1. INTRODUCTION

An antipassive construction is the mirror image of passive, with salient properties in (1) from Dixon (1994):

1) a. It applies to an underlying transitive clause and forms intransitive

   b. The underlying Agent becomes the subject by being Case-marked Absolutive

   c. The underlying Object is demoted, being marked by non-core Case/P or omitted

   d. There is always some explicit formal marking of antipassive, as for passive.

An illustration is given in (2), from Inuktitut. (2a) is a transitive sentence, (2b) an antipassive (data from Bittner and Hale 1996a).

2) a. Junna-p Anna kunip-p-a-a
    Juuna-ERG Anna kiss-IND-[+tr]-3sg.3sg
    ‘Juuna kissed Anna.’

   b. Junna(Anna-mik) kunis-si-v-u-q
    Juuna(Anna-INS) kiss-AP-[-tr]-3sg
    ‘Juuna kisses/is kissing (Anna).’

Antipassive is standardly viewed as a trademark of ergative languages (Bittner and Hale 1996a). Well-studied Nominative languages such as English or French lack it entirely\(^1\). This raises a non-trivial issue barely discussed in the literature: what is in ergative languages that attracts antipassive?

I have argued elsewhere that ergativity is an epiphenomenon derivable from (3):

\(^1\) University of Toronto
3) **The Ergativity Parameter** (Ndayiragije 2000)

T and v are devoid of Structural Case features in pure ergative languages.

The proposal was risky five years ago, and remains so in some circles, but with no warrant, in my opinion. Under (3), Ergative Case is a $\theta$-related lexical Case assigned to the external argument (Agent) in-situ, i.e. in [Spec, vP]; while Absolutive Case is a default Case valued by the object in a functional projection located in between TP and vP that I dubbed “Focus” Phrase; yet nothing in the proposal hinges on that label. What is new with the proposal is rather the idea that Absolutive Case is not a feature of T or v, contrary to the standard view (see most of the papers in this volume, among others).

Empirical evidence supporting (3) were drawn from striking syntactic similarities (such as wh-extraction restrictions, Case-marking alternations, binding, Control, etc.) found in Dyirbal, a syntactically ergative language, and Malagasy, a language I take to be probably the best example of a pure ergative language, in accord with (3). I will not review those arguments here; see Paul and Travis (this volume) for a discussion of some, with an opposite stand on the ergative nature of Malagasy, a view I respectfully disagree with.

In this paper, I intend to convince the reader to buy (3), by taking a look at antipassive, a construction commonly viewed as a species property of ergative languages. In my opinion, such a seemingly privileged status might be one of the clues towards understanding the real nature of ergativity.

To do so, I will first show that antipassive is not an exclusive seal of ergative languages. It is found in nominative languages such as Kirundi, a Bantu language spoken in Burundi. Interestingly enough, Kirundi antipassive occurs in a configuration where v lacks Case feature, a welcome result in support of (part of) (3). Relevant facts are presented in the following section.

2. **ANTIPASSIVE IN NOMINATIVE LANGUAGES**

2.1 *Dixon’s (1994) Footnote 7*

Let us start with the following discovery by Crowley (1981), as quoted in Dixon (1994):

“[..] in the Australian language Anguthimiri (Crowley 1981), the verbal derivational suffix -pri can signal an antipassive or a reciprocal (there is a different affix -thi, for reflexive).” (p.147)

As we will see shortly, a quite similar morphological strategy is at work in Kirundi reciprocals, which strongly suggests that 2.2. holds.

2.2 *Kirundi reciprocals are antipassive*

Consider first sentences (4a-b) from Chichewa, a well-known Bantu language. (4a) is a transitive sentence, (4b) a reciprocal one. In (4b), the suffix an is added to the