

FROM ERGATIVE TO ACCUSATIVE IN NORTH BAFFIN INUKTITUT

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Inuktitut is traditionally categorized as ergative since the object of a transitive construction and the subject of an intransitive construction are case-marked similarly whereas the subject of a transitive construction receives a different case-marker, as shown in (1a-b).

Kivalliq Inuktitut (Johns, 1987: 33-34)

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|-------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|--------------|
| 1) a. | <i>anguti-up</i>
man-ERG | <i>arnaq-∅</i>
woman-ABS | <i>kunik-pa-a</i>
kiss-IND-S3SG.O3SG | TRANSITIVE |
| | ‘The man kissed <u>the woman</u> ’ | | | |
| b. | <i>angut-∅</i>
man-ABS | <i>taku-vuq</i>
see-IND.S3SG | | INTRANSITIVE |
| | ‘The man sees’ | | | |

Like many other ergative languages (cf. Dixon 1979, 1994), Inuktitut has another construction with a two-place predicate, which is called the antipassive construction and which is used instead of a transitive construction whenever the object is indefinite, as shown in (2) (compare with (1a)).

Kivalliq Inuktitut (Johns, 1987: 34)

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|----|----------------------------------|------------------------------|---|-------------|
| 2) | <i>angut-∅</i>
man-ABS | <i>arna-mik</i>
woman-MOD | <i>kunik-si-vuq</i>
kiss-AP-IND.S3SG | ANTIPASSIVE |
| | ‘The man kissed <u>a woman</u> ’ | | | |

Yet, recent studies across Inuktitut dialects claim that antipassive objects can now also receive a definite interpretation and that the antipassive construction is used progressively more in disfavor of the ‘traditional’ transitive construction (cf. Johns 1999, 2001, 2006; Spreng 2005; Carrier 2012, 2017; Yuan 2018). As antipassive and intransitive subjects are case-marked similarly while antipassive objects are case-marked differently compared to the latter two (compare (1b) to (2)), Inuktitut seems to be undergoing a morphosyntactic alignment change from ergative to accusative. However, no study has yet provided any statistical evidence for this putative change.

In this talk, I present the first quantitative study on this topic. Using a variationist sociolinguistic and a syntactic approach, I analyze the speech of 40 Inuktitut speakers from Mittimatalik, Nunavut. The oldest one was born in 1902 and the youngest one, in 1998. 21 are males and 19 are females. My results confirm that the percentage of transitive constructions has been decreasing over time in favor of the antipassive construction, as shown in Table 1. In addition, a statistical analysis based on a logistic model with mixed effects shows that the grammatical person of the subject is the linguistic factor driving the change. I further argue that a historical neutralisation of subject person in transitive agreement across Eskimo-Aleut languages, which has affected Inuktitut more than any other varieties, is the origin of this current morphosyntactic alignment shift.

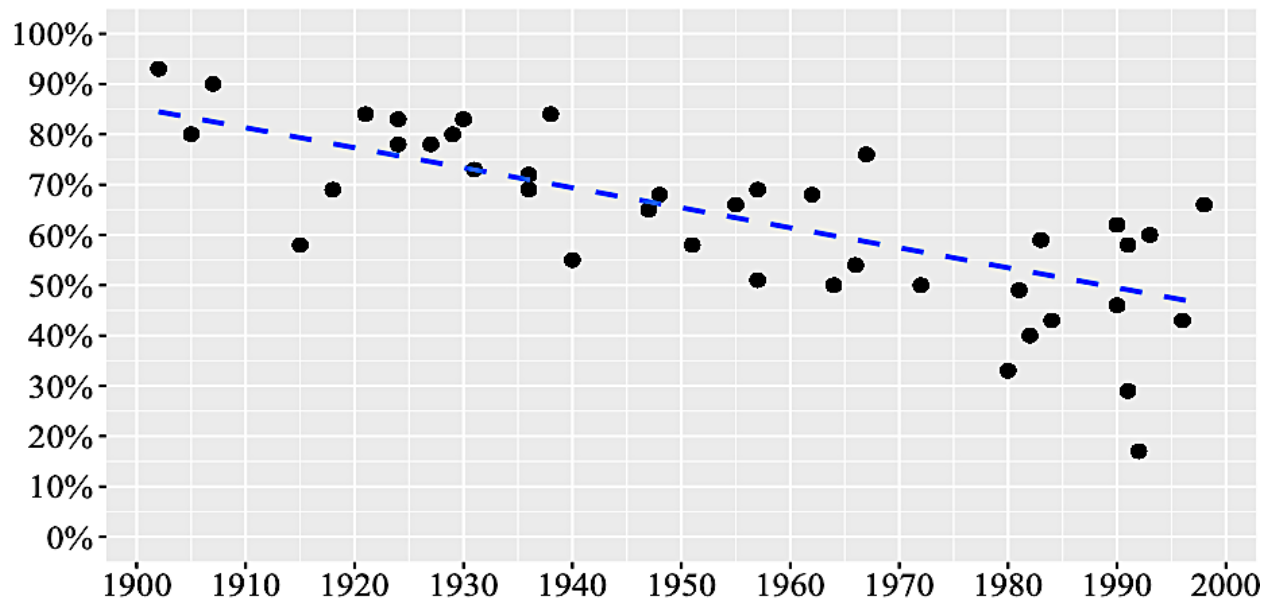


Table 1 - Percentages of transitive constructions by speaker and year of birth (2941 tokens)

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