

CONCERNING THE ERGATIVE

The founders of linguistics frequently spoke of languages as living organisms, practically autonomous, invisible and sonorous parasites of man, imposing their variations on him according to their whims or mysterious laws. *Mutatis mutandis*, this long out-moded point of view is finding new favor today. Our beautiful languages are truly organic constructions which render a mutually comprehensible service and assure regularized relations. We can do no more than use them well. However, as opposed to animals and societies, these organisms are immortal. They can disappear, of course, through suppression or denationalization of their human support, but not through old age or disease. The corruption of a previous state is already the maturation of a successive state just as young and healthy as the other. With uninterrupted adjustments and retouchings, each generation expresses all its knowledge and all its hopes with as many nuances as its own sensitivity requires. Thus the history of a language is a never-ending embryology which passes through metamorphoses without disjunction. Italian and French do not “derive” from Latin, they are Latin in an evolved and evolving state.

And if we were to wish to interrupt this flow at a point where the language had found a form in which the harmony of its sounds or the balance of its phrasing seemed to us particularly beautiful? That would be to underestimate the resources of the

Translated by Scott Walker.

future which, sooner or later, will achieve something just as good or better.

Sometimes I imagine a scholar in Neustria who might have found a melancholy amusement in putting a classical text into the jargon of his age: "*De usque-s ad quando in fine, Catalina, abusare habes tu de nostra patientia?*" It is not pleasant. From that, nevertheless, some few centuries later, should have come a phrase as noble and as academic as the original.

Such unconscious considerations of continuous changes which maintain intact and clear the expression of functions and simple relationships are the matter of historic linguistics. Observed comparatively in different languages of the world, the respective inventions of the verbal instinct are vertiginous; and in fact the first eighteen pages of Robert Triomphe are dizzying. He is correct in spinning his reader through this material, since the object of his reflection, the ergative construction, is but one of the many responses made to one of the two basic needs of a language: how to show not that A is B, but that A does something which concerns B in some manner, with or without an alteration of its condition or its being. (Peter sees, strikes, summons Paul, gives an apple to Paul.)

Accustomed as we are to ideas or at least technical terms such as subject and object, transitive and intransitive, active and passive, we cannot easily imagine that there can still be important divergences of syntax or, *a fortiori* according to grammars, that there can be options among cases of the nominal declension, prepositions or post-positions, pre-verbs. However, observation reveals a diversity (one is tempted to say an unlimited genius), sometimes even within the language itself, for creating unpredictably subtle distinctions in the formulation of this basic relation. It is only after this kind of initiation, in the ethnological sense of the word, that the author presents his reader with the particular solution to the problem which is the ergative construction, a solution which in turn is manifested in a number of varieties.

To begin with a precise fact, in many languages with declension of nouns, the ergative can be defined as a case of this declension with a special ending, distinct from the forms of the instrumental and the dative, which indicates the subject of a transitive verb and of this alone, while the direct object of this verb is denoted

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by an “absolute case,” without ending, which indicates in other circumstances the subject of an intransitive verb. Thus in Laze (Arhavi), ¹*mamuli-k* (ergative) ²*dik'a-pe* (plural, without ending) ³*k'ik'ili-te* (intransitive) ⁴*dok'orobu*: “¹The-hen ⁴gathered ²kernels ³with-its-beak.” As opposed to ¹*mamuli* (without ending) ²*oxori-s* (direct dative) ³*amaxtu*: “¹The-hen ³goes-into ²(in) the house”.

What syntactical precision is furnished by the *-k* of the subject in the first sentence? What idea of the verb structure does it imply? More simply, how can the first phrase be compared to the second word for word? Under what conditions does the ergative construction disappear partially or completely in certain languages, giving place to new kinds of conjugation? Is this not the most direct statement of the problem? In the languages with which I work, for example, Tcherkesse and its group, the ergative is only one of the values which can be given to the only oblique case of the declension.

But the reader should not forget that these morphological, embryological, physiological analyses are historic creations and that they have no effect on the fact that the man speaking is expressing and meaning specific relationships. The Laze who pronounces the two phrases we just read with *mamuli-k* and *mamuli* considers “the hen” in both cases as the agent and does not have the impression, any more than we do, of describing two incompatible modes of action. Nor does the Tcherkesse have this impression when, in his expression but not in his thinking, he constructs in an inverse fashion: “He (oblique case equivalent to the ergative) sees it (case without ending)”, and “he (case without ending) strikes it (oblique case equivalent to the dative)”.

The bibliography of the ergative case is considerable and reflects various interpretations. Useful guidelines have been given in French by R. Lafon, “Comportement syntaxique, structure et diathèse du verbe basque”, *Bull. de la Soc. de Linguistique de Paris*, L, 1, 1954, p. 190-220 and LI, 1, 1955, p. 148-175; “Ergatif et passif en basque et en géorgien”, *ibid.*, LXVI, 1, 1971, p. 327-343; A. Martinet, “La construction ergative” in *La Linguistique synchronique*, Paris, 1965, p. 206-222; and in Russian, in the collection of G. A. Klimov, *Outline of a General Theory of Ergativity (Ocerk obscej teorii ergativnosti)*, Moscow, 1973. A recent article which offers new perspectives is by

E. Tiffou, "L'effacement de l'ergatif en bourouchaski", *Studia Linguistica*, XXX, 1977, p. 18-37, and there has just appeared a book by Claude Tchaikoff,² *Aux fondements de la syntaxe, l'ergatif*.

Roger Caillois had shared with me his passionate interest in the work of Robert Triomphe. I am not surprised. For the reflections to which this work gives rise fully justify our attention.