

Transitivity and Ergativity in Squliq Atayal Reexamined

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The nature of the case marking system in Squliq Atayal has attracted a recent flurry of research activities (Rau 1992; Egerod 1993; Rau and Grimes 1994; L. Huang 1995; L. Huang et al 1998; Li 1995 and 1997), though these researchers have yet to reach a consensus on the alignment system of the language. Thus Li (1994) takes Squliq Atayal to be a morphologically accusative language, while others take the language as one exhibiting an ergative case system. It is now clear that the alignment system of the language, as in other west Austronesian languages, pivots on the status of the extended AF intransitive clauses (EICs) vis-à-vis the canonical transitive clauses (CTCs), namely non-agent focus clauses. Most linguists treat EICs as intransitive (Liao 2004; Reid and Liao 2004; Starosta 1999; cf. also Chang 2003; Nolasco 2005), and the emerging consensus seems to be that Squliq Atayal is best analyzed as a morphologically ergative language.

In this paper we propose to reexamine the case system of Squliq Atayal within the framework of discourse analysis. Our data are based on natural discourse narratives, which run to about two hours and twenty minutes in length, taken from the Formosan Language Archive in Academia Sinica and from the NTU Corpus of Formosan Languages. Analyses of these narrative data have turned up a number of surprising findings. AF clauses have always been thought to be lower in transitivity as opposed to the high-transitivity NAF clauses. The discourse-pragmatic properties of EICs turn out to be surprisingly different from those normally associated with AF clauses, however. First, while a majority of CTCs occur with imperfective aspect, a great majority of EICs occur with perfective markers (see Table 1). Second, oblique NPs in EICs are found to be referentially more definite than indefinite, again a surprising result (see Table 2). A third surprising finding is that the

oblique NPs in EICs are slightly more topical than the object NPs of NAF clauses (see Table 3). These results taken together strongly suggest that EICs are just as transitive as, if not more so than, CTCs.

Therefore, in this paper, by investigating the discourse-functional properties of various types of clauses in Squliq Atayal, we propose to throw the whole notion of transitivity, and thus ergativity, into confusion. This is partly because the whole issue of transitivity and ergativity is still very much an open question. The implication of our findings is that the dichotomy of accusativity and ergativity must first confront the dichotomy of transitivity and intransitivity, but the latter issue cannot yet be satisfactorily resolved with the current available analytical tools.

APPENDICES

Table 1. Aspect choice in Squliq Atayal narratives

	AF		Total	NAF (CTC)			Total
	Normal	Extended (EIC)		PF	LF	RF	
Perf.	271 (50.7%)	24 (80%)	295 (52.3%)	108 (35.41%)	79 (46.47%)	50 (50%)	237 (41.22%)
Imp.	263 (49.3%)	6 (20%)	269 (47.7%)	197 (64.59%)	91 (53.53%)	50 (50%)	338 (58.78%)
Total	534 (100%)	30 (100%)	564 (100%)	305 (100%)	170 (100%)	100 (100%)	575 (100%)

Table 2. Definiteness of Obl NP in all extended AF clauses (EICs)

[+def]	[-def]	Zero marking [+def]	Zero marking [-def]	Sum
60 (45.8%)	57 (43.5%)	9 (6.9%)	5 (3.8%)	131
[+def]		[-def]		131
69 (52.7%)		62 (47.3%)		

Table 3. Topic persistence in Squliq Atayal narratives

Focus	Extended AF (EIC)				NAF (CTC)				Total	
	S		E		A		O		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
High (TP>=3)	70	85.35	39	39	375	65.79	12	29.9	609	51.92
Med (TP=2)	10	11.76	11	11	93	16.32	56	13.4	170	14.49
Low (TP<=1)	5	5.88	50	50	102	17.89	237	56.7	394	33.59
Total	85	100	10	100	570	100	41	100	1173	100

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