Antipassive Morpheme *-si* in Inuktitut: Split Ergativity or Something New?

Esme Courie

Department of Linguistics, McGill University

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Professor James Crippen, Professor Jessica Coon

Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the antipassive in Inuktitut, a language spoken by the indigenous population of the eastern Canadian arctic including Northern Quebec/Nunavik, Nunatsiavut/Northern Labrador, and Nunavut. Data are from existing Inuktitut dictionaries and prior papers on the antipassive. First, I will provide an overview of Inuktitut and its usual alignment pattern. Then, I will introduce the antipassive. Next, I will outline the number of puzzles regarding the antipassive and Inuktitut. I will address some potential answers to these puzzles and a few problems with those answers. Afterwards, I will describe the antipassive in Inuktitut in more depth, as well as the overall linguistic understanding of the antipassive. This will allow me to arrive at the focus of this paper and clarify some definitions before moving forward. This paper will explore the interpretations of the Inuktitut antipassive by both Spreng (2006) and Compton (2017). I will then explore these arguments amongst other interpretations and discussions of the antipassive and split ergativity. Lastly, I will discuss my findings, outstanding questions and future research that could be done.

1 Introduction

1.1 Inuktitut Overview

Inuktitut is often characterized as a split alignment system. In most cases, there is an ergative/absolutive alignment system, shown in (1) and (2). The agent of the transitive sentence bears the ergative case, -up, while both the patient of the transitive and the subject of the intransitive bear the absolutive case, which is null (Compton 2017).

(1) Transitive (Compton 2017; Spreng 2006)

a. Piita-p mattak-∅ niri-vaa.
Piita-ERG mattak(ABS.SG) eat-IND.3SG.3SG
'Piita ate the mattak (=whale skin).'

b. anguti-up arnaq-∅ kunik-taa
man-ERG woman(ABS) kiss-PART.3SG/3SG
'The man kissed the woman'

(2) Intransitive (Compton 2017;Spreng 2006)

a. Piita-∅ tikip-puq.
Piita(ABS.SG) arrive-IND.3SG
'Piita arrived.'

b. anguti-∅ niri-vuq
man(ABS) eat-IND.3SG
'The man is eating.

This is always the case, except in antipassive constructions, like in (3). To form an antipassive, the patient of the transitive is demoted to bearing the oblique case, whilst the agent becomes the absolutive case. In this, the agent and subject share the absolutive case, while the patient bears the oblique case. This results in a nominative/accusative alignment system, resulting in split ergativity.

(3) Antipassive (Spreng 2006)

a. anguti-∅ kunik-**si**-vuq arna-mik
man(ABS.SG) kiss-**AP**-IND.3SG woman-OBL.SG
'the man kissed a woman'

b. anguti-∅ niri-vuq niqi-mik
man(ABS.SG) eat-IND.3SG meat-OBL.SG
'the man is eating meat'

To form an antipassive, the verb also changes. In both (3a) and (3b), the verb now bears the intransitive suffix -vuq. All morphology in transitives now look like intransitives, with the agent-like noun being absolutive and the verb suffix being intransitive. The only thing different is the oblique patient. Regardless of the split ergativity, something interesting is happening in these examples.

In addition to the intransitive suffix, the verb also has the option to bear the antipassive suffix morpheme *-si* like in (3a), but doesn't need to because (3b) is without it. In (3b), there is no antipassive morpheme, but it is still read as one, because of the different case assignments. This leads to the potential of *-si* being optional, is it?

2 The Puzzle

There are a couple puzzles here, split ergativity, normal antipassive construction (the intransitive suffix on the verb) and abnormal antipassive construction (optionality of *-si*). Most puzzling is related to the fact that Inuktitut is a pro-drop language, which, in the case of Inuktitiut means that if the verb suffix has subject agreement, the pronouns can be dropped, resulting in just the verb like in (4).

(4) (Spreng 2006)
   a. kunik-si-vuq
      kiss-IND.3SG
      's/he is kissing someone'
   b. niri-vuq
      eat-IND.3SG
      's/he is eating (something)'

Here, there are no nouns to bear a case assignment, and yet, the verb niri can still take the intransitive suffix, and have no antipassive morpheme. Notice that (4a) is different from (5a), which is what a 'normal' 3rd person singular/3rd person singular sentence would look like, without the antipassive reading. Meanwhile (4b) and (5b) look identical, without the antipassive morpheme.

(5) (Spreng 2006)
   a. kunik-taa
      kiss-PART.3SG/3SG
      's/he is kissing him/her'
   b. niri-vuq
      eat-IND.3SG
      's/he is eating something'

3 Potential Answers

Both Compton (2017) and Spreng (2006) hold that (4a) and (4b) cannot occur without a *-si* morpheme, but with no counterexamples shown, I would have liked to have evidence of these sentences being ungrammatical, like a possible elicitation in (6).

(6) Possible Elicitation Questions

a. ??? kunik-vuq
kiss-IND.3SG
's/he is kissing someone'

b. ??? niri-si-vuq
eat-**AP**-IND.3SG
's/he is eating (something)'

Spreng (2006) argues that when the verb has antipassive morphology like in (3b), the oblique case is assigned by v. This is opposed to when there is no antipassive morpheme, in which the oblique case is assigned by theta-roles as opposed to syntactic roles. Compton (2017) argues that the antipassive construction is not related to aspect, but rather something internal to the verb that yields different interpretations, which is less than ideal as antipassives are most understood as related to aspect.

What is interesting about both of these arguments is that they do not view the antipassive as a detransitivizing nor valency decreasing when antipassives are "widely discussed as both valency-reducing and detransitivizing constructions" (Heaton 2020). Polinsky (2017) writes that "antipassives have long been considered "exotic"—found in exotic languages and associated with exotic syntax…the antipassive is in fact well behaved, observable wherever the logical object of a transitive predicate appears as a non-core argument or an adjunct", and whether or not intentional, what both Spreng and Compton are doing is treating Inuktitut as "different". Polinsky (2017) finds that 30 out of the 48 languages in a study that have an antipassive construction, have the patient-like argument in the oblique case, which is like Inuktitut. A number of other languages need not always have an antipassive morpheme like Basque and Cavineña.

In every case in Inuktitut, except those with the pro-drop, the agent bears the absolutive case and the patient, the oblique case, which is a common antipassive construction, even without the overt *-si* morpheme. Inuktitut appears to be fully in line with the cross-linguistic antipassive construction. Thus, I do not find a need to treat it as a non aspectual-split, as there is no real reason to do so. The 'optionality' of the *-si* morpheme might seem odd and irregular, but I doubt that is really the case.

4 What is the Antipassive Construction?

Antipassives are transitive clauses whose logical object/patient is demoted to a non-core argument (Polinsky 2017). This is as opposed to a passive construction, in which the agent is demoted to a non-core argument, like in (8).

(7) Nonpassive (Allen and Crago 1995)

a. Jaaniup iqaluk nirijanga
Jaani-up iqaluk-∅ niri-janga
Johnny-ERG..SG fish(ABS.SG) eat-PAR.3SG.3SG
'Johnny is eating/ate the fish.'

(8) Passive (Allen and Crago 1995)
a. Iqaluk Jaanimut nirijaujuq
iqaluk-∅ Jaani-mut niri-jau-juq
fish(ABS.SG) Johnny-ALL.SG eat-PASS-PAR.3SG
'The fish was eaten by Johnny.'

(9) Antipassive (Spreng 2006)
a. anguti-∅ niri-vuq niqi-mik
man(ABS.SG) eat-IND.3SG meat-OBL.SG
'the man is eating meat'

In (8), the verb now bears a passive morpheme -jau, and the agent bears the allative suffix -mut. What the passive and antipassive construction have in common is they are valency decreasing mechanisms. Valency refers to the number of arguments a verb takes, thus a valency decreasing mechanism decreases the amount of arguments a verb takes. The passive construction decreases the valency by omitting or demoting the agent. The antipassive construction decreases the valency by omitting or demoting the object (Haspelmath 2022). As said before in this paper, in Inuktitut antipassives, the verb looks morphologically intransitive, while the semantic understanding is that the verb is transitive. This is in line with other antipassive constructions, as seen in Polinsky (2017) the antipassive verb "is semantically transitive, but does not project a direct object; hence, it is morphosyntactically intransitive."

5 Focus of this Paper

Cross-linguistic data shows that the absolutive/oblique case and two arguments with an intransitive verb are often concurrent with antipassive construction. For this reason, I am uninterested in the antipassives in (3), where the cases on the nouns might be enough to evoke an antipassive reading. What is of interest are the examples in (10) below, specifically the (10b) and (10c) which look exactly the same, but (10b) yields an active voice, and (10c) yields an antipassive reading, without any case markers or the antipassive morpheme.

(10) (Spreng 2006)
a. anguti-∅ niri-vuq
man(ABS.SG) eat-IND.3SG
'The man is eating' (non-antipassive intransitive with proper noun)

b. niri–vuq
eat-IND.3SG
's/he is eating (something)' (non-antipassive intransitive with pro-drop)
c. niri-vuq
eat-IND.3SG
's/he is eating something' (antipassive transitive with pro-drop.

This paper focuses on finding a way in which (10c) can be understood as an antipassive, without any hypotheses that there aren't detransitivizing or valency-decreasing constructions going on. Niri does not take the antipassive morpheme, with or without the pro-drop, which only encourages the conclusion that what is happening in sentences like (3b) is also happening in (10c). Because of this, (10c) has to be understood as an antipassive, in the same way (3b) is, which has to be understood as a detransitivizing or valency-decreasing operation. sentences with or without the *-si* morpheme must also be similar in construction, as both serve the end goal of antipassive construction.

There are a number of things that will be discussed in this paper. One is whether or not the antipassive and the following split ergativity results in an aspectual-split. Another is whether or not the antipassive is a valency-decreasing or detransitivizing operation. I will explore the possible interpretations of the antipassive in Inuktitut, and cross-examine it with other languages' antipassive constructions. I will gain a better understanding of what Inuktitut's antipassive looks like in terms of other antipassives, and determine which is more likely: the previous conclusions of Inuktitut being odd or Inuktitut actually being odd.

6 Some Clarifications and Definitions

Spreng's (2006) conclusion that the oblique case in an antipassive is assigned by vP is consistent with other syntactic approaches to the antipassive (Polinsky 2017). However, the conclusion that sentences with the antipassive morpheme are constructed differently than other antipassive sentences without the antipassive morpheme seems odd. Though some linguists might have different definitions for what constitutes an antipassive, I will use the diagnostic criteria in Polinsky (2017), which is the demotion of a semantic patient.

Unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs are both intransitive verbs. Unergatives are intransitive verbs that lack an object, e.g swim, dance, run. Unaccusative verbs lack an agent e.g. break, fall, melt (Gluckman).

6.1 Compton (2017)

As stated previously, Compton (2017) argues that aspect is "somewhat orthogonal to the antipassive in Inuktitut", it is not the construction that yields an antipassive reading, but perhaps something internal to the verb itself. He argues this with the following examples.

(11) (Compton 2017)

a. arnaup nirijanga aapu
arna-up niri-ja-nga aapu-∅
woman-ERG.SG eat-DECL.TR-3SG.3SG apple(ABS.SG)
'The woman is eating the apple.'

b. arnaq nirijuq aapumit
arnaq niri-ju-q aapu-mit
woman eat-DECL.INTR -3SG apple -OBL.SG
'The woman is eating an apple.'

(12) (Compton 2017)

a. qimmiup kiijaanga
qimmi-up kii-ja-nga
dog-ERG.SG bite-DECL.TR-3SG.1SG
'The dog bit me.'

b. qimmiq uvannit kiisijuq
qimmiq-∅ uvannit kii-si-ju-q
dog(ABS.SG) 1SG.OBL bite-AP-DECL.INTR-3SG
'A dog bit me.'

Compton argues that because niri 'eat' yields a default progressive interpretation in both (11a) and (11b) with or without the antipassive construction in (11b), and kii 'bite' yields a default recent past interpretation regardless of the antipassive construction that occurs in (12b). The antipassive might not have anything to do with aspect. As his conclusion is closely related to Spreng (2006;2012), I will address those conclusions first before discussing.

6.2 Spreng (2006)

Spreng (2006) is heavy on the theoretical syntax, which I cannot delve into the entirety of the argument in this paper. In short, AP morpheme *-si* occurs, it is in v and assigns the oblique-case to the patient. When there is no AP morpheme, the oblique case is assigned as a lexical case by the lexical head.

6.2.1 What is *v*?

v is a common practice in theoretical syntax, in which the arguments that a verb takes originate very closely to the verb, and might get moved around but hold some properties of its original place near the verb. In the case of Spreng's argument, *-si* originates closely to the verb and its arguments, so much

so that it can assign the oblique case to the object. If *-si* occurs in the sentence, Spreng believes that it looks something like the Figure 1.

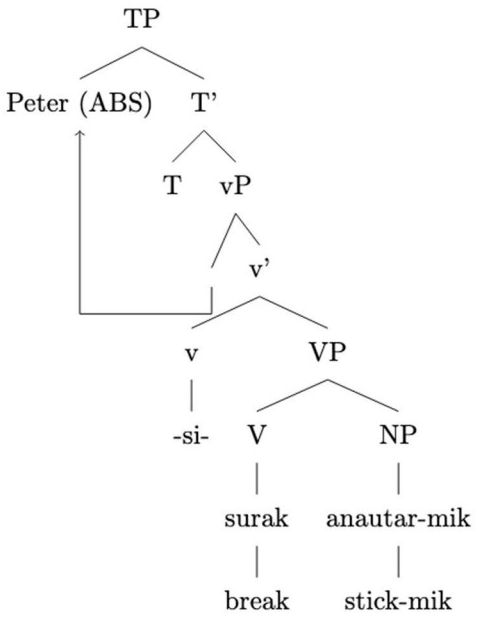

Figure 1(Spreng 2006)[1]

Spreng argues that in Figure 1, it is an unaccusative verb, in which the VP originates first, and the addition of Peter, is later that requires the *-si* morpheme. This is opposed to unergative verbs like in Figure 2 in which the object of eating is added later, and does not originate in the same VP as the verb.

[1] This is not a copy and paste syntax tree from Spreng's paper but rather a recreation of the syntax trees for clarity.

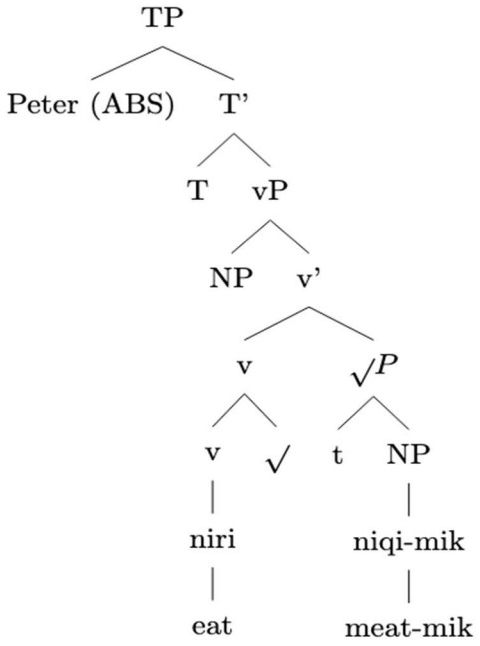

Figure 2 (Spreng 2006)[2]

In this example, the oblique case is assigned by thematic roles, as opposed to structural roles like in Figure 1.

7 Discussion

As Compton (2017) wrote, in other languages antipassive is connected to an aspectual-split, yet not in Inuktitut. In Coon (2013), there are two types of aspectual-splits: either imperfective aspects that are expressed with complex auxiliary constructions or imperfective aspects that involve demoted (i.e., oblique) objects. Though the former is likely true for Inuktitut, we have seen in (11) and (12) that the split ergativity does not result in a split from perfective to imperfective, but that the aspect reading might be internal to the verb. (11) has an imperfective reading regardless of alignment pattern, and (12) has a perfective reading. Polinsky (2017) writes that the aspectual interpretation is not necessary for an antipassive reading. I can reasonably conclude that progressive and imperfective readings are not caused by *-si* but potentially *-si* does relate to the aspect of the verb.

[2] Same as 1.

Though the antipassive in Inuktitut might have nothing to do with aspect, it is very unlikely that the antipassive and the existence of split ergativity in Inuktitut are not connected. As many academics (see Coon 2019; Polinksy 2017) note that no ergative language is 100% ergative,the split in ergativity is often related to transitivity decrease (Coon 2019). As seen in all Inuktitut examples, there is no ergative marking in the antipassive, because the agent of the verb is no longer the agent of a transitive sentence.

If this split in ergativity is not caused by the aspectual-split, there is another common factor in the triggering of split ergativity, which is a split in NP prominence (Coon 2019). There is a possibility that the split ergativity, the introduction of a nominative/accusative pattern, is based on the prominence of the NPs. In Inuktitut, the object gets demoted to a less important part of the subject, which further promotes the agent, which is consistent with this prominent NP hypothesis, of high prominence agents.

Another possibility is "agent foregrounding", leaving the most likely phenomenon occurring (Polinsky 2017). The antipassive might be for object demotion, which realistically occurs for agent promotion as focus for the agent. Though this is not universal within antipassive constructions, it might be helpful to further analyze this possibility within Inuktitut. There is a possibility that the oblique case on the object is an example of a lexical case. This interpretation of the antipassive does not account for the optionality of *-si.*

Through the entirety of my paper, I have found that in the current landscape, there is nothing "universal" about antipassive constructions. Though both Spreng (2012) and Compton (2017) are different than other antipassive interpretations, when considering the belief that the antipassive is an object demotion tool, there is no overwhelming evidence to find that it is not in line with other antipassive interpretations, as there is no universal antipassive interpretation. Overwhelmingly I agree that the antipassive in Inuktitut is not an aspectual-split, I still hold that it is most likely a valency decreasing operation.

A potential understanding of the optionality of *-si*, is not the aspect of *-si* itself, but instead how *-si* interacts with the internal aspect of a verb. Perhaps if a verb has the default progressive interpretation, it does not need to have the addition of the antipassive morpheme. This is consistent with the examples in (10), that it does not need the morpheme for an antipassive reading. In (12), we see the *-si* morpheme is needed for perfective verbs;however, it does not provide for the necessity of *-si* in examples like (3a) and (4a).

8 Outstanding Questions and Further Research

Most obvious to me is that more semantic elicitation needs to be done. I am beginning to wonder if the valency decrease only serves as focus for the agents. The antipassive in Inuktitut might not be structural at all, but rather mostly semantic. To come to a clearer conclusion, there needs to be elicitation in which the antipassive reading entails the focus of the agent, and we must see if entailment cancellation is possible.

I also am left wondering about the examples in (10), since there is no universal antipassive understanding; the pairs (10b) and (10c) would benefit from semantic elicitation. The antipassive reading in (10c) might occur from previous structural movement, in which there is something underlyingly left over that allows for an antipassive reading. The first thought I have is that something originating in the object NP moves up to the CP specifier, though I would need more information than I currently have on what Inuktitut syntax trees usually look like.

9 Conclusion

I no longer view Spreng (2006) or Compton (2017) as unprompted, as I have found out through my research nothing in the literature about a crosslinguistic form for the antipassive. I would have benefitted from a higher level of linguistics understanding to fully comprehend the conclusions of the Spreng (2006) paper. Inuktitut most likely has normal split ergativity when considering a cause of the split as NP prominence and potential agent focus. The construction of the antipassive in Inuktitut is in line with the majority of antipassive understanding, with the split ergativity and intransitive suffix on the verb. This becomes a problem when a verb has a potential transitive and intransitive reading, and there is a possible antipassive construction. I believe this most likely is either related to traces in the structure of the syntax or solely semantic understanding. The working conclusion of the examples in (13) is that the default progressive interpretation of niri does not require *-si* and so the main difference between the two is (13b) might have more semantics or previous focus going on than (13a).

(13) (Spreng 2006)

a. niri-vuq
   eat-IND.3SG
   's/he is eating (something)' (non-antipassive, intransitive with pro-drop)

b. niri-vuq
   eat-IND.3SG
   's/he is eating something' (non-antipassive, intransitive with pro-drop)

There is still much work to be done, but I have succeeded in a better understanding of the antipassive and split ergativity in Inuktitut and how it relates to the larger body of work regarding the antipassive.

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