

Algonquian languages are not ergative

A number of claims have been made that Algonquian languages are ergative (Hewson 1987, Bruening 2007, Johnson & Rosen 2012). We, however, are going to argue that Algonquian languages are accusative. We make the distinction between an ergative language and an ergative pattern: even in an accusative language, particular ergative patterns can still exist. In order to diagnose a language as being ergative, it is crucial to focus on the language's fundamental morphosyntax: case, agreement, and word order. We will show that the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative are based either on ergative patterns that are shallow and do not reflect the fundamental morphosyntax, or on patterns that are not inherently ergative but are simply common in ergative languages. The relevant data includes peripheral agreement, TA absolute forms, verb stem agreement, and coordination. Peripheral agreement, verb stem agreement, and coordination are all shallow ergative patterns that do not diagnose the fundamental morphosyntax, while the TA absolute form is not an ergative pattern at all. We will also argue that there is one pattern that does demonstrate truly ergative morphosyntax: the inverse, following Déchaine (1999) and Agnès (2014). However, despite the existence of such a pattern, Algonquian languages are still best analyzed as being fundamentally accusative, as the inverse exists in contrast to the default direct pattern. The inverse pattern shows ergativity in the behaviour of the central agreement, the theme sign, word order, and binding relations. In the direct, all of these diagnostics show accusative alignment. Since the existing arguments for Algonquian languages being ergative are based only on shallow ergative patterns, and since the truly ergative inverse pattern exists only as a marked option that contrasts with the default direct pattern, we conclude that the fundamental morphosyntax of Algonquian languages is, in fact, accusative rather than ergative.

References

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