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Methodological Approaches for
Teaching the Ergative Construction in Pashto

Subject:

- The ergative sentence structure in Pashto (مفعولي معروفه جمله).

Objectives:

- To identify reliable features and establish criteria for classifying Pashto ergative clauses for teaching purposes;
- To describe the various types of ergative sentences according to these criteria;
- To offer learners some approaches to using the ergative construction.

Target audience: This article is intended for Pashto instructors and English-speaking learners of Pashto.

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(<http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~siamakr/Kurdish/KURDICA/2001/3/trpashto.htm>)

Examples:

- Collected by the author while teaching Pashto to English-speaking learners
- From K.A. Lebedev, A.L. Grunberg, S. Rishteen and M.A. Ziyar.

First, let me briefly discuss common points of difficulty regarding ergativity faced by English speakers in the process of teaching and learning Pashto.

Unlike English, Pashto is an ergative language. Because of the absence of any English language structures similar to ergativity, ergativity presents a significant obstacle for English speakers as they gain skill in speaking Pashto. Also, to English speakers, an ergative construction may appear to be an exotic feature of Pashto. However, according to R.L. Trask, hundreds of ergative languages have been described by modern linguistics.¹ According to other sources, one in four languages spoken in the world show ergative features.

For English speakers, there is a problem of switching quickly from the nominative-accusative sentence pattern to the ergative-absolutive. Educated native Pashto speakers observe that those who learn Pashto as a second language accidentally make common mistakes on two points: first, gender agreement; second, ergativity. Some people for fun will ask a question to detect a learner's knowledge of ergative structure, such as, "Say in Pashto: A dog bit me." The inexperienced learner might respond, 'I bit a dog,' provoking laughter from native listeners.

Ergative languages can be found throughout the world, particularly in the Americas, Australia, and New Guinea. In Asia, a number of languages exhibit ergativity, such as Hindi, Urdu, Baluchi, Kurdish, a number of Pamiri languages (Yaghnobi, Roshoni, Yazgholami, Wakhi), many Caucasian languages (Georgian, Mengelian, Laz, Svan, Nakh, Abkhaz, Adyghe, Dagestanian), and Tibetan, so clearly, ergativity is a prominent feature of a number of Asian languages besides Pashto. Also it is important

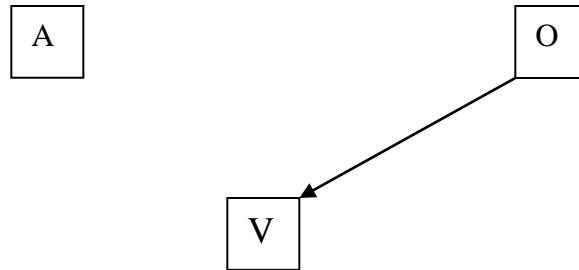
¹ R.L.Trask. *Historical Linguistics*. Oxford University Press, 1996, p.151.

to point out that some these are pure ergative languages, while others are split ergative. Pashto is also a split ergative language.

Although the ergative construction in Pashto sentences is discussed in the references mentioned above, these works generally describe the structure of the ergative construction without focusing on pedagogical issues. Therefore, it is helpful to provide a reliable strategy for teaching ergativity in Pashto. A number of methodological approaches may be offered, but in this article I would like to focus on one of them: The proper sequence for introducing the various types of sentences with ergative construction.

How does an ergative construction look in Pashto?

Ergativity is a common pattern of marking by case the roles of agent and patient (the subject and direct object in the terms of traditional English grammar) in transitive sentences. Most European languages have nominative-accusative case systems, in which the *subject* of an intransitive sentence is marked identically to the *agent* of a transitive sentence (the *nominative* case), while the patient of a transitive sentence is marked by a distinct *accusative* case. In contrast, ergative languages are characterized by the absolutive-ergative pattern, in which the *subject* of an intransitive sentence is marked identically to the *patient* of a transitive sentence (the *absolutive* case) and the agent of a transitive sentence is marked with a distinct *ergative* case. (Tripartite systems, in which all three are marked differently, are much rarer.) The standard pattern of an ergative clause may be displayed as follows:



In which:

- A – Agent (logical subject) in the oblique case (OC)
- O – Object; i.e., direct object (DO) in an absolute or direct case (AbsC)
- V – Verb
- Arrow – Indicates verb agreement.

It is important to point out that in the nominative-accusative clause the subject ‘initiates or controls the activity’ (R.M.W. Dixon, *Ergativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.11) and if there is verbal agreement, the verb takes the form demanded by the subject. But in the ergative construction for languages with verbal agreement, the *logical direct object* (the patient of the clause) dictates the form of the verb. That is, changes in the agent (for gender, number, and person) will not influence the form of the verb, but a similar change in the direct object does indeed require a change in the verb.

Examples with a masculine agent:

زلمي ډوډۍ وخورله.

Zalmi (A in OC) *doḍəy* (DO, 3rd person singular feminine noun in AbsC) *wu* (an aspect marker) *xwaṛəla* (V, 3rd person singular feminine form)
Zalmay ate (food).

Substituting *Zalmi* (personal male name) with any other noun or pronoun would not require changes in the verb:

Example with a feminine agent:

سيورمي دودي وخورله.

Spož□nəy (A in OC) *ḏoḏəy* (DO, 3rd person singular feminine noun in AbsC) *wu* (an aspect marker) *xwarəla* (V, 3rd person singular feminine form)

Spož□nəy ate (food).

Example with a personal pronoun agent:

ما دودي وخورله.

mā (A in OC) *ḏoḏəy* (DO, 3rd person singular feminine noun in AbsC) *wu* (an aspect marker) *xwarəla* (V, 3rd person singular feminine form)

I ate (food).

On the other hand, changing the gender or number of the patient (logical direct object) requires changes in the verb:

زلمي كباب وخور.

Zalmi (A in OC) *kabāb* (DO, 3rd person singular masculine noun in AbsC) *wu* (an aspect marker) *xor* (V, 3rd person singular masculine form)

Zalmay ate kebab.

ما مني وخورلي.

mā (A in OC) *maṇe* (DO, 3rd person plural feminine noun in AbsC) *wu* (an aspect marker) *xwarəle* (V, 3rd person singular feminine form)

I ate apples.

Thus, in the ergative construction, the direct object has greater effect on the verb than the agent, which has none. This is a major point to take into account when choosing a methodological approach for teaching the ergative construction.

The standard pattern of an ergative construction takes various forms depending on the structure of the sentence and type of verb. For example, H. Tegey distinguishes four forms and A. L. Grunberg six. In making these distinctions, they used two prominent features of the ergative construction as their criteria:

1. The number of core participants;
2. Types of core participants.

According to the first criterion, ergative sentences are divided into two groups based on the number of participants:

1. A one-participant clause consisting of A and V:

ما وويل.

mā (A, 1st person sing. pronoun in Oc) *wu* (a perfective aspect marker) *wayəl* (a common form of the verb for non-finite DO)

I said.

2. A two-participant clause consisting of A, DO and V:

ما منه وخورله.

mā (A, 1 sing pronoun in Oc), *maṇa* (O, sing. feminine noun in the Abs.c), *wu* (a perfective aspect marker) *xwaṛəla* (finite form of 3rd person singular feminine O)

I ate an apple.

Two-participant ergative constructions are further classified based on whether the agent and patient are nouns, personal pronouns, or weak pronouns, such as:

- A (noun), DO (noun)
- A (weak pronoun), DO (personal pronoun)
- A (personal pronoun), DO (noun)
- and so forth.

This classification can also be used as an initial basis for methodological exploration. At the same time, it is reasonable to focus on features of ergativity that may have considerable impact on improving the language skills of students. In this case, comprehension and accuracy in speaking should be targeted as the main goals of research. It is also important to focus on the direct object, which governs the verb in an ergative clause.

Three of these features can be pointed out:

1. Presence or absence of a DO in a clause.
2. The word order in a clause.
3. Correspondence between verb equivalents in both classroom and target languages.

Now, concerning the first feature, the ergative construction in Pashto requires an agent--it only occurs with transitive verbs. Even in complex sentences with parallel verbs the agent will be reiterated for each verb:

هغه یاران چې دده سره به یې ډوډی خوړله او عیشونه یې کول، هغه ټوله ځنې بېزاره شول.

Those friends, with whom he shared food, for whom he held luxurious parties, all of them became disgusted with him.

Further, the DO may be absent. This is the reason to distinguish between one-participant and two-participant clauses in Pashto, as previously observed.

For teaching purposes, it is important to point out that one-participant ergative constructions have a constant structure: There is always an A in the OC (or weak pronoun) and a verb in the 3rd person masculine plural form. This type of ergative sentences occur in two situations:

1. with quasi-transitive verbs:

زلمي وځندل

Zalmi (A in Oc) *wu* (an aspect marker) *xandəl* (V form for non-finite DO).

Zalmai laughed.

2. With transitive verbs with no direct object:

ما وويل

mā (A, 1st person singular pronoun in OC), *wu* (an aspect marker), *wayəl* (a common form of the verb for non-finite DO).

These two types of the ergative clause are grammatically identical, but they are not completely equal because the first type has no alternative pattern, whereas the second type may be converted to a sentence with an objective clause or interpreted as a sentence with the DO omitted:

ما ورته وويل چې کورته ولاړ شي.

I told him to go home.

خلکو ومنل چې ورسره مرسته وکړی.

People agreed (accepted) to help him.

ښوونکي مونږ ته يوه کلمه وويله او ويې غوښتل چې مترادف يې پيدا کړو.

The teacher quoted (said) a word and asked us to find a synonym for it.

Clearly, the second type of ergative sentence is more complex and needs more explanation and practice, but will not be treated in this presentation.

In two-participant ergative clauses, it is important to distinguish the type of DO, i.e., whether a noun or a personal pronoun functions as DO. There are two types of such clauses:

1. Ergative clauses with a *nominal* DO. This type of ergative construction appears simpler because, with this type of DO, the verb is limited to the 3rd person. In this type of ergative construction, the verb may take any one of four forms: singular masculine, singular feminine, plural masculine, or plural feminine.

زلمي پوڊي وخورله.

Zalmai ate food.

زلمي مني وخورلي.

Zalmai ate apples.

زلمي ناک وخور.

Zalmai ate a pear.

زلمي زردالان وخورل.

Zalmai ate apricots.

2. Ergative clause with a *pronominal* DO. This type allows for verbs in first or second person, yielding a list of eight options (ten in the present and past perfect):

زه زلمي ووھلم.

Zalmai beat me.

مونږ زلمي وو هلو.

Zalmai beat us.

ته زلمي وهلي يې.

Zalmai has beaten you (masculine).

ته زلمي وهلي يې.

Zalmai has beaten you (feminine).

etc.

Here we find an answer to the puzzle of how to say ‘A dog bit me,’ which should be translated into Pashto as: *زه سپي وخورلم.*

Word order in the ergative clause is also important to comprehension. There are two points that bear on this consideration:

1. In some types of ergative sentences, an A and a DO may be distinguished by word order only. For example:

احمد محمود وليد.

Ahmad (male name, the case is not indicated) *Mahmud* (male name; again, case not indicated) *wu* (aspect marker) *lid* (verb in 3rd person masculine).

سپورمی ملالی وليده.

Spož[]nəy (female name, case not indicated) *Malaləy* (female name, case not indicated) *wu* (aspect marker) *lid* (verb in 3rd person feminine).

Such sentences have no morphological marker to distinguish A and DO, which are distinguished syntactically instead: In such sentences, the first noun is considered the agent. So, these sentences would be understood as ‘*Ahmad saw Mahmud*’ and

‘*Spožmøy saw Malāløy*’. To avoid confusion in these sentences, some dialects repeat the agent:

احمد محمود يې وليد.

Ahmad (male name, case not indicated) *Mahmud* (male name, case not indicated) *ye* (weak pronoun, used in this sentence as a parallel structure to reiterate “Ahmad”) *wu* (aspect marker) *lid* (verb in 3rd person masculine).

سيوزمى ملالى يې وليده.

Spožmøy (female name, case not indicated) *Malaløy* (female name, case not indicated) *ye* (weak pronoun, parallel structure to reiterate *Spožmøy*) *wu* (aspect marker) *lid* (verb in 3rd person feminine).

2. Weak pronouns are widely used as agents in Pashto ergative constructions. The use of weak pronouns (which may not be located at the beginning of the clause) changes the regular word order. For example:

ما وويل.

mā (1st person singular pronoun in the OC) *wu* (aspect marker) *wayəl* (V form for non-finite DO)

‘*I said*’

If a weak pronoun is substituted for personal pronoun in the oblique case, word order changes as follows:

ومي ويل.

wu (aspect marker) *me* (1st person singular weak pronoun, used as agent) *wayəl* (V form for non-finite DO)

‘*I said*’

The sentence will take another shape if the aspect marker ‘*wu*’ is omitted:

ويل مي.

wayəl (V form for non-finite DO), *me* (2 person singular weak pronoun).
‘I was saying’.

The third feature of the ergative construction relates to compound verbs in Pashto that are translated into English with an intransitive verb or a transitive verb with no DO. Basically, these verbs have a ‘noun+auxiliary’ structure and, when they occur in an ergative clause, the auxiliary verb agrees with its noun component.

دلته مي خوب كړ.

I slept here.

منډي يې و هلي چې ناوخته نه شي.

He (she) was running to avoid being late.

فكر يې كاوه چې نن پنجشنبه ده.

He thought that today was Thursday.

راديو ته مي غورځيوه.

I listened to the radio.

په فابريكه كښي مو كار كاوه.

We worked at a plant.

د فيلم په هكله دي خبري كولي؟

Did you talk about a movie?

Conclusion:

A. According to the matters discussed above, there are roughly five types of ergative clauses having structural peculiarities:

1. Ergative clauses with quasi-transitive verbs.
2. Ergative clauses with transitive verbs not having an expressed direct object.
3. Ergative clauses with a direct object that is a noun.
4. Ergative clauses with a direct object that is a personal pronoun.
5. Ergative clauses with compound verbs 'noun+auxiliary'.

Focusing on these patterns helps to set a reliable strategy for teaching an ergative construction, facilitates its perception by students and improves their speaking skills in the use of the past tense.

B. Having discussed the specific features of the structure of ergativity, all types of the ergative clauses may be ranked by complexity. The types listed under number 1 and 2 are simplest, and the ergative clause with a personal pronoun used as a direct object is the most complex from the point of view of the variety of verb forms. It would be reasonable to take this matter into account when teaching and practicing the usage of verbs in the past tense.

Additionally, in order to improve comprehension and accuracy of the language skills of students, it is important to pay attention to word order in ergative clauses with various types of participants. Also, it should be remembered that the use of compound verbs requires special attention according to the issues discussed above.

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