

On the rise of ergative structures in Africa

Christa König

Abstract

Africa has long been seen as a continent without any ergative languages, that is languages with a grammaticalized ergative case system (see e.g. Creissels 2000). In the last 15 years this view has been revised. There is a geographical area stretching from the southern Sudan to south western Ethiopia where four genetically closely related West Nilotic languages (Nilo-Saharan), namely Anywa, Pări, Jur-Luwo and Shilluk (all Northern Lwoo) show ergative features to a different degree. Shilluk is the only pure ergative language with a full-fledged ergative case system, the remaining languages are split ergative languages with both an ergative or a marked-nominative system. The latter, a peculiarity outside of Africa, is the most widespread case type within Africa. Marked-nominative languages (also called extended ergative) are a mixture of ergative and nominative-accusative languages. All African ergative languages are areally and genetically surrounded by pure marked-nominative case languages. In the literature, there is a hot debate on whether these languages have acquired their ergative features out of a former marked-nominative system, or the other way round. Or whether, with regard to the case markers involved, the ergative goes back to a former nominative or the other way round.

Outside Africa, there are claims for a development from ergative to marked nominative, as e.g. by Li, Thompson and Sawyer (1977) for Wappo. Within Nilo-Saharan, Randal (2000) has speculated whether Proto-Surmic has been ergative in the past.

I will propose a development from a former marked-nominative to an ergative system; or from a nominative to an ergative case marker, respectively. The source for the ergative marker in Anywa, Pări and Jur-Luwo is possibly a definiteness marker; in Shilluk it is a preposition, originally used to introduce agents as peripheral participants e.g. in passive clauses.

Typologically, ergative languages in Africa show some bizarre features since they all have an OVA word order.

1. Introduction

For a long time, Africa was believed to be a continent where ergativity didn't exist. In introductory books to African languages, Gregersen (1977:63) claims there is no ergativity in Africa; similarly does Creissels in Heine and Nurse (2000):

But I am aware of no African language with intransitive subject markers identical to the object markers and different from the transitive subject markers, that is with a system of subject and object markers following an ergative pattern." (Creissels 2000:236)

In the World Atlas of African languages, ergativity doesn't appear in Africa on Comrie's map 98 showing the alignment of case marking. (Comrie 2005).

The first discovery of ergativity in Africa goes back to Andersen (1988), who claimed that Pāri, a West Nilotic language, is ergative.

One reason for the late discovery of an ergative language may lie in the fact that the ergative marker was assumed to be a passive marker. This is an idea nursed by Miller and Gilley for Shilluk. The West Nilotic language Shilluk is the only full-fledged ergative language discovered so far. Shilluk has a fairly long tradition of documentation (see Westermann 1912:78, Kohnen 1933:136, Tucker and Bryan 1966:424-425; Buth 1981:85-86). In these works one finds a claim to the effect that Shilluk people "tend to speak in the passive", as e.g. in the following examples:

Shilluk (Northern Lwoo, West Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan)

a-pwot yi yan.

PAST-strike by me

He has been struck by me. (Kohnen 1933)

bōl á-'cwōl! yī cōl.

Bol PAST.E-call.TR ERG Col

Col called Bol. (Miller & Gilley 2001:49)

A second reason may lie in the fact that ergative languages were believed to be absent in Africa.

Ergativity, as a grammaticalized case system, appears in a small region of East Africa (Eastern Sudan and adjacent Ethiopian). The amount of ergative languages is rather small. According to a survey (König 2008) of the roughly 100 case languages, that is languages with a grammaticalized case system, only five show ergative systems. Among them is only one full-fledged ergative language, namely the West Nilotic language Shilluk. The other Northern Lwoo languages are split languages with either a marked nominative or an ergative-absolutive system. The same case marker in certain clause types works as a nominative but in others as an ergative.

General remarks on case in Africa

Before showing some features of ergativity in Africa I will briefly outline my understanding of case, and some salient features of case systems in Africa, particularly in the area where ergativity appears. Since ergativity co-occurs with marked-nominative, the latter will also be briefly introduced.

My definition of case is as follows:

A case system is an inflexional **system** of marking nouns or noun phrases for the type of relationship they bear to their heads. Inflexional systems are expressed by affixes, tone, accent shift, or root reduction; adpositional systems are included only in so far as they encode core participants such as S [the intransitive subject], A [the transitive subject], and O [the object]. (König 2008)

According to König (2008), grammaticalized case shows the following distribution in Africa: Of the 1000 to 2000 different languages, roughly 100 are case languages, only five are ergative, among them only one being a pure ergative language. Two third of all case languages, that is 64, belong to the marked nominative type. Nominative-accusative languages are the second frequent, with thirty languages. Marked nominative is a mixture of the two basic types nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive. It shares the alignment pattern with the nominative-accusative case type in that A is treated like S and simultaneously different than O. And it shares with an ergative-absolutive system that the functionally marked form of the case system is the one covering A. "Functionally marked" is the case which is morphologically marked, if any is derived then it is the functionally marked one. The functionally marked case is not the one used for citation, it occurs in a smaller range of functions as opposed to the functionally unmarked one. Marked-nominative languages are a salient feature of Africa, they hardly occur outside of Africa but they are the most spread within Africa. Tone as an exclusive marker for case is perhaps the most striking feature of African case languages: It is not found elsewhere in the world, and it appears in marked nominative systems only. The following prediction can be made: If a language uses exclusively tone to express case then it is a marked nominative language of Africa. Among the 64 marked nominative languages there are 25 which use tone as a marker of case, 18 of them exclusively; neither any accusative nor any ergative language uses tone exclusively to mark case.

Theoretical remarks

The database for the following discussion is taken from published materials, but I analyze some of the data in a different way than the respective authors. The following observations are part of the result of looking into case phenomena in Africa from a typological viewpoint (see König 2008). Due to space limitation, I will not be able to offer a detailed analysis in all respects but rather have to concentrate on the results and historical interpretation instead. For a detailed analysis, the reader may consult König (2008). There are two obvious limitations when it comes to statements about historical developments in Africa. Africa in general, and the languages being presented here in particular, are spoken languages,

meaning that there are no historical data in support of the claims being made. The second limitation consists in the fact that unfortunately the data base is not always sufficient.

Claims about historic change are based on general principles which are observed elsewhere in the world. The theory of grammaticalization has provided some general principles which are unidirectional. On the ground of these findings, it is possible to make claims even if there is a lack of direct historical documents. Synchronic variation in neighboring languages, for example, may shed light on different historical phases, and it can give clues about historical developments as well. Therefore, it is helpful to interpret the data in a given language on the background of areal and genetic knowledge of the surrounding languages.

2. Case studies

Päri

I would like to exemplify the ergative system of Päri, one of the three split ergative languages. All three, Päri, Anywa and Jur-Luwo are closely related West Nilotic languages, belonging to the Northern Lwoo subbranch of West Nilotic.

The ergative case marker is expressed by a suffix *-i* with the allomorphs *-ì*, *-ɪ*, *-i*, or *-è*, *-e* (Andersen 1988:294).

<i>Absolutive/Accusative</i>	<i>Ergative/Marked-nominative</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
ùbúr	ùbúr-i	Ubur
mλλn	mλλn-ì	woman
tóŋ	tóŋ-ì	spear
ʔáanɪ	ʔáan`-ì	I

Table 1. Case inflexion in Päri. (Andersen 1988:294, 297)

The syntax of Päri, as in the neighboring Northern Lwoo languages, is divided into two patterns, one runs under the label ‘NP-initial’ clauses, the other one under the label ‘VP-initial’ clauses. Clauses which are subsumed under the NP-initial type differ from the VP-initial type in various respects, among them being case marking, cross reference of pronouns on the verb, and word order. Relevant for our purpose here is the fact that NP-initial clauses show an ergative system, as examples 1 to 3 may illustrate, whereas VP-initial clauses show a marked nominative system (see examples 6 and 7). The same case marker functions in NP-initial clauses as an ergative case encoding A, whereas in VP-initial clauses, it functions as a nominative, encoding S and A. Note that in the glosses the case suffix *-i* is consistently glossed as ERG, whether it serves as an ergative or a nominative.

Päri (Northern Lwoo, West Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan) NP-initial clauses – ergative system

- | | | |
|---|--|-----------|
| 1 | ùbúr á-túuk’
Ubur COMP-play
Ubur played. (Andersen 1988:292) | S V |
| 2 | jòobì à-kèel ùbúrr-ì.
buffalo COMP-shoot Ubur-ERG
Ubur shot the buffalo. (Andersen 1988:293) | O V A-ERG |

The only participant which gets a case inflexion is A, while S and O are left unmarked. The absolutive is morphologically zero. As soon as A is placed before the verb, the ergative marker is no longer used, and instead A appears in the absolutive form, see 3. This neutralization of core case encoding is a general behavior of case languages in East Africa. It applies to ergative and to marked nominative languages, to languages with verb initial, and verb medial word order, to East Africa and beyond. The only exceptions, for obvious reasons, are verb final languages. This phenomenon runs under the label: “No case before the verb”, meaning that the case inflexions are neutralized before the verb. This split condition for case languages in Africa may have come into existence by the reinterpretation of former topicalized or focused constructions, whereby a bi-clausal copula-relative syntagm has been reinterpreted as a monoclausal unit. The case which is present on the elements preceding the main verb reflect their original case which they had as nominal predicates in the former copula clauses, which usually is the morphologically unmarked case, such as the absolutive in ergative systems or accusative in marked nominative systems (further see König 2008).

- | | | |
|---|--|---------|
| 3 | ùbúr jòobì á-kèel-é.
Ubur buffalo COMP-shoot-3.SG.A
Ubur shot the buffalo. (Andersen 1988:294) | A O V-A |
| 4 | á-kwâλη-ó.
1.SG.S-swim+M-SUF
I am swimming. (Andersen 1988:296) | S-V |
| 5 | á-yáng`-ì yàng-ó
1.SG.O-skin+M-2SG.A skin+M-SUF
You will knife me. (Andersen 1988:297) | O-V-A |

VP-initial clauses show a marked-nominative pattern since the same case marker, the suffix *-ì*, encodes S and A, but never O, O is left unmarked. Therefore, the ergative marker of NP-initial clauses serves as a nominative marker in VP-initial clauses (see 6 and 7). As in NP-initial clauses, before the verb, the core participants appear in the morphologically unmarked form (see 8).

- 6 Pãri - verb-initial clauses – marked-nominative
 pìr ηð ì pλλr cíçù-ê V S-ERG
 matter what LINK jump man-ERG
 Why did the man jump? (Andersen 1988:318)
- 7 pìr ηð ì çùλ yí jìpònd'-è V O A-ERG
 matter what LINK call 3.SG.O child-ERG
 Why did the child call her? (Andersen 1988:319)
- 8 pìr ηð jìpònd'-ð¹ dháago ì çùλ-é gð. A O V-A O_{PRON}
 matter what child woman LINK call-3.SG.A 3S.O
 Why did the child call the woman? (Andersen 1988:319)
- 9 πάγγυ-ύ! V-S
 jump-2.PL
 Jump! (Andersen 1988:317)

In sum, the case in Pãri has the following features: It is a split ergative/marked-nominative language with an opposition of two cases, where the same case marker serves as an ergative in NP-initial and focus clauses (not presented here, see König 2008), and as a nominative in verb-initial clauses. Since the nominative is morphologically and functionally marked as opposed to the functionally/and morphologically unmarked accusative, this represents a marked-nominative system. Before the verb, the case inflexion is neutralized. In addition, Pãri exhibits an ergative constituent order with an OVA, SV order in NP-initial clauses.

Jur-Luwo, another closely related Northern Lwoo language, shows a similar case profile as Pãri. The case marker is the suffix *-ê*, which serves as an ergative case in NP-initial clauses and as a nominative in VP-initial clauses.

Anywa

In Anywa, the third closely related language, also Northern Lwoo, there is a suffix *-Ci* (with its allomorphs *-ê*, and *ø*), which is related to the Pãri case suffix *-i*. Reh (1996) analyses *-Ci* in Anywa as a definiteness marker, which basically appears only after the verb. In NP-initial clauses it is only A which can be marked by it, S and O are always left unmarked. As soon as A is placed before the verb, it no longer takes *-Ci* (see 12). The latter is in accordance with the ‘no case before the verb’ neutralization mentioned before.

¹ Suffix *-ð* remains unglossed by the author cited.

- 10 Anywa (Northern Lwoo, West Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan) - NP initial clause
wàaŋi² lɔ̀lɔ̀r. S V
 grandmother.his be.afraid
 His grandmother is afraid. (Reh 1996:311)
- 11 **gēn**-ū-tèén jìlàal-lì O-V
 3.PL.O-FUT-cook.PD.BEN child-DEF
 The child will cook for them. (Reh 1996:190)
- 12 ó dimó tǒŋ wànní ā-kwáa-é A O V-A
 son.mN Dimo spear.mN uncle.his PAST-ask.for-3SG.A
 Dimo's son asked for his uncle's spear. (Reh 1996:311)

Verb initial clauses are fiddly in the sense that a nominal A after the verb hardly ever occurs. This is due to the fact that two core participants nominally expressed are excluded after the verb, therefore 15 is excluded. The default way would be to place the nominal A before the verb and cross reference it on the verb, see 14. Nevertheless, it holds that the only participants which at all could show *-Ci* are S and A (see 13), O is left unmarked.

Verb initial, MNOM restricted to DEF

- 13 n-ā-òo jóɔwwì [...] V S.DEF
 C-PAST-come people.DEF
 When the people come [...] (Reh 1996:318)
- 14 jìlàál n-ā-kéel líɛe kī tǒŋ, [...] A V O
 child C-PAST-hit.3.SG.A elephant OBL spear
 After the child had speared the elephant, [...] (Reh 1996:315)
- 15 *But* *n-ā-kéel jìlàál-lì líɛe kī tǒŋ, [...] *V A O
 C-PAST-hit.3SG.A child-DEF elephant OBL spear (Reh 1996:315)

The verb initial clauses show an accusative alignment with regard to cross reference of the core participants:

- 16 Verb-initial clause V-A O
 willí mǎn-ā-màaDDHí pli kī gó [...]
 glass REL.S-PAST-drink.2.SG.A water OBL it
 The glass out of which (s)he³ drank water [...] (Reh 1996:192)

² Emphasis in bold, here and elsewhere, is mine.

³ According to my analysis 'you' would be the appropriate translation.

17 n-ā-dùu-ē, [...]

V-S

C-PAST-come.back-3.SG.S

When (s)he came back, [...] (Reh 1996:192)

A comparison of the ergative suffix *-i* in Pāri and the definitve suffix *-Ci* in Anywa shows the following: Definiteness is not obligatorily indicated in Anywa in the case of preverbal nominal participants and postverbal ones other than those in S- and A- function (Reh 1996:137). Andersen (1988:294) interprets the equivalent suffix in Pāri as an ergative case marker. Both occur only after the verb (in Anywa there are a few exceptions). In NP-initial clauses, the case suffix appears only with A, therefore it serves as an ergative case marker in a ergative system. In verb-initial clauses, it appears only with S and A, it serves as a nominative marker in a marked-nominative system. For Andersen (1988) – *(C)i* is a case marker (ergative/nominative), for Reh 1996 a definiteness marker. König (2008) followed Andersen's interpretation in claiming that *-Ci* in Anywa is a case marker but restricted to definiteness. In NP-initial clauses it functions as a ergative marker, in VP-initial clauses as a nominative marker. Anywa is a spilt ergative/marked-nominative language with case being restricted to definiteness.

Shilluk

According to Miller and Gilley (2001), Shilluk, also a Northern Lwoo language (Nilo-Saharan), is an ergative language. The ergative case marker is expressed by the preposition *yī* plus a preceding downstep [']. Like in the other Northern Lwoo languages, Shilluk also has a syntax split in what Miller and Gilley call independent clauses (corresponding to NP-initial clauses) and dependent clauses (corresponding to VP-initial clauses). As is illustrated in clauses 18 to 21, the only participant which is encoded for case is A; S and O are always left morphologically unmarked. Shilluk has an ergative case system, with the ergative being marked by the case marker and the absolutive being morphologically unmarked. The basic constituent order is SV/OVA; if A is expressed nominally before the verb, the ergative case marker no longer appears on A. However, A has to be taken up as a pronoun after the verb, which still shows the ergative case (see example 20). Shilluk is the only pure ergative language discovered so far in Africa.

Shilluk (Northern Lwoo, West Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan)

Independent clause = "NP-initial"

18 twóŋ á-gūt.

S V

Twong PAST.E-drive.AP

Twong drove (a stake/stakes) for tethering cows. (Miller and Gilley 2001:42)

19 úgīk á-'kēl' yī ɔpótī.

OVA

buffalo PAST.E-spear.TR ERG Onyoti

Onyoti speared the buffalo. (Miller and Gilley 2001:45)

to a region in the Southern Sudan and adjacent areas in Ethiopia. Genetically, a subbranch of West Nilotic is affected, Northern Lwoo. Table 3 gives an overview of some other languages in that branch which are case languages. (The list is not complete, it presents languages which are of relevance here.) As can be seen there, Nilotic languages show a high concentration of case languages. East and South Nilotic languages are throughout marked-nominative languages, with verb initial constituent order, where case is exclusively expressed by tone. West Nilotic languages are throughout verb medial languages, the Southern Lwoo languages (such as Lango, Kumam) have no case inflection whereas at least some of the Northern Lwoo languages have case inflection. Generally speaking, the West Nilotic languages differ from East and South Nilotic. They all are verb medial languages. Some of them are marked nominative (indicated in italics in table 3), some of them are marked-nominative-ergative (indicated in italics and bold), and one is ergative (indicated in bold). Surmic languages present an additional branch of Nilo-Saharan where many case languages are found. All are marked-nominative. I have listed two of them, Tennet and Majang, in table 3, since they have also been claimed to possess ergative features in the literature. All languages of table 3 show the split ‘no case before the verb’. Surmic and Nilotic languages are both subbranches of South East Sudanic. They both are spoken in East Africa, in adjacent areas with its core in Sudan, Southern Ethiopia, Northern Kenya, and Eastern Uganda.

Nilo-Saharan

Berta

South East Sudanic

Surmic

Tennet
Majang

Nilotic

West

Northern Lwoo
Shilluk
Anywa
Päri
Jur-Luwo

Dinka

East

Maa
Ongamo
Teso
Turkana
Toposa
Karimojong
Lotuxo

South

Kalenjin
Datooga
Omotik

Table 3: A selection of case languages in the Nilo-Saharan subbranches, Nilotic and Surmic.

Italics = marked nominative; bold = ergative

From agents in passive, or from extended instruments, to ergative

Historically, it is very likely that the Shilluk ergative marker has emerged out of a former preposition introducing agents as peripheral participants in a passive-like construction. This analysis does not contradict the synchronic situation described by Miller and Gilley (2001) (see above 3.2.1). Historically, the two elements *yī* (preposition to introduce peripheral participants) and *yī* (ergative case marker) are likely to be of the same origin. Evidence for this hypothesis can be seen in the following facts:

- (i) Even synchronically the ergative marker encodes peripheral participants, such as the causee.

- (ii) From a worldwide perspective, an OVA-basic constituent order is highly unusual; there must be some explanation for this order. The neighboring Northern Lwoo languages have basic AVO/SV-order. Taking the AVO/SV-order as the basis, a passive-like construction would have the order SV PP-A. The latter results in an OVA-order via reinterpretation: Due to its semantics, the former patient S is reinterpreted as O. S remains unaffected by this development: The synchronic SV-order reflects the original SV-order.
- (iii) There must be an explanation for the fact that the ergative marker only occurs after the verb. In neighboring languages such as Anywa, prepositions show stranding, meaning that they only occur after the verb.
- (iv) Worldwide, one main source for ergative markers are agent markers which encode peripheral agents in passive clauses (see Anderson 1977, Givón 1980, Lehmann 1982, Harris & Campbell 1995:243-245).
- (v) Traces of the former prepositional status of the ergative marker can be seen in the fact that the ergative participant is still placed after all core participants: In sequential clauses, the basic order is not VAO but VOA.

Reh's analysis of the ergative constituent order corroborates the development claimed for Shilluk.

Active clause - accusative pattern	Passive clause		Active clause - ergative pattern	
	S V -yɪ Agent	>	OVA	> AOV
			NP-initial transitive	
AVO			SV	SV
SV			NP-initial intransitive	
Shilluk	Shilluk		Anywa	Anywa

Table 4. The emergence of an ergative constituent order in Anywa.

There is an alternative hypothesis for the emergence of the ergative marker, namely that the ergative case developed out of a peripheral case marker used after the verb (see Dimmendaal in print). In Belanda Boor, genetically closely related to Shilluk, also a Northern Lwoo language, there is a preposition *yɪ* used as a preposition as a beneficiary marker (see Heyking this volume).

4. Alternative historical interpretations

Different opinions about the origin of ergativity in Africa have been voiced in the literature. Andersen (1988) postulates for Anywa, Pāri, and Jur-Luwo a development from nominative to ergative, Dimmendaal (in press) from ergative to nominative, König (2008) from nominative to ergative. In other words, both ways have been claimed, from ergative to nominative and the other way round. Dimmendaal's direction is cross linguistically been backed by Wappo, one of the few other marked-nominative languages of the world, spoken in California, where Thompson and Li (1976) postulate a

development of the ergative marker *-i* into a nominative, and an ergative system into a marked nominative.

In order to understand how Dimmendaal comes to the conclusion that in Northern Lwoo languages there has been a development from an ergative to a marked-nominative system and not the other way round, as I claim, he uses the following reasoning: According to Randal (2000), Majang is ergative, and Tennet shows ergative remnants, therefore Proto-Surmic is ergative.

Since in Tennet the ergative traces are visible in complement clauses, which are subordinate clauses, they can be expected to reflect the source situation -- not only for Proto-Surmic but also for Southern Sudan languages, which includes the Northern Lwoo languages Pāri, Anywa and Jur-Luwo. For me the situation is different: Since the evidence for Tennet and Majang being ergative is not convincing, there is no reason to believe that Proto-Surmic was ergative. Instead of claiming that Tennet and Majang show ergative features they are marked-nominative languages according to my analysis, therefore there is no ergative source situation. Quite on the contrary: If neither Tennet nor Majang are ergative, nor Proto-Surmic, nor other West Nilotic languages other than the Northern Lwo languages considered here, are ergative, there is no reason for an ergative origin in Northern Lwoo languages either. Considering the facts provided by the Northern Lwoo languages themselves, the most likely development is from nominative to ergative, since in Pāri, the nominative appears in subordinate clauses (the VP-initial clauses, questions etc. whereas the ergative appears in main clauses (the NP-initial clauses). Although the two clause types cannot be absolutely associated with main versus subordinate clause, there is a clear tendency according to which NP initial clauses, particularly in Pāri, comprise main clauses, whereas VP initial clauses comprise all kinds of subordinate clauses, and questions.

It is a widely accepted principle in historical reconstruction that main clauses reflect historically younger stages whereas subordinate clauses reflect conservative, i.e. historically older stages. Therefore it is most likely that the development went from nominative to ergative and not the other way round. Surprisingly enough, Dimmendaal and myself use the same principle but with different results. Dimmendaal applies the principle on a different level in the history, namely with regard to Tennet. He obviously ignores the fact, that within Pāri his interpretation does not hold.

	Randal (2000)	Unseth (p.c.)	König (this paper)
Majang	ERG	MNOM	
Tennet	ERG remnants		MNOM
Proto-Surmic	ERG		no reason to be ERG
Tennet complement clause			
VAO with A =case inflected	ERG		NOM
SV, S no case	ABS		ACC
	ERG ABS		no case before the verb

subordinate clause			
Päri, Anywa Jur-Luwo	source situation		target situation
	ERG > MNOM		MNOM > ERG
	Dimmendaal (in press)		

Table 5. Different historical interpretations of the development of case in South East Sudanic languages.

Ergative origin of marked nominative

In Africa, two scholars claim that a marked-nominative language goes back to an ergative language, namely Randal for Tenneset (2000) and Schröder (2005:14) for West Nilotic languages such as Päri. As has been argued by me, in Päri it is more likely that the marked nominative has given rise to an ergative and not the other way round (see chapter 3).

Randal (2000:72-77) claims that Tenneset has an ergative origin and he even suspects that Proto-Surmic has been ergative: “the case marking system of Proto-Surmic is likely to have been ergative as well” (Randal 2000:77).

His argumentation goes as follows:

(a) Even today there are clause types which are ergative in Tenneset, namely certain subordinate clauses, such as complement clauses. In a transitive complement clause, A appears in the nominative and O in the accusative (see A ‘Loham’ and O ‘bull’ in 21a). In an intransitive complement clause, S appears in the accusative instead (see ‘Loham’ in 22b). Therefore in complement clauses, S is encoded like O and simultaneously different than A. In this way, an ergative system is said to have been established.

Tenneset (Surmic, Nilo-Saharan)

22a *śrōng Lowór-ɪ kákát Lohám-ɪ áriz.*
 want Lowor-NOM spear.SBJ Loham-NOM bull.ACC⁵
 Lowor wants Loham to spear the bull. (Randal 2000:72)

22b *śrōng Lowór-ɪ Lohám kíkíya.*
 want Lowor-NOM Loham.ACC come.SBJ
 Lowor wants Loham to come. (Randal 2000:72)

(b) Tenneset shows ergative features in equational expressions without a copula (see 23).

23 *anét deméz-óh-t.* S N.PRED
 1SG.ACC teach-person-SG.ACC ACC ACC
 I’m the teacher. (Randal 2000:71)

(c) Tenneset is spoken in an area with languages showing ergative features.

⁵ Glossed as *áriz* by the author cited.

(d) Subordinate clauses are generally more conservative than main clauses. As subordinate clauses still are ergative and main clauses are marked-nominative, an extending ergative is more likely than a ‘shrinking nominative’.

(e) According to Randal (2000), Tennet behaves like Wappo, an American marked-nominative language, with regard to the features a to d. Feature (a) is in Wappo more widespread than in Tennet: In Wappo, all subordinate clauses are ergative today (see Li, Thompson and Sawyer 1977). According to Li, Thompson and Sawyer (1977), the Wappo system goes back to an earlier ergative system. Since Wappo and Tennet share so many features synchronically, Tennet has undergone the same historical development as Wappo. In other words, like Wappo, Tennet goes back to a former ergative structure.

On (a): This is true; nevertheless my interpretation differs from that of Randal. For me the accusative encoding of S in 22b is triggered by the rule ‘no case before the verb’, that is to say in preverbal position the case distinction is neutralized and the only case form used for A, S and O is the morphologically unmarked form, which in marked-nominative languages corresponds to the accusative. In Tennet not all clauses show this neutralization, but complement clauses do. As ‘no case before the verb’ is a general constraint in East Africa, it is more likely that complement clauses in Tennet are also shaped by this rule rather than being a relic of an earlier ergative system.

On (b): The accusative use for S in equational expressions without a copula is not a strong argument in favor of an ergative structure. Similar clauses in other marked-nominative languages behave the same: It is always the accusative which encodes S in copula-less clauses and not the nominative. For example, in Turkana, in corresponding clauses with a copula, S is encoded in the nominative like in Tennet.

Turkana (East Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan)

- | | | | |
|----|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| 24 | a-yɔŋ̀ | ɛ-ka-pɪl-a-nɪ̃. | S N.PRED |
| | I.ACC | witch.ACC | |
| | I am a witch. (Dimmendaal 1983:75) | | |
| 25 | ɛ̀ɛ̀ɛ̀ɛ̀ | a-yɔŋ̀ | ɛ-ka-pɪl-a-nɪ̃. |
| | not | I.NOM | witch.ACC |
| | I am not a witch. (Dimmendaal 1983:75) | | |

On (c): Randal (2000:74) claims that the North Surmic language Majang (Nilo-Saharan) is ergative, referring to Peter Unseth (p.c.); there is little data available on this language. According to Randal, the ergative in Majang is expressed by an L (low) tone, which requires an additional mora after H (high tone) (see 26a). The absolutive covers S and O, and is used as the citation form. The absolutive is the morphologically and functionally unmarked form. The ergative case system of Majang is a recent discovery, since in earlier publications Unseth claimed that there is no case for the core participants S, A

and O (in my terminology) (see Unseth 1989b:102⁶). In Unseth (1989a), by contrast, he presents Majang as a canonical marked-nominative language (my terminology) with a nominative expressed by the suffix *-ε* and an accusative, expressed by the morphologically unmarked form. The accusative is used as the citation form and encodes O, the nominative encodes S and A. Pete Unseth himself (p.c.) does not support the idea of Majang being ergative. Instead he says that the morphologically unmarked form is used as the citation form and as O. The nominative, derived from the morphologically unmarked form by suffix and tone, encodes S and A. If the noun is possessed, complex rules are at work, the nominative appears on the possessor after the genitive (Pete Unseth, p.c.).

26a Majang (North Surmic, Nilo-Saharan)
 ùtú-kò táng-̀ng máaw.
 drink-PAST cow-ERG water.ABS
 The cow drank water. (Randal 2000:74)

26b Dám-kò tang.
 eat-PAST cow.ABS
 It ate a cow. (Randal 2000:74)

26c rér-kò táng.
 die-PAST cow.ABS
 The cow died. (Randal 2000:74)

On (d): this is true, but, as the behavior in complement clauses is triggered more likely by the general rule ‘no case before the verb’ according to the present author, the ergative structure in complement clauses does not necessarily reflect an earlier structure.

On (e): There is hardly any substantial argument left in favor of an earlier ergative structure. The so-called reflexes of an earlier ergative structure are the canonical behavior of other marked-nominative languages as well, they are by no means suggestive of an ergative source. Furthermore, it is more likely that Tenneset shows a development similar to that of the adjacent Northern Lwoo languages Pári, Anywa and Jur-Luwo; as has been argued here, for these three languages a development from marked-nominative to ergative is more likely than the other way round.

Due to the lack of sufficient evidence it remains essentially unclear how substantial the ergative features in Majang are; it would seem that Majang is more appropriately classified as a marked-nominative language.

⁶ In the paragraph on noun case, Unseth claims that “Subjects and direct objects are unmarked” (Unseth 1989b:102).

5. Conclusions

Ergativity in Africa is a fascinating topic, rarely found in Africa, in a small area of genetically closely related languages, showing some unusual features, such as a peculiar OVA-word order, and the split ergative/marked-nominative. Although the situation for doing historical reconstruction is far from being ideal, the most convincing hypothesis consists in maintaining that marked-nominative is older than ergative. This reconstruction, based on the facts provided by the languages involved, fits with the overall pattern that marked nominative occurs in a wide area, of variant language families in East Africa.

The contrasting interpretations of Tenneset presented by Randal and myself illustrate the importance of an areal perspective. Without considering the common feature of case neutralization, which is a salient feature of that area, Randal's analysis would have been convincing, but considering the particular features of the region, it is not. An ergative origin Proto-Surmic is therefore not plausible.

For the ergative case markers presented here, two sources have been claimed: First a definiteness marker, and second an oblique agent marker either in a passive construction or as the extension of a peripheral participant, such as an instrumental marker. The latter one is a common source for ergativity from a cross linguistic perspective.

Definiteness as a source for case is also widespread. The pathway postulated here is from definiteness to nominative to ergative, but attention was drawn to an alternative interpretation. With regard to Africa, the results presented here can only be seen as a first step in reconstructing syntactic change in this region.

Abbreviations

1: First person

2: Second person

3: Third person

A: Transitive subject function

ACC: Accusative

AP: Anti-passive (Andersen)

COMP: Completive (Andersen)

COMP: Complementizer (Miller & Gilley)

DEF: Definite

DEM: Demonstrative

E: Evidential

ERG: Ergative

FOC: Focus

LINK: Linker

mN: modified noun (form)

M: Masculine

MNOM: Marked-nominative
 NOM: Nominative
 O: Transitive object function
 PAST: Past tense
 PL: Plural
 S: Intransitive subject function
 SG: Singular
 SQ: Sequential (Miller & Gilley)
 SUF: Suffix
 TR: Transitive
 >: Grammaticalized to
 !: Downstep

References

- Andersen, Torben. (1988) 'Ergativity in Pări, a Nilotic OVS language', *Lingua* 75: 289-324.
- (2000) 'Anywa and Pări, II: A morphosyntactic comparison', *Afrika und Übersee* 83: 65-87.
- Anderson, Stephen R. (1977) 'On mechanism by which languages become ergative', in Li (ed.) pp. 317-363.
- Buth, Randall. (1981) 'Ergative word order – Luwo is OVS' *Occasional Papers in the Study of Sudanese Languages*. 1: 74-90.
- Comrie, Bernard. (2005) 'Alignment of case marking' in Haspelmath, Dryer, Gil & Comrie (eds.) *Word Atlas of Languages and Language Structures*. Pp. 398-405. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Creissels, Denis. (2000) 'Typology', in Heine & Nurse (eds.) *African languages: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dimmendaal, Gerrit Jan. (1983) *The Turkana language*. (Publications in African Languages and Linguistics 2). Dordrecht: Foris.
- In press. 'Marked nominative system in Eastern Sudanic and their historical origin', in Pascal Boyeldieu et al. (eds.) *Proceedings of the 10th Nilo-Saharan Conference, Paris 2007*. Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Dixon, Robert M. W. (1994) *Ergativity*. (Cambridge studies in linguistics 69). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Givón, Talmy. (1980) 'The drift away from ergativity', *Folia Linguistica Historica (FLH)*. 1: 41-60.
- Gregersen, Edgar A. (1977) *Language in Africa. An introductory survey*. (Library of Anthropology). New York: Gordon and Breach.
- Harris, Alice C. & Lyle Campbell. (1995) *Historical syntax in cross-linguistic perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hieda, Osamu. (1992) 'Word order and word order change in Western Nilotic' *Journal of Asian and*

- African Studies* 43: 63-80.
- Köhnen, B. (1933) *Shilluk grammar*. Verona: The Nigrizia School Press.
- König, Christa. (2008) *Case in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mallinson, Graham & Barry J. Blake. (1981) *Language typology: Cross-linguistic studies in syntax*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Miller, Cynthia L. & Leoma G. Gilley. (2001) 'Evidence for ergativity in Shilluk', *Journal of African languages and linguistics*. 22, 1: 33-68.
- Li, Charles N., Sandra A. Thompson & Jesse O. Sawyer. (1977) 'Subject and word order in Wappo', *International Journal of American Linguistics* 43, 2: 85-100.
- Lehmann, Christian. (1982) 'Thoughts on grammaticalization, A programmatic sketch', 1. *Arbeiten des Kölner Universalien-Projekts (AKUP)*. 48.
- Randal, Scott. (1998) 'A grammatical sketch of Tenneset', in Gerrit Jan Dimmendaal & Marco Last (eds.) pp. 219-272.
- (2000) 'Tenneset's ergative origins', *Occasional papers in the study of Sudanese languages* 8: 67-80. Nairobi: SIL.
- Reh, Mechthild. (1996) *Anywa Language: Description and internal reconstructions*. (Nilo-Saharan 11). Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Schröder, Helga. (2005) 'Antipassive and Ergativity in Nilotic and Surmic' [Manuscript, 15 pages]
- Tucker, Archibald N. & Margaret A. Bryan. (1966) *Linguistic Analyses: The Non-Bantu Languages of North-Eastern Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Unseth, Peter. (1989a) 'An initial comparison and reconstruction of case suffixes in Surmic languages', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 22: 97-104.
- (1989b) 'Sketch of Majang syntax' in Marvin Lionel Bender (ed.) pp. 97-127.
- Westermann, Diedrich. (1912) *The Shilluk people: Their language and folklore*. Glückstadt: J. J. Augusti