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The main title of this book is well chosen: the pivot of this study is the problem of differentiating between the different types of accusative and infinitive constructions (a.c.i.) that exist in languages, on the one hand, and on the other, the unexpected case form used for the NP that occurs between the matrix verb and the infinitive in these constructions. For example, in I expected him to win the race, him functions as the subject of the infinitive and not as the object of the matrix verb, and yet the NP is found in the oblique (accusative) form and not in the nominative. The proposal put forward is that both these problems can be explained by making use of gradient notions of ergativity and transitivity, abandoning any attempt to capture the a.c.i. in terms of discrete categories. The subtitle of the book A Cross-Linguistic Typological Approach, is correct in the sense that the author makes use of typological findings of other linguists concerning ergativity and transitivity, but is less felicitous in that he does not himself carry out any typological work with respect to the a.c.i. construction. Instead he concentrates on the way this construction has been described in traditional and formal theoretical terms for three languages, all Indo-European, namely, English, Old English, and Latin. The reason for doing so is clear in itself: it is for these three
languages that detailed studies have been made of the construction in question. Although these descriptions indeed provide a useful starting-point, I find the restriction to only three languages of the same family a great drawback when one considers the typological aims (and the results) of this study. The fuzzy boundaries of the a.c.i. construction types and the case of the intervening NP are “explained” in terms of ergativity and transitivity continua, but evidence for the existence of these continua is drawn mostly from the literature on other languages, which themselves are NOT investigated with respect to the a.c.i. construction. This sometimes gave me the impression that we are comparing apples and pears, so that the “solution” to the problem at hand is somewhat ad hoc (even though I admit it has its attractive sides) in the sense that the ergativity and transitivity characteristics existing formally (i.e. morphologically and syntactically) elsewhere, but not very distinctly in the three European languages investigated, are being used to explain the “strange case” of the accusative NP and the a.c.i. in general in these very languages.

The first and larger part of the book (pp. 19–115) consists of a lengthy description of the literature on the a.c.i. for English, Old English, and Latin; the second part (pp. 119–179) deals with the topic proper, but even here a large section (up to page 160) is devoted to a discussion of the literature on ergativity (e.g. work by Robert Dixon, Bernard Comrie, and others), transitivity (the well-known Hopper and Thompson [1980] article), and the notion of subject (e.g. Keenan 1987), so that only a very small amount of space is left over to deal with the core proposal of the book. As a whole in these two sections, there is too much “review” — which the author (an “iberianism” no doubt) calls “revision” — and not enough “true revision” or pertinent rearrangement of findings. To this reader, at least, it was a little tiresome to have to go through the same arguments again and again in the discussion of what traditional linguists such as Jespersen (1909–1949), Mair (1990), Huddleston (1984), and Quirk et al. (1985) had to say about the construction in Modern English, what the opinion was within the generative school, and in other theories such as Blake’s (1990) Relational Grammar, Dixon’s (1991) semantic and Langacker’s (1995) cognitive approaches, and then again what Mitchell (1985), Fischer (1989, 1992) and Traugott (1992) had to say on the Old English construction, and Bolkestein (1976) and Lakoff (1968) on the Latin construction, in many cases using the same traditional and generative theories that had already been discussed with respect to Modern English. Since the author’s aim is not to give a detailed explanation of how the construction works in any one particular language, but rather to give a cross-linguistically valid explanation for the use of the accusative case in this construction and the unity of the different a.c.i. types, it
would have been far more helpful if he had discussed the main strands in the different analyses given for these languages and the main differences between these languages.

The most important conclusion that the author draws from the first reviewing session, thus preparing the reader for the approach that he will follow in part 2, is that none of the earlier approaches is able to provide a watertight classification of the a.c.i. construction. This is perhaps not surprising considering the fact that the a.c.i. comprises a number of different types, which some linguists have lumped all together, while others have tried to separate them out. Linguists such as Visser (1963–1973: 2334ff.) who have put them all together have used purely formal and superficial criteria for this, such as the order of the matrix verb, the intervening NP, and the infinitive. Thus, any construction in English that contains the sequence $V_{\text{fin}} \ NP_{\text{oblique}} \ V_{\text{inf}}$ would fall under one heading, comprising the following English constructions:

(i) He expected him to rouse himself
(ii) ... since the first time I saw him fight
(iii) She made him fall out with all his friends
(iv) I warned him to have no further dealings with her

Criteria that can be and have been used to distinguish between these four constructions are differences in the case form of the NP (in OE this could be dative as well as accusative); possibilities of substitution, such as a *that* clause or an additional NP instead of an infinitive; possible semantic equivalence of passive and active constructions; substitution of the NP by an empty operator, such as *it*; the nature of the NP in terms of animacy, etc. In all cases it turns out, as Rivas's overview shows, that these criteria cannot consistently be associated with any one of the four types, and also that there are verbs that straddle types. In other words, it is not possible to tie the construction types to different semantic classes either. Most linguists discussed mention this problem themselves, as Rivas acknowledges; see for instance his conclusions on the work of Jespersen (p. 24), Huddleston (p. 32), Quirk et al. (pp. 36–37) (who even suggest the establishment of a gradient to account for the differences between types), Mair (p. 48) (who adds the idea of prototypes to Quirk et al.'s gradient), Fischer (p. 90), and Bolkestein (p. 108ff.), etc. It is therefore not surprising that Rivas's overall conclusion is that "all [...] classifications intending to obtain close [sic] categories with clear-cut boundaries are condemned to fail [sic]." He adds that this failure cannot be "attributed to the scholar's epistemological [sic] failure since it arises from the selfsame nature of grammatical units" and that indeed "some grammarians have recognized and assumed this fact and therefore, changed..."
their perspective of analysis, considering that the borders between categories are actually fuzzy, with many intermediate elements,” which “led [them] to speak of a categorial continuum” (p. 120). However, for Rivas, recognizing “fuzzy” boundaries and prototypes is not enough; in his opinion this above “change of perspective is only acceptable if it entails a change in the methodology and aims of the categorization task” (p. 120). This is then his aim in the next section, where he investigates how the notions of transitivity and ergativity may solve this problem. Apart from the fuzzy boundaries, there is the question of the case of the NP that Rivas wants to discuss in the second part too, and which according to him also ties in with ergativity and transitivity. This particular point has not been addressed in any depth before by any of the above-mentioned scholars in their discussion of the a.c.i.

The solution offered is as follows. The various a.c.i. types (in English and presumably in all languages in which they occur) constitute a continuous grammatical pattern with types (i) to (iv), mentioned above, ranging from least transitive (i) to most transitive (iv), using the parameters of transitivity distinguished by Hopper and Thompson (1980). Although it looks like an elegant solution to the “fuzziness” problem, the proposal is not really well worked out and many objections could be raised against it. For instance, the causation type (iii), with an animate oblique NP, is clearly more highly transitive than the construction in (iv), because type (iii) involves entailment, while (iv) doesn’t, showing that the NP in (iv) is in fact less affected than the NP in (iii). Rivas also pays no attention to the role of to before the infinitive, even though this to has semantic value (cf. Mittwoch 1990; Duffley 1992; Givón 1993: vol. 2, 6) and is probably an indicator of lower transitivity (compared to a bare infinitive, as in [iii]), as I have shown in Fischer (1996, 1997). Another problem is that Rivas concludes from the evidence of this transitivity continuum that the leftmost construction (i.e. [i]) is the oldest and that “[f]rom there, the accusative and infinitive construction is spread [sic] to perception verbs and to other contexts” (p. 164). This goes against historical and typological evidence in that construction (i) is much rarer in languages and, at least in English, diachronically much later than the other three construction types.

There are similar problems with the solution Rivas proposes for the “strange” (accusative/oblique) case of the intervening NP. He suggests that an ergative system is at work in the a.c.i. with the oblique NP functioning as the unmarked form, rather like the absolutive case in ergative languages, which functions both as “patient” in transitive clauses (object in “accusative” languages) and as “agent” (subject in accusative languages) in intransitive ones. First of all, the evidence for other ergative
features in the languages discussed that use the a.c.i. is very meager. Second, Rivas ignores the fact that the oblique NP in some of the a.c.i. types functions not only as the subject of the infinitive but also quite clearly as the (indirect) object of the matrix verb (e.g. in types [ii] and [iv]). Indeed Bolinger (1967) has suggested that even in type (i), the least transitive type, there is still a thematic relation between the matrix verb and the oblique NP, as the following examples make clear:

(1)  I believe the report to be true
    I believe the report = the report is true

(2)  ?I believe the lights to be on
    I believe the lights ≠ the lights are on

The examples show that the a.c.i. construction is well formed only if there is a semantic relation between the matrix verb and the oblique NP. In other words, it is not unlikely that the oblique case was used because in the older types of a.c.i. constructions (e.g. [ii]) the NP functioned also as an object. This is in fact the traditional explanation for the oblique case of the infinitival subject.

All in all, the results are rather disappointing. The ideas presented, although attractive in themselves, are not well worked out. The presentation of the material, too, leaves something to be desired. It is too lengthy where it could have been succinct, and too succinct where it should have been more detailed. The study also contains very many mistakes in English, as some of my quotations have shown. The text would have been much improved if a native speaker had carefully gone over it.

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Note

1. I.e. after (iv) one could add something like “but he didn’t heed her warning”, showing that the warning issued need not have any effect. With (iii), however, the ‘falling out’ is a fact, the causation has been fully effective.

References


In this Liber Amicorum some 40 authors, mostly ASL (American Sign Language) researchers, together with some European colleagues and a few from elsewhere, have contributed 28 reports on their scientific endeavors to honor two inspiring pioneers in their field. A reviewer remains somewhat at a loss what to do with a Festschrift of 580 pages that covers