

The Perfect Nominative

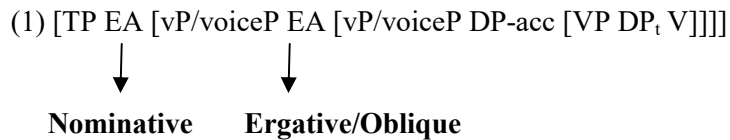
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ABSTRACT

Western Indo-Aryan languages are widely known to host ergative subjects in the perfective. However, there is very little discussion on the optional inclusion of nominative subjects with perfect unergatives. This paper highlights such variation data from two WIALs Punjabi and Gujarati, along with the structural similarities and differences between their transitives and unergatives. It proposes that the optional nominative in the perfective is indicative of a full-phi T head selection, necessitated by case-competition between the two arguments of the unergative at the edge of vP.

1 Introduction

This paper presents novel data on unergative structures in many Western Indo Aryan languages/WIALs with optional nominative subjects in an otherwise pre-dominantly ergative alignment in the perfective. Given the obligatory absence of nominative subjects in perfect, transitive structures, this optional inclusion of the nominative is theoretically significant as it exposes unique structural characteristics of unergatives. The literature is divided on the transitive/non-transitive nature of unergatives, with some (Bobaljik 1993, Mahajan 1987) positing an underlying transitive structure for them, while some others (cf. Preminger 2012) conceptualizing them as intransitive forms. We add to this debate by illustrating here that unergatives in many WIALs such as Punjabi and Gujarati are underlying transitives with distinctive VP level properties that force their cognate DP objects to move to the specifier of vP. The consequence of this obligatory movement is case competition between the two arguments at the edge of vP. With the internal argument receiving a structural accusative from v, the external argument is then forced to receive an inherent ergative/oblique from v/voice or a structural nominative from T. Schematically (1).



The paper is organized thus: in section 2, we present evidence of the similarities and the differences between Punjabi transitives and unergatives. A possible analysis is provided in section 3. Following this, in section 4, we extend the discussion to Gujarati. The final section discusses the implications of our account for optionality in minimalist grammar and concludes the paper.

2 The Punjabi unergative puzzle

Punjabi is a person based split ergative language in the perfective aspect (Bhatia 1993, Bhatt 2007, Butt and Deo 2001, Chandra, Kaur and Udaar, in print). In the transitive domain, 1st/2nd person subjects remain unmarked and are valued oblique (cf. Chandra and Kaur 2014, Kaur 2015), while 3rd person subjects are obligatorily ergative marked. This is illustrated in example (2).

- (2) maĩ/tuu/o=ne rotti khaaddii sii
1.sg.obl/2.sg.obl/3.sg=erg bread.f.sg eat.perf.f.sg be.past.3.sg
'I/you/(s)he ate bread.'

Subjects of unaccusatives however are invariably nominative, as demonstrated in (3).

- (3) maĩ/tuu/o diggeyaa sãã/saĩ/sii
 1.sg.nom/2.sg.nom/3.sg.nom fall.perf.m.sg be.past.1.sg/2.sg/3.sg
 ‘I/you/(s)he fell.’

Unergatives, on the other hand, show variation with respect to ergative case marking on the subject in the perfective. The person based split attested in the transitive is observed in the unergative domain too such that 1st/2nd person subjects are marked oblique (see Chandra and Kaur, 2014 for a Part-triggered case-assignment) and the 3rd person subject gets ergative marked (4). However, unergatives manifest an additional option wherein all 1st/2nd and 3rd person subjects get nominative valued, as in (5). We seek an explanation here for the differential unergative subject marking in Punjabi.

- (4) maĩ/tuu/o=ne hasii hassii sii
 1.sg.obl/2.sg.obl/3.sg=erg laugh.f.sg laugh.perf.f.sg be.past.3.sg
 ‘I/you/(s)he laughed a laugh.’

- (5) maĩ/tuu/o hasii hassii sãã/saĩ/sii
 1.sg.nom/2.sg.nom/3.sg.nom laugh.f.sg laugh.perf.f.sg be.past.1.sg/2.sg/3.sg
 ‘I/you/(s)he laughed a laugh.’

We begin with illustrating that unergative and transitive verbs are quite alike structurally. For one, unergatives can combine with transitive light verbs (6)¹. In addition, the cognate object of an unergative resembles a transitive object as it can be modified with an adjective and can trigger agreement on the verbal auxiliary complex, as in (7).

- (6) o=ne/o hasii hass dittii
 3.sg=erg/3.sg.nom(f) laughter.f.sg laugh give.perf.f.sg
 ‘(S)he laughed a laugh.’

- (7) o=ne/o pyaar-ii hasii hassii
 3.sg=erg/3.sg.nom(f) lovely-f.sg laughter.f.sg laugh.perf.f.sg
 ‘(S)he laughed a lovely laughter.’

Despite these similarities, unergatives differ from transitive verbs. While a transitive verb in combination with (and also without) a transitive light verb has an obligatory ergative subject (8), the unergative verb with a transitive light verb continues to manifest an optional ergative on the subject, as in (9).

- (8) o=ne /*o kamm kar dittaa sii
 3.sg=erg/*3.sg.nom work do give.perf.m.sg be.past.3.sg
 ‘(S)he did the work.’

¹ Unergatives can also combine with unaccusative verbs, as in (i). With Cinque (2004), we consider these verbs to be functional restructuring verbs that extend the verbal domain, resulting in the obligatory assignment of nominative on the subject.

i. kuRii nacc nacc paayii
 girl.nom dance.m.sg dance be.able.perf.f.sg
 ‘The girl was able to dance a dance.’

- (9) o=ne/o hass dittaa sii
 3.sg=erg/3.sg.nom laugh give.perf.m.sg be.past.3.sg
 ‘(S)he laughed.’

3 A possible analysis

Based on the similarities between transitive and unergative predicates in Punjabi, we posit that unergatives in the language have an internal as well as an external argument like their transitive counterparts. This is illustrated in (10).

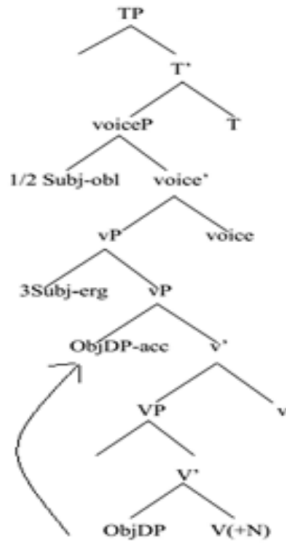
- (10) [vP EA [VP IA V]]

However, the nature of the VP containing the object varies across the two verb classes resulting in their differences. Specifically, we claim with Gallego (2012) that the underlying nominal root of an unergative and its cognate object start off as a single DP. The nominal root incorporates into the V head forming a V+N structure, while the cognate object raises to the edge of DP. Consider the schematic representation in (11).

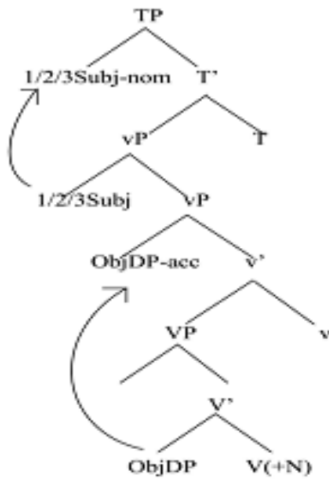
- (11) [[DP. . . [sc√N Cognate-object]] V-N]
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We additionally posit that the lexical V head in Punjabi unergatives, due to the incorporation of the nominal root loses its verbal properties. This prevents incorporation of the object DP into the verbal head (in the sense of Baker 1985, Baker, Johnson and Roberts 1989), resulting in the latter’s failure to be licensed in situ. The object DP raises to the edge of vP which already hosts the external argument. In the specifier of vP, the object receives a structural accusative from the v head and values its number and gender phi features. The external argument, hosted in the outer specifier of vP has two case options. It can either receive an inherent ergative from the v head if it is 3rd person; a 1st/2nd person subject must raise to voiceP to value its person feature and receives an oblique (12). Alternatively, all 1st/2nd and 3rd person external arguments move to the edge of TP to receive a structural nominative. This is illustrated in (13).

(12)



(13)



Punjabi transitives therefore differ from unergatives in that the V head in transitives retains its verbal properties. As a consequence, it is able to value the object as accusative in situ, in combination with the v head. There is no case-competition between the subject and the object at the specifier of vP, resulting in the subject obligatorily receiving an ergative/oblique. The nominalised V head of unergatives, on the other hand, intervenes in a long distance licensing of the object, which is then forced to raise to the specifier of vP. This leads to case competition between the two arguments, forcing optional nominative on the subject. What this analysis suggests is that a full phi T head is introduced in the perfective only when the case requirements of arguments are not fulfilled in a lower structure. Optional nominative is therefore only possible with unergatives.

4 Extending the discussion to other WIALs

In this section, we note that the variation in subject case marking observed with unergatives is not just restricted to Punjabi, but extends to other WIALs as well. To start, let us take Hindi-Urdu, where certain unergative predicates (with or without a light verb) manifest optional ergative marking on the subject (see Mohanan 1994, Mahajan 2012). Consider (14) and (15).

(14) raam (=ne) khāāsaa
 Ram (=erg) cough.perf.m.sg
 ‘Ram coughed.’ (based on Mohanan, 1994)

(15) raam (=ne) khāās diyaa
 Ram (=erg) cough give.perf.m.sg
 ‘Ram coughed.’

In addition to the above discussed facts, we observe that the optional ergative case marking on the unergative verb is found even in the presence of an overt cognate object. This is demonstrated in (16) and (17). Transitive verbs, in contrast, do not manifest optionality, and their subjects are obligatorily marked ergative, as in (18).

(16) maĩ=ne/tuu=ne/us=ne uucii hasii hasii
 1.sg=erg/2.sg=erg/3.sg=erg loud laughter.f.sg laugh.perf.f.sg
 ‘I/you/(s)he laughed a loud laughter.’

(17) maĩ/tuu/vo uucii hasii hasaa
 1.sg.nom/2.sg.nom/3.sg.nom loud laughter.f.sg laugh.perf.m.sg
 ‘I/you/he laughed a loud laughter.’

(18) us=ne/*vo kitaab likhii
 3.sg=erg/*3.sg.nom book.f.sg write.perf.f.sg
 ‘(S)he wrote a book.’

Gujarati (Saurashtra variant) displays similar patterns. Unergatives in Gujarati also manifest optionality with regard to ergative case marking on the subject in the presence of an overt cognate object, as shown in (19) and (20). The subject of a transitive verb, on the other hand, is obligatorily ergative, as illustrated in (21)².

² Like Punjabi, Gujarati unergatives can also combine with both transitive and unaccusative light verbs as in (i) - (ii).

i. ame hasi hasi didhi hati
 1.pl laughter laugh give be.past.f.sg
 ‘We laughed a laugh.’

ii. ame hasi hasi pariyaa
 1.pl laughter laugh fell.past.pl
 ‘We laughed a laugh.’

However, in combination with a transitive light verb ‘give’, the subject is obligatorily ergative (iii).

iii. me/*huu hasi hasi didhi hati
 1.sg.erg/1.sg.nom laughter laugh give be.past.f.sg
 ‘I laughed a laugh.’

- (19) ame/tame motii hasii hasi hati
 1.pl.erg/2.pl.erg loud laughter laugh.perf.f.sg be.past.f.sg
 ‘We/you laughed a loud laugh.’
- (20) ame/tame motii hasii hasyo hato
 1.pl.nom/2.pl.nom loud laughter laugh.perf.m.sg be.past.m.sg
 ‘We/you laughed a loud laugh.’
- (21) te=Ne/*te copaRii lakhii
 3.sg=erg/*3.sg.nom book.f.sg write.perf.f.sg
 ‘He wrote a book.’

Gujarati is a person and number based split ergative language wherein all transitive subjects except 1st/2nd person plural ones are ergative marked in the perfective (Deo and Sharma 2006, Bhatt 2007). Notwithstanding the feature based split in the transitive domain, unergative subjects in the language exhibit optionality with regard to case marking like their Hindi-Urdu and Punjabi counterparts.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, we have shown here that the presence of an optional nominative for WIAL unergatives in the perfective is indicative of an underlying structural difference between these predicates and transitives. A nominative valuing T is introduced into the unergative structure because of obligatory cognate object movement to the specifier of vP. However, this structure is optional, existing alongside the alternative where an inherent ergative case is assigned to the external argument by the theta-assigning v head.

If this analysis is on the right track, we have another case of true optionality in syntax (à la Biberauer and Richards 2006), with two alternative structures co-existing without any noticeable semantic distinction. Optionality is permissible in narrow syntax when case/licensing requirements are not met through typical operations or relations at lower phase levels.

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