DEFINING TRANSITIVITY AND INTRANSITIVITY:
SPLIT-INTRANSITIVE LANGUAGES AND THE UNACCUSATIVE HYPOTHESIS

ASIER ALCÁZAR
University of Southern California, Los Angeles

0. Proposals
0.1 Basque is not an ergative language; it is split-intransitive.
* Against the standard typological claim (contra Comrie 1981, Dixon 1994, Primus 1999)
0.2 Unergative verbs are not always intransitive (they can be transitive: e.g. Basque).
* Against the claim in the Unaccusative Hypothesis (contra Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986)
0.3 Split-intransitivity signals that unergatives are transitive.
* Novel claim: split-intransitivity has been otherwise considered an anomalous pattern.

1. INTRODUCTION: INTRANSITIVE VERBS WITH TRANSITIVE LOOKS (i.e. 1a). Basque is often presented as a
splendid example of ergativity (Comrie 1981, Dixon 1994, Primus 1999 among many). Traditionally, erga-
tive languages differ from accusative languages in the verbal argument they mark. Ergative languages mark
the subject of transitives (compare the girl in 2 with 1b) and accusative languages mark the object of transi-
tives (e.g. Latin/Romance; see the feminine singular pronoun in 4). However, the axioms in the typological
classification of languages would by definition declare Basque to be of type split-intransitive (e.g. like
Guarani, Gregorez and Suarez 1967 cfr. Primus 1999; or Slave, Rice 1991). For Basque has a class of intrans-
itive verbs (1a) whose argument is marked exactly as the subject of transitives (2).

Basque intransitives:
(1) a. Neskatil-ak dei-tu du
   girl-Erg.Sg call-Per have.3Sg_3Sg
   ‘The girl called’
   b. Neskatil-a ailega-tu da
      girl-Abs.Sg arrive-Per be.3Sg
      ‘The girl arrived’

Basque transitives:
(2)    Neskatil-ak izozki-a
       girl-Erg.Sg ice-cream-Abs.Sg
       finish-Per have.3Sg_3Sg
       ‘The girl finished her ice-cream’

Spanish intransitives:
(3) a. Ella llam-s
    she.Nom call-3Sg.Past
    ‘She called’
   b. Ella lleg-s
    she.Nom arrive-3Sg.Past
    ‘She arrived’

Spanish transitives:
(4)   Ella la acab-s
     she.Nom it.Acc.Fem.Sg finish-3Sg.Past
     (the.Fem.Sg ice-cream-Fem.Sg)
     ‘She finished it’ (where it = her ice-cream)

2. THE CONSEQUENCES OF (1A) FOR THE UNACCUSATIVE HYPOTHESIS AND TYPOLOGICAL STUDIES. The class
of intransitives exemplified by (1a) is identified with unergative verbs (see Laka 1993, 1995). Basque uner-
gatives for the most part overlap with the unergatives recognized for Indo-European (Burzio 1986, Sorace
2000). Thus, some examples of intransitive verbs like (1a) in Basque include, but are not limited to, verbs
like blow, cough, dance, dream, run, and work. Basque unergatives do not parallel transitives only in ergative
case marking on their argument. In addition, unergatives also require auxiliary have (unaccusatives be) and
they must show subject and object agreement in the auxiliary. In fact, over 50 commonly used unergatives
(Zubiri 2000) (may) surface as light verbs of the form [Noun + Do] (see 5). The noun argument cannot bear
absolutive case (Ortiz de Urbina 1989) as it would in a transitive (2) or intransitive (1b) sentence.

(5)    Neskatil-ak dei egi-n du
      Girl-Erg.Sg call do-Per have.3Sg_3Sg
      ‘The girl called’

2.1. THE UNACCUSATIVE HYPOTHESIS CLAIMS THAT UNERGATIVES ARE INTRANSITIVE. The unergative-
unaccusative distinction arises from Perlmutter’s Unaccusative Hypothesis (1978, henceforth UH). For
Perlmutter the traditional term intransitive encompasses a mixed group of non-transitive verbs (like 1a, 1b) that select a single expressed argument (e.g. the girl). Perlmutter proposes that the argument of intransitives is originally a canonical subject (e.g. dance, run) or an internal argument (e.g. arrive, break), and coins the terms unergative and unaccusative, respectively (not to be confused with ergativity and accusativity). In Italian Syntax, Burzio (1986) later formalizes the idea that the internal argument of unaccusative verbs becomes a subject marked nominative due to the inability of the verb to case-mark its argument. Italian provided much empirical support for the UH. Intransitives split in auxiliary choice, participial agreement, and ne-cliticization, among other morphosyntactic tests. Basque parallels and enhances these tests showing at the same time that unergatives are transitive.

2.2. Typological Studies Treat Split-intransitivity as an Anomalous Pattern. The typological classification assumes that languages mark an argument only if there is more than one argument (the transitive case). Thus, intransitives are unmarked in accusative and ergative languages. Split-intransitivity challenges this classification for a class of intransitives is marked like transitives. This anomaly can be ruled into the model by assuming that in split-intransitive languages unergatives are transitive verbs. If unergatives have a latent object, like examples (1a) and (5) from Basque suggest, then one of the two arguments needs to be marked.

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<th>Mark Subject</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intransive</td>
<td>Unergatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transitive</td>
<td>Unergatives</td>
<td>Split-intransitive</td>
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(6) TABLE 1: Ergativity, Accusativity and Split-intransitivity explained away.

3. Conclusion. Basque unergatives (1a) call for a new classification of Basque in the typological literature. The long standing claim that unergatives are intransitive does no longer hold. Split-intransitivity follows from the typological axioms assuming that unergatives are transitive in these languages.

Selected References


