Algonquian languages are not ergative

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Preamble

- A number of claims have been made that Algonquian languages are ergative (Hewson 1987, Bruening 2007, Johnson & Rosen 2012).

- In this presentation, we want to argue that Algonquian languages are, in fact, accusative.

- We do this by examining the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative, as well as looking at the genuinely ergative pattern known as the inverse.

1. How to know if a language is ergative?

- Ergativity is a term used whenever transitive objects and intransitive subjects pattern alike.
- It is important to make a distinction between an ergative language and ergative pattern.

ERGATIVE PATTERN

any structure within a language in which an object is treated the same as an intransitive subject.

ERGATIVE LANGUAGE

a language in which the fundamental morphosyntax of the clause – case, agreement, word order – is ergative.

In order to diagnose a language as being ergative, we should ultimately look at the fundamental morphosyntax of clauses of that language.

2 Are Algonquian languages ergative?

- It isn't straightforward to determine whether or not Algonquian languages are ergative.
- Out of the three elements that constitute the fundamental morphosyntax of a language, Algonquian languages only have agreement that we can look at.
- The distinction between ergative and accusative languages is quite often demonstrated on the basis of case.

2 Are Algonquian languages ergative?

Algonquian central agreement and theme signs behave in ways that are similar to case.

niwa·pama·na·n				
ni-	wa·pam	-a·	-ina·n	-Ø
1-	see.TA	-3OBJ	-1p	-3s
‘we see her’				

ninipa·na·n		
ni-	nipa·	-ina·n
1-	sleep.AI	-1p
‘we (excl) sleep’		

data from Cree, Wolfart (1973)

- Central agreement: appears in all verb forms and normally indexes the subject = NOM.
- Theme sign: appears in all transitive forms and indexes the transitive patient = ACC.

2 Are Algonquian languages ergative?

- In this presentation, we set out to show that Algonquian languages are fundamentally accusative, despite having certain ergative patterns.

We do this by examining the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative and demonstrate why they don't actually establish that the languages are ergative.

- We also take a close look at the inverse pattern, and demonstrate that the presence of this genuinely ergative pattern still does not make the languages as a whole qualify as ergative.

3 Arguments for Algonquian being ergative

The existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative can be countered by demonstrating either that the identified pattern is ergative but doesn't reflect the fundamental structure of the clause or that the pattern just isn't ergative.

Hewson 1987, Bruening 2007

Hewson 1987

Johnson & Rosen 2012

Johnson & Rosen 2012

3.1 Peripheral agreement

Both Hewson (1987) and Bruening (2007) use peripheral agreement, which agrees with the object and the intransitive subject, as an argument for Algonquian languages being ergative.

niwa:pama:na:nak
ni- wa:pam -a: -na:n -ak
1- see -DIR -1PL -3PL
'we see them'
object

nipa:wak
nipa: -w -ak
sleep -3 -3PL
' they sleep'
subject

data from Cree, Wolfart (1973)

3.1 Peripheral agreement

- Indeed an ergative pattern.
- But peripheral agreement is arguably the least important layer of agreement in the Algonquian verb. There is also central agreement and theme sign, which appear in all transitive verb forms, unlike peripheral agreement, which only occurs in certain paradigms such as the independent.
- Central agreement and theme sign don't show an ergative pattern.

niwa·pama·na·n

ni-	wa·pam	-a·	-ina·n	-Ø
1-	see.TA	-3OBJ	-1p	-3s

'we see her'

agent

ninipa·na·n

ni-	nipa·	-ina·n
1-	sleep.AI	-1p

'we (excl) sleep'

intransitive subject

Ergative pattern, only appears in certain paradigms.

3.2 TA absolute form

- Hewson (1987) argues that the TA absolute form resembles an antipassive and that antipassives mostly appear in ergative languages.

Objective form:

wənihla:wal maxkwal
wə- nihl -a: -w -al maxkw -al
3- kill -DIR -3SG -3OBV bear -OBV
'he killed the bear(s).OBV'

Absolute form: lacks central agreement prefix

xwe:li maxkwal nihle:w
xwe:li maxkw -al nihl -e: -w -Ø
many bear -OBV kill -DIR -3 -3SG
'he killed many bears.'

data from Delaware, Goddard (1974, p. 318)

- The TA absolute form isn't really like an antipassive because (1) there is no added antipassive marker, and (2) the object isn't oblique.
- TA absolute is actually a differential object marking pattern, in which indefinite objects receive less morphological marking, and such patterns are not diagnostic of ergativity.

3.2 TA absolute form

- Turkish for instance, which is an accusative language, has a DOM pattern.

Ali bir kitab-ɨ aldɨ	Ali bir kitap aldɨ
Ali one book-ACC bought	Ali one book bought
‘Ali bought a (particular) book.’	‘Ali bought a book (any book).’
accusative case	no case marking

data from Turkish, Enç (1991)

Not an ergative pattern.

- Even if the TA absolute isn’t an antipassive, in Algonquian, there is still a lexical suffix that does look like an antipassive marker (Rhodes & Valentine 2015; Zúñiga 2016).

3.2 TA absolute form

- In fact, Algonquian has both a lexical suffix that looks like an antipassive marker and one that looks like a passive marker.

Lexical antipassive	Lexical passive
VTA axam- 'to feed ANIM'	VTA wihl- 'to name ANIM'
VAI axam-kee- 'to feed people'	VAI wihl-əkwəsii- 'to be named'
suppresses patient	suppresses agent

data from Munsee Delaware, O'Meara (1990)

- Therefore, there is a form that makes Algonquian languages align with ergative languages and a form that makes them align with accusative ones.
- In any case, ergativity isn't diagnosed based on the existence of antipassives. The relationship between the two is a tendency rather than a strict correlation.

Not an ergative pattern.

3.3 Verb stem agreement

Johnson & Rosen (2012) mention verb stem agreement (transitive verb stem agreeing with the patient and intransitive verb stem agreeing with the agent) as an indicator of ergativity in Algonquian languages.

Intransitive stems: final marks animacy of subject

AI stem
sanakesi-
sanak -esi
difficult -ANIM.INTRANS
'to be difficult (animate)'

II stem
sanakat-
sanak -at
difficult -INAN.INTRANS
'to be difficult (inanimate)'

Transitive stems: final marks animacy of patient

TA stem
wa:pam-
wa:p -am
see -TRANS.ANIM
'to see ANIM'

TI stem
wa:pant-
wa:p -ant
see -TRANS.INAN
'to see INAN'

data from Meskwaki, Bloomfield (1946)

3.3 Verb stem agreement

- Stems are part of derivational morphology rather than the fundamental morphosyntax. Therefore, the existence of absolutive stem-forming suffixes doesn't reflect the structure of the clause.

- Example of an absolutive stem-forming suffix from English (clearly an accusative language):

  employee: Sue employed John.

  retiree: John retired.

Ergative/absolutive alignment pattern that doesn't reflect the fundamental structure of the clause.

3.4 Coordination

Johnson & Rosen (2012) show that coordination in Menominee follows an ergative pattern, as there is a coordinator (*taeh*) that can join a transitive and an intransitive verb if the object of the first is the same as the subject of the second.

		patient 'you'				subject 'you'
Nahāw,	ayāpaēw,	kekātaew-nīmihen	kaēh;	yōm	taeh nēk	kena-kiaqtāhsemim
well.then	stag	2.going.to-I.make.you.dance	at.any.rate	this	*taeh* my.house	2.will-you.dance.round.a.circle.

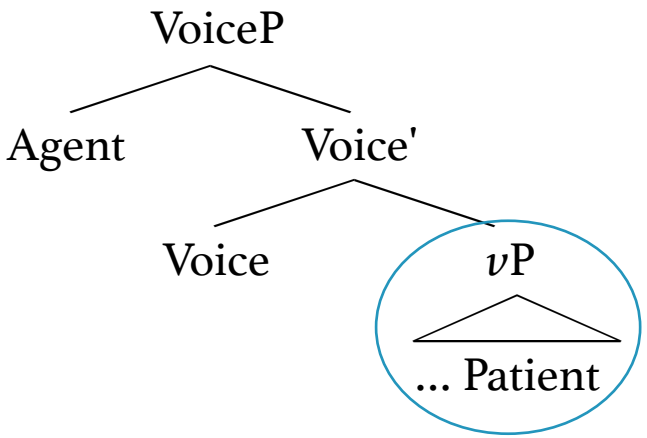
'Now then, Stag, I am going to have you dance; and around my house you will dance.'

data from Menominee, Johnson & Rosen (2012)

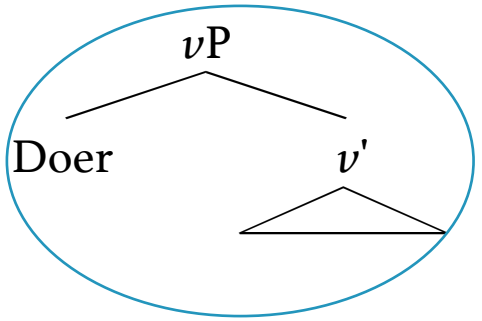
3.4 Coordination

- Based on Tollan & Oxford 2018 and Xu 2019, there is an explanation for this pattern that doesn't involve any inherent ergative properties of the language.
- The authors propose that in Algonquian intransitives, the subject (the "doer") originates in the *v*P (like the object), while in the transitives, the subject originates outside *v*P in the VoiceP. Therefore, if two *v*Ps are coordinated, we expect the transitive patient and intransitive subject to pattern together.

A transitive clause:



An intransitive clause:



Ergative pattern that doesn't have to do with clausal morphosyntax but is actually related to the nature of agents vs. doers in Algonquian.

Interim summary

We examined the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative, and it appears that none of them actually go through.

- Peripheral agreement: an ergative pattern that has no influence on fundamental structure of the clause; only appears in certain paradigms.
- TA absolute: not an ergative pattern (actually, a DOM pattern); the existence of a lexical antipassive doesn't make the fundamental morphosyntax of Algonquian ergative either.
- Verb stem agreement: an ergative pattern, but derivational morphology is distinct from clausal morphosyntax.
- Coordination: ergative pattern that doesn't reflect the clausal morphosyntax, rather the subject/doer distinction.

4 The inverse: the actual ergative pattern

Compared to the different ergative and not-really-ergative patterns talked about earlier, the inverse is the pattern that is the most of ergative of them all (Siewierska 1998, Déchaine 1999, Agnès 2014).

Direct pattern:

owa:bama:wa:n

o- wa:bam -a: -wa: -an

3- see -3OBJ -3PL -OBV

'they see the other' (3→OBV)

Inverse pattern:

owa:bamigowa:n

o- wa:bam -igw -wa: -an

3- see -INV -3PL -OBV

'the other sees them' (OBV→3)

data from Ojibwe, Nichols (1980)

In the inverse structure, the central agreement agrees with the object, which resembles absolutive case, if we follow the agreement/case parallels drawn earlier.

4 The inverse: the actual ergative pattern

Direct pattern:

owa:bama:wa:n

o- wa:bam -a: -wa: -an

3- see -3OBJ -3PL -OBV

'they see the other' (3→OBV)

Inverse pattern:

owa:bamigowa:n

o- wa:bam -igw -wa: -an

3- see -INV -3PL -OBV

'the other sees them' (OBV→3)

data from Ojibwe, Nichols (1980)

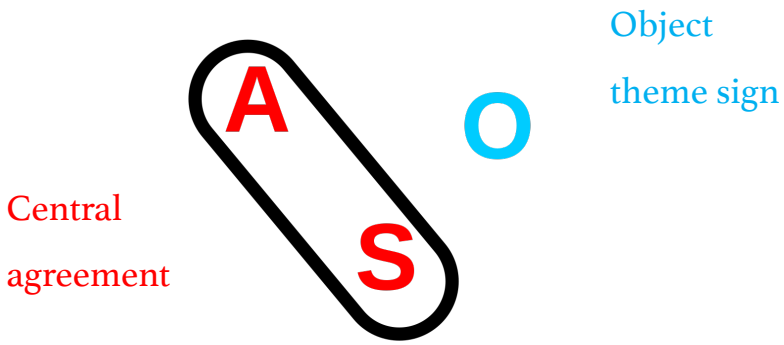
The inverse pattern shows a complete reversal of roles:

- The central agreement switches from indexing the agent (= NOM) to indexing the patient (= ABS).
- The object theme sign (= ACC) isn't present, as expected in a pattern that is ERG rather than ACC.
- The default word order is also reversed in the inverse (Rhodes 1994, Junker 2004).
- This reversal is present in binding relations as well (Bruening 2001, Lochbihler 2012, Bliss 2013).

4 The inverse: the actual ergative pattern

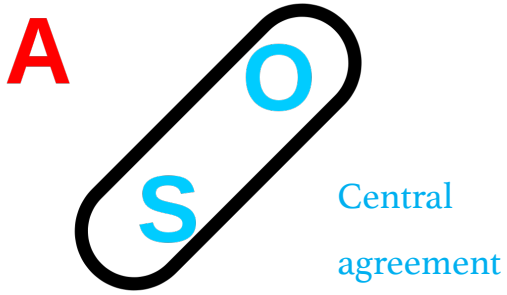
The presence of this pattern that is ergative in every way doesn't make the Algonquian languages ergative because it is used in contrast with the default, which shows an accusative pattern, as it is unlike the inverse in terms of all the features discussed.

Direct pattern:



accusative alignment

Inverse pattern:



ergative alignment

The ergative inverse pattern is in fact the exception that proves the rule: if Algonquian languages were truly ergative, all transitive clauses would show the properties of inverse clauses.

Conclusion

- The main goal of this presentation was to counter the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative and to show that Algonquian languages are, in fact, accusative.

- The existing arguments for Algonquian being ergative are examples of patterns that are ergative or common in ergative languages, but don't reflect the fundamental morphosyntax of Algonquian languages, which is the key indicator of whether a language is ergative or not.

- The pattern that really shows ergative fundamental morphosyntax is the inverse; however, it doesn't make the Algonquian languages ergative, as it contrasts with the accusative morphosyntax of the default direct pattern.

Thank you!

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