

The Loss of Ergativity in Dari Modal Verbs: Evidence for a Universal Category of Subject

Ergativity splits in the verbal morphology of the Iranian languages famously follow tense lines: ergative/absolutive is used in the past tenses and nominative/accusative is used in the nonpast tenses (see Payne 1980 on Pamir, Bynon 1980 on Kurdish, Farrell 1995 on Balochi). Modal verbs in modern Dari, an endangered Northwestern Iranian language, do not follow this split, showing accusative head-marking in all tenses. We argue that the Dari modal verbs ‘must’, ‘want’, and ‘can’ once patterned ergative, and that the subsequent loss of ergativity in these three verbs provides strong support for a universal category of subject.

Ergative head-marking arose in the past tenses of modern Dari through the reanalysis of the Old Iranian deverbal perfect aspect construction (Benevise 1952, Cardona 1970). In the simple past tense, agreement with S or O is marked by a suffix indicating person and number (1-2), and agreement with A is marked by a pronominal prefix (2):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(1) (mε) dāvu-ε 1SG run:PAST-1SG ‘I ran’</p> | <p>(2) (mε) om-di-i 1SG 1SG-see:PAST-2SG ‘I saw you (sg.)’</p> |
|---|--|

The modal verbs ‘must’, ‘can’, and ‘want’ are exceptional in patterning accusative in both the past and nonpast tenses, though they evidence historical ergative marking. In transitive constructions with ‘must’, for example, agreement with A is marked by a pronominal prefix (3-4). This pattern recapitulates the ergative arrangement of morphemes displayed by transitive verbs in the simple past tense (2, 3-4):

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(3) (mε) om-veo di-i 1SG 1SG-must:PRES see:PAST-2SG ‘I must see you (sg.)’</p> | <p>(4) (mε) om-vevyust di-i 1SG 1SG-must:PAST see:PAST-2SG ‘I had to see you (sg.)’</p> |
|---|---|

Given this similarity in the formal arrangement of head-marking morphemes, we hypothesize that ergativity arose in the modal verbs through the innovation of a new construction composed of the sequence inflected modal verb-plus-inflected main verb. Because it is the modal verb’s inflectional features that specify the tense of the clause as a whole, the tense marker on the main verb, although identical in form to the past (1-2), no longer conveys tense meaning. It does, however, critically express agreement with A and O through its historical ergative markings (3-4). The “extended ergative” accusative pattern currently displayed by the ‘must’ construction would then have developed when speakers extended the pronominal prefix marking A to mark S as well (3-4, 5-6):

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(5) (mε) om-veo dāvu 1SG 1SG-must:PRES run:PAST ‘I must run’</p> | <p>(6) (mε) om-vevyust dāvu 1SG 1SG-must:PAST run:PAST ‘I had to run’</p> |
|---|---|

The ‘want’ and nonpast ‘can’ constructions, while showing evidence of having passed through an “extended ergative” stage, have since shifted to a “canonical” accusative pattern, a shift that was motivated, we hypothesize, by pressures to match the extant nominative/accusative pattern of the non-modal nonpast tense. However, the different accusative patterns of ‘must’, ‘want’, and ‘can’ should not distract from the fact that all three modal verbs show the same fundamental transition from ergative to accusative head-marking.

We argue that this shift to accusative marking follows from the unique semantics of the modal verbs.

Modal verbs are members of a category of Secondary concept verbs which never stand alone but always associate with some other verb (Dixon 1994). Secondary concept verbs add no semantic roles and therefore have the same subject as their accompanying verbs: S if the latter is intransitive and A if it is transitive. This cross-linguistic correlation between Secondary concept verbs and an S and A grouping leads Dixon to posit a universal category of subject. The operation of the Secondary concept verbs in terms of such a semantic grouping of S and A is reflected in their morphological accusativity.

Such theoretical explanations have been criticized, however, since facts of synchronic morphological distribution can often just as easily be shown to follow from their diachronic source (Anderson 1977, Garrett 1990). In view of such criticism, we offer the gain and loss of ergativity in the Dari modal verbs ‘must’, ‘want’, and ‘can’ as support for a universal category of subject. We find that the ergative head-marking introduced in the modal verbs through the innovation of a new construction was subsequently lost, while the same ergative head-marking pattern was maintained in the past tenses of all other verbs. We conclude that the divergent behaviors of these two morphologically-identical ergative systems resulted from the unique properties of the modal verbs, namely their identity as Secondary concept verbs making reference to a universal category of subject equating S and A. As it goes beyond demonstrating a simple synchronic overlap between accusative marking and Secondary concept verbs, our account of the Dari modal verbs’ gain and subsequent loss of ergativity provides a particularly salient example in support of a universal category of subject.

References

- Anderson, S. (1977) On mechanisms by which languages become ergative. In: C. Li (ed.) *Mechanisms of syntactic change*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 317-363.
- Beneviste, E. (1952) La construction passive du parfait transitif. *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique* 48:52-62. Translated in (1971) *Problems in general linguistics*. Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 153-161.
- Bynon, T. (1980) From passive to ergative in Kurdish via the ergative construction. In: E. C. Traugott, R. Labrum, and S. Shephard (eds.) *Papers from the 4th International Conference on Historical Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 151-161.
- Cardona, G. (1970) The Indo-Iranian construction *mana (mama) krtam*. *Language* 46:1-12.
- Dixon, R. M. W. (1994) *Ergativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Farrell, T. (1995) Fading ergativity? A study of ergativity in Balochi. In: D. C. Bennett (ed.) *Subject, voice, and ergativity: selected essays*. London: School of Oriental and Asian Studies, 218-243.
- Garrett, A. (1990) The origin of NP split ergativity. *Language* 66:261-296.
- Payne, J. R. (1980) The decay of ergativity in Pamir languages. *Lingua* 51:147-186.