

# Eastern Khanty “Ergative” Is Topic Demotion, Not Dependent Case

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## 1. Morphologically marked subjects in Eastern Khanty

Khanty (formerly often referred to as *Ostyak*; Rédei 1965, Gulya 1966, Nikolaeva 1999, Csepregi 2011b, Sipos 2022, Schön & Gugán 2022, Csepregi 2023) refers to a group of languages of the Ob-Ugric branch of the Finno-Ugric languages that consists of several dialect groups, Southern (extinct), Eastern and Northern (see e.g. Csepregi 2023: 704–705). The Eastern languages, which are the focus of this paper, consist of the Vakh–Vasyugan, Surgut, and Salym dialects. Only the Eastern varieties show a system of differential subject marking (DSM), which we discuss in this paper.

Example (1) illustrates this phenomenon. The 1SG subject *män-nə* appears with a suffixal marker that is syncretic with the marker of locative case. The subject nevertheless controls agreement and has no locative semantics, so the subject is not a locative proper. As we will show below, this marker does not appear on all subjects, hence Eastern Khanty subject marking is **differential**.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Morphologically marked subject *män-nə* (Vakh Khanty; Filchenko 2011: 70)  
öllö sart **män-nə** löyöli-s-im.  
big pike 1SG-LOC cut-PST2-1SG.SBJ>SG.OBJ  
'I prepared the big pike.'

This paper discusses the nature of Eastern Khanty DSM. It has been argued that Eastern Khanty DSM reflects a kind of ergative construction (see e.g. Gulya 1966, 1970, Honti 1971, Kulonen 1991, Baker 2015). Baker (2015), in particular, argues that Eastern Khanty has dependent ergative case-marking (for dependent case, see Marantz 1991, Bittner & Hale 1996, McFadden 2004, Baker 2015, Poole 2015, Baker & Bobaljik 2017). He suggests that the subject is marked with ergative case (syncretic with LOC) when another argument is in the same syntactic domain, which can be a particular phase, for example (see Baker 2015 for details). Others have argued that DSM reflects information structural properties (see e.g. Filchenko 2005, 2007, 2010, Sosa 2017, É. Kiss 2021, Schön 2022).

In this paper, we will side with the latter authors. We will show that Eastern Khanty is not an ergative language and in particular that dependent case cannot account for the distribution of LOC-marking of subjects. Then, we will argue, building on existing work, that LOC-marking of subjects indicates that the subject has a particular information structural role. Our proposal is that LOC-marking indicates that a subject is not as topical as a morphologically unmarked subject can be, more specifically, that the LOC-marked subject serves as a topic for a given stretch of discourse only. It is therefore similar to **local topics** in West Greenlandic (Berge 2011; see also Sosa 2017). We will argue that this understanding of morphologically marked subjects is compatible with their distribution in texts, because LOC-marked

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: 1 = first person, 3 = third person, A = agent-like argument of a canonical transitive verb, ACC = accusative, AGR = agreement, COM = comitative, DAT = dative, DC = dependent case, DEM = demonstrative, DET = determiner, DOM = differential object marking, DSM = differential subject marking, DU = dual, EMPH = emphatic, INF = infinitive, INTNS = intensifier, IS = information structure, LAT = lative, LOC = locative, NEG = negative, NOM = nominative, OBJ = object, PASS = passive, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PRF = perfect, PRS = present, PST = past, REFL = reflexive, S = single argument of a canonical intransitive verb, SBJ = subject, SG = singular, TOP = topic. We mostly use unmodified transliterations of examples cited in the paper.

subjects occur in intransitive clauses (see examples (5), (6), and (7)), they can introduce referents in a narrative (see example (5)), and they occur frequently in contexts where several referents alternate as subjects.

In Section 2, we show that Eastern Khanty is not an ergative language. In Section 3, we illustrate the distribution of LOC-marked subjects in more detail and in Section 4 we present our analysis.

## 2. Eastern Khanty is not ergative

Baker (2015: 9) cites the examples in (2) from Gulya (1966). While the first person subject pronoun in (2a) is morphologically unmarked (nominative), the plural subject pronoun in (2b) has an overt suffix *-ŋən*, giving rise to a system of DSM.

(2) Vakh Khanty (Gulya 1966: 135, Baker 2015: 9; glosses adapted)

a. Morphologically unmarked subject

mä t'əkäj-əyl-äm-nä ul-a mən-γäl-əm.  
 I.NOM younger.sister-DU-1SG.POSS-COM berry-LAT pick-PST3-1SG.SBJ  
 'I went to pick berries with my two younger sisters.'

b. Morphologically marked subject

mə-ŋən ləγə əllə juγ kanŋ-a amə-γal-oγ.  
 we-LOC they.ACC large tree beside-LAT put-PST3-1PL.SBJ  
 'We put them (pots of berries) beside a big tree.'

Baker (2015: 9) interprets both sentences as transitive and argues that in the context of the “non-specific indefinite next to the verb” (*ula* in (2a)) the subject lacks a case-marker while in the context of the personal pronoun marked for accusative (*ləγə* in (2b)), the subject is morphologically marked. Baker (2015) analyses this marker, glossed here as LOC, as an ergative marker. Thus for Baker (2015), the appearance of the marker depends on the syntactic configuration of the subject and object arguments. However, considering a wider range of data, this conclusion does not hold up. We will illustrate this with a number of examples showing that syntactic proximity of subject and object is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the morphological marking of the subject.

Consider first (3a,b). Both examples have a LOC-subject. In each case, the clause-initial subject is separated from the object by other material, namely a dative and the verb in (3a) and an infinitive and a finite verb in (3b). Linear adjacency of the subject and the object can therefore not be a requirement for LOC-marking of the subject.

(3) Vasyugan Khanty (Honti 1982, Kulonen 1991: 185, 197)

a. ni-nə jǝγ-ä pämil-lə-tə kuj-əl pälta.  
 woman-LOC he-DAT show-PRS-3SG.SBJ>SG.OBJ man-3SG.POSS coat.NOM  
 'The woman shows him her husband's coat.'

b. kan-nə kit-tä jǝγi-l-wəl käsj iwän-ä-ti ...  
 tsar-LOC send-INF begin-PRS-3SG.SBJ man.NOM Iwan-LAT-EMPH  
 'The tsar sends a man to Iwan.'

Next, consider (4). Here, the subject and the object are linearly adjacent, but the subject remains morphologically unmarked (cf. (2b); see also (9)). We conclude that the adjacency of subject and object, at least in terms of linear order, is neither sufficient nor necessary for LOC-marked subjects to appear.

(4) Vakh Khanty (Filchenko 2005: 30)

ma ämp-äm tiyl-a kari-mta-s-im.  
 1SG dog-1SG.POSS DEM-LAT pull-INTNS-PRF-1SG.SBJ>SG.OBJ  
 'I pulled my dog closer.'

Morphologically marked subjects also occur with intransitive, including unaccusative, predicates, as in (5)–(7).<sup>2</sup> In each of these examples, the subject appears with the *LOC*-suffix, but the predicate is intransitive. We are not aware of the possibility of null cognate objects in these cases. But if there were a null cognate object that could trigger dependent ergative (see Baker & Bobaljik 2017 for discussion), all finite clauses with the predicates *come* and *die* would be predicted to have morphologically marked subjects. That is not the case.

## (5) Yugan Khanty (Schön 2022: 104)

Context: *Once a woman sat [awake] for a long time. One doesn't sit awake for a long time. Or else ...*

**jipəy-nə** joyot-ł.  
fright-LOC come-PRS.3SG.SBJ  
'The monster will come.'

## (6) Yugan Khanty (Schön 2022: 105)

məŋk-ət jə:γə jə:stə-t-i qu:ntə pə:n məŋk-nə joyot-ł.  
Menk-PL river say-PRS-PASS.3SG.SBJ if then Menk-LOC come-PRS.3SG.SBJ  
'If one says Menk River, then the Menk comes.'

## (7) Vakh Khanty (Filchenko 2010: 335)

ti **quj-an** kan'-kas i qala-qas.  
DET man-LOC be.ill-PST1.3SG.SBJ and die-PST1.3SG.SBJ  
'That man was sick and died.'

As a final example with a possibly unaccusative predicate, *olay* 'to lie', consider (8). Here, the subject is the inanimate *p'öt/kän* 'gun', marked with *LOC*.

## (8) Vakh Khanty (Filchenko 2010: 416)

sidar tʃöŋwä p'öt/kän-nə tofə ajrit-nə olay-wəl.  
Sidor late gun-LOC also canoe-LOC lay-PRS.3SG.SBJ  
'Late Sidor's gun also lies in the boat.'

We conclude that Eastern Khanty *LOC*-marking of subjects is not amenable to dependent ergative analysis as (very briefly) suggested by Baker (2015), for the following reasons.

First, the adjacency of the subject and the direct object is not a necessary condition for the subject to be morphologically marked (examples (3a,b)) and neither a sufficient condition, as shown by example (4) in which adjacency does not lead to morphological marking. This suggests that the object's position is not what gives rise to morphological marking of the subject. In addition, definite objects in (4) and (3a) which would be the most likely to undergo movement that triggers dependent case-marking on the subject (cf. Baker & Vinokurova 2010, Baker 2015), can and most frequently do co-occur with morphologically unmarked subjects. This means that neither the position of the object nor its semantic properties are good predictors of morphological marking on the subject.

Second, even intransitive predicates can have morphologically marked subjects (see (5), (6), (7)). For unaccusative predicates, this is unexpected on a dependent case (DC) account, as there is no object in the structure that could trigger a rule assigning morphological case to the subject. Unergative predicates are sometimes assumed to have a possibly covert cognate object that triggers dependent ergative on the subject (Baker & Bobaljik 2017). Even if this were a feasible explanation of *LOC*-marked subjects of unergative

<sup>2</sup> At least for Kazym Khanty (a northern variety), a test for the unaccusativity of *j#χt* 'to come' comes from resultative forms with converbs, which can only be formed on the basis of unaccusative predicates (Aleksandra Belkind, p.c.). When the converb is combined with a form of *wəl* 'to be', overt agents are ruled out, while other subjects can occur. Yugan Khanty, in (5) and (6), is a variety of Surgut Khanty.

predicates, it fails to account for morphological marking on the subjects of unaccusative predicates and the *differential* nature of subject marking.

In brief, both subjects of transitive clauses with high objects can appear without morphological marking and subjects of intransitive clauses can appear with morphological marking, neither of which is typical of ergative languages. Morphologically marked subjects in Eastern Khanty are therefore not ergatives and their morphological marking is not the consequence of the application of a dependent case rule.

Instead, Eastern Khanty exhibits a type of DSM that does not involve ergative case. We are not the first authors to reach the conclusion that LOC-marking is not ergative (see e.g. Filchenko 2010, F. Gulyás 2017, 2018, Sosa 2017, Csepregi 2021, É. Kiss 2021, Schön 2022, Schön & Gugán 2022), but as far as we know, we are the first to show that the data rule out an analysis in terms of dependent case.

Note also that, in principle, morphological marking on a subject could indicate marked nominative case. In contrast to ergative, marked nominative appears both on subjects of intransitive clauses (S) and subjects of transitive clauses (A). However, it is clear from the data surveyed in this section that Eastern Khanty cannot be a marked nominative language, because both S and A arguments can appear with and without morphological marking.

If DSM in Eastern Khanty is not ergative marking, what is it then? We turn to this question now.

### 3. The distribution and properties of morphologically marked subjects

We have shown in Section 2 that the LOC-suffix on subjects is not an ergative marker and does not reflect dependent case. In much of the current literature, morphologically marked subjects in Eastern Khanty are referred to as “locative agents” (see e.g. Filchenko 2005, 2011, Sosa 2017, F. Gulyás 2018, É. Kiss 2021, Schön 2022, Schön & Gugán 2022, Csepregi 2023). Note, however, that non-agentive, even inanimate, subjects can also appear with locative marking (as in (5)–(7)).

Filchenko (2011) suggests that LOC-marked subjects differ from morphologically unmarked subjects in some interpretative properties as well (though this point does not seem to appear in other literature). This is shown in the pair of examples in (9). Filchenko argues here that whether the subject is morphologically marked or not correlates with a change in interpretation such that the LOC-subject in (9b) is less volitional and exerts less control over the event (we will return to this in Section 4). Therefore the morphologically marked LOC-subject is less felicitous with the adverbial *toyoj* ‘on purpose’, compared to the morphologically unmarked subject.

(9) Eastern Khanty (Filchenko 2011: 71)

- a. mā köt-äm            kötʃäy-nä (mil-näm / toyoj) öyö-käs-əm.  
 1SG hand-1SG.POSS knife-COM touch-REFL away cut-PST1-1SG.SBJ  
 ‘I cut my hand with a knife (incidentally / on purpose).’
- b. män-nə köt-äm            (mil-näm / #toyoj) öyö-käs-əm            kötʃäy-nä.  
 1SG-LOC hand-1SG.POSS touch-REFL away cut-PST1-1SG.SBJ knife-COM  
 ‘I cut my hand with a knife (incidentally / on purpose).’

Note that generally, volitionality and/or intentionality might not be a universal property of DSM because even the subjects of unaccusative predicates, generally understood to be themes rather than agents, can be morphologically unmarked (NOM) or marked with LOC. It is possible, then, that the effect (9b) might be pragmatic rather than fully syntactic or semantic (but see F. Gulyás 2017: 163–164 for discussion).

Sosa (2017) and É. Kiss (2021), in particular, take a discourse-oriented perspective on LOC-subjects and argue that they mark topics. Sosa (2017: 195–202, 209) suggests that LOC-subjects are primary topics, can indicate a change of topic in a narrative, and sometimes describes them as “recurring” (e.g. Sosa 2017: iv). Our understanding of LOC-subjects is informed by these accounts, but differs slightly. Evidence that not all LOC-subjects function as primary or recurring topics comes from example (5), repeated from above.





### 3.2. Interim summary

In this section, we discussed the distribution of DSM in Khanty in more detail. Subjects that introduce new discourse referents can exhibit DSM (see (5)), which suggests that DSM does not mark recurring topics only and that it is not a general topic marker. Instead, we suggested that DSM indicates that a subject is a local topic, that is a topic for a stretch of discourse. As such, when several protagonists are relevant in part of a narrative, DSM can appear to indicate topic shift. But DSM also occurs when subjects do not change from utterance to utterance (e.g. in (3a,b) where two consecutive utterances have a LOC-subject; Honti 1982: 150, (143), (144)). Finally, we showed that locative is also used to mark optional logical subjects in passives and that even intransitive predicates can be passivised in Khanty.

In the following section, we discuss the function of DSM in Eastern Khanty in more detail.

## 4. Towards an analysis

Having shown that morphological marking of subjects is not ergative marking and having discussed its distribution, we now sketch an analysis of differential subject marking (DSM) in Eastern Khanty. One line of work on DSM suggests that subjects are morphologically marked when their properties are atypical given the usual properties of subjects (see e.g. Aissen 1999, 2003, McGregor 2010, Fauconnier 2011). We suggest that this basic intuition holds for Eastern Khanty as well and that DSM in the language is a way of expressing information structural properties.

We proposed in Section 3 that locative marking of grammatical subjects indicates that they are local topics, as opposed to global discourse topics. We will make this proposal more explicit in this section and describe a possible pathway towards DSM in Eastern Khanty.

We start by returning to the discussion of information structure in (Northern) Khanty. Nikolaeva (2001: 25) and Dalrymple & Nikolaeva (2011: 104) argue that subjects in Khanty are generally topics. One indication of this is that in the context of a topical referent, this referent serves as the subject of passive construction when it is the patient of the event but more topical than the agent. The discourse-new agent is introduced as an optional LOC-NP. This is shown in (14). Here *Peter* is given in the context and the referent is the patient of the event expressed in (14); Nikolaeva (2001) argues that in Northern Khanty it is not possible to express this event with *John* as the grammatical subject because the referent is new. Instead, the passive is used so that the referent of *Peter* can remain the topic.

- (14) Northern Khanty (Nikolaeva 2001: 25, Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011: 104)  
 Context: *What happened to Peter?*  
 (luw) Juwan-na re:sk-əs-a.  
 he John-LOC hit-PST-PASS.3SG.SBJ  
 ‘He was hit by John.’

The passive in Khanty, then, is one way of associating grammatical function, argument structure, and information structure, in that the most topical argument is mapped onto the subject function and the logical subject is “demoted” to an oblique function marked with locative.

Note that morphologically unmarked subjects are not always topics. In narratives, the main protagonist of a story can very well be introduced as a subject (see e.g. Schön & Gugán 2022: 630). These structures are probablythetic sentences without a topic that introduce new discourse referents (see e.g. Lambrecht 1994: 142–146, 177–181). In contrast, in sentences with topics (Lambrecht 1994: see 140–141), the subject function appears to be associated with the information structural role of topic in Khanty.

In contrast to promoting a patient to the subject function as in the passive, we suggest that DSM retains the mapping of semantic roles to grammatical functions but highlights with morphology that a subject is a local topic and not a discourse topic. To make this explicit, we assume that this information structural role can be represented as a feature we call *L-TOP*. Subjects with this feature are realised with the morphological marker that is syncretic with locative case, as shown in (15). Note that (15) restricts the spell-out of the feature *L-TOP* to contexts with *NOM*, which accounts for the restriction that only subjects can appear with “locative” morphology to indicate that they are local topics (we return to this below).

(15) L-TOP ↔ -nə / NOM

Local topic subjects are therefore realised with a marker syncretic with locative; they still behave like nominative subjects in that they control subject–verb agreement. On this view, the marker *-nə* and its allomorphs only share their form with locative but not its semantics (see Section 3.1 for other contexts in which locative morphology appears). This means that the subject is still nominative and that the DSM marker *-nə* is not a case-marker but an expression of the subject’s special information structural status.

Grammatical subjects in Eastern Khanty can therefore be expressed in three ways. First, subjects can be dropped (*pro*) in which case we assume them to be highly topical (their reference can be recovered) and they can control agreement. These properties are illustrated by the leftmost column in (16) (*pro*-NOM.SBJ) and they can control agreement. These properties are illustrated by the leftmost column in (16) (*pro*-NOM.SBJ). Second, subjects can be overt, in nominative case, and also control agreement (NOM.SBJ in (16)).

Third, what we have referred to as LOC-subjects above are also grammatical subjects in nominative case, with a DSM-marker syncretic with locative case (DSM.SBJ in (16)). These differ from other grammatical subjects in their information structural properties, namely that they are local topics (L-TOP in (16)).

(16)	<i>pro</i> -NOM.SBJ	»	NOM.SBJ	»	DSM-SBJ	»	LOC-NP		(realisation/grammatical function)
	AGR		AGR		AGR		*AGR		(properties)
	TOP		TOP		L-TOP		∅		(information structure role)

Finally, *logical* (but not grammatical) subjects of passives can be realised with locative case (see (11)–(13)). These lack usual subject properties in that they are not nominative and they do not control agreement. So while locatives in passives are not subjects, we suspect that they influence DSM in Eastern Khanty.

#### 4.1. A possible grammaticalization path of differential subject marking

The idea that ergative systems arise from passives has long been discussed in the literature, also in connection with information structural properties of the arguments involved (see e.g. Anderson 1977, Givón 1994, Siewierska 1998). We have argued above that Eastern Khanty is not an ergative language, but it is possible that DSM in Eastern Khanty is related to the passive.

What locative-marked grammatical subjects, that is DSM, and optional locative-marked logical subjects of passives have in common in Eastern Khanty is that both are less topical than morphologically unmarked (NOM) grammatical subjects (see Section 3). Note also that both of these types of phrases differ from true locative NPs with locative semantics.

Logical subjects of passives, marked with LOC but not associated with subject properties such as agreement, could have been reanalysed in certain configurations as *grammatical* subjects (we leave open how this is possible in the context of passive morphology; but note that in examples (12a), (13), and (14), agreement on the verb could in principle reflect  $\phi$ -features of the grammatical or the logical subject). subjects of passives have in common, in semantic terms, that neither is as topical as a morphologically unmarked subject, thus a type of “demotion” (as pointed out by Filchenko 2011).

Support for this brief proposal comes from text counts across varieties of Khanty: Kulonen (1991: 190–191) and Csepregi (2021: 166) note that the more DSM a variety shows, the fewer occurrences of the passive it has. In other words, it is possible that DSM in Eastern Khanty is taking over the use of the passive (at least in certain contexts). If so, this could support that idea Eastern Khanty exhibits a type of DSM that expresses the information structural status of the morphologically marked subject.

#### 4.2. Local topics and object agreement

We proposed above (see (15)) that on nominative NPs (subjects of finite clauses) with the feature L-TOP, this feature can be realised by the DSM marker *-nə*. But it is not clear so far whether this feature could only be associated with subjects or whether it could also appear on other arguments. It is possible that object agreement in Khanty could be a realisation of the same feature L-TOP on accusative objects. For reasons of space we cannot explore this idea in any detail here, but the distribution of object agreement in several varieties of Khanty has been argued to be related to whether an object is topical (see Nikolaeva 2001, Schön & Gugán 2022: 616, Csepregi 2023: 740–741 for discussion; Dalrymple & Nikolaeva

2011 take a slightly different perspective, as does Smith 2020). In brief, while subject–verb agreement in person and number is obligatory in finite clauses in Khanty, object agreement is differential, that is only a proper subset of objects control agreement (in number) on the finite verb. The trigger of object agreement is not categorical but has been argued to depend on context (given objects are more likely to control agreement; Nikolaeva 2001, Csepregi 2023) or grammatical function (Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011). Object agreement in Khanty could thus be the realisation of a feature such as *L-TOP* on the object. Again, this is compatible with general observations regarding differential object marking (*DOM*) and *DSM* (Aissen 1999, 2003, de Hoop & Malchukov 2008, de Hoop & de Swart 2008): if subjects in Khanty are usually associated with the information structural role of topic, but objects are not, both *DSM* and *DOM* via object agreement are morphological realisations of subjects and objects, respectively, that carry an additional feature corresponding to their special information structural status.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, we argued that Eastern Khanty varieties are not ergative languages but exhibit a system of differential subject marking (*DSM*) expressing information structural properties. We suggested that the *DSM* marker, syncretic with locative case, indicates that the morphologically marked subject is not a global but a local topic, highlighting its relevance for a particular stretch of discourse. Finally, we hypothesized that object agreement in Khanty expresses that an object is a local topic and discussed how *DSM* could be related to the locative-marking of logical subjects in passives across varieties in Khanty.

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