

A “split-ergativity” phenomenon in an accusative language: A note on the Japanese progressive*

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SUMMARY

It is observed in some ergative languages that grammatical subjects of apparently transitive predicates are not marked by ergative case in certain nonperfective aspects; this phenomenon is known as “split-ergativity”. While it is claimed in some previous studies that aspectual variations induce changes in the case assignment system in ergative grammars, others attribute the nonergative pattern to an intransitive structure of nonperfective sentences. This paper provides support for the structural analysis of the “split-ergativity” phenomenon on the basis of a study of progressive sentences in Japanese. It is observed that subjects of the Japanese progressive behave like an internal argument even if the root verb is transitive or unergative. Following an analysis of progressive sentences in Basque proposed in a previous study, it is claimed that the Japanese progressive involves a biclausal locative structure where the subject is selected by the progressive marker, which occurs independently as an existential verb.

RÉSUMÉ

On observe dans quelques langues ergatives que les sujets grammaticaux de prédicats apparemment transitifs ne sont pas marqués par le cas ergatif dans certains aspects non perfectifs; ce phénomène se nomme « ergativité scindée ». Bien que quelques études précédentes avancent que les variations aspectuelles entraînent des changements dans le système de la répartition des cas dans les grammaires ergatives, d'autres attribuent ce schéma non ergatif à la structure intransitive des phrases non perfectives. Cet article appuie l'analyse structurale du phénomène d'« ergativité scindée » en puisant dans une étude sur les phrases progressives en japonais. On constate que les sujets du progressif japonais se comportent comme un argument interne même si le verbe radical est transitif ou non ergatif. S'inspirant d'une analyse des phrases progressives en basque proposée dans une étude antérieure, on soutient que le progressif japonais implique une structure biprépositionnelle locative où le sujet est sélectionné par le marqueur progressif, lequel existe indépendamment comme verbe existentiel.

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1 INTRODUCTION

It has often been claimed in the literature that many ergative languages have a mixture of ergative and accusative systems within their grammars (Dixon 1994). For example, certain grammatical subjects of apparently transitive predicates do not receive ergative marking in some nonperfective aspects. This is shown in the following examples in Basque discussed by Laka (2006).¹ In the imperfective sentence involving the transitive verb *jan* ‘eat’ in (1a), the subject *emakumea* ‘the woman’ is marked by ergative case and the object *ogi-a* ‘(the) bread’ bears absolutive case, which is not pronounced. However, if the sentence is turned into the progressive form, marked by *ari*, the subject bears absolutive case rather than ergative case, as shown in (1b):

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----|------------------------------------|-----------|--------|---------|
| (1) | a. | emakume-a-k | ogi-a | jaten | du. |
| | | woman-DET-ERG | bread-DET | eating | has |
| | | ‘The woman eats (the) bread.’ | | | |
| | b. | emakume-a | ogi-a | jaten | ari da. |
| | | woman-DET | bread-DET | eating | PROG is |
| | | ‘The woman is eating (the) bread.’ | | | |
- (Laka 2006: 173)

Although this phenomenon has come to be known as “split ergativity”, Laka claims that it can be accounted for without resort to the notion of a “case split”. He notes that progressive is realized syntactically in the form of a locative predication across languages (Bybee et al. 1994) and the progressive marker *ari* in (1b) also independently occurs as the main verb taking a locative PP. Then he proposes that the progressive in (1b) involves a biclausal structure in which *ari* is the main verb selecting a locative PP containing a nominalized clause. According to this analysis, *emakumea* in (1b) occurs as the subject of the intransitive verb *ari* rather than the subject of the transitive verb *jan*, which accounts for why the subject is assigned absolutive rather than ergative case. Thus Laka claims that this kind of “split ergativity” phenomenon does not genuinely involve switching to an accusative system but occurs within an ergative system.²

This paper provides indirect support for this analysis of the “split ergativity” phenomenon in (1) by noting that a similar phenomenon is found in Japanese, which is an accusative language. The progressive aspect in Japanese is formed by adding the gerundive suffix *-te* and the existential verb *iru* ‘be’ to the root verb; (2a) is an example of a transitive sentence in the unmarked aspect, while (2b) is its progressive counterpart:³

¹ Following abbreviations are used in the glosses of examples: ACC (accusative case), DAT (dative case), DET (determiner), ERG (ergative case), GER (gerund), LOC (locative), NML (nominalizer), NOM (nominative case), PROG (progressive), TOP (topic).

² Laka (2006) suggests that what are called “split ergativity” phenomena may not be grammatically uniform; some of them may genuinely involve a split between an ergative and accusative system in case assignment, while others may only apparently exhibit it. Coon (2013) proposes that aspect-based “split ergativity” in Chol is explained in line with Laka’s (2006) analysis of the Basque progressive. Travis (2010) holds the view that such a phenomenon in Hindi indeed arises from a change in the case assignment system.

³ Although *iru* is the conjugated form of the verb *i* ‘be’ with the present tense suffix *-ru*, as shown in the glosses of (2b), the verb is cited in the form in the text throughout this paper. Note also that nominal expressions in Japanese are neutral for number specification; for example, the object noun *e* ‘picture’ in (2a,b) can refer to singular or plural entities. English translations are provided for the Japanese examples abstracting away from this point throughout this paper.

- (2) a. John-ga e-o kai-ta.
 John-NOM picture-ACC draw-PAST
 ‘John drew a picture.’
- b. John-ga e-o kai-te-i-ta.
 John-NOM picture-ACC draw-GER-be-PAST
 ‘John was drawing a picture.’

Japanese employs a nominative-accusative system in canonical constructions, and the subject is marked by nominative case in both (2a,b).⁴ However, it is observed that though the subject in (2a) exhibits properties of external arguments, the subject in (2b) behaves like an internal argument. The same contrast is found between the subject of an unergative verb in the unmarked aspect and the subject of its progressive counterpart. I argue that the peculiar behaviour of these progressive subjects is accounted for if we apply Laka’s analysis of (1b) to the Japanese progressive. In particular, the Japanese progressive involves a biclausal structure in which the progressive marker *iru* occurs as the main verb; the progressive subject is generated as the internal argument of the existential verb *iru* rather than as the subject of the root verb. By demonstrating that transitive subjects in the progressive aspect behave like intransitive subjects in an accusative language, too, the present study lends support to Laka’s (2006) claim that the “split-ergativity” phenomenon (1) does not attest a “case split” between an ergative and accusative system.

The discussion is organized as follows. In section 2, we consider data in which subjects of the Japanese progressive behave like an internal argument; it is also noted that a previous analysis of them does not account for all the relevant facts. In section 3, I propose an alternative approach based on Laka’s (2006) analysis of the Basque progressive. Finally, concluding remarks are given in section 4.

2 QUANTIFICATIONAL ADVERBS IN THE JAPANESE PROGRESSIVE

In this section, we first note that subjects of the Japanese progressive exhibit a characteristic of an internal argument with respect to interpretations of certain quantificational adverbs even if the root verb is unergative or transitive. Then we consider an analysis of the facts proposed by Kishimoto (2015), indicating some empirical problems it encounters.

2.1 BASIC DATA

It is observed by Kageyama (1993) and Kishimoto (2005, 2015) that the quantificational adverbs *takusan* ‘a lot’ and *ippai* ‘a lot’ in Japanese can be interpreted as modifying an internal argument of a verb, in particular, the theme, by specifying the quantity of its referent. However, the adverbs cannot be construed with the external argument of a verb, in particular, the agent. For example, when the adverbs occur in a sentence involving a transitive verb, they modify the object NP, not the subject NP, as shown in (3):

⁴ Some stative predicates take a noncanonical dative-nominative case marking pattern in Japanese.

- (3) a. Sensee-ga syukudai-o jyugyootyuu-ni takusan dasi-ta.
 teacher-NOM homework-ACC class-in a.lot assign-PAST
 ‘The teacher assigned a lot of homework in class.’
 NOT: ‘A lot of teachers assigned homework in class.’ (Kishimoto 2015: 13)
- b. Gakusei-ga kabin-o kyoositu-de ippai kowasi-ta.
 student-NOM vase-ACC classroom-in a.lot break-PAST
 ‘Students broke a lot of vases in the classroom.’
 NOT: ‘A lot of students broke vases in the classroom.’ (Kishimoto 2005: 122)

The adverbs can also be construed with the subject of an unaccusative verb, as shown in (4):

- (4) a. Suzumusi-ga musikago-de takusan sin-da.
 singing-cricket-NOM insect-cage-in a.lot die-PAST
 ‘A lot of crickets died in an insect cage.’ (Kishimoto 2015: 15)
- b. Kabin-ga zisin-notame ippai koware-ta.
 vase-NOM earthquake-owing.to a.lot break-PAST
 ‘A lot of vases broke owing to the earthquake.’ (Kishimoto 2005: 122)

Moreover, when the adverbs occur in a sentence involving an unergative verb, they are not construed with the subject but with the verb itself, specifying the quantity of the action denoted by the verb, as shown in (5):

- (5) a. Kodomo-ga kooen-de takusan ason-da.
 child-NOM park-in a.lot play-PAST
 ‘Children played a lot in the park.’
 NOT: ‘A lot of children played in the park.’ (Kishimoto 2015: 15)
- b. Kono kaisya-de-wa zyuugyooiin-ga nityoobi-mo ippai hatarai-ta.
 this company-at-TOP employee-NOM Sunday-also a.lot work-PAST
 ‘At this company, employees worked a lot on Sundays, too.’
 NOT: ‘At this company, a lot of employees worked on Sundays, too.’
 (Kishimoto 2005: 124)

These examples all indicate that the adverbs *takusan* and *ippai* can be associated with an internal argument, in particular, the theme, but not with the external argument of a verb.

Note, however, that the interpretation of the adverbs seems to deviate from the general pattern noted above when they occur in progressive sentences. Kishimoto (2015) observes that if the example involving an unergative verb in (5a) is turned into the progressive, *takusan* can be construed with the subject, as shown in (6a) (see also Kageyama 1993: 55). We note that the same holds true of the example in (5b); *ippai* can modify the subject if the unergative verb is in the progressive, as shown in (6b):

- (6) a. Kodomo-ga kooen-de takusan ason-de-i-ta.
 child-NOM park-in a.lot play-GER-be-PAST
 ‘Children were playing a lot in the park.’
 OR ‘A lot of children were playing in the park.’ (Kishimoto 2015: 17)

- b. Kono kaisya-de-wa zyuugyoo-in-ga nitiyoobi-mo ippai
 this company-at-TOP employee-NOM Sunday-also a.lot
 hatarai-te-i-ta.
 work-GER-be-PAST
 ‘At this company, employees were working a lot on Sundays, too.’
 OR ‘At this company, a lot of employees were working on Sundays, too.’

The extension of the interpretation of these adverbs is also observed in sentences involving a transitive verb. We saw that *ippai* cannot modify the subject of the transitive verb in (3b), which still holds true when the adverb immediately follows the subject, as shown in (7a). However, the adverb can be construed with the subject if the verb is in the progressive, as shown in (7b):

- (7) a. Gakusei-ga ippai kabin-o kyoositu-de kowasi-ta.
 student-NOM a.lot vase-ACC classroom-in break-PAST
 ‘Students broke a lot of vases in the classroom.’
 NOT: ‘A lot of students broke vases in the classroom.’
- b. Gakusei-ga ippai kabin-o kyoositu-de kowasi-te-i-ta.
 student-NOM a.lot vase-ACC classroom-in break-GER-be-PAST
 ‘Students were breaking a lot of vases in the classroom.’
 OR ‘A lot of students were breaking vases in the classroom.’

In the progressive sentences in (6) and (7b), *ippai* and *takusan* seem to be able to modify the external argument of a verb, contrary to their general behaviour observed in non-progressive sentences (see (3), (4), (5)). The question arises as to what underlies this apparently exceptional interpretation of the adverbs.

2.2 A PREVIOUS ANALYSIS: KISHIMOTO (2015)

Kishimoto (2015) proposes a structural analysis of the interpretations of the adverb *takusan* discussed above. He assumes that the adverb is merged in a position in VP that is higher than the base-generated position of the internal argument (i.e. theme) but lower than the position of the external argument (i.e. agent), as shown in (8). He then claims that the adverb can only modify an argument that is lower than it; the theme is in the domain (i.e. scope) of the adverb, while the agent is not:

- (8) [_{VP} Agent [_{VP} Adv [_{VP} Theme V]]] (see Kishimoto 2015: 17)

As for the progressive in (6a), Kishimoto assumes that *iru* ‘be’ occurs as a raising verb and selects the VP headed by *asob* ‘play’ as its complement. He then claims that the interpretation in which *takusan* modifies the external argument of *asob* arises when the adverb is merged in the VP headed by *iru*, which allows it to take scope over the argument, as shown in (9) (see also Kishimoto 2005: 153, fn. 8):

- (9) [_{VP} Adv [_{VP} [_{VP} Agent play] be]] (see Kishimoto 2015: 18)

Kishimoto thus suggests that the structural analysis of *takusan* provides us with a unified account

of the interpretations of the adverb discussed in section 2.1. One might assume that the interpretations of *ippai* observed in 2.1 are subject to the same analysis.

However, it turns out that there are some examples involving the adverbs that seem to pose a challenge to Kishimoto’s analysis. First, as noted by Kishimoto (2005), when *ippai* occurs in a ditransitive sentence, it is construed with the direct object as the theme, and not with the indirect object as the goal, as shown in (10a). We find the same pattern with *takusan* involved in a ditransitive sentence, as shown in (10b):

- (10) a. Yuubinyasan-ga gakusei-ni tegami-o asoko-de ippai watasi-ta.
 mailman-NOM student-DAT letter-ACC that.place-at a.lot pass-PAST
 ‘The mailman delivered a lot of letters to students there.’
 NOT: ‘The mailman delivered letters to a lot of students there.’
 (Kishimoto 2005: 122)
- b. Taroo-ga kodomo-ni ame-o takusan age-ta.
 Taro-NOM child-DAT candy-ACC a.lot give-PAST
 ‘Taro gave a lot of candy to children.’
 NOT: ‘Taro gave candy to a lot of children.’

Note that the adverbs still cannot modify the indirect objects when these ditransitive verbs are in the progressive, as shown in (11):

- (11) a. Yuubinyasan-ga gakusei-ni tegami-o asoko-de ippai
 mailman-NOM student-DAT letter-ACC that.place-at a.lot
 watasi-te-i-ta.
 pass-GER-be-PAST
 ‘The mailman was delivering a lot of letters to students there.’
 NOT: ‘The mailman was delivering letters to a lot of students there.’
- b. Taroo-ga kodomo-ni ame-o takusan age-te-i-ta.
 Taro-NOM child-DAT candy-ACC a.lot give-GER-be-PAST
 ‘Taro was giving a lot of candy to children.’
 NOT: ‘Taro was giving candy to a lot of children.’

If we apply Kishimoto’s analysis shown in (9) to (11), *ippai* and *takusan* would be able to occur in the matrix VP headed by *iru*, as illustrated in (12) for (11b):

- (12) [_{VP} Adv [_{VP} [_{VP} Agent [_{VP} Goal Theme give]] be]]

The goal argument is in the scope of the adverb in this structure, occurring in the embedded VP. Then the question arises as to why the adverb cannot modify the argument.

Second, consider the complex verb construction in Japanese which is headed by the aspectual verb *dasu* ‘begin’ or *hazime* ‘begin’ occurring as the second verb, as shown in (13) and (14). On the basis of facts concerning clausal idioms and selectional restrictions, Kishimoto (2005, 2009) argues that the aspectual verbs in this construction are raising verbs that take a clausal complement involving the first verb, which is transitive in (13) and unergative in (14) (see also Shibatani 1978, Kuno 1983, Nishigauchi 1993):

- (13) a. John-ga hon-o yomi-hazime-ta.
 John-NOM book-ACC read-begin-PAST
 ‘John began to read a book.’
 b. [John_i-NOM [t_i book-ACC read] begin] (Kishimoto 2005: 49)
- (14) a. Kodomo-ga asobi-dasi-ta.
 child-NOM play-begin-PAST
 ‘Children began to play.’
 b. [children_i-NOM [t_i play] begin] (Kishimoto 2009: 95)

Given Kishimoto’s analysis of the progressive in (6a) (see (9)), if the adverbs *ippai* and *takusan* occur in this construction and they are merged in the VP headed by the raising verb, it is predicted that they are able to modify the external argument of the first verb. However, this prediction is not borne out; the adverb is construed with the internal argument of the first verb in (15a) and with the verb itself in (15b), not with the external argument:

- (15) a. Gakusei-ga ippai hon-o yomi-hazime-ta.
 student-NOM a.lot book-ACC read-begin-PAST
 ‘Students began to read a lot of books.’
 NOT: ‘A lot of students began to read books.’
 b. Kodomo-ga kooen-de takusan asobi-dasi-ta.
 child-NOM park-in a.lot play-begin-PAST
 ‘Children began to play a lot in the park.’
 NOT: ‘A lot of children began to play in the park.’

Unless it is demonstrated that the adverbs cannot occur in the matrix VP in (15), while they can in the progressive in (6) and (7), these examples would also be difficult to explain under Kishimoto’s analysis.

3 THE STRUCTURE OF THE JAPANESE PROGRESSIVE

I argue in this section that the facts about the interpretations of quantificational adverbs observed above are explained if we apply Laka’s (2006) analysis of the progressive in Basque to that in Japanese. In particular, I propose that the Japanese progressive can involve a biclausal locative structure in which the progressive marker *iru* is the existential main verb selecting the subject as the theme argument.

As discussed by Bybee et al. (1994), grammatical isomorphism is observed between progressive and special location across typologically different languages. Laka (2006) argues that the Basque progressive in (1b) is also locative in syntax. He notes that the progressive marker *ari* in (1b) can independently occur as the main verb taking a locative PP whose complement is an ordinary NP, as shown in (16):

- (16) a. emakume-a dantza-n ari da.
 woman-DET dance-LOC engaged is
 ‘The woman is engaged in dance (The woman is dancing).’
 b. [_{IP} [_{DP} emakume-a] [_{VP} [_{PP} dantza-n] ari] da] (Laka 2006: 174)

Given this analysis of the Japanese progressive, we can provide a natural account of the interpretations of the quantification adverbs discussed in section 2. First, as we saw in (6) and (7b), the adverbs can be construed with the subjects of the progressive involving an unergative or transitive verb. Note that the subjects of the verb *iru* in the simple existential construction can also be modified by the adverbs, as shown in (20):

- (20) a. Kodomo-ga takusan kooen-ni i-ta.
 child-NOM a.lot park-in be-PAST
 ‘A lot of children were in the park.’
 b. Gakusei-ga ippai kyoositu-ni i-ta.
 student-NOM a.lot classroom-in be-PAST
 ‘A lot of students were in the classroom.’

The adverbs are construed with the subjects in (20) because the subjects are the theme argument of the verb. The subjects in (6) and (7b), being the theme argument of the verb *iru*, are also modified by the adverbs; they are interpreted as if they were the subject of the unergative or transitive root verb just because they control PRO as the subject of the root verb.

Second, it is also predictable under the present analysis that the adverbs cannot modify the indirect objects of ditransitive verbs even if the verbs are in the progressive, as we saw in (11). This is because the indirect objects are neither the theme argument of the main verb *iru* nor that of the ditransitive root verb; they are the goal arguments of the ditransitive verbs.

Third, it is also accounted for under our approach that the adverbs cannot modify the subjects of the complex verb construction in which an unergative or transitive verb is combined with the raising verbs *dasu* or *hazime*, as we saw in (15). This is because neither *dasu* nor *hazime* are locative verbs; they cannot select the subject as their theme argument. Thus, the subject is generated as the external argument of the first verb; the adverbs cannot be construed with them.

Under the present analysis, we can maintain the view held by Kageyama (1993) and Kishimoto (2005) about why the adverbs *takusan* and *ippai* are associated with the theme argument of a verb rather than with the agent or goal, which is in line with the analysis of the same kind of adverbial *eso* ‘many’ in Mohawk suggested by Baker (1997: 99). In particular, given that the adverbs modify the event argument of the VP it attaches to, if the verb has a theme argument that measures out the event (an “incremental theme”), many events expressed by the VP correspond to many tokens of the kind denoted by the theme, not by other arguments (see Tenny 1994).

4 CONCLUSION

It has been observed in this paper that subjects of the Japanese progressive exhibit a peculiar behaviour with respect to the interpretations of quantificational adverbs that only modify internal arguments; the adverbs can be construed with the subjects even if the root verb of the progressive is unergative or transitive. We have noted that progressive is often realized in the form of a locative predication across languages and that the progressive marker in Japanese independently

in which the verb *iru* occurs as a functional head, in addition to the biclausal structure in (19). I leave further inquiry into this point for future research.

occurs as an existential verb. Following Laka’s (2006) analysis of the Basque progressive, I have proposed that the Japanese progressive involves a biclausal locative structure in which the subject is generated as the theme argument of the existential verb, controlling the subject of the root verb. To the extent that the present study indicates that transitive subjects in the progressive aspect behave like intransitive subjects in an accusative language, it provides support for Laka’s claim that certain aspect-based “split ergativity” phenomena occur without involving a “case split”.

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