

24.910 Advanced Topics in Linguistic Analysis

Argument Alignment

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Spring 2024

Instructor: Dr. Ksenia Ershova
Contact: kershova@mit.edu
Office hours: By appointment (Calendly link)
Canvas: <https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/25012>
Class schedule: MW 11-12:30
Location: 4-261

Description of the Course

This is an advanced syntax course which will explore how arguments are organized in the clause and how the relations between a predicate and its arguments are marked. The class will discuss the following major themes:

1. What is the range of typological diversity in expressing argument relations and its correlation with theories of case, agreement and licensing in generative grammar?
2. How does morphosyntactic argument alignment relate to notions of argument prominence like subjecthood and c-command?
3. Can approaching typological classifications of morphosyntactic alignment from the perspective of generative grammar lend us novel insight into the rules underlying the expression and organization of arguments?

The class will focus on a typologically and genetically diverse set of languages and will involve reading and discussing original research. We will start with a discussion of the typology of morphosyntactic alignment and a refresher of argumenthood, case and licensing in generative grammar. We will then focus on two types of argument alignment systems: ergative-absolutive languages and Austronesian-type (or symmetrical) voice languages. The last topic will focus on noncanonical subjects, their place in generative theory, and how they interact with the basic typology of argument alignment.

Students will leave the class with knowledge of the cross-linguistic landscape of argument alignment and a deeper understanding of fundamental aspects of generative syntax, such as case and licensing, argumenthood and structural prominence, locality and other conditions imposed on syntactic operations.

Prerequisites

24.901, 24.902, and 24.903 (or permission of instructor)

Course components

1. **Class participation (10%):** attending class, participating in discussion and interactive class activities
2. **Readings and discussion posts (10%):** reading the assigned literature and posting weekly discussion posts on Canvas
3. **Written assignments (50%):** at least one problem set for each topic (\approx 12 assignments)
4. **Final squib (30%):** a 5-10 page paper presenting a syntactic analysis of the argument alignment of a language based on a grammatical description. A selection of available language descriptions will be provided by the instructor.

Readings

All required and suggested readings will be available digitally through Canvas.

Class schedule (subject to change)

The class is heavily discussion-based; depending on how the discussion develops, some of the topics may be dropped or truncated. Additional readings may be added.

	Topic & readings	
Week 1	Typology of morphosyntactic alignment	Velupillai (2012:9.1)
Weeks 2-3	Subjecthood, case and agreement in Generative Grammar	Pesetsky and Torrego (2012) McCloskey (1997)
Weeks 4-9	Ergativity	
	<i>Ergative as inherent case</i>	Sheehan (2017) <i>Suggested: Legate (2017); Tollan (2018)</i>
	<i>Ergative as dependent case</i>	Baker and Bobaljik (2017) <i>Suggested: Deal (2010); Levin and Preminger (2015)</i>
	<i>Absolutive case</i>	Legate (2008)
	<i>Syntactic ergativity</i>	Deal (2016) <i>Suggested: Aldridge (2008); Ershova (2023)</i>
	<i>Split ergativity</i>	Legate 2014a

		Coon 2013:Ch.4
Weeks 10-12	Austronesian-type voice	
	<i>Background on symmetrical voice</i>	Chen and McDonnell (2019)
	<i>Ergativity-based approaches</i>	Aldridge (2012) <i>Suggested: Legate (2014b:Ch.3)</i>
	<i>Wh-agreement-based approaches</i>	Rackowski and Richards (2005) <i>Suggested: Erlewine et al. (2017)</i>
Weeks 13-15	Applicatives and quirky subjects	
	<i>Applicatives</i>	McGinnis (2017)
	<i>Quirky subjects</i>	Cuervo (2020) Sigurðsson (2004)

Attendance

This class is designed to be fully in-person with no hybrid/Zoom backup and students are expected to attend the class meetings regularly. There is no official penalty for missed classes, but missed classes will have a direct negative effect on your overall performance. If you are sick, please notify the instructor and stay home to recover. If your absences accumulate to significantly impact your performance, I will reach out to you to discuss your options.

Students are responsible for recovering the content of a missed class from classmates and the assigned readings. Any slides/handouts will be posted on Canvas, but will not provide a comprehensive account of class content.

Academic integrity

Students are allowed to collaborate and discuss problem sets and their final projects with each other. However, all written assignments should be authored solely by the student. Any collaborations with others should be explicitly stated at the top of the written assignment.

Students are expected to follow MIT's rules on academic integrity, as outlined in the Mind and Hand Book.

Students with Documented Disabilities

MIT is committed to the principle of equal access. Students who need disability accommodations are encouraged to speak with Disability and Access Services (DAS), prior to or early in the semester so that accommodation requests can be evaluated and addressed in a timely fashion. If you have a disability and are not planning to use accommodations, it is still recommended that you meet with DAS staff to familiarize yourself with their services and resources. Please visit the DAS website for contact information.

If you have already been approved for accommodations, please inform the instructor as soon as possible.

Diversity and Inclusion Statement

The discipline of linguistics, while striving to be as objective and non-discriminatory as possible, is still largely built on a small sample of privileged voices. If there are any concerns you wish to raise, please reach out to me directly, or via the anonymous survey link provided below. As a participant of this course, I ask that you strive to maintain a respectful environment and honor the diversity of your fellow classmates. For additional resources, please explore the links below:

1. <https://hr.mit.edu/diversity-equity-inclusion>
2. <https://studentlife.mit.edu/impact-opportunities/diversity-inclusion>
3. <https://linguistics.mit.edu/diversity-statement/>

Anonymous survey: <https://forms.gle/BfwxVYUBHKzhkpKBA>

References

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- Erlewine, Michael Yoshitaka, Theodore Levin, and Coppe van Urk. 2017. Ergativity and Austronesian-type voice systems. In *The oxford handbook of ergativity*, eds. Jessica Coon, Diane Massam, and Lisa Demena Travis.
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