From *Ergativus Absolutus* to Topic Marking in Kiranti: A Typological Perspective
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From *ergativus absolutus* to topic marking in Kiranti: a typological perspective

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1. Case markers as subordinators

In many languages, clauses can be subordinated by means of case markers. For Bodic languages, a branch of Sino-Tibetan, Genetti (1986) has shown that the meaning of case markers on clauses is in most instances a natural extension of their function on nouns. A dative, for example, which marks a referential goal with a noun, signals a situational goal, i.e., a purpose, when used on a clause. Among the case markers recruited for subordination, we not only get relatively concrete cases like datives, comitatives and various types of locatives, but also core argument relators such as ergatives and accusatives. In this paper, I will focus on ergative markers in one subgroup of Bodic, viz. in Kiranti languages spoken in Eastern Nepal, especially in Belhare. A typical example of ergative case-marking on a clause is the following:[1]

(1) cama m-pak-yakt-u-na**ŋa** ta-hatt-he-ŋ.
food 3nsA-serve-IPFV-3U-ERG reach-TELIC-PT-1sA
'I arrived there when they were dealing out the food.'

In Belhare the ergative is marked by *-ŋa*, but after vowels there is an alternative form in *-a*. Where the forms compete, *-ŋa* seems to be slightly more emphatic and typically appears when repeating an ergative expression. In subordinate clauses, *-ŋa ~ -a* is always supported by a marker *-na*,[2] whose function will be elucidated below. Outside subordinate clauses, the ergative has three basic functions: it indicates a transitive actor (2a), an instrument (2b) or a cause (2c):

(2) a. tombhira-**ŋa** wa sei?-t-u.
lynx-ERG chicken kill-NPT-3U
'The/a lynx will kill the/a chicken.'

b. dabhek-**ŋa** n-cept-he.
khukuri.knife-ERG 3nsA-cut-PT
'They cut it with the/a *khukurī*.'

c. cuŋ-**ŋa** si-yu.
cold-ERG die-NPT
'S/he will die from the cold.'

Given this range of meanings, the use of ergative markers as subordinators seems to follow from the straightforward application of a grammaticalization scheme along the lines sketched in (3):

(3) ERGATIVE/INSTRUMENTAL > BECAUSE > WHEN/WHILE

Such a grammaticalization path is well-attested throughout Bodic (Genetti 1986), but several observations cast doubt on this explanation in Southern and Eastern (SE) Kiranti languages. These observations are discussed in Section 2. In Section 3 I propose an alternative explanation according to which SE Kiranti ergative clauses derive from a reanalysis of relative constructions as absolute constructions, in which the ergative functions like an absolute case in an Indo-European language (e.g., the *ablativus absolutus* in Latin), viz., as a signal that its host NP has sentential rather than referential or attributive force and that it supplies circumstantial background information. The scheme in (3) might still explain the choice of the ergative as the absolute case, but it falls short of accounting for all aspects of the construction. Section 4 closes the paper by discussing the Kiranti findings against the background of a general typology of absolute constructions.

2. Problematic aspects of a grammaticalization account

While an account in terms of grammaticalization may hold for other Bodic languages, most semantic, morphological and syntactic properties of SE Kiranti ergative clauses are left unexplained by the developmental scheme in (3) or are even hard to reconcile with it. I first focus on the semantics of ergative clauses (Section 2.1), before moving on to morphological structure (Section 2.2) and syntactic distribution (Section 2.3).

2.1. The function of ergatives in subordinate clauses

From the scheme in (3) it would appear that causal readings figure prominently among the available interpretations. Indeed, in other languages where ergatives are found on clauses, the prototypical function they assume is causal. This is the case in many languages of Nepal (both Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European) and also in Tibetan (cf., among others, Genetti 1986, 1991; Gyurme 1994; Tournadre 1996):

(4) stag maṅpo yod pa-**s** ṅa-s gcig bsad-pa yin.
tiger many have NZR-**ERG** 1s-ERG one kill-NZR AUX:PFV
'Because there are many tigers I killed one.' (Genetti 1991:231)

While Northern Kiranti languages such as Thulung (Ebert 1994:135) or Yamphu (Rutgers 1998:274) show essentially the same pattern, the functional range of ergative clauses is quite different in the Scuthern and Eastern part of the Kirant.[3] In Belhare, cause relations are typically expressed by sequential clause chaining, which follows the universal logic of *Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc* 'after this, therefore because of this' (see Haiman 1985 for similar patterns in other languages):

(5) a. mai-lur-he kina khar-e-ŋa.
1sU-tell-PT SEQ go-PT-e
'He told me and then I went' = 'I went because he told me so.'

b. ika khar-e-ga? — un-na mai-lur-he kina=mu!
why go-PT-2 3-ERG 1sU-tell-PT SEQ=OBVIOUSLY
'Why did you go? — Because he told me [what else do you think?!]'

This is all the more remarkable as *kina* (~ *ki* ~ *kinahuŋ*) is not a **marker** for causality: the ergative subordinator *-naŋa* ~ *-naa* could easily take over functional ground here. In elicitation it is possible to get causal readings from ergative clauses, but such examples are hard to come by in natural discourse:

(6) u-lamma kar-a-naa cama n-ca-at-ni,
3POSS-appetite come.up-SUBJ-ERG food NEG-eat-PT-NEG
tʌrʌ u-sak lus-a-naa.
but 3POSS-hunger be.felt-SUBJ-ERG
'S/he doesn't eat because [the food] is appetizing, but because s/he is hungry.'

The core function of ergative clauses is different. It lies in signaling a sentential topic, that is, "a framework within which the main predication holds" (Chafe 1976). As is typical for topic clauses in many other languages (Haiman 1978), this often translates as a conditional clause:

(7) ŋka-na har-e-ŋ=be kochu lis-a-ŋ-naa. <G4.56b>
1s-TOP bite-PT-1sA-IRR dog be-SUBJ-e-TOP
'I would have bitten him if I were a dog.'

Being full-fledged discourse topics, the scope of ergative subordinate clauses is by no means limited to single predications. Especially in narratives, it is not uncommon to find ergative clauses setting the stage for a longer stretch of discourse. This use defies direct translation; it is perhaps best captured by a colon in English writing:

(8) ŋ-kond-a-ch-u-lo ansar-ai bicar-ai cok-sa ŋ-khar-a-chi-naŋa
3ns-search-SUBJ-d-3U-COM thought-EMPH opinion-EMPH do-CONV 3ns-go-SUBJ-d-ERG
sadhu-rok=phu ta-he, sannesi ta-he, sitara teĩ-sa, kina, "ŋka-na
pure-FOC=REP come-PT ascetic come-PT sitar play-CONV SEQ 1s-TOP
jogi-ŋa, yaŋ nak-cai-ʔ-ŋa-ha" cek-sa, kinahuŋgo Ram
mendicant-e DISTR ask.for-eat-NPT-e-NZR say-CONV SEQ R.
Lachuman-chi-ŋaha un-chik-ŋaha khimm-e mokkha-et-tok=phu lig-he
L.-ns-GEN 3-ns-GEN house-LOC porch-LOC-FOC=REP enter-PT
kinahuŋgo . . . <KP59a>
SEQ
'Thinking and considering, they[d] went looking for [Sītā]: (*-naŋa*) maybe it was a *sādhu* who came, or a *sannyāsī* came, playing the sitar. Then he would say: "I am a *yogī*, I am one who asks everywhere for food." And then he would go onto the veranda at the house of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and then...'

The ergative clause in this example describes the general background for the thoughts that are reported in the subsequent paragraph, it explains why these thoughts are relevant for the overall narrative.

In other situations, the sentential topic described by an ergative clause simply indicates the temporal and spatial circumstances of the main clause event. In the presence of imperfective aspect in either the subordinate or the main clause, this creates what aspectologists call a 'scheme of incidence', where one event interrupts another event going on in the background, as in the introductory example (1). With the (unmarked) perfective aspect, by contrast, the reading is usually sequential:

(9) i-net-nahuŋ Kathmandu khar-e-i-ŋa. Kathmandu khar-i-ŋ-naŋa
DIST-LOC-ABL K. go-PT-1p-e K. go-1p-e-ERG
i-na MʌkanpurjillaLe pheri tʌrkari-ro his-si khar-e-i-ŋa.<ST4>
DIST-DEM M. district-LOC again vegetable-FOC look-SUP go-PT-1p-e
'From there we[e] went to Kathmandu. After we[e] had gone to Kathmandu, in Makvaɲpur district it was again vegetable [fields] that we[e] went to see.'

For an account of ergative clauses in terms of the grammaticalization path sketched in (3), this reading is crucial because it bridges between BECAUSE and WHEN via notions of logical SOURCE and temporal SEQUENCE (Genetti 1986). However, the sequential reading is already predicted by the aspectual choice, and there is no reason to attribute 'sequentiality' to the semantics of the subordinator. Moreover, among the available interpretations, this use of ergative clauses is rare and virtually limited to tail-head linkages as in (9). In other cases, sequential relations are encoded by chaining constructions of the type exemplified by (5) above.

In other SE Kiranti languages, the situation is similar although causal readings of ergative clauses are found in discourse. Nonetheless, sequential readings seem to be rare again, whereas WHEN and IF readings are very common if not the default choice (cf. van Driem 1987:231 on Limbu; Ebert 1997:149 on Athpare). The following example is from Phedāppe Limbu (van Driem 1987:233):

(10) kɛ-da-ʔil**le** aŋga ta-ʔɛ wa:-ʔɛ.
2-come-ERG 1s come-1sNPT AUX-1sNPT
'By the time you show up, I'll have come [back].'

It is of course possible that, functionally, clausal ergatives split away long ago from the instrument, cause and agent readings they have on nouns, but there is no positive evidence for such a historical development. There is, however, positive evidence against such a scenario. This is what I turn to in the following section.

2.2. The morphological structure of ergative clauses

The most important morphological feature of ergatives in subordinate clauses is that, unlike comitatives and other cases, they are not directly attached to a finite verb form but instead follow another morpheme. This morpheme is *-na* in Belhare and Athpare, where it is obligatory, and *-ʔin (~ -ʔil)* in Limbu, where it is optional in at least one dialect (Phedāppe). The markers are all systematically homophonous with definite or specific articles.

Unlike what we are used to in modern European languages, SE Kiranti articles can appear on the attribute instead of the head noun, and in Belhare and Athpare

they are even restricted to this position (Belhare example; see Bickel 1999 for discussion):

(11) tu-na khim *vs.* tu-kha khim
up-ART house up-NZR house
'the house up there' 'a (unspecific) house up there'

The similarity between the article and the pre-ergative marker on subordinate clauses is unlikely to be due to accidental homophony as we find the same formal convergence in the case of the etymologically distinct marker *-ʔin* in Limbu. However, no explanation for the appearance of the article is readily available if we assume ergative clauses to develop through gradual semantic extension of regular case constructions. Kiranti languages do not necessarily require nominalization in order for case-markers to be attached to clauses. The Belhare comitative in *-lo*, for instance, directly follows finite verbs (cf. *ŋkondachu-lo* 'while they searched' in (8) above) and, as noted before, in at least one dialect of Limbu, the ergative can optionally appear on clauses without additional marking as well (e.g., *ta-lle* 'come-ERG', i.e., 'when he came'; van Driem 1987:234). Moreover, even if we assume that the additional marking found on ergative clauses has a nominalizing function, why is it not a plain nominalizer that is chosen, if the language has one, as in Belhare (*-khak,* Bickel 1999) and Limbu (*-pa,* van Driem 1987:193-99)? The presence of the article calls for a different explanation.

2.3. The syntactic distribution of ergative clauses

Other problems with the grammaticalization account in (3) have to do with the syntactic distribution of ergative clauses. In line with their topic-indicating function, ergative clauses are 'ad-sentential' (Bickel 1991), i.e., outside the main clause rather than embedded in it. This contrasts with other case-marked clauses, notably with comitative clauses, where the case marker indicates — through simple extension of its meaning on nouns — an accompanying circumstance (cf. again *ŋkondachulo* in (8) above). The difference is evidenced by the possible scope of main clause negation in Belhare. Comitative clauses, which are intrasentential constituents, always attract the scope of main clause negation, to the exclusion of the main predication (12a). Ergative clauses, by contrast, do not necessarily attract negation scope (12b):

(12) a. taw-a-**lo** kam n-cok-gatt-u-n.
come-SUBJ-COM work NEG-do-PT-3U-NEG
'He didn't [keep] working up to [the time] he came here.'

b. i-na taw-a-na**ŋa** unbhasan cok-ma-ro mi-ŋ-pi-att-u-n. <III.71.17>
DIST-DEM come-SUBJ-ERG 3 speech do-INF-FOC 3nsA-NEG-allow-PT-3U-NEG
'They didn't allow him to deliver a speech when he came here.' (but at another time and place they did allow it.)
or: 'He came here, but they didn't allow him to deliver a speech.'

(12a) implies that the referent did engage in the activity denoted by the main verb, i.e., what is negated is the circumstance, not the main event. From the sentence in

(12b), by contrast, it does not necessarily follow that the main event ever occurred. This difference in scope properties is unexplained under a grammaticalization account: why should the semantic shift from ERGATIVE/INSTRUMENTAL to WHEN entail a shift in scope properties? — For this, we need a different explanation.

Another difficulty for the grammaticalization approach is that the ad-sentential topic function established by ergative clauses is also available with plain NPs, but only under one condition: unlike topic NPs in, say, Chinese or Lahu, Belhare NPs marked by *-naŋa* ~ *-naa* require a propositional interpretation. In other words, a construction like (13a) can only be understood as an implicit conditional clause and can therefore be continued only by a sentence like (13b) and not by anything like (13c):

(13) a. pʌtrika-na**ŋa**, ...
newspaper-ERG
'if there/it were a newspaper, ...' *not:* *'as for the newspaper, ...'

b. ... ŋka=cha nis-e-ŋ=be.
1s=ADD know-PT-1sA=IRR
'... I would have known too.'

c. *... uchoũat sʌmacar ŋ-watt-he-ni.
new news NEG-be-PT-NEG
'... there was no news.'

If ergative clauses are topic constructions developed through grammaticalization, there is no reason why an expression like *pʌtrikanaŋa* should not be able to describe a general topic. Again, another explanation is needed.

3. Relative clauses, articles and the *ergativus absolutus*

The key to an alternative account of ergative clauses in SE Kiranti comes from relative constructions. Apart from prenominal constructions as in the Belhare example (14a), SE Kiranti languages allow, albeit as a minor pattern, internal-head constructions as illustrated by (14b). The article is used in both cases in the same way as it was in some dialects of Ancient Greek (especially Ionic and Aeolic), viz. as a 'linker' or 'joint' (= Lat. *articulum*, whence Engl. *article*) between an attribute clause and its head noun (cf. Bickel 1995, 1999):

(14) a. asamba niu-s-u-ŋ-**na** maʔi-ŋa pʌisa khat-lott-he.
last.night see-TRANS.PERF-3U-1sA-ART person-ERG money take-TELIC-PT
'The person I saw last night took the money.'

b. asamba maʔi niu-s-u-ŋ-**na-ŋa** pʌisa khat-lott-he.
last.night person see-TRANS.PERF-3U-1sA-ART-ERG money take-TELIC-PT
'The person I saw last night took the money.' *or:*
'When I saw the person, s/he took the money.'

The internal-head version (14b) is formally identical to a subordinate topic clause — the only difference is in the interpretation. I propose that the semantic shift is due to a reanalysis of the construction as an *ergativus absolutus*, i.e., as an absolute construction parallel to what is known in Indo-European languages.

The core property of absolute constructions is that the erstwhile attribute (*niusuŋnaŋa*) is understood as a predicate. In this interpretational shift, the case desinence loses its standard meaning and comes to signal that the host NP has a predicative rather than an attributive or referential force. Where an attributive reading is semantically impossible as in the earlier examples, the reanalysis is compulsory and the shift complete. Absolute constructions are renowned for a wide range of interpretational possibilities, but from a discourse perspective, they are centered on a general notion of sentential topic: they recapitulate previous information or set the stage anew for the following (Holland 1986, Bickel 1991:138-40, Keydana 1997). This corresponds exactly to what we found in Kiranti, and in these languages, the topic function receives further support from the fact that the reanalysis of attributes as predicates also entails a reanalysis of the attribute-marking device, i.e., of the article (*-na*). Since there is no longer a head noun that it could specify, the article only retains its discourse function, which is to signal topicality. This is a short step since specific or definite NPs tend to be topical and vice-versa. Once the article is reanalyzed as a topicality marker, it can be used even outside absolute constructions, and this is indeed what we find: the marker *-na* has become a common means of topicalizing constituents clause-internally, i.e., without putting them into an ad-sentential position (Bickel 1993). Examples for this are *ŋka-na hareŋbe* 'as for me, I would have bitten him' in (7) and *ŋka-na jogiŋa* 'as for me, I am a yogī' in (8).

The single-most important difference from absolute constructions in Indo-European is the fact that Kiranti absolutes derive from attribute constructions that do not show the kind of NP-internal case-agreement that is characteristic of Indo-European (cf. Nichols 1982): the ergative function of the NP is not copied onto any of its sub-constituents. Accordingly, the subject of the absolute construction does not inherit absolute case from the predicate, as it would in Indo-European. The subject *ina* 'that one, he' in (12b), for example, remains in the (unmarked) absolutive. Just as attribute constructions can be headless, however, so can absolute constructions be without subject:

(15) asamba	niu-s-u-ŋ-**na-ŋa**		pʌisa	khat-lott-he.
last.night	see-TRANS.PERF-3U-1sA-ART-ERG		money	take-TELIC-PT

'The one I saw last night took the money.' *or*

'When I saw him/her, s/he took the money.'

It is well-known in Indo-European linguistics that the only obligatory constituent of absolute constructions is the participle (among many others, cf. Serbat 1979, Bickel 1991:140, Keydana 1997:22). At least some expression must be included that allows the construal of a proposition. This explains, finally, why a simple noun marked by an absolute ergative (as in (13)) can only be understood as having sentential value. The effect is the same as with Latin expressions like *Cicerone consule*, where the absolute ablative in *-e* triggers a propositional reading 'when Cicero was consul'.

4. Conclusions and typological issues

An analysis in terms of an absolute construction explains (i) why SE Kiranti ergative clauses typically include an article that is otherwise used for relativization, (ii) why they are in adsentential position rather than embedded in the main clause, (iii) why article+ergative marking can create sentential but not referential topics and (iv) why the core function of the construction is the description of discourse frameworks rather than of propositional causes. This analysis does not contradict the grammaticalization scheme in (3), but limits its scope. The scheme may still provide an explanation for why the ergative/instrumental/cause marker, rather than, say, the genitive, is chosen as the absolute case. This choice was no doubt supported by contact with other languages of the area, which, as noted in Section 2.1, did follow the path in (3) and grammaticalized the ergative into a marker of causal subordination. However, instead of venturing here further into an historical explanation, I wish to explore in the remainder how the SE Kiranti data fit into a general typology of absolute constructions.

Absolute constructions appear to be rare outside of Indo-European. They are known in Finnish, where the absolute subject is in the genitive and the participle in the partitive case (Flinck 1924, König & van der Auwera 1990):

(16) [Peka-**n** herät-ty-**ä**] Liisa läht-i töi-hin.
P.-GEN wake.up-PPP-PART L. leave-PT work-ILLAT
'When Pekka woke up, Liisa went off to work.'

From the data discussed by Evans (1995:542-49), it appears that *dat. abs.* (and perhaps *loc. abs.*) constructions are used in some Tangkic languages of Northern Australia, as in the following Yukulta example (in Evan's 1995 orthography):

(17) dangka-ya=kanda kurri-ja maku, [kunawuna-**ntha** jambila-tharrba-**ntha**].
man-ERG=AUX:3>3PT see-IND woman child-DAT kick-PRIOR-DAT
'The man saw the woman as the child kicked her.' (Keen 1983:246)

At least one Pama-Nyungan language (Warlpiri), too, seems to have *dat. abs.* constructions, although the construction is currently dying out (Simpson & Bresnan 1983:62). Other absolute constructions are found in two North American families, Yuman (Winter 1974) and Muskogean (Bickel 1991:175f). Yuman languages use an 'associative' case suffix as in Maricopa *Bonnie-m* 'with Bonnie' or *ʔii-m* 'with the stick' (Gordon 1986:43):

(18) [da-sh ma-**m**] ʔ-maa-uum.
DEM-NOM be.ripe-ASS (SUB:DS) 1-eat-INC
'I'll eat it because it is ripe.' (Gordon 1986:278)

Muskogean relies on object markers (Chickasaw examples):

(19) a. hattak-at an-k-**ã** abi-tok.
man-NOM 1sPOSS-father-ACC kill-PT
'The man killed my father.' (Munro & Gordon 1982:88)

b. [ofi? yamma pĩs-li-tok-**ã**] illi-tok.
dog ART see-1sA-PT-ACC (SUB:DS) die-PT
'After I saw the dog, it died.' *or* 'The dog I saw died.' (*op.cit.* 94)

In contrast to Indo-European and Australian languages, the embedded subject (if present) is not assigned absolute case in Yuman and Muskogean. The reason is the same as in Kiranti: the absolutes derive in these languages from attribute constructions without NP-internal case agreement.

Most absolute constructions have developed into a formal switch-reference device. Synchronically, the Yuman and Muskogean absolutes illustrated by (18) and (19), respectively, are probably best analyzed as different-subject markers. This has a parallel in Uto-Aztecan: in this family, the wide-spread different-subject marker *-ku* can be reconstructed as identical with the accusative suffix **-kV* (Jacobsen 1983:174), which suggests a prehistorical development from *acc. abs.* to different-subject marking. In agreement with these developments in America, Indo-European, Finnish and Tangkic absolutes also usually signal referential discontinuity. This is true even when the absolute subject is missing as in the following examples from Ancient Greek (20a) and Yukulta (20b):

(20) a. [ø ek dè toútou thâtton proïó-nt-**ōn** sùn kraug-ę̂]
outPTCL DEM:GENsM faster proceed-IP-GENpM with shout-DATs
apò toû automátou drómos e-géne-to
from ART:GENsM spontaneity:GENs run:NOMs PT-become-3sIMPERF.MED
toîs stratiō̂t-ais. <Xen. *Anab.* I, 2, 17>
ART:DATpM soldier-DATp
'But afterwards, as they (the leaders) proceeded faster and with a loud shout, the soldiers took to a running pace by themselves.'

b. baa-ja=kandi dathin-ki dirr-i [ø bala-tharri-**nja**=ma].
bite-IND=3>3POT DEM-ERG snake-ERG hit-NEG.IND-DAT=if
'That snake will bite if (someone) doesn't kill (it).' (Evans 1995:545)

However, the referential discontinuity condition is not an intrinsic and necessary property of absolutes (Morani 1973, Haiman 1983, Keydana 1997). Rather, it is the result of a pragmatic competition with conjunct participles (*participia coniuncta*) that show case agreement with a coreferential argument of the matrix, occupy roughly the same adsentential position as absolutes, and fulfill a similar discourse function (Bickel 1991:171-76). This is found in the classical Indo-European languages as much as in Australia. Notice, however, that in Tangkic languages, case markers typically spread on all constituents of the conjunct clause (as a result of *Suffixaufnahme*, on which see Plank 1995):

(21) a. [hoû dè tòn aítio-n theò-n humnoû-nt-**es**]
where thus ART:ACCsM responsible:ACCsM god:ACCs praise-IP-NOMpM
dikaíōs àn humn-oî-men Érōt-a. <Pl. *Symp.* 193d>
rightly PTCL praise-OPT-1p Eros-ACCs
'If we thus praise the responsible god, we may rightly praise Eros.'

b. danka-**ya**=karri ngida karna-ja [makurrarra-wurla-**ya** karna-jurlu-**ya**].
man-ERG=3>3PRES wood light-ACT wallaby-PROPR-ERG light-PURP-ERG
'The man lit the fire in order to cook the wallaby.' (Keen 1980:247)

Being the result of pragmatic competition, the referential discontinuity condition is not a strict syntactic constraint and can be overridden under certain circumstances. This is true, again, for both Indo-European and Tangkic:

(22) a. [asthenḗsa-nt-**os** aut-**oû**$_i$] oudépote ap-é-leip-e
feeble-IP-GENsM 3-GENsM never away-PT-leave-3sIMPERF
tòn pápp-on$_i$. <Xen. *Cyr.* I, 4, 2>
ART:ACCsM grandfather-ACCs
'When he was sick, he would never leave his grandfather.'

b. mutha=kurrarringka kurri-kurri-ja [ø$_i$ wirrka-jarrba-**ntha**
lot=AUX:3p>1ns$_i$PT watch-RED-IND dance-PRIOR-DAT
wangarr-inaba-**ntha**].
corroborree-ABL-DAT
'A big mob watched us dancing the corroborree.' (Evans 1995:544)

Referential continuity, however, is least likely between subjects, and this tendency can easily grammaticalize into a syntactic constraint. This suggests the possibility that the different-subject condition in American languages, too, arose from competition with competing coreference-indicating forms. Indeed, all languages of this part of the world which show a development from absolute case to different-subject marking also have same-subject converbs used in a similar subordinate position. While in Muskogean it is likely that the same-subject converbs derive from nominative-marked conjunct participles (in *-t*), thus further strengthening the parallel to Indo-European, they seem to have had a different origin in Uto-Aztecan and Yuman (cf. Jacobsen 1983).

In SE Kiranti languages, the situation is radically different: Here, absolute constructions do not compete with coreference-indicating forms. While they exist, such forms are limited to supines (in *-si*, e.g., *hissi* 'in order to look' in (9) above) and tightly embedded adverbial converbs (in *-sa*, e.g., *coksa* 'doing' in (8) above). Both these forms have a completely different distribution in discourse than the *erg. abs.* construction (see Bickel 1993). In the absence of any pragmatic pressure, there is no reason for the *erg. abs.* construction to develop a ban on referential interlacing, and, as examples (8) and (9) attest, it indeed freely tolerates subject continuity. Instead of developing into a switch-reference marker, the Kiranti *erg. abs.* constructions have elaborated on the discourse function of absolutes and have thereby become general markers of sentential topics. This, and the observation that the development of switch-reference in other languages results from pragmatic competition with other forms, suggests that, from a universal perspective, the fundamental issue in absolute constructions is not referential discontinuity. Rather, what is important is that a case marker is used to establish an erstwhile attribute as a predicate with a backgrounded, often topical discourse value.

Notes

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[1] Abbreviations: A 'actor argument of a transitive verb', ABL 'ablative', ACC 'accusative', ACT 'actual', ADD 'additive', ART 'article', ASS 'associative', AUX 'auxiliary', COM 'comitative', CONV 'converb', d 'dual', DAT 'dative', DEM 'demonstrative', DIST 'distal', DISTR 'distributive', DS 'different subject', e 'exclusive', EMPH 'emphatic', ERG 'ergative', FOC 'focus', GEN 'genitive', ILLAT 'illative', INC 'inceptive', IND 'indicative', INF 'infinitive', IMPERF 'imperfect' IP 'imperfective participle', IPFV 'imperfective', IRR 'irrealis', LOC 'locative', M 'masculine', MED 'middle voice', NEG 'negative', NOM 'nominative', NPT 'non-past', ns 'non-singular', NZR 'nominalizer, OPT 'optative', p 'plural', PART 'partitive', PASS 'passive', PERF 'perfect', PFV 'perfective', PPP 'past passive participle', PRES 'present', PRIOR 'prior', PROPR 'proprietive (case)' POSS 'possessive', POT 'potential', PT 'past', PTCL 'particle', PURP 'purposive', RED 'reduplicated sequence', REP 'reportative', s 'singular', SEQ 'sequential', SUB 'subordinator', SUBJ 'subjunctive (mood)', SUP 'supine', TRANS 'transitive', TOP 'topic', U 'undergoer argument of transitive verb'. '=' marks a clitic boundary, '>' a transitive relationship.

[2] *-na-a* is realized tautosyllabically, i.e., as [na:]. In a preliminary report (Bickel 1993), I misinterpreted the lengthening as a top-down effect of clause-final 'comma' intonation and wrote *-na* in the practical orthography (vocalic length is not phonemic in Belhare). After that, my friend and consultant Lekh Bahādur Rāī insisted on two distinct vowels. He furthermore proposed that the subordinators *-na-a* and *-na-ŋa* are parallel to the two allomorphs of the ergative on vowel-final nouns (e.g., *maʔia* ~ *maʔiŋa* 'person-ERG') and that it is my task to find out why. Here is, then, my response, which I offer in deep gratitude to Lekh Bahādur's never-tiring help in studying his mother-tongue.

[3] Southern and Eastern languages appear to form a typological unit in several other respects as well (Ebert 1994). Given the current state of research, it is uncertain whether this is also a genetic unit.

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