

ERGATIVE (AND ACTIVE) TRAITS IN LATIN

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The aim of this paper¹ is twofold: to throw some new light on certain facts of Latin grammar, and to adduce some new evidence for the gradient nature of the distinction between the ergative, active and accusative types.

1. Ergative, active and accusative systems

Following Bossong 1980, the relations between a verb and its argument-terms may be called 'fundamental relations', though this may have misleading implications (see § 3). The two principal semantic roles constituting these relations are the agent (A) and the patient (P). They may cooccur in a transitive verb; only one of them occurs in an intransitive verb. Thus we have *Cicero (A) accusat Verrem (P)*, *Cicero (A) orat*, *Verres (P) succumbit*. In different languages, the distinction between these two roles may be expressed morphologically or syntactically, and they may participate in different grammatical processes. If A and P were kept distinct both with transitive and with intransitive verbs, there would be four different forms for them:

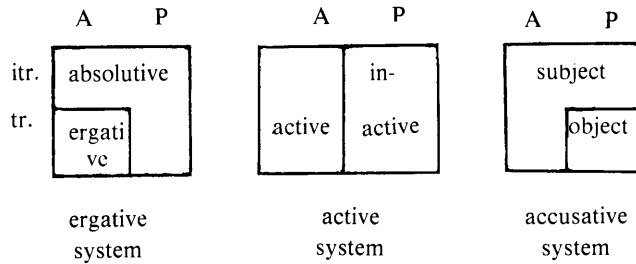
	A	P
intransitive	itr. A	itr. P
transitive	tr. A	tr. P

In fact, however, there are syncretisms in all languages, so that in almost none are there more than two distinct forms.² One distinction is almost always maintained, namely that between A and P with transitive verbs. One distinction is comparatively seldom observed, namely that between A and P in intransitive verbs. The reason is, of course, that in the

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² Sapir (1917) reports that there are three different forms in Takelma, namely for itr. A/P, tr. A and tr. P. Three different forms also occur in Motu (Austronesian; Heger 1982:4) and in Munji (Pamir; J. Payne, oral comm.).

former case an opposition constituted by a syntagmatic contrast is to be expressed, while in the latter case, the need for an opposition rarely arises, since the meaning of the verb determines, almost exclusively, the nature of the argument roles. Nevertheless, there are verbs such as *labor* "slide, fall" whose unique argument may be an A or a P (cf. Comrie 1981:53f). The following syncretisms occur:³



Thus, if the transitive A is opposed, as an ergative, to the other roles, which constitute the absolutive, then we have an ergative system. If A and P are opposed to each other, as active and inactive, then we have an active system. If the transitive P is opposed, as a direct object, to the other roles, which constitute the subject, then we have an accusative system. The ergative and absolutive, the active and inactive, the subject and object, are syntactic functions constituted by the syncretisms of the semantic roles. In the ergative system, the ergative is marked. In the accusative system, the object is marked (Comrie 1981 : 119f). In the active system, there is no obvious markedness relation.

All this looks like a neat mirror symmetry. But there are certain basic asymmetries built in. First, the patient is more inherent in the transitive verb than the agent, the patient being the 'prime experiencer' of the action (cf. Chafe 1970, ch. 9). This makes for a tendency to leave the P unmarked, which works against ideal accusative systems. On the other hand, the agent of a transitive verb is the natural topic. This makes for a tendency to treat it on a par with the sole argument of an intransitive verb, which works against ideal ergative systems. Nevertheless, the three systems do occur in their ideal form. The simple clause is constructed according to the accusative system in German, Persian, Turkish and Quechua. It is constructed according to the active system in Dakota, Chickasaw, Tunica and Guarani. And it is constructed according to the ergative system in Eskimo, Chukchee, Dyirbal and Tongan.

Apart from the two factors just mentioned, which cause the basic asymmetry in the fundamental relations, there are various others which interact with the semantic roles and which are responsible for the fact that in different semantotactic constructions, different syncretisms of the semantic roles tend to occur. For instance, the imperative favors the active system, because a command is appropriately addressed only to an agent. Again, there is "a bias towards ergative-absolutive syntax in resultative constructions"

³ At the Hannover Colloquium, very similar schemes were proposed independently by K. Heger (1982:4f) and G. Bossong (1982:6).

(Comrie 1981:113) (and in perfective or completive constructions), because the most inherent argument of the verb tends to be subsumed under, or affected by, the result of the action (Comrie 1.c.). This means that a language is never wholly and exclusively either ergative or active or accusative, in all its constructions. Rather, following universal tendencies such as the ones mentioned, some constructions will be ergative, others active and the remaining accusative (cf. Comrie 1981:110). A language can be said to be ergative, active or accusative only insofar as one system prevails in its constructions. Latin, for instance, is decidedly an accusative language: its simple clauses are constructed according to the accusative system, and many syntactic processes make reference to the notions of subject or object. Nevertheless, there are some active and ergative traits even in Latin, which we will examine in the following section.

2. Ergative and active traits in Latin

2.1. The nominative and accusative cases

2.1.1. Morphology

In the ideal accusative system, the nominative, as the subject-case, should be unmarked, and the accusative, as the object-case, should be marked. This is not so in a major part of the Latin declension system. The nominative has an overt desinence, just as does the accusative, in most of the masculine nouns (e.g. *dominu-s* vs. *dominu-m*) and in most of the feminine nouns except in the a-declension (e.g. *re-s* vs. *re-m*).

Secondly, in neuter nouns, nominative and accusative alike are morphologically unmarked (e.g. *animal*). In the o-declension, this unmarked form is identical to the accusative and not the nominative form of the masculine nouns (e.g. *bellu-m* vs. *dominu-m*; cf. Collinge 1978:623).

Thirdly, in many ergative languages such as Eskimo, Sherpa, Lezghian and other Daghestan languages, the ergative is formally identical to the genitive. The basis for such a syncretism is the syntactic fact that both are oblique cases, and the presence of semantic affinities between the possessor and the agent (cf. Seiler 1982). The syntactic motivation is absent in an accusative system; and yet, in Latin, nominative and genitive singular have the same desinence in masculine and feminine nouns of various declensions (e.g. *turri-s*).

These three facts of Latin declensional morphology are atypical of accusative and typical of ergative languages.⁴

2.1.2. Syntax

According to its name, the nominative should be the case in which a noun is cited ("Nennkasus"); and this is indeed to be expected if the nominative is the unmarked case.

⁴ Similar points have been made repeatedly in the literature with respect to Proto-Indo-European and various IE languages, including Latin. Cf. Uhlenbeck 1901, Vaillant 1936, Boeder 1976:123, Knobloch 1982, Schmalstieg 1982.

In Latin, however, nouns are not quoted in the nominative. Observe the examples given by Kühner & Stegmann (1962,1:254): *clamare triumphum* “to shout ‘io triumphe’” (Livy 21, 62, 2); *nomen regis* “the title ‘king’”; *Cerere[m] poetae dicunt pro frugibus* “the poets say ‘Ceres’ instead of ‘field-produce’”.⁵ Again, if someone is addressed, not the nominative, but the vocative is used, which further detracts from the functions of the nominative.⁶ And one does not exclaim *o ego miser!*, but *o me miserum!* Here we see the accusative instead of the nominative, which should appear if it were functionally unmarked.⁷

The accusative clearly functions as the subject case in the a.c.i. construction. Synchronically, this cannot be explained by the double syntactic function of the subject of the dependent clause in expressions such as *video eum currere*, because the a.c.i. is widespread in subject complement clauses such as *oportet iuvenem modestum esse*. Even the nominal predicate of an impersonal infinite clause (where there is no subject) is in the accusative: “to be modest” is *modestum esse*, not **modestus esse*. Rather, one is reminded of the situation in languages such as Mohave (Yuman), where in complement clauses the subject loses its nominative suffix and remains unmarked for case; i.e. the subject loses those properties expressed by the nominative. When this occurs in Latin, the accusative comes in.

This evidence shows that the nominative and accusative in Latin are unlike these cases in typical accusative systems, because they are not opposed as unmarked vs. marked; rather, either case is both formally and functionally marked in certain respects in which the other case is unmarked, so that there is no simple markedness relation between them.⁸

2.2. Grammatical processes

Various grammatical processes are applicable to an NP which has a certain syntactic function. Such functions need not coincide, within a language, with those functions which the case morphology (or verbal agreement) expresses; this has been clearly brought out in

⁵ P. Ramat (p.c.) has objected to this argument that the nouns in question have definite oblique syntactic functions in the example sentences and, given Latin syntax, cannot but take the corresponding oblique case forms. However, the syntax of the nominative is part of Latin syntax, and it differs from the syntax of the nominative in more purely accusative languages: in the latter, it allows meta-linguistic mention of a noun in a sentence using the nominative, whereas in Latin it does not.

⁶ It has been claimed that the subject is more narrowly restricted, in terms of semantic functions, in Latin than in French or English, because of the meaning of the Latin nominative: “tout semble se passer comme si seuls pouvaient exister des ‘sujets’ ayant un minimum de ‘comportement positif’” (Carvalho 1980:9).

⁷ This has led Collinge (1978:625) to the conclusion “that a NP which is ‘at rest’, so to speak, in a syntagm will display ACC (= unmarked role). Marking creates nominative”.

⁸ In this respect the Latin nominative differs markedly from the Russian one, which has been characterized by Jakobson (1936:58) as the unmarked case.

recent research on ergativity (s. Comrie 1981, ch. 5 and 6). For instance, the imperative is possible, in Latin as presumably in any other language, only as addressed to active, not to inactive NPs, although these functions are not expressed by Latin cases. I will examine here the syntactic functions presupposed by passivization, nominalization and preverba-tion.

2.2.1. Passivization

If passivization were possible only for truly transitive verbs, then it would make reference to the syntactic function of the direct object (putting this into subject position). But there are passives of intransitive verbs such as *itur*, *venitur*, *curritur*, *manetur*, *ridetur*. If every personal verb could have a passive, then passivization would make reference to the syntactic function of the subject (removing this out of its position). Again, this is not so. About half of the intransitive verbs, such as *ferveo*, *fluo*, *ruo*, *pateo*, *lateo*, *careo*, *iaceo*, *senesco* do not form a passive (though this would be morphologically quite regular). The descriptively adequate solution appears to be: Passivization in Latin (as, incidentally, in German) is sensitive to the active system ('active' here understood not as a diathesis, but as a fundamental relation (§ 1.)): only active verbs can be passivized. This is why *curritur*, but not **ruitur* is possible. The activeness of the subject is, of course, closely linked to its humanness. With some possible exceptions among transitive verbs,⁹ only human subjects can be active. But humanness and activeness do not coincide, as is clear from the impossibility of **senescitur*.¹⁰ This regularity of passivization therefore constitutes an active trait in Latin.

2.2.2. Nominalization

Before we look at how syntactic relations are affected by nominalization, it must be recalled that a whole array of morphological and syntactic processes is subsumed under the concept of nominalization, which differ in their degree of grammaticalization (s. Lehmann 1982(N)). Nominalization in Latin covers both completely regular syntactic processes such as the a.c.i. and completely irregular and unproductive word formations such as *clamor* or *naufragium* (cf. *audio eum clamare* with *audio clamorem eius*). If we are interested in how syntactic relations are affected by nominalization, we must look neither at weakly grammaticalized nominalizations, because there the relations are not (sufficiently) affected, nor at strongly grammaticalized nominalizations, because there they are not affected regularly. I therefore confine my observations to nominalizations in *-tion-*, which are comparable to English *-ing-* (with genitive) and German *-ung-*

⁹ Presumably *lorica* is active in *me tegit lorica* (Pl.).

¹⁰ It would be interesting to learn whether in Latin intransitive verbs with non-human animate subjects can be passivized (which is impossible in German). Can one say *latratur* (of dogs), *canitur* (of cocks), *salitur* (of animals)?

nominalizations.

If a verb is nominalized with *-tion-*, its subject cannot remain in the nominative, and its direct object cannot remain in the accusative (apart from certain minor exceptions; s. Lehmann 1982, p. 81f). Instead, both regularly are in the genitive, namely the genitivus subjectivus and genitivus objectivus, respectively. Thus we have:

Cicero orat - Ciceronis oratio (genitivus subjectivus)

aliquis urbem defendit - defensio urbis (genitivus objectivus).

The question is: do we find

Caesar aliquid defendit - Caesaris defensio (gen. subj.)?

The answer is: no. A single genitive accompanying a *-tion-*nominalization of a transitive verb¹¹ cannot be interpreted as a genitivus subjectivus. *Occisio Caesaris* can only mean that Caesar was killed, never that Caesar killed someone. A genitive accompanying such a nominalization can be interpreted as a genitivus subjectivus only if there is, in addition, a genitivus objectivus. Thus we have:

animus res ac verba firme percipit - firma animi rerum ac verborum perceptio (Cic. inv. 1,9; more examples in Kühner/Stegmann 1971,1:416).

The restriction on the use of genitivus subjectivus obviously respects the ambiguity that a single genitive with a nominalization of a transitive verb would be subject to; recall the famous examples *amor dei* and *the shooting of the hunters*. If both a genitivus subjectivus and an objectivus accompany a nominalization, ambiguity is removed by an additional rule which requires that the first be the subjectivus, and the second, the objectivus (Kühner/Stegmann 1.c.). This word order restriction, rather untypical of Classical Latin, confirms our hypothesis about the nature of the constraint on the use of genitivus subjectivus. Of course, the same purpose would be served if, instead, the use of genitivus objectivus were constrained in a similar way. This would even seem to create a natural parallelism in the interpretation of the genitive with nominalizations: it would always be a genitivus subjectivus, except when appearing in addition to an already present genitivus subjectivus. The regularity which actually obtains in Latin, instead does not make use of the syntactic function of the subject, but comprises the subject of the intransitive and the object of the transitive verb, thus the 'prime experiencer' of the action.

It must be mentioned that more strongly grammaticalized nominalizations do not conform to the above rule. Thus we have the already cited ambiguity of *amor dei*, as well as that of *metus hostium*, and we have both *studium regum* and *studium lucri*. I cannot at present say why this should be so. However, the regularity obtaining in the much more productive *-tion-*nominalizations clearly constitutes an ergative trait in Latin.

2.2.3. Preverbation¹²

A preverb, like a preposition, is a local relator with two arguments, a locatum and a

¹¹ This must possibly be restricted to obligatorily transitive verbs because an isolated genitivus subjectivus might be admissible with *-tion-*nominalizations of basically intransitive, but occasionally transitive verbs such as *cantio*.

¹² A detailed treatment of the problems of this section can be found in Lehmann 1983.

relatum. For example, in *Caesar exit urbe*, *ex-* establishes a local relation between a locatum, *Caesar*, and a relatum, *urbe*, which may be paraphrased by “Caesar (is located) outside the city”. Putting it more generally: the locatum of a local relator is the object whose location is described; and the relatum is the object with respect to which the locatum is located. The question in the present context is: What becomes of the locatum and the relatum of a local relator if this is prefixed, in preverbatum, to a verb? How are these two arguments accommodated in the case frame of the verbum simplex?

The following examples are typical of all preverbs and of all verbs:

Caesar		exit		urbe.
locatum	local relator			relatum
subject		verbum simplex		oblique complement

Caesar	legiones		educit		urbe.
	locatum	local relator			relatum
subject	object		verbum simplex		oblique complement

The locatum of the preverb is identified with the subject of the verbum simplex, if this is intransitive, but with its object, if the verbum simplex is transitive. There is no exception to this rule; in particular, in no case does a locatum become the subject of a transitive verbum simplex. The relatum, on the other hand, mostly corresponds to an oblique complement or to an adjunct of the verbum simplex; cf.:

Caesar	{	exit	}	urbe. – Caesar	{	it	}	ex urbe.
		legiones educit				legiones ducit		

In some instances, however, the relatum is even identified with the subject of a transitive verbum simplex. For instance:

hostes	arma		abiecerunt.
relatum	locatum	local relator	
subject	object		verbum simplex

The local relation here involved is clearly *arma ab- hostibus* “the arms (are located) off the enemies”. This may be taken as evidence that preverbatum treats the transitive subject on a par with oblique complements, i.e. it treats it as an ergative. One might be tempted to explain this away somehow, for instance by considering not the subject itself as the relatum, but a reflexive phrase (*a se* in the example given) which, being redundant, would remain unexpressed. While this seems a viable explanation, so that the decision between the two solutions must be left to further research, it is a fact which cannot be explained away that the locatum is identified with the prime experiencer, the absolutive, of the ver-

bum simplex. This syntactic regularity in preverbatation is therefore one more ergative trait in Latin.

3. Conclusion

Before I conclude, I must emphasize that I have only hinted at some ergative (and active) traits in Latin. None of the evidence mentioned has been scrutinized to the bottom; more precision is clearly necessary. Furthermore, the morphological and syntactic features and processes discussed remain rather disconnected within Latin grammar. Apart from some hints, no explanations have been given, and therefore no unified picture of "ergativity in Latin" has emerged.¹³

It must also remain an open question to what extent the phenomena discussed are restricted to Latin, or to some languages, or are rather the outcome of universal tendencies. For example, the regularity governing the absolutive interpretation of a genitive complement in nominalizations seems to be the same in Hungarian (L. Dezső, p.c.), and it is, presumably, connected with the universal tendency of resultative constructions mentioned in § 1. The behavior of complements under nominalization, as well as their behavior under preverbatation, are evidence for the universal fact that the prime experiencer is more inherent in the verbal concept than the transitive agent. There is, of course, evidence from other angles to the same effect.

The moral of this brief investigation is twofold. First a methodological result: Even such an overwhelmingly accusative language as Latin displays some ergative (and active) traits. This is empirical confirmation of the initial assumption that every language combines ergative, active and accusative features. Linguistic experience teaches as a rule-of-thumb that what is a pervasive structure-organizing principle in one language - for instance ergativity in Abkhaz -, cannot remain totally alien and irrelevant to another linguistic system, for instance that of Latin.¹⁴ And conversely, every single language is better understood, and more adequately described, if confronted with typologically vastly different languages.

The second result is of a theoretical nature. Ergative, active and accusative organization of the morphosyntax are not in complementary distribution over the languages of the world. Rather, there are certain constructions which tend to be one way in all languages, and there are other constructions where the language has a choice, but still need not make the same choice in all of them. This has the consequence that the ergative, active and ac-

¹³ The features mentioned are doubtless not the only ergative or active traits in Latin. Thus E. Coseriu (p.c.) considers the constructions such as *pudet me*, *paenitet me (alicui rei)* as ergative, because the primary actant is in the accusative, while the instigator (or cause) of the process is not in the nominative, but in an oblique case. Cf. also Ramat 1981:10.

¹⁴ A fine example outside the present context where this thumbrule proves valid is Bolinger's (1972) demonstration of the relevance of the distinction underlying Spanish *ser* vs. *estar* to the structure of English.

cusative systems are not a sufficient basis for the establishment of holistic language types. Not only that the characterization of a language as ergative, active or accusative is in itself not very precise because, as we have seen, it conceals a great deal of variation; it is also an open question whether the 'fundamental relations', even if they are, in a language, prevalently organized according to one system, exert such a strong clustering force, i.e. are in the center of so many connections with other structural traits, that they can be made the basis of a language typology. There appears to be so far neither sufficient empirical support for this conclusion nor a theoretical basis which would justify the expectation that the 'fundamental relations' should be at the basis, or in the center, of linguistic structure. Rather I would expect that the global structure-organizing, and thus type-constituting, principles are of a more abstract nature.

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