ERGATIVITY AND UNACCUSATIVITY

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The main goal of this lemma is to summarize how the term ‘ergativity’ has been used in analyzing aspects of Chinese syntax. In the typological literature, ‘ergativity’ typically refers to the patterning of transitive objects with intransitive subjects for the purposes of case-marking and certain syntactic operations like relative clause formation. The term ‘ergativity’ is also sometimes used to refer to an alternation between the transitive and intransitive use of a verb in which the argument functioning as the direct object in the transitive variant is the subject when the verb is used intransitively. It is in this latter sense that ‘ergativity’ can be observed in Chinese.

1. Ergativity

An ergative-absolutive case-marking system is distinguished from a nominative-accusative one in that the case of the subject in an intransitive clause receives the same marking as the object in a transitive clause. This is referred to as ‘absolutive’ case. The subject in a transitive clause receives a different case, which is termed ‘ergative’. In the Pama-Nyugan language Dyirbal, absolutive case is phonologically null; the ergative case is realized as the suffix -nggu.
Dyirbal (Dixon 1994:161)

(1) a. yabu banaga-n’u

mother.ABS return-NONFUT

‘Mother returned.’

b. nguma yabu-nggu bura-n

father.ABS mother-ERG see-NONFUT

‘Mother saw father.’

This pattern contrasts with an accusative language like English, in which transitive and intransitive subjects are marked alike, while the object in a transitive clause is treated differently. Case in English is indicated by position in the clause: subjects appear in preverbal position, while objects in transitive clauses follow the verb.

(2) a. Mary saw John.

b. Mary came.

The accusative pattern is confirmed by examining the personal pronouns, which show a morphological distinction between nominative and non-nominative case. Only the nominative form of the pronoun is grammatical in the preverbal subject position, while the non-nominative must be used in post-verbal object position.

(3) a. She/*her saw him/*he.
In addition to the case marking system, some languages also exhibit ‘syntactic ergativity’, whereby transitive objects and intransitive subjects are eligible to undergo certain syntactic operations which transitive subjects are not. For example, in many Inuit, Mayan, and Austronesian languages – as well as the Pama-Nyungan language Dyirbal – a relative clause can be formed only on the absolutive argument. In the following Dyirbal examples, the gap position in the relative clause in (4a) is the direct object; in (4b), it is the subject of an intransitive clause. A relative clause cannot be formed directly on the subject of a transitive clause. In order to extract a transitive subject, the embedded verb must have the antipassive suffix –nga. An antipassive is semantically transitive in that the verb takes two arguments. However, it is formally intransitive, since the object is not marked absolutive but rather has oblique case. In Dyirbal this case is dative. The external argument is treated as an intransitive subject and consequently can be extracted.

**Dyirbal**

(4) a. palan jukumpil [ ___ ngaja purangu] nyinanyu
there. ABS woman. ABS 1S.NOM see. REL.ABS sit-NONFUT

‘The woman whom I am watching is sitting down.’ (Levin 1983:282)

b. ngumagi [ ___ banaga-ngu] yabu-nggu bura-n
father.ABS return-REL.ABS mother-ERG see-NONFUT

‘Mother saw father, who was returning.’ (Dixon 1994:169)
Throughout their attested history, Sinitic languages have exhibited accusative alignment with respect to both morphology and syntax. Like English, Chinese varieties generally mark case positionally, placing subjects in clause-initial position and objects after the verb, as seen in the following Standard Mandarin examples.

(5) a. 李四買了那本書。

Lisi mǎi le nà běn shū.

‘Lisi bought that book.’

b. 李四來了。

Lisi lái le.

‘Lisi came.’

There is also no asymmetry between transitive subjects and objects in relative clause formation. Relative clauses can be formed on either subject or object position.
(6) a. 買了那本書的人

[ __ mǎi le nà běn shū ] de rén

buy ASP DEM CL book DE person

‘person who bought that book’

b. 李四買的書

[Lǐ sì mǎi __ ] de shū

Lisi buy DE book

‘book that Lisi bought’

In sum, Standard Mandarin, as well as the other Chinese varieties, is an accusative language. However, the term ‘ergative’ has been applied in some research in Chinese syntax to refer to one class of intransitive verbs, which I discuss in the next section.

2. Unaccusativity and ‘ergativity’ in Chinese

Since Perlmutter (1978), it is well known that intransitive verbs come in two varieties: unergative verbs, which take an external argument like an agent as their sole argument; and unaccusative verbs, which only take an internal argument like a theme. The term ‘unaccusative’ refers to the lack of canonical accusative licensing for the semantic object, while ‘unergative’ refers to the lack of special licensing for the semantic subject. In most languages, the single argument of any type of intransitive verb is marked uniformly as either nominative (in an accusative language) or absolutive (in an ergative language). Unaccusative constructions are treated as ergative by some linguists, because of the
mapping from argument structure to grammatical relations. Specifically, the grammatical subject in these intransitive constructions has the thematic status of a direct object.

It is in this sense that Cikoski (1978) analyzes unaccusative verbs as ‘ergative’ in Classical Chinese (approximately 500-200 BCE). The ‘ergative’ verbs in Classical Chinese participate in alternations like that illustrated in (7). The intransitive variant in (7a) merely asserts the proposition that the subject has escaped from death. The transitive variant in (7b) is a causative construction which includes an agent (causer) responsible for the servant’s being saved. Cikoski treats this alternation as a type of ergativity, because the object in the transitive clause has the same semantic relationship to the verb in (7b) as the subject does in the intransitive clause in (7a). Both are internal arguments, specifically themes.

(7)  a. 臣免於死。 (Zuòzhuan, Wén左傳:文 10/3; Cikoski 1978:131)
    Chén miǎn yú sǐ.
    servant escape from die
    ‘Your servant has escaped from death.’

b. 君 … 免臣於死。 (Zuòzhuan, Chéng左傳：成 17/13; Cikoski 1978:130)
    Jūn miǎn chén yú sǐ.
    lord cause.to.escape servant from die
    ‘Your Lordship has … saved your servant from death.’
Unergative verbs are termed ‘neutral’ verbs in Cikoski’s analysis. These can also often be either transitively or intransitively. In this alternation, the argument retained in the intransitive clause is the semantic subject, i.e. the external argument.

(8)  a. 王 … 避風雨。 (Zuòzhùàn, Xī 左傳:僖 32/5; Cikoski 1978:131)

Wáng bì féng yǔ.
king avoid wind rain

‘The king … retreated from the storm.’

b. 王 … 避。 (Zuòzhùàn, Zhāo 左傳 昭公 12/9; Cikoski 1978:132)

Wáng bì.
king avoid

‘The king … retreated.’

Zhōu Fǎgāo 周法高 (1961), Yáng Bōjùn 杨伯峻 and Hé Lèshì 何乐士(1992), Pulleyblank (1995), and others characterize the alternation in (7) as an active/passive pair. This analysis is ultimately credited to Mǎ Jiànzōng 马建忠 (1898), who classifies passives as constructions in which the recipient of the action (shòuzhě 受者) functions as the subject. Wáng Lì 王力 (2004:484) distinguishes this alternation from morphologically marked passives by referring to it as ‘conceptual passive’ (gàiniàn bèidòngshì 概念被動式). Lǚ Shūxiāng 呂叔湘 (1992:57) rejects the passive analysis and treats the unaccusative variant as a stative construction (biǎotàijù 表態句), pointing out that the completion of an action
results in a state. More recently, Ōnishi 大西 (2004) and Wū 巫 (2008) adopt the approach taken by Cikoski (1978), labeling the unaccusative verb class as ‘ergative’ (zuògé 作格).

Lǚ Shūxiāng 呂叔湘 (1987) observes that the same two verb classes are found in Modern Standard Mandarin. In the unergative class (his ‘pattern one’ dìyī géjú 第一格局), the single argument in the intransitive variant corresponds to the subject in the transitive version.

(9) a. 中國隊勝南朝鮮隊。 (Lǚ Shūxiāng 呂叔湘 1987:1)

Zhōngguó duì shèng nán cháoxiān duì.

China team win south Korea team

‘The Chinese team defeats the South Korean team.’

b. 中國隊勝。 (Lǚ Shūxiāng 呂叔湘 1987:1)

Zhōngguó duì shèng.

China team win

‘The Chinese team wins.’

In contrast, ‘pattern two’ (dìèr géjú 第二格局) verbs are unaccusative. The single argument in the intransitive clause corresponds to the object in the transitive version.
Lü considers whether the existence of the unaccusative/transitive alternation classifies Chinese as an ergative language but quickly dismisses this possibility. He points out first that Chinese lacks the morphological case alignment found in languages like Dyirbal, as shown in (1) above. He further notes that only a subclass of Chinese verbs (specifically, the unaccusatives) participate in the alternation in which a semantic object is the surface subject.

Huáng Zhèngdé 黃正德 (1989) seconds the conclusion that Chinese is not an ergative language, pointing out that the ‘ergative’ (i.e. unaccusative) type of verb is found in accusative languages as well. As demonstrated by Burzio (1986), Italian unaccusative verbs (which he terms ‘ergative’) behave very much like those in Standard Mandarin. The direct object of the transitive verb in (11a) surfaces as the subject when the same verb is used intransitively, as in (11b).

Y.-H. Li (1990) and Zhou (1990) examine existential and presentational verbs in Standard Mandarin. These verbs are unaccusative (‘ergative’) and hence take an internal argument as their subject. Interestingly, this argument can surface in its post-verbal base position when it is indefinite, as in (12a). The subject may also appear in pre-verbal position, but in this case it is interpreted as definite, as in (12b).
In contrast, only preverbal position is possible for the subject of an unergative verb. This is because the sole argument of an unergative verb is an external argument, which never occupies a VP-internal position during the course of the derivation.

(13)  a. 客人哭了。

Kèrén kū le.

guest cry ASP

‘The guests cried.’

b. *哭了客人。

*Kū le kèrén.

cry ASP guest

‘There cried some guests.’ (Y.-H. Li 1990:137)
Another type of unaccusative construction which has been labeled ‘ergative’ in the literature is the type which alternates with causative constructions, as in the following pair of examples from Cheng and Huang (1994:188). As a theme internal argument, the subject in the intransitive clause in (14a) merely undergoes the action expressed by the predicate. In the transitive (causative) variant in (14b), this participant (now the direct object) is made to undergo this action by the subject. This alternation is parallel to that observed in (7) above for Classical Chinese.

(14)  a. 張三嚇了一跳。

Zhāngsān xià-le  yī tiào.
Zhangsan shock-ASP one jump
‘Zhangsan was taken by surprise.’

b. 李四嚇了張三一跳。

Lǐsì xià-le  Zhāngsān  yī tiào.
Lisi shock-ASP Zhangsan  one jump
‘Lisi surprised Zhangsan.’

Dèng Sīyǐng (2004) discusses an asymmetry between unaccusative and unergative verbs in the ability to undergo passivization, which he terms ‘ergativization’ (zuògéhuà 作格化). Specifically, ergativization derives a passive (unaccusative) verb from a transitive
verb and promotes the thematic object to subject status. The internal argument must then occupy preverbal subject position.

(15)   a. *被殺了張三。
        Bèi shā le Zhāngsān.
        PASS kill ASP Zhangsan
        ‘Zhangsan was killed.’

b. 張三被殺了。
        Zhāngsān bèi shā le.
        Zhangsan PASS kill ASP
        ‘Zhangsan was killed.’

Contrary to this, unergative verbs cannot be passivized, because there is no internal argument in their argument structure to be promoted.

(16)   *張三被哭了。
        Zhāngsān bèi kū le.
        Zhangsan PASS cry ASP
        ‘*Zhangsan was cried.’
Shěn Yáng 沈阳 and Rint Sybesma (2010) analyze what they refer to as ‘middle constructions’ (zhōngdòng jiégòu 中动结构) employing the auxiliary gěi 给. They show that the main verb in this construction must be unaccusative fēibīngé 非宾格 (which they also term ‘ergative’ zuògé 作格). (17a) shows that gěi can precede an unaccusative verb but not an unergative verb (17b).

(17) a. (犯人)给跑了．

Fàngrén gěi pāo le.

criminal GEI run ASP

‘(The criminal) was allowed to escape.’

b. *(她)给哭了．

Tā gěi kū le.

she GEI cry ASP

‘She was made to cry.’ (Shěn and Sybesma 2010:226)

Interestingly, they show that there is a difference between middle constructions and pure unaccusative/ergative constructions in that the former has a causative sense that the latter does not. Specifically, the middle construction has an implicit agent, while the unaccusative/ergative construction is a simple intransitive.
To summarize the discussion in this section, the term ‘ergative’ is often employed to refer to unaccusative verbs in Classical Chinese and Modern Standard Mandarin. I have also pointed out, however, that having an unaccusative verb class does not suffice to classify a language as ergative. The next section considers an attempt in the literature to claim that Standard Mandarin has ergative characteristics beyond the existence of an unaccusative verb class.

3. Ergativity beyond unaccusativity?

Building on earlier work by Zēng Liānghāng 曾立航 and Yáng Xiāowèi 杨小卫 (2005), Zēng Liānghāng 曾立航 (2009) proposes that the surface positioning of subjects in unaccusative constructions in Standard Mandarin provides evidence for split-ergativity in the language. Specifically, she claims that case-marking in Standard Mandarin is sensitive to the animacy hierarchy first proposed by Silverstein (1976) and expanded on by Dixon (1994).
According to this hierarchy, pronouns and NPs referring to humans are more likely to be marked according to an accusative pattern, while common nouns, especially those referring to non-humans, are more compatible with an ergative pattern.

(19) **Nominal Hierarchy** (Dixon 1994:85)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st/2nd person pronoun</th>
<th>3rd person pronoun</th>
<th>Proper noun</th>
<th>Common noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><code>Nom/Acc marking</code></td>
<td><code>Erg/Abs marking</code></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This type of ‘NP split-ergativity’ is found in a number of ergative languages, including Pama-Nyungan languages like Dyirbal. As shown above in (1), 3rd person NPs are marked with ergative and absolutive case in Dyirbal. But marking on 1st and 2nd person pronouns follows a nominative/accusative pattern. In (20), both intransitive and transitive subjects appear without an overt case-marker, while the transitive object in (20c) takes the accusative suffix `-na`. Morphologically, the null nominative marker is identical to the absolutive marker shown in (1). The difference between (1) and (20) is the distribution of this form, marking absolutes in (1) and subjects in (20).

(20) **Dyirbal** (Dixon 1994:161)

(20) a. ṇana banaga-nyu

   we.NOM return- NONFUT

   ‘We returned.’
Zēng (2009) claims that case-marking in Standard Mandarin is subject to a similar animacy hierarchy. As discussed previously for (12), the subject of an unaccusative verb can surface in post-verbal position when it is indefinite. Zēng assumes that the post-verbal NP in an unaccusative clause like (21b) functions as an object in the syntax. Since the intransitive ‘subject’ is treated as an object, the clause can be said to display an ergative pattern.

(21) a. 電報來了。

Diànbào lái le.

telegram come ASP

‘The telegram arrived.’

b. 來電報了。

Lái diànbào le.

come telegram ASP

‘A telegram arrived.’ (Zēng 2009:319)
In contrast to the alternation in (21), pronouns and personal names are restricted to preverbal position when selected as the single argument of an intransitive verb. In other words, this type of NP can only function as a subject in intransitive clauses. Since personal names and pronouns are marked the same way (i.e. in preverbal position) in both transitive and intransitive clauses, Zēng (2009) claims that they follow a nominative/accusative pattern.

(22)  a. 我来了。

Wǒ lái le.

I come ASP

‘The telegram arrived.’

b. *来了我。

Lái wǒ le.

come I ASP

‘A telegram arrived.’ (Zēng 2009:319)

Further consideration, however, reveals that the asymmetry between (21b) and (22b) does not provide evidence for split-ergativity in Mandarin. Rather, it is merely an instantiation of the definiteness restriction discussed for (12) in the previous section. Given that subjects in post-verbal position must be indefinite, pronouns and personal names will never surface in this position because they are inherently definite.
5. Concluding remarks

This lemma has introduced the two main ways in which the term ‘ergativity’ is used in the field of linguistics. An ‘ergative’ language is uncontroversially a language which aligns transitive objects with intransitive subjects in its case-marking system and possibly other aspects of its grammar. Less commonly, the term ‘ergative’ is used interchangeably with ‘unaccusative’. This is the sense in which the term ‘ergative’ has been appropriately applied in research on Chinese. In all other respects, Sinitic varieties are accusative languages.

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**Keywords:** alignment, case, causative, ergativity, external argument, internal argument, passive, transitivity, unaccusative, unergative

**Teaser:** This lemma summarizes two uses of the term ‘ergativity’ in linguistic research and shows that ‘ergativity’ in Chinese is limited to the mapping of a thematic object to grammatical subject in unaccusative clauses, a universal syntactic phenomenon which is unrelated to the typological classification of languages according to their case-marking pattern.