Similarly the *subject* yabu in sentence
(2) has the same form as the **object** *yahu* in sentence (4). According to Dixon, 1979, 61, the noun phrase in the absolutive case, the subject of sentences (1) and (2) and the object of sentences (3) and (4) in the absolutive case (i.e., without any ending) occurs in sentence-initial position. The subject of sentences (3) and (4) has the ergative case marker `-ugu`.

It seems to me then that the terms **subject** and **object** which are useful for most Indo-European languages which class the actor of an intransitive verb along with the actor of a transitive verb are not very useful for ergative languages. Contrary to many linguists I do not believe that the concepts **subject** and **object** have universal significance, but rather are to be used with specific meaning for specific languages. These terms work very well for the majority of the modern Indo-European languages of Europe, for example. It seems to me that for the purposes of this paper, at least, the terms **agent** ‘the performer of an action with a verb which has two arguments’ and **patient** ‘the recipient of an action with a verb which has two arguments’ and **subject** ‘the noun phrase which is connected with a verb which has a single argument’ are more useful notions. It should be noted that some linguists are willing to define **agent** and **patient** as primitive grammatical concepts. (A more thorough analysis of this is given by Desclés et al. 1985, 64 ff.) As Comrie, 1978, 331–332, points out there are five possibilities for the **morphological marking** of the noun phrases denominated **agent**, **patient** and **subject**.

(A) The noun phrases **agent**, **patient** and **subject** may have no overt markers at all.

(B) The **agent** and **subject** may have one type of morphological marking and the **patient** may have another type of morphological marking. This is typical of many Indo-European languages with which we are familiar.
Thus Latin:

(5) puer (nom. case) puellam (acc. case) amat (transitive verb)
    boy (agent)    girl (patient)    loves

vs.

(6) puer (nom. case) vēnit (intransitive verb)
    boy (subject)    came

Languages like this are variously called *nominative-accusative* languages, *nominative* languages or *accusative* languages.

(C) The *subject* and *patient* may have one type of morphological marking vs. the *agent* which may have another type of morphological marking. Such languages are called *ergative* languages and Dyirbal, an example from which I gave at the beginning of this paper, can be called an *ergative* language.

(D) The *subject*, *agent* and *patient* may each have its own morphological marking. This seems to be relatively rare in the languages of the world and if it does exist (as in the system of the interrogative pronoun in Dyirbal), it apparently does not encompass the entire language.

(E) The *agent* and *patient* have one type of morphological marking as opposed to the *subject* which has another type of morphological marking. I know of no examples of this and it would seem to make no sense, because from the point of view of communicative needs there would seem to be no reason to make such a distinction.

There are also languages other than Dyirbal which show ergative structures. As our colleague, Prof. Shimomiya, 1978, 32, writes: "Das auffallendste Merkmal der georgischen Grammatik, das sich vom Indogermanischen, Semitischen, Uralischen usw. unterscheidet, ist das Vorhandensein des Kasus Ergativ. Die Ergativkonstruktion...ist allen den kaukasischen Sprachen sowie dem Baskischen gemeinsam. Anders als im Indogermanischen, wo der Täter (Agens) gewöhnlich im Nominativ, das Ziel (Patiens) im
Objektkasus steht...verhält es sich in den kaukasischen Sprachen folgendermassen: Subjekt ist nicht der Täter, sondern das Ziel, es steht also im Nominativ; der Täter steht in einem obliquen Kasus. Im Georgischen ist nun der Obliquus bei den aoristischen Tempora, d.h. im Aorist und Optativ, der ...Ergativ." (The most remarkable feature of Georgian grammar, distinguishing it from Indo-European, Semitic, Uralic, etc., is the presence of the ergative case. The ergative construction...is common to all the Caucasian languages and Basque. Differently from Indo-European, where the performer [agent] is usually in the nominative, the goal [patient] in the object case, the Caucasian languages behave in the following way: The subject is not the performer but the goal, so it stands in the nominative; the performer stands in an oblique case. In Georgian the oblique case with the aorist tenses [i.e., the aorist and optative] is the ergative.)

Next I should like to proceed to some glottogonic speculation. I propose that the earliest type of verb was intransitive and I take my cue here from a work that was pointed out to me by my friend and colleague, Prof. Pierre Swiggers of the Belgian National Science Foundation. The following quotation is from Michel Bréal's *Essai de sémantique*, 1908, 194-195. Tout le monde connaît la différence entre les verbes dits neutres et les verbes dits transitifs, les premiers se suffisant à eux-mêmes, exprimant une action qui forme un sens complet (comme courir, marcher, dormir), les autres prenant après eux ce qu'on a appelé un complément. La question a été soulevée de savoir lesquels, de ces verbes, étaient les plus anciens. Pour moi, la réponse n'est pas douteuse: non seulement les verbes neutres sont les plus anciens, mais on doit admettre une période où il n'y avait que des verbes neutres. Je crois, en effet, que les mots ont été créés pour avoir une pleine signification par eux-mêmes, et non pour servir à une syntaxe qui n'existait pas encore'. I translate this into English thus: 'Everyone
knows the difference between verbs called neuter (neutral, intransitive?) and verbs called transitive, the first being sufficient unto themselves expressing an action which forms a complete meaning (like to run, to walk, to sleep), the others taking after themselves what one calls a complement. The question has been raised as to which of these verbs are the oldest. For me there is no doubt about the answer: not only are the neuter verbs the oldest, but one must assume a period when only neuter verbs existed. I believe, indeed, that words were created to have a complete meaning by themselves, and not to serve a syntax which did not yet exist.'

The Russian scholar A. V. Desnickaja wrote, 1984, 130: 'The historical syntax of a series of Indo-European languages gives us the possibility of following the gradual creation of the category of transitivity which occurs as a result of the constant narrowing of the original 'intransitivity'; more accurately speaking, here we have the process of the gradual liquidation of the original neutrality ('neuterness', intransitivity) of verbal stems and the creation of a more differentiated distribution of meanings according to the categories of transitivity and intransitivity which were being created...'

Nominative–accusative languages frequently have passive constructions which appear to be derived from active constructions. I should now like to introduce the term antipassive which I believe was created by Prof. Michael Silverstein of the University of Chicago. The antipassive construction appears to be a derived
construction in an ergative language. We can make the following rough (and not quite accurate) comparisons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ergative Languages</th>
<th>Nominative-Accusative Languages</th>
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<tr>
<td>Basic Voice</td>
<td>Derived Voice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ergative Construction</td>
<td>Passive Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derived Voice</td>
<td>Basic Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antipassive Construction</td>
<td>Active (transitive) Construction</td>
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As Shaumyan, 1985, 319, has remarked: "...the basic voice in ergative languages corresponds to the derived voice in accusative languages, and the derived voice in ergative languages corresponds to the basic voice in accusative languages." Superficially at least an ergative construction looks like what we are accustomed to calling a passive construction. The recipient of the action is the subject of the verb and the agent is expressed by some oblique case. Similarly the active construction looks like an antipassive construction, the primary difference being that the antipassive construction typically has an object in the dative case and the verb does not entirely encompass this object.

In Dyirbal it is possible to derive an antipassive from an ergative construction. From sentence (4) above we can derive an antipassive by putting guma 'father' in the absolutive case, making the verb intransitive with a special antipassive derivational suffix and putting the object yabu 'mother' in the dative case. Thus:

(7) ŋuma buṟal+ŋa+nʔu yabu+gu
    father (abs. case) saw (intrans. suffix) mother (dat. case)

In Dyirbal this allows for such co-ordinated sentences as (1) plus (4):

(8) ŋuma banaga+nʔu buṟal+ŋa+nʔu yabu+gu
    father (abs. case) returned (and) saw (intrans. suffix) mother
    (dat. case)
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Note the following examples from the Bzhedukh dialect of West Circassian as quoted by Anderson, 1976, 21:

(9) (erg.) \( \text{č'v}a\text{a}l\text{a}-\text{m} \) \( \text{č'v}\text{g}w\text{-}\text{ar} \) \( \emptyset \) \( \text{ya} \) \( \text{z}\text{'w}a \)

boy -erg. field-abs. 3 sg. -3 sg. -plows

'The boy is plowing the field'

(10) ("acc.") \( \text{č'v}a\text{a}l\text{a}-\text{r} \) \( \text{č'v}\text{g}w\text{-}\text{am} \) \( \text{maa}\text{-z}\text{'w}a \)

boy -abs. field-obl. 3 sg.-plows

Anderson writes further, 1976, 22: 'These examples (which I owe to John Colarusso) are from the Bzhedukh dialect of West Circassian. There are numerous such pairs, and they differ systematically in the following way: the "accusative" form in each case indicates that the action is carried out less completely, less successfully, less conclusively, etc., or that the object is less completely, less directly, less permanently, etc. affected by the action. Anderson, 1977, 348-449, quotes Braithwaite (1973) to the effect that in Georgian the progressive tenses of the present series were originally structurally similar to the English progressive with non-finite participial form of the verb itself and a copula element. The verb phrase of such tenses would consist of a participle perhaps with a dative element representing the object noun phrase and the subject would always be structurally the subject of a fundamentally intransitive predication. A sentence such as *I am reading the book* would be structurally *I am at-reading (with respect to the book)*. If there were a general ergative morphological pattern, it would follow that subjects of such structures would appear in the absolutive (or nominative) case since structurally they would be subjects of intransitives. The apparently accusative form of the object noun phrase would follow from the fact that these would be structurally oblique similar to benefactives and other indirect object noun phrase types. Braithwaite notes, according to Anderson, 1977, 349, the tenses of the present series, differently from those of the aorist series, involve a stem-formative element, following
the verb stem itself. This stem formative is also present in the existing non-finite forms of the verb and the pattern of verb agreement with objects in tenses of the present series is more like the treatment of indirect objects than like the treatment of direct objects of noun phrases in tenses of the aorist series. Thus I am convinced, as is apparently Braithwaite, that the Georgian present tense forms are really antipassives. I should point out here that in Georgian, as one may know, there is no accusative case, only a dative which functions as an accusative as well as a dative. Note the present tense example:

(11) monadire irem-s klavs
    hunter (nom. case) deer (dat. case) he kills
    ‘The hunter kills the deer.’

Note that the direct object is in the dative case. (Shimomiya, 1978, 34)

Now it is my view that the original Indo-European antipassive became the transitive active. Such a view is really not quite as new as it might seem. Thus Woodcock, 1959, 2, affirming the notion ‘...that there were to begin with, no transitive verbs at all,’ writes that the verb peto in extant Latin, is transitive, but the root pet- seen in the Greek verb πιεύει ‘I fly’ originally signified merely rapid motion. A Latin phrase such as (12) peto urbem originally meant ‘I fly to the city’ but later came to mean ‘I seek the city’ with the change of an intransitive verb to a transitive verb and an indirect object to a direct object. This is one way in which intransitive verbs can become transitive verbs. An originally indirect object can come to be felt as a direct object and correspondingly the old intransitive verb will come to be felt as a transitive verb.

Now transitivity can arise in other ways also. Consider now the following Sumerian sentences (Foxvog, 1975, 397):
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(13) má-pi₄-li-a mèr-ra-ba-ni
Apilia Errabani
(subject in absolutive case) (subject in absolutive case)
lú-inim-ma-šè im-ta-è [eš]
(witness(es) (terminative case) (prefix) came (encodes
3rd pl. subject)
‘Apilia and Errabani came forth as witnesses.’

(14) ur-dumu-zi-da-ke₁ lu-inim-ma
Urdumuzida (in ergative case) witness (in absolutive case)
im-ta-an è
(prefix plus encoding of 3rd brought (zero encoding of 3rd
sg. personal agent) sg. patient)
‘Urdumuzida brought forth a witness.’

Here the verb imta. n. è 0 is translated as ‘brought forth’ because both an agent and a patient are encoded (the agent by -n- and the patient by zero) whereas in sentence (13) only a subject is encoded (by -eš) so that the same verb is translated as ‘came.’ In other words, by adding an agent the originally intransitive verb came comes to be considered a transitive verb brought. The addition of the agent brings about a reinterpretation of the verb.

Consider now the Avar sentences (Tchekhoff, 1978, 73-74):

(15) ḥama b- ač'- ula
donkey (subject) (encodes subject) comes (modal marker)
‘The donkey comes.’

(16) či- yas ḥama b- ač'-
man (agent marking) donkey (encodes patient) leads
ula
(modal marker)

In sentence (15) the verb bač'ula is translated as ‘comes’ because only the subject is present, but when the agent čiyas ‘man’
is added we must translate the verb as 'leads.' When the actor of sentences (13) and (15) becomes the patient of sentences (14) and (16) respectively a former intransitive verb (Sumerian ṑ and Avar bašula) could then be interpreted as being transitive.

Traditionally the verb in the passive voice is considered intransitive, but it is only intransitive in the sense that the grammatical subject does not perform any action on anything else. In fact, however, in the passive constructions the grammatical subject can be the semantic object (=patient). Thus a passive verb viewed in this way can be considered transitive with respect to its subject (=patient).

Having completed the introduction I should like to introduce some speculations concerning the original ergative nature of Indo-European. I propose essentially that within Indo-European there was a reversal of basic and derived voices, viz., that the traditional active voice was originally antipassive (and imperfective in aspect) and that the traditional medio-passive voice (usually perfective, but not with all verbal categories) was used in an ergative context.

A reconstructed etymological antipassive sentence is given below:

**ANTIPASSIVE**

(17) *māter  pekʷ-ēt  ovi-ṃ
    mother  cooks away  at the sheep
    (absolutive case) (intransitive verb) (dat.-loc. case)

A reconstructed etymological ergative sentence is given below:

**ERGATIVE**

(18) *ovi  pekʷ-ōt  mātr-ē/ōs
    sheep  cooked  by mother
    (absolutive case) (intransitive verb) (ergative case (transitive???) [=genitive])
‘Mother has cooked the sheep.’ or ‘the sheep has been cooked by mother.’

At this early stage there would have been no contrast between active and passive since the antipassive (=imperfetive) would only have been used in the present tense and the ergative (=perfective) would only have been used in some preterite tense. One would, on the basis of the attested Indo-European languages, perhaps be more satisfied with the passive translation of sentence (18), but that is a prejudice on our part and not a requirement. At this early stage of Indo-European the perfective aspect, which eventually became the preterite (as reflected in Hittite) or aorist/imperfect (as reflected in Greek and Sanskrit) was only possible with ergative syntax. The imperfective aspect which eventually became the present tense had antipassive syntax for the most part (but with certain stative verbs also ergative syntax as we shall see below).

In my judgment another type of ergative sentence was possible, viz.

**ERGATIVE**

(19) *medhu pekʷ-tó vir-os
honey cooked by the man
(absolutive case) (intransitive verb) (ergative case)
(transitive ???)

In sentences (17), (18) and (19) the verb is intransitive from the point of view of the subject or the noun in the absolutive case. However, in sentences (18) and (19) the verb may perhaps be considered transitive from the point of view of the agent in ergative case.

It can be recalled that Woodcock suggested that originally all verbs were intransitive, cf. sentences (12) and (17) above. Let us return now to sentence (17) and suppose that it underwent a change similar to that proposed by Woodcock for sentence (12). Sentence (20) is formally the same as sentence (17), but only the
interpretation has changed.

(20) *mäter    pekʷ-et    ovi-m
    mother    cooks    the sheep
    (nom. sg.) (transitive verb) (acc. sg.)

Three things have happened. (A) The shift of the antipassive to the active voice has changed the verb from intransitive to transitive. (B) The absolutive case of the subject has shifted to a nominative case. (C) The dative-locative case of the object has become the accusative case.

This shift of antipassive to active brought about a corresponding reinterpretation of the old ergative, which came to be felt as the corresponding passive. Sentences (21) and (22) below are formally exactly the same as sentences (18) and (19) above:

(21) *ovi    pekʷ-tó    mātr-ē/ōs
    sheep    cooked    by mother
    (nom. sg.) (passive) (gen. of agent)

(22) *medhu    pekʷ-tó    vir-os
    honey    cooked    by the man
    (nom. sg.) (passive) (gen. of agent)

In sentences (21) and (22) the old absolutive case was also interpreted as the nominative, the ergative verb pekʷ-tó was reinterpreted as passive and the ergative case became the genitive of agent.

There are two problems with the theory as presented so far:
(1) If the accusative case in *-m derives from some kind of dative or locative, why doesn’t it occur in the neuter nouns, e.g. *medhu?
(2) If the nominative case derives from an absolutive case, why are some Indo-European nominatives marked with the morpheme *-s (e.g., *viros).

Let me turn to question (1). Once the passive voice has been created it is susceptible to what Golab, 1975, 15, calls ‘activization,’
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viz. its reinterpretation as an active and the simultaneous reinterpretation of the subject of the passive as the object of an active verb. Bogoljubov, 1982, 20–21, has noted this phenomenon in many languages of the world and gives such examples as North Russian:

(23) у волкóв тут корóбу уидéно
by wolves here cow eaten
(prep.) (gen. pl.) (acc. sg.) (past passive participle)
‘A cow has been eaten by wolves here’ = ‘Wolves have eaten a cow here’

Cf. also standard Russian (24) эту бáшню (acc.) ви́дно издалекá ‘this tower is visible from afar’ and Polish (25) práce (acc.) rozpoczyna się о ósmiej ‘work begins at eight.’

Thus a phrase such as (22) *medhu пекw-tó ‘the honey is (has been) cooked’ could be interpreted as ‘(someone) cooked the honey.’ i.e., the interpretation of medhu as nominative singular could shift to accusative singular. Traces of such a possible ambiguity exist in ancient Greek. Note the following sentence (Iliad, XIII, 597):

(26) τó δεφέλκετο μελίνου ἔγχος
the (he) dragged after ashen spear

Schwyzer, 1966, 237, writes that the sentence could be translated in several ways: (a) der eschene Speer schleifte nach ‘and the ashen spear dragged after’ or (b) wurde nachgeschleift ‘was dragged after’ or even (c) er schleifte den e. Sp. hinter sich nach ‘he dragged the ashen spear after himself.’ If one accepts translation (a) or (b), then the neuter μελίνου ἔγχος ‘ashen spear’ is in the nominative singular. But if one accepts the ‘activized’ translation (c) then the neuter μελίνου ἔγχος is in the accusative singular.

Thus it was frequently possible to interpret the neuter either as nominative or as accusative. Since, in general, neuters or inanimates were low on the agentivity index, for the most part
they did not need the morpheme *-m to mark them as direct objects. Following the pattern established in preterite forms the direct objects of the activized passives were substituted as direct objects of the original preterite active and thence to the present tense of both the active and the medio-passive. Thus sentences of type (27) became possible:

(27) *mäter pek*-et(-i) medhu
     mother cook-ed, (-s) honey
     (nom. sg.) (transitive verb) (neut. acc. sg.)

In sentence (27) the high agentivity of 'mother' vs. the low agentivity of 'honey' renders the extra morphological marking unnecessary. (The ancient thematic neuters such as Sanskrit yugám, Latin iugum, Greek ζυγόν 'yoke', Sanskrit padám 'step,' Greek πίθον, etc. are transformed m-stems according to Burrow, 1965, 173. The -m in Sanskrit yugá-m was originally the m-suffix, but owing to the similarity with the accusative singular of the *o-stem masculine (or feminine), it came to be adapted to the declension of the animate *o-stem nouns. The lack of the final nasal in the neuter is discussed in detail by Prof. Murata in his 1986 article and if I understand him correctly, he is of the opinion, which I share, that the neuter final nasal is not old.

A partial parallel may be observed in the Čan (Laz) dialect of the Zan language (South Caucasian). According to Klimov, 1962, 78, in common Khartvelian on the eve of its split into separate languages the morpheme *-s functioned as a grammatical marker of the oblique case in all groups of tenses and as a marker of the direct object in the first group of tenses (i.e., present-tense group -WRS). As a result of changes on the way to nominativization in the Čan dialect there came to be two allomorphs of the accusative, one deriving from the old nominative and a second deriving from the etymological *-s. This second allomorph is limited to a small group of verbs, the object of which is generally an animate
noun. Thus, e.g., (28) k'atu-k [erg.>] nom.] mač 'angu Axmedi-s [dat.>] acc.] ‘кошка оцарапала Ахмеда, the cat scratched Akhmed’ (Klimov, 1976, 153). It is also well known that in modern Russian there is a difference between animate and inanimate accusatives.

Now I shall try to answer the second question. Since I have proposed that in principle the nominative case derives from the absolutive case I must try to explain away the sigmatic forms of the nominative. One may observe again a partial parallel in Ĉan where sometimes the -k and sometimes zero functions as the marker of the nominative case, thus, e.g., (29) bere imtu ‘папень убежал, the lad fled’ beside (30) bere-k (erg.>) nom.) ıbgaru ‘папень заплакал, the lad burst out crying’ (Klimov, 1976, 154).

One can surmise then that in the Indo-European languages some nouns (i.e., those which are attested as * [j-] o-stem masculines or feminines) transformed the old ergative (=genitive) into the nominative case, whereas the remaining classes transformed the old absolutive into the nominative case. The derivation of the sigmatic nominative singular from the sigmatic genitive singular explains the identity of these two cases in Hittite (e.g., nominative singular=genitive singular antuhsas ‘man’), the Gothic *jo-stem nominative singular=genitive singular harjis ‘army,’ hairdeis ‘shepherd,’ Vedic nominative singular=genitive singular ve-s ‘bird’ (beside the usual nom. sg. vi-s, see Specht, 1947, 362). The o-stem nouns then furnished the final *-s which became one of the markers of the Indo-European nominative singular.

In sum then, Indo-European is perhaps typologically unusual in that sometimes there exists surface structure marking for the subject (nominative in *-s in some instances) and marking for the patient (accusative case in *-m in most instances). But neither the marking in *-s nor the marking in *-m was thorough-going. I explain the zero-marking of the nominative and the *-m marking of the accusative from the nominative–accusative (ABSOLUTIVE
subject-indirect object) syntax of the imperfective aspect (which was probably at the base of the present tense). The *-s marking of the nominative and the zero-marking of the accusative derives from the ergative syntax of the perfective aspect (which came to be reflected in the preterite tenses).

I should like to suggest now certain that within Indo-European there were changes in the syntactic interpretation of certain constructions, changes which took place on the way from ergativity to nominativity. Consider the following Old Persian sentence (Cardona, 1970, 2; Kent, 1953, 133):

(31) avaiy ūvijīyā āha arikā u- tāšām Aūramazdā naiy ayadiya
the Elamites were unfaithful and by them Ahuramazda not was revered.

'The Elamites were unfaithful and Ahuramazda was not revered by them.'

An Old Indic example is given below (Jamison, 1979, 134):

(32) idām tyāt pātram indrapānām, this that cup Indra's drink
andrasa priyām armṛtam apāyi by Indra dear immortal was drunk
by Indra dear immortal was drunk
by Indra immortal was drunk
by Indra immortal was drunk

'This very cup, Indra's drink, dear, immortal, was drunk by Indra.'

A Tocharian (B) example is given next (Krause–Thomas, 1960, 83):

(33) srukor aiśaumye pioloyo [r]toy(tā)r death by wise(m) very is to be sought
by wise(m) very is to be sought
by wise(m) very is to be sought
by wise(m) very is to be sought
‘eher dürfte der Tod von einem Weisen gesucht werden,'
death ought rather to be sought by a wise man.'

Note the patient in the nominative case and the agent in the genitive case as can be expected for Indo-European passives, although I assume these to be etymological ergative type constructions. (In fact, apparently in agreement with Klaiman, 1978, I believe that the ergative constructions of the modern Indo-Iranian languages are not an innovation derived from the passive, but rather reflect a retention of the Indo-European construction.) According to Erhart, 1980, 184, Indo-Iranian fourth-class verbs (those in -ya) were originally stative, but some had developed into passives already in the Indo-Iranian period. Let us compare the following sentence from Old Indic: (34) ánnasya (gen. sg.) trpyali (3rd sg. present tense verb) which is usually translated as ‘he refreshes himself with some food’ (Macdonell, 1916, 319). According to the text-book interpretation the verb trp- governs the genitive case, but note that this verb belongs to the Indic fourth class and that one could reverse the syntactic interpretation to make it into a passive (or ergative). The original interpretation of the sentence would have been ‘the food refreshes him.’ Thus many apparently stative Indo-European verbs which now govern the genitive case could well have had quite a different syntactic interpretation in the past.

Consider the following Latin examples:

(35) pudet      mé      tuī
shames      me      you
(3rd sg. pres.) (acc. sg.) (gen. sg.)
‘I am ashamed of you’

(36) paenitet    mé      hūjus     factī
repents      me      this      act
(3rd sg. pres.) (acc. sg.) (gen. sg.) (gen. sg.)
‘I repent of this act’

(37) eum      taedet     vítae
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him is weary life
(acc. sg.) (3rd sg. pres.) (gen. sg.)
'he is weary of life'

Now it is well known that when an original personal construction comes to be felt as an impersonal construction the nominative case is replaced by the accusative case and the personal form of the verb is replaced by the third singular, see sentences (35-37) above. Thus for the Latin sentences above I propose (respectively):

(38) *(ego) pudeō tui
    I am ashamed of you
    (nom. sg.) (1st sg. pres.) (gen. sg.)
    (pudeō is attested but the usage is rare.)

(39) *(ego) paeniteō hūjus factī
    I repent this act
    (nom. sg.) (1st sg. pres.) (gen. sg.) (gen. sg.)
    'I repent of this act'

The meaning and the syntactic construction lead to the later interpretation of this verb as a deponent and in the New Testament we encounter the 2nd pl. imperative paenitemini 'repent ye' (Mark 1, 15; Acts 3, 19).

(40) *is taedet vitae
    he is weary life
    (nom. sg.) (3rd sg. pres.) (gen. sg.)
    'He is weary of life.'

In this sentence one assumes the nominative is 'he' to be the subject and the verb taedet 'is weary' to take a genitive object vitae 'life.' But if one assumes ergative syntax then is becomes the patient and vitae becomes the agent. The replacement of the nominative is by the accusative eum takes place when the construction becomes impersonal.
Applications of the Notion of Ergativity

There are parallel examples from Lithuanian. Hermann, 1926, 286-287, would connect the Latin verbs in *-ē- with the Lithuanian stative verbs in -ē- which require a genitive object, cf. the sentence from Basanavičius (41):

(41) O jėi tū manęs taip bjaūrisi
    But if you by me (gen.) so are repelled
    'But if you are so repelled by me.'

(The verb in this sentence, bjaūritės 'to be repelled,' is, obviously an ē-stem verb.) Hermann, 1926, 284-286, compares the final vowel of χρῆ of the Greek collocation χρῆ μῆ (acc.) τῆνος (gen.) 'I need something' with the Lithuanian ē-stem verbs. It should be noted, however, that another syntax is possible and that in addition to the accusative a dative can also be used in that collocation. Thus Schwyzer, 1966, 72, gives the example (42) χρῆ aē (acc.) or σαλ (dat.) τῆνος 'you need something.' With the substitution of the dative for the accusative case the syntax is exactly parallel to the Lithuanian construction:

(43) τάυ relīka kō
    to you is necessary something
    (dat. sg.) (3rd pres.) (gen.)
    'You need something'

Perhaps the dative takes over from the accusative when the person needing something is felt as the experiencer rather than the patient.

In the Indo-European languages it was probably not only the *l-participles and the stative verbs which had ergative syntax, but other forms as well, cf. the German sentence:

(44) mich wundert des schwarzen Ritters
    me wonders from the black knight
    (acc. sg.) (3rd sg. pres.) (gen. sg.)
    'I wonder at the black knight.'
It seems likely to me that the genitive of agent is original, but that the accusative *mich* 'me' has replaced a nominative *ich* 'I.'

In conclusion then I should like to say that the surface structure representation of the notions of *subject*, *object*, *agent*, or *patient* are not immutable or permanently embedded in the same way in the surface structure of all languages. The frequent replacement of the nominative case by the accusative case in impersonal constructions is the surface structure expression of the reinterpretation of the original *subject* as a *patient* or *object*.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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