

The Formal Syntax of Alignment Change: The Case of Old Japanese

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Within the generative literature, active alignment is widely viewed as a subtype of ergativity (Bittner & Hale 1996, Legate 2008). Legate (2008) suggests that in ergative languages [+transitive] *v* assigns inherent ergative case, while in so-called “ergative-active” languages, transitivity features are irrelevant; agent arguments are uniformly assigned inherent ergative case. However on the view that ergative languages are simply languages that assign inherent case to the external argument in Spec, *v*, active actually represent the basic type; in ergative languages, assignment of ergative case is conditioned by the distribution of the [+transitive] feature, but in active languages, there is no such condition. Further support for distinguishing ergative and active alignment comes from the contrasting behavior of Silverstein’s (1976) nominal hierarchy. While ergative marking occurs with NPs **lower** on the hierarchy, active marking picks out NPs **higher** on the hierarchy (Dahlstrom 1983, Mithun 1991). A third difference between the two alignment types, noted in the typological literature, is that active languages are more likely to be reanalyzed as nominative-accusative (Klimov 1974, 1977). We show, focusing on data from earlier Japanese, that this follows in a natural way from the treatment of active languages as assigning inherent case to both transitive and intransitive external arguments. Our empirical point of departure is evidence that Japanese underwent a shift from split active to nominative alignment. The active alignment properties of Old Japanese (8th century) are characteristic of the clause types we identify as ‘nominalized’. They are summarized in (I-IV) below.

I. Active case marking: In Old Japanese, *ga* is a genitive particle, marking both possessors of NP and subjects of nominalized clauses. *Ga* appears only on the agent argument (A) of active verbs (1a-b), and marks only NPs higher on the nominal hierarchy. Personal pronouns and definite [human] nouns such as *kimi* ‘lord’ are marked with *ga*, (1a-b), while arguments lower on the hierarchy are unmarked. The patient argument (P) of intransitive verbs is generally unmarked morphologically (1c), and never marked with *ga*.

- (1) a. itado **wo** wa **ga** pirak-am-u ni (Man’yōshū 3467, 8th c.)
door Obj I Agt open-Fut-Adn at
‘when I was about to open the door’
- b. kimi **ga** yuk-u miti (Man’yōshū 3724, 8th c.)
lord Agt go-Adn road
‘the road that my lord (you) travels’
- c. pisakwi Ø opu-ru kiywoki kapara ni (Man’yōshū 925, 8th c.)
hisagi grow-Adn clear riverbank on
‘on the clear riverbank where the hisagi grows.’

II. Active/Inactive head marking: Active (transitive and unergative) predicates are marked by the prefix *i-*, while inactive (unaccusative) predicates are marked by the prefix *sa-*.

III. Alienable vs inalienable possession: Active languages typically mark the distinction between alienable and inalienable possession (Klimov 1974:22). This distinction is expressed in the two distinct sets of pronominal forms, one marking alienable and the other marking inalienable possessors. In OJ, 1st person clitic pronouns have two different forms: *a* (inalienable) vs *wa* (alienable).

IV. Impersonal verbs: Impersonal (weather) verbs represent an important class in active languages (Bauer 2000). In OJ, the inactive prefix *sa-* appears on weather predicates (*sa-ywo fuke* ‘passing of the SA-night’, *sa-gwiri* ‘SA-foggy’ *sa-gumori* ‘SA-cloudy’ *paru sa-me*, ‘spring SA-rain’) and on inactive verbs (2). We hypothesize that *sa-* originated as a 3rd person pronoun functioning as an expletive in impersonal clauses.

- (2) a. **sa-ne-si** tumaya ni asita ni *pa* ide-tati sinopi (Man’yōshū 481, 8th c.)
sa-sleep-Pst.Adn bedroom in morning in Top leaving remembering
‘remembering, leaving the bedroom where (I) slept’
- b. kapa se ni *pa* ayu kwo **sa**-basir-i (Man’yōshū 475, 8th c.)
River shallow in Top sweetfish fry sa-run-Inf
‘the young sweetfish running in the river shallows’

In OJ, transitive nominalized clauses display another distinctive syntactic property (Yanagida 2006, 2007, Yanagida and Whitman 2008). When subject and object are both case marked, NP_O + object marker *wo* always precedes the *ga*-marked subject: [O *wo* A *ga* V] (1a). This is reminiscent of the “de-ergative” pattern (Franchetto 1990) found in Cariban languages such as Kuikuru, Panare and Makushi, where A is realized inside, but O outside VP. Gildea (1998) proposes that the de-ergative pattern originates from an object nominalization structure. The object nominalization functioned as the predicate nominal in a copular clause; the matrix subject was the notional O. The diachronic reanalysis envisaged by Gildea is [O copula [_{NP}Poss V-NMLZR]] > [O auxiliary [_{VP}A V-T/A]] (order variable). In Panare and Kuikuru, this pattern is obligatory in focus/*wh* constructions. In OJ as well, the [O *wo* A *ga* V] pattern occurs in clause types with nominalization properties, and displays active alignment properties internal to the nominalized clause. Like their Carib counterparts, these clause types are associated with clefts and *wh*-questions. We argue that prior to OJ the [O *wo* A *ga* V] construction underwent the same ‘de-ergative’ reanalysis that Gildea envisages for Cariban. We show that this is the first step on the way to the eventual nominative realignment of Japanese, further accelerated by restriction of the domain of active *ga* in early Middle Japanese.

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