

# Non-Canonical Subject Construction in Endangered Iranian Languages: Further Investigation into the Debates on the Genesis of Ergativity

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## Abstract

This paper deals with the over a century-old debate on the genesis of ergativity in the Iranian languages. Six theories have been proposed for the origin of this construction: (a) the Passive, (b) the Possessive, (c) the Raised Possessor Construction, (d) the External Possessor Construction and Non-Canonical Subject Construction, (e) neither the Possessive nor Passive Construction, and (f) via the Middle Construction. I provide examples from a number of endangered Modern Iranian languages with split agreement systems, which also contain an array of constructions with intransitive and two-place verbs but they, like transitive past tense stems, use pronominal clitics to encode a core NP as Oblique and encode the other core NP as Direct. I propose that a Non-Canonical Subject Construction with the core meaning ‘exist’ in Old Persian triggered the genesis of ergativity. After the well-attested morphological changes which resulted in the reanalysis of Old Persian perfect forms as past stems in Middle Persian, the ergativity was grammaticalized in the past tense domain. The paper proposes that the occurrence of ergativity in Middle Persian was the consequence of an analogical extension whose effect is evident in old Persian and a reanalysis whose effect is realized in Middle Persian. The availability of the rich evidence across many Modern Iranian languages justifies reconstruction of these constructions with the oblique logical subject back to older stages. The presence of the Non-Canonical Subject Construction in Proto-Indo-European and in a number of currently spoken languages globally substantiates the widespread use of this construction and that this construction outlives ergativity.

*Keywords: genesis of ergativity, non-canonical-subject constructions, Iranian languages, split agreement, dative-subject constructions, oblique subject constructions, non-nominative subject, differential subject marking, quirky subjects, non-canonical agreement, non-canonical case-marking, subject-like oblique*

## 1. Introduction

The majority of Modern Iranian languages show some degree of ergativity. Ergativity refers to a pattern in which the subject of an intransitive verb (S) and the object of a transitive verb (O) are identically marked, while the agent of a transitive verb (A) is marked differently.<sup>1</sup> The existence of such a pattern indicates an Ergative-Absolutive type language. In Iranian languages, we observe split ergativity. This means that the ergativity pattern, when it exists, is found in clauses containing verbs formed with past stems. In clauses with verbs formed from present stems, S and A are identically marked, while O is marked differently. Thus, in the present tense domain, these languages are of the Nominative-Accusative type. Relevant examples from Modern Iranian languages that show split ergativity are presented in section (3) of the paper. But as an illustration of split ergativity, consider examples (1)–(4) from Larestani, a Southwestern Modern Iranian language. In this set, S is encoded as a verbal suffix, i.e., *-en*, (examples (1) and (2)). The A argument of a transitive verb formed with a present

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<sup>1</sup> For standard descriptions of ergativity, see Comrie (1978) and Dixon (1994).

stem is also encoded on the verb by the same verbal suffix that encodes S (example (3)). In contrast, A of a past tense transitive verb is encoded by an Oblique Proclitic, i.e. *om=*, while O is encoded by means of a verbal suffix, i.e., *-en*, (example (4)). The encoding of O in (4) is the same as the encoding of S in (1) and (2).

- (1) *ænæ-iyā da-en*  
s/he-PL come- 3PL  
'They come.'
- (2) *ænæ-iyā ond-en*  
s/he-PL came-3PL  
'They came.'
- (3) *ænæ-iyā ketab-ū æ-sæ-en*  
s/he-PL book-DEF INCOMPL-buy-3PL  
'They buy the book.'
- (4) *mæ ænæ-iyā om=binæd-en*  
I s/he-PL 1SG.OBL=saw-3PL  
'I saw them.'

A well-known fact about Middle Persian, the official language of the Persian dynasties, the last one being the Sasanians, in south-western Iran (ca. 200 B.C.–651 A.D.), is that it was a split ergative language. Middle Persian is descended from Old Persian of the Achaemenid period (ca. 558–330 B.C.). Old Persian is commonly characterized as a Nominative-Accusative type language with a relatively rich inflectional morphology. An important question that has been addressed with respect to the mentioned Iranian languages is the genesis of split ergativity.

Examples (5) and (6) below from Old Persian, which I quote from Haig (2008: 25), clearly show that S and A are uniformly case-marked as Nominative and that the verb also agrees with them, while O is case-marked as Accusative.

- (5) *pasāva adam(A) kāram (O) frāišayam Bābirum* [14]  
thereupon 1SG.NOM army.ACC send.PST.1SG to-Babylon  
'Thereupon I (A) sent an army (O) to Babylon' (Kent 1953: DB 3. 84).
- (6) *adam (S) xšāyaθiya abavam* [15]  
1SG.NOM king become.PST.1SG  
'I (S) became King' (Kent 1953: XPf, 36–37)

In contrast, Middle Persian exhibits the ergative construction in the past tense domain. In this language, A is in the Oblique case (frequently an enclitic pronoun), and O is in the Direct case. The verb normally agrees with O. Example (7), which I quote from Skjærvø (2009b:228), substantiates this observation.

- (7) *guft ō awēšān ka=[š dād būd hēnd] kū mard-ēd*  
said to them when=[he. A create.PST PRET 3PL] that man-be.2PL  
'(he) said to them when he had created them: You are men' (Dk 7.1.9).

In (7), the enclitic *=š* encodes A and *hēnd* shows agreement with O. In the final clause of this example, the suffix *-ēd* encodes agreement with S.

With regard to the genesis of ergativity in the Iranian languages, six theories have been proposed: Benveniste (1952/1971), who proposed a Possessive account; Cardona (1970) and in line with that Skjærvø (1985), who advocate a Passive analysis; Bynon (2005), who suggested the Raised Possessor Construction; Haig (2008), who argues for the External Possessor Construction and Non-Canonical Subject Construction; Jügel (2010), who proposed the neither Possessive nor Passive Construction; and Jügel (2015), who claims that the Middle Construction facilitated the formation of ergativity in Iranian languages. In this paper, I first provide a review of the aforementioned literature on the origin of ergativity in Middle Persian (section 2). Second, I describe the ergativity pattern as found with past tense transitive verbs as well as in a group of intransitive and two-place verbs in selected Modern Iranian languages (section 3). My specific hypothesis is that the rich evidence from the synchronic behaviour of Modern Iranian languages with respect to agreement (and occasionally case marking) illuminates the genesis of ergativity in Middle Western Iranian. Third, I propose an analysis of the genesis of ergativity in Iranian languages. I specifically propose that a Non-Canonical Subject Construction with the general configuration *NP-Oblique NP-Direct V ('exist')*, in which the verb agrees with the NP-Direct, which was an ancient Indo-European construction still productive in Old Persian, was extended to the participial form of transitive verbs and hence triggered the emergence of ergativity in that language. Subsequently, the well-attested morphological changes that are found between Old and Middle Persian in the verbal system led to the reanalysis of the Old Persian perfect forms as past tenses. Hence, in Middle Persian, ergativity was grammaticalized in the past tense domain of transitive verbs (section 4). This observation implies that the emergence of ergativity in Iranian languages was epiphenomenal. I furthermore claim that the Non-Canonical Subject Construction was also analogically extended to a group of intransitive and two-place verbs that share the semantic feature of *stativity*. Hence, I will claim that a reanalysis (between Old and Middle Persian and more generally between Old Iranian and Middle Iranian) and an analogical extension explain the split agreement systems of a large number of Modern Western Iranian languages. Thus, I will rely on the synchronic behavior of Iranian languages to shed light on the diachronic developments of these languages. In another section, I will make use of the insights of Barðdal and Smitherman (2013), who argue for a reconstruction of “oblique subject constructions in Proto-Indo-European” (p. 28).

## 2. Review of the Previous Analyses

### 2.1. Benveniste

Benveniste (1971:153), originally published in French in 1952, writes that in 1893, Geiger talked about “the passive structure of the transitive past in the Iranian languages”. Geiger had referred to the expression repeated in (8) below in Old Persian and claimed that “the preterite” was in fact “a passive construction” (ibid).<sup>2</sup>

- (8) *ima tya manā krtam*  
 this.NOM.N.SG what.NOM.N.SG I.GEN.SG do.PST.PTCP.NOM.N.SG  
 ‘here is what I have done’, lit., ‘what by me has been done’ (DB 1.27; 4.1,49)

According to this analysis, *manā krtam* of Old Persian continued as *man kart* in Middle Persian and in Modern Persian as *man kardam*, where the affixation of the personal ending *-am* in the verb shows that the construction became “active” and “transitive” again (p. 154). Benveniste writes that it is now half a century since this theory received wide acceptance, and the description of Ancient and Modern Iranian languages are based on the passive source of the past tense transitive verbs (ibid). In his paper, Benveniste provides a completely different analysis of sentence (8).

His first point in this discussion is that the expression in (8) “... is not a ‘preterite’ but a perfect, or rather an expression that in Old Persian served to make up for the lack of the ancient perfect.” (p. 154). He then provides examples in (9), which are similar to (8), and writes:

“In this list, whether the subject is represented by a noun [= *maiṣ pissa* ‘my father’] or by a pronoun whose form is full (*manā*) or enclitic (= *maiṣ*, = *taiṣ*, = *šam*), the case form remains the same. The actor is denoted by the genitive-dative.” (Benveniste 1971: 154)

- (9) a. *utā=maiṣ vasiy astiy krtam*  
 and=1SG.GEN much is do.PST.PTCP.NOM.N.SG  
 ‘I have still done many [things]’ (DB 4. 46)
- b. *ava=išām avā naiṣ astiy krtam*  
 that=3PL.GEN.M as much not is do.PST.PTCP.NOM.N.SG  
*yaθā manā ... krtam*  
 as I.SG.GEN do.PST.PTCP.NOM.N.SG  
 ‘they have not done as much as I have done’ (DB 4.51)
- c. *tya manā krtam utā*  
 what.NOM.N.SG I.SG.GEN do.PST.PTCP.NOM.N.SG and  
*tya=maiṣ pissa krtam*  
 what.NOM.N.SG=1SG.GEN father.GEN.M.SG do.PST.PTCP.NOM.N.SG  
 ‘that which I have done and that which my father has done’ (XP a, 19–20; c, 13–14)

Benveniste asks “[b]y what criterion do we recognize that this construction is passive?” (p.154). He did not find the facts that the actor in this construction is in the genitive-dative

2 The examples that I quote from Benveniste and Cardona do not have interlinear glosses. I added the interlinear glosses based on Kent (1953). The examples from other studies I quote are presented with minor modifications in the glosses, for the sake of uniformity.

and that the verb is represented by the verbal adjective sufficient to consider the construction passive. He presents example (10) from Old Persian as the real morphological passive of this language. This passive verb is marked with the passive morpheme *-ya*, and the actor is expressed by the ablative preposition *hačā*.

- (10) *tya=šām*                      *hačā=ma*                      *aḡah-ya*  
 what.NOM.N.SG=3PL.GEN.M    from.ABL=1SG.ABL            declare.IPF-PASS  
 ‘that which by me was commanded them’ (DB 1.19–20, DN a20: XP h18)

According to Benveniste, the most notable fact in the analysis of the construction in examples (8) and (9) is the existence of a construction in which a noun or a pronoun is in the genitive-dative case and its predicate is a form of “to be”, which “serves to denote the predicate of possession” (p. 155). Examples in (11) are among those that he provides for this construction.

- (11) a. *utā=taiy*            *yāvā*            *tauhmā*            *ahatiy*  
 and=2SG.GEN as long as    strength.NOM.N.SG    be.SBJV  
 ‘and as long as you will have seed’ (DB 4.74,78)
- b. *dārayava[h]auš*    *pussā*            *aniyaičiy*            *ahantā*  
 Darius.GEN.M.SG son.NOM.M.PL other.NOM.M.PL be.3PL.IPF.MID  
 (Lit. ‘to Darius were other sons’) (XP f28)  
 ‘Darius had other sons’
- c. *avahyā*            *ka(n)būjīyahyā*            *brātā*  
 that.GEN.M.SG Cambyses.GEN.M.SG brother.NOM.M.SG  
*brdiya*            *nāma*    *āha*  
 Brdiya.NOM.M.SG name be.IPF  
 ‘this Cambyses had a brother named Brdiya’ (DB. 1.29–30)

According to Benveniste, the Old Persian perfect “... is an *active* perfect of *possessive* expression, which as early as Western Old Iranian has been realized in the periphrastic type...” (p. 156).<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2. Cardona and Skjærvø

Cardona (1970) is a return to Geiger’s analysis of the *ima tya manā krtam*, example (8), as “a passive construction”. Cardona (1970:1–2) presents example (12) and argues that, in this example, the passive verb *ayadiya* ‘was revered’, which contains the passive morpheme *-ya*, has the genitive enclitic *=šām* ‘them’ as its agent, rather than taking the preposition *hačā* ‘from’ which is found elsewhere in this passive construction.

- (12) *avaiy*                      *īvjīyā*  
 those. NOM.M.PL    Elamite.NOM.M.PL

3 Skalmowski (2004) has mentioned that “[t]he first linguist to point out the active character of this construction [*tya manā kartam*] in OP [Old Persian]... is professor J. KURYŁOWICZ [1931]” (p. 17). Skalmowski, in his discussion of this construction, which he calls the Old Persian periphrastic perfect, announces that: “The purpose of the present paper is to show that the Elamite (E.) and the Babylonian Akkadian (B.) versions accompanying most of the OP inscriptions supply strong additional arguments for the active character of the OP periphrastic perfect.” (p. 17–18)

<i>arikā</i>	<i>āha</i>	<i>utā=šam</i>
faithless.NOM.M.PL	were.IPF	and=3PL.GEN.M
<i>auramazdā</i>	<i>naiy</i>	<i>ayadi-ya</i>
Ahuramazda.NOM.M.SG	not	revered-PASS
<i>auramazdām</i>	<i>ayadaiy</i>	
Ahuramazda.ACC.M.SG	revered.1SG.MID	

‘The Elamites were faithless and Ahuramazda was not revered by them. I revered Ahuramazda.’ (DB 5.15–16)

Skjærvø (1985:217) believes “BENVENISTE’s statement that the m-k constr. [*manā kartam* construction] is a possessive construction (i.e. formally) is a meaningless statement when applied to a synchronic description of OP [Old Persian]...” for the following two reasons. First, “... *manā kartam* obviously functions as a verbal clause in OP, not a noun clause, ...” (ibid). Secondly, Benveniste’s analysis “... leaves completely out of consideration the agentless passive perfect *taya kartam* ‘what has been done’” ... where the past perfect “on no account can be a mere verbal adjective, but clearly belongs in the system of the OP finite verb”(ibid).

However, in Skjærvø (2009a), it appears that his previous position is to some extent modified. He mentions that the Old Persian past participles exist for both intransitive and transitive verbs. Skjærvø (2009a: 144) adds “when it is from a transitive verb and the agent is not expressed, it corresponds to a passive imperfect”. However,

“If an agent (noun or pronoun) is expressed, it is in the genitive-dative, and the perfect corresponds to an active imperfect. The only examples are with *karta* ‘done, made’, and the construction is formally identical with possessive constructions in which *karta* means ‘work, achievement’...” (Skjærvø 2009a: 145)

### 2.3. Bynon

Bynon (2005) describes the historical source of the ergative construction in Indo-European. She names a number of languages of the world with “a split marking system” from various language families, and points out:

“[in] all of these it is the transitive clause in the perfective aspect (or the past tense) which attracts the ergative-absolutive type of alignment while all other clauses have nominative-accusative alignment. The reverse distribution, although theoretically conceivable, is unattested in the languages of the world.” (Bynon 2005: 2)

Even though the final sentence in the above-mentioned quotation is a well-known fact in the literature on the emergence of ergativity in the Iranian languages, it still deserves particular attention in the analysis of the source of ergativity in these languages. Bynon also makes it clear that “their [namely, split marking systems] origins are in major respects still unresolved” (Bynon 2005: 3). She adds:

“Even in the Indo-Iranian family of Indo-European, which has a documented language history of some three thousand years, the issue is in fact still controversial.” (Bynon 2005: 3)



What Bynon considers uncontroversial is that “it is the ergative marking pattern which here represents the innovation” (Bynon 2005: 3). Bynon then specifies her objectives:

“The historical derivation of the ergative construction to be developed in this paper is designed to account for two essential facts hitherto unclarified, (i) the clause-initial position of the agent and (ii) the grammatical function of the source construction in early Indic and, ultimately, Proto-Indo-Iranian.” (Bynon 2005: 3)

I also consider these last two essential facts highly pertinent to the reconstruction of the source structure of the ergativity pattern in the Iranian languages.

Bynon is of the opinion that “[t]he immediate ancestors of the present-day ergative construction of the Indic and Iranian languages are readily identifiable” (2005: 6). The Old Persian construction that she cites as the immediate ancestor of the present-day ergative construction in Iranian languages is given in example (8). Bynon mentions that this construction has the following grammatical characteristics:

- (i) “the verb [i.e., *krtam*] is in the form of the past participle functioning as a finite verb”
- (ii) “the patient [i.e., *tya*] is in the unmarked nominative case”
- (iii) “the agent [i.e., *manā*] is oblique-marked”, more specifically, it is “genitive”
- (iv) “the construction would initially have had the status of a perfect (with current relevance at the time of speaking) and, like many perfects elsewhere, would subsequently have become a past tense” (Bynon 2005: 6–7).

The four characteristics listed above are realized in the constituents, which have formed a construction with the linear order of NP-Direct NP-Oblique Verb (see *tya manā krtam* in example (8)). In that Old Persian construction, the verb agrees with the NP-Direct. Bynon argues that this construction and its Sanskrit counterpart were already an ergative clause. In this ergative clause, the “morphological subject properties are with the morphologically unmarked patient”, namely, the NP-Direct in the above-mentioned construction, “whereas discourse-syntactic criter[i]a identify the agent as the subject”, namely, the NP-Oblique in that construction (Bynon 2005: 14–15). Bynon makes it clear that:

“From the perspective of the historical grammar of Indo-Iranian, however, it is to be noted that this particular ergative clause structure lacks direct counterparts in both the earliest Old Indic ... and Old Iranian ...” (Bynon 2005: 15)

Therefore, the analysis of example (8) would be that *tya* is the morphological subject, whereas *manā* is the discourse-syntactic subject. As Bynon has pointed out:

“Benveniste’s strongest argument in favour of his ‘Possessive’ analysis is the existence of a structural parallelism between transitive perfects and possessive predications found in quite a number of languages.” (Bynon 2005: 37)

It is needless to mention that example (8) represents the transitive perfect construction and that example (11b) is one representative of the possessive predication construction. In both of these examples, the following structural parallelisms hold: (a) There is one NP-Oblique actant (namely *manā* and *dārayava[h]auš*, respectively, which are genitive), (b) one NP-Di-

rect actant (that is to say, *tya* and *pussā aniyaičiy*, respectively, which are nominative), and (c) the verb agrees with the NP-Direct actant. In contrast, Bynon proposes an “alternative analysis ... which treats the genitive agent [i.e., *manā* in example (8)] as a raised adnominal possessor” (Bynon 2005: 39–40). Bynon uses the phrase “pre-ergative construction” (p. 25, 42, 43, 45, 64, and 66) to refer to any raised adnominal possessor construction, whether it contains an intransitive non-action verb (e.g., examples (11a–c) or a transitive action verb (e.g., examples (8) and (9a–c)). Thus, a raised adnominal possessor construction is a construction whose “two noun phrases form a possessive relationship. The genitive phrase (or clitic) can accordingly be interpreted as a raised possessor and an extra actant of the verb” (Bynon 2005: 58).

Finally, Bynon summarizes her “admittedly speculative sequence of events” that led to the emergence of ergativity in Indo-Iranian (p. 63). In her words,

“the pre-ergative construction is likely to have originated with non-agentive intransitive (un-accusative and ergative [in the generative linguistics terminology]) verbs. It would then have spread to transitive verbs through the intermediary of ergatives such as ‘break’, which could enter both intransitive-spontaneous and transitive-causative constructions, [namely, ambitransitive verbs] the latter allowing the possessor to be identified with the transitive agent.” (Bynon 2005: 66)

#### 2.4. Haig

Haig (2008) reassesses the *ima tyā manā kartam* construction. In his detailed investigation of this construction, he relies on four parameters. One of them is “the syntactic status of the Agent-Phrase” (p. 45). He argues that

“If the A [i.e., Agent-Phrase] can be shown to be a peripheral element, to which no syntactic rules make reference, then we would have strengthened the case for treating the m k. construction as a passive. If, on the other hand, it can be demonstrated that the Agent-Phrase possesses at least some properties of a core argument, then the passive interpretation is weakened.” (Haig 2008: 45)

The syntactic rule that he examines is “the cliticization process”, in which these clitics are attached “to the first word of the clause of which they are syntactically constituents, regardless of the syntactic category of that word (i.e., a Wackernagel position)” (p. 46). Haig’s examples of the “Genitive Clitics” are quoted in (13) and (14), and one of his examples of the “Accusative Clitic Pronouns” is presented in (15) (p. 27,47).

(13) *utā=maiy aniyasčiy vasiy astiy kartam* [18]  
and=1SG.GEN much else COP.PRS.3SG do.PTCP  
‘and much else was done **by me**’ (Kent 1953: DB 4. 46)

(14) *aita=maiy Auramazdā dadātuv* [31]  
this=1SG.GEN Ahuramazda may. give  
‘may Ahuramazda give this to me’ (Kent 1953: DNa, 53–55, cf. also DPd, 23–24; DPh, 8; DNa, 50–51, 54–55)

(15) *kāra hya Aθuriya hau=dīm abara yātā Bābirauv* [33]  
people which Assyrian DEM=3SG.ACC brought to Babylon  
‘the Assyrian people – they brought it to Babylon’ (Kent 1953: DSf, 32–33)



Haig's remarks on the placement of the Accusative Clitic in the last example are quite interesting.

“The last example shows that cliticization is sensitive to syntax rather than pragmatics: The phrase *kāra hya Aθuriya* is a fronted topic, external to the clause, and is thus not treated as a first constituent for the purposes of cliticization. The Accusative Clitic attaches to the first grammatical constituent of the clause, the subject pronoun *hau ...*” (Haig 2008: 47)

On the basis of the insightful observations that the pronoun *manā* in example (8), which is a m.k. construction, has the clitic counterpart =*mai*y in example (13), which is the same as (9) a, and that the host for this clitic is the first syntactic constituent of the sentence, Haig suggests that the aforementioned pronoun or its clitic form are core syntactic arguments in these examples. In contrast, in examples (14) and (15), which contain transitive verbs, the Genitive Clitic in the first example and the Accusative Clitic pronoun in the latter constitute core arguments, which are also attached to the first syntactic constituent of the sentence. Thus, Haig has identified a well-defined syntactic rule, namely, the cliticization rule, which, as illustrated in the preceding examples, is restricted to Accusative and Genitive pronouns. Haig, at this point, reminds the reader about one of the most prominent properties of a prototypical Agent-Phrase. He quotes Comrie (1988: 16), who proposed that “few if any syntactic rules refer to the A (agent phrase)” (Haig, p. 47). Haig concludes:

“This constitutes one piece of evidence in favour of considering the Genitive a structural rather than a semantic case, and hence against considering the A of the m.k. construction to be an Agent-Phrase of a prototypical passive.” (Haig 2008: 47)

Haig also relies on a semantic and pragmatic parameter to further substantiate his aforementioned conclusion. In his words:

“It is remarkable that in all the attested m.k. constructions, the Agent-Phrase is maximally topical and animate: either a personal pronoun, most commonly first person singular *manā* (or clitic =*mai*y), or third person plural (clitic =*šam*, referring to humans), or (in one example) a kinship term ‘my father’. This distribution of animacy and topicality is precisely what one would expect of the A of an **active transitive construction**. It is precisely what one would not expect of the Agent phrase of a passive construction.” (Haig 2008: 51, original emphasis)

Haig believes that the *manā kartam* construction is an extension of an External Possessor Construction. He then quotes Haspelmath (1999: 109), who has proposed that an External Possessor Construction involves a possessive modifier that “does not occur as a dependent constituent of the modified NP, but NP-externally as a constituent of the clause” (quoted in Haig 2008: 61).

Haig's analysis of the m.k. construction and his stance on the genesis of the ergative construction in Iranian languages are cited below:

“[...] I have presented the justification for abandoning the theory that ergativity in Iranian arose from an agented-passive construction. I have also developed an alternative, according to which the m.k. construction is an extension of an External Possessor Construction [EPC], already present in Old Iranian, from which the m.k. construction inherited crucial structural

features. In particular, the semantic, pragmatic and syntactic constellation associated with possessors in EPCs coincide with those associated with Agenthood, thus easing the shift from EPC to m.k. construction, and ultimately an ergative construction.” (Haig 2008: 82)

According to Haig, the m.k. construction gradually compensated

“for the loss of the finite tense forms, until it became the sole available means of expressing past transitive propositions throughout [the Middle] Iranian. The mechanism involved in this process is thus primarily one of extension, driven ultimately by changes in verbal morphology, rather than syntactic reanalysis of the construction itself.” (Haig 2008: 85–86)

In his concluding remarks, Haig reiterates and to some degree clarifies further his position on “the emergence of ergativity in Iranian”. He says:

“I believe that deeper insights into the Iranian developments can be gained through the literature on External Possessors, and on non-canonical subjects.” (Haig 2008: 87)

He adds:

“In a sense, the story of the emergence of ergativity in Iranian can be seen as the extension of non-canonical subjects to a specific, morphologically-defined environment: the past tense of transitive verbs. In other languages which have non-canonical subjects, they are generally restricted to a semantically-defined group of predicates, in particular psych-verbs or verbs of possession. The shift to the past transitive environment in Iranian was, as I have argued, largely motivated by highly specific developments in the verbal morphology, which were largely restricted to the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European and are therefore rare elsewhere.” (Haig 2008: 87)

Haig terminates his analysis by providing examples from *Badīnānī*, which belongs to the Northern group of Kurdish, and has “existential predicates” with “a fronted oblique, yielding an External Possessor Construction” (Haig 2008: 258). These examples, which are adopted from MacKenzie (1961, 1962), are quoted in (16) and (17) below:

- (16) *naqlakē hākīm-ak-ī sē kuṛ ha-bō-n.* [258]  
 at. a. time prince-INDF.SG-OBL three son existent-COP.PST-PL  
 ‘Once a prince had three sons’ (lit. once to-a-prince three sons existed)  
 (MacKenzie 1962: 320)
- (17) *ta qalam ha-ya?* [259]  
 2SG.OBL pen existent-be.PRS.3SG  
 ‘Have you got a pen?’ (lit. to-you is there a pen?) (MacKenzie 1961: 191)

It should be stressed that the arguments in the Direct case, i.e. *sē kuṛ* and *qalam*, govern agreement suffixes on the predicates.

Lastly, Haig presents examples from other verbs which contain fronted obliques. As an illustration of this observation, he says: “*Badīnānī* has a verb *vyān*, which is intransitive and basically means ‘be necessary, be desirable’. It is regularly used with a fronted Oblique ‘Needer/Wanter’ and a Direct ‘Needed/Wanted’ ...” (p. 260). Example (18) supports his observation. Here, “the needed entity ... governs agreement on the verb” (p. 261).