

When Ergative = Genitive: Nominals and Split Ergativity

While the majority of Mayan languages show ergative agreement patterns in both perfective and non-perfective clauses, Chol, and some of its close relatives, show aspect-based splits. In Chol, perfective clauses like those in (1) show an ergative-absolutive agreement pattern, while imperfective clauses, as in (2), show a nominative-accusative pattern of agreement. But the agreement pattern is not the only difference. In addition to differences in person-marking, the clauses in (1) and (2) also show different stem morphology. In this paper I argue that while the perfective stems are formally verbal, the imperfective stem forms in (2)—*imek'ety* and *iwäyel*—are formally nominal. This claim is surprising from the point of view of recent work in which nominalization has been argued to be the source of *ergativity*. This has been claimed for process nominals in some Indo-European languages (Alexiadou 2001), as well as for main clauses in Inuktitut (Inuit, Canada) (Johns 1992) and Mëbengokre (Jê, Brazil) (Salanova 2007). While in these languages we find ergativity in the nominal domain, in Chol we find the opposite: ergativity in verbal forms and accusativity in nominals.

Data: A number of distributional tests support the analysis of the imperfective stem forms in (2) as formally nominal. These stems may take determiners, appear with adjectives, be possessed, and serve as arguments of clauses. Take for example the sentences in (3). In (3a) the noun *waj* ‘tortilla’ is the argument of the verb *-om* ‘want’. In (3b) we have this same verb ‘want’ appearing with what seems (from an English point of view) to be an infinitival complement. Note, however, that the “infinitival” *wäyel* ‘sleep’ is the same form that we find in imperfective constructions like (2b). If we analyze this as an infinitive, we are left without an explanation for its presence in matrix (finite) clauses like (2b). I argue that analyzing *wäyel* as a nominal in all constructions provides the best analysis of the Chol facts.

Analysis: Specifically, I argue for the analysis illustrated in (4). I propose that the imperfective stems in (2) are formally possessed nominals. The subject (here *x'ixik* ‘woman’) is in fact the possessor. Crucially for the analysis of the nominality of imperfective stems is the fact that ergative and genitive agreement are identical in Mayan languages. Compare the imperfectives in (2) with the possessive phrases in (5). Just as subjects follow the predicate in Chol, possessors also follow the possessum. In imperfectives the possessive phrase—*iwäyel x'ixik* ‘the woman’s sleeping’, for example—is the nominal argument of a semantically vacuous one-place predicate: the aspectual marker *mi*, as illustrated in (5a). This predicate shows absolutive agreement with its sole argument. As in other Mayan languages, third person absolutive is null. The structure of imperfectives then contrasts with the structure of perfectives, in which the stem is the true predicate. The proposed structure of a perfective clause is shown in (5b).

If this is correct, then the aspect markers—*mi* (imperfective) and *tyi* (perfective)—are formally very different: *mi* is always a predicate while *tyi* never is. Support for this proposal comes from another type of imperfective construction. Both aspect markers have full forms which must be used to host clitics. (This is a phonological fact. The minimal word requirement is CVC so a morpheme must be at least CVC in order to host a clitic.) The full form of the imperfective is *muk'*; the full form of the perfective is *tsa'*. While both *muk'* and *tsa'* can appear with a range of evidential and modal second position clitics, only the imperfective aspect marker *mi* can appear with an *absolutive* agreement marker, as shown by the contrast in (6). In (6a) *muk'* (imperfective) appears as the main predicate. The stem *wäyel* appears subordinated by the preposition *tyi*. This type of construction is impossible with the perfective, supporting the claim for a formal difference between the imperfective and perfective aspect markers.

Under this analysis, split ergativity in Chol is not a split in the behavior of verbs. Rather, it is a split between verbal and nominal forms. *All* intransitive verbal forms—*mi* in (4a) and *wäyi* in (4b)—show absolutive agreement with their single arguments. Nominals, on the other, hand show an accusative pattern. This analysis has important consequences for analyses which propose ergativity to be the result of nominalization. In Chol at least, it will be argued that this cannot be correct.

Data

(1) Perfectives (stem = verbal)

- a. Tyi i-mek'-e-y-ety x'ixik'.
PERF 3ERG-hug-VT-EP-2ABS woman
'The woman hugged you.'
- b. Tyi wäy-i-y-ety.
PERF sleep-IV-EP-2ABS
'You slept.'

(2) Imperfectives (stem = nominal)

- a. Mi i-mek'-ety x'ixik.
IMPF 3ERG-hug-2ABS woman
'The woman hugs you.' (lit.: 'The woman's hugging you happens.')
- b. Mi i-wäy-el x'ixik.
IMPF 2ERG-sleep-NML woman
'The woman sleeps.' (lit.: 'The woman's sleeping happens.')

- (3) a. K-om waj.
1ERG-want tortilla.
'I want tortillas.'
- b. K-om wäy-el.
1ERG-want sleep-NML
'I want to sleep.'

(4) a. Mi is the predicate:

Mi-Ø_i [_{DP} i-wäy-el x'ixik]_i.
IMPF-3ABS 3ERG-sleep-NML woman
'The woman sleeps.' ('The woman's sleeping happens.')

b. wäyi 'sleep' is the predicate:

Tyi **wäy-i-Ø_i** [_{DP} x'ixik]_i.
PRFV sleep-IV-3ABS woman
'The woman slept.'

- (5) i-chich x'ixik
3ERG-sister woman
'the woman's sister'

- (6) a. Muk'-oñ tyi wäy-el.
IMPF-1ABS PREP sleep-NML
'I sleep.'
- b. *Tsa'-oñ tyi wäy-el.
PRFV-1ABS PREP sleep-NML
'I slept.'

References

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