

Acquisition of Split-Ergativity in Kurmanji Kurdish: Variability and Language Change

Questions of learnability surrounding ergativity have prompted studies suggesting that children acquire the morphological systems of ergative and accusative languages equally easily (Pye 1990) and that sociolinguistic distribution can cause the late appearance of ergative case-marking (Ochs 1982). However, what do children acquiring ergativity do when presented with the problem of variability in caretaker input? Research suggests that children can acquire “variable forms of a language at an early stage, reflecting the proportion in which the variants occur” in caregiver input (Henry 2002, 278).

This study examines the acquisition of split-ergativity in Kurmanji Kurdish, where, in present-tense transitive sentences, the oblique case (OBL) marks patients and the direct case (DIR) marks agents, the verb agreeing with the agent. In past-tense transitive sentences, however, agents are marked with OBL and patients are marked with DIR, the verb agreeing with patient instead of agent (Example 1). Subjects of intransitive sentences are always marked with DIR. However, recent research suggests that split-ergativity in Kurmanji is weakening due to either internally-induced change or contact with Turkish (Dixon 1994, Dorleijn 1996), perhaps moving towards a full nominative-accusative system. This change is demonstrated by the disappearance of OBL on masculine nouns and the increasing use of OBL to mark objects in past-tense transitive structures (Example 2). Therefore, children acquiring Kurmanji are faced with learning split-ergative grammatical relations with highly variable non-systematic input from caretakers, likely due to language change in progress.

Data include spontaneous speech samples and results from an experimental task from 10 children between 2;0 and 4;6 and caretakers. Data from caretakers confirm the limited use of the past-tense ergative-absolutive. Only 22% of target sentences demonstrate full ergative agent and patient case-marking; by contrast 76% demonstrate present-tense nominative-accusative case-marking. This usage patterns after suggestions in previous literature, resulting in variable case-marking of agents and patients in past-tense structures, i.e., rare OBL marking of nouns and a shift to marking objects in the past tense with OBL. However, pronouns have a tendency to retain ergative case-marking, showing OBL as agents of past-tense sentences.

These patterns are reflected closely in the child data. Results show the use of ergativity in samples from children as young as 2;0, especially in OBL marking of pronominal agents—85% of possible targets. Older children display adult usage patterns: a low percentage of ergative case-marking on agents (average 4%) and a high percentage of OBL markings on patients (75%). Thus children seem to acquire ergative constructions early, but ultimately conform to the variability modeled by the adult community. This non-systematic variability in case-marking may suggest a shift to increasing reliance on word order as an indicator of agent-patient relations in Kurmanji.

**Example 1.**

*Present tense; verb agrees with agent*

Ez                      wî                      dibînim  
 1s+DIR              3s+OBL              see+1s PRES  
 “I see him.”

*Past tense; verb agrees with patient*

Min                      ew                      dit  
 1s+OBL              3s+DIR              see +3s PAST  
 “I saw him”

**Example 2.**

- N<sub>OBL</sub> + N<sub>DIR</sub> + V<sub>AGENT AGREEMENT</sub>
- \* N<sub>OBL</sub> + N<sub>OBL</sub> + V<sub>NO AGENT AGREEMENT</sub>
- \* N<sub>DIR</sub> + N<sub>OBL</sub> + V<sub>AGENT AGREEMENT</sub>