

A hierarchical view of the ergative and antipassive in Inuktitut

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Much research on the syntax of Inuit languages has focused on the differences between the ergative and antipassive (AP) constructions in a two-argument sentence such as ‘Jaani saw a caribou’ (see (1)).

- (1) Erg Jaani-up tuku-Ø taku-lauq-tanga.
 Jaani-Erg caribou-Abs see-Past-Partic.3s.3s
- AP Jaani-Ø tuku-mik taku-lauq-tuq.
 Jaani-Abs caribou-Mod see-Past-Partic.3s

One view is that the differences are primarily semantic or discourse-related. It has been claimed, for example, that the AP object is indefinite (Swadesh 1946, Sadock 1980, Fortescue 1984), nonspecific (Manga 1996), takes narrow scope (Bittner 1987, Wharram 2003), introduces new information (Kalmár 1979), or is a non-topic (Berge 2011), while the object in an ergative structure has opposite properties. The other view focuses on the syntactic properties of the AP structure: the AP suffix is an incorporated noun (Bittner & Hale 1996), an aspect marker (Bittner 1987), or accusative case assigner (Spreng 2006, Johns 2006). Surprisingly, there is little consensus on what underlies the ergative/AP contrast in Inuit.

This paper presents a study that investigates which structure speakers of one Inuit dialect, Inuktitut, prefer in a context-neutral experimental setting. The study focuses on verbal agreement (double with ergative, single with AP) rather than Case, as pronouns in Inuktitut are normally deleted and thus cannot be used to distinguish between the two structures. In the Verb Preference Task Inuktitut speakers were given 28 subject-object pairs consisting of all person and number combinations, and were required to create a simple sentence using the verb *takulauq* ‘see.Past’ (e.g. ‘the man saw the woman’, ‘I saw the boys’, ‘you saw me’). They were free to produce either the ergative or antipassive form. The results revealed the following hierarchy of preference for the antipassive form (where, for example, 1>2 represents a 1st person subject and 2nd person object): **3>3**, **3>2**, **3>1**, **2>1**, 1>2, 2>3, 1>3.

This hierarchy strongly suggests the existence of a directional system in Inuktitut based on a 1>2>3 person hierarchy. The antipassive form is preferred when a subject lower on the hierarchy is acting on an equal or higher object (shown in bold), while the ergative form is preferred when a higher object is acting on a lower one. I present a sketch of an inverse agreement system in Inuktitut consisting of direct, inverse and equal status marking in domains other than 3>3, and obviation with 3>3 (see Hewson 1991). Obviation systems “rank third person nominal according to a complex function which includes grammatical function, inherent semantic properties, and discourse salience” (Aissen 1997:205). Given that most of the studies cited above focus on examples with 3rd person subjects and objects, it is perhaps not surprising that there is so much variation in their explanations of the ergative/AP structures. The current study, which takes into account all subject-object domains, can provide a more global perspective on the two structures.

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