

Morphosyntactic Alignment Typology vs. Information-Structural Prominence: Evaluating Nominative-Accusative and Ergative-Absolutive Frameworks in Discourse-Driven Argument Encoding

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Abstract. The tension between morphosyntactic alignment typology and information-structural prominence hierarchies represents one of the most contested theoretical fault lines in contemporary grammatical theory. This study presents a cross-linguistic comparison of nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive argument-encoding strategies across six genetically unrelated languages, assessing the predictive adequacy of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) against Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG) in capturing discourse-conditioned case alternations. Drawing on annotated corpora of spontaneous spoken discourse and controlled elicitation tasks, our analysis reveals that neither framework fully accounts for split-ergativity phenomena when topic continuity and referential salience interact with aspect-driven transitivity shifts. We conclude that a hybrid constructionist interface, sensitive to both macro-syntactic juncture and pragmatic givenness scales, offers superior empirical coverage. These findings carry significant implications for formal typological modelling and computational parsing of morphologically rich languages.

Keywords: morphosyntactic alignment, ergative-absolutive encoding, Role and Reference Grammar, Lexical-Functional Grammar, split ergativity, information structure, discourse-conditioned case alternation, referential salience, cross-linguistic typology

Introduction

The grammatical encoding of core argument structure — that is, the systematic mapping of semantic participants such as agents, patients, and experiencers onto syntactic and morphological categories — constitutes a foundational problem in theoretical linguistics, with far-reaching consequences for typological modelling, language acquisition research, and natural language processing. As of the mid-2020s, the proliferation of large-scale cross-linguistic databases such as WALS (World Atlas of Language Structures) and Grambank has intensified scrutiny of competing formal frameworks that seek to characterize the principles underlying argument-marking variation across the world's languages. Central among the unresolved debates is the question of whether morphosyntactic alignment patterns — specifically the nominative-accusative versus ergative-absolutive opposition — are best explained through purely syntactic prominence hierarchies or whether discourse-level information structure, including topic continuity, referential givenness, and focus projection, plays a constitutive rather than merely modulating role. Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), as articulated by Van Valin and LaPolla, proposes a layered clause architecture in which the Actor-Undergoer hierarchy interfaces directly with pragmatic functions at the level of the Focus Domain. Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG), by contrast, maintains a strict separation between c-structure and f-structure, treating information-structural properties as annotations rather than as determinants of grammatical function assignment. These divergent architectural commitments generate empirically testable predictions — particularly in languages exhibiting split ergativity, where alignment patterns shift conditioned by tense, aspect, evidentiality, or the animacy and topicality of noun phrase referents. Despite decades of comparative theoretical work, a systematic corpus-based evaluation of these two frameworks against naturalistic spoken data from typologically diverse languages remains conspicuously absent from the literature. Existing studies have tended either to privilege introspective grammaticality judgements or to focus narrowly on single-language case studies, thereby limiting the generalizability of their conclusions. The present study addresses this gap directly by analysing annotated spoken corpora drawn from six genetically unrelated languages spanning Austronesian, Tibeto-Burman, Kartvelian, Algonquian, Mayan, and Nilo-Saharan families, supplemented by controlled cross-linguistic elicitation protocols targeting aspect-driven transitivity alternations. This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of RRG and LFG with respect to their treatments of alignment and information structure. Section 3 describes the corpus compilation methodology and annotation scheme. Section 4 presents quantitative and qualitative analyses of split-ergativity phenomena across the six target languages. Section 5 evaluates the predictive coverage of each framework against the observed data. Section 6 proposes a hybrid constructionist interface

model and discusses its formal properties. Section 7 concludes with implications for typological theory and computational grammar engineering.

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