

SPLIT ERGATIVITY IN MIKASUKI

Sylvia S. Boynton

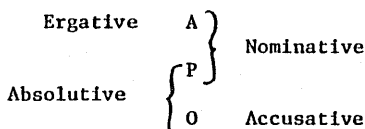
Dallas Independent School District

Mikasuki is a Muskogean language spoken by American Indians in south Florida.¹ It is spoken by all of the 300 members of the Miccosukee Tribe and by three quarters of the more than 2000 members of the Seminole Tribe. Mikasuki is not spoken outside of Florida. Other Muskogean languages include Alabama, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Koasati, and Seminole.

This paper is a consideration of the notion of ergativity in relation to Mikasuki. It is based on the framework elaborated by R.M.W. Dixon for describing linguistic features as ergative (1979:59-138).

A language may be described as having ergative characteristics if the intransitive subject (P) is treated in the same fashion as the transitive object (O) and in a different fashion from the transitive subject (A). One of these languages is usually described as being ergative/absolute with ergative referring to the distinctive treatment of A and absolute referring to the treatment of O and P. Ergative/absolute languages contrast with nominative/accusative languages in which the subjects of both transitive and intransitive verbs (A and P) are treated in the same manner and transitive objects (O) are treated differently. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1



It is possible to illustrate nominative/accusative languages using English as an example.

- (1) I hit the book. (transitive)
- (2) I slept. (intransitive)
- (3) Judy hit me. (transitive)

For the above example to be considered ergative the pronoun in (1) would differ from the pronouns of (2) and (3) which would be the same.

According to Dixon (1979), languages can be ergative at the morphological or at the syntactic level. This analysis is concerned with morphological ergativity. There are three principal ways in which the morphological manifestation of ergativity occurs: 1- case inflections on nouns, 2- separate particles (prepositions or post-positions), 3- within the verb or verbal auxiliary. In Mikasuki, ergative characteristics are found within the verb; that is, within the morphological system of bound pronominal affixes.

Again, according to Dixon (1979), no language is fully ergative. No language uses consistently one marking for P and O functions and a different marking for A everywhere; that is, for all NP's and their constituents and in the verbal cross-referencing. Thus, in Mikasuki, case inflections on NP's, whether the verb is transitive or intransitive, take nominative case. All other NP's take oblique case.

/cokf.ot tayk.on hi:c.om/ 'the rabbit sees the woman'
 /cokf-/ 'rabbit'
 /-ot/ nominative case inflection
 /tayk-/ 'woman'
 /-on/ oblique case inflection
 /hi:c-/ 'see'
 /-om/ auxiliary root

/cihn.ot ci.no:c.i:p.om/ 'you're sleepy (not I)'
 /cihn-/ 2nd person pronoun
 /-ot/ nominative case inflection
 /ci-/ 2nd person patient prefix
 /no:c-/ 'sleep'
 /-i:p/ completive aspect
 /-om/ auxiliary root

It is clear, then, that Mikasuki has nominative/accusative case inflections. However, the morphology on bound pronominal affixes on the verb is ergative. Is this the split ergativity of Mikasuki? Not exactly. Before it is possible to explain what is split in Mikasuki a description of the verb inflection is necessary.

Within the Mikasuki verb phrase any non-third person subject requires a person affix. The person affix classes are agent, patient, and dative. The choice of the person affix class is determined by the root class of the verb: active or stative. Active verbs include all transitive verbs and those intransitives that refer to action. Stative verbs refer to mental conditions and bodily states. Adjectives and numbers have predicate forms and are stative verbs.

Active verbs inflect for subject with agent suffixes (see Table 1 and Table 2). Most stative verbs inflect for subject with patient prefixes (see Table 3 and Table 4), although a few take dative prefixes for subject.

Table 1

		Agent Suffixes	
Singular		Plural	
1p.	-ii	-i:ka	(inclusive)
2p.	-icka	-o:	(exclusive)
3p.	∅	-acka	
		∅	

Table 2

Verb Inflected with Agent Suffixes			
Singular		Plural	
1p.	/ko:s.l.om. <u>ii</u> / 'I cut'	/ko:s.l.om. <u>i:ka</u> /	'we cut' (you incl.)
		/ko:s.l.om. <u>o:</u> /	'we cut' (you excl.)
2p.	/ko:s.l.om. <u>icka</u> / 'you cut'	/ko:s.l.om. <u>acka</u> /	'you all cut'
3p.	/ko:s.l.om/ 'cut'	/ko:s.l.om/	'cut'

Table 3

		Patient Prefixes	
Singular 1	----ca/	___consonant	or /i/
	----ac	elsewhere	
Plural 1	----po/	___consonant	or /i/
	----ipo	elsewhere	
2	----ci/	___consonant	or /i/
	----ic	elsewhere	
3	(i)		

Table 4

Verb Inflected with Patient Prefixes for Subject	
1p.s.	/ca.ba:n.om/ 'I want'
1p.pl.	/po.ba:n.om/ 'we want'
2p.	/ci.ba:n.om/ 'you want'
3p.	/i.ba:n.om/ 'want(s)'

to indicate object transitive verbs take patient (see Table 5) or dative prefixes. Some verbs take patient and some verbs take dative as object prefixes. Verbs with two objects have patient prefixes to mark direct objects and dative prefixes to mark indirect objects.

Table 5

Verb Inflected with Patient Prefixes for Object	
1p.s.	/ca.hi:c.om/ 'she sees <u>me</u> '
1p.pl.	/po.hi:c.om/ 'she sees <u>us</u> '
2p.	/ci.hi:c.om/ 'she sees <u>you</u> '
3p.	/hi:c.om/ 'she sees him'

It is clear from the above examples that Mikasuki is an ergative language. The subjects of transitive verbs (Table 2) are treated differently from the subjects of intransitive verbs (Table 4). Transitive verb objects receive the same treatment as intransitive subjects (Table 5). However, the following examples appear to contradict this statement of ergativity.

- /a^hiy.i:p.om.li/ 'I'm going'
 /a^hiy-/ 'go'
 /-i:p/ completive aspect
 /-om/ auxiliary root
 /-li/ 1p.s. agent suffix
- /yawk.om.i:ka.si/ 'we two were just around'
 /yawk-/ 'be around' (dual stem)
 /-om/ auxiliary root
 /-i:ka/ 1p.pl. inclusive agent suffix
 /-si/ 'just'

These two verbs are clearly intransitive, but they take A suffixes rather than the P prefixes as would be expected for an ergative language. This, then, is the split in Mikasuki ergativity. In

Mikasuki, transitive verbs take A suffixes and some intransitive verbs take P prefixes, but certain intransitive verbs take A suffixes.

According to Dixon (1979), the factors that may condition a split ergative system are: 1. the tense/aspect choice, 2. the semantic content of the NP's (human or higher animal vs. something inanimate), and 3. the semantic content of the verb. It is this final factor, the semantic content of the verb, that is of interest in the analysis of Mikasuki. According to Dixon (1979), in this type of split ergative marking system, the NP whose referent can "initiate and control" the verb activity occurs as A. The NP occurs as P when it exercises no control over the verb activity. Therefore, in Mikasuki, verbs such as: 'leave', 'die', 'walk', 'be around', 'sing', 'eat', 'come', and 'run' take A suffixes. The subject controls the action. Verbs such as: 'want', 'cough', 'itch', 'be sober', 'be afraid', 'be happy', 'fall', and 'get mad' take P prefixes. Presumably, verbs from the first group are perceived of as being relatively under the control of the subject and verbs of the second group are perceived of as being relatively not under the control of the subject.

However, the situation in Mikasuki is yet more complex. Most verbs are restricted to either A suffixes or P prefixes for subject. There are some which take either set.

/no:c.i:p.a.li/ 'I'm going to sleep' (subject agent suffix)
 /no:c-/ 'sleep'
 /-i:p/ completive aspect
 /-a/ stem vowel
 /-li/ ip.s. agent suffix

/ca:no:c.i:p.om/ 'I'm sleepy' (subject patient prefix)
 /ca-/ lp.s. patient prefix
 /no:c-/ 'sleep'
 /-i:p/ completive aspect
 /-om/ auxiliary root

/tabaks.i::c.om.li/ 'I'm straightening it' (subject agent suffix)
 /tabaks-/ 'straight'
 /-i/ stem vowel
 /-:c/ causative
 /-om/ auxiliary root
 /-li/ lp.s. agent suffix

/ca.tabaks.om/ 'I'm sober' (subject patient prefix)
 /ca-/ lp.s. patient prefix
 /tabaks-/ 'straight'
 /-om/ auxiliary root

According to Dixon (1979), this type of fluid subject marking is uncommon. However, it is found in other Muskogean languages. Byington (1870) must have been the first to describe this phenomenon in his work on Choctaw. Nicklas (1974) also discusses it for Choctaw. Booker (1980) gives some examples in Creek and West (1974) and Derrick-Mescua (1980) include examples in Mikasuki in their work.

In summary, Mikasuki must be included among the languages characterized as ergative. However, only one area of Mikasuki has ergative characteristics, the person affixes of the verb. Even this limited area of the morphology is not fully ergative, rather it is split. All transitive verbs mark subject with A suffixes and many intransitive verbs mark subject with P prefixes. The split in Mikasuki ergativity is because intransitive active verbs, those in which the subject can initiate and control the verb action, take A suffixes. Those in which the subject can exercise relatively little control take P prefixes. Further, in Mikasuki the split ergativity is of the type known as fluid subject marking. That is, some verbs can take either A suffixes or P prefixes depending on the degree of control enjoyed by the subject. This type of split ergativity is characteristic of Muskogean languages.

A word of caution is perhaps in order here. While it is clearly valuable to analyze Mikasuki grammar in relation to the notion of ergativity, it must be pointed out that this framework has a limited descriptive and analytical contribution to make. It is misleading to describe the Mikasuki verb person system primarily in terms of P, O, and A only. Dative prefixes which may mark subject (rarely) and are used to mark indirect object must be given equal attention in any complete description of the Mikasuki verb person system.

Notes

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