

Ergativity of the Georgian Language



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Introduction to the Georgian Language

- ✓ The Georgian language belongs to the **South Caucasian language family**. It is a **highly agglutinative language**.
- ✓ Georgian has its writing system. It is an entirely phonemic writing system with **33 characters** (28 consonants and 5 vowels).
- ✓ The first evidence of the Georgian script originates from a plate which was found in Palestine in the first half of **the 5th century A.D.**
- ✓ There are about **4.6 million** speakers of Georgian.

ა	ბ	გ	დ	ე	ვ	ზ	თ	ი	კ	ლ	მ	ნ	ო	პ	ჟ	რ
a	b	g	d	e	v	z	t	i	k'	l	m	n	o	p'	zh	r
[a]	[b]	[g]	[d]	[ɛ]	[v]	[z]	[tʰ]	[i]	[kʰ]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[ɔ]	[pʰ]	[ʒ]	[r]
ს	ტ	უ	ფ	კ	ღ	ყ	შ	ჩ	ც	ძ	წ	ჭ	ხ	ჯ	ჰ	
s	t'	u	p	k	gh	q'	sh	ch	ts	dz	ts'	ch'	kh	j	h	
[s]	[tʰ]	[u]	[pʰ]	[kʰ]	[ɣ]	[qʰ]	[ʃ]	[tʃ]	[ts]	[dz]	[tsʰ]	[tʃʰ]	[χ]	[dʒ]	[h]	

Georgian alphabet

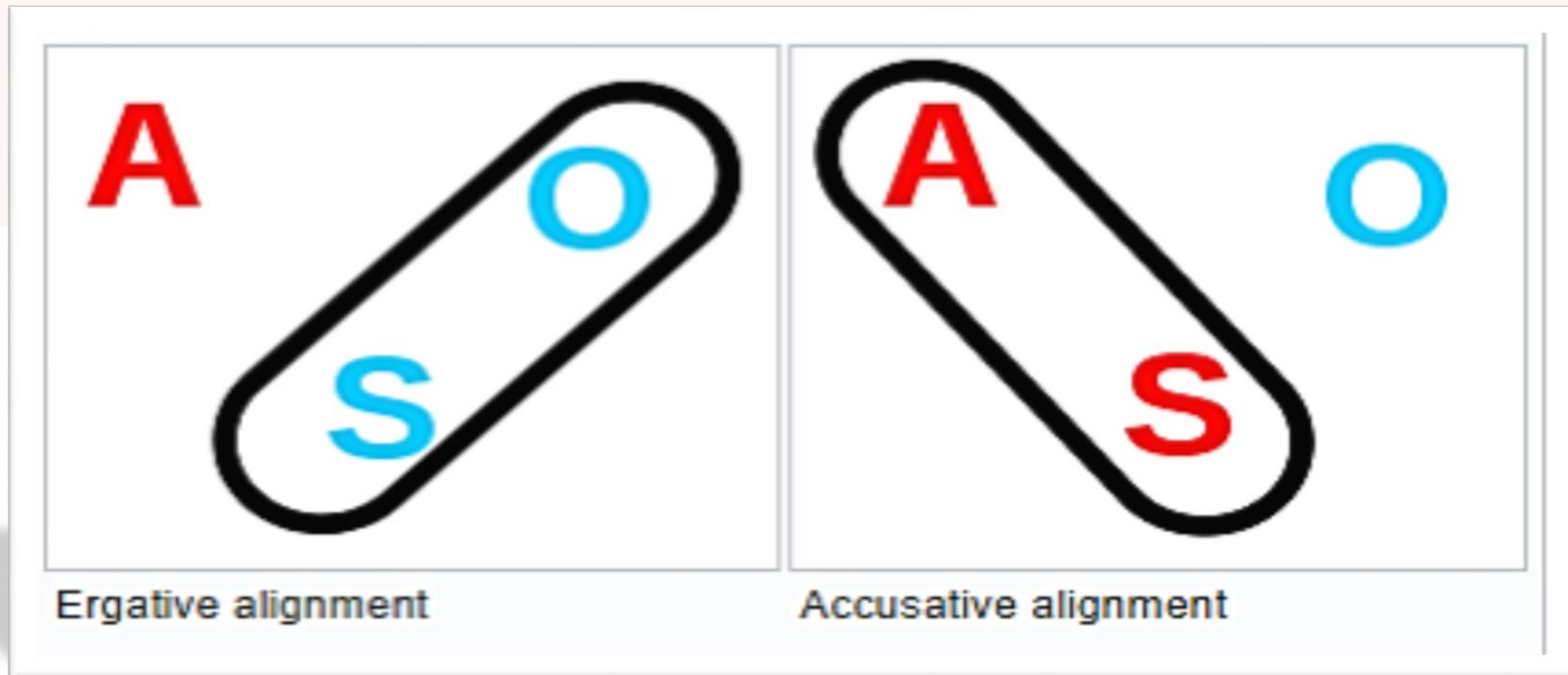
Ergative Languages

Ergative languages have a particular distinctive pattern related to the subjects (technically, arguments) of verbs.

- ✓ **Ergative languages** are Georgian, Basque, Mayan, Tibetan, a small number of Indo-European languages (Kurdish languages and Hindi) and ,in a certain sense, the Semitic modern Aramaic languages.
- ✓ In ergative languages, subject of an intransitive verb acts like the object of a transitive verb.
- ✓ In other words, the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb act similarly.
- ✓ Some linguists believe that Proto-Indo-European was an ergative language. But, this theory is controversial.

The Contrast with Nominative-accusative Languages

- ✓ In the nominative-accusative languages (for example, English) the argument of an intransitive verb acts like the agent of a transitive verb.
- ✓ Ergative languages keep a syntactic or morphological correspondence for the object of a transitive verb and the argument of an intransitive verb. However, the agent of a transitive verb behaves differently.



- **A** = agent of transitive verb
- **O** = object of transitive verb
- **S** = core argument of intransitive verb

Split Ergativity

- ✓ Some languages that are categorized as ergative present **split ergativity**, where ergative patterns are determined by the grammatical context.
- ✓ In other words, **split ergativity** is a property of the languages where sentences use ergative syntax, but other sentences present a nominative-accusative pattern.
- ✓ The context in which ergative constructions are showed is different based on the language in use.
- ✓ The Georgian language shows split ergativity.

Three Types of Split Ergativity

Makharoblidze's book "*The Georgian verb*" (2012) lists the following three types of split ergativity:

1. Ergativity in the **Australian languages** (The **Dyirbal** language) is showed morpho-syntactically. However, the first and second personal pronouns are in nominative and accusative cases.
2. The languages where ergativity is presented in subjects in perfect tenses. The **Georgian** language fits in this group.
3. Ergativity is presented in intransitive subjects (the **Dakota** language). The subject of the active verb is in ergative case. However, the subject of passive verbs is in the nominative case.

Split Ergativity in the Georgian Language

Thuleen's blogpost about "The Verbal Syntax and Ergativity of Georgian" notes that split ergativity in the Georgian language has the following form:

- ✓ In some tenses , notably the **subjunctive** and the **aurist tense**, the verbs are marked with the ergative and absolutive case markings.
- ✓ In other tenses, the constructions have the usual pattern of nominative-accusative case.
- ✓ Split ergativity is presented in the following Georgian sentences:

(1) Student-i mivida.
student-ABS went
'The student went.'

(2) Student-ma ceril-i dacera
student-ERG letter-ABS wrote
'The student wrote the letter.'

Thuleen suggests the following method to tell apart tenses that take the ergative case markings or the accusative case markings.

We should write the same sentences in different tenses and then analyze the results.

Txa-i c'am-s venax-s

goat-NOM eat-3sgS vine-DAT

'The goat eats the vine.' -- **Present**

Txa-m se-c'am-a venax-i

goat-ERG ASP-eat-3sgS vine-NOM

'The goat ate the vine.' -- **Aorist**

Txa-s se-u-c'am-i-a venax-i

goat-DAT ASP-VER-eat-FORM-3sgS vine-NOM

'The goat has apparently eaten the vine.' -- **Perfect**

Passive Construction and Ergativity

Thuleen observes that Georgian is an ergative language but it has grammatically-functional passive construction. This phenomenon is particularly interesting for linguists.

- ✓ This is not common in other languages. Usually, when a language is ergative it does not have a passive voice.
- ✓ From the 19 ergative languages only [Georgian](#), [Basque](#), [Hindi](#) and some of the [Mayan](#) languages have a passive voice together with ergativity.

Thuleen maintains that the passive voice in Georgian is not very complex. The following examples will be enough for a general picture of its characteristics.

Passive with Object:

jagli ukbens bavsvs

dog-NOM he-bites-it child-DAT

'The dog is biting the child.'

bavsvi dakbenilia jaglis mier

child-NOM bitten-it-is dog by

'The child is bitten by a dog.'

Passive with Location:

mascavlebelc gaugzavnes cemi tavi

teacher-DAT they-sent-him-him my self-NOM

'They sent me to the teacher.'

me gagzavnili var mascavleblastvis

I-NOM sent I-am teacher-for

'I am sent to the teacher.'

Final Remarks

- ✓ The ergativity of the Georgian language is apparent and has rational rules of application.
- ✓ There are more interesting topics in Georgian syntax, some of which are connected to the ergativity vs. nominative distinctions.
- ✓ Unfortunately, it is hard to access the works that have been written about this topic.
- ✓ It is rather significant that Georgian verbs are highly inflected while the nouns and other parts of speech are barely inflected as usual.

If you are interested to learn more about ergativity please watch the following video. The link is provided below:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFzt_GHNd1M

The video player shows a diagram illustrating the concept of ergativity. On the left, a stick figure with a red cross on its chest is labeled "Ergative (marked)" with a circled letter "A". On the right, two stick figures are shown: one with a blue and yellow body and another with a red and green body. A large, tilted oval labeled "S" and "P" connects the two figures. The text "Absolutive (unmarked)" is partially visible. The video title is "Ergativity: Her Likes She" and it has 104,754 views as of 16 Apr 2018. The video progress is at 2:04 / 10:41.


Sources

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Thank you
for your attention!