

# Ergativity

Visit Nicola (nicola.mah@u.nus.edu) in the writing center! Bring hard copies of your drafts.

- Mon: 2pm-4pm
- Tues: 11am-2pm
- Wed: 11am-2pm
- Thurs: 2pm-4pm
- Fri: 10am-12nn

## 1 Patterns of case and agreement

In the last two classes, we have concentrated on analyzing languages with nominative/accusative alignment.

Many other languages have different patterns of case and agreement<sup>1</sup> morphology. Which NPs are grouped together according to this morphology?

(1)	<u>Nominative/accusative:</u>	<u>Ergative/absolutive:</u>
<i>transitives:</i>	(subj) obj	subj (obj)
<i>intransitives:</i>	(subj)	(subj)

**Exercise:**<sup>2</sup> For each set of data, identify the type of case or agreement pattern observed:

(2) **Tongan (Austronesian: Oceanic):** (Churchward 1953 in Dixon 1994, p. 41–42)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>a. na'e lea [ 'a Tolu].<br/> <small>PAST speak A Tolu</small><br/>         'Tolu spoke'</p> <p>b. na'e lea [ 'a e talavou].<br/> <small>PAST speak A the youth</small><br/>         'The youth spoke.'</p> | <p>c. na'e tamate'i [ 'a e talavou] [ 'e Tolu].<br/> <small>PAST kill A the youth E Tolu</small><br/>         'Tolu killed the youth.'</p> <p>d. na'e tamate'i [ 'a Tolu] [ 'e he talavou].<br/> <small>PAST kill A Tolu E the youth</small><br/>         'The youth killed Tolu.'</p> |
|---|--|

(3) **Abaza (Northwest Caucasian):** (Allen 1956 in Dixon 1994, p. 43)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>a. d-ád<br/>         'He/she's gone.'</p> <p>b. h-ád<br/>         'We've gone.'</p> <p>c. h-l-bád<br/>         'She saw us.'</p> | <p>d. h-y-bád<br/>         'He saw us.'</p> <p>e. d-h-bád<br/>         'We saw him/her.'</p> |
|---|--|

<sup>1</sup>Agreement generally refers to morphemes that encode features (often  $\phi$ -features) of some NP.

<sup>2</sup>Based on an exercise by Jason Merchant

(4) **Albanian (Indo-European):**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| a. Vajza vjen.<br>the.girl(f) come.3s<br>'The girl comes.'        | c. Vajza çon shoku-n.<br>the.girl(f) take.3s the.friend(m)<br>'The girl takes the friend(m).' |
| b. Shoku vjen.<br>the.friend(m) come.3s<br>'The friend(m) comes.' | d. Shoku çon vajzë-n.<br>the.friend(m) take.3s the.girl(f)<br>'The friend(m) takes the girl.' |

(5) **Hindi (Indo-Aryan):** (Mahajan 1990, 1991 in Woolford 2000)

Consider the agreement pattern here:

- a. Raam baazaar gayaa.  
Ram(masc) market go(past,masc,sg)  
'Ram went to the market.'
- b. Raam-ne roTii khaayii thii.  
Ram(masc)-NE bread(fem) eat(perf,fem) be(past,fem)  
'Ram had eaten bread.'
- c. Siitaa kelaa khaatii thii.  
Sita(fem) banana(masc) eat(imp,fem) be(past,fem)  
'Sita (habitually) ate bananas.'
- d. Siitaa-ne laRkii-ko dekhaa.  
Sita(fem)-NE girl-DAT see(perf,masc,sg)  
'Sita saw the girl.'
- e. kuttoN-ne bhoNkaa.  
dogs-NE barked(masc,sg)  
'The dogs barked.'

(6) **Nez Perce (Penutian):** (Deal, 2010)

- a. mine hiiwes pit'iin?  
where is girl  
'Where is the girl?' (intransitive)
- b. pit'iin-im paa'yaâna picpic-ne.  
girl found cat  
'The girl found a cat.'
- c. 'aayat-om paa-'yaâ-n-a pit'iin-ine.  
woman found girl  
'The woman found the girl.'

Examples like Nez Perce are called tripartite .

## 2 Analyzing ergativity

### 2.1 Case theory recap

- *The Case Filter*: Nouns need case.
  - N all start with inflectional feature [uCase:\_\_\_], which must be valued via Agree.
- Two classes ago: A proposal for nominative/accusative languages like English:
  - T has [Case:NOM]
  - *v* has [Case:ACC], which correlates with introducing an agent [uD]
- We know that Case-assignment via Agree could be limited in its “direction.” Two common configurations:
  - Spec-Head: Case-assignment is always from a head with [Case:...] to a N with [uCase:\_\_\_] in its specifier.
  - Downward Agree: Case-assignment is always from a c-commanding head with [Case:...] to a c-commanded N with [uCase:\_\_\_] (as in Russian genitive of negation).

### 2.2 Ergative is inherent

(7) **Georgian (Kartvelian)**: (Harris, 1981; Aronson, 1982 in Marantz, 1991)

a. Series I tenses (present, future, ...)

- Nino gia-s surateb-s ačveneb-s.  
NINO.NOM Gia-DAT pictures-DAT showI  
'Nino is showing pictures to Gina.' (ditransitive)
- Es saxl-i ivane-s aušendeba.  
this house-NOM Ivan-DAT builtI  
'This house will be built for Ivan.' (passive)
- Vano pikrobs marikaze.  
VANO.NOM thinkI Marika-on  
'Vano is thinking about Marika.' (intransitive + PP)

Relevant fact: “In Georgian, dative and accusative morphological case have fallen together into what’s called the dative case.” (Marantz, 1991, p. 234)

b. Series II tenses (simple past, aorist)

- Nino-m gia-s surateb-i ačvena.  
NINO-ERG Gia-DAT pictures-ABS showII  
'Nino showed the pictures to Gina.' (ditransitive)
- Es saxl-i ivane-s aušenda.  
this house-ABS Ivan-DAT builtII  
'This house was built for Ivan.' (passive)

iii. Vano-m ipikrs marikaze.  
 Vano-ERG think<sub>II</sub> Marika-on  
 'Vano thought about Marika.' (intransitive + PP)

- We can describe Georgian as *split ergative*: it's nominative/accusative in Series I and ergative/absolutive in Series II. (And note that Series I NOM looks morphologically the same as Series II absolutive: names are unmarked.)
- **But!** In (7biii) the subject Vano — the only DP argument — is ergative. This is different than the intransitive subject in (7bii). What's the difference?
- ▶ Ergative case is specifically associated with agents (Spec,*v*P). Case which is associated with a particular thematic role — here, ERG is for agents — is called *inherent case*.<sup>3</sup>
  - We know that neither nominative nor accusative is inherent in English. Why?

**Proposal:** Transitive/(unergative) *v* in ergative languages (Georgian II) has [Case:ERG], which can only be used to assign case to its specifier (Spec-Head).

### 2.3 Two theories of absolutive

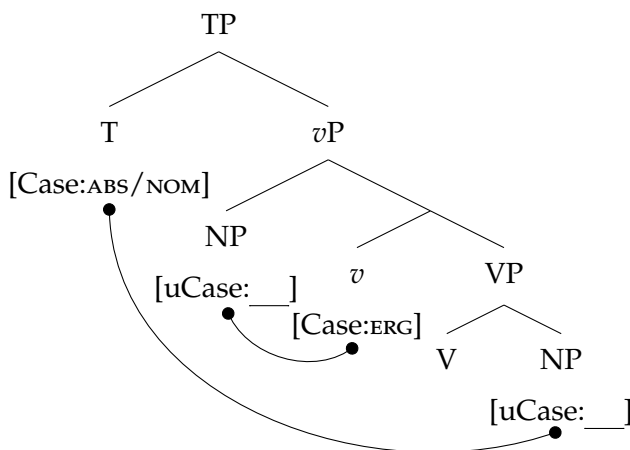
What about absolutive? We could imagine (at least) two different approaches. (This section and the next follow Legate (2008).)

#### 2.3.1 ABS = NOM

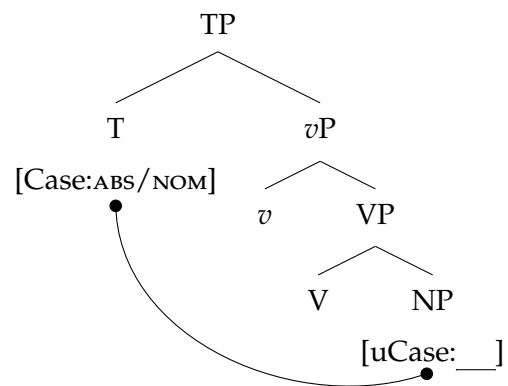
Recall that the morphology of ABS and NOM in Georgian split-ergativity shows that ABS = NOM across Georgian I and II.

**Idea:** ABS = NOM; T always has [Case:ABS/NOM]. (EPP movement not shown here.)

Transitive:



Unaccusative intransitive:



<sup>3</sup>But there is a recent line of work that suggests that ergative is not always an inherent case; see e.g. Deal (to appear) and references there.

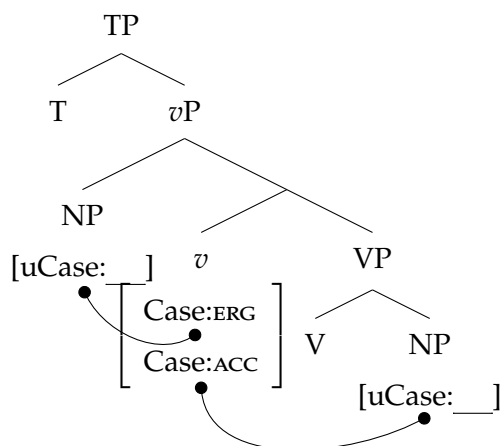
### 2.3.2 ABS = DEF

**Idea:** In addition to inherent ergative on the agent...

- the system is underlyingly like a nominative/accusative system: transitive  $v$  Case-licenses the theme (ACC), whereas T Case-licenses the subject in intransitives (NOM); and
- it just so happens that NOM (from T) and ACC (from  $v$ ) look the same.

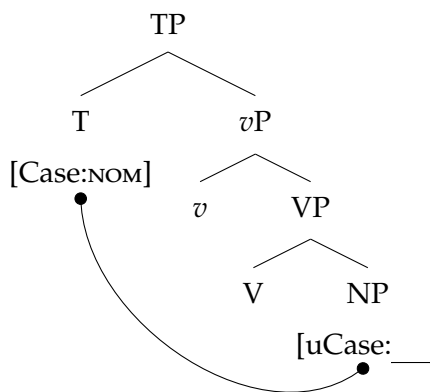
Transitive:

$v$  has inherent [Case:ERG] for its specifier and [Case:ACC] for the theme (pronounced ABS).



Unaccusative intransitive:

$v$  has inherent [Case:ERG] for its specifier. T has [Case:NOM] for the subject (pronounced ABS).



But how would we distinguish these two views for absolutive?

## 2.4 Predictions for embedded nonfinite clauses

Last class: Nonfinite clauses in English (and nominative/accusative languages in general) lack nominative. This is explained by nonfinite clauses having a very different T, which lacks [Case:NOM,  $u\phi$ : \_\_\_], and is pronounced *to*.

Now look back at the two possible theories for absolutive case assignment:

- In ABS = NOM, T is always required for giving ABS case.
  - In ABS = DEF, T gives ABS in intransitives, but  $v$  gives ABS in transitives.
- **There are two kinds of ergative/absolutive languages in the world**, as predicted by the ABS = NOM and ABS = DEF theories above.

(8) **Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan) temporal clauses are nonfinite:** (Legate, 2008, p. 62–63)

a. Transitive: object is absolutive (unmarked)

Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku turnu-ma-ni,  
man-PAUC-ERG PRES.IMPF-3PL.SUBJ-3PL.OBJ bullock group-CAUSE-NONPAST  
[karnta-patu-rlu miyi-(\*ku) purra-nja-puru].  
[woman-PAUC-ERG food-(\*DAT) COOK-NONFIN-TEMP.C]

‘The men are mustering cattle while the women are cooking the food.’

b. Intransitive: absolutive (unmarked) impossible; use dative instead

Kurdu-lpa manyu-karri-ja [ngati-nyanu-\*(ku) jarda-nguna-nja-rlarni].  
child.ABS-PAST.IMPF play-stand-PAST [mother-ANAPH-\*(DAT) sleep-lie-NONFIN-OBV.C]

‘The child was playing [while his mother was asleep].’

c. Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku turnu-ma-ni  
man-PAUC-ERG PRES.IMPF-3PL.SUBJ-3PL.OBJ bullock group-CAUSE-NONPAST  
[kurdu-\*(ku) parnka-nja-rlarni].  
[child-\*(DAT) run-NONFIN-OBV.C]

‘The men are mustering cattle while the children are running.’

- Warlpiri is a ABS = DEF ergative/absolutive language.

Nonfinite clauses in Enga (Trans-New Guinea) and Hindi (Indo-Aryan) also show this pattern in embedded nonfinites; see Legate.

Compare this to nonfinites in Georgian:

(9) **Georgian (Kartvelian) nominalized verbs are nonfinite:** (Legate, 2008, p. 66)

a. Transitive: absolutive impossible; use genitive instead

[Datv-is mok'vla am t'qeši] ak'ržalulia.  
[bear-GEN killing this woods.in] forbidden

‘Killing bears in this woods is forbidden.’

b. Intransitive: absolutive impossible; use genitive instead

[Tamad-is damtknareba supraze] uzdelobaa.  
[tamada-GEN yawning table.on] rude

‘It is rude for the *tamada* to yawn at the table.’

- Georgian is a ABS = NOM ergative/absolutive language.

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