GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS IN KURDIC LANGUAGES:
A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

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It is widely assumed that ergativity in Iranian developed from a passive construction (e.g. Bynon 1979, 1980, Estival & Myhill 1988, Campbell & Harris 1995:243–244). On this view, the emergence of ergativity must have involved, among other things, a transfer of subject properties from the grammatical subject of the erstwhile passive construction to the Agent-phrase, which ultimately became the subject of the ergative construction. These changes are generally considered to have occurred somewhere between the Old and Middle Iranian periods.

While modern Kurmanjî Kurdish appears to offer a straightforward case of ergative alignment (cf. Haig 1998), data from lesser-known Kurdish dialects and closely related West Iranian languages (Gurani, Awroman, Mukri), suggest that the development of ergativity may in fact have had little to do with the widely-held 'transfer of subject properties' account. In Bahdinanî Kurdish (North Iraq), for example, both 'passive' and 'active ergative' functions of the same set of verb forms coexist, yet there is no evidence of an intermediate stage involving agented passives. In Gurani and Mukri, a broad spectrum of constructions with non-canonical subjects combining with intransitive verbs is attested, with no clear demarcation distinguishing them from the ergative construction. Crucially, it can be demonstrated that such non-canonical subjects already possess subject properties.

An alternative view of the emergence of ergativity would be to interpret it as the extension of an existent construction, thereby rendering an account in terms of a transfer of subject properties within the ergative construction superfluous. It will be argued that this mechanism also offers a more plausible explanation for the evolution of ergativity in the Iranian languages generally, a suggestion that follows the spirit, if not the letter, of Benveniste (1952). Finally, it is consonant with more recent accounts of the changes in Germanic from oblique to nominative subjects of Experiencer verbs (Eythórsson & Barddal 2003), where Cole et al's (1980) approach in terms of a transfer of subject properties is called into question.

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