Review of *Aspects of Split Ergativity*
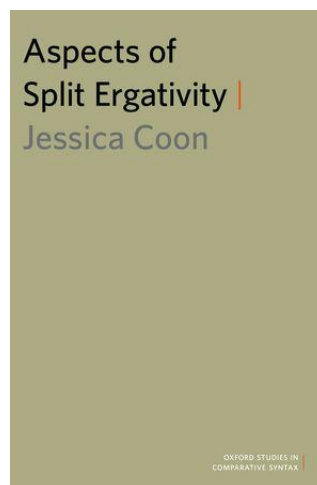
Reviewed by
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Abstract

A review of *Aspects of Split Ergativity* by Jessica Coon is presented. Aspect-based split ergativity refers to splits in agreement or morphological case which are the result of different syntactic structures. The review presents a brief description of split ergativity by way of introduction. The book is presented in two parts with seven chapters. Content of each chapter is presented and discussed.

Key words: Split ergativity, person split, tense, aspect, semantics of ergativity

Aspects of
Split Ergativity |
Jessica Coon

OXFORD STUDIES IN
COMPARATIVE SYNTAX

A Theory of Aspect-Based on Split Ergativity

In *Aspects of Split Ergativity*, Coon argues for "a theory of aspect-based split ergativity" (p.1). She deals with the languages with aspect-based split ergativity in which splits in agreement or morphological case are the result of different syntactic structures. This theoretical work is an

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expansion of the ideas of split ergativity in progressive aspect, proposed by Laka (2006) for Basque. Coon proposes that "transitive subjects are always marked ergative; intransitive subjects and transitive objects are marked absolutive" (p. 1). The author focuses on nonperfective aspects with complex auxiliary constructions and demoted objects.

Seven Chapters in Two Parts

The book is organized into seven chapters: Introduction, Mayan Background and Clause, Verbs and Nouns in Chol, Explaining Split Ergativity in Chol, Beyond Mayan: Extending the Analysis, The Grammar of Temporal Relations, and Conclusions. These chapters are the parts of two thematic divisions. The part one, *Complementation in Chol,* follows a general introduction on ergativity and split ergativity which provides an outline to the book, and the part two, *Theory of Split Ergativity,* is followed by three appendices (abbreviations, narrative text abbreviations, and the summary of basic constructions).

Chapter 1 on Ergativity and Split Ergativity

Chapter 1 (pp. 1-15) provides a brief outline to the issues which are going to be presented in the following chapters. She discusses ergativity and split ergativity; the author observes that "it does not make sense to characterize an entire language as ergative" (p. 6). Following Dixon, She represents two systems. In an ergative-absolutive system, A (agent of the transitive verb) is coded as ergative while S (core argument of intransitive verb) and O or P (object of the transitive verb) are coded as absolutive whereas in nominative-accusative system A and S are coded as nominative and O or P is coded as accusative. Furthermore, she describes the factors conditioning split ergativity from the work of Dixon (1994, 70) (p. 7):

a. semantic nature of the core nominal argument ("person split")
b. tense or aspect or mood of the clause ("TAM split")
c. semantic nature of the main verb ("Split-S")
d. grammatical status of the clause (i.e., main or subordinate)

Widespread Use of Ergativity

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Ergativity is found in one-quarter languages of the world. Coon quotes that Australia, the Caucasus, the Americas, New Guinea, South Asia, and the Austronesian family as 'hotbeds of ergativity' Comrie (2011)" (p. 5). She provides a brief summary to historical and functional accounts, explanations of ergative case and agreement patterns within the generative tradition: from the assertions that ergative subjects are like nominative subjects; they are licensed by T^0 and absolutive objects are licensed by v^0 (Levin and Massam (1985); Bobaljik (1993); Laka (1993); Chomsky (1995); and Rezac (2003)), to claims such as ergative DPs are licensed lower in the structure (Mahajan (1989); Woolford (1997); Legate (2002)), and ergative DPs are licensed lower in the structure Marantz (1991). She notes that ergative is assigned by T^0 and accusative is assigned by v^0 Bittner and Hale (1996), and it should not be treated as unitary phenomenon Johns (2000); Aldridge (2008); Marantz (1984); Woolford (2000); Wiltschko (2006); Coon (2011)).

Split Ergativity – Conditioned by Person Split

The split ergativity is conditioned by "person split", "TAM split", "Split S", and "the grammatical status of the main or subordinate clause" (p. 7). Chol, an aspect-based split ergative language, exhibits all splits except person. Further, Coon provides her theory-neutral labels "Set A" for ergative and relative case, and "Set B" for absolutive (p. 4). She states that ergativity has many analyses in generative traditions but she is interested to show how "the absence of ergative patterning in an otherwise ergative language is derived from structural differences… … … and fitted with any theory of case and agreement" (p. 6). She provides a predication generalization for Chol which states that transitive and intransitive verbs, in this Mayan language, require an internal argument, and "Split-S system in Chol is about the presence or absence of a full complement" and it "makes split between perfective and imperfective aspects" (p. 10). She has named "A-Constructions" after Set A, and "B-Constructions" after Set B to the nonperfective forms. She argues that the stems occurring in these two constructions in Chol nonperfective aspects are in complementary distribution.

Jessica states that the natural consequence of the generalization is that the stems combine with transitives, unaccusatives, and passives appear in A-Constructions and unergatives and antipassives in B-Constructions. There are other languages too, including French, Dutch, Basuqe,

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Kashmiri, and others where constructions similar to Chol B-Constructions are found in progressive and imperfective. Two types of splits are the focus of her study. In the first part of this book she looks at split person-marking in the Mayan language Chol.

Chapter 2 on Ergativity in Mayan Languages

In chapter two (pp.19-61), the author provides detail background information on Mayan languages. The focus, however, is on Chol which is spoken by approximately two million people. The Mayan languages, around thirty in number, are classified into five or six groups: Huastecan, Yukatekan, Greater Tseltalan, Greater Q'anjob'alan, K'ichean, and Mamean. Chol comes under Greater Tseltalan family. It is divided into two dialects: Tila Chol and Tumbala' Chol. Both of dialects are mutually intelligible to one another. The author follows the work of Chol-speaking linguists Vazquez Alvarez (2011) and Gutierrez Sanchez (2005) from Tila dialect in this work.

Chol – VOS Order

Chol is a pro-drop language with VOS order, and it has a "head-initial, head-marking, morphologically ergative language with predicate-initial word-order" (p. 22). This language is predicate initial, *i.e.* predicates precede the subject in unmarked discourse. Chol predicates complete a sentence, and it consists of verb, noun, numeral, and adjective. It is interesting to note that any Chol form that combines with a DP internal argument functions as predicate, and any stem form (nominal, adjective, and numeral) can serve as a predicate. First and second person pronouns are generally employed for emphasis. Overt third person nominals follow VS in intransitives and VOS in transitives. The author argues that VSO order is also possible as the result of remnant VP movement, and subject and object can be topicalized. Eventive predicates appear with an aspectual marker unlike statives.

Roots and CVC Structure

Roots have CVC structure in Chol, including lengthened, aspirated CV_jC and interrupted $CV_i`V_iC$ vowels. All consonants occur either in initial or final position of a root, and a root with a glottal stop at initial position is written without the glottal stop. In the word formation process, roots combine with one or more affixes. The roots forming eventive stems are divided into

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transitive, intransitive, and positional types. Unergative roots do not inflect directly but they appear as arguments in the light verbs.

Transitives and Intransitives

Coon argues that the classification of roots in Chol is not straightforward, and it is a contested topic. Transitive roots appear in transitive stems with a harmonic vowel suffix in perfective aspect, and transitive subjects are co-indexed by Set A prefixes *e.g. i, k, a,* etc. while transitive objects are marked Set B. Transitive roots in the nonperfective aspects form stems with either no suffix or the suffix *-e`*. Derived transatives are of two types: applicatives, marked by the suffix-b and causatives, formed from intransitive stems with the suffix *–(i)s*. Derived transitive stems appear with a vowel suffix in the perfective aspect and a *–Vn~* suffix in the nonperfective aspect. For derived transitives, the vowels in the suffixes are not necessarily harmonic with the root vowel, though the vowel in perfective/non-perfective *–V/Vn~* is always identical.

The author says that intransitives appear with the suffix *–i* in the perfective aspect and the suffix *–el* in the nonperfective aspects. The perfective forms and nonperfective forms show Set B and Set A marking with their subjects respectively. The positional roots refer to position, shape, or physical state. Positionals form eventive predicates with the suffixes *–li/le* in the perfective aspect and *–tyal* in the nonperfective aspects.

Aspect in Chol

Coon further discusses aspect in Chol. They are of three types: perfective, imperfective, and progressive. Eventive declarative predicate employs either form. She claims that imperfective and progressive (refer as nonperfective) markers *mi/muk'/mu`*and *chon~kol* are predicates, while perfective markers *tyi* and *tsa`/ta`* are only aspectual particles. Eventive predicates appear with initial aspect marker, while stative predicates employ temporal adverbs. Some researchers have called *tyi* a past tense morpheme. It is interesting note that past tense denoting clauses may appear without *tyi* and *tyi* does occur in the antecedents of nonpast conditionals in fake aspect. The author drops this discussion, stating "tyi bundles both perfective

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and past features together" (p.40). She uses the gloss "PRFV," following Vazquez Alvarez (2011).

Predicate and Argument

Grammatical relations are head-marked on the predicate. Set A (ergative and possessive) employs *k-/j-* for 1st person, *a(w)-* for 2nd person, and *i(y)-* for 3rd person, and Set B (absolute) employs *–(y)on~* for 1st person, *-(y)ety* for 2nd person, and *2* φορ 3ρδ περσον. Gender distinction is not maintained within the person markers. Set B markers are placed in transitive objects, subjects of perfective intransitives, and the theme in predicate nominal and predicate adjectival constructions. Coon proposes two generalizations for Set A and Set B which state: Set A marks all external arguments (transitive subjects, unergative subjects, possessors), and Set B marks all internal arguments (intransitive subjects, themes).

Coon argues that Chol predicates have an internal absolute argument. With the help of tree diagram she shows that the root undergoes head movement to the v^0 head where the status suffix is attached, and she assumes that the perfective aspect marker resides in $Infl^0$. Internal arguments of transitives behave similarly as intransitives. She further quotes her previous generalization, *Little v^0 Generalization*, for Chol: "all internal arguments must be assigned (absolute) case by a v^0 head", and "all v^0 heads must assign absolute case to an internal argument. The author provides a non case base to support her argument" (Coon 2010) (p. 48).

Examples from a Variety of Mayan Languages

The author provides examples from Tzotzil, Chol, Jakaltek, Akatek, Ixil, and Mopan languages to show ergative-absolute patterns of person-marking, manifested as head-marking on the predicate. She further gives examples of extended ergativity from Chol which shows the nonperfective aspects both transitive and intransitive subjects are marked Set A. The author quotes Larsen and Norman who provide factors for the split in Mayan language:

a. occurrence in subordinate clause

b. the presence of a focused constituent immediately preceding the verb

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c. particular tenses or aspects, and she discusses the each type briefly   (Larsen   and Norman 1979, 353) (p. 56).

Chapter 3 – Analysis of Splits

In chapter 3 (pp.62-108), Coon provides an analysis of the two splits found in Chol. The transitive subject is marked with Set A morphology, the transitive object and intransitive subject take Set B morphology in perfective aspect whereas in nonperfective aspect transitive and intransitive subjects are marked by Set A morphology. This she calls Split-S in Chol imperfectives.

Following Gutierrez Sanchez (2005) and Vazquez Alvarez (2011), she says that in Split-S system some intransitive subjects pattern like transitive subjects and some like transitive objects, and she says that this distinction can be equated with the structural difference between unergative and unaccusative predicates; these two constructions pattern differently. In an unaccusative the subject is marked Set B and in unergative, the subject is marked Set A. She repeats *Chol Predication Generalization*, stating all predicates in Chol must appear with an internal argument. Further she discusses four types of complementless stems: root unergative *son~* does not combine with an internal argument; ambivalent intransitives appear in an unaccuasative or unergative constructions; the absolutive antipassive is formed with a suffix and without object; and incorporation antipassive involves a bare transitive root with an NP object. To show that all verbs in perfective constructions combine with DP internal arguments, she illustrates how unaccusatives appear directly in verbal stems, and unergatives and antipassives require the use of the light verb.

Split Ergativity in Chol

Chapter 4 (pp.109-182) provides a detail analysis of split ergativity in Chol. The author refers to subjects marked in Set A as "A-Constructions." She says that just as the subject follows the nonperfective stems similarly the possessor follows the possessum. She further compares the Set A agreement in Hindi and Chol. She says that an ergative-patterning transitive shows ergative morphology on the transitive subject in Hindi while nonergative patterning does not. But in Chol Set A agreement co-indexing subjects in both perfective and nonperfective transitive

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constructions. She proposes that the Set A-triggering nominal in the nonperfective aspect co-indexes a genitive argument.

Jessica shows that the nonperfective aspect markers are predicates, and they behave as one-place stative predicates. They combine with single DP argument, and they are in fact responsible for split. In nonperfective A-Constructions, the argument is a possessed nominalized clause, and in nonperfective B-Constructions, the nonperfective marker shows overt Set B marking.

Imperfective and Progressive Aspects

Coon says that imperfective and progressive aspects are periphrastic, and not inceptive like English. The aspect marker serves as the matrix predicate and embeds a nominalized clause. The embedded complementless stem never assigns a ==T−role, rather "the subject ==T−role is assigned by the matrix predicate, and the complementless stem is realized as an adjunct" (p. 132). The complementless forms appear in "raising" constructions, also known as B-Constructions, and this type of construction is similar to light verb constructions.

Chapter 5 – Analysis Beyond Mayan Languages

Chapter 5 (pp.185-223) introduces *PART 2*, and it extends the analysis of aspects in split ergativity beyond Mayan languages. In the previous section, the author shows that split ergativity in Chol is a result of set of features associated with the nonperfectives aspects, and Coon puts that the nonperfective aspects are verbs. She further explains in Chol that ergative and genitive are identical; nonfinite embedded clauses are nominalizations; and transitive and intransitive subjects are expressed as possessors. The focus of this chapter is to examine aspect-based split ergativity in the languages of different groups. The author quotes Dixon's *Aspect Split Generalization* which states: "if a split is conditioned by tense or aspect, the ergative marking is always found either in the past tense or the perfective aspect" (p. 186). She also repeats Moravcsik's generalization that "no ergative language is fully consistent" (p.187).

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Further she discusses split patterns, three types of split ergativity, and extended ergativity in this chapter. There are four types of split patterns described, including a hypothetical one to show a language switching from an ergative-absolutive to a nominative-accusative pattern. Most of the Mayan languages exhibit extended ergativity. Hindi, Basque, and Nakh-Daghestanian languages exhibit neutral alignment in the split. The author gives examples of Georgian and Samoan languages to discuss that P is marked as an oblique and both subjects get absolutive. As we know that this theoretical work is an expansion of the ideas of split ergativity in progressive aspect, proposed by Laka (2006) for Basque. Firstly, we will take into consideration Basque. This language shows an ergative-absolutive alignment in the perfective and imperfective-aspects. A arguments are marked –ak as in (25), P and S arguments are marked with –a.

However, in the progressive aspect all three arguments receive the absolutive –a suffix. Laka proposes, since progressive constructions are complex clauses this results in the absence of the ergative marking on the transitive constructions. Coon proposes that Chol "B-Constructions" behave similarly to the Basque progressive constructions. Though Chol and Basque differs in many respects: Chol is head-initial, while Basque is head-final; and Chol is exclusively head-marking, while Basque shows case on nominals and agreement yet both are morphologically ergative. The aspect markers are unaccusative predicates that assign absolutive case and θ-roles to the subjects. She says that "this is found in the progressive" in Basque, and in the progressive and imperfective in Chol (p. 194).

The pattern of split ergativity found in Basque represents an ergative-to-neutral type split. Nakh-Daghestanian (Archi, Tsez, Ingush, and Lak), Indo-Aryan (Hindi, Gujarati, Kashmiri, etc.), and Je` (Mẽbengokre and Kĩsedje) languages also behave similarly. "Bi-absolutive" found in Nakh-Daghestanian languages show an ergative-absolutive pattern of case-marking on nominals in Archi. The basic word-order is SOV, and ergative case is morphologically marked whereas the absolutive remains unmarked. However, the verb agrees with the absolutive argument in gender and number.

Laka (2006) states that Hindi, Gujarati and Basque languages have a similar construction in split ergativity. Coon says that in Hindi and Chol, we find a split between the perfective aspect and imperfective aspect in ergative patterning, and progressive aspects and perfective aspects in

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nonergative patterning while in Basque show splits between progressive and nonprogressive. She quotes Farrell (1995), showing a final auxiliary affecting subject marking in Balochi and Hindi when the final light verb is intransitive[i]; no ergative case may appear on the A subject.

Further she provides examples of progressive and non-progressive aspects in a couple of languages of the Brazilian Amazon family. She states that nominative-accusative pattern is found with all verbs while ergativity in the nominal domain in these languages. The examples from different languages made her to conclude that" the split is the result of additional structure in some nonperfective aspects" (p. 206). Limiting the scope of her work she briefly provides examples for ergative to extended ergative pattern and ergative to ABS-OBL pattern from Dari, Georgian, Samoan, Warrungu, and Adyghe languages. The extended ergative pattern is the result of the embedded clauses take the form of nominalizations and ergative marking and possessive marking are identical. ABS-OBL patterning is conditioned by grammatical and lexical aspect.

She further interrogates and introspects: Why don't we have "split accusativity"? She confirms her conclusions with the theoretical perspectives of Comrie (1976), Bybee (1974), Demirdache, and Uribe-Etxebarria (2007), stating nonperfective aspects involves more complex structure, and imperfective aspect is associated with atelicity and lower transitivity. She quotes Tusanda: ("A split is not a conflict of two (or more) different case-marking systems, but is conditioned by one single, integrated scheme") (p. 233).

Chapter 6 – Use of Non-complex Constructions

The next chapter (pp.224-246) is devoted to the discussion on: why imperfective and progressive aspects involve more complex constructions? The author suggests and shows that they are built on the same type of structure as locative constructions. The author arguments are supported by the analysis of Uribe-Etxebarria and Demirdache (2007). They suggest that Tense and Aspect heads denote prepositional meanings. Utterance Time (UT-T) and Assertion Time (AST-T) are related to Tense, and Assertion Time (AST-T) and Event Time (EV-T) are related to Aspect. However, these notions are constrained by Hale's notions of *central coincidence* and *noncentral coincidence.*

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Coon says though perfective remains absent from the typology, the perfective aspect the AST-T contains the EV-T, while the present tense and imperfective/progressive aspect follow the WITHIN typology, past and perfect follow BEFORE, and future and prospective follow AFTER. The author concludes that if not specified the perfective can be treated as default.

Chapter 7 – An Overview of Content and Analysis Presented

The final chapter (pp. 247-251) provides a brief overview to the work. The author believes that more work will determine any generalization on splits; however Chol can be taken as a case study in such works. There is but one criticism of the book. The consistency of highlighting the examples has been done only partially. Moreover, since the examples of different languages have been quoted from various sources, the data do not follow a uniform pattern. Her repetition of generalizations and theoretical notions for the support of aspects of split ergativity runs in the book throughout.

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[i] Agnihotri (2007), in Hindi: An Essential Grammar discusses transitive verbs laanaa 'to bring', Daranaa 'to be afraid', and bhulanaa 'to forget' that, though transitive, may avoid the ergative pattern in the past perfect. Similarly, chukanaa also indicates the completion of activity but it does not participate in ergative pattern (p. 187).

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