The Ergative, Absolutive, and Dative in Basque

The Basque language, spoken in the westernmost part of Europe, is a good example of an ergative-type language. Although knowledge of it has been available for at least four centuries, its peculiar grammatical structure has been studiously ignored in the Western tradition of grammar, even to the present day. The occurrence in it of an ergative case was simply explained away as a form of obligatory passivization. In short, the discourse was kept within the familiar and inherited categories of latinate terminology and its presuppositions. In view of this general European neglect, it behooves us to examine the evidence for ergativity offered by the language itself. While this discussion will make use of the traditional terms, subject, object, transitive, intransitive, nominative, accusative, their applicability or even aptness must be understood to be intermediate and provisional.

The subject of a transitive verb obligatorily carries in Basque sentences an ergative marker. The direct object of that transitive verb is unmarked.

(1) *Gizonak liburua galdu du.*
     man-def.sg.-erg. book-def.sg.-abs. lost abs.-aux.-3sg.erg.
     'The man has lost the book.'

The marker for ergative is *-k* suffixed to the definite noun phrase *gizon-a*. The marker for the definite direct object, *liburu-a*, is zero. Current usage calls this form of the noun **absolutive**. (In the literature of Basque grammar one will also find the terms **nominative** and **neutral**.) It must also be pointed out that the Basque inflected verb is polypersonal in that it contains pronoun reference to the noun phrases in its sentence that are marked as ergative, dative, and absolutive. (There is a fourth item in this list, allocution, which refers to the person addressed.) The inflected auxiliary *du* 'has' actually means 'he has it'.

In contrast, it is the subject of an intransitive verb that is marked by zero, i. e. absolutive.

(2) *Manex joan / jin da.*
     Johnny-abs. gone / come abs.-aux.
     'Johnny has gone / come.'

(3) *Liburua galdu da.*
     book-def.-abs. lost abs.-aux.
     'The book is / has been lost.'

In other words, the direct object of a transitive verb is identical in form to the subject of an intransitive verb. We may speak of absolutive and absolutive-ergative sentences.

Since the indirect object is marked in the noun phrase and in the inflected verb, we may also speak of dative or, rather, dative-(ergative)-absolutive sentences.

(4) *Gizonak emakumeari liburua eman dio.*
     man-def.sg.-erg. woman-def.sg.-dat. book-def.sg.-abs. given
     abs.-aux.-dat.3sg.-erg.3sg.
     'The man has given the book to the woman.'

The definite noun phrase *emakume-a-ri* 'the woman' is marked as dative by the suffix *-ri*. The auxiliary *dio* reads literally 'he has it to her'. Indirect object indication can also be seen in the dative-ergative sentence:

(5) *Ni hari segitu nitzaio.*
     I-abs. him-dat.sg. followed abs.1st.sg.-aux.-dat.3sg.
     'I have followed *him*.'

In it the emphatically introduced pronoun *hari* is marked for dative as is the verb *nitzaio* 'I am for him'. The regular reflection of persons in the verb complex explains the ease with which noun phrases and pronouns may be omitted in the surface realizations of Basque sentences. The following sentences are perfectly grammatical in Basque:

(4') *Eman dio.*

(5') *Segitu nitzaio.*

If we abstract the ordering of elements from the examples above, we determine that the ordering interests us is:

(NP-erg.) + (NP-dat.) + NP-abs.

This represents the unmarked order of noun phrases in a Basque sentence [1]. On the other hand, the ordering of these elements in the inflected verb takes place in this fashion:

abs. + aux. + (dat.) + (erg.)

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1 Traditional grammarians of Basque concede that factors corresponding to emphasis, focus, topic are operative in Basque sentence formation, particulary in the case

This ordering varies with tense and mood.

In this description we have outlined a fragment of a formalized grammar that accounts for the realization of the greater number of sentences in Basque. There are, however, any number of grammatical sentences in the language that do not cling to this pattern. Two dative-ergative sentences illustrate this:

(6) *Haurrak behatu zion.*
child-def.sg.-erg. looked abs.3d.sg.-erg.3d.sg.-aux.-dat.3dsg.-past.
'The child looked at him.'

(7) *Jainkoak laguntzen dauku.*
God-def.sg.-erg. helping abs.3d.sg.-aux.-dat.1st.pl.-erg.3d.sg.
'God is helping us.'

In these two cases, the absolutive reflex in the verb is lexically void. It is quite possible to insert, rather redundantly, pronouns with a dative marker in the two sentences above:

(6') *Haurrak hari behatu zion.*
(7') *Jainkoak guri laguntzen dauku.*

It would be impossible to insert an absolutive pronoun, *hura,* in these sentences even though there is pronominal indication of it in the verb. This indication occurs de rigueur. Older Basque texts had more of such sentences:

(8) *Etsaiek Jesusi iguriki zioten, jazarri zioten eta nehork ez zion lagundu.*
'The enemies waited for Jesus, attacked him, and nobody helped him.'

This sentence has exactly the same dative-ergative structure as those in (6) and (7). However, it must be noted that even the oldest texts show some of these dative noun phrases in the absolutive:

(9) *Patientiaz igurikiten dugu.*
patience-instr. awaiting abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.1st.pl.
'We are awaiting him with patience.'

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of Basque's free-and-easy scrambling. Consciously or unconsciously. it is held that such parameters are not part of a formal grammar, for they play no role in a word-and-paradigm explication. Consequently, they are either ignored or treated as 'just being natural', and therefore are relegated to chapters on figures of speech and poetic usage. Two recent papers have tried to repair this manque: Rudolf P. G. de RIJK, *Is Basque an SOV language?* "Fontes Linguae Vasconum" 3 (1969), 319-51, and Françoise DONZEAUD, *The expression of focus in Basque,* Anuario del Seminario de filologia vasca "Julio Urquijo" VI (1972), 35-45.

(10) *Gizona ez dugu lagundu.*
man-def.sg.-erg. not abs.3d.sg.-aux-erg.1st.pl. helped.
'We have not helped the man.'

(11) *Segitu dut.*
followed abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.1st.sg.
'I have followed him.'

Another group of sentences also contains vacuous absolutives. This group includes those that contain the verbs *kurritu* 'run', *iraun* 'last, endure', *irakitu* 'boil'.

(12) *Berriek kurritu dute.*
new-def.pl.-erg. run abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.3d.pl.
'The news ran about.'

(13) *Urak irakitzen du.*
water-def.sg.-erg. boiling abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.3d.sg.
'The water is boiling.'

(14) *Burdinak ez du beti irauten.*
iron-def.sg.-erg. not abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.3d.sg. always lasting.
'Iron does not last forever.'

We may speak of a pure ergative sentence in this case. In traditional Basque grammars, verbs of this class are called **deponents.** Pierre Lafitte lists in his grammar (1963: 189-90) some twenty-eight verbs under this rubric. He says of them, 'ces verbes marquent en général une certaine continuité, une certaine insistance.'

Meteorological sentences often occur with an empty ergative indicator on the verb as well as a lexically doubtful absolutive, which would occur anyway. These sentences contain the verbs *ari* 'to be engaged in', *egin* 'to do, make', as well as the simple verb *izan* 'to be'.

(15) *Euria egiten du.*
rain-def.sg. making abs.-aux.-erg.3d.sg.
'It is raining.'

(16) *Euria ari du.*
rain-def.sg. engaged in abs.-aux.-erg.3d.sg.
'It is raining.'

(17) *Igortziriak ari ditu.*
thunder-clap-def.pl. engaged in abs.3d.pl.-aux.-erg.3d.sg.
'It is thundering.'

(18) *Eder egiten du.*
beautiful making abs.-aux.-erg.3d.sg.
'It (the weather) is beautiful.'

(19) *Hotz egiten du.*
'It (the weather) is cold.'

(20) *Bero ari du.*
'It (the weather) is hot.'

Grammatically the sentences above with the inflected auxiliaries *du, ditu* presuppose a noun phrase marked ergative. However, the insertion of an ergative noun phrase into any of these sentences would yield nonsense. The uncertainty of these sentences is shown by the fact that the following sentences are equally grammatical:

(15) *Euria egiten da.*

(16) *Euria ari da.*

(17) *Igortziriak ari dira.*

Only absolutive marking is to be found in the inflected auxiliary. We can speak of ergative-switching in these sentences. If we remain within the predispositions of traditional grammar, the following sentences are baffling:

(21) *Iguzkiak argitzen du eta zerua argitzen da.*
sun-def.sg.-erg. shining abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.3d.sg. and
heaven-def.sg.-abs. shining abs.3d.-aux.
'The sun is shining and the sky is sparkling.'

(22) *Iguzkia egiten du / da.*
'It is sunny.'

Ergative-switching is not confined to meteorological sentences. We find it also in sentences with the verbs *laket* 'to be pleased' and *higuintu* 'to abhor, to hate'. In this case ergative switches with dative.

(23) *Bekhatuan laketzen zaio.*
sin-def.sg.-inessive pleasing abs.3d.sg.-aux.-dat.3d.sg.
'It pleases him (to remain) in sin.'

(24) *Segur niz nik ere hantxet laket nezakela.*
sure I-am I-erg. also there pleased abs.3d.sg.-erg.1st.sg.-subj.
aux.-potential-that.
'I am sure that I should like it there.'

(25) *Higuintzen zaizkit plazerak.*
repelling abs.-aux.-abs.3d.pl.-dat.1st.sg.
'The pleasures repell me.'

(26) *Haren egiteak higuintzen ditut.*
he-gen. do-ing-def.pl.abs. disliking abs.-abs.3d.pl.-aux.-erg.1st.sg.
'I dislike his actions.'

Sentences (23) and (25) show a form of the auxiliary with absolutive
and dative markers, while (24) and (26) show forms of the auxiliary with
ergative and absolutive markers. It would seem that the person of interest
shifts easily between ergative and dative indication. Two verbs of closely
related semantic content, *maite* 'to love' and *plazer* 'to be pleased' permit
only ergative and absolutive markers:

(27) *Nik zakurra maite dut.*
I-erg. dog-def.sg.-abs. love abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.1st.sg.
'I love the dog.'

(28) *Plazer dut zure ezagutzea.*
pleased abs.3d.sg.-aux.-erg.1st.sg. you-gen. acquaintance-def.
sg.abs.

In the case of causative complex verbs such as *hil-erazi* 'to kill, to cause
to die', *jan-arazi* 'to feed, to cause to eat', *erakhutsi* 'to show, to cause to see'
we find a dative for what we must assume to be an underlying ergative. The
complex verbs illustrated here are derived from the simple verbs *hil* 'to die',
jan 'to eat', and *ikhusi* 'to see' by affixation of the causative element *era-* / *ira-*
or *-arazi* /*-erazi* to the root.

(29) *Hilen dira.*
die-fut. abs.3d.pl.-aux.
'they will die.'

(30) *Hil-eraziren dituzte.*
die-cause-fut. abs.3d.pl.-aux.-abs.3d.pl.-erg.3d.pl.
'They will kill them.'

(31) *Andereak ogia jan du.*
      woman-def.sg.-erg. bread-def.sg.-abs. eaten abs.-aux.-erg.
      'The woman has eaten the bread.'

(32) *Antoniok andereari ogia jan-erazi zaikon.*
      Antonio-erg. woman-def.sg.-dat. bread-abs. eat-cause abs.-erg.-
      aux.-dat.3d.sg.-past.
      'Antonio made the lady eat the bread.'

(33) *Ikhusiko dugu.*
      see-fut. abs.-aux.-erg.1st.pl.
      'We shall see it.'

(34) *Lurrean zerbeit erakhusten ziola.*
      earth-def.sg.-inessive something cause-seeing abs.-erg.-aux.-
      dat.3d.sg.-past-that.
      'As he showed him something on the ground.'

From these causative sentences may be derived the following linear abstract representation [2]:

$^s[$ NP $^{vp}[$ $^s[$ NP $^{vp}[$ (NP) V $]^{vp}]^s$ CAUSE $]^{vp}]^s$

In this complex predicate, or three-place function, when any third noun phrase (here in parentheses) is present, the first noun phrase is marked ergative, the second dative, the third absolutive. When a third noun phrase is not present, the first noun phrase is marked ergative, the second absolutive. If only one noun phrase is present in any sentence, it is marked absolutive. We have an assignment order in verbs, simplex or complex:

(a) absolutive
(b) absolutive + ergative
(c) absolutive + ergative + dative.

These are precisely those assignments that are syntactic in Basque, for they are obligatorialy reflected in the verb.

Viewed configurationally, sentences (30), (32), (24) represent structures with embedded sentences. If the embedded sentence were realized inde-

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2 The literature of causative construction is copious. See in particular Judith AIS-SEN, *Verb raising*, "Linguistic Inquiry" 5 (1974), 326-366, Renate BARTSCH and Theo VENNEMANN, *Semantic Structures* (Frankfurt / Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1972) pp. 127-131, and Terence H. WILBUR. *Causative sentences in Basque*, "The Third LACUS Forum 1976" (Columbia, S. C.: Hornbeam Press), pp. 537-544.

pendently, one of the noun phrases would have been marked ergative. When, in the embedded structure, that ergative is raised into the matrix sentence, it is assigned to dative. This seems to be in accord with the claims of the Keenan-Comrie accessibility hierarchy (Comrie 1974; Keenan and Comrie 1977: 88-90). We could also say that there is a language-particular constraint that prevents the occurrence of two ergatives in the same sentence.

These two approaches seem to be purely formalistic, place-counter interpretations of surface structure grammar. Any semantic representations we might retrieve from sentences realized according to the assignment order above will have the most varied internal structure. Such interpretations certainly assure the autonomy of syntax.

In order to put this formalistic view to the test, it is necessary to account for those sentences that display a deviant assignment of markers. In the sentences above we find examples of the following assignments:

(d) ergative

(e) dative

(f) dative + absolutive

(g) dative + ergative

We find representatives of (d) in sentences (12), (13), (14); of (e) in sentence (23); of (f) in sentences (5), (25); of (g) in sentences (6), (7), (8). In sentences (15) through (20) we find a to-beseecopy expected ergative + absolutive assignment where the ergative slot is lexically void.

Tradition tends to dismiss sentences that deviate from normal expectations as exceptional, which, of course, says nothing. Since exceptional sentences are an affront to what can normally be anticipated, for adherence to strict identification of unvarying morphology and unvarying function will discover only leakage and whimsy in grammars, it is safer to take the stand that every apparent violation is a highly motivated exploitation of the grammatical resources of the language. If we take this task upon ourselves, we are in a position to pull into the center of grammatical theory that which seems to be peripheral.

One of the currently debated problems in the theory of universal grammar is the establishment of a firm foundation for the relationships, **subject-of, direct object-of,** and **indirect object-of.** Those early theorists of Basque grammar, who saw that the ergative case-marking muddied the picture, found an easy solution in identifying morphology and function, choosing the absolutive as the subject of any sentence it might occur in. The result of this was the passive theory of the Basque verb, wherein the ergative represented an agentive case, safely packed away in the verb phrase of a transitive

sentence. This ingenious solution was offensive to the intuition of Basque speakers and grammarians [3]. Intuitively, the ergative always seemed to he the better candidate for the function. One thing was apparent to everybody: the passivity theory introduced a lopsided view of diathesis, where transitive verbs were always passive, intransitive always active. It would seem that transitive/intransitive would be a basic classification of verb classes, far more so than in the neighboring Indo-European stocks. This illusion is aided by the paradigmatic presentation of the complex Basque inflected verbal forms. A closer look at the paradigms reveals that transitive conjugations differ from intransitive conjugations only in the presence of an ergative reflex in the individual forms. Also, it is to be noted that some seemingly intransitive verbs become transitive with careless abandon. The assumption that subject-of is **the** basic relationship in the sentence continues to support the transitive/intransitive notion and everything that follows from it. It is clearly stated in the *Aspects*-model (Chomsky 1965: § 4) and in the Relational-Grammar model (Johnson 1976). Since it is a primitive term in those models, it is not defined, but defines all other relationships (Johnson 1977: 89-90) [4]. I propose to cast radical doubt upon the existence of this relationship and to develop the consequences of that doubt.

Let us assume that the relationship between any noun phrase(s) and the verb in any particular sentence is unique. These relationships can be stated in the logical forms: $f(x)$, $f(x,y)$, $f(x,y,z)$. The fact that any function has one or more arguments depends upon the real extra-linguistic content of the function that a verb represents. The unique relationships, which can be anything in human experience, persist even when the proposition is linearized according to the grammatical mechanisms of a particular language. What does persist is: fRx, fRy, fRz (where R = unique relationship), which is prior

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3 The history of the battle of passivity is neatly outlined by Johnathan SEELY in an article, *An ergative historiography*, "Historiographia Linguistica" 2 (1977), 191-206, particularly on pages 197-199. A very popular thesis pops up over and over again: 'diachronically the ergative is a passive made obligatory (Comrie 1973: 252)'. This represents a refusal to recognize ergative-nominative as a real typologically possible grammar among other grammars. It amounts to the thesis that ergative *must* correspond to one of the funstional (i. e. notional) relationships posited in the normative nominative-accusative type. This reeks of doctrinal blindness.

4 In my opinion the recent defense of or rather insistence upon the ultimate metaphysical reality of the subject, subjecthood, and subjectness is evidence of a species of atavism. What CHOMSKY managed to sweep under the rug with an adroit gesture has been elevated on high by David E. JOHNSON in *Toward a theory of relationally-based grammar* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1976), by Stephen ANDERSON in *On the notion of subject in ergative languages*, in Charles LI, ed. "Subject and Topic" (New York: Academic Press, pp. 1-23, and Eduard L. KEENAN and Bernard COMRIE in *Noun phrase accessibility and universal grammar*, "Linguistic Inquiry" 8 (1977), 63-99. We must ask ourselves whether the current paradigm of linguistic investigation is such a house of cards that removal of this questionable category will topple the whole structure.

to any grammar. Given the surface mechanisms of any particular language, f, x, y, z are lexicalized and linearized in a specific manner, which may be rigid or elastic. If we assume for a Basque sentence a function with three arguments, say one that is lexicalized as *eman* 'to give', the basic linearization is:

(h) x, y, z, f

(i) gizon emakune liburu eman

This represents only the unmarked order of noun phrases. Other factors such as topicalization, focus, thematic emphasis can rearrange this order. This amounts to a claim that the ability of Basque syntax to scramble is prior to or independent of the assignment of markers for ergative, dative, or absolutive. Another factor, therefore, is operative in that assignment. That factor is the degree of participation of the noun phrase in the scenario of the sentence, which will be triggered in the underlying semantic structure. This thesis says that surface case-morphology sorts out and disambiguates noun phrases according to the **intensity of participation** of each. This is a scalar concept, for items measured on it slide from inertness to over-intensity. It stands in a parallel relationship to the degrees that we find in the class of relative adjectives and in the class of deictics. Points along these three scales of intensity or proximity are indicial rather than symbolic. Syntax employs devices that make an infinite number of possible points manageable, thereby increasing the efficiency of the limited number of units, which, of necessity are discrete and linear. The specific device is the employment of lexical items that point to three places on the scale. These can be provisionally characterized as **least / more / most**. The lexicalization, because it is made up of discrete units, has the appearance of representing **things,** i.e. absolute symbolic units, when, as a matter of fact, these units signal a relative state-of-affairs. Basque employs a three-point lexical placement on the scale in all three relative systems:

(j) *eder / ederr-ago / ederr-en*
     'beautiful / more beautiful / most beautiful'

(k) *haur / hori / hura*
     'this / that / that-over-there, yon'

(l) *-k / -(r)i / -ø*
     'ergative / dative / absolutive'

Within each triad every unit is dependent upon every other unit, for each is measured only in relation to the other. That measurement is constituted within the cogitatum whatever the illocutionary force of the sentence may be. The irregular behavior of categories, the exceptions, turn out to be illusory,

for false expectations have been pressed upon them by an inappropriate theory.

The realization of an index of degree of participation must be triggered by the presence in the semantic structure of an operator on the set of all arguments in the proposition that ranks the members of the set along the proposed scale of measurement:

(m) $((\text{INT } x, y, z) \ (f(x, y, z)))$

(n) $x^1 \ y^2 \ z^3 \ f$

If the actual propositional form is $((\text{INT } x) \ (f(x)))$, i.e. only one argument is present, the lexical read-off of the index is absolute, the **least** degree. This accounts for the greater number of the so-called intransitive sentences, e.g. (2), (3). Obligatory encoding of the absolute in the verb, even when it is lexically void, is explained. The odd class of meteorological sentences (15-22) makes most obvious use of scalar intensification by adding the most intense indicator of participation, ergative, to an already required absolute. We might even speak of a rhetorical ergative. We may surmise that this grammatical device indicates the degree of attitudinal participation of the speaker since there is no other participant. The speaker adds Lafitte's 'une certaine insistance' to the otherwise background environmental event. In other words, the ergative-insertion pulls the rain out of the background into the center of attention.

Ergative-dative switching in the case of those verbs where a potential participant is present (23-26) is an even clearer piece of evidence for the surface realization of such a device. The relationship between the two noun phrases shifts by intensifying one of them, much as the lexicalized shift in the English pair *I hear : I listen*. The difference in the degree of participation is observable and measurable relatively if only internally. The attitude of the speaker is objectified in these sentences. In (23) and (25) the person of interest is merely present in the situation, at least as far as the speaker is concerned and it is he who generates that semantic structure that underlies the realized sentence. In sentences (24) and (26) he is creating the situation, actually or potentially. I should guess that the first person would occur more frequently in the ergative than in the third person if a statistical count of these sentences were to be undertaken. In sentences (27) and (29) the person of interest is always the active participant, for that is the content of the function represented by the verb. The same holds true for (11-14). The a priori criteria for the classification of the deponent verbs as basically intransitive are inappropriate. In fact, rather than being in any way exceptional, this class of verbs is a proof by the mode of reductio ad absurdum of the vacuousness of the classification transitive/intransitive. Rather than being

part and parcel of the primitive vocabulary of grammar, the pair of alternatives is an unnecessary accretion, a false classification imposed upon the evidence.

In the sentences where the two verbs *lagundu* (7, 10) and *iguriki* (8, 9) appear, the second noun phrase is marked both as absolutive and dative. According to the hypothesis proposed here, the intensity of participation of that noun phrase can be shifted to a higher or lower degree: INT (x^1, y^3) or INT (x^1, y^2). In the second case, greater interest is focussed upon the content of argument y. On the other hand, in sentences containing *segitu* (5, 11) it is the variable intensity of the first noun phrase that comes into play, INT (x^1, y^2) or INT (x^3, y^2). The x can, so-to-speak, be deactivized. This is exactly what happens in sentences that contain *behatu*. The first noun phrase can be the most active participant or the least active participant.

> (5)   *Haurrak behatu zion.*
>   'The child looked at him.'

The noun phrase of intense interest is in the second degree, the dative. The most active participant is in the first degree, the ergative. In the following sentence, the noun phrase of interest remains constant while the second noun phrase, now marked absolutive (partitive) shifts to the background:

> (35)   *Horitarik ez zait behatzen deusik.*
>   these-ablative not ab.-aux.-dat. 1st.sg. looking anything-
>   absolutive-partitive.
>   'None of these things concerns me.'

When only one noun phrase is present, the realization is absolutive, for no indication of degree of participation is necessary.

> (36)   *Behatzen direlarik, eztezaten entzun ez endelga.*
>   attending abs.-aux.-3d.pl.-when not-abs.3d.-erg.3d.-aux.-
>   abs.3d.pl.-past heard not comprehended.
>   'As they are listening, they neither heard nor comprehended.'

This is not a case of polysemy. It is a case of the same underlying function with shifting potential relationships among the noun phrases. If, as I have proposed, morphological marking of noun phrases is basically a deictic function, various semantic roles are indicated by the marking[5]. Grammarians

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5 The attitude I have assumed here has been influenced by the provocative criticisms of current linguistics made by Erica C. GARCIA in *The role of theory in linguistic analysis* (New York: American Elsevier Co., 1975). I think that my conclusions are quite different.

have attempted to frame the relationships, supposing them somehow to be constant, as agent, experiencer, patient, recipient, and several others. In any given sentence with a function represented by a verb (or verbal derivative), the kind of roles played can vary according to the real content of the function. The labels above will sometimes be appropriate and sometimes not! Intensity or importance or degree of participation can indicate different kinds of role-playing in the realized sentence, e.g. responsability, instigation, involvement, control, causality in the case of ergative; secondary participation, goal, reduced involvement in the case of dative; and passivity, inertness, automatic performance, indifference, backgrounding for the absolutive. The distribution of the roles by means of this form of deixis will be different from sentence to sentence [6]. It is useless to search for either a universal syntactic function or a universal semantic content for ergative, absolutive, or dative. It is equally useless to force everthing into airy categories of subject and object, transitive and intransitive [7]. Both of these pairs of notions are specious, secondary, and dispensable. Vendryes remarked 'la distinction des catégories de l'actif et du passif repose sur une base bien fragile ... la distinction des verbes transitifs et intransitifs, qui joue dans les grammaires classiques un grand rôle, n'a pas de fondement plus solide (1921: 123).' This also holds true for contemporary syntactic investigation.

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6 Certainly, the examples of ergative-absolutive switching in West Circassian discussed by Anderson (pp. 21-22) yield to this sort of analysis very easily. for the semantic differences are a contrast in degree of intensity of participation, greater or reduced, on the part of the noun phrase content in the real action of the function represented by the verb.

7 It must be pointed out that basically the point of view represented here in no wise questions the very revealing results of using the Keenan-Comrie accessibility hierarchy. I propose only that the labels be reinterpreted. The universal grammatical entity SUB need not be determined by such a complicated procedure.

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