

Split Marked-S Case Systems

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Abstract

Split systems of case-marking are most prominently known from languages of the ergative-type (Dixon, 1994). However, they also occur in languages of the marked-S-type, which has shared properties with nominative-accusative as well as ergative-absolutive languages. Languages of this type appear to be the ideal test-case to compare two hypotheses trying to account for the types of splits in alignment one finds along the prominence scale by Silverstein (1976): the ‘overt marking hypothesis’ and the ‘alignment hypothesis’.

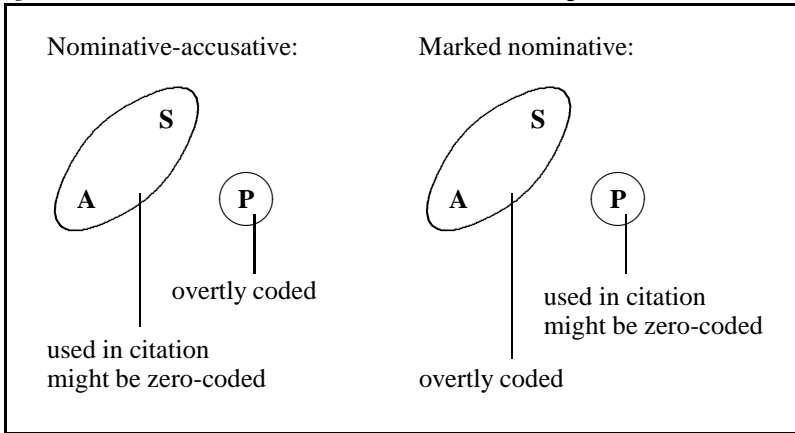
1. Introduction

This paper discusses the kinds of split alignment-systems found in languages of the rare marked-S system. In the following section (2) I will introduce this kind of alignment, which exists in two ‘flavors’: Marked-nominative and marked-absolutive. Afterwards some introductory remarks will be made on split-alignment systems and the interpretation of those splits in terms of prominence-scales. In sections 4 to 6 individual kinds of splits found in marked-S languages will be discussed.

2. Marked-S alignment

Syntactic typology traditionally distinguishes between nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive systems as the main types of alignment. They can be easily distinguished by how they treat the single argument of an intransitive

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Figure 1: Nominative-accusative vs. marked-nominative alignment

verb (S). If S is treated like the most agent-like argument of a transitive verb (A) – e.g. by means of case marking – but different from the more patient-like argument of a transitive verb (P), we are dealing with nominative-accusative-alignment. If on the other hand S is treated like P and distinct from A we are dealing with an ergative-absolutive-language (cf. e.g. Comrie, 1978; Dixon, 1994).

It has been observed that the marking of the transitive role which is encoded in the same form as S is usually the case-form with the smallest amount of overt marking. This has been formulated as universal 38 in Greenberg (1963, 75) – if any case-form is not overtly marked it will be “the one which includes among its meanings that of subject of the intransitive verb.”

However, there are some languages which behave in the opposite way. They have long been known for the nominative-accusative system as so-called ‘marked-nominative’ languages. In those languages the Nominative case (S and A function) is overtly coded while the case covering the P function is zero-coded. For the languages of the marked-nominative type it has been observed that the P case covers more functions than just marking transitive objects (König, 2006), the most wide-spread function of zero-coded P case is to be the form of a noun used in citation. The standard nominative-accusative alignment is contrasted with the marked nominative in Figure 1. The other possibility for a language to violate the Greenberg Universal is marked-absolutive alignment. This is a parallel structure for the ergative-absolutive system. There a zero-coded case-form marking the A function (Ergative) contrast with an overtly-coded form of the noun covering S and

P function. The marked-absolutive system – although claimed to be non-existent (Dixon, 1979, 78) – is attested for the Austronesian language Nias (Brown, 2001). Both marked-nominative and marked-absolutive languages use an overtly coded form to mark the S function while one of the transitive roles is left zero-coded. Therefore I employ the term marked-S languages to refer to both kinds of alignment-systems. Though Nias – so far the only language with a well-attested marked-absolutive alignment – shows a number of interesting splits in its alignment system, none of them is a split on the nominal hierarchy. Therefore we will concentrate on languages of the marked-nominative type in the following.

The marked-nominative system is seen by many as a hybrid between nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive alignment. Dixon (1979, 77) proposed ‘extended-ergative’ as an alternate name for this alignment-type, since this would “ensure that ‘ergative’ and ‘accusative’ are always used to name the marked case choices, and ‘absolutive’ and ‘nominative’ unmarked choices.” This view reflects the idea that in terms of markedness (in the sense of actual overt morphological marking) the marked-nominative system is closer to the ergative-absolutive than the nominative-accusative alignment.

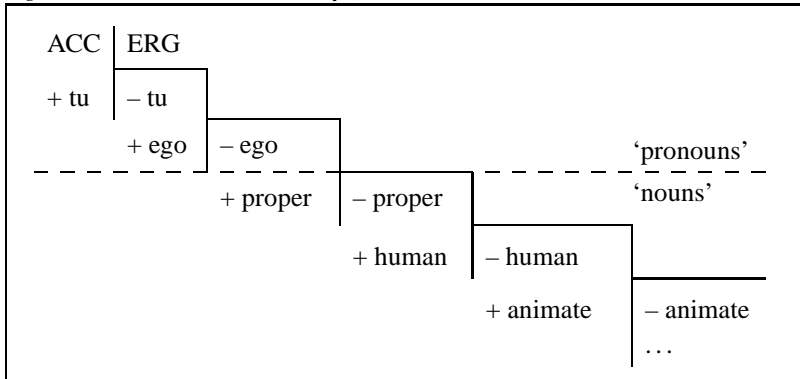
3. Splits on the prominence-hierarchies of nominals

That languages often do not exhibit a uniform alignment-system throughout all domains of their grammar has been stated many times and been dealt with in the linguistic literature of all orientations (an incomplete list contains Silverstein, 1976; Dixon, 1994; Aissen, 2003). Based on these splits in alignment scales are set up where those parts of the grammar sharing an alignment-system constitute continuous parts of the scale.

Silverstein’s hierarchy of “ ‘inherent lexical content’ of noun phrases” (1976, 113) is one of the first and probably the most prominent example of a referential scale. Based on data from languages with a split of the alignment-system they employ for different types of nominals Silverstein has set up the ordering in figure 2. Languages with classical Silverstein splits in their case-marking e.g. have 1st and 2nd person pronouns which behave different from 3rd person or pronouns which behave different from full noun phrases etc.

Working on those languages linguists noted that the splits in a number of languages seemed to be parallel. The same kind of alignment was observed to be associated with the same kinds of nouns. This has led to claims about the ordering of those parts of grammar in terms of cognitive prominence (ultimately reflected in the hierarchy itself). Furthermore proposals have been

Figure 2: The Silverstein hierarchy (Silverstein, 1976, 122)



made to universally assign particular alignment systems to particular parts of the scale.

On the scale set up by Silverstein (and many similar ones produced by other scholars) – so is the prediction – ergative-absolutive alignment will be found on the lower end and nominative-accusative on the upper end. This is often said to be due to the low potential of inanimates and non-human referents to be the agent of a clause, therefore making overt agent-marking necessary. Whereas pronouns (especially 1st and 2nd person) are said to be “natural agents”, thus making special agent marking unnecessary. I will refer to this hypothesis as the **OVERT MARKING HYPOTHESIS** from now on. Given the reasoning of the overt marking hypothesis the split between alignment-systems is a coincidental one since the split is purely based on the overt marking relations of the two arguments of transitive verbs (A and P) and does not take the encoding of the single argument of intransitive verbs (S) into account. In the previous section I discussed the ergative-absolutive-like properties of the marked-nominative alignment-system in terms of overt case-marking. According to the overt coding hypothesis marked-nominative alignment should be found on the lower end of the animacy-hierarchy, just like ergative-absolutive systems.

The **ALIGNMENT HYPOTHESIS** is a different line of argumentation. It says that it is not the necessity to overtly mark a certain case-form (for a subset of nominals) that leads to splits in the alignment-system of a language. Rather the mechanisms leading to split on the hierarchy are truly based on the alignment-system. This means that the the ergative-system aligning S with P is connected the lower parts of the hierarchy. For the nominals on the lower part of the hierarchy one would thus predict that they are more likely to be the

S argument of intransitive verbs of the unaccusative type, therefore making the S/P relation more prominent than the S/A relation. Likewise the nominals on the upper part of the hierarchy should preferably appear with unergative verbs. This hypothesis would predict that marked-nominative systems behave just like standard nominative-accusative systems in terms of split marking, i.e. they should both be found with nominals on the upper part of Silverstein's scale.

4. Marked-S only with 3rd person: Datooga

Nouns in Datooga – a Nilotic language spoken in Tanzania – have distinct forms for S+A function (Nominative) and P-function (referred to as the Absolute form of the noun). The two forms can be distinguished through their contrasting tonal patterns. Since the base form of a noun – i.e. the form used in citation and to derive non-basic forms – is the Absolute rather than the Nominative, Datooga must be considered a marked nominative language.¹ Absolute and Nominative forms of the nouns *gùdéedà* 'dog' and *jáawùudà* 'cat' are shown in (1).²

(1) **Datooga** (Nilotic; Tanzania; Kiessling, 2007, 153)

- a. qòo-dâw jáawùudá gùdéedà
S3-give cat.NOM dog.ABS
'The cat gave (it) to the dog.'
- b. qòo-dâw gùdéedá jáawùudà
S3-give dog.NOM cat.ABS
'The dog gave (it) to the cat.'

Yet, this situation does not hold for all the nominals in Datooga. While full nouns and 3rd person pronouns distinguish between Nominative and Absolu-

¹Kiessling (2007) convincingly states that the Nominative form is clearly derived from the Absolute and not vice-versa. Knowing the tonal shape of the Absolute form one can tell which tonal shape the Nominative will have. Predicting the Absolute from the Nominative is, however, not unambiguously possible.

²The following glosses are used: 1,2,3 = first, second, third person; ABS = absolute (zero-coded accusative); ACC = accusative; COP = copula; DR = different referent; EX = exclusive; IRR = irrealis; LOC = locative; M = masculine; NEG = negation; NOM = nominative; OBL = oblique; PL = plural; POL = polite; POSS = possessor; PRV = perfective; Q = question; S = subject agreement; SG = singular; SR = same referent

Figure 3: Case on personal pronouns in Datooga (Kiessling, 2007, 160)

	absolute	nominative
1SG		ániini, ání
2SG		ájiiji, ájí
3SG	níj	níj
1PL		éesèsà, èsà
2PL		óogòogá, òogà
3PL	sàawà	sáawá

tive case via tonal marking (2), 1st and 2nd person independent pronouns on the other hand do not have distinct forms for the two cases as the paradigm in Figure 3 demonstrates.

(2) **Datooga** (Kiessling, 2007, 162)

- a. gwà-éefà nùot
S3-say other.ABS
'She/he told another one.'
- b. gwà-éefà nóot
S3-say other.NOM
'Another one said.'

The Datooga situation does mirror the expected findings for split-ergative marking (as would be predicted by the overt marking hypothesis), since the marked-Nominative case is only found with entities at the lower end of this hierarchy i.e everything from 3rd person pronouns downwards. The following scale visualizes the split case-marking in Datooga (3).

- (3) 1st, 2nd > 3rd, full NP
neutral > marked nominative

5. Marked-S only on Pronouns: Oirata

While the last section showed an example where the marked-nominative system show the same split in marking as a well-behaved split-ergative system, we will now discuss an example of a marked-nominative behaving the other way around. In Oirata – a non-Austronesian language spoken on the island Timor – pronouns functioning as S or A arguments of the verb are marked by the suffix *-te* – i.e. Nominative case.

- (4) **Oirata** (Timor-Alor-Pantar; Timor; Donohue and Brown, 1999, 66, 67)
- a. in-te ee asi
1PL.EX-NOM 2SG.POL see
'We saw you.'
 - b. ee-te in asi-ho
2SG.POL-NOM 1PL.EX see-NEG
'You didn't see us.'
 - c. an-te ete na'a ippa
1SG-NOM tree OBL fall
'I fell out of the tree.'
 - d. Nahi ee-te mede-pe'e-é
tomorrow 2SG.POL-NOM eat-IRR-Q
'Are you going to eat tomorrow?'

There are no 3rd person pronouns. Demonstratives can take over the function of third person pronominal elements, yet they receive no case-marking. The same is true for all full noun phrases, they do not receive any marking in S, A or P function. In other words: Oirata exhibits neutral alignment for full NPs as demonstrated in (5).

- (5) **Oirata** (Donohue and Brown, 1999, 66, 67)
- a. maaro [mede-n] kopete-he
person [eat-REL] black-NEG
'The person who is eating isn't black.'
 - b. ira eme modo ina-to tutu
water take child give-DR drink
'Give the child some water to drink.'
 - c. ihar ani asi-le mara
dog 1SG.ACC see-SR go
'The dog_i saw me_j and \emptyset _i left.'

Thus in Oirata we find the marked-nominative alignment system in that region of the Silverstein scale where we would expect to find marking of the nominative-accusative type. Rather than behaving like an ergative-absolutive system to which it should according to the over marking hypothesis, Oirata's marked-nominative maps like a nominative-accusative system on the Silverstein scale thus supporting the alignment hypothesis. The Oirata system is visualised in (6).

- (6) 1st, 2nd > full NP
 marked nominative > neutral

6. Marked-S only on full noun phrases: Kab'eena

The two examples of the precious sections showed a split between marked-nominative alignment in one domain of the Silverstein hierarchy and neutral alignment for the rest of the hierarchy. In this section we will turn to a system where the split lies between marked-nominative and standard nominative-accusative alignment.

In some approaches the marked-nominative system is not defined in terms of the overt marking of one form (i.e. the Nominative) versus the zero-coding of another form (i.e. the Absolute). Rather the notion of 'functional markedness' is called on. A case-form is functionally marked if its use is limited to a small range of functions while another case-form (the functionally unmarked one) is employed in a wide range of functions. Zero-coding is no necessary prerequisite, though it often correlates to functional unmarkedness (cf. e.g. König, 2006).

In Kab'eena – a Cushitic language of Ethiopia – the functional (un-)markedness of nominals does not obviously correspond to the zero-coding/overt coding distinction. Crass (2005, 86) argues that the Absolute (or Accusative in his terminology), though not morphologically zero-coded, is still less marked than the Nominative since the Nominative is derived from the Absolute through vowel-change and/or suprasegmental marking (i.e. tonal change). Given this analysis Kab'eena is marked-nominative in terms of formal marking. Furthermore the Absolute form of a noun clearly seems to be the unmarked member of the Absolute-Nominative pair in terms of the functional definition of marked-nominative. It is for example the Absolute form of a noun that is used in citation.

While for full noun phrases the Nominative is a marked case in terms of its distribution, for pronouns the opposite seems to be true. For example if we compare the two nominal predications in (7), we see that the case-form of the predicate nominal differs. While pronominal predicate nominals are in the Nominative case (7a), full nouns phrases are in the Absolute when functioning as predicate nominals (7b).

(7) **Kab'eena** (Cushitic; Ethiopia; Crass, 2005, 124, 263)

- a. 'aneetⁱ hi'riyoommii-h^u
 1SG.NOM.COP buy.PRIV.1SG-M.NOM
 'It is me, who bought [it].'
- b. 'is^u haakimee-h^a
 3SG.M.NOM doctor.ABS-COP.M
 'He is a doctor.'

If we take the range of uses of a case form as indicator for its functional markedness, we should analyze the Kab'eena pronominal system as an instance of the standard nominative-accusative alignment (as opposed to the marked-nominative of full noun phrases). Thus Kab'eena nominals are split into marked-nominative for full noun phrases and nominative-accusative for pronouns. Finding the standard nominative-accusative on the upper part of the hierarchy is what we would expect from the overt marking hypothesis. The Kab'eena system is illustrated in (8).

- (8) 1st, 2nd, 3rd > full NP
 nominative-accusative > marked nominative

7. Conclusion

Given the overall rarity of languages with marked-S alignment it is difficult to draw conclusions from the data which would yield statistically significant results – a point also made in general for split ergative-systems by Bickel (in press). The three examples discussed in this paper should therefore be understood as an impressionistic overview on the split case-marking of nominals in marked-S languages.

We have seen that one finds examples of marked-S alignment on the upper part of the Silverstein hierarchy (Oirata) as well as on the lower end (Datooga, Kab'eena). As stated before, marked-nominative case marking in domains where one would expect ergative-absolutive alignment (i.e. the lower part) is to be seen as supporting the overt marking hypothesis of split alignment. While marked-nominative alignment on the upper part of the hierarchy – the part where standard nominative-accusative systems should be found according to Silverstein – would corroborate the alignment hypothesis. The results of this brief survey mean a two to one in favor of the overt marking hypothesis. However, the overt marking hypothesis does fail to explain all instances

of marked-S split systems and thus cannot be the ultimate explanation for alignment-systems split along the Silverstein hierarchy.

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