

**Diachronic study of the ergative-antipassive alternation  
in North Baffin Inuktitut**

The alternation between the ergative and the antipassive in Inuktitut, as shown in (1a-b), has generated considerable discussion in the literature.

Baffin Inuktitut (Spreng 2005: 2)

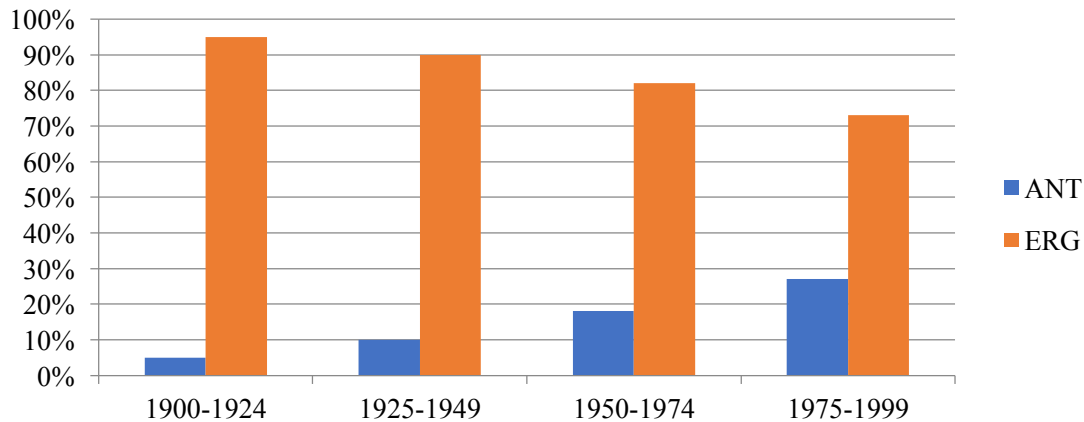
- |     |    |                              |                 |                         |             |
|-----|----|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| (1) | a. | <i>anguti-up</i>             | <i>arnaq-∅</i>  | <i>kunik-taa</i>        | ERGATIVE    |
|     |    | man-ERG                      | woman-ABS       | kiss-IND.SUBJ3SG.OBJ3SG |             |
|     |    | ‘The man kissed the woman’   |                 |                         |             |
|     | b. | <i>anguti-∅</i>              | <i>arna-mik</i> | <i>kunik-si-vuq</i>     | ANTIPASSIVE |
|     |    | man-ABS                      | woman-INS.SG    | kiss-ANT-IND.SUBJ3S     |             |
|     |    | ‘The man is kissing a woman’ |                 |                         |             |

In fact, the interest in this alternation comes from two different (but arguably related) puzzling problems. First, the interpretation of the patient in these transitive constructions is not consistent. On one hand, some theoretical linguists claim that the patient is interpreted as definite in the ergative but indefinite in the antipassive (e.g., Sadock 1980, Fortescue 1984), as the examples above suggest. However, other examples in the literature contradict those hypotheses and other proposals have been advanced. For example, Kalmár (1979: 95) argues that the patient in the ergative is actually a given argument (i.e., an argument that had already been mentioned in the discourse and is consequently definite) while the patient in the antipassive is a new argument (i.e., an argument that had not been introduced yet in the discourse and could be indefinite or definite) (see also Bittner 1987, Manga 1996, Hallman 2008). Importantly though, these other proposals do not account for all the data as we always find counterexamples.

Second, recent studies show that there are ongoing changes with the ergative and antipassive in many Eastern Inuktitut dialects. For example, Johns (2001, 2006) reports that in Labrador Inuktitut the patient in the antipassive can refer to a proper noun (i.e., an inherently definite patient), which is possible only in the ergative in the more conservative Western dialects. In South Baffin Inuktitut, Spreng (2005) claims that the antipassive rather than the ergative is obligatory with some verbs in certain contexts. Finally, in Nunavik Inuktitut, Carrier (2012) observes that the frequency of the antipassive overwhelmingly surpasses the frequency of the ergative, and also that the ergative case marker is no longer used.

I strongly believe that the variability in the interpretation of the patient in these two constructions and the recent language changes observed in some Eastern dialects are interconnected. Thus, my present research consists of analysing these two constructions in one Eastern dialect over a long period of time, using a variationist approach. The data being analysed was collected in the Inuit community of Mittimatalik, in the North Baffin region, from 41 native Inuktitut speakers, who were all born between 1902 and 1998. 20 of them are male speakers, and 21 of them are female speakers. Therefore, this large amount of data gives us the opportunity to not only look at different linguistic factors that could be involved in the alternation, such as the grammatical person of the agent and/or the patient, but also at social factors such as age or gender.

Interestingly, primary results show that when the patient is definite, the ratio of antipassives has steadily increased through time while the one of ergatives has steadily decreased<sup>1</sup>.



For the upcoming WSCLA, I propose to present some primary results of my research on the ergative-antipassive alternation in North Baffin Inuktitut, and also discuss some of their theoretical aspects. For instance, in addition to the tendencies shown in the graph above, it appears that only speakers born before 1940 produce ergative constructions with a patient in the first or second person, which is intriguing from a theoretical perspective since ergativity in all Inuit languages is expressed morphologically in the verbal inflection only when the patient is either in the first or second person, as discussed by Vakhtin (1979) and Fortescue (1995).

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<sup>1</sup> These results present the percentages of 172 tokens from 12 different speakers (6 males and 6 females).