

A reflection on ergativity in Modern and Middle Indo-Aryan languages

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It is generally accepted in linguistic circles that several Modern Indo-Aryan languages display traces of ergativity (cf. Masica 1991: 341). Ergativity has been defined as a grammatical pattern “in which the subject of an intransitive clause is treated in the same way as the object of a transitive clause, and differently from transitive subject” (Dixon 1994: 1). These languages (including Hindi, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Marathi, Marwari, Nepali etc) are sometimes called ‘ergative languages’, in analogy with other non Indo-Aryan languages which also display the same kind of alignment features (eg. Georgian, Dyirbal). However, to call these languages fully ergative is an exaggeration, as they only display certain features which are considered ergative. The way the ergative features are distributed differs for each Modern Indo-Aryan language, and is reflected either in the agreement patterning or in the case marking.

It has been conjectured in previous literature that Middle Indo-Aryan languages also display ergative features (cf. Bubenik 1998). In examples taken from Apabhramsha the verb agrees with its logical object and thus forms an agreement type which is ergative. The subject-agent takes a non-nominative (ergative?) marking in the form of an instrumental case-ending. The use of the instrumental case for the ergative is not unusual (cf. Hjelmslev 1972). However, the ergative interpretation of these examples has been criticized (eg. Tieken 2000). In this regard, Apabhramsha is considered as an artificial language, for which a linguistic analysis is difficult to perform. Hence, it is implied that linguistic terminology as ‘ergativity’ should not be applied to this language.

In this paper I contend that the notion of ‘ergativity’ must not be seen as a definite label of a language, but rather as an assembly of certain features. Each language should be analyzed on its own premises (cf. Coseriu 1978), and the motivations for the appearance of certain ergative features are exclusive and different for every language. A language should not be called ‘ergative’, rather the ergative features should be discussed separately. Moreover, I would also like to re-open the discussion if any language should be excluded from linguistic investigation, due to its status as an artificial or literary language. Without calling Apabhramsha an ‘ergative’ language, I believe that certain ergative features are present, and that they deserve investigation. I will illustrate my point using examples from several Modern Indo-Aryan languages and Apabhramsha literature.

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