

Apparent Ergative Constructions in Syrian Arabic

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□ ABSTRACT □

The ergativity phenomenon was studied in a variety of languages, but, to the best of my knowledge, not in connection with Syrian Arabic. The primary objective of this paper is to shed light on apparent ergative constructions in Syrian Arabic. We begin by considering what an ergative construction really means, introducing the basic data. Then we use word order and agreement facts as arguments to support our assumption that what resembles a subject in apparent Syrian ergative clauses is not a subject, but a topic.

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التراكيب اللازمة لزوماً ظاهرياً في العربية السورية

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□ الملخص □

لقد طُرقت ظاهرة اللزوم في العديد من اللغات، إلا أنها، حسب أقصى معرفتي، لم تُعالج في العربية السورية. يكمن الهدف الرئيس لهذه الورقة في تسليط الضوء على التراكيب اللازمة لزوماً ظاهرياً في العربية السورية. نستهل عملنا هذا بالتطرق إلى ما يُعنى بالجملة اللازمة بالفعل، إذ نستعرض المعطيات الأساسية. بعدها ننتقل لنتناول حُجَّتَيْن مُمْتَلَتَيْن بترتيب الكلمات والتطابق لدعم فرضيتنا القائلة أن ما يُشبه الفاعل في التراكيب اللازمة لزوماً ظاهرياً في العربية السورية ليس بفاعل، بل حالة من حالات الموضَعة.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘ergative’ was first used in the way it is used in GB Theory by Burzio (1986). In a different sense, it has been around for a long time. Burzio (ibid) defines an ergative clause as an intransitive clause with a transitive counterpart, in which the transitive object corresponds to the ergative subject, as illustrated by the following:

- (1) a. The winds capsized the ferry.
b. The ferry capsized.

It has been proposed in GB (Chomsky 1981, 1986b; Haegeman 1991; Levin & Hovav 1995; Horn 1980, among others) that ergative verbs, like passive participles, do not have external 0-roles and do not assign case. Given these characteristics, ergatives will involve NP-movement, as illustrated in the following schematization corresponding to the data in (1):

- (2) [NP The ferry_i] capsized t_i

There are fairly well-developed arguments for this analysis in various languages. What this paper attempts to examine is whether good arguments can be developed for such an analysis in connection with Syrian Arabic (Lattakian dialect). Hence, we’ll try and see whether Syrian Arabic ergative constructions involve NP-movement as is the case with English ergatives.

1.1. THE BASIC DATA

It has been traditionally assumed that verbs in English are classified into transitive and intransitive (Quirk et al. (1985)). This traditional view caters for the distribution between the following sets of verbs:

- (3) a. Stefan dreams.
Stefan nags.
Stefan strolls.
- b. Nancy heated the meal.
Nancy hit the road.
Nancy lights the fire.
- (4) a. s-sams dawbet t-tal j
the-sun melt3SGfpast the-snow
- “The sun melted the snow.”
- b. t-tal j dab
the-snow melt3Sgmpast
- “The snow melted.”

- (5) a. l-muraje9 rasha l-mwazzaf
the-client bribe3SGmpast the-clerk

“The client bribed the clerk.”

- b. l-mwazfeen by nrashu b shuleh
the-clerks bribe3plpres. easily

“Clerks bribe easily.”

The verb phrase in (3b) clearly contains an object; the verb phrase in (3a) does not. However, this dichotomy does not explain the relation between the forms in (4) and (5). (4b) and (5b) clearly differ from (3a) despite their being intransitive on the face of it. Moreover, (5b) exhibits what we call middle verbs, following Burzio (1981).

Both ergatives and middles (cf. Fagan (1988)) are underlyingly represented with an object. But whereas middles are the product of a syntactic rule of Move and are transitive while in the lexicon, ergatives are generated by a lexical rule of Move and hence have both a transitive and an intransitive form in the lexicon. We now turn to those arguments that support this assumption.

Firstly, for Lees (1969), intransitives enjoy freedom of occurrence, particularly in prenominal position, whereas transitive verbs are normally excluded. Consider Lees’s own examples, cited in in Keyser & Roeper (1984:386-87).

(6) Intransitive

- a. the walking boy
- b. the running boy
- c. the sleeping man
- d. the dying flowers
- e. the groaning father

(7) Transitive

- a. *the killing boy
- b. *the persuading ideas
- c. *the arranging men
- d. *the making children
- e. *the pushing truck

The data in (6) and (7) lend support to the claim that ergative verbs are intransitive, whereas middle verbs are transitive. This can be ascribed to the fact that ergatives, like intransitives, are capable of being preposed, whereas middles are not:

(8) Ergatives

- a. the rolling ball
- b. the pounding heart
- c. the roasting chicken

(9) **Middles**

- a.*the bribing men
- b.*the killing chickens
- c.*the painting wall

One might assume that the ungrammaticality of (9a-c) is triggered by the absence of adverbs which must occur with middles. Notice, however, that even when an adverb is inserted, the resulting phrases are unacceptable:

(10) **Ergatives**

- a. the swiftly rolling stone
- b. the slowly developing economy
- c. the rapidly increasing tax

(11) **Middles**

- a.*the easily bribing men
- b.*the rapid-painting wall
- c.*the deft-killing man

One point to note about the head nouns in (10a-c) is that they all function as themes of the events described by the prenominal adjective. For instance, in (10a), it's the ball that rolls, and not the ball that causes the rolling. In fact, if we try to use nouns that tend to trigger an agentive role, the result is ungrammatical.

- (12) a.*the rolling man (agent)
b.*the bouncing mug (agent)
c.*the baking cook (agent)

Notice the funny nature of the data in (12); in (12a), it is the man who is rolling; in (12b), the mug is bouncing; and in (12c), the cook is being baked.

It is worth mentioning here that most intransitives allow a derived nominal to occupy the object position (cf. Larson (1988)):

- (13) a. He danced a strange dance.
b. He dreamed a wonderful dream.
c. He fought a fierce fight.
d. He sprinted a good sprint.

However, as suggested by Marantz (1981), ergatives do not:

- (14) a.*The ferry capsized a strange capsizing.
b.*There emerged a shocking emergence.
c.*They approached a weird approach.
d.*She slept a strange sleeping.

This difference can be explained in terms of assuming that the object position is occupied by a coindexed trace, and by claiming that (15b) involves an optional natural object position, following Carlson and Roeper (1980):

- (15) a. The ferry_i capsized [t_i].
 b. He sang ([NP]).

Having demonstrated what an ergative clause is, and consequently diagnosed what peculiar features it has, our next step will involve using two arguments – namely, **Word Order** and **Agreement Facts**– to argue that the sentences at issue in Syrian Arabic are not in fact ergative sentences. The arguments will show that the constructions concerned are not cases of raising, but rather cases of topicalization with an empty pleonastic subject, thus providing evidence against a raising analysis and in favour of a topicalization analysis.

1.2. WORD ORDER FACTS

We intend to argue here that, in apparent ergative clauses in Syrian Arabic (4a-b), the apparent subjects are really topics, and that there is a null pleonastic subject.

We will first introduce topics with some straightforward sentences –i.e. sentences having an overt subject and do not involve anything resembling an ergative verb. The following illustrate this point:

- (16) a. Mazen, Salma saf t-u
 Mazen Salma see3SGfpast-3SGm

“Mazen, Salma saw.”

- b. Mazen, Salma haket ma9-u
 Mazen Salma speak3SGfpast with-3SGm

“Mazen, Salma talked to.”

- c. Mazen, Salma fakkert-u r beh l-ja? zeh
 Mazen Salma think3SGfpast-3SGm win3SGmpast the-prize

“Mazen, Salma thought won the prize.”

We can now consider related examples with null subjects, since a topic will sometimes look like a subject in such instances. The following, for example, demonstrate:

- (17) a. Mazen, saf t-u
 Mazen see3SGfpast-3SGm

“Mazen, (she) saw.”

- b. Mazen, haket ma9-u

Mazen speak3SGfpast with-3SGm

“Mazen, (she) talked to.”

c. Mazen, fakkert-u r beh l-ja? zeh
Mazen think3SGfpast-3SGm win3SGmpast the-prize

“Mazen, (she) thought won the prize.”

The interpretation in such cases makes it clear that the NP filling the clause-initial position is not a subject. The question that we should ask here is whether any other piece of evidence shows that these NPs are not subjects. The fact that they cannot show up following the verb demonstrates this-hence the following are ruled out:

(18) a. *saf t-u Mazen
see3SGfpast-3SGm Mazen

b. *haket Mazen ma9-u
speak3SGfpast Mazen with-3SGm

c. * fakkert-u Mazen r beh l-ja? zeh
think3SGfpast-3SGm Mazen win3SGmpast the-prize

We can now turn to consider examples that show that the same holds true of the clause-initial NP in an apparent ergative sentence. Consider the following examples which involve both an apparent subject and what looks like an ergative verb:

(19) a. t-tal j s-sam s daww bt-u
the-snow the-sun melt3SGfpast-3SGm

“The snow, the sun melted.”

b. *daww bt-u t-tal j
melt3SGfpast-3SGm the-snow

c. l-khazneh r-r jjal fatah-a
the-safe the-man open3SGmpast-3SGf

“The safe, the man opened.”

d. *fatah-a l-khazneh
open3SGmpast-3SGf the-safe

What look like subjects in (19a) and (19c) cannot follow the verb-hence the ungrammaticality of (19b) and (19d). The data in (19) clearly show that the apparent subjects are not really subjects. They are topics, and there is a null expletive subject. The following examples corresponding to (19a) and (19c), respectively illustrate this point:

- (20) a. t-tal j, daww bt-u
 the-snow melt3SGfpast-3SGm

“The snow, (it) melted.”

- b. l-bab, nfatah
 the-door open3SGmPASS

“The door, (it) (was) opened.”

From the data we have considered, it follows that the NPs occurring initially are not subjects, but topics, taking into account that topics can only occur in clause-initial positions. We have illustrated the facts with straightforward examples involving overt and null subjects with no ergative verbs. All these conspire to buttress our earlier proposal that a clause-initial NP in an apparent ergative construction in Syrian Arabic is not a subject.

Given that the apparent ergative subjects on our hands cannot follow the verb suggests that they are topics in much the same way as the fact the apparent that-clause subject in English cannot follow a preposed auxiliary suggests that they are really topics. Koster (1978:53) illustrates with the following:

- (21) **That the doctor came** surprised me.
 (22)*did **that John showed up** please you?

The subject’s inability to follow the verb clearly implies that what looks like a subject in (21) is really a topic, as is the case with the apparent ergative clauses of Syrian Arabic.

Having looked at word order facts to support our claim that what seems to be a subject in apparent ergative clauses in Syrian Arabic is really a **TOPIC**, we will now consider another argument involving agreement facts.

1.3. AGREEMENT FACTS

Syrian Arabic, among other languages, has subject-verb agreement in person, number, and gender. Consider the following examples:

- (23) a. Mazen bih b l-bah r
 Mazen like3SGmpres. the-sea

“Mazen likes the sea.”

- b.*Mazen bih bbu l-bah r
 Mazen like3plpres. the-sea

- c. l-banat haku ma9 Samer
 the-girls speak3plpast with Samer

“The girls talked to Samer.”

d. *l-banat	haka	ma9	Samer
the-girls	Speak3SGmpast	with	Samer

(23a) is well-formed because the predicate bih b l-bah r is compatible with the subject Mazen. (23b) is ungrammatical on the basis that the predicate bih bbu l-bah r is incompatible with the right subject-i.e. it requires a third person plural subject. Similarly, (23c) is grammatical because the main verb haku has the right kind of subject –i.e. the third person feminine subject l-banat. However, (23d) is ungrammatical because of the verb’s inability to pick and choose a compatible subject-i.e.a third person masculine subject.

Let us see how we can integrate this proposal into our earlier assumption that what seems to be a subject in apparent Syrian ergative clauses is just a **TOPIC**. We can first demonstrate with examples containing overt subject, but with no apparent ergative verbs being used:

(24)	a. s-s yyara	Mazen	ba9-a
	the-car	Mazen	sell-3SGmpast-3SGf

“The car, Mazen sold.”

b. l-hrami	n-nas	haku	9ann-u
the-thief	the-people	Speak3plpast	with-3SGm

“The thief, people talked about.”

As the glosses clearly indicate, the clause-initial NP in the above examples is not a subject. In (24a), the form ba9-a appears with a third person singular masculine subject –i.e. Mazen. In (24b), the form haka occurs with a third person plural subject –i.e. n-nas. The point is that the verb agrees with the subject, not the topic. Notice that s-s yyara is feminine – hence the verb hosts a third person singular clitic in (24a), and so does the preposition in (24b). The idea is that when both topic and subject are overt, the verb agrees with the subject.

We can now consider some related examples containing topicalized objects with simple transitive verbs.

(25)	a. s-s yyara	ba9-a
	the-car	sell-3SGmpast-3SGf

“The car, (he) sold.”

b. l-hrami	haku	9ann-u
the-thief	Speak3plpast	with-3SGm

“The thief, (they) talked about.”

Yet again, the examples in (25) are like those in (24) in that the verbs concerned do not agree with clause-initial NP –i.e. s-s yyara, l-hrami. The data in (25) are just like

those in (24) in that they provide further evidence to show that the element occupying the sentence-initial position is not a subject. Moreover, the data in (25) stipulate that when only the topic is overt, the verb still agrees with the subject.

Let us consider some related examples containing topicalized objects out of the complement of what looks like an ergative verb:

- (26) a. l-m ftah fatah l-bab
 the-key open3SGmpast the-door

“The key opened the door.”

- b. l-bab nfatah
 the-door open3SGmPASS

“The door opened.”

As is seen from the glosses, the apparent ergative verb in (26b) and (26b) does not change in form, irrespective of the type of subject used. Consider the following:

- (27) a. l-hajra kasr-et ?eid-u
 the-stone break3SGmpast-3SGf hand-3SGm

“The stone fractured his hand.”

- b. ?eid-u nkasr-et
 hand-3SGm break3SGmPASS-3SGf

“His hand fractured.”

The data in (26) and (27) help our earlier assumption gain further momentum – i.e. what looks like a subject in apparent Syrian ergative sentences is not a subject, but a **TOPIC**. Put differently, the apparent subjects are not triggered by a movement operation called NP movement –i.e. following GB assumptions, the so-called subjects cannot have originated in the position immediately following the verb at D-structure, and subsequently raised into clause-initial position via NP movement at S-structure.

1.4. SUMMARY

What we have done in this paper is consider what is normally meant by an ergative construction. We began by introducing the basic data. Then we used two arguments, namely Word Order and Agreement- to support our premise that the element filling the clause-initial position in an apparent Syrian ergative construction is not a subject, but a topic. That is, the element concerned is not the product of an operation that extracts an item from its direct object position at D-structure and lands it clause-initially, leaving an NP trace behind to keep track of the moved element. In other words, the elements occupying the clause-initial position in apparent Syrian ergative structures are base-generated, giving additional support for the nonexistence of NP-traces-i.e. no NP movement-in apparent ergative constructions in Syrian Arabic- hence the constructions involved are instances of topicalization.

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