

## "OVS" – A misnomer for SVO languages with ergative alignment

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### Abstract

Languages with a basic OVS clause structure do not exist, contrary to claims in the literature. Languages filed as OVS in typological surveys turn out to be SVO languages with ergative alignment that have been misclassified due to ill-chosen diagnostics for "S" and "O".

### 1. How to do comparative grammar research?

There is an ongoing debate on how to study linguistic diversity. Levinson and Evans (2010: 2734), see a "great divide" between C- and D-linguists ('Chomskyan' vs. 'diversity-driven'). D-theories are "more surfacy (and thus more falsifiable)" and they use "*only minimal formalism*" (p. 2737). "*D-linguists prefer Boasian 'methodological relativism' – first analyse a language in its own terms, then compare*". Exactly this kind of approach is the source of a problem.

This squib focuses on an exemplary case, namely the handling of the term "subject". Typologists who follow the "*minimal formalism*" fail to properly identify syntactic subjects cross-linguistically, and in particular across different alignment systems. The source of the misunderstanding is this. Field linguists customarily identify the arguments of a verb in a minimal transitive clause by content, that is, as agent and patient roles. In the majority of languages, namely languages with a nom-acc alignment system, a strict *agent-V-patient* order corresponds to a *subject-verb-object* structure. However, when *patient-verb-agent* languages are classified as OVS, the alignment system must not be neglected or else a language with ergative alignment will inevitably be misclassified.<sup>1</sup> In such languages, the agent noun phrase (= ergative NP) is not the syntactic subject. The syntactic subject is the noun phrase with absolutive case, that is the "patient" argument. Hence, in brief, an ergative language with strict patient-verb-agent order is not OVS but SVX, modulo ergative alignment.

It will be shown that the languages that have been uncontroversially classified as OVS languages, in fact, have to be re-classified as "SVO" languages with ergative alignment. The preverbal non-agentive noun phrase is not the syntactical object. It is the syntactical subject in an abs-erg-language. The subtle point is not so much the linguistic description but the subsequent typological interpretation, that is, the step from "agent" or "patient" to "subject" and "object", respectively. Dixon (2010, vol. 2: 119) and other field linguists are cautious in this respect and separate description from interpretation. "S" is reserved for the single argument of a finite intransitive clause. For the arguments of a minimal transitive clause, the terms "A" (agent) and "O" (object) are employed. Here we are at the source of the confusion. "A" is a content-based category while "O" is the customarily used formal syntactic category "object". Word order typologists take OVA as input information and interpret it as OVS. What they should do, however, is take patient-V-agent as input, check the alignment system, and then interpret it, based in syntactic criteria, either as SVO in an abs-erg language or, as OVS in a nom-acc language. Dixon (1994:22) characterizes an (absolutive-) ergative alignment system as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Dryer (2007:70) is aware of this problem when referring to Pări: "*Characterizing such languages as OVS is somewhat misleading in that the word order really follows an ergative pattern Abs-V-(Erg).*"

*"The term 'ergativity' will be used in the standard way, for referring to S and O being [grammatically]<sub>HH</sub> treated in the same way, and differently from A. 'Ergative' is then used in relation to A, the marked member of such an opposition, and 'absolute' in relation to S and O, the unmarked term."*

Although he does not explicitly generalize the term 'subject' across alignment systems, it follows: If S and O are "*treated in the same way*" in ergative systems, and S is the subject of a finite clause, then "O" will qualify as the subject of a transitive clause in an ergative system.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat intriguingly, Dixon (2010, vol. 2: 119) chooses the following formulation: Cross-linguistically, "*there are two recurrent patterns – S marked like A and S marked like O.*" In fact, this is the inverse of the relevant relation for which the syntactic properties of S serve as tertium comparationis: In nom-acc systems, the A-argument is marked like S, namely by nominative, while in abs-erg systems, the O-argument is marked like S, namely by absolute. Hence, a clause with strict OVA order and ergative alignment is a clause with an SVO structure.

In other words, there is no justification for classifying an ergative language as "OVS" whenever its obligatory serialization pattern in simple clauses with non-pronominal noun phrases happens to be patient-V-agent. However, this is exactly what happens in typological surveys, as for instance in WALS and other surveys. Pāri, for instance, is listed in WALS (Dryer & Haspelmath 2013) as "OVS" (feature 100A) and "ergative" (feature 81A).

Upon closer inspection it turns out that in most typological surveys, "OVA" is counted as "OVS" without taking into consideration the particular alignment system of the given language. If type-assigned correctly, these languages have to be counted as SVO languages with ergative alignment. Dixon (1994: 49-50) explicitly notes that for "*languages with syntactic function shown by constituent order,*" SV/OVA is likely to be a sign of ergativity.

Greenberg (1963) has been very clear about his – preliminary – recourse to easily applicable criteria for the identification of the subject of a clause and that he is aware that his strategy is just a time-saving shortcut:

*"I fully realize that in identifying such phenomena in languages of differing structure, one is basically employing semantic criteria. There are very probably formal similarities which permit us to equate such phenomena in different languages. However, to have concentrated on this task, important in itself, would have, because of its arduousness, prevented me from going forward to those specific hypotheses."* Greenberg (1963:74)

An on-line encyclopaedia<sup>3</sup> explicates "*ergative-absolute languages, sometimes called ergative languages*" as "*languages where the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb behave the same way in a sentence.*" Evidently, this way of describing the grammatical circumstances is biased towards the majority, that is, languages with nom-acc alignment. The verbal argument that is "*the object of a transitive verb*" is an *object* only in a nominative-accusative setting. In an absolute-ergative system it is the *subject* of the clause.

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<sup>2</sup> It depends on the grammar of a given language whether the argument marked with ergative case behaves like an oblique noun phrase or is treated like a structural object. In the latter case, it will surface as absolute in the anti-passive construction (which, in fact is the passive construction in an ergative alignment system, since it signals the syntactic elimination of the original subject argument).

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia on "*Ergative-absolute language*".

A more appropriate rendering would be this: In the vast majority of languages, one of the two arguments of a transitive verb, A or B, is aligned with the syntactic subject function and the other one with the grammatical function of an object. Consequently, this opens a system space for two systems. In one system, argument A is aligned with the subject, in the other system, argument B is the subject. In each system, the remaining argument is aligned as object. If A is the *agent* argument of an agentive verb aligned with the subject function, the alignment system is called *nom-acc*. If B is the *non-agent* argument of an agentive verb aligned with the subject function, the alignment is called *abs-erg*.

The syntactical subject is the morpho-syntactically privileged noun phrase aligned with an argument of the finite verbal predicate. 'Privileged' is a concept that is relative to the given language, as Keenan (1976) showed, with a cross-linguistically assembled pool of roughly thirty grammatical subject features. Mel'čuk (2014: 179) suggests the following definition:

*"The SyntSubj is the most privileged Synt-actant of the syntactic predicate (≈ Main Verb) in L; what exactly are syntactic privileges in L has to be indicated by a specific list of SyntSubj privileges elaborated for L."*

'Privileges' show in morphology, as for instance agreement patterns of the finite verb in languages with subject-verb agreement. In languages that provide a unique structural subject position, the subject is structurally privileged, and this is reflected in word order patterns. In genuine [S[VO]] languages, the preverbal position is reserved for the subject while objects follow the verb. Moreover, privileges are also linked with obligations. Subjects, unlike objects, must not be omitted<sup>4</sup> without signalling this morpho-syntactically, that is by "passive" in Nom-Acc languages, and in direct grammatical correspondence by "anti-passive" in ergative languages, which in reality is what passive is in nom-acc languages, namely a means of syntactically eliminating the argument that would otherwise surface as subject. Dixon (1994:146), (2010) and Dixon & Aikhenvald (2009: 9) characterize antipassive as follows:

- i. The antipassive construction is formally explicitly marked.
- ii. Antipassive forms a derived intransitive from a transitive verb.
- iii. The otherwise ergative-marked NP becomes S (viz. subject).
- iv. The otherwise absolutive-marked NP goes into a peripheral function and can be omitted.

As for (ii), the appropriate term for the derived antipassive verbal form is not 'intransitive' but 'unergative', since the ergative-marked argument of the active construction switches case and surfaces as absolutive, as stated in (iii). This is in direct correspondence to the acc-to-nom switch in the passive of Nom-Acc languages,<sup>5</sup> if the given alignment system is a system with structural cases. In such systems, a dependency relation holds between the assignment of subject case and the direct-object case. The object case is assigned only in the presence of the subject case (Haider 2000). If the primary subject candidate is syntactically unavailable, subject case is passed on and assigned to the object. The consequence is the familiar acc-to-nom (=

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<sup>4</sup> "Omission" must not be confused with the pronominal null-subject phenomenon. In the following example (i), the objects of 'forget' and 'forgive' are *omitted*. The subject, however, cannot be omitted (ii.).

- i. But Beijing never forgets and certainly does not forgive.
- ii. \*But never forgets anything and certainly does not forgive anyone anything.

<sup>5</sup> "Antipassive is the exact opposite of the passive in terms of case change." Primus (1995: 1090).

object-to-subject) switch or an ergative-to-absolutive (= non-subject-to-subject) switch respectively, in passive.

In French (1), the combination of a particular verb form (participle) and a particular auxiliary ('be'-type auxiliary instead of the 'have'-type one), blocks the primary subject argument. This is the way how Indo-European languages typically implement the syntactic elimination of the subject argument. Since French is a language with an [S[VO]] clause structure, the argument that is the direct object in (1a) surfaces in the position of the subject in (1b) and enters the typical agreement relation with the finite verb. In Matsés (2), a suffix<sup>6</sup> on the verb is the morphological signal of the syntactically suppressed would-be subject argument. As a consequence, the ergative-marked noun phrase of (2a) switches its case to absolutive as the subject case.

- (1)a. La mère a encouragé les filles French  
 the mother<sub>Subj</sub> has<sub>sg.</sub> encouraged the daughters<sub>Obj</sub>  
 b. Les filles ont été encouragées (par la mère)  
 the daughters<sub>Subj</sub> have<sub>pl.</sub> been encouraged (by the mother)
- (2) a. Aid opa-n matses pe-e-c. Matsés  
 that.one dog-ERG people.ABS bite-<sub>nPST-INDICATIVE</sub> Fleck (2003: 931)  
 'That dog bites people.'  
 b. Aid opa pe-an-e-c.  
 that.one dog.ABS bite-<sub>AntPass-Npast-INDICATIVE</sub>  
 'That dog bites' / 'That dog always bites me / is biting me'

Polinsky (2013) and (2017: 310), describes passive and antipassive in the customary way that focuses on the circumstantial property, namely "*In the passive, the suppressed or demoted argument is the agent-like argument, in the antipassive, the patient-like argument*" and in (2017: 310), as clause "*with a transitive predicate whose logical object is demoted to a non-core argument or non-argument*". This is not wrong but misleading. The syntactically relevant property is not the thematic role of the demoted argument or its logical argument status. Relevant is only the syntactic role, and this role is the grammatical function of a subject. Whenever in a finite clause, the argument of the verb that would otherwise surface as a syntactic subject, viz. as nominative or absolutive, respectively, is syntactically omitted, this must be morpho-syntactically formally marked. The naming of the semantic role of the suppressed subject is redundant since it is determined by the alignment system anyway.

Why are "D-linguists" unwilling to apply formal categories? One reason seems to be the idea that observation and description could be done in a theory-neutral way, while formal categories are often theory-related. Philosophy of science, however, tells us that every scientific observation is theory-laden. A grammar is a theory of the described language, even if it is formulated in terms of a "Basic Linguistic Theory" (Dixon 2010). Another reason is the 'Boasian methodological relativism' that D-linguists endorse.

*"Haspelmath (2010: 663), for example, claims that 'descriptive formal categories cannot be equated across languages because the criteria for category-assignment are different from language to language', and Croft (2013: 216) propounds that 'there are no grammatical*

<sup>6</sup> In Indo-European languages, affixal passive is suffixal, too, as for instance Latin ("-ur") or the Scandinavian s-passive with the verbal suffix "-s", which is the continuation of the cliticized reflexive of a middle construction.

*categories independent of constructions, since each construction defines its own distribution'. But their premise is wrong.*" (Davis et. als. 2014: e185).

Dryer (2006: 210), on the other hand, does not find fault with the notion of subject and object: *"While the typological work of the 1970's freely supplemented traditional grammar with notions required to describe many non-European languages, such as ergativity, an example of the link to traditional grammar was the bringing back to central stage of the notions of subject and object."*

A third reason for the aversive response to formal categories seems to be their cross-linked properties which make them difficult to assess. A "more surfacy" approach is technically easier, since content is easy to grasp. Structure is hard to assess. Syntactically, however, structure matters more than content. Grammars define structures, and structures constrain the form of the presentation of content.

Haspelmath (2014: 494) justly asks: *"Saying that Japanese generally has SOV order while English has SVO order is far more problematic, because it seems to presuppose that we can identify subjects, objects and verbs, i.e. abstract syntactic categories, in both languages. But on what basis?"* Regrettably, instead of insisting on the inevitability of providing structurally sound definitions as the basis of any comparative grammar, he suggests to stick to Greenberg's preliminary shortcut approach.

*"The basic principle is [...] that languages can be readily compared only with respect to meanings and sounds/gestures, but not with respect to their categories, because only meanings and sounds, but not categories, are universal. Thus, instead of saying that English has SVO order, while Japanese has SOV order, we must say that English has agent-action-patient order, while Japanese has agent-patient-action order."* (Haspelmath 2014: 495).

Such a strategy is not promising. What matters is not "readily" but "correctly".<sup>7</sup> Languages can and in fact must be compared *"with respect to their categories"*, but only after having ensured that one is comparing identical categories. This is exactly *not* what we do if we compare "agent-patient" order. Davis et als (2014: e180) suggest the following maxim. *"A scientific approach to the study of linguistic diversity must be empirically grounded in theoretically informed, hypothesis-driven fieldwork on individual languages."* This seems to be self-evident, but it isn't, unfortunately. Here we are at the core issue of this squib. If languages are compared *"only with respect to meaning"*, the outcome is likely to end up as a confusing maze of patterns, since syntax – the result of evolutionary grammaticalization (Haider 2020a) – overrules semantic distinctions.

## **2. "OVS" languages are SVO with ergative alignment**

This section will demonstrate that virtually all of the hitherto undisputed candidates for "OVS language" are Abs-V-Erg languages. The syntactical subject of an ergative language is the *non-agentive* argument, that is, the so-called patient-argument. Hence an ergative "OVS" language is in (syntactic) reality an SVO language, with Abs-Erg-alignment. What is the source of the

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<sup>7</sup> This is a direct parallel to comparative biology. Although cross-species differences may be at least as pronounced as cross-linguistic differences, biology compares homologically nevertheless. Analogous structures are seen as the result of convergent evolution. It is the structure that determines the functional content (see Haider 2020).

misperception? The source is the non-structural characterization of grammatical functions, namely the equation of a lexico-semantic stereotype, viz. agenthood,<sup>8</sup> with "syntactic subject". Let us now inspect several samples of alleged OVS languages.

Greenberg (1963: 76) described OVS as one of the types that "*do not occur at all or, at least are excessively rare*", and this has proven correct, contrary to positions held in the typological literature, based on about a dozen of alleged OVS languages. Greenberg's (1963) original sample of thirty languages contained only two languages that he classified as OVS, with VOS as alternative word order, namely Siuslaw and Coos (s. Greenberg's Appendix II). Both languages are ergative, see Mithun (2005).

Dixon (1994: 50-52) itemizes the following ergative languages as instances of SV/OVA, that is, ergative SVO languages: Kuikúro, Macushi,<sup>9</sup> Maxakalí, Pári, and Nadëb. Here is further confirmation: on Kuikúro by Franchetto (2002), on Macushi by Abbot (1991), on Maxakalí by Popovich (1986), on Pári by Andersen (1988), and on Nadëb by Martins & Martins (1999).

But, he also refers to a second pattern, namely VS/AVO, and refers to Huastec and Paumarí. Huastec is described as an SVO language by Edmonson (1988). Paumarí has been characterized as split-ergative by Chapman & Derbyshire (1991: 267, 271) with nom-acc alignment for pronominal arguments. This deserves a comment, since in an *ergative* setting, "AVO" would structurally be XVS. Chapman & Derbyshire (1991: 164, 250) describe "SVO" as the basic word order. Only the immediately preverbal noun phrase is case-marked. The language has a passive construction, but no antipassive. Zwart & Lindenbergh (in press) note that its coding is incomplete, for case as well as for agreement and conclude "*It seems, therefore, that the pattern is basically accusative (agreement only with S<sup>T</sup>/S<sup>I</sup>), and that on top of that verbal agreement is sensitive to transitivity (in the 3rd person singular)*". It does not qualify as an ergative language.

In a study on word order type and alignment, Siewierska (1996) lists four languages as "OVS" out of a set of 237 languages, namely Makushi, and Pári, as above, plus Hixkaryána, and Southern Barasano. As for Southern Barasano, Jones & Jones (1991) presented a syntax monograph that has been reviewed by Dryer (1994). He points out a crucial weakness<sup>10</sup> of their type assignment and concludes: "*It is possible that it is best treated as indeterminately SOV/OVS, a word order type that appears to be quite common in the Amazon basin*". (Dryer 1994: 63). Hixkaryana will be discussed with the following set of languages.

In WALS (Dryer & Haspelmath 2013), eleven languages are listed as "OVS". Four of them are plainly ergative, namely Kuikúro, Macushi, Pári, and Tuvaluan.<sup>11</sup> Four are caseless (i.e. 'neutral'

<sup>8</sup> Queixalós and Gildea (2010: 8) are explicit in this respect: "*So for now we adopt the theoretically problematic but heuristically useful practice of relying on intuitive-impressionistic identifications of A and P.*"

<sup>9</sup> Dixon (2010, vol.1: 73) criticizes Ethnologue: "Macushi [...] is given as OVS, despite the excellent grammar of this language specifying that the 'basic orders' are OVA (although AOV also occurs frequently) and SV."

<sup>10</sup> "*A count of all examples in the grammar shows both SV and VS order common, with SV slightly more common, though numbers of examples cited in a grammar is a poor source of data. But the frequency of SV examples both in the grammar and in the text examined does suggest that the claim that subjects tend to follow the verb is based on both noun and pronoun subjects rather than just noun subjects. If we interpret the notion of an OVS language as referring to clauses with a noun object and a noun subject (the standard usage in word order typology), it is not clear that Barasano qualifies.*" (Dryer 1994: 63).

<sup>11</sup> Besnier 1986: 245: "*Despite the word-order freedom exhibited by Tuvalan, there is a basic order, and this order is verb initial.*" Besnier (2000: xxiv): "*Case marking follows an ergative-absolutive pattern*".

alignment) but show ergative properties: Asurini,<sup>12</sup> Selknam,<sup>13</sup> Tiriyo,<sup>14</sup> Ungarinjin.<sup>15</sup> The three languages to be discussed further are Kxoe, Urarina, and Hixkaryána.

For Kxoe, Fehn's (2015:214) grammar of Ts'ixa (Kalahari Kxoe) is very explicit: "*There are three patterns available for transitive clauses: AOV, AVO and OAV, with the latter occurring less frequently than the other two. Although the dominant word order of the Khoe languages is thought to be AOV (cf. Heine 1976, Güldemann 2014), AVO is just as frequent.*" The type-assignment in WALS exclusively follows Köhler (1981). In sum, Kxoe does not seem to qualify as a reliable testimony of OVS.

Urarina, according to Olawsky (2006:1; 146; 654), is classified best as a nominative-accusative language with OVA/VS word order. "*The language has a nominative-accusative system but case is marked by constituent order only*" (Olawsky 2007: 45). However, "OVA" does not mean that the sentence-initial position is reserved for objects, or that objects, if overtly expressed, must appear in initial position (Olawsky 2006: 660-661). A text count based on 445 main clauses sampled from seven texts produced the following frequencies:<sup>16</sup> 3% OVA and 4% AOV orders (Olawsky 2006: 653; 2007: 45). 93% are clause with null-subjects and/or null-objects. For dependent clauses, Olawsky (2006: 658) reports 0,3% VA and 0,8% AV orders.

The essential issue to be settled for Urarina and for Hixkaryana, too, is this: Are these languages head-initial or head-final? If their VP is head-final, [OV] is a constituent. If they are head-initial, [VA] is a constituent preceded by O. The latter case would make them [O[VA]] languages, with "O" being the structurally highest argument in the clause. This would presuppose ergative alignment. What are the relevant facts?

Both, Urarina and Hixkaryana, are post-positional. According to Dryer (2007: 69) "*the fact that the characteristics in other languages pattern with the order of object and verb would lead us to expect both OVS and OSV languages to pattern with SOV languages. In so far as we have evidence, this prediction seems to be true. For example, Hixkaryana is postpositional and GN.*" The same is true for Urarina. In addition, as Kalin (2014: 1096) emphasizes, the adjective phrase is head-final, too.

Olawsky (2006: 667-668) provides information on the V+Aux order of Urarina, an order that is completely absent in V-initial languages. Finally, Olawsky (2006: 662) notes that in negated sentences, AOV is an unmarked order, that is, A is not focussed. "*In a transitive clause, constituent order can be AOV as the result of negation.*" Taken together, these grammatical features are good indicators for a head-final organization of the verb phrase in both languages.

<sup>12</sup> Primus (1995:1089): "*The Tupi-Guarani languages Asurini and Oiampi have ergative marking in dependent clauses.*"

<sup>13</sup> "*Selk'nam seems to be an ergative language as to word order and verbal marking. Nevertheless, case marking is still an issue that remains to be debated, since the data now available is not sufficient to determine the typological nature of the language, which appears to have been an S marking/A-O unmarked language till the beginning of the twentieth century.*" Rojas-Berscia (2014: 23).

<sup>14</sup> Rill (2017: 430): "*In the end, Tiriyo verb agreement is best analyzed as ergative in alignment.*"

<sup>15</sup> Rumsey (1982:145) summarizes the "ordering norms": S precedes V, O precedes V, while A follows. This is exactly the order one expects to find if a language is an SVO language with ergative alignment.

<sup>16</sup> Olawsky (2006:654): "*It has to be noted that, in a language with extensive omission of overt NPs, the presence of arguments realised as core NPs is not very frequent*"

The evidence for a head-final VP has lead Kalin (2014) to the conclusion, that Hixkaryana is an [[OV]SX] language, with the VP<sup>17</sup> in a secondary, fronted position. This would support Derbyshire's (1981) conjecture that the OVS clause structure is the result of the loss of ergative case marking in the Carib languages. An [[OV] ... S ...] structure is the likely outcome when in an ergative Abs-V-Erg system, case distinctions are lost and the alignment system is reinterpreted as nom-acc, while the order is preserved. The result is a nom-acc system, with OVS order, at the price of a complication in clause structure.

In sum, out of a total of 1377 languages in the WALS data base, a tenth of a percent show a word order that justly deserves to be qualified as OVS, namely Hixkaryana and Urarina. However, if the analysis of Kalin (2014) turns out to be robust enough, no language is known whose clause structure is [O[VS]].

There is no compelling evidence for OVS from non-ergative languages. For ergative languages, "OVS" means Absolutive-V-Ergative order, and this is *subject-verb-object* order, under ergative alignment. It is a consequence of such findings that the *structural* identification of grammatical relations is the proper and inevitable basis for cross-linguistic comparisons.

### 3. Properties shared by ergative languages

The above discussion has implications for the typology of ergative languages. Siewierska (1996: 149) identifies and summarizes the following positions arrived at in the literature, all based on the Greenbergian semantic definition of subject and object. Let us keep in mind that "SVO" and "OS" order is understood as "*Agent-Action-Patient*" and "*Patient-Agent*" order, respectively. In her study, Siewierska (1996) notes that there is "*an association between ergative alignment and non-SVO order*" and "*an association between ergative alignment and object-before-subject order*". This would be surprising, given the fact that SVO is a major type. If, however, the semantic identification of "S" is duly replaced by structural criteria, her findings turn out as expected, straightforward, and cross-linguistically uniform properties of syntactic subjects across alignment systems.

Siewierska (1996:149) identifies and summarizes the following positions arrived at in the literature, based on a semantic definition of subject and object. Typologists agree that there is "*an association between ergative alignment and non-SVO order*" and "*an association between ergative alignment and object-before-subject order*". This would be surprising, given the fact that SVO is a major type.

In the literature Siewierska refers to, "SVO" and "OS" order is understood as "*Agent-Action-Patient*" and "*Patient-Agent*" order, respectively. What this neglects is the fact that 'ergative alignment' ought to be read as follows: The argument of a transitive verb that is a *direct object* in nominative-accusative alignment is the *syntactic subject* under ergative alignment, if 'subject' is construed *grammatically*. If we apply structural criteria, Siewierska's findings turn out as expected, straightforward, and cross-linguistically uniform properties of syntactic subjects across alignment systems.

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<sup>17</sup> "Transitive clauses have a tightly bound OV verb phrase constituent that is usually followed by the subject NP. Des had actually said so in a dense 1961 paper I had not seen (IJAL 27, 125-142), packed with obscure formulae." (Geoffrey Pullum, Obituary: Desmond Derbyshire, *Linguist List* 19.1, Jan 03 2008).



First, an *ergative* language that would 'semantically' be identified as "SVO" is structurally an *OVS* language, with ergative-V-absolutive order. Structural OVS languages, however, are extremely rare if not inexistent. Siewierska's *second* point, the "object-before-subject order" of ergative languages, in reality is the Patient-before-Agent order, or Absolutive-before-ergative. Structurally, in ergative languages, this is subject-before-object, that is, the noun phrase with absolutive case precedes the noun phrase with ergative case. This – nominative before accusative – is the common serialization in Nominative-Accusative languages as well. Subjects precede objects. In sum, ergative languages pattern just like Nom-Acc-languages, modulo alignment, with SOV and SVO as the most frequent types. The allegedly non-existent "ergative SVO" do exist, as ergative languages that have been misidentified as OVS languages. The alleged "object-subject" order of ergative languages is in fact the cross-linguistically pervasive subject-object order, modulo ergative alignment. Hence, there is no reason for being surprised that an ergative "agent-V-patient" language, which would in fact structurally be an OVS language, has not been detected and presumably does not exist.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The *structural* identification of grammatical functions is the necessary, proper, and inevitable basis for cross-linguistic comparisons. 'Semantic' classifications of grammatical relations obviously lead astray. They rest on a hidden but wrong premise, namely, that universally, for verbs with an agent and a patient argument, the agent argument is the subject in a 'plain'<sup>19</sup> clause. This is true for Nom-Acc-languages, but crucially not for languages with ergative alignment. The equation of Agent with Subject works for Nom-Acc languages, but not for Abs-Erg languages. In these languages, the patient of a transitive verb is the grammatical subject. If one compares Agent-V-Patient patterns cross-linguistically, one compares the *subject* of Nom-Acc systems with a non-subject of Abs-Erg systems. It is not astonishing at all that such ill-defined "subjects" do not share relevant *grammatical* properties. If compared properly, that is, structurally, several puzzles disappear:

- Structural OVS languages are not only rare; they are virtually inexistent.
- "OVS" languages listed in typological literature are SVO languages with ergative alignment.
- SOV and SVO are the most frequent types, both for nom-acc languages as well as for languages with abs-erg alignment.
- Comparative grammar must be based on structurally defined grammatical concepts

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<sup>18</sup> This is exactly what Greenberg (1963:76) had foreseen: "*The three which do not occur at all, or at least are excessively rare, are VOS, OSV, and OVS.*"

<sup>19</sup> 'Plain' means: non-passivized, non-middle, etc., or, in other words, in non-derived form.

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