

*Agency and the Subject in the Amazon:
Ergativity and the “Empowered” Shaman*

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A subject is a subject, right? You hit someone, you kiss someone, you love or hate him or her, or you just sit and think, or wander around. Our language embodies this: It doesn't matter if what you are doing is something transitive, like kissing someone, or something intransitive, like thinking – if you do it, you are the subject who does it.. Any of the major European languages is the same – in fact *all* of the European languages except Basque: *je pense, tu penses, je t'aime, il m'aime ; ich denke, du denkst, ich liebe dich, er liebt mich* – the subject is always marked in the same way, in the nominative case, coming before the verb, and the object is accusative, coming after.

The language I learned when I went to live with the Parintintin in the Brazilian Amazon, a language called Kagwahiv, of the Tupí family, does it somewhat differently. They use a structure of the sentence which linguists call ergative, or more exactly: ergative-absolutive--a structure that calls in question all of our assumptions about the subject being the agent of any action.

The linguistic definition of this structure is quite simple: deceptively simple, we may say, considering its implications. In this structure, called ergative, the subjects and objects are grouped in a different way. The *object* of a transitive verb takes the same form as the *subject* of an intransitive verb, as if to do something that is not directed at something else is the same as to have something done to you. Only the subject of a *transitive* verb is given a distinct form, or a distinct position in the sentence, as if doing

something *to* someone else, or to something, is the only way one is truly an agent. This position, the subject of a *transitive* verb, is what is called the “ergative” case: “ergative” from the Greek ἐργον, meaning “work, deed, function” – if you are acting *on* something, you are really doing something.. On the other hand, the object of the transitive verb and the subject of the intransitive are grouped together in another form, which linguists call “absolute.” If you’re just sitting, thinking, or running, you’re not doing any *work*, you might as well be the object of someone else’s action. Thinking about it this way, it is as if the subject of an intransitive verb isn’t really an agent, but rather is (as Lacan says) is *subjected to* the action, just like an object.

Or one can think about the equation of the object with the intransitive subject a slightly different way. The object of an action also takes part in the action – a part which might be compared with the degree of agency of someone who is doing something that is not “to” someone else. In a bit, I’ll give an example that illustrates this.

Robert Dixon, who has written the book on the subject (Dixon 1994), labels each of these positions with a letter: the subject of the transitive verb is A, for “agent”; the object is O, and the subject of the *intransitive* verb is S.

All this goes counter to our “common sense.” The subject of a verb is the subject of a verb, whether that verb is transitive or intransitive; you are the agent of an action, whether the action is running or chopping a block of wood, whether you are speaking or touching someone – an intransitive act, or a transitive one. Where does this notion come from, that being an agent who does something to someone or something is different from just doing something? And even more perplexing, to treat “just doing something” as being the same as being the object of an action?

Yet most if not all languages of the Tupí-Guaraní family that Kagwahiv belongs to, and some of the other language families of the Amazon Basin share this structure – in fact, probably the majority of the languages of the Amazon region. Most of these languages have this structure as an *alternative* way of saying something, it's not the only grammatical structure of a sentence; but most of these languages have it as at least one way to say it. And it has been asserted that the majority of human languages are “split ergative,” that is partially ergative. A huge number of these languages are, of course, the indigenous languages like those of New Guinea or the Australian aborigines, but it also includes languages like Hindi that are spoken by hundreds of millions.

So what is it that makes this form so widespread? What makes people use this form that seems so irrational to us? Or we might ask in a different way – a little humbler, perhaps -- what is it that such a structure permits us to say that we can't say in English or French or German? What kind of thinking does such a structure facilitate?

I should make clear that the Kagwahiv language structure, like many of these languages, is not entirely ergative. There is a sentence form in which you can say things the same way as in our familiar languages; but the most common form of speech in Kagwahiv follows this peculiar ergative pattern.

Let's think about the form that equates an intransitive subject with the object of a transitive verb. One way to look at that is that an *object* is treated like the *subject* of an intransitive verb: could that suggest that the object participates in the act that it is the object of? While I was preparing this talk, an event was reported in the New York Times, that I had seen some months before in the Chicago Tribune. A man shot another man in an argument in a bar in Philadelphia, injuring him seriously. The man he shot was sent to

the hospital with a severe paralysis. The culprit was tried for assault and battery, convicted and sent to jail.

Twenty years later, the man comes out of jail. The man he shot has managed to regain some function of his limbs, but he still lives precariously. After some years, he dies, and the doctors find that his death is a consequence of the gunshot wound he got years earlier. Now, the man who shot him is brought to trial once more, this time for a new crime: murder.

The papers find this strange: isn't it double jeopardy? No, reply some lawyers: the crime is a different one. Now that the victim has died, the crime is murder. The condition of the victim is what defines the crime as either just assault and battery, or murder.

This is a situation that is much easier to think about in terms of ergative grammar: The object of the act determines what the significance of the act is; but he determines it in an intransitive way: he lives, or he dies, or he just suffers.

What kinds of logic, what kinds of thought are facilitated by an ergative structure?

In the considerations above, several trends come out. The first is the stressing of the act which imposes on someone, or on something. The ergative form which distinguishes the subject of a *transitive* verb, and separates it from an intransitive verb, privileges the agency of someone who acts *on* something or on someone. It stresses dominance, action in an interpersonal field. This is particularly the case in languages which grammatically mark the ergative case – as Dixon says is generally the case in ergative structures. It is the case in Gê languages, which are spoken in Central Brazil. In

the Gê languages which have ergative structures, it is the subject of the transitive verb that is marked: the pronoun or noun which is the subject of the verb is followed by a particle (in Xokleng for example *tô*), which marks it as the ergative case. Many of these cultures have political systems in which competition for village leadership is intense and central to the social order; the successful leader is one who acts on others. The value they place on assertiveness and dominance has no doubt contributed to the prominence and success of Gê-speaking groups like the Shavante and the Kayapó in the movement of indigenous protest against white injustice and treachery.

Tupí languages such as Kagwahiv, spoken by the Parintintin, have a different kind of structure – a double structure. One way of conjugating the verb, and making a sentence, is the same as ours, nominative-accusative, but the other way is ergative. If you will forgive me for thrusting a little grammar on you, I will sketch two ways that Kagwahiv conjugates verbs. One way is a conjugation with prefixes which mark the first, second, third person -- like the Latin “*amo, amas, amat, amamos, amatis, amanti*” or the similar Spanish endings. In Kagwahiv, the persons are marked by prefixes, *a-*, *ere-*, *o-* ... so that for the verb *-potá*, “want,” or “love,” you have: *apotá*, “I want”; *erepotá*, “you want”; *opotá*, “he or she wants,” and so on. This conjugation is basically the same for a transitive verb like “want” (*apotá ji ga*, “I want him” or “I love him”) or for an intransitive verb like “go,” which is *-ho – ahó, erehó, ohó,...* “I go, you go, he goes...” etc. Since the subjects of an intransitive verb have the same markings as the subjects of a transitive verb, it’s the same as our system, it is what we call “nominative-accusative.”

The other form, though, is a little more complicated. Instead of prefixes, there are just a series of pronouns that are placed before the verb – more like English, except for

one thing. For the *intransitive* verb, like “go,” the pronoun that comes before the verb is the subject: *ji hoi*, “I go”; *nde hoi*, “you go”; *ga hoi*, “he goes”; *hẽ hoi*, “she goes,” and so on, where *ji*, *nde*, *ga*, *hẽ* are the pronouns “I, you, he, she...” For the transitive verb, you also have pronouns that come before the verb, but the pronoun is not the *subject* of the verb, but its *object*. So that *ji-potá ga*, means “*he* loves *me*.” So the *subject* of an Intransitive verb is treated like the *object* of a transitive verb – and that is the definition of an ergative structure. Only here, it is not the ergative case that is marked grammatically (that is, the subject of the transitive verb) but the other case, the case that linguists call “absolutive.” Because the pronoun that is put before verb when it is intransitive is the subject, but when the verb is transitive the pronoun that comes there is the *object*.

What does all this mean? What difference does it make whether a language lumps together the subject of a transitive verb and the subject of an intransitive verb, and marks the object differently, like ours, or lumps together the subject of an intransitive verb with the object of a transitive verb, and treats the *subject* of the transitive verb differently – the “ergative”?

That “ergative” does has a meaning is demonstrated by Robert Dixon, when he dedicates his book to “Sasha, the only ergative woman” – although he does not elaborate on just what it is for a woman to be ergative.

We can get some sense by thinking about what it means to group together the subject of an intransitive verb with the object of a transitive one. What does an intransitive subject have in common with an object? From one view, you could say that the act which has no object—walking, sitting, thinking, speaking--is no more than something we are subjected to. As Lacan says, “we are spoken by our unconscious.”

But we can equally say the reverse: that the object of an act *does* participate in the act, even (as in the Times story) has a determinant effect on the act, in defining it—even if he (or she, or it) participates in an intransitive way.

In one of the cultures related to the Parintintin, which has a very similar language, the Kayabí, there is a practice whereby each adult man has a song which he sings on ritual occasions. The song is often an enactment of a war exploit, frequently one in which the singer killed an enemy. (Nowadays, with the enforced Pax Brasiliensis, the song may be inherited from an ancestor who was a warrior.) But the peculiarity of many of these songs (described in a book by Suzanne Oakdale, *I Foresee my Life*) is that the song is sung in part from the perspective of the victim, the person who was killed. The song is a dramatization of the fear with which the enemy becomes aware of the approaching warrior, the grief he feels for his certain impending death—in a sequence alternating the warrior's perspective with that of the victim. The two are united in the act; but it is the victim who exalts the terrifying presence of the warrior, his prowess in war: it is the object of the act who defines it as an act of martial glory.

In other ways, Tupí warriors were identified with the objects of their martial victories. The Araweté warriors took the names of the enemies they slew, as their new names to celebrate their victories. When they reached the afterlife, their souls went up linked with the soul of the slain enemy, which jointly provided them with godly status. Thus the object of the act participated actively in the definition of the act itself and its social consequences, and even its consequences after death (Viveiros de Castro, 1992).

Parintintin shamans give another example which corresponds with a different aspect of ergative thinking.

The word for “shaman” itself is in fact not a noun, as in English, but a verb, *ipají*, meaning “is possessed of shamanic power.” This verb has the same form as those ergative verbs I was speaking of earlier—it has the pronoun before it, *ji pají* (“I am possessed of shamanic power”), *nde pají* (“you are possessed of shamanic power”), etc.

What makes someone a shaman? What gives a person this power? Each shaman is intimately associated with a spirit, which comes in his dreams and provides visions of what will come, of what is happening, but which also goes in his dreams to carry out his shamanic acts—to bring hunting success to someone, to inflict illness on an enemy, or what he wills. It is also this spirit, his *rupigwára*, that goes out when the shaman is in trance during the curing ceremony, and brings back spirits to blow on the patient to help in the cure.

But where does this *rupigwára* come from? It is literally born into the shaman. Before the shaman’s birth, a spirit comes to *another* shaman in *his* dream, and asks to be born. The older shaman who received the spirit in his dream, tells the spirit to enter a particular woman to be born. When that woman gives birth, her child is considered the incarnation of that spirit. The child will later be apprenticed to the shaman who dreamed him, and will grow up to be a new shaman, whose *rupigwára* is the spirit that was born as him. So that every shaman is in a sense *lived by* the spirit that was born into him, or born as him; it is as if his very existence is a manifestation from “the other scene.”

We can see how various aspects of ergative thinking show up in the beliefs and practices of these cultures that have partially ergative languages; but what does all this have to do with psychoanalysis?

This will be the topic of Bonnie's paper; but let me just in brief conclusion anticipate some possibilities. Children live in a world like the one the Tupi have constructed. They are acted upon by the *other* -- the other in the person of their parents, of adults, or the Other in the form of the language and culture that surround them, that are imbued in the, yet of which they have as yet an imperfect grasp. Their task is to *become* this other--to absorb the parents in identification, to absorb and integrate their language and culture in order to complete themselves as human beings. Because a child is not yet fully in language, does not fully "control" his speech, he is spoken by language. Thus, so to speak, the child *lives ergatively*; he experiences the world as a series of events that happen around him and to him. When he falls, something made him fall.

Take Little Hans. Love *happens* to him, in the form of a reaction to a little girl he sees at a restaurant -- a reaction which he can only try to control, evidently, by acting *like* the adults he has seen loving. And when the same feeling is precipitated in him before a little boy cousin, he relies on the same kind of acting--"I do so love you!"-- which Freud (in the voice of the adult) humorously labels as "homosexual."

A child's fantasy life, then, naturally takes an ergative form, at least in part. Events seem to act "through" one, rather than one performing the events as if one were in control of them. It's natural, seeing it from a child's perspective.

And aren't we *all* children before our unconscious? We are all spoken by language; we are lived by our unconscious fantasies.

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