

KARO BATAK: PASSIVE, ERGATIVE OR NEITHER?

Clodagh Norwood

Abstract

This paper focuses on three questions relating to Western Malayo-Polynesian syntactic typology. Two are general questions concerned with relevant syntactic theory; the first questions the formal differences between passive and ergative constructions and some of the difficulties that arise in distinguishing the two types of construction are discussed. Secondly the usefulness or otherwise of answering the first question is examined. The third question specifically addresses whether or not a Western Malayo-Polynesian language of Northern Sumatra, Karo Batak, is typologically ergative-like or whether the construction type that might be interpreted as ergative is in fact a passive.¹

1. Introduction

Those familiar with the typological literature on Western Austronesian languages, in particular the Phillipines-type, will be well aware of the controversy surrounding their syntactic voice typology. These languages typically have two alternative clause types that appear, superficially at least, to be transitive. Both contain at least two nominal arguments which may exhibit core syntactic properties. The two arguments of one construction mirror the opposite two arguments of the other in marking (word order or case), and the two constructions differ in the marking of the main verb. The discourse frequency of each type varies according to semantic and pragmatic factors.

Some linguists classify one or more of these languages as typologically accusative in which the argument that is regarded as the subject relation of a transitive clause is more semantically *agent-like* than the other core relation and is usually referred to as A, following Dixon (1994). The other core relation, the object, is semantically more *patient-like* and hence referred to as P, or O, following Dixon. A has formal properties similar to those of the single argument, the subject, of an intransitive clause (referred to as S). Together they take the usually unmarked nominative case or may be identified by word order. In such languages P is the accusative relation and is typically marked as such, giving this type its name. In short A/S are usually unmarked and are called subject, and P, the object, is marked to distinguish it from A in a transitive clause.

On the other hand in the active voice of a typologically ergative language it is A that is the marked relation of the transitive clause. P/S are the unmarked ('nominative' case) relations, called the absolutive. To a greater or lesser extent in ergative languages the absolutive relation parallels the subject relation of accusative languages. The separate marking of A gives this type of language its name. Several linguists have gone to considerable lengths to classify at least one or more of the Phillipines-type languages as typologically ergative.

Other linguists such as Schachter (1976, 1984) have long claimed that these languages fall outside these *familiar* classifications and have shunned the use of terms such as subject etc. in relation to these languages. The two types of constructions are referred to by more neutral terms such as *actor focus* for the construction that the 'accusative school of thought' consider to be basic, and *patient focus* for the construction that the 'ergative school of thought'

¹ I would like to thank Edimon Ginting and family, Professor Barry Blake and members of the audience at the Linguistic Inter-campus Postgraduate Society meeting held at La Trobe University on 29th November, 1996 for useful comments, though none are in any way responsible for the conclusions I come to here.

consider to be basic wherein P is seen as pivotal. Examples from both Tagalog and Karo Batak (KB) are shown to illustrate the difference. The intransitive pattern will be discussed later.

TAGALOG (following Kroeger, 1991)

- (1) *b-um-ili ang-lalake ng-isda sa-tindahan*
 A-F buy NOM-man GEN-fish DAT-store²
 ‘The man bought fish at the store.’

The verb is marked with a so-called actor-focus (A-F) infix *-um-*, and the correspondingly marked nominative argument (indicated by the article *ang*) is the most agent-like one. Word order of the nominals is fairly free.

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- (2) *kalak n-ukur ikan ku tiga*
 man A-F buy fish at market
 ‘The man buys fish at the market’.

The verb is marked with an A-F homorganic nasal prefix (*N-*) and will henceforth be called a *N-verb*. There is no case marking but the fairly fixed word order of the arguments is **A V P**.

These patterns which are considered to represent the basic alignment of a transitive clause by the accusative school of thought will henceforth be referred to as *accusative* patterns. In KB they can be recognised by the nasal prefix on the verb, and by the order of the arguments *vis-à-vis* the verb.

The second and alternative two-place construction type, which is usually considered by the accusative analysis to be a derived passive construction, is as follows:

TAGALOG

- (3) *b-in-ili-Ø ng-lalake ang-isda sa-tindahan*
 PERF-buy P-F GEN-man NOM-fish DAT-store
 ‘The man bought the fish at the store.’

The verb is marked with what is generally regarded as an object or patient-focus (P-F) infix³ and the patient P is correspondingly marked nominative. Tagalog, unlike KB, can have other focused nominals.

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- (4) *(i)tukur kalak ikan ku tiga nderbih*
 P-F-buy man fish at market yesterday
 ‘The man bought fish at the market.’

The verb (henceforth called an *i-verb*) is marked with the P-F prefix *i-*, which is frequently realized by a zero allomorph, *Ø-*, and the word order is **V A P**. Not infrequently the order is **P V A**. The **V A** sequence is rigid and A pronominals are obligatorily affixed verbal enclitics.

This pattern, wherein P appears to be the privileged relation, marked nominative in Tagalog and with freedom of movement in KB, is considered to be basic by an ergative analysis, and

² NOM=Nominative case, GEN=Genitive case, DAT=Dative case, EMP = Emphatic, PERF=Perfective mood. Other abbreviations are explained in the text.

³ Kroeger(1991:20) notes that in the presence of the aspect marking infix *-in-*, the Objective Voice (P-F) suffix *-in* does not appear.

will be referred to as an *ergative* pattern. The accusative pattern exemplified in (1) and (2) is sometimes analysed as a derived antipassive by this analysis.

There is evidence that a third approach that refutes either an accusative or an ergative analysis is becoming more widespread (e.g. Foley 1991). Several authors prefer the more neutral term 'pivot' to cover the privileged syntactic relation of either language type, the subject (A/S) in an accusative alignment, or the absolutive (P/S) in an ergative alignment, though its use is usually restricted to interclausal processes such as coordination deletion and relativisation. Its use avoids the confusion that frequently arises by the assignment of the term *subject* in discussion of ergative languages either to A on the one hand, following the accusative designation, or P, the zero-marked, privileged absolutive relation of transitive clauses. Different designations of the term *subject* in the literature are commonly found, often without adequate definition.

Accusative languages usually have a derived intransitive clause, the passive, wherein the accusative P relation of a transitive clause assumes a privileged subject status, S. The equivalent intransitive clause in an ergative language is an antipassive⁴ and in it the marked ergative A relation assumes privileged status, absolutive S. In either situation the new status of the arguments, previously marked as accusative or ergative respectively, allows them not only to assume the privilege of becoming the unmarked relation but also to become the pivot in syntactic processes.

In the following section it will be shown how the P relation of a typical two-place construction might be interpreted as either (1) the absolutive (and hence unmarked) relation, P, of a transitive ergative clause or (2) the derived intransitive subject relation (and hence also unmarked), S, of an accusative passive clause. The discussion will address the potential ambiguity that arises from this situation; specifically considering the case of Karo Batak in this regard. In the process some light may be shed on an answer to the second question.

Space limits the discussion to the formal properties of marking and structure and only passing reference will be made to the role of arguments in syntactic processes. To avoid confusion or any sort of bias grammatical relations will simply be labelled as A, P and S. Here, however, there is no presumption of transitivity in the use of A and P; they are used simply to denote the relations of a two-place clause. The terms *accusative pattern* and *ergative pattern* are used as described above, to refer to the alternative two-place patterns, but not preemptively. Use of the term accusative or ergative *alignment* applied to either of the two patterns is however meant to suggest that either of the two patterns approaches one or the other basic types.

2. The difference between ergative and passive

It might be expected that the differences between an intransitive passive and a transitive ergative construction would be clear. Criteria for distinguishing the two are listed below, but as Comrie (1988) points out, only the most prototypical examples are representative of these criteria and even they may be open to differing interpretations.

- 1) The passive (and also anti-passive) is usually a more marked construction in terms of morphological complexity. This may be evident from the verbal marking (2.1.1) and to a lesser extent by the oblique marking of the demoted A (2.1.2). An ergative construction is no more marked than the active voice of an accusative construction.

⁴ The 2→3 retreat (of Relational Grammar) may be employed in lieu of antipassive (Blake 1990:41).

- 2) The demoted A may be omitted in a passive and often is, leaving only one core argument, the derived S. Being transitive, an ergative construction normally has two core arguments and A is integrated more fully into the syntax (2.2).
- 3) P has a more prominent role in the syntax of a passive than in a transitive ergative construction, where the pivotal syntactic properties are more equally shared between P and A.
- 4) The basic voice in a language, be it accusative or ergative, is more frequent in discourse than a derived and therefore usually marked construction, be it passive or antipassive respectively (2.3).

These criteria, taken from Comrie (1988) and Dixon (1994:146), will now be discussed in light of the marking and structure of Karo Batak.

2.1.1 Verbal marking

Accusative pattern:

- (5) a. *biang ah ngayak danak-danak* (verb stem=*ayak*)
 dog EMP N-chase child
 A N-verb P

Ergative pattern:

- b. *(i)ayak biang danak-danak*
 i-chase dog child
 i-verb A P

It is tempting to gloss (5a) as: ‘The dog chases the child’ in the active voice where A is the privileged relation, the subject; and (5b) as: ‘The child is chased by the dog’ in the passive voice where the verb is marked differently and P is the privileged relation with relative freedom of movement. The question is whether or not the most obvious approach from this Anglo-centric viewpoint is in fact misleading.

In the English equivalent of (5b) under this interpretation the verb, *is chased*, is more marked; it has both an auxiliary and a passive suffix. In KB the verb has equal marking in both the accusative pattern of (5a) with its N-prefix and the ergative pattern of (5b) where *i-* is the prefix. It is possibly significant however that the prefix *i-* freely alternates with zero (*0-*), suggesting that in the minds of speakers this is the unmarked, more basic pattern. But this is too skimpy as evidence for treating the ergative pattern as basic and the accusative pattern as derived.

The marking of intransitives can be considered at this point. Intransitives take various prefixes (and a handful of common verbs are unprefixes); a large proportion of them take a N-prefix. A typical example of an intransitive N-verb is:

- (6) *Nggirgir ia⁵ ban biarna* (verb stem = *girgir*)
 N-shake he DAT fear
 ‘He is shaking with fear’.

The verbal marking with *N-* of a large number of intransitives as well as the accusative two-place patterns could perhaps be interpreted as indicative of a basic accusative alignment, but several factors contest this analysis. Among them (but see also 2.3) are that the accusative N-

⁵ *ia*= 3 SG/PL (3rd person singular/plural) MASC/FEM. For the sake of simplicity all pronouns are given an idiomatic gloss, with one exception (e.g. 12).

verb patterns are usually translated as imperfective aspect, often with the imperfective marker *san gana* associated with them⁶. By comparison the ergative patterning i-verb constructions often occur with the perfective marker *enggo* and would therefore be higher in transitivity according to the semantic parameters outlined by Hopper & Thompson (1980:252).

While it is not the position adopted in this paper that one pattern be chosen over the other as the basic alignment, word order (see below) supports an analysis of the ergative pattern as the basic transitive pattern.

2.1.2 The marking of the agent argument

The difference between the marking of the agent argument, A, in a transitive clause of an ergative language and that of the oblique marking of the agent in a derived passive of an accusative language is not always clear. Sentences (5a) and (5b) are repeated here:

Accusative pattern:

(5) a. *biang ah ngayak danak-danak*
 dog EMP N-chase child
 A N-verb P

Ergative pattern:

b. *(i)ayak biang danak-danak*
 i-chase dog child
 i-verb A P

If this were a fully case marked accusative language A would have nominative case in (5a) (putative active), and in (5b) (putative passive) A would bear the by-phrase oblique marking. The core relations of KB where full nominals are concerned are no more overtly case marked than in English, and like English are distinguished by fairly rigid word order. But there is nothing to suggest in these alternative patterns a difference in their marking such as the oblique by-phrase equivalent in English or similarly the *oleh-phrase* in Indonesian which occurs before a demoted agent. The order is that A precedes the verb in (5a), the accusative pattern, and only under a restricted set of circumstances may it occur elsewhere. In (5b), the ergative pattern, A is rigidly fixed in position after the verb and if it is pronominal it forms an enclitic on the verb as shown in (9) below. (A mirror of this occurs in the accusative pattern, where a 3rd person pronominal P may be represented by a verbal enclitic, though this is not obligatory as it is with the pronominal A enclitic in the ergative pattern.)

These restrictions in the verb-plus-following-argument patterns of KB predicates, similar to those in related languages (e.g. Toba Batak and Balinese), reduce the word order of the accusative pattern to ‘A Predicate’, and of the ergative pattern to ‘Predicate P’, where A and P are the privileged relations of each of the two patterns respectively.

Each can be compared with the word-order pattern of a typical intransitive clause. While intransitives do not exhibit the fixed word order of two-place clauses, there are strong claims from native speakers that ‘Predicate S’ is the unmarked order and these claims are supported by statistics (Woollams 1996:176). The intransitive verb and S are underlined in the following examples.

(7) *gelah pulung kita kerina i rumah enda ras man kita pagi je kerina*
 so reunite we all in house this and eat we later on all
 ‘so later on we will all be reunited in this house and eat together’

⁶ Woollams (1996:216-220) provides a detailed and lucid discussion of aspect in relation to the N-verb constructions.

- (8) *Ope kam berkat ertoto kita lebe*
 before you leave pray we first
 ‘Before you leave let us pray.’ (from Woollams 1996:244)

In comparison with the two-place patterns which are ‘A Predicate’ (accusative pattern) and ‘Predicate P’ (ergative pattern), the favoured (or unmarked) order for intransitives of ‘Predicate S’ supports the ergative pattern as more basic, where in a predicate-initial language P and S are in the same position.

The form of the pronominal arguments may also be used as an analytic tool. The existence of bound versus free forms might be seen as an extended definition of case marking. In intransitives S always occurs as a free form, as does A in accusative patterns. In ergative patterns P always occurs as a free form but singular A is always an enclitic affixed to the verb. Plural A pronouns and full nominals immediately follow the verb as stated above and nothing may intervene. P may receive the same marking as a verbal enclitic in accusative patterns but is restricted to third person singular and the verb-P unit is not as fixed as the verb-A unit of the ergative pattern. The forms of pronominals are exemplified in (9). For the sake of clarity the i-prefix will be omitted from the verbs of the ergative patterns, especially as they are not always used in everyday speech.

(9)	Accusative pattern:	Ergative pattern:	Intransitive pattern:
	<i>ak mekpek kam</i>	<i>kupekpek kam</i>	<i>lawes aku</i>
	I N-hit you	I-hit you	go I
	A N-verb P	A ⁷ -i-verb P	verb S
	<i>kam mekpek kita</i>	<i>pekpek-ndu kita</i>	<i>lawes kam</i>
	you N-hit us	hit-you us	go you
A	N-verb P	i-verb-A P	verb S
	<i>ia mekpek-sa</i>	<i>pekpek-na ía</i>	<i>lawes ía</i>
	she N-hit-her	hit-she her	goes
	A N-verb-P	i-verb-A P	verb S

From this it can be deduced that A is marked by affixation or uninterruptible word order in the ergative patterns. This is suggestive of ergative marking of A but could also be interpreted as oblique marking of a demoted A in a passive. By the same token, the affixation of 3rd person singular P in the accusative pattern is suggestive of accusative marking (or oblique marking of demoted P).

2.2 The role of the agent argument in the syntax

A feature of canonical passives is that the demoted A may be omitted and often is, leaving only one core argument, S, while a basic transitive ergative construction has two core arguments, the A having a significant syntactic role.

In KB there are a number of verbal prefixes including the two already discussed (*N-* and *I-/Ø-*) which are attached to precategorial stems to form a fully inflected verb. (The same precategorial stems may function as nominals when prefixed appropriately.) There is also a small class of verbs that frequently occur without prefixes. In general any specific prefix determines whether a verb occurs in either a one- or a two-place construction (unless certain valency increasing suffixes are also applied).

The nasal prefix (*N-*) is noteworthy in its occurrence in one-place intransitives as discussed above (2.1.1), as well as in the two-place constructions of accusative patterns. Some

⁷ The 1st person pronominal form is prefixed rather than suffixed to the verb.

examples of both one-place and two- place constructions where the verb is prefixed with *N-* are given below, where (10) and (11) are one place, and (12) and (13) are two-place:

- (10) *Nggeluh denga nande ras bapaku* (verb stem = *geluh*)
 N-alive still mother and father-my ‘
 My mother and father are still alive.’
- (11) *Ngandung silalap danakna* (verb stem = *andung*)
 N-cry always child-her
 ‘Her child is always crying.’
- (12) *Ia ngisap mbako ras bulung ipah* (verb stem = *isap*)
 he N-smoke tobacco with leaves ‘ipab’
 ‘He smokes tobacco with ipah leaves.’
- (13)⁸ *Nande mereken bangku sen* (verb stem = *bere(ken)*)
 mother N-give DAT-me money
 ‘Mother gives me money.’

In the ergative patterns the VA sequence can never be interrupted, but in the accusative patterns another constituent can interrupt the VP sequence as (13) shows. It is not clear at this stage whether or not this is significant. Nevertheless in certain two-place accusative pattern constructions a non- referential P can be interpreted as part of a verbal complex suggestive of noun incorporation and hence reduced transitivity.

- (14) *Aku nukur emas*
 1sg N-buy gold
 ‘I am a buyer of gold (a gold merchant).’

Woollams (1996:189) gives several further examples.

The *i-/Ø-* prefix almost invariably occurs in two-place constructions; according to Woollams (1996:192), the agent argument is retained in 85% of constructions with these verbs. The conditions where A may be omitted from these ergative patterns is where it is unknown, as in (15), irrelevant, or mention of it is deliberately avoided for the sake of politeness such as in imperatives.

- (15) *Ikirim aku erdahin ku rumah sakit* (verb stem = *kirim*)
 i-send 1SG work at hospital
 ‘I was sent to work in a hospital.’/ ‘(They) sent me to work in a hospital.’

Omission of a direct P argument may also occur in ergative pattern constructions such as reflexives or when the verb takes a sentential or PP complement. For example,

- (16) *Itatapna i datas nari, ku kelewetna* (verb stem = *wrap*)
 i-look-he at above from to surroundings-its
 ‘He gazed down from above, towards the surrounding area.’

Examples like (16) which have an *i-*prefix on intransitives need further investigation but seem to be suggestive of agentive marking of intransitives in split-S marking (Dixon1994:71ff).

Apart from noting its strong tendency to be retained in ergative patterns in KB, the integration of A into the syntax of the ergative patterns, as well as the prominence of P. or otherwise, in syntactic processes (criterion (3) above) cannot be addressed in this short paper.

⁸ Examples (13), (15) and (16) are from Woollams 1996.

Only one clause type will be shown to exemplify the fact that in certain ergative pattern clauses in the syntax of KB the more agent-like argument has a more significant role than P.

- (17) *Icubaken nini bulang ngajari ianulis Karo*
i-try grandfather N-teach her N-write Karo
(verb stems = *cuba(ken)*, *ajar(i)*, *tulis*)
'Her grandfather tried to teach her to write Karo.'

The deleted arguments of the second accusative-pattern clause is controlled by the only argument of the first, ergative pattern clause. The pivot and controller of deletion of the first clause does not have to be a P (the privileged relation of ergative clauses), nor is an accusative pattern used in order to make the accusative 'subject' the controller. Ergative pattern matrix clauses such as the one in (17) above, containing verbs such as 'try' and 'want' are frequently used in KB.

2.3 Discourse frequency

Clauses that are basic as opposed to those that are derived are likely to be more frequent in discourse, though discourse type and semantic factors have to be taken into account. Woollams (1996:212) has found that across all genres of KB discourse the ergative pattern occurs over twice as frequently as the accusative pattern in two-place clauses. The relative frequency varies considerably between dependent and independent clauses. In independent clauses the frequency is 8:1 ergative:accusative, while in dependent clauses the relative frequency is about 1:3 ergative:accusative. In some Austronesian languages the so-called *patient-focus constructions* (ergative patterns) have been found to be more frequent when the patient is a definite or specific entity (Kroeger 1991:19, for example) but the situation with KB in this regard is not entirely clear. There is some evidence that in KB the *N-verb* (accusative pattern) constructions are more likely to be used when A is definite or referential. What is noteworthy is that the prototypicality of a transitive event involves specific semantic and discourse factors (Hopper & Thompson 1980, Givon 1994:7) that appear to correlate with these same factors in the ergative patterns of KB.

3. Summary of morphological and structural patterns

Taking each of the criteria listed above in isolation, only the fourth, discourse frequency, up to date shows as being a distinctive diagnostic in Karo Batak. In part this is related to the inherent difficulties in distinguishing between the formal properties of ergative and passive clauses, and in part to the formal symmetry between the two alternative patterns of KB. With discourse frequency alone is there strong individual evidence favouring the ergative pattern as the basic alignment in this language.

With regard to verbal marking, if the *N-prefix* is associated with intransitives, noun incorporation and imperfective aspect, then this would seem to indicate that the accusative pattern is the less transitive of the two patterns. This analysis is supported by the fact that most adjectives are also marked by a similar *N-prefix*, although with adjectives there are more differences in the phonological effects on the stem initials than between the verbal *N-prefix(es)*.⁹

⁹ Woollams (1996:40) claims 'there are 5 different morphemes realised by *N-* 'including a 'transitive' (for what are here called the accusative patterns), an 'intransitive' and two 'adjective' morphemes. The differences by Woollams' own admission between the stem replacive effects are slight and the data warrants further investigation.

As for the role of A and P in the syntax, according to Comrie (1988) A plays a greater role in the syntax of an ergative clause, and P a greater role in that of a passive. In syntactic processes of KB such as relativisation, coordination and subordination, anaphoric reference in second and dependent clauses suggests that the roles of A of an accusative and P of an ergative pattern are more or less equal. But the distribution of each clause pattern is not equal and the predominance of the accusative pattern in dependent clauses and its relatively uncommon appearance in independent clauses might suggest that these are derived constructions.

4. Conclusion

Taken as a whole the accumulated evidence of all the criteria supports an analysis wherein the ergative patterns are transitive and the accusative patterns are basically intransitive, or on a scale of transitivity, the less transitive of the two patterns. Semantic and discourse factors such as aspect and referentiality of the arguments involved, as well as the discourse genre will probably prove influential in a speaker's choice of construction type.

Labelling these constructions *ergative* when there seems to be sufficient justification for making the distinction, rather than *passive*, is more than just a matter of difference in terminology. The use of the term *passive* implies, above all else, that the constructions thus labelled are intransitive and derived. Derived constructions presumably attract extra marking because in the minds of the speaker there is a reason for the derivation, it is intended to fulfil a function outside the normal pattern of speech. *Passive* and *subject* are terms applicable to accusative languages. Use of the term *subject* applied to ergative languages leads to a certain amount of confusion unless the grammatical relations covered by this term are carefully delineated. Use of the term *passive* for a construction type that is basically transitive can also be confusing, and seems to misrepresent the whole orientation of the language.

The conclusions made here cannot be applied to all the Phillipines-type languages; each must be examined individually. Often only small differences can shift the analysis from one to another type as the literature reveals.

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