

Variation in the Ergative Pattern of Kurmanji

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Kurdish-Kurmanji (or Northern Kurdish) belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. This study is dedicated to a deeper understanding of a specific grammatical feature typical of Kurmanji: the ergative structure. Based on the example of this core structure, and with empirical evidence from the Kurmanji dialect of Muş in Turkey, I will discuss the issues of variation and change in Kurmanji, more precisely the ongoing shift from ergative to nominative-accusative structures. The causes for such a fundamental shift, however, are not easy to define. The close historical vicinity to Turkish and Armenian might be a trigger for the shift; another trigger is language-internal (diachronic) change. In sum, the investigated variation sheds light on a fascinating grammatical change in a language that is also sociopolitically in a situation of constant change, movement, and upheaval.

ABSTRACT (DEUTSCH)

Kurdisch-Kurmanji (oder Nordkurdisch) gehört zum iranischen Zweig der indoeuropäischen Sprachfamilie. Eine zentrale und charakteristische grammatische Struktur dieser Sprache ist der Ergativ; ihm ist der vorliegende Beitrag gewidmet. Am Beispiel des Ergativ werde ich Variation und Wandel im Kurmanji diskutieren und insbesondere auf den Dialekt von Muş (Türkei) eingehen. Dabei zeigt sich, dass sich derzeit im Kurmanji der Wandel von einer Ergativ- zu einer Nominativ-Akkusativ-Sprache vollzieht. Die Ursachen für einen derart grundlegenden Wandel sind nicht leicht zu benennen. Ein Grund mag in der schon historisch engen Nachbarschaft zum Türkischen und Armenischen liegen; ein anderer Grund mag im sprach-internen (diachronen) Wandel des Kurmanji selbst zu finden sein. Insgesamt erlaubt uns diese Untersuchung einen Blick auf den faszinierenden grammatischen Wandel in einer Sprache, die sich auch soziopolitisch in dauerhaftem Wandel, in Bewegung und Umbruch befindet.

ABSTRACT (KURDÎ-KURMANCÎ)

Kurdîya Kurmancî (bi menaya Kurdîya Bakur) zîmanekê ji famîlya zîmanên Hîndo-Ewropayî, ji şaxê zîmananê Îranî ye. Ev xebate, peyê armanca bi temamî serwestbûna yêk qatda gramatikî (rêzîmanî) ya Kurdîya Kurmancî ye ku temerkûza wê li ser saxtara ergatîfê ye. Di wê awayê da emê bi taybetî li ber hindek şewahîdên Kurdîya Kurmancîya Muşê, li ser guberîn û varyasyona di nav saxtara ergatîfê ya li wê devokê, û li ser behsa ji ergatîfê derbasbûna saxtara nominatîf-akuzatîfê, binirxînin. Herwisa li gel wan, di wê behsê da sekinîna li ser sebebên binyadî ya wê cihgubestîne jî, yêk ji armanca wê xebatê ye ku terîfkirîna wê ne hêsan e. Em webe hizîr dikin ku ew cihgubestîna û cihgirtîna ji nêzîkmayîna dirokê û gelhebûn bi Tirkî û Ermenîkîyê destpêkirîye, û sedemek din jî neguberîna xwebixweyî ya diakronîkî ye. Bi kurtabî, ew varyasyona ku di wê xebatê da li ser lêkolîn tete kirin, li pey ronahîkirîna guberîna gramatikî ya zîmanekî webe ye ku bi sosyo-polîtîkî li ber rûşa guberîna daimî û ya cihbicibbuî ye.

ABSTRACT (TÜRKÇE)

Kuzey Kürtçe olarak bilinen Kurmanci Kürtçesi Hint-Avrupa dil ailesinin İran dilleri koluna mensuptur. Bu çalışma, Kurmanci gramerinin tipik bir özelliği olan ergatif dizge yapısını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu dildeki ergatif dizge yapısında gözlemlenen çeşitlilik ve değişimler, özellikle de nominatif-akuzatif dizge yapısına dönüşme süreci, Muş ilinde konuşulmakta olan Kurmanci özelinde tartışılacaktır. Sunu da belirtmek gerekir ki, bu temel dönüşüm sürecinin sebeplerini belirlemek oldukça zordur. Türkçe ve Ermenice ile uzun yıllar süregelen dil etkileşimi bu dönüşüm sürecini tetikleyen etmenlerden biri olarak düşünülebilir, fakat aynı zamanda dil-içi diyakronik bir süreç de bu dönüşümü harekete geçirmiş olabilir. Kısacası, bu çalışma ergatif dizge yapısında ortaya çıkan çeşitlilik ve dönüşümlerden hareketle sosyo-politik açıdan sürekliliği balinde olan bu dilde ortaya çıkan dilbilgisel (gramatik) bir değişime ışık tutacaktır.

Introduction

Kurdish – in this case the Kurmanji variety – is an *ergative* language. In brief, ergative languages build on the difference between transitive constructions (i.e., verb requires object) and intransitive constructions (i.e., verb does not require objects). More concretely: an English construction like *I ran* works just the same way in Kurmanji (*Ez revîm*). In contrast, constructions such as *You saw me* are different in Kurmanji (*Te ez dîtîm*): in this *ergative* example, the subject ‘behaves like an object’. Or, to put it in linguistic words:

Ergativity is a ‘[...] grammatical pattern in which the subject of an intransitive clause [S] is treated in the same way as the object of a transitive clause [O], and differently from a transitive subject [A].’¹

In summary this means that in *ergative* (also: *ergative-absolutive*) languages the case system treats a subject S (subject of an intransitive verb) just as an object P (‘patientive’ argument of a transitive verb, as opposed to an ‘agentive’ argument A).² The subject-as-a-patientive-object pattern in Kurdish-Kurmanji and other ergative-absolutive languages is shown in (1a) below. Kurmanji shares this ergativity pattern with Basque, Mayan, and some more (otherwise unrelated) languages.

The *nominative-accusative* pattern, in contrast, features a much broader global distribution. Languages of this group align the subject S with an argument A (‘agentive’ argument of a transitive verb, as opposed to a ‘patientive’ argument P). The subject-as-an-agentive-argument pattern is summarized in (1b).

¹ Dixon 1994: 1.

² Comrie 1978.

It is exactly this region, the province of Muş in Turkey, on which the present study is based.⁴ The data from Muş was collected in the course of three different time periods (2011, 2013, and 2015). And in fact, my data indicates that there is even more variation in the ergative patterns of the Muş dialect than previously expected. I will present all the patterns found in *past tense transitive constructions* in the *Muş dialect of Kurmanji* (MK, henceforth).

Furthermore, I will investigate any potential factors that might trigger the use of these different patterns. Basically, I will argue that the following two crucial factors may play a role here:

First, the observed variation may be the result of extensive language contact between the ergative MK dialect, on the one hand, and typical nominative-accusative languages such as Turkish and Armenian on the other hand. A similar approach (regarding the contact between Persian and Balochi) has already been proposed by several researchers.⁵ Therefore, it is possible to assume that the ergative pattern in MK has been undergoing an alignment shift due to extensive contact to Turkish and Armenian.

Second, I will argue that the variation observed in the MK dialect might also be a consequence of language-internal grammatical change. As is well documented, languages undergo substantial shifts over time; structures are changed or lost altogether (e.g., nominal inflection such as case, gender, etc.), and such structural loss gives rise to new constructions (see, for example, the existing work on Iranian languages⁶).

My paper will be structured as follows: First I will present both the canonical and deviant ergative patterns as observed in Kurmanji in general, and in the MK dialect in particular; I will then discuss how the observed patterns of the MK dialect deviate from canonical ergativity (section *Ergative alignment in Kurmanji*). In a next step I will address the potential influence of language contact to Turkish and Armenian along with similar cases of language contact observed in other (non)Iranian languages – cases that support the language contact approach (section *Language contact to Turkish and Armenian*). The subsequent section will provide arguments for the other approach, (i.e., diachronic language-internal change) as a reason for deviant ergativity (section *Language-internal change*). Concluding remarks and issues requiring further attention are then presented in the last section (*Conclusions*).

⁴ An earlier version of this study was presented at the *Patterns of Alignment in Indo-Iranian Languages: Towards a Typology - Workshop* at the University of Michigan, USA (LSA 2013 Workshops) in July 2013.

⁵ Jahani 2003, Korn 2009.

⁶ Stilo 2009a.

Ergative alignment in Kurmanji

The ergative alignment patterns in Kurmanji differ with respect to transitivity (transitive vs. intransitive) and tense (past vs. non-past) in any given sentence.⁷

The *nominative-accusative* alignment (see 1b above!) occurs in all intransitive and non-past transitive constructions where the subject controls the verb. In intransitive constructions, the case of the subject is direct (DIR) and its person-number features are reflected in the verb, as shown in examples (4) and (5) below. Note that in Kurmanji, singular arguments always agree with the verb in person and number (see 4a and 5a), whereas plural arguments agree with the verb merely in number (see 4b and 5b).

(4) Present-Intransitive

- a. *Ez* *di-rew-im*
1S.DIR PROG-run.PRS-1S
'I am running.'
- b. *Em* *di-ç-in* *mal-ê*
1PL.DIR PROG-go.PRS-PL house-OBL
'We are going home.'

(5) Past-Intransitive

- a. *Ez* *revê-m*
1S.DIR run.PST-1S
'I ran.'
- b. *Em* *çû-n* *mal-ê*
1PL.DIR go.PST-PL house-OBL
'We went home.'

Similarly, in non-past transitive constructions, the subject features a DIR case, while the object is of oblique (OBL) case, and the subject controls agreement on the verb (see example 6 below):

- (6) a. *Ez* *cil-an* *di-şû-m*
1S.DIR cloth-PL.OBL PROG-wash.PRS-1S
'I am washing the clothes.'

⁷ Dorleijn 1996, Haig 1998; 2004; 2008, Thackston 2006, Gündoğdu 2011, Karimi 2012.

- | | | | |
|----|--|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| b. | <i>Ez</i>
1S.DIR
'I see you.' | <i>te</i>
2S.OBL | <i>di-bin-im</i>
PROG-see.PRS-1S |
| c. | <i>Tu</i>
2S.DIR
'You see me.' | <i>min</i>
1S.OBL | <i>di-bin-i</i>
PROG-see.PRS-2S |
| d. | <i>Ew</i>
3PL.DIR
'They see me.' | <i>min</i>
1S.OBL | <i>di-bin-in</i>
PROG-see.PRS-PL |

Quite in contrast, the *ergative* alignment (see 1a above!) occurs in transitive past tense constructions. Here, the subject bears the OBL case, while the object is of DIR case and triggers verb agreement (see 7 below). This pattern is called the *canonical ergative construction* in Kurmanji.⁸

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|--|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (7) | a. | <i>Min</i>
1S.OBL
'I was washing the clothes.' | <i>cil</i>
cloth-PL.DIR | <i>di-sûst-in</i>
PROG-wash.PST-PL |
| | b. | <i>Min</i>
1S.OBL
'I saw you.' | <i>tu</i>
2S.DIR | <i>dît-i</i>
see.PST-2S |
| | c. | <i>Te</i>
2S.OBL
'You saw me.' | <i>ez</i>
1S.DIR | <i>dît-im</i>
see.PST-1S |
| | d. | <i>Wan</i>
3PL.OBL
'They saw me.' | <i>ez</i>
1S.DIR | <i>dît-im</i>
see.PST-1S |

The *ergative* agreement relation as presented here stands in sharp difference to the *nominative-accusative* alignment given above (see 6) because in the *ergativity* case given in (7), the *object* (not the subject!) shows agreement with the verb. The pattern of case-marking and agreement in the canonical ergative pattern is in full conformity with the definition of the ergative structure provided in (1a).

⁸ Haig 2008: 213.

However, not all past transitive constructions in Kurmanji dialects conform to this canonical ergative pattern. For instance, there are only a few examples of canonical ergative constructions in my data of the Muş dialect. One example is provided in (8) below:

- (8) *Wan* *eş* *gellekî* *acis* *keir-im*.
 3PL.OBL 1S.DIR very bored do.PST-1S
 ‘They bored me so much.’

In the MK dialect, we observe different non-canonical, ergative-derived constructions that deviate from the canonical ergative pattern in transitive past-tense constructions. The first and most common pattern is the *double oblique construction*⁹, where both the subject and the object have OBL case and neither of them controls agreement on the verb. The verb appears in the default third person singular form (9):¹⁰

- (9) a. *Min* *cil-an* *di-şûşt- Ø*
 1S.OBL cloth-PL.OBL PROG-wash.PST-3S
 ‘I was washing the clothes.’
- b. *Min* *te* *dît- Ø*
 2S.OBL 2S.OBL see.PST-3S
 ‘I saw you.’
- c. *Te* *min* *dît- Ø*
 2S.OBL 1S.OBL see.PST-3S
 ‘You saw me.’
- d. *Wan* *min* *dît- Ø*
 3PL.OBL 1S.OBL see.PST-3S
 ‘They saw me.’
- e. *Ku* *te* *şimik-ê* *hilda-Ø* (... *tu revî ew diqêre*)
 that 2S.OBL slipper-OBL up.give.PST-3S (...you ran away it screamed)
 ‘when you held the slipper ...’
- f. *Me* *vana* *keşt-Ø* *û* *dû ra...*
 1PL.OBL 3PL.OBL kill.PST- and then...
 ‘We killed them and then...’

⁹ Haig 2008: 225.

¹⁰ Gündoğdu 2011; 2015; 2016.

The double oblique pattern is a deviant case pattern because its case and agreement properties diverge from the canonical ergative in two ways: first, the object is put into the OBL case instead of DIR, and second, the verb does not show agreement.

In some double oblique constructions, a plural subject triggers agreement on the verb. This generally takes place in sentences with an overt third-person plural subject (see 10) or an impersonal plural subject (see 11).¹¹

(10) a. ... *wan ji me rêy-a mal-ê birs-în*
 3PL.OBL P 1PL.OBL road-EZ.F house-OBL ask.PST-PL
 ‘They asked us how they could get to the house.’
 (lit: They asked us the road of the house)

b. *gundî-yan ewî ji me ra ne-got-în*
 villager-PL.OBL 3S.OBL P 1PL.OBL P NEG-say.PST-PL
 ‘The villagers didn’t say that to us.’

c. ...*paşê camer-an şivan-ekî berda-n*
 then man (high-minded)-PL shepherd-INDF.OBL release.PST-PL
 ‘Then the high-minded men released the shepherd.’

(11) a. *bûk-ê di-xwast-în, dianîn,*
 bride-OBL PROG-want.PST-3PL PROG-bring.PST-3PL
 ‘(They) asked for the bride’s hand, brought her,

ben-a xwe çêdikir-în, dewet-a xwe di-kir-în
 henna-EZ.F self make.PST-PL wedding-EZ.F self PROG-do.PST-PL
 made their henna, held their wedding.’

The two patterns presented here differ from double oblique constructions in that the subject triggers agreement on the verb despite OBL case morphology. Moreover, the construction deviates from the canonical ergative construction in two ways: first, the object has OBL case instead of DIR, and second, there is subject-verb agreement rather than object-verb agreement.

¹¹ Note that the existence of similar constructions has also been documented in other Kurdish-Kurmanji varieties in Bedirxan and Lescot 1997, Haig 1998: 157, Dorleijn 1996: 118.

The last deviant pattern attested in my MK dialect data is just like the nominative-accusative alignment discussed above (cf. 1b): here, the subject has DIR case, while the object has OBL case; the subject controls verb agreement (see 12 below). This deviant pattern's case and agreement properties stand in direct opposition to the canonical ergative construction:

- (12) *genc-ek* *mîna* *Ismail û Ömer* *bûk-ê* *di-bir- Ø*
 young-INDF.DIR like I and Ömer bride-OBL PROG-take.PST-3S
 'A young (boy), like Ismail and Ömer, was taking the bride away.'

To recapitulate, the deviant patterns attested so far in transitive past-tense constructions of the MK dialect are listed in (14) below. It should, however, be emphasised that the canonical ergative pattern is generally rare in the MK dialect data (see 13). The common pattern in the Kurmanji dialect at stake is, in fact, the double oblique pattern (see 14a).¹²

- (13) a. A_{OBL} – P_{DIR} – V_P (canonical ergative pattern)
- (14) a. A_{OBL} – P_{OBL} – V_{no agreement} (double oblique pattern)
 b. A_{OBL} – P_{OBL} – V_A
 c. impersonal A – P_{OBL} – V_A
 d. A_{DIR} – P_{OBL} – V_A

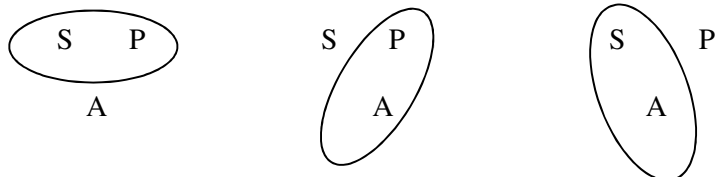
The constructions listed in (14) clearly show that alignment in the MK dialect does not conform to ergative alignment as described in the literature for Kurmanji.¹³ In ergative constructions in Kurmanji, P generally aligns with S as illustrated in (13); however, in the MK dialect's double oblique pattern as given in (14a), P aligns with A rather than patterning with S. Moreover, in other patterns provided (in 14c and 14d), A aligns with S just like the pattern we observe in the nominative-accusative alignment described in the introduction.

¹² Note that A stands for the subject of the transitive clause, while S corresponds to the subject of the intransitive clause, and P refers to the object of a transitive clause.

¹³ Dixon 1994, Comrie 1978.

In sum, the MK dialect has the following alignments in past tense transitive constructions (15):

- (15) a. ergative alignment b. double oblique c. accusative alignment



It is thus precisely the ‘*canonical*’ Kurmanji ergative construction that is ‘*deviant*’ in the MK dialect. This observation in turn might be taken as an indication of a shift from *ergative* to *nominative-accusative* alignment in the Kurmanji Muş dialect in Turkey. This is paralleled by Haig’s finding that *all* Kurmanji (i.e., Northern Kurdish) dialects show deviations from canonical ergativity. The deviations attested are in fact similar to what we have observed in the MK dialect data (specifically the rise of double oblique constructions where both A and P are in OBL, as well as A-dominated agreement). Haig asserts that putting the object into OBL in the past minimises the case-marking distinction between past and present, as the object always gets OBL in all tenses. Likewise, he proposes that the presence of double oblique constructions and A-dominated agreement in past-tense transitives in Kurmanji (i.e., Northern Kurdish) dialects indicate a movement towards accusative alignment; as with the loss of OBL marking on A, the result is a nominative-accusative construction.¹⁴ In fact, the deviant patterns listed in (14) in the MK dialect data indicate these very paths of alignment shift in the MK dialect. The most striking issue, however, is the last deviant pattern given in (14d), where A in DIR, P in OBL and the verb show agreement with A; this in turn signals the last step of a shift towards nominative-accusative alignment. Therefore, one can state that all patterns attested in the MK dialect data provided here support Haig’s claim.

In the next sections, I will discuss the answer to the question of what triggers the rise of non-canonical ergative patterns in the MK dialect. I will focus on two potential triggers: language contact to Turkish and Armenian on the one hand, and language internal change on the other.

¹⁴ Haig 2008: 273 f.

Language contact to Turkish and Armenian

It is well known that languages undergo changes in contact situations.¹⁵ In his work, Stilo has shown that Iranian languages develop renewal strategies as the result of interaction with typologically different languages.¹⁶ He proposes that Iranian languages are ‘sandwiched’ between right-branching (VO) Semitic languages and left-branching (OV) languages, such as Turkic languages, Armenian, and Indic languages – the contact ‘conflict’ is solved by creating an intersection (‘sandwich’) zone which accommodates to both patterns. The fact that the MK dialect in Turkey has a long tradition of contact to Turkish and Armenian might influence the rise of the deviant ergative patterns attested in the MK data, leading to a shift towards nominative-accusative alignment.

Turkish and Armenian are, in fact, two languages with a long tradition of neighbouring Kurmanji (and specifically the MK dialect).¹⁷ Both Turkish and Armenian, however, have only nominative-accusative alignment (i.e., the subject controls agreement on the verb in all tenses). In Turkish, for instance, the nominative (NOM) is the default case on subjects whereas the accusative (ACC) is the most typical object case, and only subjects can index the verb for their person-number features (16).

- (16) a. *Ben* *kitab-ı* *oku-yor-um*
1S.NOM book-ACC read-PROG-1S
‘I am reading the book.’
- b. *Ben* *kitab-ı* *oku-du-m*
1S.NOM book-ACC read-PST-1S
‘I read the book.’

Similarly in Armenian, subjects have NOM case, while ACC is the typical object case; and only subjects can trigger agreement on the verb.¹⁸

- (17) a. *Yes* *kirk-ı* *garta-m*
1S.NOM book-ACC read-1S
‘I am reading the book.’
- b. *Yes* *kirk-ı* *garta-ts-i*
1S.NOM book-ACC read-PST-1S
‘I read the book.’

¹⁵ Heine and Kuteva 2005, Matras 2009.

¹⁶ Stilo 2005, 2009b.

¹⁷ Although today the Kurmanji spoken within the borders of Turkey only shows rare contact with Armenian, we know that it had close and intense contact in the past. Such influence has proven to be long-lasting, which is why not only Turkish but also Armenian and its influence should always be taken into account in the case of Kurdish-Kurmanji.

¹⁸ Armenian data was taken from Nişan Güreç, a native speaker of Western Armenian in Turkey.

Just as a reminder, Kurmanji has accusative alignment in non-past transitive constructions, just as Turkish and Armenian:

(18)	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Object</u>	<u>Verb</u>
a.	NOM	ACC	V _{subject agreement} (Turkish)
b.	NOM	ACC	V _{subject agreement} (Armenian)
c.	DIR	OBL	V _{subject agreement} (Kurmanji/MK in non-past)

In the deviant patterns attested in the MK dialect, however, the objects systematically get OBL case and never trigger agreement on the verb (19):

(19)	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Object</u>	<u>Verb</u>
a.	OBL	OBL	V _{no agreement}
b.	OBL	OBL	V _{subject agreement}
c.	impersonal	OBL	V _{subject agreement}
d.	DIR	OBL	V _{subject agreement}

Considering that Kurmanji already has accusative alignment in certain environments – such as non-past tenses – the deviant constructions (where objects are always OBL and/or subjects control agreement on the verb) are possible patterns obeying constraints of case and agreement morphology of Kurmanji. In other words, the emergence of these deviant patterns is potentially in line with the case and agreement properties of this language. Once again, what is crucial in this regard is the question of what triggers the rise of these patterns. One reasonable assumption is the contact influence as discussed here. The contact to Turkish and Armenian may have triggered morpho-syntactic levelling in the MK dialect, this in turn resulting in marking all the objects with OBL case, parallel to ACC object case in Turkish and Armenian, and making verbal agreement possible only with subjects. It seems thus reasonable to propose that it is language contact that caused the MK dialect to adopt a case system according to Turkish/Armenian nominative-accusative alignment. In consequence, objects always get OBL case, while subjects start showing agreement with the verb irrespective of their case morphology. The existence of similar deviant patterns in other Kurmanji dialects might provide further support for the influence of the language-contact situation with Turkish – e.g., in her research on Kurmanji spoken in Diyarbakır/Amed, Dorleijn reports similar examples of deviant patterns, such as double oblique construction with no agreement or with subject agreement.¹⁹ Dorleijn evaluates these non-canonical ergative constructions as *ergative loss*; she, too, considers this to be the result of the influence of close Turkish-Kurdish contact situations.

Moreover, similar changes in case systems have also been found in several languages in close contact to Turkish and Persian (Farsi). Once again, these findings provide

¹⁹ See Chapter 6 in Dorleijn 1996 for all examples of deviant patterns attested in Diyarbakır Kurmanji.

evidence of the powerful effects of language-contact situations. Investigating the case of Balochi, for example, the Persian (Farsi) influence might have triggered considerable changes in the case system:²⁰

[...] Case system reductions and reshapings have taken place in many Indo-European languages, including the Western Iranian languages from Old Persian to Middle Persian, and even further to New Persian, so why should it not happen as an internal phenomenon in Balochi?

Even if parts of this case-reduction process are the result of language-internal change, Jahani suggests that the Balochi-Farsi contact situation still plays a crucial role, given that the change has affected Balochi in Iran much more than in the case of Pakistan. Features such as the emergence of *exafe* replacing the genitive construction of Balochi, and the preposition of *be* as a dative marker are among the most prominent evidences for the Balochi-Farsi language-contact example.

Another example of contact influence similar to my own data is presented by Demirok.²¹ He investigates two different dialects of Georgian spoken in close vicinity to Turkish (i.e., in the cities of Ünye and İnegöl in Turkey). Demirok found out that the Georgian dialect of Ünye (ÜG) has lost its ergative property, while ergative case has begun to function as a specificity marker in the Georgian dialect of İnegöl (İG). Demirok suggests that the decline of ergativity in ÜG as well as the rise of specificity marking in İG may be due to language contact to Turkish, more specifically: to the accusative alignment typical for Turkish.

In summary we can say that for the rise of *deviant ergative* patterns in the Kurmanji MK dialect, the long contact to *nominative-accusative* languages such as Turkish and Armenian might provide plausible explanations. However, the influence of language-contact situations is but one potential cause for shift. The second and equally plausible cause is language-internal change, which I will address in the next section.

²⁰ Jahani 2003: 129; also see Korn 2009: 74 for similar arguments.

²¹ Demirok 2012.

Language-internal change

Iranian languages have diachronically undergone several historical changes: e.g., certain structures such as case and gender were lost; new constructions like differential object marking (e.g., *ra* in modern Persian) and ergativity were applied; and many more. Although Old Iranian languages, for instance Gathic Avestan, had a rich case system, this system diminished to two cases (direct vs. oblique) by the very earliest stages of Middle Persian and Parthian. Today's modern Iranian languages either preserve this two-case system (e.g., Kurdish-Kurmanji or Northern Kurdish, Balochi, Tati dialects, Pashto, etc.) or they have already lost their case properties ending up without any case distinction altogether (e.g., Central Kurdish, Modern Persian, etc.).²² Likewise, the development of ergative alignment in the Iranian language family goes back to Old Persian and Middle Persian,²³ although it is not preserved in all Iranian languages nowadays. Iranian languages, such as Kurdish-Kurmanji, Zazaki, and Balochi, still retain ergativity in their grammar; however, other languages such as modern Persian and Kurdish-Gilani have lost their ergative patterns. In sum, the findings on Iranian languages suggest that accusative alignment is preserved in all languages in this family, while ergative alignment is not.²⁴ These changes indicate that the rise and loss of certain structures is mostly due to the degree of relationship between languages.

In light of these findings, the loss of ergative properties in several Kurdish-Kurmanji dialects (e.g., Muş, Diyarbakır) may be seen as language-internal changes. Modern Persian (Farsi) and Kurdish-Gilani serve as excellent examples in this regard: modern Persian has totally lost ergativity and adapts a nominative-accusative alignment instead. Similarly, Kurdish-Gilani shifts to nominative-accusative alignment in the past tenses – in contrast to other Northern Kurdish dialects, however, that mostly preserve their ergative alignment.

Haig proposes that the non-accusative alignment (i.e., the preservation of ergative patterns) in Iranian languages has emerged as a result of a set of factors, such as 'the loss of past finite verb forms and the fusion of a non-canonical subject construction with a participial predicate'.²⁵ Similarly, Karimi argues that the ergative pattern is an extension and development of past participle constructions in Iranian languages.²⁶ He also states that the studies tracing the origin of the ergative pattern to past participle constructions argue that the ergative verb is syntactically *intransitive* but semantically *transitive*. This phenomenon is the result of the ergative verb in modern Iranian languages having retained the intransitive properties of its past participle predecessor (which is nominal/adjectival and thus lacks accusative case), but carries the meaning of a two-place predicate verb. Furthermore, Dorleijn suggests that the

²² Stilo 2009a.

²³ Karimi 2012.

²⁴ Haig 2008, Karimi 2012.

²⁵ Haig 2008: 312 f.

²⁶ Karimi 2012.

past verb forms in ergative constructions are not fully transitive, which in turn leads to the instability of case assignment and agreement.²⁷ Along with Dorleijn's suggestion, Haig points out that the *labile nature* of ergative constructions in Kurmanji might be due to the fact that ergative verbs are still in the process of reanalysis towards transitive verb forms.²⁸ In fact, in his recent work Haig further elaborates on this issue and proposes that the transitivity of verb forms is among the components involved in subsequent developments leading to the emergence of ergative alignment in past-tense transitive constructions. Haig suggests that the verb forms were originally resultative participles, and just like intransitive verbs they were unable to assign the accusative case.²⁹ Therefore, the general assumption is that an ergative verb is 'defective' and, therefore, unable to license the accusative case on a direct object,³⁰ so that the direct object is assigned the nominative case. Here, we can think ACC as parallel to OBL case on the objects and NOM as parallel to DIR case on the subjects in Kurmanji.³¹ Thus, if the ergative verb is considered to lack accusative case properties, then the emergence of OBL objects in the MK dialect implies *ergative alignment shifts towards nominative-accusative alignment*. In other words, the ergative verb is not 'defective' but rather is about to 'behave' like a transitive verb that is capable of assigning accusative (or OBL) case to its arguments. It seems that some Kurmanji dialects, just like the MK dialect, reduce the tension between two alignment types *by shifting ergative to accusative*. If we additionally consider diachronic developments in Iranian languages in general, and in Kurmanji in particular, then it seems quite reasonable to assume language-internal change as the trigger for deviant (i.e., nominative-accusative alignment) patterns in the MK dialect, too.

In fact, in a previous study I have demonstrated that ergative is a morphological case in MK dialect: ergative and accusative patterns observed in this dialect are syntactically the same, despite different case morphology.³² It has also been illustrated that oblique subjects (or ergative subjects) as well as direct subjects display the same subject properties with respect to the control of anaphoric possessors (binding) (see example 20), passivization (21), and scope tests (22). Therefore, both OBL and DIR subjects pattern structurally alike, irrespective of their case morphology in the MK dialect. Note here that Haig proposes the same for Kurmanji in general – i.e., that ergative and direct subjects 'behave' in the same way.³³

²⁷ Dorleijn 1996.

²⁸ Haig 1998.

²⁹ Haig 2008.

³⁰ Karimi 2012: 27.

³¹ Gündoğdu 2011 shows that DIR case is syntactically the same as NOM, while OBL case on the objects has the same syntactic properties as ACC case. For further information, see Gündoğdu 2011, Chapter 2.

³² Gündoğdu 2011.

³³ Haig 1998: 160, 161, 166.

- (20) a. *Ez̤i* *xwe_i* *di-bîn-im*
 1S.DIR self PROG-see.PRS-1S
 ‘I see myself.’
- b. *Min_i* *xwe_i* *dît-Ø*
 1S.OBL self see.PST-3S
 ‘I saw myself.’
- (21) a. *Zana_i* *bi* *tifîng-a* *xwe_i* *tê-Ø* *ledan*
 Zana.DIR P gun-EZ.F self come.PRS-3S to shoot
 ‘Zana is shot with his gun.’
- b. *Zana_i* *bi* *tifîng-a* *xwe_i* *bat-Ø* *ledan*
 Zana.DIR P gun-EZ.F self come.PST-3S to shoot
 ‘Zana was shot with his gun.’
- (22) a. Her zarok du pirtûk-an di-xwîn-e
 every child.DIR two book-PL.OBL PROG-read.PRS-3S
 ‘Every child reads two books.’ [every>two]
- b. Her zarok-ê du pirtûk-an xwand-Ø
 every child-OBL two book-PL.OBL read.PST-3S
 ‘Every child reads two books.’ [every>two]

Moreover, the deviant patterns also indicate that ergative or oblique subjects build an agreement relation together with the verb, just as the direct subjects do. This data further supports the claim that the ergative subject is about to acquire the properties of direct subjects. Since ergative is just a morphological ‘superficial’ phenomenon in the MK dialect, the case and agreement morphology of this dialect is, in fact, in the process of adapting to an nominative-accusative syntax. The emergence of oblique objects and agreeing ergative subjects may strengthen the view that in the future, as with modern Persian (Farsi), some Kurmanji dialects (e.g., Muş and Diyarbakır dialects) will also adapt to nominative-accusative alignment by completely losing their ergative pattern.

Given that, from a diachronic point of view, the Iranian languages are in a state of transition from the inflectional to the analytic language type³⁴, and given that languages with ergative alignment (especially Kurdish-Kurmanji and Balochi) exhibit similar deviant patterns³⁵, it seems reasonable to suggest that these languages experience a language-internal change. This shift also includes *a shift from ergative towards nominative-accusative alignment in all tenses*.

Conclusion

Using the Kurdish-Kurmanji dialect of Muş as an example, my study investigated two potential factors triggering the shift to nominative-accusative patterns in an ergative language. I first argued that the emergence of non-canonical ergative patterns is morphologically possible, as these patterns do not violate case and agreement morphology in the Kurmanji dialect at stake. Second, I illustrated that either language contact to Turkish and Armenian or language-internal grammatical change may lead to the rise of these deviant patterns; most probably, both external contact and internal change are responsible for the change. Regarding external contact, the neighbouring languages of Turkish and Armenian are typical nominative-accusative languages, where subjects always control the agreement of the verb; I therefore proposed that, due to close language contact, the ergative MK dialect is about to shift in the very same direction – i.e., towards nominative-accusative alignment. Regarding internal change, on the other hand, the Kurmanji MK dialect might be about to lose its ergative property, just as modern Persian (Farsi) once did. Similarly it can be assumed that ergative verbs in this dialect experience a transition from being defective to being fully transitive (with ACC case properties). Furthermore, it is possible to assume that the MK dialect places the object into the OBL case and favours subject agreement in the past tenses to minimize the case-marking distinction between past and present tenses; these two factors in turn simultaneously influence the transition process from ergative to accusative alignment in the MK dialect.

However, there are some issues requiring further investigation. Given that all Kurmanji dialects spoken in Turkey maintain close contact to Turkish, one would expect the patterns discussed above not only in the MK dialect, but also in other Kurmanji dialects, at least in Turkey. Therefore, further studies on the ergative pattern in various Kurmanji dialects of Turkey will be necessary to support the hypothesis presented in this study. And still, since Kurmanji is a language ‘in motion’ due to migration and displacement, language contact perhaps remains the most crucial factor to be further investigated in the case of Kurmanji. Data is still rare on Kurmanji spoken in Syria, Iran, Armenia, and Russia, for example, as well as in the worldwide diaspora: it is exposed to extensive contact to virtually most existing language families. Research on the case and alignment system in Kurmanji would thus lead to great insight into processes of change and adaption in a language of such high mobility as Kurdish-Kurmanji and its dialects.

³⁴ Karimi 2012.

³⁵ Haig 2008, Korn 2009.

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