Parameterizing ergative and absolutive agreement: Microvariation in Kurdish

The behavior of absolutive objects has been a topic of interest in much previous work on ergative systems. It has been shown that in some languages, absolutive objects are licensed in-situ, while in some others, they obligatorily raise (Aldridge 2004, Coon et al. 2014, Deal 2017, Yuan 2022). In this study, I examine microvariation in the ergative alignment of three Kurdish dialects and introduce novel parameters on absolutive agreement. I argue that the main point of parametric difference in these dialects is the number of loci of φ-agreement: While some dialects have two loci of agreement, corresponding to ERG and ABS, some dialects only have one locus of ABS agreement, and no locus of ERG agreement. I further show that the probing behavior of the ABS head is sometimes influenced by the constraints on absolutive raising. Importantly, these parameters lead to some in-between patterns which could not simply be categorized under one alignment type, casting doubt on a simple dichotomy of ACC versus ERG alignments.

Central Kurdish: Ardalani and Mukriyani. The alignment of these dialects is typically considered as split-ergative, with the ergative restricted to the past tense (Karimi 2012). In the ergative alignment, the intransitive subject (1a–1b) is tracked by a verbal agreement suffix (henceforth Series I). The transitive subject (2a–2b), by contrast, is tracked by a clitic that appears on the leftmost element within *v*P (henceforth Series II). Note that in (2), no agreement is obtained with the full DP object, and the verb inflects as default [3SG]. The example in (2) deviates from the canonical absolutive property of ergatives (Deal 2015), where intransitive subjects and objects share similar grammatical marking. In (2), the absence of absolutive marking by Series I (which also marks intransitive subjects) results in the loss of this property. Crucially, in the absence of a full DP object, however, the two dialects show an important distinction. In Mukriyani (3a), the object, receives a null realization, but its φ-features are tracked by a Series I agreement suffix (in square in (3a)), which is the same agreement suffix found on intransitive verbs. By contrast, in Ardalani (3b), we see no Series I agreement suffix and the object, is encoded as a Series II clitic (in square in (3b)).

(1) a. **ema** doweynešow zor pe-kan-**īn**$^{\mathbf{I}}$. (Mukriyani)
we last-night much PV-laugh.PST-1PL
'We laughed a lot last night.'

b. **ema** dowešow fera kan-**in**$^{\mathbf{I}}$. (Ardalani)
we last-night much laugh.PST-1PL
'We laughed a lot last night.'

(2) a. **min** siw-akān=**im**$^{\mathbf{II}}$ xʷārd. (Mukriyani)
I appl-PL.DEF=1SG eat.PST.3SG
'I ate the apples.'

b. **ema** sif-akān=**mān**$^{\mathbf{II}}$ xʷārd. (Ardalani)
we apple-PL.DEF=1PL eat.PST.3SG
'We ate the apples.'

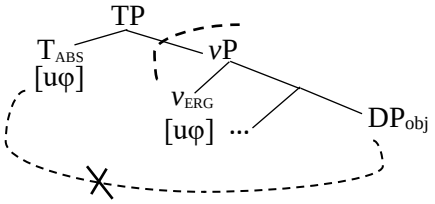
(3) a. **min** xʷard=**(i)m**$^{\mathbf{II}}$-(i)n^{I}. (Mukriyani)
I eat.PST=1SG-3PL 'I ate them.'

b. **ema** xʷard=yan^{II}=**mān**$^{\mathbf{II}}$. (Ardalani)
we eat.PST=3PL=1PL 'We ate them.'

ERG agreement. I propose that *v* is the locus of ERG agreement and establishes an inherent agreement with the external argument (Wiltschko 2006, Forbes 2018, Coon et al. 2021). This agreement leads to the obligatory cross-referencing of the ergative subject by Series II clitics (2–3). In other words, the Series II clitics tracking the transitive subject are the realization of valued φ-features of the ergative *v* head.

ABS agreement. I propose that T is the locus of ABS agreement (Aldridge 2008 and references therein), establishing an Agree relation with the intransitive subject. This agreement leads to cross-referencing of the subject by Series I agreement suffixes (1). Taking T as a locus of ABS agreement, however, leaves us with a question of why ABS agreement is not obtained in (2). I propose that ABS agreement with the object succeeds only when the object is in the same phase as T; however, if they are separated by a *v*P phase boundary, ABS agreement fails. Aligned with the viewpoint defining phase heads as hosts of uninterpretable features (Chomsky 2008), I propose that in Mukriyani and Ardalani, where *v* is a φ-probe, *v*P is phasal (cf. Karimi 2013). The phasal status of *v*P, in conjunction with variation in the height of the object (whether the object is in Spec-*v*P or *v*P-internal), accounts for the patterns in (2–3). In (2) the object is *v*P-internal, thus unavailable for ABS agreement (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Phasal *v*P



Ardalani (Ex. 3b). In (3b), illustrating Ardalani, the object is realized by the same set of Series II clitic form that also tracks the transitive subject. Despite sharing the same form, I argue that these clitics in fact have two distinct sources, with completely different functions: while the subject Series II clitics are the realization of ERG agreement, the Series II clitic

encoding the object in (3b) is a pronoun. Further facts lend support for this claim. Subject Series II clitics in (2–3) are obligatory and appear irrespective of the overt presence of the external argument, meaning that the external argument can be elided. This is identical to the distributional pattern of Series I agreement suffixes in (1). In contrast, crucially, the Series II clitic encoding the object in (3b) appears *only* in the absence of a full DP object–a canonical property of pronominal arguments in the language also observed in the present tense (often regarded as ACC alignment) (4). Notably, the pronoun in (4b) shares both distribution and form with its counterpart in the past (3b).

(4) a. ema sif-akān a-xwa-īm. 'We eat the apples.'
we apple-PL.DEF DUR-eat.PRS.3SG

b. ema a-xwa-īm=yān. 'we eat them.'
we DUR-eat.PRS-1PL=3PL

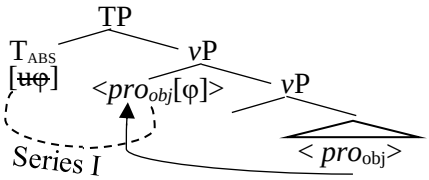
Additionally, the use of Series II clitics as pronominal arguments in Ardalani, extends to other argument types. In (5), a Series II clitic expresses an indirect object.

(5) rāz-aka=m^{II} pi=**t^{II}** wet. 'I told you the secret.'
secret-DEF=1SG to=2SG tell.PST.3SG

In light of these observations, I take the object Series II in (3b) as a weak pronoun (*pro*) in Ardalani. Merged within *v*P, the object *pro* is not accessible for ABS agreement, as predicted, leading to the default [3SG] agreement.

ABS agreement with a weak pronoun in Mukriyani (Ex. 3a). The account provided above is clearly not adequate for explaining the Mukriyani pattern in (3a). More particularly, due to the phasal status of *v*P, we would expect the failure of ABS agreement with the object across the board in this dialect. Yet, (3a) indicates ABS agreement. I posit that in Mukriyani, the object *pro*, as opposed to its full DP counterpart, consistently undergoes raising to the phase edge (reminiscent of previously attested patterns in Woolford 2017, Taghipour and Kahnemuyipour 2021, Yuan 2022), leading to its accessibility for ABS agreement (Figure 2). I further posit that whenever agreement is established with a *pro*, the pronoun is deleted.

Figure 2. *pro$_{obj}$* raising to the phase edge



I take this deletion process to be directly related to the *pro*'s Agree relation with T. Additional facts from Mukriyani provide further support for the raising analysis of weak pronominal arguments. Similar to what we saw with a direct object in (3a), in (6), we see that the indirect object receives a null realization and is tracked by a Series I marker. See (5) where a comparable indirect object in Ardalani is realized as a PP-internal pronominal clitic, while triggering no agreement.

(6) rāz-aka=m^{II} pī kot-ī^{I}. 'I told you the secret.'
secret-DEF=1SG to tell.PST-2SG

Standard Kurmanji. The current analysis predicts that in dialects where the ergative subject lacks ERG agreement, ergative *v* is φ-defective and thus non-phasal. This should result in a canonical absolutive property: ABS agreement with object with no restrictions. This prediction is borne out in Standard Kurmanji. This dialect shows overt case distinction with the agreement being restricted *only* to absolutives (7–8) (this dialect lacks weak pronouns). Table I summarizes the key points of variation examined.

(7) **ez** hat-**im^{I}**. 'I came.'
I.ABS come.PST-1SG

(8) min tu dit-i^{I}. 'I saw you.'
I.ERG you.ABS see.PST-2SG

Table I. A Summary of parametric differences in Kurdish dialects

Dialect	ERG agreement	Phasal v$_{ERG}$	ABS agreement with *v*P-internal obj	*pro* raising
Ardalani	✓	✓	✗	✗
Mukriyani	✓	✓	✗	✓
Standard Kurmanji	✗	✗	✓	NA

Conclusion. I provided a parametric system to account for the microvariation in the ergative alignment of three Kurdish dialects that are otherwise very similar. These facts provided novel support for taking ergativity as a constellation of various grammatical parameters and constraints (Dixon 1994, Johns 2000, Deal 2016, Yuan 2022). The interactions of these parameters were shown to lead to some in-between patterns which could not simply be categorized under one alignment type, casting doubt on a simple dichotomy of ACC versus ERG alignments.

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