

ERGATIVE, ABSOLUTIVE, ACCUSATIVE AND NOMINATIVE AS COMPARATIVE CONCEPTS

Martin HASPELMATH

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (Leipzig)
martin_haspelmath@eva.mpg.de

Abstract. This paper discusses the definitions of the terms *ergative*, *absolute*, *accusative* and *nominative* (as general concepts), which are often taken for granted in the literature. Several authors, notably Mel'čuk and Creissels, have criticized some of the terminological usage, but I note here that the classical definitions (in terms of alignments of S, A and P) need not be modified. The crucial point to keep in mind is that language-particular descriptive categories are distinct from comparative concepts for general linguistics.

Keywords: grammatical case, adposition, accusative, ergative, definition.

1. Overview

In this paper, I start out with definitions of the four well-known terms *ergative*, *absolute*, *accusative* and *nominative* (§ 2) and I explain and justify these definitions against the background of the literature of the last few decades. That the technical terms of linguistics should be defined clearly has been emphasized repeatedly by Igor A. Mel'čuk, and I am indebted to him for helping me to think in this direction. The specific proposals of this paper diverge somewhat from Mel'čuk's (and are more in line with the classical definitions given by Comrie 1978 and Dixon 1979), but I have found his work consistently inspiring. There has been some more recent critical discussion of the terminology by Creissels (2009; 2018), but in general, most linguists seem to assume that these terms have a uniform meaning across the discipline and that we need not spend too much energy on methodological issues such as discussing the terminology.

However, now that we increasingly recognize that language-particular descriptive categories are independent of general categories (e.g. Dryer 1997; Haspelmath 2018), the issue of the definition of general categories for comparison becomes more important, because no amount of language-particular research will guide us to the "correct" general categories. General or comparative concepts are instruments for research, not results of research, and it is an important methodological prerequisite for general linguistics to have clear terms. While highly specific terms must be explained each time they are needed, we should not need such explanations for basic terms like *nominative*, *accusative*, *absolute* and *ergative* (cf. Haspelmath 2021b).

Mel'čuk (2021: 291–293) formulates some principles of scientific definitions, among them that a definition should be applicable mechanically, based only on well-defined

concepts or primitive concepts, and should provide necessary and sufficient conditions. The definitions in (1) below should conform to these principles.

2. Proposed definitions

The terms *ergative*, *absolutive*, *accusative* and *nominative* are often used for argument markers (flags and indexes), and in (1), I give definitions of the four types of argument markers. They (and other definitions of the same terms) are discussed further in the paper.

- (1) a. An ergative argument marker is a marker that signals A-arguments, but not S- and P-arguments.
- b. An absolutive marker is a marker that signals S- and P-arguments, but not A-arguments.
- c. An accusative marker is a marker that signals P-arguments, but not S- and A-arguments.
- d. A nominative marker is a marker that signals S- and A-arguments, but not P-arguments.

These definitions thus correspond to the classical picture showing coexpression patterns among A, S and P, as seen in Figure 1. For these coexpression patterns, the term *alignment* has become widely known (since Plank 1979a: 4). Neutral alignment basically means absence of flags. In addition to the three main patterns shown here, we sometimes also find tripartite alignment, which is briefly considered in § 5.5 below.

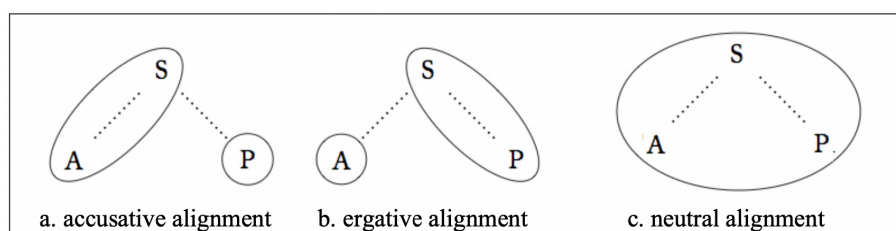


FIG. 1 – The three monotransitive alignment types.

The definitions in (1) have been widely accepted since Comrie (1978) and Dixon (1979). While the terms *nominative* and *accusative* go back to classical antiquity (Greek *onomastikē ptōsis* ‘nominative case’, *aitiatikē ptōsis* ‘accusative case’), the term *ergative* has become more widely known only since the 1950s (Bokarev ed. 1950; Žirmunskij ed. 1967; Fillmore 1968; Comrie 1973; Plank ed. 1979b), and the term *absolutive* has become fully accepted in typology only since Comrie’s and Dixon’s work in the 1970s.¹

The alignment patterns can be illustrated by transitive and intransitive clauses, as in (2a-b) from Lezgian (for *ergative* and *absolutive*), and in (3a-b) from Hungarian (for *accusative* and *nominative*).

- (2) Lezgian (Mel’čuk 1988: 212–213, adjusted)

- a. Ruš-a zi perem-∅ gazun-na.
girl-ERG my shirt-ABS tear-AOR
‘The girl tore my shirt.’
- b. Ruš-∅ aluq^h-na.
girl-ABS fall-AOR
‘The girl fell.’

¹ The role-types S, A and P were originally proposed by Dixon (inspired by Fillmore 1968: 86) and adopted by Comrie (1978), and later by many others (see Haspelmath 2011 for discussion of their definitions).

(3) Hungarian (Moravcsik 1978: 257, 259)

- a. János-Ø elült-ette a fák-at a kert-ben.
 János-NOM plant-PST.3SG.DEF the tree-ACC the garden-INESS
 ‘János planted the trees in the garden.’
- b. János-Ø átúsz-ott a tav-on.
 János-NOM swim-PST.3SG the lake-SUPERESS
 ‘János swam across the lake.’

In these examples, it is the argument flagging that shows ergative alignment (in Lezgian) and accusative alignment (in Hungarian), respectively.

All of this is uncontroversial and unproblematic, but some issues with the terminology have been noted by Mel’čuk (1997), Creissels (2009, 2018), and others. Before getting to the issues in § 5 below, we need somewhat more background on argument markers and behavioural alignment patterns (§ 3), and on the distinction between case affixes and case forms (§ 4).

3. Alignment patterns of argument markers and behavioural constructions

The definitions in (1) only concern argument markers (flags and indexes), but the terms *ergative*, *absolutive*, *accusative* and *nominative* are sometimes also used for behavioural constructions. Since Anderson (1976), it has become widely known that argument coding patterns need not coincide with behavioural patterns such as control of implicit subjects of complement clauses, or being the antecedent of reflexive pronouns. Moreover, it has become clear that alignment is often MIXED: the alignment of indexing is very often accusative even when the alignment of flagging is ergative, and the alignment of behavioural patterns is quite rarely ergative.

In this paper, I will focus on the definitions of terms for argument markers, but it is clearly very desirable that the terms for behavioural alignment should not be different from the terms for the alignment of argument markers. Thus, I will assume that definitions analogous to those in (1) can be formulated for behavioural alignment patterns, though I will not provide the definitions here (for reasons of space).

There are two types of argument markers, flags and indexes (Haspelmath 2019b). The term *flag* is a cover term for case affixes and adpositions, which is relatively recent, but for which the need was long felt. Zwicky (1992: 370) noted that “anything you can do with cases you can also do with adpositions, and vice versa”, so there is no reason not to extend the traditional Latin-based case labels also to adpositions (Haspelmath 2009: 506–507).

Outside of the generative community, there are few linguists who would want to make a deep distinction between case affixes and adpositions, because the affix-word distinction is not necessarily relevant for morphosyntactic constructions.² A flag is defined as a marker on a nominal that signals its semantic or syntactic role, i.e. a bound form that occurs adjacent to the nominal.³

² Baker (2015) appears to limit his theory of “dependent case” to ergatives and accusatives that are “realized morphologically”, though he is not very clear about this – he seems to allow for adpositional realization (2015: 18, n. 9), but does not give examples of languages with ergative or accusative adpositions. Polinsky (2016), by contrast, makes a very clear distinction between morphological ergative marking on the one hand, and ergative adpositions on the other, which she associates with different syntactic behaviours. (See also Deal 2015: § 3.2.1–2 for possible contrasts between ergative adpositions and ergative case(s).)

³ When the bound form is always adjacent to the noun, it is called a *case affix* (see Haspelmath 2021a), but when it is promiscuous (sometimes adjacent to the noun and sometimes to a modifier), it is called an *adposition*. The distinction between these two kinds of flags thus depends primarily on constituent order.

Semantic-syntactic roles can also be indicated by PERSON INDEXING, and index-sets may show ergative or accusative alignment just like flags. In (4), we see ergative alignment of indexing, and in (5), we see accusative alignment of indexing.

- (4) Yimas (Foley 1991: 193-195)
- a. Payum narman pu-n-tay.
man.PL woman.SG 3PL.ABS-3SG.ERG-see
'The woman saw the men.'
 - b. Pu-wa-t.
3PL.ABS-go-PERF
'They went.'
- (5) Italian
- a. Te lo legg-e
2SG.DAT 3SG.ACC read-3SG.NOM
'She reads it to you.'
 - b. Vien-e.
come-3SG.NOM
'She comes.'

In the glosses of (5a-b), the subject person forms are treated as “nominative” person forms, as they behave just like nominative case affixes in terms of alignment (signaling S and A arguments). This is not normally done (more often they are glossed as “subject” indexes), probably because these person forms have often been regarded as “agreement markers” in the past, not as argument markers in their own right (see Haspelmath 2013). For the same reason, object indexes are not often called “accusative agreement markers”, but when there is both a dative index and an accusative index, it is quite common to use these labels (as in Romance languages such as Italian).⁴

4. Case affixes and case forms

In most of the earlier literature, the focus is on nominal “case systems” or “case marking” on nominals, and accusative and ergative indexing plays little role. In accordance with this trend, the remainder of this paper will mostly be concerned with nominal ergative, absolutive, accusative and nominative marking.

Before proceeding to issues with the alignment terminology in § 5, I should make a comment here about the relationship between the terms *flag* and *case form*, because “case systems” are often concerned with CASE FORMS, rather than directly with case flags. Case forms usually contain a flag, but we will see that they need not.

In some languages, there are flags for all of S, A and P, e.g. in Japanese and in Niuean.⁵

- (6) Japanese (Tsujimura 2014: 134)
- a. Kodomo-ga hon-o yon-da.
child-NOM book-ACC read-PST
'The child read the book.'

⁴ Of course, the use of case-like labels for Romance object indexes is due to the fact that they transparently derive from Latin personal pronouns in the accusative and dative case. By contrast, the subject indexes in the European languages are much older and do not go back to earlier personal pronouns, as far as we know.

⁵ The older Indo-European languages are like Japanese in that in addition to an accusative suffix, there is (often) a special nominative suffix (cumulated with a number value), e.g. Latin *pleb-s* [people-NOM.SG], *hort-us* [garden-NOM.SG], *hort-i* [garden-NOM.PL], *mens-ae* [table-NOM.PL].

- b. Taroo-ga hasi-ta.
Taro-NOM run-PST
'Taro ran.'

(7) Niuean (Seiter 1978: 211)

- a. Nofo e tagata ia i Tuapa.
live ABS man that in Tuapa
'That man lives in Tuapa.'
- b. Ne lagomatai he ekekafo e tama.
PST help ERG doctor ABS child
'The doctor helped the child.'

But in many other languages, the S/A argument is unflagged, or the S/P argument is unflagged. In the examples from Lezgian and Hungarian in § 2 above, I provided a zero gloss for nominative and absolutive arguments, as if there were a "zero flag", but there is of course no such thing. A flag is a kind of form, and a form is by definition a pairing of a meaning and a shape (a signatum and a signal).

However, we can still say that Lezgian *ruš* is an "absolutive form", and Hungarian *János* is a "nominative form", if we consider the entire paradigm of relevant constructions in which the noun occurs. The noun *ruš* and the noun *János* do not bear flags, but they can be said to be "zero-coded", because the absence of a flag can be said to be meaningful. Such zero-coding is possible when there is a contrasting meaning (e.g. accusative or ergative) that is obligatorily expressed by a form. In such situations, the absence of a form is meaningful and can be taken as a kind of coding.

For inflectional systems, it is usual to talk about CASE VALUES such as accusative, and we say that Hungarian *fákat* 'tree(ACC)' in (2a) above is an accusative case form, while we say much less often that there is an accusative flag *-at*. Talking in terms of feature values has the evident advantage that we can include forms such as German *du* 'you.NOM' and *uns* 'us.ACC', which clearly express their "case values" in a suppletive way but do not contain case flags (compare the mini-paradigms *du / dich* 'you.NOM / you.ACC' and *wir / uns* 'we.NOM / we.ACC').

(8) German

- Du brauch-st uns.
you.NOM need-2SG us.ACC
'You(SG) need us.'

It is often thought that the case values that are "expressed" in various ways by case forms are primary, while the modes of expression are secondary. However, here I base my definitions on flags, because they are much more readily comparable across languages than case forms or case features. Abstract elements such as features are convenient for description when an inflectional system shows complexities, but we probably cannot extend them to adpositions (or at least this has not been done).⁶

5. Some possible issues with the proposed definitions

The classical alignment terminology in (1) has been widely adopted, but some possible issues with it have been noted in the literature. I will show here that once we realize that

⁶ Of course, one might say that there is an abstract "Dative" feature of nominals in French that is sometimes realized as a preposition (e.g. *à Jeanne* 'to Jeanne') and sometimes as a suppletive pronominal form (e.g. *lui* 'to her'). But linguists almost never think of prepositions as realizations of abstract features.

the terms are comparative concepts, the issues disappear.

5.1. *Zero case forms vs. nominative case forms*

The first issue is that in some languages, the nominative form as defined in (1) is not the same as the ZERO CASE FORM, i.e. the form that is used for pure labeling or for extragrammatical use (Creissels 2009). According to Mel'čuk (1986: 71, 1997: 136), the term *nominative case* should be defined as “the case used to NAME objects or situations, i.e. to mark a noun in isolation” (thus reflecting its etymological origin closely, cf. Latin *nomen* ‘name’). But there are two well-known types of languages in which this is not the case: (i) flagged-nominative languages like Japanese (seen in (6) above), and (ii) “marked-nominative languages”, such as Wappo. Wappo has a nominative suffix *-i*, but accusative forms of nouns do not bear a flag.

(9) Wappo (Thompson et al. 2006: 11)

- a. Mey-i tekiw'-khi?
water-NOM flow-STAT
'The water is flowing.'
- b. Ce k'ew-i ce holo:wik'a-Ø t'a-ta?
DEM man-NOM DEM snake-ACC kill-PST
'The man killed the snake.'

In languages such as Wappo where the accusative has no flag, usually the zero case form (to use Creissels's 2018 term) is not coexpressed with the nominative, but with the accusative. In Wappo, the form for ‘man’ in extragrammatical use is *k'ew*, identical to the accusative. Mel'čuk (1997: 135) finds the use of *nominative* for such flagged nominatives which contrast with a zero case “problematic” and even says that it “runs counter to many universalist theories of syntax”.⁷ But if all we are doing is define terms for comparative concepts (i.e. items in our methodological toolkit for language comparison), no theoretical issues arise. It is true, of course, that nominative forms are most commonly unflagged in the world's languages, but in order to state this as a universal tendency, we need a terminology that does not presuppose the tendency.

5.2. “Unmarked” accusative forms

Accusative case forms commonly bear an accusative flag, while nominative case forms are commonly unflagged, or “formally unmarked”. An accusative case form – such as ‘snake’ in (9b) – that is unflagged is thus surprising. Mel'čuk (1997: 135) says that it “seems problematic to label as ‘Accusative’ the morphologically basic, i.e., ‘unmarked’, form of the noun”, and finds this usage “detrimental to linguistic typology”. Similarly, Creissels (2009: 456) wants to exclude the use of *accusative* for a form that is used for pure labeling (as a citation form). But while perhaps a stereotypical inflected form is both formally and semantically (or featurally) “marked” (e.g. Kiparsky and Tonhauser 2012), there is actually no good theoretical reason for why this should be so, and the term *markedness* has many different meanings anyway (Haspelmath 2006).

In Mel'čuk (1997), the focus is on Maasai (an Eastern Nilotic language), which does not have any nominative or accusative flags. In Maasai, the nominative and accusative forms differ in tone (e.g. ‘village’: *kāŋ* ACC, *kāŋ* NOM; ‘horse’: *bártá* ACC, *bartá* NOM; Mel'čuk 1997: 134), and one may say that the accusative is “basic” in the sense that the

⁷ Mel'čuk (2021: 186–187) uses the term *subjective case* for Japanese and Korean, where nominative nominals are not unflagged (the relevant flags are Japanese *-ga*, Korean *-ka / -i*).

rules are easier to formulate if the accusative form is the input. Thus, this is a special sense of *markedness* that is not closely related to Croft's (2003) typological markedness, and it is even less clear here that there should be a problem in using the terminology that Mel'čuk wants to replace.⁸

Similar considerations seem to have prompted Dixon's (1979: 77) suggestion that "marked" nominatives which contrast with "unmarked" accusatives should be called "extended ergative" (because they are similar to ergatives in that they are "marked"). However, as Handschuh (2014: 10) noted, this terminology was not adopted by language describers or typologists such as König (2008), and in his later book, Dixon (1994: 66-67) abandoned it himself.

5.3. *Nominative-absolutive forms*

In languages that use different alignment patterns in different tense-aspect constructions, the same form of a noun ends up as both a nominative and an absolutive. For example, Kurmanji has the A-argument in the Direct case in the present tense (10a), but in the Oblique case in the past tense (10b). Conversely, the P-argument is in the Oblique case in the present, but in the Direct case in the past (Creissels 2009: 448-449; based on Blau and Barak 1999).⁹

(10) Kurmanji

- a. Ez Sînem-ê dibîn-im.
1SG.DIR Sinem-OBL see.IPFV-1SG.DIR
'I see Sinem.'
- b. Min Sînem-Ø dît-Ø.
1SG.OBL Sinem-DIR see.PFV-3SG.DIR
'I saw Sinem.'

Creissels (2009) sees this as a problem, because the Direct case in Kurmanji is both a nominative case (in 10a) and an absolutive case (in 10b). However, this would be a problem only if the definitions in (1a-d) were taken to apply directly to the description of specific languages like Kurmanji. But language-particular terminology need not be identical to comparative concept terminology. Indeed, from a comparative perspective, the Direct case is a nominative in (10a), and an absolutive in (10b), but this does not mean that it cannot be called "Direct case" (as is traditional in Iranian linguistics). If we see it as desirable to replace traditional labels by more transparent labels that match well-known comparative-concept labels, we could rename it to "nominative-absolutive case". But in any event, the fact that a language-particular case construction matches several established comparative concepts is not problematic and actually quite normal. (For example, the Eskimo "Relative case" is both an ergative case and a genitive case from a comparative perspective; it could be renamed to "ergative-genitive" case, but it could also keep its traditional name.)

5.4. *Subtypes of single-argument verbs*

In some languages, single-argument verbs do not all behave alike with respect to the flagging of their argument, and one may wonder how these differences should be dealt with in the terminological system of § 2. For example, Basque has quite a few single-argument verbs

⁸ Still another sense of *markedness* appeals to the broader vs. narrower distribution of a form. In some eastern African languages, the accusative form of nouns is more widely distributed and could thus be said to be the default or "unmarked" form (König 2008: 138; Handschuh 2014: 18).

⁹ The person indexing on the verb is with the P-argument, so it can be said to be "Direct", similarly to the "nominative" indexing in Italian in (5).

that take an Ergative subject, while most others take an Absolutive subject. The former are also called *unergative*, and the latter *unaccusative*; the contrast is illustrated in (11b-c).

(11) Basque (Creissels 2018: ex. (6))

- a. Haurr-ak ur-a ekarri du.
child-ERG water-ABS bring AUX.TR
'The child brought the water.'
- b. Ur-ak irakin du.
water-ERG boil AUX.TR
'The water boiled.' (unergative verb)
- c. Haurr-a etorri da.
child-ABS come AUX.INTR
'The child came.' (unaccusative verb)

Creissels (2018) notes that it would be very odd to say that Basque shows both accusative alignment (when comparing 11a and 11b) and ergative alignment (when comparing 11a and 11c).

The reason why linguists do not normally say this is that for determining monotransitive alignment patterns, they consider only intransitive verbs of the non-agentive change-of-state type (unaccusative verbs). Unergative verbs stay out of the comparison, just as experiential verbs are left aside. For example, we do not say that German *Mir gefällt der Plan* [to.me pleases the.NOM plan] 'I like the plan' shows an ergative experiencer argument, even though the other argument is in the same case as the intransitive subject.

The term S is thus best taken to include only unaccusative verbs (what Creissels 2018 calls "S_U"), and we should leave unergative verbs aside (cf. Haspelmath 2011: 561). This means that the comparison is somewhat narrower than is often implied, and the traditional distinction between "S_A" and "S_P" (going back to Sapir 1917) plays no role in this proposal. But it should be recalled that the definitions of § 2 are intended as comparative concepts, and comparison can never be complete, so full coverage is not important. Terminological consistency and clarity is more important, as complete coverage of the phenomena of a language will require a special set of language-particular categories anyway.

5.5. Ergative forms and ergative constructions

We saw how ergative flags (and indexes) are defined in § 2, and how ergative nominal forms are defined in § 3. But what is an "ergative construction"? This term is sometimes taken as basic, but it is in fact difficult to single out such constructions in a comparative perspective because ergative flags (on A-arguments) may cooccur not only with absolutive arguments (on P-arguments), but also with accusative arguments, in tripartite patterns such as (12) from the Pama-Nyungan language Wangkumara.

(12) Wangkumara (Blake 1977: 11)

- a. Kaṇa-ulu kalka-ṇa ṭiti-ṇaṇa.
man-ERG hit-PST dog-ACC.FEM
'The man hit the female dog.'
- b. Palu-ṇa ṇa-nyī.
die-PST I-NOM/ABS
'I died.'

Here the A-argument bears an ergative flag, the P-argument ('dog') bears an accusative flag, and the S-argument bears a "nominative / absolutive" flag. We may be reluctant to

call constructions like (12a) “ergative constructions”, because they are at the same time “accusative constructions”.¹⁰ But of course, this need not be a problem, just as it is not a problem to say that a case form is both a nominative and an absolutive. (In any event, a notion of “ergative construction” is not very important from the present perspective.)

According to Mel’čuk (2021: 134), *ergative construction* is defined as any construction whose subject shows a case other than nominative (defined as the naming form, see § 5.1), but this is not how linguists use this term. We never say, for example, that Japanese shows an ergative construction just because its subject bears a flag *-ga* (and is thus distinct from the naming form; see (6) above). Another surprising claim made by Mel’čuk (1988, 2021: 141–143) is that Lezgian (seen in (2a-b) above) does not have an ergative construction, even though it has an ergative case. The reason is that the agent (*ruš-a* in (2a)) is claimed not to be a subject, but an ergative-coded agentive adjunct (see Haspelmath (1991) for an earlier critical discussion of this proposal). Mel’čuk (2021: Chapter 3) provides a rich discussion of how to recognize subjects in different languages. This is a very contentious area of comparative grammar, and since Martinet (1972) and Foley and Van Valin (1977), the relevance of a universal subject notion has often been called into question. Fortunately, the matter does not have to be addressed here, because the definitions in (1) are based on S, A and P, not on a “subject” notion.¹¹

6. Conclusion

In this short paper, I have not reported on discoveries or made new proposals, but I focused on an important aspect of general-comparative linguists’ work: our basic terminology for core case flags (and case forms). This terminology is fairly standard, but some critical comments have been made by a number of authors (especially Mel’čuk 1997, 2006: 263–286; Creissels 2009, 2018). The purpose of this paper was to remind readers that comparative concepts are subject to different requirements than terms for language-particular categories or for hypothesized universal building blocks. As comparative concepts, the standard definitions in (1) are adequate and unproblematic – see also Handschuh (2014: § 1.4) for related discussion.

Linguists’ traditional terminology is often based on stereotypes that arose through complex historical processes, and these do not always result in very useful concepts – see, e.g., Cristofaro (2007) on the problems with the traditional term *finite*. The terms *nominative* and *accusative* derive from Classical Antiquity (Greek and Latin) and might be thought to be biased by these languages, but the definitions in (1a-b) have turned out to be cross-linguistically applicable and useful. The terms *ergative* and *absolutive* are more recent (going back to Schmidt 1902; Trombetti 1903; and Thalbitzer 1911; Dixon 1979; respectively; see Butt 2006: 154–158; Lindner 2015), but again, the definitions in (1c-d) have turned out to be applicable to languages from around the world. The terminology is standard across different schools of thought within linguistics – see Deal (2015) and Coon et al. (2017) for generative approaches to ergative patterns, which nevertheless use the same terminology as in this paper –, and once the concepts of S, A and P are understood, the definitions are easy to understand and remember.

But the simple and clear terminology for comparative purposes should not lead us to

¹⁰ Note that in idealized tripartite systems, the A-flag can be called *ergative* and the P-flag can be called *accusative*, but the S-flag cannot be called either *nominative* or *absolutive* according to the definition in (1). Such systems are quite rare, so we probably do not need a general label for it (one might use *unicative*, as the flag or form for the *unique* argument of an intransitive verb).

¹¹ A simpler definition of *subject* is simply “S or A”, as in Dixon (1994: 112).

think that it necessarily entails deep insights. DeLancey (2004: 1) is quite right to point out that such comparative concepts need not single out a “coherent typological phenomenon”. He notes that languages with ergative alignment show a wide variety of different patterns, and he fears that a collection of phenomena that merely share the ergative property might “end up with a kind of natural history exhibit, with various strange and exotic specimens on display, but no systematic result issuing from it at all” (2004: 2). Ergativity might be analogous not to “birds with talons” (important for taxonomy) or “birds that swim” (important for functional-ecological considerations), but to “birds that are blue” (interesting primarily for an amateur bird collector, but not for a scientist). In the same vein, Deal (2015: 654) emphasizes that “ergativity is not one but many phenomena”, and she sees it as a virtue of the Chomskyan approach that it offers no possibility of unified treatment of the phenomena. These critical assessments may well be right, but the terminology in (1) is compatible with them, because it is not more than terminology. Whatever deeper insights we gain will of course go far beyond clear terminology.

In a view of general linguistics that emphasizes the contrast between general (language-independent) concepts and language-particular categories, what exactly is the value of clearly defined terminology? I see it as twofold. On the one hand, technical terms that are widely used anyway should have a clear meaning, regardless of how useful they might end up being, and the terms in (1) are widely used. On the other hand, in order to test universal claims about the world’s languages, we need comparative definitions that allow us to identify phenomena uniformly. Deal (2015: 664–667) formulates six potential ergative universals, and if these are confirmed by further research, they represent an important general-theoretical finding, regardless of how they might be explained eventually. Similarly, Sauppe et al. (2021) make claims about ergative patterns and results from neurocognitive experiments, and again, these claims crucially rely on comparative concepts. Thus, the methodological importance of terminological clarity and of discussions of terminology should be evident.

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