ERGATIVITY IN IGBO AND GERMAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper investigates ergativity in Igbo and German languages. Both languages are morphologically opposed to each other. While German is a case marking language with subject-verb agreement, Igbo language does not have surface morphological or syntactic case marking or subject verb agreement. Despite the severe dichotomy between the two languages, both manifest ergative features. The description of the patterns of ergativity in the languages is the main focus of this paper. The work finds that in Igbo, ergativity is manifested syntactically and semantically as a conceptual category realized as an inter-clausal relation, but in the German language, ergativity is realized morphosyntactically. Similarly, in Igbo and German, ergative verbs are also restricted to verbs that can be used in a transitive and intransitive alternation with the same meaning, where the theme of the transitive verb is the same as the subject of the intransitive verb. The paper concludes that ergativity is a potential category that is necessary in the syntactic and semantic classification of verbs across languages.

Keywords: Ergativity, language, languistic typology, transitive, intranstive

1. Introduction

The concept - ergativity originally applied to languages like Basque in which the complement of a transitive verb and the subject of an intransitive verb were assigned the same morphological case. By extension, it has come to be used to denote verbs, which can have their objects as their subjects without changing their meanings. It has been variously called: causative alternation (Haspelmath 1993 and Levin and Rappaport 1995), transitivity alternation (Hale and Keyser

1987), and unaccusativity alternation (Kiparsky1998), among others. Ergativity plays a role in approximately 25 percent of the world's languages (Dixon 1994:2). It is a cover expression in modern typological linguistics which refers to a number of grammatical phenomena. Ergativity not only refers to the grammatical pattern of a construction but has also come to indicate the ergative system of a language, thus, being a categorisation used to discern a particular "type" of language.

Ergativity is not a common characteristic of African languages, though it is found in a number of Western Nilotic languages from the Southern Sudan; neither is it readily encountered in the familiar languages of Europe (see Ejele, 2005). While the grammarsof different languages exhibit certain differences,languages also have some properties in common.Ergativity is a structuring property of the grammar of certain languages.Languages show ergativity when they treat transitive subjects distinctly from intransitive ones; treat objects like intransitive subjects or treat unaccussative subjects unlike unergative and transitive subjects.It shows in the different treatments given to subjects oftransitive verbs in contrast to the objects of intransitive verbs and the subjects of intransitive verbs which are treated similarly.Differential treatments may be shown morphologically (case marking) or by verb agreement (person and number).

The investigation of ergativity in the Igbo and German languages is the main thrust of this study. Igbo and German are morphologically different; while German is a case marking language with subject-verb agreement, Igbo has no case marking or verb agreement. The aim is to find out how ergativity is manifested in both languages.It is a descriptive investigation of ergativity in the two languages. The variety of the languages utilised here are the standard variety used in writing and teaching. The data were mainly secondary data gathered from previous empirical studies in both Igbo and German languages.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The first part of the study is the introduction to the work. Review of literature follows in the second part, while the data for the study is presented and analysed in the third section. The fourth section concludes the paper.The tone marking convention adopted herefor the Igbo data is that of Green andIgwe (1963) where low tones and down-stepped tones are marked while high tones are left unmarked.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Ergativity

Primarily, ergativity is perceived as a different way of grouping subjects vs objects (eg.Egede 1760, Fillmore 1968, Silverstein 1976, Dixon 1979). It is a term that refers to a certain pattern that some languages show in treating arguments of a verb. Arguments are commonly classified into three types: the subject of a transitive verb, the object of a transitive and subject of an intransitive verb (see Otsuka 2000:13).

Matthews (2007:126) refers to ergativity as, "a case which identifies the agent in a basic transitive construction when the patient is absolutive". The absolutive identifies the patients with the single argument or valent in an intransitive construction. In continuation, Matthews says that the same terms are extended to other constructions in which an agent is similarly distinguished, but by, for example, word order instead of case. He classifies language, which has an ergative versus absolutive case or which distinguishes semantic roles by word order, in an equivalent way. Languages either partly or wholly of this type are said to illustrate the phenomenon of ergativity.

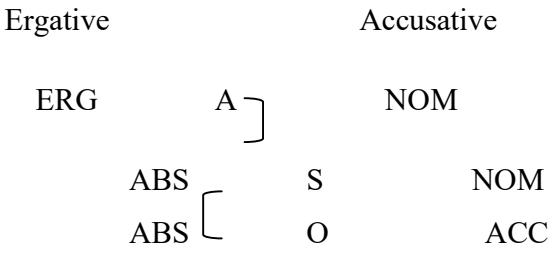
In line with the above view, Bomfoco (2006) asserts, "ergativity is an umbrella term used in modern typological linguistics to cover a variety of grammatical phenomena, and basically, it is a grammatical pattern in which nouns are inflected or marked for case". According to traditional accounts on ergativity (like Silverstein, 1976; Dixon, 1979, 1994), ergative languages are those which identify with the same case (ABS) S and O, while nominative languages identify with the same case (NOM) S and A.

2.2 Types of ergativity

Ergative languages are classified roughly into two groups: those which show an ergative pattern only at the morphological level, those which exhibit an ergative pattern also at the syntactic level and those that manifest ergative patterning at discourse level. Only morphological and syntactic patterns will be briefly discussed in the sections that follow.

2.2.1 Morphological ergativity

A language is said to be morphologically ergative if the S and O appear in the same case while a special case is assigned to A. The marked case which A receives in such a system is called ergative (ERG), while the case assigned to O and S is traditionally called absolutive (ABS). This type of case marking is different from the more familiar accusative system, in which S and A receive nominative case (NOM) and O receives accusative case (ACC). The contrast between the two systems is schematised below.



In the above schemata, the two case marking systems (Ergative and Accusative) are represented. In Ergative system, S and O are grouped together and they appear in the same case absolutive while A is assigned a special case-ergative.

In English, for example, this formal distinction is reflected in the form of pronouns. As illustrated in (1), the third person singular pronoun has the same form *he* and it occurs as S and A, while as O, it must take a distinctive form, *him.*

1. (a) He went to school

(b) He/*him likes Mary

(c) Mary doesn't like him/*he

In example 1, the third person singular pronoun 'he' occurs as S(subject) in 1a and as (A) agent in 1b showing nominative case. In 1c, the third person singular pronoun takes the accusative form as O (object). Replacing 'he' in 1b with 'him' as in 1c yields unacceptable structures respectively.

In contrast, the distribution of the case markers, 'a' and 'e' in Tongan shows an ergative pattern: 'a' occurs with S or O, while 'e' occurs exclusively with A. See (2), below.

2 (a) Na'e 'ala 'a/*'e Sione ki he [ako]

Pst go ABS/*ERG John to def school

"John went to school"

(b) Na'efana'i 'e Sione 'a Mele.

Pst shoot ERG John ABS Mary

"John shot Mary."

(Culled from >https://www2.hawaii.edu/~yotsuka/pubs/Ch2.pdf)

In the Tongan examples in 2, the case marker 'a' occurs with the subject (S) *Sione*(John) in 2a, while the case marker 'e' occurs with the agent (A) *Sione* in 2b. Marking the subject (S) with 'e' in 2a yields unacceptable structure.

2.2.2 Syntactic ergativity

Mcgregor (2009: 484) refers to syntactic ergativity as situations in which syntactic rules or generalisation in a language treat the actor and the undergoer (entity affected by the action of the verb) in the same way but differently from the agent. Mcgregor says the term has a wide range of applications, depending on how syntactic rules are construed theoretically. In his words, syntactic ergavity in the literature is normally understood to refer to patterns of inter-clausal syntax. More specifically, it is understood to refer to ergative patterning revealed by cross-clause co-reference conditions that must be met in certain types of clause combination. For instance, in

Dyirbal, two clauses can be coordinated with the omission of the shared argument in the second clause if they show co-referentiality of Actor or undergoer (Dixon 1972, 1979:61-63).

Syntactic ergativity is also revealed by most other types of complex sentence constructions in Dyirbal. For instance, as Dixon (1979:127-128) opines, relative clauses must have an Actor or Undergoer NP co-referential with an NP in the main clause. And in purposive complements, the co-referential NP must be Actor or Undergoer in both main and complement clauses.

Another type of ergative patterning on the syntactic level is the pattern in word order whereby the agent of a transitive clause is treated differently from the Undergoer and the intransitive Actor, which are the same. Few languages show this type of syntactic ergativity. Andersen (1988) gives Pari (Nilotic, Sudan) as an example of such a language, which has relatively rigid word order patterns in which the Actor and the Undergoer immediately precede the verb while the Agent occurs following the verb in the unmarked transitive, but precedes the Undergoer if topicalised.

2.2.3 Split ergativity

In addition to accusative languages (which treat subjects in a structurally similar manner and distinguish them from objects), and ergative languages (which group together subjects of intransitives and objects of transitives, and distinguish them from subjects of transitives), there is a third way of treating these basic grammatical relations. An important feature of all ergative languages is that they are never ergative in all aspects of their syntax and morphology; but they have a combination of ergative and accusative properties. No language is completely ergative with regard to morphology and syntax. Often, a language does not use just one case-marking system consistently for all instances of A, S and O, but instead has ergative case-marking for some constructions and accusative case-marking for other constructions. Many morphologically ergative languages show asymmetries in case-marking whereby the ergative system operates only in certain circumstances and, elsewhere, a different system applies. In many languages, the conditions under which the various systems apply are lexically or grammatically determined. This is referred to as spilt-ergativity.

In split ergativity, the split is conditioned by some other property or properties of the sentence, such as tense/aspect, lexical semantics of the verb, and possibly main vs. subordinate clause, or some property of the noun (e.g. full noun vs. pronoun, animacy).Moravcsik (1978) observes that every language that shows ergative property shows them in a limited degree. There is no language where all grammatical generalizations distinguish transitive from intransitive subjects; group intransitive subject and transitive object together, or distinguish among subjects of unaccusative and unergative intransitives. This, in Moravcsik's view shows that every language showing ergative properties has what is sometimes called an ergative split, or a division among domains in the grammar which do and do not show ergative behaviours

2.3 Features of ergative languages

Nigar and Nizami (2012) as captured in Ugochukwu (2016) outlined the following characteristics which tend frequently to occur together with ergative constructions:

(a) Ergative languages nearly always have the basic word order SOV (Subject-Object-Verb), occasionally VSO, but virtually never SVO.

(b) Apparently, all languages that manifest ergativity at all (outside of certain derivational processes) show morphological ergativity, while very few exhibit syntactic ergativity.

(c) In languages with ergative case marking, the ergative case is always overtly marked, while the absolutive case is usually morphologically unmarked.

(d) It is very common for ergative languages to index direct objects in the verb.

(e) It is very common for ergativity to be confined to certain tenses or aspects of the verb; in such cases, it is always the past tense or the perfective aspect which is ergative, while the non-past or imperfective verb forms show accusative constructions.

(f) Few ergative languages have a fully developed passive voice.

(g) In case-marking languages, the ergative case is often identical with another case,most often the genitive or instrumental, sometimes the locative or dative.

(h) It is very common for ergative constructions to be used when certain types of NPs,or certain combinations of NPs, appear in the subject and object position.

3. Ergativity in Igbo and German

3.1 Ergativity in Igbo

Igbo is a strict SVO language. It does not have surface morphological or syntactic case marking (except for some pronouns that change their forms in certain syntactic environments), or subject verb concord of any kind but has ergative forms. The language does not case-mark overtly because NPs do not have a morphological inflection to indicate their cases, and there is no number, noun or verb agreement. Igbo is neither strictly ergative nor accusative because there is no morphological inflection showing agreement between the verb and transitive object and intransitive subject or between the verb and the transitive subject. Ergativity is marked structurally in Igbo.Ergativity in Igbo is essentially expressed through a parallel relationship existing between the direct object of transitive verb and the subject of its intransitive counterpart since an ergative construction is the intransitive variant of the transitive sentence (Ugochukwu, 2016).

Igbo ergative verbs consist of two groups: those that manifest ergativity through the inversion of the positions of their subject and objects (arguments) and those that achieve ergativity through transformation (verbs that can be used in a transitive and intransitive alternation with the same meaning). The object of the transitive verb is the same as the subject of the intransitive verb. The two forms of Igbo ergativity are exemplified below:

3.1.1 Argument –inversion ergativity

In the Igbo language, it has been observed that there are some verbs that have the ability to swap their arguments (cf. Nwankwo 2012) (i.e. NP1 and NP2 exchange position with no morphological transformation). In this kind of ergativity, the object maintains the same semantic relation with the ergative verb in the two constructions and the affected entity remains the same in both structures without any morphological change on the verb. Here are some examples as Nwankwo (2012:9-17) observes.

3(a) Nchara gbà-rà gbamgbam
Rust attack-rV(past) the zinc
(b) Gbamgbam gbà-rà nchara
Zinc attack-rV(past) rust
'The zinc is attacked by rust.'

4 (a) Afọ tò-rò Okoyè
Belly grow-rV(past) Okoye
(b) Okoye tòrò afọ
Okoye grow-rV(past) belly
'Okoye has swollen belly'

In examples 3 and 4 (a) and (b), the verbs '*gbara*' and '*toro*' select two arguments each despite the inversion of the arguments showing that the verbs '*gba*' and '*to*' are ergative.

3.1.2 Inter-clausal ergativity:

This is the type of ergativity observed between two clauses, where a verb is used transitively in one clause and intransitively in another clause. In both clauses, the verb remains the same (no morphological change). In this case, ergativity is realised through transformation.

5(a) X kùrù mgbịrịmgba
X hit-rV-PST bell
'X rang the bell'

(b) Mgbịrịmgba kùrù
Bell hit-rV-PST
'The bell rang'

6(a) X kpùrù ụgbọ
X sink-rV-PST
'X sank the boat'

(b) Ụgbọ kpùrù
Boat sink-rV-PST
'The boat sank'

In example 5(a) and (b), the verb '*kùrù*' remains the same. In 5(a), the verb selects two arguments – '*X*' and '*mgbịrịgba*' while in 5(b), the verb '*kùrù*' selects one argument – 'mgbịrịgba'. In 6(a) and (b), the verb 'kpùrù' also selects two arguments '*X*' and '*ụgbọ*' and only one argument –'*ụgbọ*' in 6(b). Thus, the verbs '*kụ*' and '*kpù*' are ergative verbs.

3.2 Ergativity in German

In the German language, ergativity is realized morphosyntactically.Arguments are case marked.In German, a 'Nominative' language, the sole argument of an unaccusative verb receives Nominativecase like the agent of a transitive verb and differently from the patient, identified instead with Accusative case. In the language,case is typically not marked on the head noun, but is marked instead on the determiners and any adjective in the noun phrase as in the followingexamplesfromCocci(2009):

7(a) Der Mann sah den Lehrer
the-NOM man saw the-Acc teacher
'The man saw the teacher'

(b) Der(*den) Lehrer kam
The-NOM teacher came
'The teacher came'

8. [Der gross-e Hund] knurrte
the:NOM big-NOM dog growled
'The big dog growled'.

9. [Der gross-e Hund] biss [den klien-en Mann].
the:NOM big-NOM dog bit the:ACC small-ACC man
'The big dog bit the small man'.

In the examples, case is marked on the determiners and the adjectives. In 7 and 8, it is marked on the determiner - *der* 'the' and the adjective- *gross-e* 'big' showing nominative case. In 9, it is marked on the determiner- *den* 'the' and the adjective- *klein-en* 'small' showing accusative case.

3.3 Comparison study of ergativity in Igbo and German

In Igbo and German, ergative verbsare also restricted to verbs that can be used in a transitive and intransitive alternation with the same meaning, where the object ofthe transitive verb is the same as the subject of the intransitive verb.

Example:Igbo:

10. (a) Ike **kùrù** mgbịrịmgba
'Ike rang the bell'

(b) Mgbịrịmgba **kùrù**
'The bell rang'

11. (a) X **zù-rù** ahịa
X buy-rV(past) market
'X transacted market'

(b) Ahịa **zù-rù**
Market buy-rV(past)
'Market transacted'

German:

12. (a) John **läutet** die Glocken
'John rings the bell'

(b) Die Glocke **lautete**
'The bell rang'

13. (a) Jane **zerbrach** den Spiegel
'Jane broke the mirror'

(b) Der Spiegel **zerbrach**
'The mirror broke'

In the above examples,the Igbo verbs, *kụrụ* and *zụrụ*10 and 11and the German verbs *läutet* and *zerbrach*in 12 and 13 can be subjected to both transitive and intransitive use thus showing ergativity. However, while German maintains subject-verb agreement as shown in example 12a, Igbo does not show subject-verb agreement.

4. Conclusion:

The two languages studied here manifest ergativity but with some differencesand similarities.While the study identifies two types of ergativity in the Igbo language: argument inversion and inter-clausal ergativity.German manifests ergativity through surface morphological case marking of determiners and adjectives showing agreement between the verb and transitive object and intransitive subject or between the verb and the transitive subject.

In the transitive use of ergative verbs in both languages, two arguments are involved: Agent and Theme while in their intransitive use, only one argument- Theme is involved.

The paper concludes that ergativity is a potential category that is necessary in the syntax and semantic classification of verbs across languages.By implication, Igbo students learning German must learn to differentiate between the subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs.

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