Ergativity in Punjabi

Asher John

Abstract: This paper is about ergativity in Punjabi. Punjabi shows morphological split ergativity. The ergative case marking in Punjabi is split and depends upon the aspect of the verb and person of the agent. The data in this paper is from Majhi dialect. Different dialects in Punjabi have different instances of ergativity and hence the analysis presented in this paper cannot be applied to all the dialects of Punjabi.

Introduction: Punjabi is a New Indo-Aryan language (Bhattia 1993, Tolstaya 1981). The dialects which are traditionally recognized both by researchers and common man on the street are numerous, Majhi, Doabi Malwi, Puwadhi are considered to be the main dialects of Punjabi. My data in this paper will consist of examples from Majhi dialect. Majhi is considered the most prestigious and widely spoken dialect of Punjabi. (Bhattia 1993, Dulai 1989, Tolstaya 1981).

Punjabi has been in literary use since the 11th century. Punjabi is primarily written in three distinct scripts (Gurmukhi, Devnagri, and Perso-Arabic). (Bhattia 1993, Kaul & Bala 1992). Punjabi as a tonal language is unique among its sister languages, according to Professor Bhattia “A unique feature of the language is that, along with Lahanda and western Pahari dialects, it is the only modern Indo-European language spoken in South Asia which is tonal in nature” (Bhattia 1993, pp. xxv). “Punjabi is a Subject-Object-Verb language. Its word order is fairly fixed. Interrogative or other sentence types do not induce any word order changes. The verb generally occurs with the subject. Punjabi shows split ergativity (Butt 2001). In transitive perfective sentences, where the subject is overtly or underlyingly marked with the ne postposition (ergative marker), the verb agrees with the object” (Bhattia 1993, pp. xxvii). “Word formation in Punjabi is vocalic as well as consonantal morphophonemic adjustments are made; it primarily uses
prefixes and suffixes to arrive at inflectional and derivational word classes. Nouns are generally inflected for number, gender and case” (Bhattia 1993, pp xxviii)

Ergativity is a common feature of NIA languages and many of these languages show one or other kind of ergativity. Mostly these languages show aspect based split ergativity (Bhatt 2007, Butt 2004). Punjabi shows both aspect and person based split ergativity.

1.1 Person Based Ergativity

Although case marking on pronouns in Punjabi is similar to that of nouns, personal pronouns have more case markings than nouns. Case marking in Punjabi is carried out by means of postpositions (Bhattia 1993). Case marking on Pronouns and nouns in a perfective and non perfective sentence is given in the tables 1.1 and 1.2 respectively.

**Case Marking on Punjabi pronouns and nouns in perfective sentences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Person</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Person</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Person</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Pl.</td>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Pl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>mɛ:-∅</td>
<td>asii-∅</td>
<td>tuu-∅</td>
<td>tusii-∅</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>mɛ:-nu</td>
<td>saa-nu</td>
<td>tai-nu</td>
<td>tuaa-nu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>mɛ:-∅</td>
<td>asii-∅</td>
<td>tuu-∅</td>
<td>tusii-∅</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.1**

The ergative marker *ne* does not occur with the first and second person pronouns in Agent position but it does occur with the third person pronouns and nouns in this position. Third person
pronouns show different degrees for proximity and distance but they are also marked differently for cases. All three functions subject, patient, and agent of the third person pronoun are marked differently from each other. Table 1.2 shows case markings on both proximate and remote third person pronouns in a perfective sentence.

Case markings on 3rd Person pronouns in a perfective sentence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Proximate</th>
<th>Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Pl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>e-nu</td>
<td>enaa-nu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>e-ne</td>
<td>enaa-ne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.2**

Punjabi exhibits split ergativity and only third person pronouns, common nouns, and proper nouns in Agent Position are marked for ergative but these nouns and pronouns are marked for ergativity only when the main verb of the clause is in perfective aspect/tense (Bhattia 1993, Butt 2004, Bhatt 2007). So the ergativity in Punjabi is not only dependent on person but also on the aspect of the transitive verb. Table 1.3 shows case marking on nouns and pronouns in non-perfective sentences.
Ergativity in Punjabi

Case Marking on Punjabi pronouns and nouns in non-perfective sentences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>1st Person</th>
<th>2nd Person</th>
<th>3rd Person</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Pl.</td>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Pl.</td>
<td>Animate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>ⱓː-Ø</td>
<td>asii-Ø</td>
<td>tuu-Ø</td>
<td>tusii-Ø</td>
<td>O-Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>mː:-nu</td>
<td>saa-nu</td>
<td>tai-nu</td>
<td>tuaa-nu</td>
<td>O-nuu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>mː:-Ø</td>
<td>asii-Ø</td>
<td>tuu-Ø</td>
<td>tusii-Ø</td>
<td>O-Ø</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.3

Punjabi exhibits split ergativity and this is evident from the fact that only nouns and 3rd person pronouns are marked for the ergativity. Another fact in Punjabi grammar is that verb usually agrees with the subject regarding number and gender but in transitive perfective sentences the verb agrees with object regarding number and gender, this fact can be seen in the following sentences.

1. Baboo suta ai.
   Baboo (a male name) sleep (m/s) present is.
   Baboo is sleeping.

2. Baboo kataab paRda ai.
   Baboo book (f/s) read (m/s) present is.
   Baboo reads a book.

3. Baboo-ne kataab paRi si
   Baboo-erg book (f/s) read (f/s) was.
Baboo read a book.

4. *Baboo-ne kataab paRda ai.

   *Baboo-erg book (f/s) read (m/s) present is.

5. *Baboo kataab *paRdi ai

   *Baboo-erg book (f/s) read (*f/s) present is.

Sentences 1-5 show the contrast between case marking in perfective and non-perfective transitive sentences in Punjabi. These sentences also show the variations in verb-subject and verb-object agreement in transitive perfective and transitive non-perfective sentences. Sentence 1 is a non-perfective intransitive sentence and in this sentence verb agrees with the subject. Sentence 2 is a transitive non-perfective and in this sentence verb agrees with the agent and agent is not marked for the ergativity. Sentence 3 is a transitive perfective sentence and in this sentence agent of the transitive verb is marked for ergativity and the verb agrees with the object in gender and number. The object kataab is a feminine noun and hence the feminine inflection on the verb ‘read’. Sentence 4 & 5 are incorrect because in sentence 4 the agent of a non-perfective transitive verb is marked for ergativity. Sentence 5 is incorrect because the verb of a non-perfective sentence agrees with the object. The same phenomenon can be seen in sentences 6-8. In sentence 6 the intransitive non-perfective verb agrees with the subject in gender and number. The transitive non-perfective verb of sentence 7 agrees with the agent in number and gender, but the transitive perfective verb of sentence 8 agrees with the direct object in gender and number. Sentence 9 is incorrect because in this sentence verb of a perfective transitive sentence agrees with the agent in number and gender.
   Sara (a female name) sleep (f/s) present is.
   Sara is sleeping.

7. Saraa paNi peendi ai
   Sara water (m/s) drink (f/s) present is.
   Sara drinks water.

8. Saraa-ne paNi pita si.
   Sara-erg water (m/s) drink (m/s) past was.
   Sara drank water.

   * Sara-erg water (m/s) drink (*f/s) past was

Table 1.1 shows that postposition *nuu* ‘to’ is suffixed to the pronouns to derive oblique/dative/accusative form, usually this postposition is only suffixed to pronouns and animate nouns. The postposition *nuu* is usually not affixed to inanimate nouns in patient position, the occurrence of this postposition with inanimate nouns in patient position functions as definitizer (Bhattia 1993).

10. Baboo-ne kataab vekhii si
    Baboo-erg book (f/s) see (f/s) (pst) was.
    Baboo (a male name) saw a book.

11. Baboo-ne kataab-nuu vekhiaa si
    Baboo-erg book (f/s) (accus) see (m/s) (pst) was.
    Baboo saw the book.
The difference between sentence 10 and 11 is very informative and subtle. In S10 the agent of the perfective verb is marked with the ergative case marker *ne*, but the patient, which is an inanimate object, is not marked with the *nuu* postposition, which usually occurs as a dative/accusative case marker. In Punjabi the verb usually agrees with the Subject in gender and number but this does not happen in transitive perfective sentences as is evident from sentence 10, here verb agrees with the direct object of the verb. Postposition *nuu* is usually not affixed to inanimate objects/patients of a verb but when it is added to an inanimate object/patient it makes it a definite noun. An effect of the postposition *nuu* on the verb is that it motivates a gender change on the verb i.e. when post position *nuu* is added to an inanimate object/patient the verb is always marked for the masculine gender irrespective of the gender of the subject or object. In sentence 11 where *nuu* is affixed to the patient of the verb as a definitizer the verb is marked for the masculine gender although the object is a feminine noun and in Punjabi gender on verb in transitive perfective sentences usually agrees with the object. The fact is shown in the examples given below.

12. Saraa-ne cha chakhi si
    Saraa-erg tea (f/s) taste (f/s) past was.
    Sara (a female name) tasted tea.

In sentence 12 like sentence 10 the gender marking on the verb agrees with the gender of the object (tea), which is a feminine noun. The things get really interesting for the *nuu* postposition and its effect on gender marking on the verb in sentence 13. In sentence 13 both Subject and object are feminine nouns but the verb is marked for the masculine gender (which is not a usual phenomenon in Punjabi, the verb in Punjabi agrees with the subject/agent in gender in all instances except in transitive perfective sentences where it agrees with the object as is evident
from sentences 3 and 8). But in sentence 13 the verb is marked for the masculine gender and this change can only be attributed to *nuu* postposition.

13. Saraa-ne cha-nuu chakhia si.

Saraa-erg tea (f/s)-dative taste (m/s) pst was.

Sara tasted the tea.

This fact shows that postposition *nuu* not only functions as definitizer on inanimate objects but also affects the gender marking on the verb.

It is also evident from tables 1.1 and 1.3 that in first and second person pronouns the case marking is NOM/ACC irrespective of the aspect and tense of the verb. 1st & 2nd person pronouns are marked for the case only when they occur as objects of a transitive verb. The following sentences show that ergativity in Punjabi is not split on the base of aspect only but also shows the split in relation to the person of the pronouns.

14. mc: sutta si

I (m) sleep (m/s) past was.

I was asleep.

15. tuu jagdaa si

You (m/s) wake (m/s) past was.

You were awake.

16. O betha si

He sit (m/s) past was.

He was sitting.
17. 

I (m/f s) you (Dative) beat(pst) was.

I beat you.

18. 

You (m/f s) I (dative) (m/f s) beat (pst) was.

You beat me.

19. * 

*I (m/f s)-erg Baboo (dative) bread/food give(pst) was.

20. * 

*You (m/f s)-erg Baboo (dative) bread/food give(pst) was.

21. 

He/she (erg) I (m/f s) (dative) beat (pst) was.

He/she beat me.

22. 

Sara gave bread/food to Baboo.

23. 

Goat-erg two kids (m/p) give (m/P)(past) was.
The goat gave birth to two kids.

The examples 14-23 show that only third person pronouns, proper nouns, and common nouns can be marked for the ergativity in a transitive perfective sentence. Sentences 14-16 are perfective but intransitive hence none of the subjects of these sentences is marked for the ergativity. Sentences 17-18 are perfective transitive but the agents are not marked for the ergativity because the agents in these sentences are 1st and 2nd person pronouns. When 1st and 2nd person pronoun are marked for ergativity it results in incorrect sentences (19-20). This generalization is true only for Majhi dialect of Punjabi, in some other dialects 1st and 2nd person pronouns are marked for ergativity. In Urdu and Hindi 1st and 2nd person are also marked for ergativity in transitive perfective sentences. Another fact, which is evident from the above given examples, is that all the sentences, which were marked for the ergativity, were perfective in aspect/tense. The examples given below show that Punjabi exhibits NOM/ACCU case patterns in non-perfective sentences.

24. mc: tai-nu kuttaa ga

   I (m/s) you (Dative) beat(fut) will (m/s).

   I will beat you

25. tu mc:-nu kuttai ga.

   You (m/ s) I (dative) (m/f s) beat (fut) will (m/s).

   You will beat me.

26. O- Ø mc:-nu kuttai ga.

   He I (m/f s) (dative) beat (fut) will(m/s).
He will beat me.

27. Saraa Baboo-nu roti deve gi.

Saraa Baboo (dative) bread/food (m/s) give (fut) will (f/s).

Saraa will give food to Baboo.


Goat two kids (m/p) give (fut) will (f/s).

The goat will give birth to two kids.

29. *O-ne mē:-nu kuttai ga.

*He-erg I (m/f s) (dative) beat (fut) will(m/s).

30. *Sara-ne Baboo-nu roti deve gi.

*Sara-erg Baboo (dative) bread/food give (fut) will (f/s).


*Goat two kids give (fut) will (f/s).

The examples show that when the aspect is not perfective then Punjabi exhibits NOM/ACCU case marking system. Sentences 29-31 are incorrect because Agents of the transitive verb are marked for ergativity in non-perfective sentences. The gents in non-perfective sentences are not marked for ergativity.

Another pattern which occurs in Punjabi is the inflection of masculine proper nouns marked for ergativity and ending with an [aa] vowel. This inflection only occurs in transitive perfective sentences and there is no phonological motivation for this inflection. This phenomenon is shown in the following examples.
32. Munaa kar jave ga.
   Munaa (a male name) home (m/s) go (fut) will (m/s).
   Munaa will go home.

33. Munaa kar gia si
   Munaa home (m/s) go (m/s) past was.
   Munaa went home.

34. Munai-ne roti khadi si
    Munai-erg bread (f/s) eat (f/s) past was.
    Muna ate bread.

35. Muna roti khave ga.
    Muna bread (f/s) eat (future) will (m/s)
    Muna will eat bread.

The inflection on the proper noun can be seen in sentence 34. The proper noun Munaa is a male name and is always used as Munaa. In sentences where proper noun Munaa acts as the ergative agent of a perfective sentence the last [aa] vowel is changed into [ai] before the ergative marker as is evident from example 34. This change in the last vowel of the proper noun Munaa also happens in this noun when it is marked for the dative case with the postposition nuu (example 36). This change that occurs because of the nuu postposition is also limited to male proper nouns ending with [aa] vowel.

36. Saraa-ne Munai-nuu roti diti si.
    Saraa-erg Munaa-dative bread (f/s) give (f/s) past was.
Saraa gave bread to Munaa.

37. *Munaa-ne roti khadi si
*Munaa-erg bread (f/s) eat (f/s) past was.

The examples 37 is incorrect because here the last vowel of the proper noun Munaa is not changed into [ai] from [aa]. The inflection, which is triggered by ergative marker ne and dative marker nuu in male proper nouns ending with [aa] vowel, does not take place in feminine proper nouns ending in [aa] vowel. The examples given below show this fact.

38. Zaraa kar jave gi
Zaraa (a female name) home (m/s) go (fut) will (f/s).
Zaraa will go home.

39. Zaraa-ne roti khadi si
Zaraa-erg bread (f/s) eat (f/s) was.
Zaraa ate bread.

40. Zaraa roti khave gi.
Zaraa bread (f/s) eat (fut) will (f/s).
Zaraa will eat bread.

41. *Zarai-ne roti khadi si
*Zarai-erg bread (f/s) eat (f/s) was.

Sentence 41 is incorrect because the last vowel [aa] of female proper noun Zaraa is changed into [ai], which is not allowed.
Conclusion: Punjabi shows split ergativity. The ergativity in Punjabi is based on the person of the agent and the aspect/tense of the verb. The ergativity is usually marked with ne postposition. Postposition *nuu* is used to mark the nouns and pronouns for dative/accusative cases; this postposition also triggers some other changes regarding verb object gender agreement. The possibilities for *nuu* postposition in this regard need to be explored in more detail.

References: