

## Ergativity in Bactrian

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### Abstract

The Middle Iranian language Bactrian is described as having an ergative construction for past transitive verbs, while the present system patterns nominatively. The aim of this article is to show the specific forms of ergativity in Bactrian. The focus will be on the different forms of subject and object marking, including the function of the preposition αβο “to” to mark the object. I will argue that apart from canonical ergative constructions, Bactrian shows neutral and tripartite patterns. These can be seen as signs of a transition of the ergative into the nominative construction.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Bactrian belongs to the Eastern Middle Iranian language group and was originally spoken in northern Afghanistan. It is the only Iranian language that is known to be written with the Greek alphabet. “As the language of the Kushan kings, Bactrian must have been widely known throughout a great empire, in Afghanistan, Northern India and parts of Central Asia.”<sup>2</sup> This language is attested in sources such as coins, seals, and a few inscriptions of the Kushan period “(first to third centuries AD)”<sup>3</sup> and also by many economic and legal documents such as lists, accounts, and letters perhaps from the fourth to the eighth or ninth century AD.

A number of Iranian languages, such as Middle Persian, Pashto, Kurdish, and Hawrami, are described as having an ergative construction. According to Dixon, ergativity is a grammatical pattern in which “the subject of an intransitive clause is treated in the same way as the object of a transitive clause, and differently from transitive subject.”<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Iranian languages generally exhibit what is known as “split ergativity”,<sup>5</sup> since the ergative construction is found only in clauses based on the past stem of the verb. It derives from constructions based on the Old Iranian perfect participle in *-ta*, which are called the “*manā kartam* construction”. This construction is interpreted by some scholars as passive<sup>6</sup> while others prefer to see it as possessive<sup>7</sup> or call it free genitive.<sup>8</sup> The question of whether the ergative is to be interpreted as passive or possessive will not be discussed here.

Instead, the characteristics of the ergative construction and its typical features in

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Nicholas Sims-Williams for valuable corrections and comments.

<sup>2</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 1997.

<sup>3</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 1989: 344.

<sup>4</sup> DIXON 1994: 1.

<sup>5</sup> See DIXON 1994: 14.

<sup>6</sup> See SKJÆRVØ 1985: 211–227 and CARDONA 1970: 1–12.

<sup>7</sup> See BENVENISTE 1966: 176–186 and ANDERSON 1977: 317–363.

<sup>8</sup> See HAIG 2008: 27–29.

the Bactrian language will be presented, and the patterns of case marking will be analysed. The text corpus used for this investigation comprises the texts edited by SIMS-WILLIAMS as *BD I* (legal and economic documents) and *BD II* (letters), the Rabatak inscription edited by SIMS-WILLIAMS and CRIBB (1996),<sup>9</sup> and the Kanishka inscription of Surkh Kotal (see LAZARD, GRENET and DE LAMBERTERIE 1984).<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Morphological notes<sup>11</sup>

### 2.1 Case marking<sup>12</sup>

The older Bactrian texts show a nominal system of two cases and two numbers. However, the distinction between direct (DIR) and oblique (OBL) case in the singular can only be seen in a few instances in the inscriptions. In the economic documents, legal documents, letters, and Buddhist texts, singular nouns are found in what used to be the direct case (-o) while plural nouns are found almost exclusively in the oblique. So the plural oblique case is generalized, and the morpheme -avo indicates the plural, leaving a system where nouns are essentially unmarked for case (uninflected, UFL).

In the texts used for this investigation, examples of case distinction are extremely rare, and we can conclude that at this stage, no real case distinction is found in nouns anymore.

### 2.2 Pronouns

Personal pronouns only distinguish a direct and oblique form in the singular. For the 3rd person, demonstrative pronouns are used. Table 1 shows the most common forms of pronouns in the researched documents.

	direct	oblique	enclitic
1s	αζο	μανο	=μο =μαγο with preposition
2s	το (τοι, τοο, τογο, τοουο)	ταο (ταοι, ταοο)	=δηιο =φαγο with preposition
3s	ειμο, ειδο		=ηιο
1p	αμαχο	αμαχο, ιαμαχο	=μηνο
2p		τωμαχο, τομαχο, ταμαχο	=δηνο
3p	ειμι	ειμοανο, ειμουανο εδουανο	=ηνο, =τηνο

As in other languages the enclitic pronouns function exclusively as oblique. They usually function as:

<sup>9</sup> See also SIMS-WILLIAMS 1998.

<sup>10</sup> See also SIMS-WILLIAMS 1985: 111ff. and 1996: 635–638, 650.

<sup>11</sup> For a morphological sketch of Bactrian, see SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 40–49.

<sup>12</sup> See also SIMS-WILLIAMS / CRIBB 1996: 89.

## (i) subject of transitive verbs in the past

- 1) στο=μηνο      αγγιτ-ινδο      ι      οαυαγο      οισπο      ασποριγο  
 and=we.CP      receive.PST-3p      ART      price      all      complete  
 “And we received the price all complete.” (L 21–22)<sup>13</sup>

## (ii) object of transitive verbs in the present:

- 2) κιδ-ανο      αβα=φαγο      ζηρο ...      αβκαρ-αδο  
 who-PAR      to=you.s.CP      PN      pursue.PRS-SBJV.3s  
 “who might pursue you, Zer” (F 12–13)<sup>14</sup>

## (iii) pronominal possessive on noun

- 3) χοβο=μο      περιφτο  
 own=I.CP      inheritance  
 “my own inheritance” (C 7)<sup>15</sup>

## (iv) recipient / indirect object

- 4) φαρα=φαγο      πιδοσημο  
 for=you.s.CP      declare.PRS-1s  
 “I declare [it] to you.” (C 5–6)<sup>16</sup>

## (v) governed by a preposition

- 5) ασα=φαγο  
 from=you.s.CP  
 “from you” (A 10)<sup>17</sup>

The demonstratives are used both in singular and plural forms in the extant material, but they show a case distinction only in the plural in the inscriptions. In the texts in *BD I* and *II* we only have one form; the oblique plural form is generalized. There are also other demonstrative pronouns in Bactrian such as ειο, οο, and μο. The plural forms of these demonstratives are not used in the extant material.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Ergativity in Bactrian

I now turn to the past transitive or ergative constructions. Bactrian shows split ergativity with agreement of the verb with the object in person and number. Bactrian ergative constructions show the subject in the oblique and the object in the direct case. “In principle transitive forms derived from the past stem agree with the direct object.”<sup>19</sup> But in *BD I* and *II*, nouns do not show a case distinction (see Section 2.1).

In the legal and economic documents and the inscriptions, the animate object is

<sup>13</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 66.

<sup>14</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 46.

<sup>15</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 39.

<sup>16</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 39.

<sup>17</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 33.

<sup>18</sup> For the demonstratives in Bactrian see GHOLAMI (forthc.).

<sup>19</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 46.

usually in the third person, whereas in the letters there are also examples in which the object is in the first or second person.

The preposition  $\alpha\beta\omicron$  is also used as marker of a direct object which is animate and human with verbs in the past or the present domain.<sup>20</sup> It can also be used with an indirect object (ex. 13). Here is an example from the economic and legal documents:

- 6)  $\kappa\omicron\omicron\alpha\delta\omicron$   $\alpha\mu\alpha\chi\omicron$   $\alpha\beta\omicron$   $\rho\alpha\lambda\iota\kappa\omicron$   $\chi\omicron\alpha\delta\omicron$   $\zeta\eta\phi\tau\omicron$   
 that we.UFL to PN own request.PST.3s  
 “that we ourselves have requested Ralik” (A 23–24)<sup>21</sup>

### Classification of the past transitive constructions<sup>22</sup>

According to the material available at present, two main types of ergative constructions can be distinguished. The first type can be further divided into seven subtypes. The main difference is the marking of the object and the word classes involved. The first group has no marker for the object, whereas in the second group the direct object is marked by the preposition  $\alpha\beta\omicron$ .

#### Type I: Direct object DIR or UFL, or indicated by verbal ending

Examples 7–8 and 12 show the general structure of the ergative construction, in which the subject stands in the oblique case, and the object is in the direct case or indicated by the verbal ending. The subject may be an enclitic (exx. 7–9), a full personal pronoun (exx. 10–11, 13), or a noun (exx. 12, 14–15). The object may be a noun (exx. 9–10, 13–14), a noun with demonstrative (exx. 11–12) or article (ex. 1), or a full personal pronoun (ex. 7).

Subject	Object
(a1) CP	PRON.DIR
7) $\omicron\tau\omicron=\mu\omicron$ $\tau\omicron$ $\zeta\eta\omicron\omicron$ $\alpha\zeta\alpha\delta\omicron$ ... $\upsilon\iota\tau\tau\text{-}\eta\iota\omicron$ and=I.CP you.s.DIR PN free set.PST-2s “I released you, Zer.” (F 7–8) <sup>23</sup>	

(a2) CP Verbal ending indicates the object

In ex. 8 the verb is third person plural, while the subject is first person plural and the verb agrees with the object.

- 8)  $\sigma\iota\delta\omicron=\mu\eta\gamma\omicron$   $\alpha\beta\omicron$   $\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron\gamma\omicron$   $\rho\omega\beta\omicron$ [ ]  $\phi\alpha\omicron\omicron$   $\chi\omicron\eta\omicron$   $\omicron\alpha\sigma\tau\text{-}\iota\upsilon\delta\omicron$   
 which=we.CP to great PN for lord take.PST-3p  
 “which [= two sheep] we took to great Rob for the lord” (ef 7–8)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 1998: 86.

<sup>21</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 34.

<sup>22</sup> Some of these constructions are also mentioned by TREMBLAY 2003: 128 (using other terminology). According to information received from Xavier Tremblay, a paper presented by Nicholas Sims-Williams at the 7th Conference of the *Societas Iranologica Europaea* 2007 in Vienna discussed issues related to those mentioned in this paper, among these, dialectal variation of Bactrian sentence patterns.

<sup>23</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 44.

<sup>24</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 119.

(b) CP N.UFL<sup>25</sup>

- 9) ταδο=μο ωσο ... οαναγο σποριγο αγγιτο  
 so=I.CP now price complete receive.PST.3s  
 “So now, I received the full price.” (F 6)<sup>26</sup>

(c1) PRON.OBL+ N.UFL N.UFL

- 10) μσιδο πιδοροβδο μανο μοζ[δο ι χαρα]γανο ... ιαιοι  
 now receive.PST.3s I.OBL PN [do i chara]gano ... grain  
 “Now I, Muz[dkhara]gan, received ... grain.” (G 2–5)<sup>27</sup>

(c2) PRON.OBL + N.UFL DEM + N.UFL

- 11) μσιδο ζιφο μανο βαγοφαρνο ... ειιο ζινο  
 now request.PST.3s I.OBL PN Bag-farno ... DEM woman  
 “Now: I, Bag-Farn, requested this woman.” (A 10–11)<sup>28</sup>

(d) N.OBL DEM + N.DIR

- 12) βαφαρε καταλαραγε κιρδο ειιο βαγολαγγο  
 PN.OBL lord of the marches.OBL make.PST.3s DEM sanctuary  
 “Shafar the lord of the marches made this sanctuary” (inscription of Rabatak l. 15)<sup>29</sup>

(e) PRON.UFL N.UFL

- 13) ταδο μαχο ωσο λαδο αβο=φαγο βηκο βονο οαρζιαδ  
 so we.UFL now give.PST.3s to=you.s.CP PN land farming  
 “So now we gave the farming of the state to you, Bek.” (U 6–7)<sup>30</sup>

(f) N.UFL N.UFL<sup>31</sup>

- 14) δανομανο μαρδο ζιγο βηλαδδιο κιρδο  
 such-and-such man damage unlawful do.PST.3s  
 “Such-and-such persons did the damage [and] unlawful (acts).” (X 23)<sup>32</sup>

(g) N.UFL Verbal ending indicates the object

In ex. 15 the “steward” is the subject, and the verb agrees with the object, which is first person singular.

- 15) ταδο φρομαλαρο πιδο Δηβαυρο αγιτ-ιμο  
 so steward with anger hold.PST-1s  
 “Then the steward arrested me.” (jh 6)<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See also example 1 and the third clause of 22.

<sup>26</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 45.

<sup>27</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 49.

<sup>28</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 33.

<sup>29</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2008: 57.

<sup>30</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 107.

<sup>31</sup> This pattern is even found in texts that use an obl.sg. in some instances (TREMBLAY 2003: 128 note 23).

<sup>32</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 141.

<sup>33</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 137.

**Type II: Direct object marked by αβο**

In Bactrian the preposition αβο, originally meaning “to, in, according to, etc.”, is occasionally used to mark a definite direct object. It is also described as marking animate objects only. This can co-occur with agreement of the verb with the so-marked object (see ex. 17).<sup>34</sup>

- | Subject   | Object                    |
|---|---------------------------|
| (a) CP  | αβο + N.UFL               |
| 16) κooαδο=μo    αβο    ζηρο ...    χιρδο<br>that=I.CP    to    PN    buy.PST.3s<br>“that I had [formerly] bought [you], Zer” (F 4–6) <sup>35</sup>   |                           |
| 17) ταδο=μo    πιδο    ταμαχο    σαχοανο    αβο    ρωβιγο    βαστ-ινδο<br>so=I.CP    with    you.p.OBL    statement    to    of.Rob    bind.PST-3p<br>“so because of your statement, I bound the men of Rob.” (cm 9–10) <sup>36</sup>               |                           |
| (b) PRON.UFL  | αβο + N.UFL <sup>37</sup> |
| 18) αγγιτιδο    αμαχο    μανο    βαβο    οδο    πιδοκο    αβο    ραλικο    ολο<br>receive.PST.3s    we.UFL    I.OBL    PN    and    PN    to    PN    wife<br>“We received – I, Bab, and [I,] Piduk – Ralik [as our] wife.” (A 15–16) <sup>38</sup> |                           |
| (c) POSS + N.UFL  | αβο + N.UFL               |

In ex. 19 δαθβομαρηγο βραδο and βραυριγο are the objects, and the verb agrees with the last of them (or with them together if they were seen as a collective):

- 19) οτ-ανο    ταιοι    χοβαν-ανο    αβο    δαθβομαρηγο    βραδο  
so-PAR    your.s    shepherd-PL    to    PN    brother  
οδ-αβο    βραυριγο    ζιδο  
and-to    nephew    strike.PST.3s  
“And your shepherds struck Dathsh-mareg’s brother and nephew.” (ba 6–7)<sup>39</sup>

The αβο construction is comparable with the use of prepositions in some Pamir languages like, for instance, *az* in Shughni-Roshani and *z* in Yazghulami. These prepositions originally had the meaning “from” and are used in similar constructions to mark the direct object.<sup>40</sup> These constructions are restricted to personal pronouns in these languages.

According to Payne one possible development in the decay of ergativity is the “grammaticalization of prepositions or postpositions as object-marker”.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. SIMS-WILLIAMS 1998: 86.

<sup>35</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 45.

<sup>36</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 91.

<sup>37</sup> See also example 6.

<sup>38</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 33.

<sup>39</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 53.

<sup>40</sup> WENDTLAND 2008: 418–419.

<sup>41</sup> PAYNE 1998: 557.

**Type III: Indirect object indicated by verbal ending**

(a1) CP Verbal ending indicates the indirect object

- 20) ταδο=μο      πιδο      ι      ναβιχτ-ημο  
 so=I.CP      with      DEM      write.PST-2s  
 “So I have written to you regarding this.” (bh 8–9)<sup>42</sup>

ναβιχτ- is a transitive preterite verb and therefore one would expect it to agree with the direct object. But instead it agrees with the indirect object, which is second person singular.

In ex. 21, the verb is first person singular and agrees with the indirect object “I”.

- 21) ταδο=μο      ναγατο      σαγωνδο      ναβιχτ-ημο  
 so=I.CP      hear.PST.3s      how      write.PST-1s  
 “So I have heard how (your lordship) has written to me.” (ci 4)<sup>43</sup>

(a2) PRON.OBL Verbal ending indicates the indirect object

- 22) ασο=μαγο      ιωβιγο      βραδο      πιδο      χαγγαρο      ζιδδ-ιμο  
 through=I.CP      PN      brother      with      sword      strike.PST-1s  
 οδο      τασο      βραμαρζο      αβισταοοαγο      κιρδδ-ημο  
 and      you.s.OBL      PN      disloyal      do.PST-1s  
 ταδο      παφτο      ναναφτ-αμο      χοαδο  
 so      agreement      fix.PST-1p      self

“I, Yobig, struck (your) brother with a sword, and you, Bramar, outlawed me. So we ourselves have made a pact.” (O 7–9)<sup>44</sup>

According to Sims-Williams, the second clause in ex. 22 displays “the third possible construction of the transitive preterite, where the verb agrees neither with the subject nor with the direct object but with the indirect object”.<sup>45</sup>

Yoshida mentions this example as another instance of the so-called “indirect affectee”:<sup>46</sup>

- 23) ηβοδαλαγγο      τωγγο      ζαρο      οδο      ποσο      αβαναγαδδ-ιμο  
 Hephthalite      tax      gold      and      sheep      charge.PST-1s  
 “[And they] have charged me gold and sheep for the Hephthalite tax.” (Ii 7)<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 67.

<sup>43</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a: 85.

<sup>44</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007b: 11. The points of dispute this text attempts to solve, and thence several sentences mentioning them, have been variously interpreted, see e.g. SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 80, 2007b, forthc., and TREMBLAY 2003: 129–131.

<sup>45</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2005: 24.

<sup>46</sup> YOSHIDA 2003: 157.

<sup>47</sup> SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000: 53.

#### 4. Conclusion

The discussion above has revealed a variety of case marking patterns in the surveyed Bactrian material. Table 2 presents the results of the case uses in different constructions such as ergative, neutral, and tripartite constructions.<sup>48</sup>

Type	transitive subject	object	pattern
Ia	OBL: pronoun (CP)	DIR: pronoun	ergative
Ib	OBL: pronoun (CP)	UFL: noun	ergative
Ic	OBL: pronoun + noun	UFL: noun	ergative
Id	OBL: noun	DIR: noun	ergative
Ie	UFL: pronoun	UFL: noun	neutral
If	UFL: noun	UFL: noun	neutral
Ig	UFL	verbal ending	ergative
IIa	OBL: pronoun (CP)	with preposition	tripartite
IIb	UFL: pronoun	with preposition	nominative
IIc	UFL: noun	with preposition	nominative

There are four main constructions in Bactrian. The first group is ergative, in which the subject is in the oblique and object is in the direct case or uninflected (Ia, Ib, Ic, Id). The object may also be indicated by a verbal ending (Ig).

There are also some contexts in which the subject and the object of transitive verbs, and the subject of intransitive verbs, are marked identically. This pattern is called neutral (Ie, If). It arises as a consequence of the loss of case distinction (see Section 2.2).

The third group is “tripartite”, in which the transitive subject, object, and subject are in different cases: in IIa the transitive subject is in the oblique and the subject of an intransitive verb in the direct case, whereas the object is marked by the preposition  $\alpha\beta\omicron$ . This function of  $\alpha\beta\omicron$  is rare in the extant inscriptions, but common in the letters. If the transitive subject is unmarked for case owing to the loss of case distinctions, the pattern is nominative as far as case marking is concerned, since the transitive and intransitive subjects are marked identically. However, the verb still agrees with the object, not with the transitive subject.

Otherwise it is not easy to be very precise about the development of the ergative construction in Bactrian. Because of a lack of more inscriptions, the number of inscripational ergative constructions is rather low.

From the above information we can conclude that Bactrian shows a mixture of the nominative and ergative construction. The existence of mixed constructions in the past domain can show the transition from the ergative to the nominative construction. The variety of patterns is parallel to that displayed by other Iranian languages.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> This terminology follows COMRIE 1978.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. KORN 2008: 269–272.

*Abbreviations*

ART	Article
BD I	SIMS-WILLIAMS 2000
BD II	SIMS-WILLIAMS 2007a
CP	Enclitic Pronoun
DEM	Demonstrative pronom
DIR	Direct case
N	Noun
OBL	Oblique case
PAR	Particle
PL	Plural
PN	Personal or place name
POSS	Possessive
PRON	Pronoun
PRS	Present stem
PST	Past stem
SBJV	Subjunctive
SG	Singular
UFL	Uninflected
1s / 2s / 3s	1st / 2nd / 3rd person singular
1p / 2p / 3p	1st / 2nd / 3rd person plural

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