**ERGATIVITY: AN OVERVIEW**

Maria Polinsky  
Harvard University  
*polinsky@fas.harvard.edu*

Outline of the lecture:  
- Ergativity as a phenomenon  
- Split ergativity  
- Morphological ergativity  
- Syntactic ergativity  
- Deriving ergativity  
- (Diachronic origins of ergativity; acquisition of ergativity)

1 **Phenomenon of ergativity**

1.1 **Starting point**  
early work: Comrie 1978, Dixon 1979, 1994  
basic primitives: S, A, P (O)  
types of alignment in feature X

1.2 **Case systems: some illustrations**

(1)  
a. **arengke-le** aye-nhe ke-ke  
dog-A me-obj bite-PAST  
`The dog bit me.'

b. **athe** **arengke-nhe** we-ke  
me:A dog-Ơ strike-PAST  
`I hit the dog.'

c. **arengke-o** nterre-ke  
dog-S run-PAST  
`The dog ran.'

(2)  
a. rex milit-em laudavit  
soldier.NOM king-ACC praised  
*Latin*

b. milis reg-em laudavit  
soldier.NOM king-ACC praised  
c. milis rex vincit

(3)  
a. putn-s lidoja  
bird-NOM fly-PAST.3S  
`The/A bird was flying.'

b. běrn-s žımê putn-i  
child-NOM draw.PRES.3S bird-ACC  
`The/A child is drawing a bird.'

(4)  
a. ṗl?og- ön ret-g?e  
man-ABS arrive-AOR.3SG  
*Chukchi* (Paleo-Siberian)

b. ṗl?og-e keyη-ǫn təm-nen  
man-ERG bear-ABS kill-AOR.3SG:3SG

c. ṗl?og- ön keyη-e təm-nen  
man-ABS bear-ERG kill-AOR.3SG:3SG

(5)  
a. pšaše-r kәewә-κ  
girl-ABS cry-PAST  
*Adyghe* (NW Caucasian)

b. he-m pšaše-r ә-λ,әκә-κ  
dog-ERG girl-ABS 3SG-see-PAST

`The girl cried.'

b. he-m pšaše-r ә-λ,әкә-κ  
dog-ERG girl-ABS 3SG-see-PAST

`The girl cried.'

b. he-m pšaše-r ә-λ,әκә-κ  
dog-ERG girl-ABS 3SG-see-PAST

`The dog saw the girl.'

the "unmarked" case?  

- accusative system: NOM  
  *but:* Baltic languages, Diegueño, Aymara, Oromo, Igbo, Maricopa  
- ergative system: ABS  
  *but:* Chukchi, NW Caucasian languages, Nias (absolutive formed by affixation on the ergative)

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Case System</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adyghe</td>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>pšaše-r kәewә-κ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin</td>
<td>NOM</td>
<td>rex milit-em laudavit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chukchi</td>
<td>ERG</td>
<td>ṗl?og- ön ret-g?e</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

does the variation in case systems reflect deeper differences in grammatical structure?  

are the surface cases observed here uniform or do they mask different abstract cases?
alignment in agreement

(6) Criteria:
   a. agreement triggers (subject/object, A, S, P; ergative/absolutive)
   b. agreement exponents (prefix, suffix, circumfix)

(7) Subtypes of ergative alignment in agreement
   a. agreement with the absolutive only
   b. agreement with the ergative only
   c. agreement with both

(8) a. Juma a-li-ik-a mapema
    Swahili
    Juma SUBJ.CLASSI-PAST-arrive-INDIC early (Niger-Congo)
    ‘Juma arrived early.’
   b. Juma a-na-m-pend-a Mariam
    J SUBJ.CLASSI-PRES-OBJ.CLASSI-like-INDIC M
    ‘Juma likes Mariam.’
   c. watoto wa-na-m-pend-a Mariam
    children SUBJ.CLASSII-PRES-OBJ.CLASSI-like-INDICM
    ‘The children like Mariam.’
   d. Juma a-na-wa-pend-a watoto
    J SUBJ.CLASSI-PRES-OBJ.CLASSII-like-INDIC children
    ‘Juma likes the children.’

(9) a. na-peppe’-i Amir asung-ku
    Konjo
    3SG-hit-3SG Amir dog-my (Austronesian)
    ‘Amir hit my dog.’
   b. alampa’-i Amir
    go-3SG Amir
    ‘Amir went.’
   c. alampa’-i asung-ku
    go-3SG dog-my
    ‘My dog went.’
   d. ku-peppe’-i pro Amir
    1SG-hit-3SG Amir
    ‘I hit Amir.’
   e. na-peppe’-ku Amir aku
    3SG-hit-1SG Amir 1SG
    ‘Amir hit me.’

(10) San Miguel Chimalapa Zoque; no number distinction (Johnson 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case marking</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Numbers (WALS, maps 98-100; N=190)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>Avar, Tongan, Aleut, Siberian Yupik</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>accusative</td>
<td>Dargi, Kashmiri, Gujarati (past tense only), Chukchi, Itelmen, Warlpiri</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accusative</td>
<td>accusative</td>
<td>Greek, Russian, Finnish</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accusative</td>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>Unattested/impossible (Corbett 2006: 58)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is ACC case-marking/ERG agreement unattested?

(12) alignment in French causatives (see also Bobaljik and Branigan 2006)

a. Luc a fait travailler les étudiants
   L has made work.INF [the students].ACC
   ‘Luc made the students work.’
b. Luc a fait lire un livre aux étudiants
   L has made read.INF [a book].ACC [the students].DAT
   ‘Luc made the students read a book.’
c. Luc les/*leur a fait travailler
   L them.ACC/*DAT has made work.INF
   ‘Luc made them work.’
d. Luc leur/*les a fait lire un livre
established alignment patterns can be found in different grammatical phenomena and are not exclusive to morphological case marking

2 Split ergativity

main types of splits: person, TMA, split intransitivity

2.1 Person split

Main generalization: no split systems with the ergative alignment on pronouns vs. accusative alignment on nominals

Dyaabugay (Pama-Nyungan family, Australia); mang- ‘ridicule, laugh at’; no agreement (Hale 1976; Patz 1991)

(13) yaburu-nggu warruwarru mangarril
    girl-ERG boy.ABS laugh
    ‘The girl ridicules the boy.’

(14) yaburu warruwarru-nggu mangarril
    girl.ABS boy-ERG laugh
    ‘The boy ridicules the girl.’

(15) nyurra nganydji-ny mangarril
    2SG.?? 1PL -?? laugh
    ‘You ridicule us.’

(16) nganydji nyurra-ny mangarril
    1PL  2SG laugh
    ‘We ridicule you.’

so far, standard person-based split:
pronouns:
nominals:

(17) nyurra warruwarru mangarril

2SG boy laugh
‘You ridicule the boy.’

(18) a. yaburu nganydji-nda manggang
    girl we laughs
    ‘The girl ridicules us.’

b. *yaburu-nggu nganydji(-ny) mangarril

c. *yaburu-nggu nganydji(-ny) manggang

(19) warruwarru nyurranda manggang
    boy 2sg laugh
    ‘The boy ridicules you.’

(20) yaburu manggang
    girl laughs
    ‘The girl laughs.’

(21) nganydji manggang
    we laugh
    ‘We laugh.’

(22) Dyaabugay case alignment (referentially distinct arguments)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P = NP</th>
<th>P = pronoun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A = NP</td>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A = pronoun</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>Accusative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(23) Generalized animacy hierarchy:
1/2 > 3sg > 3 pl > proper names > human names > animates > natural forces > inanimates

2.2 TMA split

Main generalization: no split systems with the ergative alignment on non-past/imperfective/irrealis vs. accusative alignment on past/perfective/indicative
Hindi: contrastive/ergative in perfective/aorist, accusative otherwise
(24) a. laRkaa kal aay-aa Hindi
    boy yesterday come.AOR-SG.M
b. laRKe ne larkii ko dekh-aa
    boy ERG girl ACC/DAT see.AOR-SG.M ‘The boy saw the girl.’

How common is this split?
(25) a. morphologically ergative languages without TMA split: Araona, Burushaski, Chukchi, Dani (Lower Grand Valley), Gooniyandi, Itelmen, West Greenlandic, most NE Caucasian; all NW Caucasian, Ngiyambaa, Sanuma, Suen, Tukang Besi
b. morphologically ergative with the opposite split (imperfective ~ ergative): UNATTTESTED

can person and TMA splits be predicted?
can splits receive a principled synchronic explanation? (see Kiparsky 2004, Anderson 2004, for diachronic explanations); how can (22b) be ruled out?

2.3 Split intransitivity (narrowly defined)
(26) a. as wit’a-s Batsbi
    1SG.ERG go-1SG
    ‘I am going.’ UNERGATIVE?
b. so dožal
    1SG.ABS fall
    ‘I am falling.’ UNACCUSATIVE?
(27) a. as kottla-s
    1SG.ERG worry-1SG
    ‘I am worrying.’ UNERGATIVE?
b. so kottol
    1SG.ABS worry
    ‘I am worried.’ UNACCUSATIVE?

Holisky (1987): about 30 one-place verbs that require an absolutive DP, and about 70 that require an ergative DP

3 Morphological ergativity

Why is it morphological?

3.1 Ergativity and phrase structure
- Binding, complex reflexive (different from se stesso)
(28) a. kid-bā nelā že žek’-si Tsez
girl-ERG self.ABS hit-PAST.EVIDENTIAL (NE Caucasian)
    ‘The girl hit herself.’
b. nelā že kid-bā žek’-si
    self.ABS girl-ERG hit-PAST.EVIDENTIAL
    c. *kid nelā že/nelā nelā žek’-si
        self.ABS girl.ABS/ERG hit
    d. *nelā že/nelā nelā kid žek’-si
        self.ABS/ERG girl.ABS hit
(29) a. kid-ber nelā že yeti-xosi yol
    girl-DAT self.ABS like-PRES.PART be.PRES
    ‘The girl likes herself.’
b. kid nelā nel-er yeti-xosi yol
    girl.ABS self.DAT like-PRES.PART be.PRES
    ‘The girl likes herself.’

Binding, simple reflexive
(30) a. šuru učo šurčo’nu Tabassaran
daughter.ERG self.ABS beat
    ‘The daughter beat herself up.’
b. učo šuru šurčo’nu
    self.ABS daughter.ERG beat
    ‘The daughter beat herself up.’
c. *čav riš šurčo’nu
    self.ERG daughter.ABS beat
    d. *riš čav šurc’nu
        daughter.ABS self.ERG beat
(31) a. Na’e tafitafi’i pē ‘e Mele(‘a) ia3 Tongan
    PAST groom REFL ERG Mary ABS 3SG (Austronesian)
    ‘Mary groomed herself.’
b. Na’e tafitafi’i pē ‘a ia3 ‘e Mele,
PAST groom REFL ABS 3SG ERG Mary
    ‘Mary groomed herself.’
c. *Na’e tafitahi pē ‘e ia, (*a) Mele, ‘e ia

d. *Na’e tafitahi pē (*a) Mele, ‘e ia

- Control
(32) a. miiqqat-up Juuna iku-p-a-a West
  children-ERG J.ABS help-INDIC-TRANS-3SG Greenlandic
  ‘The children helped Juuna.’

  b. miiqqat [miiqqat-up Juuna iku-ssa-lu-gu]
  children.abs children-ERG J.ABS help-FUT-INF-3SG
  niriusuippit
  promised
  ‘The children promised to help Juuna.’

- Imperative/hortative addresssee
(33) a. tagi-Ø Siberian
  come-IMPER
  ‘Come to visit!’

  b. aglati-nga-Ø Yupik
  lead-1SG.OBJ-IMPER
  ‘Lead me!’
  (*‘Let me lead you’)

- Coreference across clause
(34) a. ṣononag-Ø wi-gi
  old_man-ABS descend-AOR.3SG Chukchi
  ‘The old man came down.’

  b. ṣononag-e neneno winren-nin
  old_man-ERG child.ABS help-AOR.3SG.3SG
  ‘The old man helped the child.’

  c. ṣononag-Ø wi-gi ṣonqam pro neneno
  old_man-ABS descend-AOR.3SG and child.ABS
  winren-nin
  help-AOR.3SG.3SG
  ‘The old man came down and helped the child.’
  *‘The old man came down and the child helped him.’

  d. ṣononag-e neneno winren-nin ṣonqam pro retg-i
  old_man-ERG child.ABS help-AOR.3SG.3SG and
  ‘The old man helped the child and left.’
  *‘The old man helped the child and the child left.’

Evidence against VP-coordination: adverbial co-occurrence and placement, use of two finite forms, nominalization

- Raising
straightforward cases
(35) a. ne kamata ke uku hifo e tama
  Niuean
  PAST begin SUBJUNCTIVE dive down ABS child
  ‘The child began to dive down.’

  b. ne kamata e tama [ke uku hifo t]
  PAST begin ABS child SUBJ dive down
  ‘The child began to dive down.’

(36) a. ne kamata ke hala he tama e akau
  PAST begin SUBJ chop ERG child ABS tree
  ‘The child began to chop the tree.’ (Seiter 1983: 320-1)

- Passive
(37) a. Piitaat-up Maali kunik-t-aa Inuit
  P-ERG M.ABS kiss-PRES-IND.3SG.3SG
  ‘Peter kissess Molly.’

  b. Maali Piitaat-mit kunik-ta-u-vuq
  M.ABS P-ABLATIVE kiss-PASS-AUX-IND.3SG
  ‘Molly was kissed by Peter.’ (Bok-Bennema 1991)


- pro-drop licensing: absolutive intransitive and ergative (Chukchi, Tsez, Basque, Eskimo-Aleut), all arguments (Tongan, Samoan)

- nominalizations—just like in English (Tongan—Hendrick 2004, Chukchi)

The ergative DP asymmetrically c-commands the absolutive DP; morphological ergativity does not show any syntactic effects
3.2 Morphological ergativity and antipassive

(38) Morphological ergativity and antipassive

(39) a. ?aaček-a kimitʔ-øn ne-nlʔetet-øn Chukchi
  youth-ERG load-ABS 3PL.SUBJ-carry-AOR.3SG.OBJ
  ‘The young men carried away the/a load.’

b. ?aaček-øt ine-nlʔetet-gʔe-t kimitʔ-e
  youth-ABS ANTI-carry-AOR.3SG.SUBJ-PL load-INSTR
  ‘The young men carried away the/a load.’

(40) Deriving the antipassive

a. base-generation (Chung 1998); antipassives are provided in the lexicon
b. abstract nominal incorporation saturating the internal argument position, with the logical object adjoined (Baker 1988; Basilico 2006)
c. logical object remains low in the VP and does not participate in case checking (Bobaljik and Branigan 2006)
d. additional aspectual projection licensing the non-absolutive/non-accusative object, which is structurally equivalent to the regular object (Alexiadou 1999, Borer 2005)

(41) a. incorporation-style derivation (40b)

(42) Antipassive correlations:

a. antipassive ~ imperfective
b. antipassive ~ ergative case-marking
**Table 1. The antipassive construction and case marking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCUSATIVE</th>
<th>ERGATIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acoma, Cahuilla, Canela-Krahö, Chamorro, Choctaw, Comanche, Cree, Kiowa, Koyraboro Senni, Kongo, Lungo, Lavukaleve, Nez Perce, Ojibwa, Paiwan, Sanuma, Thompson</td>
<td>Arichi, Bezhta, Cakchiquel, Central Yupik, Chechen, Chukchi, Copainalä Zoque, Diyarı, Djaru, Dyirbal, Embaloh, Godoberi, Gooniyandi, Halkomelem, Hunzib, Jakalte, Kabardian, Kapampangan, Lai, Lak, Mam, Mangarrayi, Pari, Tsez, Tzutujil, Wardaman, Warrungu, West Greenlandic, Yidiny, Yukulta,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Polinsky 2005 [WALS: ch. 108])

4 **Syntactic ergativity**

4.1 **Syntactic ergativity in A-bar phenomena**

main generalization: the absolutive is the only DP that undergoes A’-movement

- **relativization**

(43) a. **Chukchi**

\[ \text{old\_man-ABS \ descend\text{-}AOR.3SG} \]

‘The old man came down.’

b. \[ \text{old\_man-ABS \ descend\text{-}PART-ABS} \]

‘the old man that came down’

(44) a. \[ \text{old\_man-ERG \ carry\text{-}AOR.3SG.3SG} \]

‘The old man carried away the load.’

b. \[ \text{old\_man-ERG \ carry\text{-}PART-ABS} \]

‘the load that the old man/someone carried’


A-bar phenomena are sensitive to the ergative/absolutive distinction

i. any ABS and only ABS can undergo extraction (Chukchi)

ii. only subject ABS can undergo extraction (Mayan, Austronesian)

4.2 **More unusual cases: coreference across clauses and control**

Austronesian and Mayan control; Dyirbal; Tongan

- **topicalization**

(45) a. \[ \text{old\_man-ABS \ anti\text{-}carry\text{-}AOR.3SG \ load\text{-}INSTR} \]

‘The old man carried away the load.’

b. \[ \text{load\text{-}INSTR \ anti\text{-}carry\text{-}PART-ABS \ old\_man-ABS} \]

‘the old man that carried the load’
• Control in Mayan and Austronesian: in some Mayan and Austronesian languages, control is possible only into intransitive clauses (Aldridge 2004, 2005)

(47) a. m-n-osa  [m-ari patis taihoku PRO]  Seediq
    INTR-PERF-go INTR-buy book Taipei
    ka  Ape
    ‘Ape went to buy books in Taipei.’
  b. *m-n-osa  [burig-un taihoku (ka) patis PRO]
    INTR-PERF-go buy-TRANS Taipei ABS book
    ka  Ape
    ‘Ape went to buy books in Taipei.’
  c. *m-n-osa  [burig-un taihoku (ka) patis PRO]
    INTR-PERF-go buy-cheef Taipei ABS book
    ka  Ape
    ‘Ape went to buy books in Taipei.’

• Dyirbal coreference (Dixon 1972, 1994)

(48) a. bayi yaŋa  bani-n’u
    DEM.ABS man.ABS come-TENSE
    ‘The man came here.’
  b. balan  d’yngumbil bangul yaŋ-ŋu balga-n
    DEM.ABS woman.ABS DEM.ERG hit-TENSE
    ‘The man hit the woman.’
  c. bayi  yaŋa  bængun  d’yngumbi-ŋu balga-n
    DEM.ABS man.ABS DEM.ERG hit-TENSE
    ‘The woman hit the man.’

(49) a. bayi  yaŋa  bæni-n’u, bængun  d’yngumbi-ŋu
    DEM.ABS man.ABS come-TENSE DEM.ERG woman-ERG
    balga-n
    hit-TENSE
    ‘The man came here and the woman hit him/*hit the woman.’
  b. bayi  yaŋa, banin’u, pro, bængun  d’yngumbi-ŋu balgan

• Dyirbal control?

(50) a. nguna  banaŋ-ŋu
    DEM.ABS man.ABS
    d’yngumbi-ŋu balga-n
    DEM.ERG
    hit-TENSE
    ‘The woman hit the man and he/*she came here.’
  b. nguna  banaŋ-ŋu
    DEM.ABS man.ABS
    d’yngumbi-ŋu balga-n
    DEM.ERG
    hit
    ‘The man hit the woman.’

• Tongan coreference (Otsuka 2000)

(51) a. bayi  yaŋa  bængun  d’yngumbi-ŋu balga-n
    DEM.ABS man.ABS DEM.ERG woman-ERG
    hit-TENSE
    ‘The man came here and the woman hit him/*hit the woman.’
  b. nguna  banaŋ-ŋu
    DEM.ABS man.ABS
    d’yngumbi-ŋu balga-n
    DEM.ERG
    hit
    ‘The man hit the woman.’

Alternative explanations?

ii. Center embedding, not coordination: accounts for “coordination” but not for control

iii. Ergative = passive, antipassive = active; accounts for all the data

• Beyond A-bar movement, the range of syntactic ergativity is not entirely clear, and alternative explanations need to be explored
5 Deriving ergativity

5.1 Ergative: structural or inherent case?

Woolford (2006): “regular” inherent case

(53) Case
\[ \text{structural} \quad \text{inherent (~ non-structural)} \]
\[ \text{lexical} \quad \text{inherent (proper)} \]

(54) Difference in licensing conditions:
- a. lexical case is licensed by lexical heads only
- b. inherent case is licensed by light v heads only; ergative is analogous to dative

(55) Non-structural case diagnostics:
- a. case preservation on the subject of tensed clause (but see Bittner and Hale 1996)
- b. use of nominative on the object (but see Legate 2006 on the heterogeneity of the absolutive)
- d. selection by specific lexical items (Woolford dispenses with this criterion via the disjunctive definition)
- e. case preservation under A-movement; competition between inherent and structural cases

Arguments against the inherent case analysis
- Cited instances of case preservation under A-movement are questionable
- Case-stacking

Crucial example: Tongan lava ‘be able to’ (Woolford 2006)

(56) a. ‘e lava ‘o ako ‘e Pita
\[ \text{TENSE be able COMP learn ERG P} \]
\[ \text{ABS DEF language Tongan} \]
‘Peter can t the Tongan language.’

b. ‘e lava ‘e Pita ‘o ako
\[ \text{TENSE be able ERG P COMP learn} \]
\[ \text{ABS DEF language Tongâ} \]
‘Peter can learn the Tongan language.’ (Chung 1978; Hendrick 2004, Woolford 2006)

(57) a. ‘e lava \(\text{expl} \) [‘o faiako’i ‘e Pita
\[ \text{TNS be able COMP teach ERG P} \]
\[ \text{ABS DEF language Tongan} \]
‘It is possible that Peter will teach Tongan.’

b. ‘e lava ‘a Pita, [‘o faiako’i \(t_l\)
\[ \text{TNS be able ABS P COMP teach} \]
\[ \text{ABS DEF language Tongan} \]
‘Peter is able to teach Tongan.’

(58) evidence for structural differences between (57b) and (57c):
- a. restructuring and/or serialization is otherwise attested in Tongan (Otsuka 2000)
- b. wh-in-situ possible for both DPs in (57c) but not for the absolutive DP in (57b)
- c. two separate negations in (57b), but only single negation in (57c)
- d. the embedded complement in the raising construction can be fronted, the “embedded” portion in (57c) cannot
- e. if a different complementizer is used, raising is possible, but only

case preservation: Tongan, Hindi, Basque
with the absolutive DP upstairs; the “raised ergative” is impossible
f. (tentative) definitive stress placement indicates that the structure in
(57c) is monoclausal; no definitive stress in (57b)

(59) wh-in-situ in the raising constriction
a. ‘e lava ‘a hai [‘o faiako’i
TNS be able ABS who COMP teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga]
ABS the language Tongan
‘Who is able to learn Tongan?’
b. **‘e lava ‘a Pita ‘o faiako’i ‘a e hā?
TNS be able ABS P COMP teach ABS DEF what
(‘what is Peter able to teach?’)

(60) wh-in-situ under restructuring
a. ‘e lava ‘e hai ‘o faiako’i
TNS be able ERG who COMP teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga?
ABS the language Tongan
‘Who is able to teach Tongan?’
b. ‘e lava ‘e Pita ‘o faiako’i ‘a e hā?
TNS be able ERG P COMP teach ABS DEF what
‘What is Peter able to teach?’

(61) negation with raising
a. ‘e ‘ikai lava ‘a Pita ‘o faiako’i
TNS NEG be able ABS P COMP teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga
ABS DEF language Tongan
‘Peter is unable to teach Tongan.’
b. ‘e lava ‘a Pita ‘o ‘ikai faiako’i
TNS be able ABS P COMP NEG teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga
ABS DEF language Tongan
‘Peter is able to not teach Tongan.’

(62) negation with restructuring
a. ‘e ‘ikai lava ‘e Pita ‘o faiako’i
TNS NEG be able ERG P COMP teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga
ABS DEF language Tongan
‘Peter is unable to teach Tongan.’
b. **‘e lava ‘e Pita ‘o ‘ikai faiako’i
TNS be able ERG P COMP NEG teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga
ABS DEF language Tongan

(63) other complementizers: only absolutive DP can be spelled out
a. ‘e lava ‘a Pita ke faiako’i
TNS be able ABS P COMP teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga
ABS DEF language Tongan
‘Peter is able to teach Tongan.’
b. **‘e lava ‘e Pita ‘ke faiako’i
TNS be able ERG P COMP teach
‘a e lea faka-Tonga
ABS DEF language Tongan

ergative does not undergo case preservation in Tongan
case preservation in Hindi
Davison (2003): in Hindi, ergative is not preserved in counterfactual
clauses, but dative is
case stacking (Suffixaufnahme)
structural cases do not stack (Yoon 2003)

(64) a. DAT-ERG
b. DAT-ABS

* the inherent case characterization of the ergative is untenable
what head(s) can license the ergative case?

5.2 Unpacking the absolutive

Two main approaches:
- The absolutive is uniformly licensed by a (high) functional head (finite T, (indicative) C—Bobaljik 1998, Ura 2001, Bittner and Hale 1996)
- The absolutive is not a uniform category (Aldridge 205, Legate 2006)

Main assumptions:
- a. ergative is an inherent case licensed by the highest $v$
- b. absolutive is always a structural case
- c. morphological default: case used when no morphological exponent of a particular case is available
- d. syntactic default: case assigned when no appropriate licenser is available

\[
\text{Absolutive} \quad \wedge \\
\text{licensed by } T \quad \text{by } v
\]

\[
\text{Nominative (e.g., in Turkic, Dravidian, Hindi)} \quad \wedge \\
\text{licensed by } T \quad \text{by } v
\]

Deriving intransitive clauses:
- ACC or ERG is not assigned
- T licenses NOM
- T and the single argument agree in phi-features
- movement to spec,TP satisfies the EPP

Deriving transitive clauses: main problem has to do with T licensing the nominative

Legate’s solutions (left open):
- (i) optional licensing
- (ii) two different Ts
- (iii) case is based on assignment, not feature checking, so NOM is either interpretable across the board or is interpretable on functional heads only (cf. Pesetsky & Torrego)

the relativization of the absolutive (“split absolutive”) entails the presence of (at least) two distinct light verbs

intransitive light verb:
- a. assigns theta-role to a thematic subject
- b. combines with intransitive verbs
- c. does not license structural case

transitive light verb:
- a. assigns a theta-role to the thematic subject
- b. assigns inherent ergative to the thematic subject
- c. licenses structural accusative
- d. combines with transitive verbs
- e. has unvalued phi-features

general result:
- a. T checks ABS in intransitive clauses
- b. $v$ checks ABS in transitive clauses

5.3 Deriving ergative clauses

- Main strategies that have been proposed:
  - Reverse theta-role assignment $\rightarrow$ deep ergative hypothesis (Levin 1983, Marantz 1984, Dixon 1994)

Problems with this approach?
Present diachronic derivation as synchronic \(\rightarrow\) nominalization hypothesis (Johns 1993, 2006): the ergative is not an argument of the verb but a complement of the nominal derived from the main verb

Problems with this approach?


(72) early minimalist derivation (Murasugi 1992)

(73) Desiderata:


Improvement over the other approaches; remaining difficulties:

i. lack of evidence for the inherent case nature of the ergative
ii. agreement facts
iii. systematic restriction of syntactic ergativity to A-bar movement

- universal relationship of argument structure to syntactic structure
- non-uniform licensing of the absolutive (Aldridge, Legate), which brings ergative languages closer to accusative languages
- structural case on the ergative
- dissociation of case-checking and agreement
- deriving the privileged status of the absolutive with respect to A-bar phenomena (see 4.1)
(74) NOM/ACC (Bobaljik and Branigan 2006)

Nominative / Accusative Case pattern

(75) Difference between accusative and ergative language:
   a. Ergative v assumption: v-heads in ergative languages are unable to check accusative
   b. Tucking in (Richards 2001): merging closest to the attracting head and preserving the hierarchical structure
   c. object has to raise to T for case reasons
   d. object has to merge lower than subject

(76) ERG/ABS (Bobaljik and Branigan 2006)

T(ense)P

(77) Unresolved issues:
   a. the absolutive restriction on extraction (ergativity in A-bar phenomena)
   b. the restriction to intransitives in non-finite contexts (for some ergative languages)
   c. case-marking and agreement mismatches

References
Bobaljik, Jonatahn, and Phil Branigan. 2006. in Johns et al.
Hualde, Jose Ignacio, and Jon Ortiz de Urbina (eds.). *A grammar of Basque*. Berlin--New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
[includes papers by Anand & Nevins, Legate, Otsuka, Bobaljik & Branigan]