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Ergativity in Indo-European

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Ergativity

It might be best to explain what an ergative language is by beginning with what it is not. Almost all Indo-European languages, including English, may be classified as nominative-accusative languages: in transitive constructions, the subject is nominative and the direct object is accusative; transitive and intransitive subjects are identical in form. In examples (1) and (2), three grammatical functions are filled by two nominatives and one accusative:

I see him.  (nom. subj. with trans. verb and acc. obj.)  (1)
He left.  (nom. subj. with intrans. verb)  (2)

Ergative languages treat these distinctions very differently. The subject or, as the terminology prefers, the agent of a transitive action is marked ergative, and the object of the action, or rather the patient, is marked absolutive. The absolutive is generally more weakly marked than the ergative; in fact it is often marked by zero. The agent of an intransitive action is not marked ergative, but rather absolutive. Ergative languages include Basque, Georgian, many aboriginal languages of Australia, and some North-American Indian languages. Example (3) and (4) are from Dyirbal, an Australian language:

Balan d’yugumbil bangul yaranggu balgan.  (3)
(classifier) woman (abs.) (class.) man (erg.) hit
The man hit the woman.
Bayi yara banin\textsuperscript{Y}u.
(classifier) man (abs.) came-here
The man came here.

Absolutive is marked here by zero, and ergative by the suffix \textit{-agu}. Thus in nominative-accusative languages, function is determined by whether a nominal element is the source of an action, whereas in ergative languages, the crux is rather whether the nominal element directly affects a patient.\textsuperscript{2} Example (5) contrasts this overlap in syntactic function.\textsuperscript{3}

\begin{itemize}
  \item nominative-accusative
  \item ergative-absolutive
\end{itemize}

This initial definition of ergative languages needs to be somewhat refined. First of all, it is an oversimplification to classify a language as either ergative-absolutive or nominative-accusative. Recent work on the typology of ergativity indicates that very often, a language may be "split-ergative," that is, some nominal features are marked ergative-absolutive, others may be neutrally marked, and still others may be marked as nominative-accusative. In fact, Silverstein (1976) has proposed a hierarchical ordering of such types of marking, as shown in example (6).\textsuperscript{4}

Although Silverstein's hierarchy is useful in establishing general tendencies, I would not insist as strongly as Rumsey (1987) on using the hierarchy to constrain reconstructions. After all, one may note by examining the top half of the chart that English disagrees with it in explicitly marking the first person pronoun, (I:\textit{me}) while marking the second singular pronoun neutrally (you:\textit{you}).\textsuperscript{5} In any case, it is worth noting that split combinations of ergative-absolutive, neutral, and nominative-accusative marking are typologically very common.

Just as many nominative-accusative languages offer an inversion of the transitive construction, the passive, many ergative languages show a construction which inverts the roles of agent and patient, the so-called
antipassive. Thus sentence (3) above may also be expressed as follows:

Bayi yara bagun d'yugumbilgu balgalanYu. (7)
(class.) man-(abs.) (class.) woman-(dative) hit-(antipassive)
The man hit the woman, the woman was hit by the man.

Here the man is no longer viewed simply as the source of an action with a patient. Instead, the absolutive marking suggests action not directly focused on a patient, while the dative marking of woman also suggests an indirect relationship with the agent. In some ergative languages, such constructions are used to indicate incomplete or partial transfer of action between agent and patient.6

**Remains of Ergativity in Indo-European**

As early as 1901, Uhlenbeck proposed that Indo-European was once an ergative language. He noted that the neuter nominative and accusative were undifferentiated and identical with the masculine accusative (singular). This form he referred to as *Passivus* or *Patiens* ('patient'). It was opposed to a form marked by -s, which he referred to as *Aktivus* or *Agens* ('agent'). Thus figure (8), the familiar paradigms for IE masculine and neuter in the nominative and accusative cases, would have arisen from an earlier paradigm shown in figure (9):

(8) masc. neut. (9) anim. inanim.
nom.-os -om
acc. -om -om

The reason why no inanimate ergative form occurs, according to Uhlenbeck, is because inanimates could not function as agents of transitive verbs.7 This matter turns out to be more complicated than Uhlenbeck suspected, and will be discussed in greater detail below.

Ergativity in early Indo-European was treated much more fully by Vaillant (1936), who elaborated Uhlenbeck's treatment of the animate and inanimate case endings and drew attention to two additional phenomena: two classes of verbal conjugation (active and middle) and patterns of suppletion in pronominal stems. Vaillant identified the ergative -s ending
as derived from an earlier ablative. He saw the -mi conjugation as a verbal noun with suffixed pronominal elements. This verbal conjugation Vaillant refers to as pseudo-transitive, derived from an earlier passive construction. With a lative object marked by -m to denote the patient, the original construction would have been something like g̣wen-mi to-m 'there is hitting by me in reference to him.' Vaillant also demonstrated that Indo-European pronouns show a split similar to the pattern in nouns. Thus, for many of the personal pronouns, the nominative is built on a different stem than the other cases, e.g. Latin ego, but mé, mihi, med, etc. Similarly, the demonstrative pronoun uses one stem, so- for animate nominative, but another, to-, for inanimate nominative-accusative, (i.e., the absolutive) and for the oblique of all genders.

Kurylowicz also treated ergativity in his 1935 discussion of nominal forms and their suffixes. Contra Uhlenbeck, Kurylowicz concluded that the historical nominative is not a continuation of the earlier ergative, but rather a transformation of the absolutive, generalized to ergative functions in transitive sentences. Although Rumsey (1987) prefers Kurylowicz' explanation of ergativity on typological grounds, many details present problems from the point of view of Indo-European reconstruction. The -m case marker, Kurylowicz suggests, is a lative (not his term) like a in Spanish veo a la hija, originating with animate beings. For Kurylowicz, the ergative case is preserved in gen.-abl. -és. The absolutive is the endingless accusative, and an old oblique case, -é, has disappeared. He suggests that the entire question needs to be considered in conjunction with problems of transitivity and voice, positing two verbal voices requiring two separate ergatives, thus ergative in -e for verbs of sensation ("he appears to me > I see him") and ergative in -s for action verbs ("he dies by me > I kill him").

In discussing contributions to the ergative theory since Vaillant and Kurylowicz, I will proceed topically rather than chronologically. All of the issues except the last, absolute constructions, have been treated previously, especially by Schmalstieg (1981) and (1986), Shields (1978/79) and (1982), and Laroche (1962). Recently, reconstructions of Indo-European as an ergative language have been criticized on typological grounds, especially by Villar (1984) and most recently by Rumsey (1987).
The reconstruction of -s as an ergative marker implies confusion or identity at one point between the ergative and the genitive-ablative (these two were undifferentiated in early Indo-European). Traces of this confusion survive, especially in the form of genitive-ablative subjects. Such constructions are attested in many Indo-European dialects. On the one hand there are genuine passive constructions in which the logical subject is marked by the genitive, as in example (10), a sentence from the Greek New Testament which, interestingly enough, retains its syntactic marking quite literally in the Gothic translation, as indeed it does in English. Here, then, the logical source of the action is denoted by a genitive:

καὶ ἔσονται πάντες διδάκτοι θεοῦ.  (10)
(kai esontai pantes didaktoi theou.)
jah waířpand allai laisidai gudis.
And all will be taught of (by) God.

More interesting are constructions like (11) in Latin, where the logical source of the action is genitive, (earlier ergative) and the patient or object is accusative (absolutive), but the verb is transitive. This construction would match closely what is proposed as a typical transitive construction in Indo-European before the rise of nominative-accusative syntax.

taedet me illius, pudet me tui, etc.  (11)
(It) bores me of him, (it) shames me of you, etc.
He bores me, I am ashamed of you, etc.

Lithuanian preserves a similar construction in which the agent is genitive, and the verbal form is the neuter passive participle:

Piemeños dúonas dúota.  (12)
of the shepherd (gen.) some bread (gen.) is given (neuter past ptc.)
The shepherd gave some bread.

The word for bread, duonas, is genitive here because of its partitive function. Similar constructions occur also in Indo-Iranian, where they are known as mama krtam constructions after the Sanskrit form. Example (13) is from Old Persian.
ima tya manā kartam. 
This is what I have done (is done of me). (Darius Behistan I.27 and passim; Kent (1953:117)

In all of these cases, the source of the action is marked as genitive. Where an object occurs, it is marked as accusative. We have then, the pattern familiar from example (3), typical of ergative languages. A closely related pattern presents the logical source of the action in the genitive case, but as a grammatical object. This construction would be similar in origin to the type suggested above by Kuryłowicz, 'he appears to me,' which then develops semantically into 'I see him' via the intermediate forms 'me see of him' and then 'I see of him.' It is this last construction which is preserved in Greek in connection with ἀκούω 'I hear,' a verb of perception, just as one would expect.17

Neuters, generally regarded as descended from an earlier category of inanimates, are also associated with ergative constructions. In Latin, archaically, and in Russian, when an inanimate functions as the subject of a transitive verb, the subject is recast as an ablative (or instrumental in Russian, which lacks an ablative). The object remains accusative.

si hominem fulminibus occisit...18
If it kills a man by thunder, if thunder kills a man...

ubilo čeloveka derevom.
It killed the man by a tree, a tree killed the man.

Hittite preserves a similar construction, but it is attested much more widely and regularly. In fact, the Hittite examples should be regarded as the oldest historically attested evidence of ergative syntax in Indo-European. Laroche (1962) has documented numerous occurrences for over 70 neuter nouns in Hittite which fit into this pattern:
nu-wa-mu apat watar pešt en.  

(16) to me that water give (Give me that water.)

parkunummas-wa kuiš witenanza eššar ... parkunuzi.  

(17) of purification which water blood purifies  

(Which water of purification purifies the blood.)

In the first example, watar, an -r-/-n- stem, appears in the accusative singular. In the second example, from the same sentence, watar is used as the subject of a transitive verb. The suffix -anz (from suffix -nt-) is added to the oblique stem witen-. Interestingly, the suffixed neuter is now modified by nom. animate kuiš. The semantic metaphor inherent in an inanimate agent is therefore matched by a transformation of grammatical category. In numerous examples from the Hittite corpus, it can be shown that when an inanimate, neuter noun functions as the subject of a transitive verb, the suffix -anz is added.

The Hittite ergative suffix itself is quite interesting. Aside from the similarity to regular Hittite ablative in -az or -z, both with original final -t, the form -ants is highly suggestive of the ending of the present participle as well as the oblique form of -r-/n- stem neuters as in Greek gen. sgl. ὅδερτος < ὅδε-ντ-ος. I would suggest that such Greek forms with -nt- instead of -n- as the oblique of -r- may in fact be archaic, and that the three forms, Hittite ergative -anza, Greek -ntos as genitive of inanimate -r-/n- stems, and the Indo-European present participial suffix -nt- are closely related. In each case, the semantic notion is 'the one doing.' In the case of the participle, it is the one doing the action expressed by the verbal root. In the case of the Greek and Hittite forms, it is an inanimate agent which is nevertheless performing the action expressed by the transitive verb of the sentence.19

Absolute Constructions

Indo-European offers another constructions in which the subject appears in an oblique case, frequently the genitive or ablative, and which to my knowledge has not been previously viewed as a survival of ergative syntax. This is the so called absolute construction, attested in most dialects. After a
brief digression on several problems associated with the absolute constructions, I will conclude by suggesting how the absolutes may have developed from earlier ergative constructions, especially considering some forms attested in Indo-Iranian and Armenian.

Absolute constructions are attested in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Avestan, Baltic and Slavic, Germanic, and Armenian. Aside from Albanian and Tocharian, both of which significantly restructured their case systems, and Hittite, where the evidence is not conclusive, only in Old Irish are absolute constructions not attested. They typically provide background information to the sentence, and are almost inevitably translated by a subordinate clause introduced by such words as 'when, after, although, because, etc.' Absolute constructions present several problems, three of which I will briefly discuss here. Can an absolute construction be reconstructed for Indo-European; if so, what was the case; and how did the construction arise?

Suggestions that absolute constructions arose independently in the various dialects are usually based on the diversity of cases represented in the historical languages. This is not really a serious objection. Sanskrit alone presents two absolute constructions, locative and genitive, but one would hardly propose that they must have therefore arisen independently within Sanskrit. In fact, Holland (1986) points out that in almost Indo-European dialects, absolute constructions occur in more than one case. Far more plausibly, several closely related constructions co-existed, or some dialects have diverged from the most commonly attested forms, genitive and ablative.

There is then great diversity among the attested languages in regard to the case of the absolute construction. Furthermore, almost all of the dialects permit absolute constructions using a variety of cases, although this is generally not fully appreciated by the traditional grammars. Determining an original case for the absolute constructions is not easy. In fact, one must almost certainly conclude that more than one case is involved. Beginning with Sanskrit, one could reconstruct genitive or locative, since both forms occur. Since locative absolutes are attested only in Indo-Iranian, however, they probably do not reflect the original construction. The Greek genitive absolute could continue either a genitive or an ablative, both cases having conflated into the genitive in Greek. On the other hand, the Latin ablative
absolute could continue an ablative or an instrumental. Baltic, Slavic, and Germanic attest a dative absolute. Germanic could be either ablative, instrumental, or true dative, while Balto-Slavic could represent either ablative or dative. Armenian is unambiguously genitive. It should be clear from the preceding that although concensus is not possible, attempts at reconstruction of the original case should center on the ablative (Latin, Germanic, and Balto-Slavic) and genitive (Greek, Armenian, and Indo-Iranian). As I have mentioned, in the earliest phases of Indo-European, genitive and ablative were undifferentiated.

Several attempts have been made to demonstrate that absolute construction are late, secondary formations. Most prominent among these is Brugmann's (1904) "Verschiebung der syntaktischen Gliederung." (Shift in syntactic division). According to this explanation, absolute constructions began in situations where the subject of the absolute could also be understood as the object of a verb in the main clause:

(18) τοῦ δ' ἵθυς μεμαώτος ἄκόντισε Τυδέος νιός
tou d'ithys memaotos akontise Tydeos huios
The son of Tydeos shot at him as he was rushing forward. (Iliad 8.118)

In this case, τοῦ δ' ἵθυς μεμαώτος could be interpreted either as a genitive absolute or as supplying an object to ἄκόντισε, which takes the genitive case. After phrases of this type were reinterpreted as absolute, the grammatical category would have become established, and non-ambiguous examples would have spread from this point. Holland (1986) has argued convincingly against this interpretation. Examples (19) - (25) provide further illustrations of absolute constructions in various Indo-European dialects.

(19) id ratibus ac linitibus intctis transibant De Bello Gallico 1
They were crossing this (river) by tying together rafts and boats.

(20) ταυτ' ἐπράξθη Κόνωνος στρατηγοῦντος (Greek)
taut' eprakhthe Kononos stratêgountos.
These things were done while Conon was in command.
havamaha Indra prayati adhvaré

We invoke Indra as the sacrifice proceeds (Sanskrit: RigVeda. 1.16.3)

andanahita Ṛvan waurpanamma, Ṛvan qasaggq sauil, berun du imma allans Ṛvan ubil habandans jah unhulpons habandans. (22)

When it was night, when the sun went down, they brought to him all the sick and possessed. (Gothic: Mark 11.32)

iti emu skvozē sēlnē, i vůstrūzaakhq učenici ego klasy i ědēakhq (23)

While he was going across the fields, his disciples plucked ears of grain and ate. (Old Church Slavic: Luke 6.1)

Bralei seseris imkiet mani ir skaitikiet,
Jr tatai skaitidami permanikiet.
Brothers and sisters, take heed to me and read,
And when this is read, consider (it). (Lithuanian: The Catechism of Martynas Mažvydas, 1-2 (written 1547))

Ew mteal (sc. nora) i Kap'arabum mateaw aē na hariwrapet mi. (25)
(Matthew 8.5)
And as (he) was coming to Capernaum, a centurion approached him.27

The Armenian genitive absolute is closely related to the periphrastic perfect in the same language. Benveniste (1952) notes "l'étrangeté de cette construction ....énigmatique."28 The chief difficulty he finds is that with intransitive verbs, the subject is nominative, but with transitive verbs, the subject is genitive and the object is accusative, thus:

Yisus ekeal ēr.
Jesus came.

z-ayn nšan arareal ēr nora.
This miracle done is of him, he performed this miracle.

Given the examples of genitive subject as a relic of ergative syntax, these forms should not be so startling. Particularly interesting here is the nearly
identical absolute construction in Armenian, which differs in deleting the conjugated verb 'to be,' and in using the genitive for both transitive and intransitive constructions. Significantly, the participle does not agree with its subject in the genitive case, although the Armenian participle does inflect for case. Another important feature of the Armenian construction is its role in the sentence. Its subject can differ from the subject of a main clause, as is obligatory for other absolute constructions, but it much more frequently agrees with a main subject, as below:

Oroc tareal z-t'ul't-n, patahecin nma j-Erusal'em. (28)
they taking the-letter, met him in-Jerusalem
They took the letter and met him in Jerusalem.

This raises an interesting question. Does the Armenian genitive absolute reflect more accurately the state of the earliest absolute constructions, or is it rather a later development? If the answer were based only on a comparison of the absolute constructions in various dialects, the Armenian form would of course be considered secondary, since it varies considerably from the others. However, given several other archaic Indo-European constructions considered earlier in this paper, the Armenian forms may actually reflect a more archaic state than other absolute constructions, one midway between the mama krtam construction of Indo-Iranian and the absolute constructions of the other Indo-European languages. The earliest ergative constructions had the form:

NP-erg. V NP-abs. (29)

where the first nominal expression appeared in the ergative, later confused or conflated with the genitive-ablative. The SVO order is arbitrary here. The verb was very weakly inflected, quite possibly in origin a verbal noun, and very much like the neuter -to participle in the Lithuanian example (12). The verb was typically transitive, with direct object, as would be expected if the subject were ergative. The final nominal form was absolutive, probably marked as zero in the earliest periods, and perhaps assimilated to lative -m marking at a later time. The expression did not function as background or subordinate information to a main clause.

The Armenian absolute construction differs in only one respect from the
description above: the verb may be transitive or intransitive. All other Indo-European absolute constructions agree in this detail. It is the only significant difference between the Armenian absolute construction and the other examples with genitive-ablative subject discussed earlier.\textsuperscript{29} Even here, we may see in the periphrastic perfect an earlier stage in which genitive was associated much more closely with transitivity.

It seems therefore quite attractive to consider the Armenian absolute construction as an archaic remnant of an earlier Indo-European ergative construction. The non-finite nature of the absolute constructions in the historical dialects is derived from the uninflected status of the early Indo-European verb as preserved in example (12). That such verbal constructions could nevertheless function in independent clauses is however clear not only from this Lithuanian example, but also from the \textit{mama kψtam} constructions of Indo-Iranian and the genitive absolute of Armenian. On the other hand, it is the non-finite, nominal character of the verb in such expressions that led to their eventual status as absolutes in the later Indo-European dialects, after the finite verb had seen the enormous development of distinctions in person, number, tense, voice and mood so evident in Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit.

Notes

1. Examples 3, 4, and 7, as well as the examples in fn. 3, are derived from Comrie (1981: 106, 108).

2. The distinction is so basic that it affects the notion of what the subject of a sentence is. As Comrie (1981) points out, the definition of subject as "the intersection of agent and topic," which works so well in nominative-accusative languages, simply does not describe the fundamental syntactic processes of an ergative language.

3. Subject deletion in coordination provides an interesting illustration of this grouping. In English, given the following sentence with deletion of subject in the second clause:

\textbf{The man hit the woman and came here.}

the subject of the second clause can only be \textit{the man}. But in an ergative language, since the subject of an intransitive verb is absolutive, in the "same" sentence, the implied subject of the second clause must \textit{the woman}:

\textbf{Balan dψyugumbi bψngul yarangul balgan, baninyu.}
\textit{The man hit the woman and (the woman) came here.}
4. The chart is from Rusmey (1987: 27)

5. It is irrelevant that you is historically plural in English. The methodology of typology requires us to ignore historical considerations, and to treat modern and earlier forms of English as two or more separate languages. Alternatively, if one accepts the results of typology too literally, it means that when a second plural pronoun is reinterpreted as singular (as happened in English) then during the process, a mark distinguishing the nominative and oblique forms must develop. Clearly, this did not happen, and one suspects that historical processes regularly ignore typological constraints with malicious glee.

6. Schmalstieg (1981) quoting Anderson (1976) gives the following two contrastive examples, illustrating ergative and accusative usages respectively, from Bzhedukh, a West Circassian language:

- c'Yāaālə-m c'gʷ-ar #-ya-zʷa.
- boy (erg.) field (abs.) 3 sg.-3 sg.-plows
- The boy is plowing the field.

- c'Yāaα-r c'gʷ-em maa-zʷa
- boy (abs.) field (obl.) 3 sg.-plows
- The boy is trying to plow the field, the boy is doing some plowing, in the field.

7. Uhlenbeck further connects nominative -s with demonstrative so, suggesting the origin of the case marker as a post-positive definite particle. He also suggests a connection between thematic noun stems and patient, a notion taken up recently by Schmalstieg (1981) (see below fn. 14). Uhlenbeck further notes, in connection with the idea of neuter, that names of fruits in Indo-European are neuter, whereas the tree (the agent in the process) is generally a masculine (ergative) noun formed from the same stem.

8. Vaillant saw the -mi conjugation as a verbal noun suffixed in the first and second persons by pronominal elements (thus gʷhensi 'you hit' from earlier gʷhent-t-i, with t > s, and gʷhenmi 'I hit' from gʷhent-m-i, etc.) The third singular of the verb was originally simply the uninflected verbal noun, perhaps with deictic -i, the third plural was a much later addition. This verbal conjugation Vaillant refers to as pseudo-transitive, derived from a passive construction.

9. "La forme du nominatif sing. masc.-fémin. (à allongement+s) prouve qu'il y a eu remplacement d'une construction à ablatif ou à un autre cas oblique par une construction à ancien nominatif (ancien «c. passif»), ou, ce qui revient au même, extension de la forme du sujet des phrases nominales et intransitives au dépens de l'ancien «c. actif» fonctionnant dans les phrases transitives." Kurylowicz (1935) 162.

10. Rumsey prefers Kurylowicz chiefly because his approach does not require postulating that IE neuters could not function as ergatives. Typologically, one finds, quite in contrast to Uhlenbeck's (1901) claim, that the neuters are in fact particularly
susceptible to ergative marking (see below, fn. 17).

11. Kurylowicz’ explanation of \textit{poteř}, for example, with \textepsilon as a reflex of lengthened vowel ergative, is doubtful; much more probable is loss of \textit{s} after \textit{r}, or of the cluster \textit{rs}, with resulting compensatory lengthening, and subsequent restoration of \textit{-r} by paradigmatic analogy.

12. Kurylowicz proposes that the form \textit{-om} cannot be correctly interpreted until the distribution of the two neuter markers in Indo-European, \textit{-o} and \textit{-om}, is settled, especially in Anatolian and Balto-Slavic.

13. The two methods of forming the ergative case (lengthening and \textit{-s}) represent another problem for Kurylowicz’ explanation.

14. For a more recent discussion of ergativity and transitivity, see Schmalstieg (1981).

15. The main thrust of the objections is based on the hierarchical nature of nominal elements subject to ergative, neutral, or nominative-accusative marking. Three major problems emerge here. First, as I indicated very briefly above, in fn. 5, the hierarchy may not yet be sufficiently defined (although Rumsey (1987: 28) strongly maintains the contrary). Secondly, it may well be that reconstruction of Indo-European ergativity can be redirected and refined by typological considerations. Thirdly, when historical reconstruction and typology do conflict, one must often simply choose between the two, admittedly on the basis of background, training, and preference. I acknowledge my preference to the historical approach, and suggest two articles in defence of this approach, Dunkel (1981) and Schlerath (1987).

16. The \textit{-to} verbal form, which functions here as a "finite verb" in spite of its usual nominal connections (as the marker of the past passive participle in Indo-Iranian, Balto-Slavic, Greek and Latin, and Germanic), is of some interest. It may well be such a form, or this very form, which served as a transitional form between nominal ergative sentences such as \textit{AGENT-os VERB-to PATIENT-#} (there is/was action as expressed by \textit{VERB} done by \textit{AGENT} to \textit{PATIENT}) and the later attested IE construction \textit{SUBJECT-os VERB-\textit{tu} OBJECT-om}. The earlier form and sense of the verb would then have survived in a nominal expression of the verb, the participle.

17. It has been noted for example by Schmalstieg (1986) that this Greek construction, which finds parallels in Vedic and Slavic, requires a genitive animate object but an accusative inanimate object. This is not as inviting as it would seem at first, and we should not interpret it, as did Uhlenbeck nearly a century ago, as due to the inherent nature of inanimates which prohibits their being felt as the source of a transitive action. After all, the accusative object functions here grammatically in a manner identical to an animate ergative: whether or not an inanimate is by nature typically the source of an action with a patient, it is here \textit{de facto} such an agent. Second, Rumsey (1987) has pointed out that inanimates are very low on Silverstein’s hierarchical scale. If any element above marks for ergative, then inanimates will mark for ergative. Contrary to expectation then, inanimates are \textit{particularly susceptible} to ergative marking if they function as agents of transitive actions (see Rumsey 1987: 28-29, 31)). And finally, we shall shortly see that one Indo-European
dialect, Hittite, actually preserves an ergative marker for inanimates. How is the genitive-accusative distinction then to be explained? Schmalstieg (1986: 167), suggests that this construction reflects an original "agentive genitive" case for the later genitive, with absolutive marking for the later nominative. As the system was remodeled from ergative-absolutive to nominative-accusative, "the nominative subject became the agent and the original agentive genitive came to be interpreted as a special kind of object... The genitive was either reinterpreted as bearing special meaning (in Slavic, a partitive) with verbs of perception or else the genitive replaced completely by the accusative case." Admittedly, this explanation is not entirely satisfactory.

18. Ernout (1966: 112). Ernout emmends fulminibus to fulmen Iovis to avoid the ablative subject.

19. This explanation would require, of course, that the -nt- of the Greek oblique cases originated in the genitive-ablative and spread from there to the other cases by paradigmatic analogy.

20. Hittite is generally not thought of as attesting absolute constructions. Holland (1986: 177-9), who sees nominative absolutes as important in the development of oblique absolutes, does however give examples of nominative absolutes in Hittite.

21. Similarly, Old Irish lacks a true infinitive. The heavy use of the verbal noun, which no doubt replaced the infinitive, may likewise be responsible for the loss of absolute constructions.

22. Holland (1986: 165-6) summarizes several of these arguments. They rest chiefly on the diversity of case in the attested languages. More recently, the fact that Hittite does not attest an oblique absolute construction (although it does attest a nominative absolute, see Holland (1986: 177-9) has added evidence to these views.

23. See below, fn. 25

24. This is the view of several authors cited by Holland (1986: 165-6), notably Wackernagel, Meillet and Vendryes.

25. Holland (1986) gives examples from practically every dialect to show that within a given language, the absolute construction could be expressed by more than one case.

26. Sommer (1931: 104), Schwyzer and Debrunner (1953: 398), Chantraine (1953: 324) and Smyth (1920: 461) argue similarly. Delbrück (1888) presents a similar argument for the Sanskrit locative absolute. Here the explanation is obviously more forced, since ambiguous examples such as the genitive construction above are truly rare for the locative in Sanskrit.

27. Jensen (1959: 135) offers only this one example from early (New Testament) Armenian (Mt. 8.5), with several later examples from Movses Khorenatsi. Actually, Armenian genitive absolutes in which the subject of the absolute differs from the subject of the main clause are extremely rare, and could probably be entirely explained as due to Greek influence. However, absolutes which agree with the subject
of the main clause are very common.

28. Benveniste (1952: 57). Benveniste further notes that Caucasian influence seems to have played no part in the formation of the construction.

29. One other minor difference is that while other Indo-European dialects form absolute constructions from at least two participles, past and present, Armenian uses only the past participle in -eal to form absolutes. A possible explanation is that either the construction originated with the past participle and spread to the present in the other dialects (which is not as unlikely as it might sound at first, given the pivotal role of -to verbals in this process, discussed above) or that Armenian has lost the present absolute construction. None of the several other participial formations in Armenian correspond formally to the IE -nt participle.
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