

## The Accessibility Hierarchy Revisited: Ergative Case

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### Abstract

The goal of this paper is to determine the relevance of the Accessibility Hierarchy for relativization of noun phrases with reference to ergative case bearing nominals. Since the time when the hierarchy was presented, many details have surfaced about ergative languages, especially about Mayan languages and Chukchi language that could potentially challenge the hierarchy. This has also been the case with South Asian languages. As such, this study analyses the hierarchy while having before us data from English, Hindi/Urdu, and Pashto to determine whether it is still relevant or not. The results are that the hierarchy works for English and Hindi/ Urdu but not for Pashto. However, by adopting the idea that ergative case-bearing nominals are PPs, even Pashto can be considered to follow the Accessibility Hierarchy for relativization.

**Key Words:** Accessibility hierarchy; Ergative case; Extraction; Relative clauses

### Introduction

The goal of this paper is to revisit the Accessibility Hierarchy with reference to ergative case bearing nominals. The Accessibility Hierarchy (henceforth AH) has been an influential idea in the Syntax of relative clauses. To determine the extent to which it is relevant to the extraction facts on cross-linguistic basis, the AH is considered in the context of three languages, namely, English, Hindi/Urdu, and Pashto. English is a Nom-Acc Indo-European language, Hindi/Urdu is a morphologically split-ergative Indo-Aryan language, while Pashto is a syntactically split-ergative Indo-Iranian language. As per the available information about these languages, it is proposed that English and Hindi/Urdu will act according to the AH but Pashto will not. The secondary goal of the paper is to determine whether some mechanism could be proposed to do away with the effects of syntactic ergativity in Pashto or not. For this purpose, the generative idea of ergative case-bearing nominals as PPs is utilized.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces the topic. Section 2 gives a short literature review about the hierarchy and the studies that were conducted to support or criticize the hierarchy. Section 3 is about the analyses of the three languages with reference to the AH and the results that are obtained from the analyses. Section 4 is titled discussion and is mainly concerned with applying the idea of ergative case-bearing nominals as PPs. Section 5 concludes the paper.

### Literature Review

Keenan and Comrie (1977) presented their Noun Phrase Accessibility Hierarchy (NPAH) to show how nominals follow an hierarchy when relativized. The proposed hierarchy is:

Subject > Direct Object > Indirect Object > Oblique > Genitive > Object of Comparison

The basic idea is that if a nominal is relativizable on a 'lower' position, then nominals on the 'higher' positions in the hierarchy must relativize. For instance, if in a language the nominal carrying genitive case can be

relativized, then it must relativize nominals in its subject, direct object, indirect object, and oblique positions. On the contrary, if a language has a ban on the relativization of genitive nominal, then it must have a ban on the relativization of object of comparison. To support their point, they give details about various languages to demonstrate that relativization is not random but universal and cross-linguistically, languages follow a systematic pattern for relativization.

Comrie (1981) follows Keenan and Comrie (1977). Here, the chief emphasis is not on relative clauses but language universals. He argues for a typological investigation of language universals instead of making use of a small set of well-known or genetically related languages. For our purposes, relative clauses form a section of the book; in the section on relative clauses, he presents additional evidence from other languages to substantiate their hierarchy.

Over the years, different studies have emerged vis-à-vis the accessibility hierarchy; some have supported and successfully applied the AH to other languages while others have either criticized or reinterpreted the AH. Some of the well-known accounts that have supported the hierarchy are Hawkins (1987), Eckman et al. (1988), Comrie (2002), and, Ozeki & Shirai (2007). On the other hand, Maxwell (1979), Lehmann (1986), Fox (1987), Cristofaro (2003) are either against it or have proposed changes to the hierarchy. Moreover, a very large number of research studies have been concerned with acquisition hierarchies (Haendler, Kliegl, & Adani, 2015; Alosaimi, 2021; Tanaka, Cherici, 2022; Waseem, Rahman, & Arshad, 2023), which we will avoid as they are not directly related with our study.

## **Analysis and Results**

### **English**

English is an Indo-European (West Germanic) language. It has nominative-accusative case alignment. As per Keenan and Comrie (1977), English could be considered a fairly flexible language. It could be relativized on all the points enumerated on the hierarchy:

#### Subjects

1. The woman who saw

#### Direct Objects

2. The pen that he broke

#### Indirect Objects

3. The man whom you handed over a book to

#### Oblique

4. The playground where we played

#### Genitive

5. The girl whose cup fell down

#### Objects of comparison

6. The boy whom I am taller than

### **Hindi/ Urdu**

Constructions in Hindi/Urdu are made a bit confusing by the abundance of correlatives. For Hindi/Urdu, subjects and direct objects can be relativized. Indirect objects, oblique nominals and genitive nominals can be relativized but that results most of the time in marked structures. Objects of comparison are exclusively unacceptable.

## Pashto

Pashto on the other hand is the least flexible. Pashto has nominative-accusative morphology in the present and future tenses, and ergative-absolutive case alignment in the past tense (Masood & Rahman 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2020; Masood 2014, 2021, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). It allows those subjects to relativize that have nominative case but, at the same time, it does not allow subjects to relativize that have ergative case.

7. *thə che aksar late way zan mehnathi hum gana.ɟay.*

you.NOM REL often late be.PRS self hardworking also consider

‘You who are often late consider yourself hardworking as well’.

8. *tha che rootai day khwa.ɟəla jaba day zakhmi k.ɟa.*

you.ERG REL bread 2S.RP eat.PRG.PST tongue 2S.RP injured do.PST

‘You who were eating the bread injured your tongue’.

A reverse situation exists for direct objects. In the past tense, it allows relativization of direct objects; however, in the present and future tenses it does not allow relativization of direct objects. For indirect objects, the situation is a bit different. Consider the following examples for direct and indirect objects:

9. *ma pen che haghay tha tha der ka.ɟay wo math k.ɟo.*

I.ERG pen.ABS REL she.ERG you -to to give be.PST break do.PST

‘I broke the pen which she had given to you.’

10. *?ma tha tha che haghay pen der karay wo math k.ɟo.*

I.ERG you -to REL she.ERG pen.ABS to give be.PST break do.PST

Literal: ‘I to you broke the pen that she had given to you.’

11. *zə pen che hagma ye tha tha der kawi mathavum.*

I.NOM pen.ACC REL she.NOM 3P.RP you -to to give break.PRS

‘I am breaking the pen which she is giving to you.’

12. *?zə tha tha che hagma pen der kawi mathavum.*

I.NOM you -to REL she.NOM pen.ACC to give break.PRS

Literal: ‘I am breaking for you the pen which she is giving to you.’

13. *zə ba pen che hagma ba ye tha tha der kawi mathavum.*

I.NOM FUT pen.ACC REL she.NOM FUT 3P.RP you -to to give

break.PRS

‘I will break the pen which she will be giving to you.’

14. *?zə ba tha tha che hagma ba pen der kawi mathavum.*

I.NOM FUT you -to REL she.NOM FUT pen.ACC to give break.PRS

Literal: ‘I will be breaking for you the pen which she will be giving to you.’

In examples (9, 11, 13), we have relativization of the direct object in the past, present, and future tenses, respectively; while, in examples (10, 12, 14), there is relativization of the indirect object in the past, present and future tenses, respectively. As is clear from example no. 9, the direct object can be relativized in the past tense: the direct object *pen* is relativized. However, what about examples (11 and 13)? We have already stated that direct objects in the present and future tenses do not relativize; however, here they are relativized. The solution lies in the resumptive pronoun *ye* that has been inserted in the two relative clauses. It is a standard theory that in syntactically ergative languages if an ergative case bearing nominal is unable to move to an A-bar position, then in some languages a resumptive pronoun is inserted to save the construction from crashing. At the same time, in some other syntactically ergative languages some other techniques are resorted to. Collectively they (including the insertion of resumptive pronoun) are called compensatory strategies (Deal, 2016; Polinsky, 2016, 2017). As such, in examples 9 and 11, a resumptive pronoun has been added to save the constructions from crashing. Technically, and for our purposes, the direct objects cannot be relativized.

As for examples (10, 12, 14), the situation is a bit different. In a normal conversation or in a quick speaking style, these constructions would look ungrammatical to the listeners. However, the same constructions, if spoken with a slow and purpose specific intonation, are grammatically acceptable. Therefore, to conclude about these constructions, it would be safe to say that they are grammatical at best and ungrammatical at worst.

As far as the relativization of genitive case-bearing nominals is concerned, a large DP (consisting of the possessor and the possessed) if it occupies the subject position in the present and future tenses and object position in the past tense, it can be relativized. However, the large DP consisting of the possessor and the possessed nominals cannot be relativized if it occupies object position in the present and future tenses and subject position in the past tense. Moreover, importantly, if we have only the possessor DP, then it cannot be relativized whatever position it occupies. This may perhaps have to do with the nature of genitive case bearing nominals in Pashto as the possessive nominal bearing genitive case cannot stand alone on its own in a construction, unless another nominal, which is the possessed one, stands side by side with it.

15. *zma plar che khat leki ostad day.*  
 my father REL letter write.PRS.PROG teacher be.PRS  
 ‘My father who is writing a letter is a teacher.’
16. \**zma plar che khat wolekalo ostad wo.*  
 my father REL letter write.PST teacher be.PST  
 Literal: ‘My father who was writing a letter was a teacher.’
17. \**zma che plar khat leki ostad day.*  
 My REL father letter write.PRS.PROG teacher be.PRS  
 Literal: ‘My who father letter is writing is a teacher.’

Example (15) has relativization of a large DP (consisting of possessor and possessed nominals) *zma plar* ‘my father’ from the relative clause and the construction is grammatical. In no. 16, there is relativization of the large DP from the relative clause and the construction is ungrammatical. However, this ungrammaticality has nothing to do with the form of the DP; rather, it is due to the fact that the noun *plar* has ergative case and the large DP consisting of a genitive case bearing possessor and ergative case bearing possessed cannot move to an A-bar position. In (17), we have relativized the genitive part of the subject from a present tense embedded clause. In case, hypothetically speaking, the noun was not genitive, then by case alignment for Pashto present tense, it would have nominative case and would have been able to relativize; however, here since it has genitive case and cannot stand alone, therefore, it is unable to relativize.

## Discussion

Based on Keenan and Comrie (1977), later developments and findings reported in the literature review section, and, our analyses that followed, it is evident that English is more flexible than Hindi/Urdu when it comes to accessibility for relativization. However, at the same time, it is important to note that they are acting according to the hierarchy proposed for accessibility. Thus, largely they substantiate the hierarchy.

The real difficulty lies with the Pashto language. In it, the ergative subjects and accusative objects cannot be relativized. This poses a direct challenge to the Accessibility Hierarchy of Keenan and Comrie. It is interesting to note that Keenan and Comrie (1977) try to do away with this issue by positing that such languages are subject-less languages. This is itself a controversial claim as many split-ergative and ergative languages do have proper subjects and they carry all the attributes associated with subjects. Therefore, ergative languages still pose a challenge to their hierarchy.

An alternative to do away with the issue of ban on A-bar movement of ergative and accusative case bearing nominals, which challenges the accessibility hierarchy in a formidable way, is to come out with an idea that changes our notion of the ergative and accusative case marking. We will need a proposal that changes the

fundamental nature of ergative and accusative cases. For this purpose, we will appeal to the proposal that ergative case-bearing nominals are essentially PPs. This proposal has been there in the Minimalist Program (1993, 1995) for quite some time. Some of the well-known exponents of this proposal/ theory are Stepanov (2004), Markman and Grascchenkov (2012), and Polinsky (2016, 2017). Polinsky (2017) proposes that ergative case-bearing nominals are PPs. The ban on A-bar movement of the ergatives is because PPs are islands for movement. Moreover, she claims, “A’-movement is contingent on the phonetic content of the moved operator, in that only operators that bear phonetic content are permitted to A’-move (Den Dikken, 1995). This is why A’-movement is possible in wh-questions but not in relative clauses (where the moved element is a null operator)” (p. 27).

Her proposal revolves around visible vs invisible dichotomy. Her argument is based on the difference, in terms of relativization, between wh-elements and ergatives. Wh-elements are able to relativize while ergatives are unable to relativize as the former have visible operators while the latter have null operators. We do not agree with her argument vis-à-vis wh-element vs ergative, as in Pashto it is not the case; however, we do agree with the idea that ergatives are a special type of PPs. At the same time, the idea that ergative case-bearing nominals are PPs of a special type due to their null prepositional content, suits our purposes. The status of our ergative case-bearing subjects and accusative case-bearing objects would mean that they are not required to occupy places at the Subject and Direct Object slots. Rather, they would be placed at OBL spot of the Hierarchy. This is perfectly fine and is in harmony with the AH. Thus, adopting the ergatives as PPs theory, and extending that idea to accusatives, makes Keenan and Comrie (1977) Accessibility Hierarchy suitable for explaining the realization facts of the Pashto language.

## Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to determine the suitability of accessibility hierarchy for nominal phrases in the context of the new details about syntactically ergative languages, especially ergative case-bearing nominals. For this study, three languages were considered: English, Hindi/Urdu, and Pashto. English had Nom-Acc case alignment in all the three tenses. Hindi/ Urdu had Nom-Acc and Erg-Abs case alignment depending upon tense and aspect. Pashto had Nom-Acc case alignment in the present and future tenses and had Erg-Abs case alignment in the past tense. During our analysis, it turned out that English was the most flexible of the three languages as it allowed relativization for almost all the slots in the hierarchy. Hindi/Urdu stood in the middle as it allowed relativization from some slots of the hierarchy but not others. Pashto was the least flexible as it did not allow relativization of ergative case-bearing nominals. Our results showed that English and Hindi/Urdu acted according to the hierarchy but Pashto did not. To deal with ergative languages, Keenan and Comrie (1977) had proposed that ergative languages are subject-less languages; however, in this study it was proposed that accessibility of ergative case-bearing nominals could better be explained if we assume that ergative case-bearing nominals are a special type of PPs with invisible prepositions - an idea that is already there in the generative grammar on ergative case.

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