New Data and New Methods in Afroasiatic Linguistics
Robert Hetzron in Memoriam
Edited by Andrzej Zaborski

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On ergativity in Egyptian

Helmut Satzinger

In recent publications (cf., e.g., Zeidler 1992: 210-212; Loprieno 1995: 83-85; Roccati 1997) the question has been raised whether Egyptian has characteristic features of an ergative type language. Reintges (1998a: 458-461; 1998b: 210-211) is certainly right when he states that Egyptian is not an ergative language. But still, indications of ergativity seem to exist.

The characteristic feature of ergativity is that the objects of transitive verbs are in the same case (viz. the absolutive) as the subjects of intransitive verbs, whereas the subjects / agents of transitive verbs are in a particular case, the ergative. If a language does not have case markers ergativity may be betrayed by the forms of the pronominal element and/or the person/number/gender (noun class) markers at the verb.

In many ergative languages these features do not appear in every tense group or aspect. In many New Indo-Iranian and some Indo-Aryan languages they are restricted to the perfective aspect, in some Kartvelian languages to the aorist system (excluding it from the present and perfect systems), and so on. In the other tenses the absolutive is used for the subject of transitive verbs. In Maya, conversely, the use of the ergative pronouns is extended to the subject of intransitive verbs in the present/future forms. In other languages it is the tenses of the imperfective aspect that have the ergative construction. In Lugbara (a Central Saharan [Nilo-Saharan macro-phylum] language in Uganda and Zaire), grammarians distinguish two aspects, definite and indefinite. In the indefinite aspect, both the object of transitive verbs and the subject of intransitive verbs are marked by their position in front of the verb, whereas the agent of transitive verbs is marked both by a postposition and by its position in front of the object (Schadeberg 1982: 285-286).

Indefinite aspect:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>agent</th>
<th>patient / verb</th>
<th>object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mvá-m</td>
<td>ti</td>
<td>sfi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child-POSTP</td>
<td>cattle</td>
<td>bring-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma</td>
<td>ti-mvá</td>
<td>ázi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I[AGENT]</td>
<td>cattle-child</td>
<td>bring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"The boy is driving the cattle into the craal."
"I am bringing the cattle to the chief."
Definite aspect:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Rest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(unmarked)</td>
<td>/ object</td>
<td>(unmarked)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \text{äkō} \quad \text{dzi} \quad \text{a'ū} \quad \text{ ámbō-n̩} \]

"The woman brought the chicken to the lord."

\[ \text{ā} \quad \text{dzi} \quad \text{wārāgā dārī} \quad \text{śp̪ī-v̪ū} \]

"I brought this letter to the chief."

Fully-fledged ergativity implies that the ergative case is used for the agent of the transitive verbs in all forms (as in Basque). The so-called split ergativity restricts the ergative to a limited temporal domain (in Hindi and Lugbara, different in each case). On the other hand, ergativity is generalized in the present/future domain of Maya.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject trans.</th>
<th>Subject intrans.</th>
<th>Subject transitive</th>
<th>Subject intransive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maya: ergative</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>ergative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basque: ergative</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi: ergative</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lugbara: absolutive</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>absolutive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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In Egyptian grammar there are three realms that appear to be “ergativoid”: (1) the enclitic personal pronoun, (2) the constructions with the agent marker \( jn \), and (3) the perfect tense of the verbal system.

(1) The enclitic personal pronoun

It has two main uses: ¹ it is the form of the pronominal subject in the adjectival sentence (i.e., the sentence with adjectival predicate), and it is also the expression of the object of transitive verbs in all their forms, except the infinitive (where it may also appear, though; see section 2 [a.1.B]). If we select for comparison expressions like:

\[ \text{wōb} \quad \text{sw} \]

"he is pure"

pure he

\[ \text{jw} \quad s(w)^{6} \text{b.n.j} \quad \text{sw} \]

"I purified him"

AUX. purify-PAST-I he

¹The subject role in certain adverbial predicate constructions depends on the matrix into which the adverbial sentence is embedded; e.g. \( nn \) “there is not,” \( m.k \) “behold, there is,” etc.
we may see here an ergativic system at work, to be exact: the enclitic pronoun seems to represent the absolutive case. Things are, however, more complicated. In the adjectival sentence we find, on the one hand, adjectives in the predicate slot, whether verbal adjectives — most or all of them perfective participles of verbs of quality — or nisba adjectives, derived from substantives, proper names or prepositions. But there are, on the other hand, also examples with participles of action verbs, both transitive and intransitive: jr sw (ddt) “he (is one who) does (what has been said),” hc sw “he (is one who) rejoices.” The participles are mostly active; passive participles are extremely rare (Gardiner § 374). This means that the enclitic pronoun is in these cases mostly the expression of an agent. An ergativic interpretation is precluded, at least for historical Egyptian.

The adjectival sentence has static meaning, and this is its raison d’être. When it is chosen for dynamic verbs, instead of the dynamic finite forms of the suffix pronoun conjugation (i.e., in Egyptological terminology, the suffix conjugation), it is for its expressing a static present, or a present perfect. In the Egyptian verbal system its only rival is the Old Perfective, which is, however, passive with most transitive verbs: jr sw “he (is one who) does,” but with Old Perfective: jw.f jf.(w) “he has been made.” Voice, tense and aspect are not expressed by the adjectival sentence as such, but rather by the inherent qualities of its predicate, the adjective or participle.

(2) The agent marker jn.

It has two main uses: a. as an agent marker with the infinitive and all forms of passive meaning; b. as a marker of the rhematized element in the cleft sentence. Jn plus noun is in a paradigm with the absolute personal pronoun, though this is not attested for the passive constructions. (But this is just one sector of the uses of the absolute pronoun; in its other uses it is in a paradigm with the bare noun.)

a.1. Agent marker with the infinitive

Normally, a genitive expanding an infinitive is the expression of the subject of an intransitive verb (pr.t Mnw “the going out [= procession] of [god] Min”; pr.t.f “his going out”), and of the object of a transitive verb (m33 nfrw.k “seeing your beauty”; m33.f “seeing him”; see Gardiner § 300; Edel §§ 696-699). This looks, of course, like an

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2 A recent assessment in terms of general linguistics (generative grammar) is given by Reintges (1998b; he not only identifies the agent markers mentioned here but also includes jn as marker of yes/no questions, etc.)
ergative feature, but as we are dealing with an infinite form, whose agent is by definition primarily implicit, we should not lay too much emphasis on this. A systematic account of the possibilities for expressing the patient (logical object) and the agent (logical subject) of an infinitive makes it clear that the two constructions mentioned, m33.f “seeing him” and pr.t.f “his going out”, are not in a paradigm. Egyptian has two ways for expressing the subject and object of the infinitive: A. Here it is the patient which is expressed by the genitive / suffix pronoun; if the agent is to be expressed at all, this is done by a backward extraposition marked by jn. In the case of a pronominal agent the absolute pronoun is used (without jn):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infinitive</th>
<th>Suffix Pronoun / Noun</th>
<th>Absolute Pronoun / Jn + Noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitive verbs:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gm.t</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>ntka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gm.t</td>
<td>bj3</td>
<td>jn hm.fb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intransitive verbs:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pr.t</td>
<td>ntnsc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pr.t</td>
<td>jn mnj.fc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ a^{"the finding of it on your part" (cf. Gardiner § 300).} \\
\[ b^{"the finding of the well on part of his majesty" (cf. Gardiner § 300).} \\
\[ c^{"the going forth on their part" (cf. Gardiner § 300).} \\
\[ d^{"the going out on part of his personnel" (cf. Edel § 697).} \\

B. The direct genitive and the suffix pronoun are the expressions of the agent; for the patient, the enclitic pronoun is used (this means that this infinitive construction resembles the finite verb forms of the suffix pronoun conjugation, and it is mainly by the specific infinitive forms of the weak verbs that it can be recognized).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infinitive</th>
<th>Suffix Pronoun / Noun</th>
<th>Enclitic Pronoun / Noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitive verbs:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rd.t</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>swd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rd.t</td>
<td>Mntw</td>
<td>tswb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intransitive verbs:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pr.t</td>
<td>fc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pr.t</td>
<td>Mnwad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ a^{"his appointing him (to be prince)" (cf. Gardiner § 301).} \\
\[ b^{"(god) Month’s giving the Two Lands (to king NN.)" (cf. Gardiner § 301).} \\
\[ c^{"his going forth."} \\
\[ d^{"the going forth (= procession) of (god) Min."}
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\( \text{Jn} \) is here not an ergative marker (pace Loprieno 1995: 64-65, 83-84). It marks both the agents of transitive verbs and the subjects of intransitive verbs. It is best seen as a (backward) extraposition.

2. Agent marker with passive forms

It was stated above that the infinitive, as a finite form, has an implicit agent/subject. The same is true, for other reasons, of the passive: the essence of the passive is that the subject is deleted, the object taking its place. If, however, the speaker desires to mention, in addition, the agent language also provides a way for this. In Egyptian, this is the \text{Jn} phrase.

Egyptian has three types of passive construction: (1) the internal passive, like \text{rdj(w)} "has been given," (2) the external passive with the marker \text{tw}, like \text{rdj.n.tw} "that ... was given," and (3) the Old Perfective in its Stative use: \text{jrj.tw/j} "you having been made." In all three cases the \text{Jn} phrase can be used for the agent expression.

With the passive, the \text{Jn} phrase expresses by definition the agent. Yet the agent expression is secondary with the passive. Also here, \text{Js} is best regarded as a (backward) extraposition.

b. Marker of the focalized element in the cleft sentence.

The cleft sentence of Middle Egyptian has the matrix \#\text{Jn} + Noun - active participle\# for the perfect and the aorist, but \#\text{Jn} + Noun - prospective \text{sdm.f}\# for the prospective. This somewhat strange Middle Egyptian paradigm is an amalgam of two different paradigms of Old Egyptian, one with participles (as in the Middle Egyptian perfect and aorist), and one with forms of the suffix pronoun conjugation (as in the Middle Egyptian prospective).

1) Participles:

- perfect \( \text{Jn + N} \) perfective active participle
- aorist \( \text{Jn + N} \) imperfective active participle
- prospective ?

2) Conjugated forms (Allen 1984 § 222)

- perfect \( \text{Jn + N} \) \text{sdm.n.f} (coreferential)
- aorist \( \text{Jn + N} \) aoristic \text{sdm.f} (coreferential)
- prospective \( \text{Jn + N} \) prospective \text{sdm.f} (coreferential)

The variants which are not anymore found in Middle Egyptian - with \text{sdm.n.f} and with aoristic \text{sdm.f} - are rare already in Old Egyptian. The question arises as for the syntactic status of these conjugated forms - are they rhematic or nominal? The \text{sdm.f}
verb forms are not conclusive as the prospective \textit{sdm}.f does not show any difference between the two statuses, and hardly any weak or irregular verbs are attested in the aoristic \textit{sdm}.f in Old Egyptian. As for the cases of \textit{sdm}.n.f, all examples are transitive. One single instance of an intransitive verb could decide the matter: if it was \textit{sdm}.n.f - nominal; if Old Perfective - rhematic. Anyway, the complete lack of overtly circumstantial (adverbial) forms in this slot (in particular, Old Perfective and the gerunds [infinitives reigned by prepositions \textit{hr} "on," \textit{m} "in," \textit{r} "to"]), whether in Old Egyptian or later, strongly advocates for a nominal nature of the forms attested. Therefore the original meaning of the two \textit{jn} constructions must be something like,

(1) \textit{jn} NN. \textit{sdm} "it is NN. who heard."\textsuperscript{3}
(2) \textit{jn} NN. \textit{sdm}.n.f "it is on the part of NN. that he (= NN.) heard."

Both constructions are mostly used of transitive verbs, but intransitive verbs occur likewise. \textit{Jn} is a subject or agent marker, but it has nothing to do with ergativity: it marks subjects of both transitive verbs and intransitive verbs (cf. Reintges 1998a: 461; 1998b: 211). In the same time, \textit{jin} is a marker of the rhematic role of a noun. This function is, however, limited to subjects of verbs: it never emphasizes or rhematizes an object or a noun or pronoun of another function. This means that the essential function of \textit{jn} is that of marking the subject.

\textbf{(3) The perfect tense of the verbal system}

Egyptian has three basic tenses: perfect, aorist and prospective. Each of the tenses has two basic statuses: rhematic (initial and circumstantial) and part-clausal (\textit{that} forms, with gender/number concord: relative forms; cf. Satzinger 1986). The part-clausal forms of the perfect tense are uniform for all verbs: \textit{prj}.n.f "that he went out," \textit{(st) prj}.t.n.f (\textit{jn}) "(the place from) which he went out." The rhematic forms, however, have different forms for the transitive and the intransitive verbs, making use of the \textit{sdm}.n.f form and the Old Perfective, respectively: \textit{jw} \textit{rdj}.n.f "he gave," \textit{rdj}.n.f "(he) having given," vs. \textit{jw}.f \textit{prj}.w "he went out," \textit{prj}.w "(he) having gone out." The respective

\textsuperscript{3}Some grammarians point to a similar construction, found in the \textit{Pyramid Texts}, which could be the matrix for this type of cleft sentence, viz. \textit{jn} introducing the first member of a nominal sentence: # \textit{jn} - noun - noun #. The problem is that only two instances of it can be found (PT 1370a, quoted by Edel § 845 (aa); PT 1988a (N.), quoted by Edel § 952), and both can be interpreted in another way: in the first instance, \textit{jn} + king's name have been automatically substituted for the absolute pronoun; in the second instance, the second \textit{m}3\textsuperscript{r} has been interpreted as a participle (Paulkner, Allen) which makes it an instance of Cleft Sentence.
Old Perfective forms of the transitive verbs yield the passive (with pronominal subject only): *jw.f rdj.w* "he was given," *rdj.w* "(he) having been given."

The situation is not as neat as it may appear from this. As was said already, part-clausal forms are uniform for both transitive and intransitive verbs (there is no part-clausal Old Perfective). On the other hand, the Old Perfective of transitive verbs is not generally passive. We may disregard here the verb *rh* "to know" whose Old Perfective is always active. Yet, besides its static form the Old Perfective has also a dynamic form (morphologically different in the first and second persons; cf. Satzinger, printing, following Schenkel 1994) which is active with the transitive verbs. Still, the *suppletive system* (Polotsky) of the perfect is a manifest reality, with one and the same verb form (the Old Perfective) marking the subject or agent of intransitive verbs and the patient, or the subject of the passive, of transitive verbs.

There are close parallels between the Egyptian Old Perfective and the Akkadian Stative. This enlarges the perspective from Egyptian to some Proto stage of Afroasiatic (cf. Satzinger, printing).

It has been assumed (Diakonoff 1965, 58) that Afroasiatic was originally an ergative language. This hypothesis can account for several features. The strong affinity of the suffix conjugation of Akkadian with verbs of quality and with the passive use of transitive verbs, together with comparable features of the Egyptian Old Perfective and the static character of the Kabyle suffix conjugation, seem to point to a conjugation that lacks an agent (although it has a subject). Another assumption is that the Semitic prefix conjugation is originally restricted to action verbs, in particular, to transitive verbs. In Egyptian it is the suffix pronoun conjugation that is avoided by all intransitives in the rhematic perfect, and it is not employed for the rhematic static present; we find *ndm.f* "that he is pleasant," but *ndm sw* "he is pleasant" (cf. above, section 1). These facts could be accounted for by assuming that both the Afroasiatic prefix conjugation and the Egyptian suffix pronoun conjugation were originally ergative conjugations, denoting an agent rather than the subject of an intransitive verb.

**Conclusion**

Whereas the agent marker *jn* has nothing to do with ergativity we may see a relic of an ergative system in the conjugations of Afroasiatic in general (suffix versus prefix conjugation) and of Egyptian (suffix conjugation versus suffix pronoun conjugation). We might put up the following pronominal paradigms:
Absolutive Case: *ku, *ta, *ti, etc. (positioned after the predicate)
Ergative Case: *'a, *ta, *ta-, etc. (positioned before the predicate)
Genitive Case: *T, *ka, *ki, etc. (positioned after the noun)

The absolutive case pronoun expressed both the subject of intransitive verbs and the patient of transitive verbs, whereas the ergative case pronoun expressed the agent of transitive verbs. Grammaticalization of the sequence of verb plus absolutive pronoun yielded the suffix conjugation, whereas the ergative pronoun yielded, together with the verb, the prefix conjugation. When eventually a transition from the ergative system to an accusative system took place the antinomy of agent and subject was blurred. Forms of the suffix conjugation of transitive verbs could also assume active meaning, whereas the prefix conjugation was extended to intransitive verbs.

\[ ta-BEAT-ku \text{ “you beat me” } \quad \text{ WALK-ku “I walked” } \]

\[ ta-BEAT “you beat” \quad \text{ BEAT-ku “I am/was beaten” } \quad \text{ WALK-ku } \]

\[ 'a-WALK “I walk” \quad \text{ BEAT-ta “you beat” } \]

Proto-Egyptian developed a suffix conjugation (the Old Perfective), but it did not follow the other branches in forming a prefix conjugation. Rather, it expanded the genitive case to ergative function, a phenomenon that is manifest in other languages, too. In Hungarian, the conjugations of the past and the “definite” conjugation (i.e., the conjugation of transitive verbs with a definite object) of the present bear close resemblance with the possessive suffixes. In Maya, the ergative pronoun is identical with the possessive pronoun. In Burushaski (northern Pakistan; unclassified language), however, the possessive pronouns are used as the absolutive case form of the pronoun (Campbell 1991: 249). In Shilluk (Upper Nile province, southern Sudan; a Western Nilotic language, Eastern Sudanic, Nilo-Saharan phylum) “the possessive enclitic may specify the pronominal subject” (Campbell 1991: 1229), especially in the past tense.4

Another promising field for detecting traces of an older ergativic system is the Egyptian personal pronoun. In historical Egyptian its paradigms do not correspond to distinct case functions. The absolute pronoun is both used as an absolute case (e.g., for nominal predicates) and (with restrictions) for the subject of the nominal sentence. The enclitic pronoun expresses both the object of transitive verbs and the subject of the

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4In Mende (a Mande language of Sierra Leone and Liberia, Niger-Congo macro-phylum), and in Choctaw (a Muskogean language in Oklahoma, etc.; Campbell 1991: 325), on the other hand, “the possessive series also provides the objective pronouns” (Campbell 1991, 914).
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adjectival sentence (for which see above, section 1). The function of the suffix pronoun is similar to the genitival function of its Semitic counterpart, but in addition it expresses the pronominal subject in the suffix pronoun conjugation. It seems that we have here a testimony of an older case system:

Absolute pronoun - absolute case (predicates, etc.)
Enclitic pronoun - absolutive case (originally, subject of intransitives [?], patient of transitives)
Suffix pronoun - genitive and ergative (originally, agent expression with transitive verbs [?]).

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