

### Eastern Khanty ‘ergative’ marking is topic demotion, not ergative

Eastern Khanty (EKH), represented here by its Vakh–Vasyugan, Yugan, and Surgut varieties, exhibits differential subject marking (DSM), cf. (1a,b). *-ən/-nə* usually expresses LOCATIVE case, but has been argued to be ERGATIVE, because it marks subjects of transitive clauses (Gulya 1966, 1970, Kulonen 1991). Baker (2015) analyses *-ən/-nə* as **dependent ergative**.

(1) a. [<sub>α</sub> *mä* [<sub>β</sub> *t’əkäjəyl-äm-nä* *ul-a* *mən-γäl-əm* ]]. Vakh Khanty  
 1SG younger.sister-1SG.POSS-COM berry-LAT go-PST3-SBJ.1SG  
 ‘I went to pick berries with my younger sister.’

b. [<sub>α</sub> *məŋ-ən* *ləγə* [<sub>β</sub> *əllə* *juγ* *kan-ŋa* *amə-γal-oγ* ]].  
 1PL-ən they.ACC large tree beside-LAT put-PST3-1PL.SBJ  
 ‘We put them (pots of berries) beside a big tree’. (Gulya 1966: 135, Baker 2015: 9)

We argue that (i) EKH is not an ergative language and that (ii) DSM indicates a type of topic demotion, signalling a change of the subject’s information structural (IS) status while retaining certain subject properties (cf. Filchenko 2011). (i) is supported by the distribution of DSM, which also occurs in intransitive, even unaccusative contexts. (ii) is in line with cross-linguistic tendencies in DSM, namely that ‘atypical’ subjects are morphologically marked. In EKH, DSM marks that a subject is not as topical as a default, unmarked subject is. From a comparative perspective, EKH is interesting as DSM is grammaticalised marking of IS in addition to other grammatical processes affecting IS, such as the passive, which serves to demote the logical subject and promote another argument to subject and thus topic.

**1 Data** Dependent case (DC) is assigned when two NPs are in a particular syntactic configuration and domain (e.g. Baker 2015). For EKH, Baker argues that an object close to the subject triggers LOC. This analysis is not supported empirically. Adjacency of subject and object is neither necessary, (2b), nor sufficient, (3), for morphologically marked subjects. Moreover, DSM also occurs with intransitive predicates, (4), (5).

(2) a. *ni-nə* *jöγ-ä* *pämil-lə-tə* *kuj-əl* *palta*. Vasyugan Khanty  
 woman-LOC he-DAT show-PRS-SBJ.3SG>SG.OBJ man-POSS.3SG coat.NOM  
 ‘The woman shows him her husband’s coat.’

b. *kan-nə* *kit-tä* *jeγi-l-wəl* *kasi* *iwänä-ti*.  
 tsar-LOC send-INF begin-PRS-SBJ.3SG man.NOM Iwan-LAT  
 ‘The tsar sends a man to Iwan.’ (Kulonen 1991: 185, 197)

(3) *ma* *ämp-äm* *tiyl-a* *kari-mta-s-im* Vakh Khanty  
 1SG.SBJ dog-1SG.POSS DEM-LAT pull-INTNS-PST-1SG.SBJ>SG.OBJ  
 ‘I pulled my dog closer.’ (Filchenko 2005: 30)

(4) Context: *One doesn’t sit awake for a long time. Or else ...* Yugan Khanty  
*jipəγ-nə* *joyot-t*.  
 fright-LOC come-PRS.3SG.SBJ  
 ‘The monster is coming.’ (Schön 2022: 104)

(5) *ti* *quj-an* *kan’-kas* *i* *qala-qas*. Vakh Khanty  
 DET man-LOC be.ill-PST1-3SG.SBJ and die-PST1.3SG.SBJ  
 ‘That man was sick and died.’ (Filchenko 2010: 335)

The unaccusative predicates in (4) and (5) rule out a null cognate object triggering DC on the subject. Morphological marking can have interpretative effects, (6), where DSM does not license an intentional interpretation expressed by the adverb *toyoj* (indicated by ‘#’).

- (6) *män-nə köt-äm (mil-näm / #toyoj) öyö-käs-əm kötfäy-nä.* Vakh Khanty  
 1SG-LOC hand-1SG.POSS touch-REFL away cut-PST1-1SG.SBJ knife-COM  
 ‘I cut my hand with a knife (incidentally / on purpose).’ (Filchenko 2011: 71)

LOC also marks non-agreeing, optional logical subjects of passives. Khanty allows forming passives from intransitive predicates, (7). Such passives do not reduce valency, but demote the logical subject, replacing it with a different grammatical NOM subject that controls agreement.

- (7) *(məŋ) mǎč jāy-nə jöwt-øj-əw.* Surgut Khanty  
 1PL guest people-LOC arrive-PST.PASS-1PL  
 ‘Guests came to us.’, lit. ‘We were arrived at by guests.’ (Csepregi 2023: 744, 743)

**2 Topic demotion and DSM** We propose, building on Filchenko (2011) and Sosa (2017), that DSM indicates a *less* topical subject than a nominative subject, a type of **topic demotion: a DSM subject is not a main discourse topic, but a local topic**, i.e. a topic for a given stretch of discourse (cf. Berge 2011): (i) Some LOC-subjects introduce discourse referents and open narratives, speaking against their role as primary topics. (ii) LOC-subjects retain subject properties such as controlling agreement but are less volitional, (6b), unexpected for highly topical arguments. (iii) Topic demotion explains why the grammatical subject in passives is never LOC. The passive promotes an argument to subject (and topic). Marking the grammatical subject of the passive would counteract its promotion to subject and topic. (iv) Morphological marking of less topical subjects is typical of DSM (e.g. Aissen 2003). ‘Atypical’ subjects are not main topics and hence morphologically marked.

## References

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