«BUT THE CHIMERA WAS MADE UP OF REAL BEASTS ...» PARTIALLY SALVAGING INDO-EUROPEAN ERGATIVITY

πρόσθε λέων ὄπιθεν δὲ δράκων μέσση δὲ χίμαιρα,
Il. 6.181

Robert Orr

Department of Modern Languages and Literatures,
University of Ottawa, Canada,
e-mail: roborr@aix1.uottawa.ca

Abstract : There is a tradition of reconstructing ergativity for Indo-European, with the nominative singular ending *-s, which would have been restricted to animates, as an original ergative ending. Recent work on case-marking splits hints that such a reconstruction is typologically impossible. In many modern Iranian languages ergativity is organised according to a tense/aspect split. They show limited case marking, sometimes restricted to nominative/oblique, with «oblique» including the ergative among its functions. This paper will propose that Indo-European ergativity may have been similar to these constructions, and it would therefore have been marginal.

1. INTRODUCTION - THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ERGATIVITY IN INDO-EUROPEAN

For almost a century there has been a tradition of reconstructing Indo-European (IE) as an ergative language, usually traced back to Uhlenbeck's influential, albeit short, article (1901).[1] Since then many definitions of ergativity have been recorded (see Dixon 1994: 1-22, 232-236); this paper will use that of Payne (1980: 149): «... that the case marking of transitive subjects be distinct from that of intransitive subjects and transitive objects.»

The theory of ergativity in Indo-European mainly involves the reconstruction of *-s (attested mainly in the nominative and genitive singular, but also sporadically in other functions of the singular, and in certain cases of the plural) as a marker of the ergative case. Although cases described as «ergative» are normally closely associated with the subject of the transitive verb (agent), in many instances they also have other functions, usually those of possession or indirect object, see Trask (1979: 385), Payne (1980), Klimov (1984), Orr (1991) and the literature cited therein.

The reconstruction of ergativity for IE usually includes an animate/inanimate gender distinction in nouns, where animate nouns would take the ergative in the role of the agent, and inanimate nouns would not appear in the role of the agent (see Tchekhoff 1978: 228). This animate/inanimate distinction would have predated the masculine/feminine/neuter gender distinction familiar from most modern IE languages.

2. ERGATIVITY AND TYPOLOGY

2.1. Silverstein's Hierarchy

As research into ergativity progressed, it was noted that hardly any languages may be described as purely ergative: nominative constructions nearly always occur in languages conventionally described as ergative, and the demarcation between nominative and ergative constructions can usually be clearly discerned. The choice between nominative and ergative is based either on the **different types of noun phrase** appearing as the agent or the **tense/aspect of the verb**.

For nominative/ergative splits according to **type of noun phrase**, Silverstein (1976) proposed a hierarchy (commonly known as «Silverstein's Hierarchy«, hereafter SH) which predicts that such splits will always occur at a given point on the following continuum:

1st/2nd Person > 3rd Person > proper nouns > humans > animates > inanimates,

with all forms to the **left** of the split (i.e., those higher in **animacy**) being construed in the role of agent with the nominative, and not the ergative. SH is attested in a wide variety of ergative languages, and it has become generally accepted as a linguistic universal.[2] Recently, basing themselves on SH, some authors, e.g., Rumsey (1987), Villar (1984), have denied the validity of reconstructing ergativity for IE. They recall that, as we have seen, according to the most

commonly accepted reconstructions, IE ergativity often implies an animate/inanimate distinction in nouns, where animate nouns would take the ergative in the role of agent and inanimate nouns would not appear as agents, thus almost diametrically conflicting with SH.

2.2. Ergativity and Typology - Trask's Framework

In addition to ergative/nominative splits according to animacy, languages with splits organised along tense/aspect lines are also attested. In such languages ergative constructions are restricted to the past, usually perfect, and the agent in the present is construed with the nominative. In such languages ergativity is a marginal morphological feature (often accompanied by minimal case marking, see below), and SH does not normally apply; in fact, many such constructions seem to show the mirror image of SH. Trask (1979) suggests that these different splits are in fact manifestations of two distinct types of ergative construction, which he labels Type A and Type B respectively. He suggests that Type A ergativity arises from a «passive made obligatory ((1979: 391).» In contrast, however, Type B ergativity, which will be of greater interest to us here, arises from «the incorporation into the inflectional [verbal - RAO] paradigm of a nominalised deverbal form with stative force ... (with) the agent occupy[ing] a peripheral position (1979: 397).» It is universally agreed that the verbal component of South Asian (SA; here partly following Klaiman (1987: 61-66)) ergative constructions arises from the Indo-European *-ta participle, see, e.g., Trask (1979: 396-400), Klaiman (1987: 63-65), and the literature cited therein.

cf.   Sanskrit *naro vedān paṭhati*
          man-NOM Vedas-ACC PL reads - «The man reads the Vedas»

          nareṇa vedāḥ paṭhitāḥ
          man-INSTR Vedas-NOM PL read-PART NOM PL - «The man has read the Vedas»

Sometimes such constructions may be glimpsed in embryonic form, and the agent may be clearly seen as supplementing a stative construction, e.g.,

Irish   *tá an fhuinneog briste*
          is the window   broken - «The window is broken.»

          tá an fhuinneog briste agam
          is the window   broken at-me - «I have broken the window.»

(see Orr 1989, 1991).

Trask (1979: 391-395) goes on to suggest that SH is a concomitant of **Type A** ergativity, and that basically it is irrelevant to **Type B** ergative constructions (1979: 399). He goes on to say that **Type A** and **Type B** constructions are not generally found in the same language. As we shall see below, however, there are counterexamples to this generalisation.
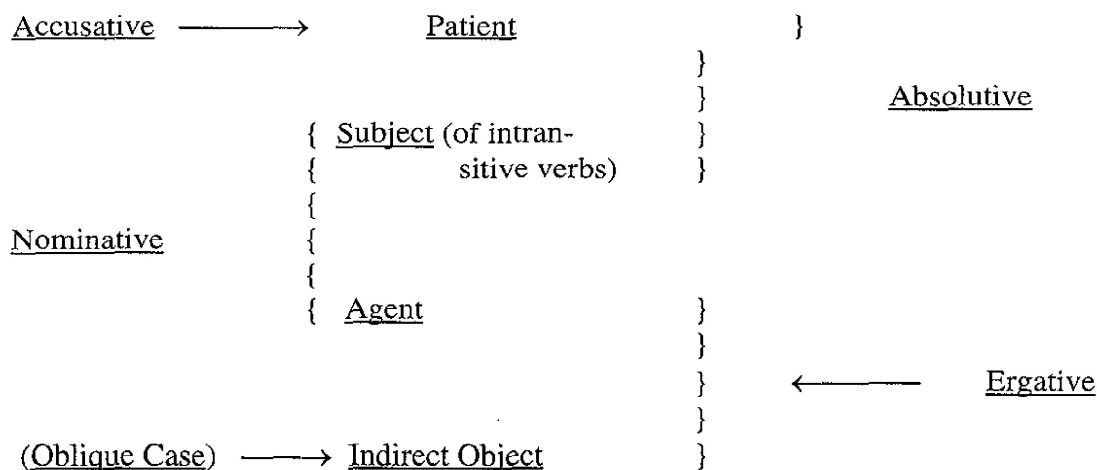
2.3. The Ergative as a Function of the Oblique

Klimov (1984) gives perhaps the most succinct presentation of the fact that the cases normally labelled **ergative** in grammars often include additional **oblique** meanings, and can even appear simultaneously in different roles in the same construction, cf. Adyghe:

hače-m čale-m sər rit
guest-AG to-youth horse gave - «A guest gave the horse to the youth.»

where the *-m* ending is the marker of both the agent (subject of the transitive verb) and the recipient (indirect object), and often named ergative. This additional function of the case normally labelled ergative may be integrated into the system thus:

Accusative ————→ Patient   }
                                                 }
                                                 }   Absolutive
                        { Subject (of intran-   }
                        {   sitive verbs) }
                        {
Nominative   {
                        {
                        { Agent   }
                                                 }
                                                 }   ←———— Ergative
                                                 }
(Oblique Case) ————→ Indirect Object   }

Klimov (1983: 127) suggests some sort of vagueness in the description of these other uses of the «ergative» case, which he subsumes under **kosvennyj** («oblique»): «... the standard system of ergativity (corresponding to the scheme S - O ~ A - O_1, where O_1 is the symbol of the «indirect» object), ...» [emphasis mine - RAO]. His 1984 article also seems to be implying some sort of vagueness about the notion of «indirect object»: «... a syncretic ergative case ... of this kind ... clearly exists ... single ... elements organically combine with the relations of the subject of a transitive verb with those of the non-direct object, i.e., those relations which in the nominative system are distributed between the **instrumental** and **dative** case.» He goes on to say, however, that « ... there are the numerous languages where the ergative also marks the **instrumental** relation ... and where, in a number of instances, the ergative similarly «combines» the functions of **some** further oblique cases, primarily the **dative** and **locative**, as well ... this combination of **subject** and **non-direct** object functions in an ergative marker ... » [emphasis mine - RAO]. Several scholars have also noted a possible correlation between ergativity and **possession**, e.g., Benveniste (1952). Moreover, to extend the comparison yet further, Seiler (1983: 40-1) and Isačenko (1974: 62-5) have drawn attention to the fact that «possession», like «indirect object», and «implication», is a very vague notion, see also Orr (1991: 170-173).

3. THE RISE AND FALL OF TYPE B ERGATIVITY - THE CASE OF IRANIAN

For Type B ergativity we are fortunate in being able to glimpse the whole proposed evolution of the rise and fall of the construction; this development may be seen as a very good example of a cyclical linguistic change. The history of the Iranian languages provides an illustration; the canonical, attested example is Old Persian *manā kartam* - «I did» (cf. Latin *mihi factum*), where *manā* (dative/genitive) is used as a de facto 1st singular ergative, apparently in direct conflict with SH.

The *manā kartam* construction developed into the Middle Persian ergative *man kart* - «I did», and in Modern Farsi the use of *man* has spread to intransitives, e.g., *man raft ham* - «I have gone.» Such ergative constructions are also frequently attested in the subsequent development of many modern SA languages, which developed from ones very similar to that attested in Old Persian, see Klaiman (1987), Payne (1980), Farrell (1995), and the literature cited therein, and similar typological developments may be glimpsed in embryonic form in Irish (*tá sé déanta agam* - «I have done it») and dialects of Russian (*u menja svoja izba postavlena* - «I have built my own house»), see above, Orr (1989, 1991). As Klimov's framework would predict, the form *manā* can also be used as a dative, e.g.,

hauv dahyāum pārsam manā frābara
he   kingdom Persian to-me entrusted - «He entrusted me with the Persian kingdom.»

See Saxokija (1985: 31) for additional examples.[3]

Some Type B ergative languages have very limited case marking; Skalmowski (1968) gives the example of Pashto, where a nominative (absolutive) is opposed to an oblique, which includes the ergative among its functions, similar to the ergative system proposed by Klimov and cited above. Another feature of Type B ergativity is its marginality with respect to the rest of the syntax and morphology of the languages where it is attested: the existence of Type B ergative constructions in any given language does not imply anything else about the structure of that language. In this context I would like to respond to O Sé (1992: 46), who, paradoxically, seems to provide support for this view, while appearing to attack it. In a criticism of Orr (1989), he states: «... ergativity is not otherwise a feature of Irish grammar ...» This is precisely what we might expect for a construction such as Type B ergativity, cf. Trask (1979: 389) «... The ergativity of Type B languages is **marginal** [emphasis mine - RAO]...». Cf. also Stefański (1990: 233), who describes similar constructions, such as those found in Old Persian, Armenian, and Lithuanian as «... [phenomena] ... occupying marginal subsystems of these languages.»

Frequently case marking in languages with Type B ergative constructions is minimal. In many modern SA languages the only case distinction is *absolutive/oblique*, where the ergative is one of the functions of the oblique, e.g., Pashto absolutive singular *saráy/* oblique singular *sarí* - «man», also, e.g., *mal/mla* - «companion»; *manál/mané* - «apple». In some instances the oblique singular is formally identical with the plural, e.g., Pashto *sarí* (oblique singular/absolutive plural), cf. similar constructions in German (*Bauer* (nominative singular)/*Bauern* (oblique singular + rest of paradigm) - «peasant» and Romanian (*prietena* (nominative singular)/*prietene* (oblique singular + rest of paradigm) - «female friend».

Case marking in SA languages shows a great deal of variety, see Payne (1980); Klaiman (1987). To cite a few examples, Gujarati has one agent marker for nouns (-*e*), and special forms for pronouns:

> *Rameše sudhane dhəmkawyi*;
> Ramesh-AG Sudha-OBJ scolded - «Ramesh scolded Sudha».

> *mãi təmne marya che*
> 1st-sg-AG 2nd-pl-OBJ beat - «I have beaten you (pl.)».

There are also examples of ergative constructions with case marking only in the pronouns, e.g., Roshani 1st singular absolutive *az*/oblique *mu*; *virōd* absolutive/oblique - «brother».

In this context it should be noted that pronominal declension in SA is problematic. Morphologically, however, it is usually organised along nominative(absolutive)/oblique lines, parallel to the pattern widespread in IE, where the nominative is opposed to an oblique stem, see below.

Some SA languages even include the direct object as one of the functions of the oblique, e.g.,

> Roshani   *mu tā wunt*
>   1st-sg-OBL 2nd-sg-OBL saw - «I saw you».

> *tā mu wunt*
> 2nd-sg-OBL 1st-sg-OBL saw - «You saw me».

See Payne (1980: 149, 154-5), passim, for further examples

Very often however, special object markers have evolved. In addition to the Gujarati example above, one might also cite, e.g.,

> Bartangi   *tā pid as tā qīw-d*
>   your father **OBJ** 2nd-sg calls - «Your father is calling you».

These object markers are usually directional affixes in origin; similar to *z-* in Armenian, *-r_* in Farsi, and the use of the preposition *a* with animate direct objects in Spanish, cf.

> Farsi   *Hasan ketabrā did*
>   Hasan book-OBJ saw - «Hasan saw the book».

> Armenian   *zgorc gorceal ē nora*
>   OBJ-work done is of-him - «He has done the work».

> Spanish   *busco **a** mi amigo*
>   I-search **to** my friend - "I am looking for my friend",

4. BALOCHI - A TYPOLOGICAL PARALLEL FOR INDO-EUROPEAN

Farrell (1995) cites evidence from Balochi to show that, *pace* Trask, SH may actually coexist with a tense-aspect split in the same language. This situation may have implications for the reconstruction of ergativity for IE. Farrell goes on to suggest (1995: 230) that SH in Balochi may have developed **after** the emergence of Type B ergativity. Such a development may have implications for IE; it is conceivable that IE **first** developed a Type B ergative construction, and subsequently realigned its ergative case marking in accordance with SH:

Balochi *jinik-ø nan-ø wa*
girl-ABS bread-ABS eats - «The girl eats bread.»

BUT

jinik-a bɘcik ja
girl-ERG/OBL boy-ABS hit - «The girl hit the boy.»

mɘn tera gitt-ø
1st-sg-NOM 2nd-sg-ACC caught - «I caught you»

5. ERGATIVITY IN INDO-EUROPEAN

If we reconstruct IE ergativity as a marginal morphological phenomenon, similar to those briefly cited from SA, we can see the following parallels:

5.1. The Development of an Absolutive/Oblique Distinction.

The earliest reconstructible IE case distinction was probably *-ø*(absolutive)/*-s*(oblique, including the meanings of possession and ergative; if we were forced to select a more specific name for the case in question than «oblique», «dative» might be the best). It might also be noted that the patterns attested in SA suggest that ergativity is declining, and will be lost in the future, parallel to what is being reconstructed for IE, where the range of the nominative singular *-s* has declined further in the attested period.[4]

5.2. Plural Marking.

In addition to its other functions, the widespread extension of *-s* as a plural marker in IE also finds a clear parallel in SA, cf. the Pashto examples cited above. This use of *-s* is clearly a further development of its function as a general oblique form, see, e.g., Schmalstieg (1980: 78-95).

5.3. The Development of a Special Object Marker

Yet a further IE parallel to the SA situation might be seen in the development of another

oblique ending, *-*m*, in the function of the **direct object**. If the development in IE followed parallel lines to that attested in SA, the appearance of *-*m* in this function would clearly be later than that of *-*s* as an oblique ending. Kuryłowicz (1964: 210-7) suggests that in IE *-*m* as an **accusative** ending is older than *-*s* as a **nominative** ending in the nominal declensions, but he does not mention the age of *-*s* as an **oblique/genitive/ergative** ending in relation to *-*m*.

5.4. Pronominal Declension

It should also be noted that pronominal declension in SA is idiosyncratic. Syntactically it is organised along nominative lines, and morphologically it is parallel to the pattern in IE, where a nominative stem is opposed to an oblique stem, e.g., Russian nominative singular *ja*/oblique stem *m(e)n-*, etc. This phenomenon was proposed by Vaillant (1936) as a piece of evidence that IE may have been ergative, later denied by some scholars. Suppletion in pronominal declension, however, is commonplace; this might be seen as a neutral feature, evidence neither for nor against the reconstruction of ergativity in IE.

5.5 Conclusion.

The development of ergativity in SA languages shows that the number of possible typological varieties and developments of ergativity is very high, and that it would be rash to deny the validity of reconstructing ergativity based on a single criterion, even one as well-supported as SH. It is in this context - the need to disentangle the various strands appearing to lead to ergativity, and to exclude any red herrings - that the title and epigraph to this paper was selected: *pace* the title of Rumsey 1987.

Carrying the parallel further, it might be noted that the ***absolutive/oblique*** distinction attested in the modern SA languages is the result of a large scale reduction of the original Indo-Iranian case system, see Skalmowski (1968: 111). Therefore it is possible that the *-ø/*-*s* distinction reconstructed here for IE might itself be the end-point of a process involving earlier large-scale losses of case morphology.

6. SUMMARY - CHRONOLOGY

The chronology of the development of ergativity in IE may therefore be divided into the following four stages:

Stage I: Decline of the Pre-IE Case System

Actual evidence for the details of this stage is exiguous, but it does seem quite possible that an earlier case system in Proto-Indo-European was gradually reduced to a two-way nominative/oblique distinction.

Stage II: Rise of Tense/Aspect-Based Ergativity
-s/-ø (IE *uiro-s (ERGATIVE/OBLIQUE)/*uiro-ø (ABSOLUTIVE))*

During this stage the ergative would have emerged as one of the functions of the case labelled «oblique».[5] This stage might also have seen the start of the rise of number distinctions in Indo-European, with *-*s* also being used to indicate the plural, in addition to its other functions.

Stages I and II might be seen as Late Proto-Indo-European in the process of developing into dialectally differentiated Indo-European.

Stage III: Emergence of SH, Suppletion in Pronouns, Marginalisation of Ergativity

The development of *-*m* as a direct object marker might be assigned to this stage, typologically parallel to the development of similar markers in modern SA languages as outlined above, as well as in languages such as Spanish, Armenian, and Farsi.

Stage IV: Further Decline and Eventual Loss of Ergativity

Indo-European, by now ever-increasingly split into dialects, retains traces of the ergative in the nominative singular *-*s*, which is maintained in several groups as the attested languages develop. Subsequently, however, over wide areas of modern Indo-European *-*s* is completely lost, thus erasing the last trace of the former ergative construction.

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1. Uhlenbeck himself did not actually use that terminology.

2. Although it is not absolutely exceptionless; the various casemarking splits in Coast Tsimshian (Mulder 1994: 149-150) appear to constitute an exception to SH.

3. The embryonic ergative constructions in Russian and Irish also show such ranges of function, e.g.,

Irish   *tá sé déanta agam*
      is it done at-me - «I have done it»
Russian *u menja postroen dom*
      at me   built   house - «I have built a house.»
Irish   *fuair mé an leabhar aige*
      got I the book at-him - «I got the book from him».
Russian *ja poprosil u nego karandaš*
      I asked   at him pencil - «I asked him for a pencil.»

4. The nominative singular *-s* has now been lost over most of the range where it is attested from previous records (e.g., Italic, Indic, Germanic, apart from isolated forms, e.g., Spanish *Dios*, French *fils*, English *Charles*, etc.). It is still preserved in Lithuanian, Latvian, and Modern Greek, and in Insular Scandinavian in transmogrified form (*-s* > *-r*).

5. This earlier case system might be seen as a feature in the development from Nostratic to PIE; at this stage I will confine myself to hypothesising the prior existence of such a case system, rather than attempting to reconstruct the actual details.