ON ERGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN OSTYAK

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There is only one language in the Uralic language family, which has an independent syntactic category that can be referred to as ergative. This language is Ostyak, also called Khanty. Ostyak belongs to the Ugric branch of uralic — or Finno-Ugric — languages, and its most closely related languages are Vogul and Hungarian.

In Ostyak there are three syntactic construction types: (nominative-)active, (nominative-)passive and ergative. They have the following form:
active: Ag [NOM] — Pat [NOM/ACC] — V [INDEF/DEF]
ergative: Ag [LOC] — Pat [NOM/ACC] — V [INDEF/DEF]
passive: (Ag [LOC] —) Pat [NOM] — V [PASS]

active/indefinite:
ku [NOM] *rįt* [NOM] *tus* [INDEF] '(a) man carried a boat'
active/definite:
ku [NOM] *rįt* [NOM] *tustə* [DEF] '(a) man carried the boat'
ergative/indefinite:
kunə [LOC] *rįt* [NOM] *tus* [INDEf] '(the) man carried a boat'
ergative/definite:
kunə [LOC] *rįt* [NOM] *tustə* [DEF] '(the) man carried the boat'
passive:
kunə [LOC] *rįt* [NOM] *tusį* [PASS] 'a/the boat was carried by the man'

In the construction type referred to as ergative, the logical and grammatical subject, the Agentive, is marked with the locative case, while the object, the Patient, is unmarked or marked with the accusative, if it is a personal pronoun. The verb is active in form and agrees with the subject in number and person, or both with the subject and the object when the objective conjugation is used. It seems that the ergative constructions are used only with verbs that have the Ag—Pat relation. As for the history of the ergative constructions, a very credible statement has been made by Honti (1971: 436): viz. because 1) the ergative constructions are common in OstyE and very rare in other Ostyak dialects 2) the old ending of the accusative for nouns has vanished from all of the Ostyak dialects, not

from Vogul and 3) in many of the Siberian languages, the eastern neigh-
bours of the Ostyaks, there are also ergative constructions, then the use of
the ergative in Ostyak has 1) its origin in the eastern dialects, 2) due to the
disappearance of the accusative case and 3) due to the influence of those
Paleo-Siberian languages that also have ergative constructions.

The Ostyak ergative constructions do not represent a prototypical er-
gative in the sense that the subject of the transitive verb is marked with a
special ergative case and both the subject of the intransitive verb and the
(direct) object is unmarked or in an »absolute» case (Comrie 1975: 12),
i.e. a construction which identifies intransitive subjects with direct objects
as opposed to transitive subjects (Plank 1979: 4). The fact separating the
Ostyak ergative sentences from the prototypical ergatives is that Ostyak
does not identify the (direct) object with the »intransitive» subject: this
can be seen when the object is a personal pronoun and marked with the
accusative case. The primary distinction that can be seen between the no-
minative type and the ergative constructions in Ostyak is that the latter is
used to mark the logical and grammatical subject of the sentence.

There is no reason to call OstyE an ergative language, because the sen-
tence type forms only a small part of the sentences besides the »normal»
nominative type active and passive constructions. There is some kind of a
split in the use of the ergative and nominative constructions, as in most
languages referred to as ergative (Trask 1979). It is probable that the use
of the ergative construction type in OstyE is »functional» in the sense that
Plank (1979: 5) defines it: »the choice between ergative or accusative align-
ment is contingent upon semantic-pragmatic or syntactic factors». Ac-
cording to Trask's statement (1979: 388) about the two main types of er-
gative split, »NP split» and the »tense/aspect split», the use of the ergative
in OstyE does not fit to either of these well. The general characteristics
that Trask has applied to the ergative in the languages that have a »ten-
se/aspect split» are quite similar to that of OstyE, except that the use of
the ergative does not seem to be restricted to any given tense or aspect.
Trask gives the following features to his group B (T/A -split): the ergati-
ve is a marginal construction type in the language, it is used mainly to
mark a transitive subject, the superficial nature of the ergative in these
languages makes it possible to use ergative constructions besides the accu-
sative constructions in the same tenses and aspects, using the same subject
and the same object, while the actual difference in the meaning of the dif-
ferent constructions lies in the emphasis of the constituents. (Trask 1979:
389.)

What then is the functional use of the ergative in OstyE? The view most often adopted is that it is used to emphasize the subject. This is naturally a very tempting idea because the ergative construction can be regarded as having its origin in the disappearance of the original object marker, and the agent marker (abstracted from the passive) has been a way to distinguish the subject from the object. This idea is not, however, supported by the fact that the locative ending is also used in sentences with an accusative marked object as in the following:

(1)   Vj   *ăpamnə jŏɣət ĕntə wĕwəl* (NyK 84: 135)
            father-PX.SG1SG-LOC-S he-ACC-O not take-INDEF3SG
            'my father does not take him with him'

The emphasis of the subject has been often identified with its definiteness. This interpretation does not explain why ergative constructions are frequently used with subjects that already are definite, e.g. proper names, as in the following

(2)   Vj   *iwännə ninä jolə̂ɣwə̂l: "mä niŋintəsəm"* (NyK 84: 153)
            Ivan-LOC-S they(2)-DAT say-INDEF3SG (O:) I-S get married-
            INDEF1SG
            'Ivan said to them: »I have got married»

In the following I will present something that I discovered in the ergative sentences collected from different sources of Eastern Ostyak material. I have made the following table on the basis of numbers of passive and ergative sentences in the eastern dialects:

Dialect	pages	sent/page	erg	ps	erg+ps/page	index
V (Gulya)	10	44.5	19	22	4.1	10.8
V (Teryoshkin)	27	25.0	19	57	2.8	8.9
Vj	16	60.9	72	39	6.9	8.8
Tra	9	60.5	2	58	6.7	9.1
Pim	9	36.3	2	25	3.0	12.1

Table 1. Number of passive and ergative sentences in OstyE

Even though the ergative construction is usually treated as a special

phenomenon of the Vakh dialect, it can be seen as essentially more frequent in the Vj texts than in V. In other OstyE (Surgut) dialects, ergative construction seems to be rare and in other dialects of Ostyak it appears only sporadically. It also seems clear that the numbers of ergative and passive sentences correlate — as is shown in the table — in such a way that ergative sentences are more frequent in those dialects in which there seems to be fewer passive sentences. If the numbers of ergative and passive sentences are summed up, we discover that the index which shows the number of accusative-active sentences for each ergative or passive sentence is very close to the index of passivization in the other Ob-Ugrian dialects. This leads us to the conclusion that the functions of the passive and ergative sentences are partly the same. The problem is, which functions of the passive are transferred to the ergative sentences.

When we are trying to determine the functions of the ergative sentences in Ostyak, our first task is to clarify the general conditions for the occurrence of the sentence type in question. This includes the investigation of the semantic structures possible in ergative sentences, followed by an examination of the promotion vs. demotion (or absence) of the arguments of the predicate, their definiteness vs. indefiniteness, their position in the hierarchy of animacy or intentionality, as well as the thematic structure of the ergative sentences.

The semantic structure of ergative sentences in Ostyak seems to be restricted to semantic relations of Agent and Patient. This is a very tight restriction if we compare it to the scale of semantic relations which occur in passive constructions: I have found ten different semantic structures in Ostyak passive sentences. In ergative constructions besides the simple two-placed relation of Ag and Pat, only a three-placed one with an additional Recipient may appear. Both the Pat and the Rec may appear in the object position in the ergative as well as in the nominative-active sentence:

(3)   Vj *ninə jŏɣä pämillətə kujɔ̂l pălta* (NyK 84: 149)
        wife-LOC-S he-DAT show-DEF.SG3SG husband-PX.SG3SG
        coat-NOM-O
        'the woman showed him his husband's coat'

(4)   Vj *jaɣnɔ̂ min(t) ńäń(t)ə-pə ĕntə mejimsil* (NyK 84: 127)
        people-LOC-S we-ACC-O bread-IF not give-DEF.PL3PL
        'the people don't give us any more bread'

(5) Vj *pä-kŏtnə jaɣ minä räk totɔɣlịlwɔlt* (NyK 84: 139)
now-and-then people-NOM-S we-DAT flour-NOM-O bring-INDEF.3PL
'now and then the people bring to us some flour'

(6) V *min nŏŋə wokịtɔ̂ majɔ̂llɔ̂mɔ̂n* (Honti 1984: 63)
we(2)-NOM-S you-DAT fox-IF give-DEF.SG1DU
'we give you a fox'

The appearance of the arguments in the ergative sentence is an important question when we are dealing with an Ob-Ugrian language, which usually show the possibility of deletion in a very large scale of situations. The subject of the sentence can normally be deleted right after it has been introduced and the deletion can take place as long as there is no doubt about who is the subject. Because of the personal ending on the verb, the 1st and 2nd person subjects can be deleted right in the beginning of the text, because the person of the subject is identifiable on the basis of the verb form. With the help of the definite conjugation of the verb also a definite object can be deleted, as soon as it has once been mentioned. In ergative constructions only object deletion is possible. The subject cannot be deleted because the nominative-active and ergative sentences can formally be separated only on the basis of the marking of the Ag. In the material of 101 ergative sentences 66 sentences have an apparent object: that is, 2/3 of the ergative sentences have two overt arguments, one of which is the Agentive and the other the Patient of the situation.

The use of the definite vs. indefinite conjugation of the verb shows the definiteness of the object in the sentence. In 72 sentences the predicate is in the form of definite conjugation, while in 29 sentences the predicate shows an indefinite form. The number of definite objects is, however, bigger that 72, because the use of the definite conjugation is obligatory only in situations in which the definite object is deleted. In the case of an overt definite object, the definite conjugation of the verb is facultative. In 15 sentences with an indefinite-formed verb the overt object is a personal pronoun, very clearly definite:

(7) Vj *ăpamnɔ̂ jŏɣət ĕntə wĕwəl* (NyK 84: 135)
father-PX.SG1SG-LOC-S he-ACC-O not take-INDEF.3SG
'my father does not take him'

(8) Vj *kăsịnə̂ män(t) erəɣliləwəl* (KT 81)
man-LOC-S I-ACC-O mention-INDEF.3SG
'someone is speaking about me'

(9) Vj *kannə̂ nŏŋə(t) waɣə̂s* (NyK 84: 131)
czar-LOC-S you-ACC-O call-INDEF.3SG
'the czar is calling you'

There are only a few repliques which have to be regarded as indefinite objects, e.g.

(10) Vj *iwännä l'eləɣtəntə jĕɣilkəlwəl: "mänt äl kăjịtə̂ɣ!"* (NyK 84: 157)
Ivan-LOC-S scream-INF begin-INDEF.3SG I-ACC-O not leave-IMPERAT
'Ivan starts to scream: »Don't leave me!»'

On the basis of the context most of the objects which appear with a verb in indefinite form can be regarded as definite. Many of these contain a definite element (px, definite pronoun etc.) and in these cases the definite marking of the verb is not necessary:

(11) V *apịlŏɣnə̂ ťi kăntə̂ɣ jaɣ ịl welsət* (TO 120)
father-PX.SG1PL-LOC-S this Ostyak people-NOM-O (down) kill-INDEF.3PL
'our father killed these Ostyaks'

Besides the 7 repliques there are only three sentences with a clearly indefinite object. The definite conjugation which directly shows the definiteness of the object appears in the predicate of 72 sentences (72%). In the majority of these sentences the object is overt, i.e. not deleted, e.g.

(12) Vj *ăpamnə̂ ťu tăɣị on(t)ə̂ltə̂* (NyK 84: 139)
father-PX.SG1SG-LOC-S that place-NOM-O know-DEF.SG3SG
'my father knows the place'

(13) V *păɣalịnə̂ ĕŋkil wuɣakə̂tə̂tə̂* (TO 118)
boy-LOC-S mother-PX.SG3SG-NOM-O call-DEF.SG3SG
'the boy is calling his mother'

It seems that these sentences show an emphasis on the object. At least the

object is placed in front of the predicate which is the typical focus position. It is more complicated to define the function of those ergative sentences in which the (definite) object is deleted. The thematic structure of this sentence type is problematic: when the object is so well known that it can be deleted, it is already near to the topic position from the thematic point of view. That is, something is said about the deleted object, e.g.

(14) Vj *jĕɣəl-păkkâlamnâ tuɣaltân* (NyK 84: 155)
      brother-PX.DU1SG-LOC-S bring-DEF.SG3DU
      'my brothers have taken it away'
(15) Vj *tapal mĕnnə uɣaḷim* (NyK 84: 157)
      last-year I-LOC-S see-DEF.SG1SG
      'I saw him last year'

There are 31 sentences of this kind. This type of an ergative sentence seems very similar to the passive construction. In the passive construction, the passive subject, normally the Patient, is often deleted. In this case, when the personal pronoun object is deleted, the corresponding passive sentence is very similar:

(15a) Vj **tapal mĕnnə uɣaḷi*
      last-year I-LOC-AG see-PASS.3SG
      'he was seen by me last year'

The difference is more remarkable between ergative (15b) and passive (15c) if the personal pronoun is overt:

(15b) Vj **tapal mĕnnə jŏɣət uɣaḷim* (NyK 84: 157)
      last-year I-LOC-S he-ACC-O see-DEF.SG1SG
      'I saw him last year'
(15c) Vj **jŏɣ tapal mĕnnə uɣaḷi* (NyK 84: 157)
      he-NOM-S last-year I-LOC-AG see-PASS.3SG
      'he was seen by me last year'

In my ergative material, most interesting are those ten sentences in which the overt object is topicalized and the locative marked subject is in the focus position in front of the predicate, as in normal passive sentences:

(16)   Vj   *kakįmə̂n t'iɣrənə istə* (NyK 84: 157)
          brother-PX.SG1DU-O tiger-LOC-S eat-DEF.SG3SG
          'the (a ?) tiger has eaten our younger brother'
(17)   Vj   *kuntə̂ puɣla jŏmämennə ti wer minnə jaɣa jäsəŋləɣälimən*
          (NyK 84: 143)
          when village-LAT come-GER-LOC this thing-NOM-O people-
          LAT tell-DEF.SG1DU
          'when we arrived in the village, we told this thing to the people'

A closer look at the quality of the 66 overt objects reveals that 32 of these are definite nouns, 15 personal pronouns, 9 subordinate clauses and 7 repliques. In three sentences there is a nominal object that has to be regarded indefinite and new. Also the repliques have to be interpreted as indefinite objects. All the deleted objects are definite.

The subject is overt in all ergative sentences, as stated above, because the marking of the subject is the only formal criterion of the ergative construction. What is the function of the ergative construction from he point of view of the subject? The ergative marker on the subject does not mark the subject definite, because the subject seems to be already definite in the majority of the ergative sentences: The subject is a personal pronoun in 13 sentences (1Sg in 4, 3Sg in 5, 1Du and 3Du both in two sentences). Proper nouns or the like (Ivan, Czar, God) appear in the subject position in 38 sentences, nouns defined by a px or demonstrative pronoun, especially kinship terms with px, in 15 sentences. Nouns in the subject position without a special definite marker appear in 35 ergative sentences. The majority of these can be regarded as definite on the basis of the context, that is, also without the locative suffix they would be definite.

In the hierarchy of animacy or intentionality the subject is in all ergative sentences on the same level with the object, in many of the sentences above the object. The subject in an Ostyak ergative sentence has always the role of Agentive, as stated, and the Agentive is always animate and able to control over the situation. In my material there are only four sentences with a non-human subject and human object, but also in these sentences the division of the syntactic roles is expected: the constituents in the subject position are tigers or wild animals and the predicate is 'eat', that is, »tigers have eaten our brother». The Ostyak ergative therefore does not support the view of the ergative construction as a marker of an unexpected subject. In many languages this is the case, when the role of

the subject is restricted to some semantic functions. In Ostyak the subject position in ergative sentences is restricted to the Agentive, the semantic function that most often appears in the subject position. Does this make any sense? Why do we have to mark an Agentive as subject, even though it is expected to occupy the subject position in any case? The answer lies probably in the order between the subject and the object, Agentive and Patient: in appr. one half of the situations expressed with an ergative construction also the Patient is animate and human, that is, possesses the same qualifications to **act** (as an Agentive). In these ergative sentences it seems that the locative case ending marks one of two semantically equal arguments as subject. Thus the syntactic functions of the arguments are defined not only by word order but also morphologically. We have to admit, however, that in 15 sentences the morphological marking of the constituents is double, because also the personal pronoun as object is marked with the accusative suffix.

Finally, a closer look at the thematic structure of the ergative sentences. The topic of an Ostyak sentence is at the beginning of the sentence and the place of the focalized constituent is in front of the verb. In the majority of situations the subject and the topic represent the same constituent and when the subject is overt, the sentence seldom begins with another constituent. So a normally emphasized constituent order is SOV, and when the speaker wants to topicalize another constituent than the original subject, he makes use of the passive. In the passive the topicalized constituent becomes subject and the sentence begins with the subject, as usual. The passive is not only good for the topicalization of the initial object (or another nuclear constituent), but also for the focalization of the initial subject. When the listener already knows that something has happened to the initial object, the initial subject can be expressed as the focalized agent with the passive.

Most of the ergative sentences with an overt object (38 / 66 s.) show the word order SOV, e.g. (2), (7), (8), (11), (13), (14) and (18):

(18)   V   *pownậ min(t) kätləwtəs* (KT 460)
        priest-LOC-S we(2)-ACC-O marry-INDEF3SG
        'the priest married us'

The order SVO is less common, it appears in 19 sentences, and in the majority the place of the object is due to its heavy structure: it is represented by a subordinate clause or replique, e.g.

(19) Vj *iwännə ninä joḷə̂γwə̂l: "mä niṇintəsəm"* (NyK 84: 153)
      Ivan-LOC-S they(2)-DAT say-INDEF3SG I-NOM-S get mar-
      ried-INDEF1SG
      'Ivan told them: »I got married»'

(20) Vj *kannə̂ kɔlkə̂llə̂tə̂, što ărə̂ŋ kan-mĕγ ťoras-ku ĕntə waγi̧*
      (NyK 84: 151)
      czar-LOC-S hear-DEF.SG3SG that other czar-land trader-
      NOM-S not invite-PS3SG
      'the czar heard that the trader from the foreign land had not
      been invited'

There are only four sentences with an object represented by a single noun
which follows the predicate. In three of these the object is definite (on the
basis of the definite form of the verb) and one of the sentences show a
clearly indefinite and new nominal object:

(21) Vj *kannə̂ kittä jĕγilwəl kăsi̧ iwänä-ti* (- -) (NyK 84: 151)
      czar-LOC-S send-INF begin-INDEF3SG man-NOM-O Ivan-
      LAT
      'the czar is going to send a man to see Ivan'

Finally, there are nine sentences in my material which have the constitu-
ent order OSV. The object in nominative form is clearly in the topic po-
sition and the subject between the object and the verb is focalized. These
sentences seem to have the function of a passive construction:

(22) Vj *kaki̧mə̂n ťiγrənə istə* (NyK 84: 157)
      brother-PX.SG1DU-NOM-O tiger-LOC-S eat-DEF.SG3SG
      'the (a ?) tiger has eaten our younger brother'

(23) Vj *ťi wer mĕnnə ip-pə nomli̧m* (NyK 84: 143)
      this thing-NOM-O I-LOC-S still remember-DEF.SG1SG
      'I still remember this thing'

It seems, then, that the functions of the ergative and passive in Ostyak are
partly the same. However, we can ask what are the functions of the passi-
ve that have been transferred to ergative in the eastern dialects. First, one
would naturally consider the passive sentences with agent in which the
passive is used for the focalization of the Agentive; the ergative construc-

tions would have taken their functions. This assumption is problematic: The same dialects that in Ostyak make use of the ergative construction also show the most passive sentences with agent. In fact, more than 50% of the Eastern Ostyak passive sentences have an overt agent, which is universally uncommon. Furthermore, the majority of these sentences are thematically exceptional in the sense that their agent is topicalized. One universal assumption about the agent in passive sentences is that when the agent is overt it never appears as the topic but rather in the focus position. In these Ostyak passive sentences the perspective change typical of the passive has taken place, but simultaneously the Agentive has preserved its position as the topic. Thus, besides nominative-active sentences with different thematic solutions, there are in Ostyak also passive sentences with either a topicalized **subject** or a topicalized **agent** (which show the perspective of the **Patient**), as well as ergative sentences with either a topicalized **subject** or topicalized **object** (and the perspective of the **Agentive**).

Table (2): Summary

	% overt	% deleted	definite	indefinite
Subject	100%	0%	66 s.	34 s.
Object	66%	34%	82 s.	19 s.

Hierarchy:
Subject = Object in 55 sentences (animate/human/intentional)
Subject < Object in 4 sentences (human vs. non-human)
Subject > Object in 42 sentences (animate/human/intentional)

The typical Ostyak ergative sentence is, then, one in which there is both a definite, known subject and an equally definite object. In the majority of the sentences, the object is overt, the subject being always overt. Both of the main constituents are animate and capable of actions, or the subject is above the object in the hierarchy of intentionality. Both the definiteness of the subject and its capability to action have to be considered rather as preconditions of the ergative construction, not its functions. The same goes for the object: in the majority of the ergative sentences it is definite on other grounds. So it seems that the use of the ergative construction clarifies the syntactic role of the subject in sentences with a subject and an object both of which are definite and fulfill the preconditions for the

semantic function of the Agentive. Thus the use of the ergative makes possible the large variation of thematics and perspective in these sentences.

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