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 morphology. Which NPs are grouped together according to this morphology?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nominative/accusative:</th>
<th>Ergative/absolutive:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subj</td>
<td>obj</td>
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<tr>
<td>transitives:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>intransitives:</td>
<td>subj</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Exercise 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)

a. na’e lea [a Tolu]
past speak A Tolu
'Tolu spoke'
b. na’e lea [a e talavou]
past speak A the youth
'The youth spoke.'
c. na’e tamate’i [a e talavou] [e Tolu]
past kill A the youth E Tolu
'Tolu killed the youth.'
d. na’e tamate’i [a Tolu] [e he talavou]
past kill A Tolu E the youth
'The youth killed Tolu.'

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

a. d-ád
‘He/she’s gone.’
b. h-ád
‘We’ve gone.’
c. h-l-bád
‘She saw us.’
d. h-y-bád
‘He saw us.’
e. d-h-bád
‘We saw him/her.’

1 Agreement generally refers to morphemes that encode features (often φ-features) of some NP.
2 Based on an exercise by Jason Merchant
(4) **Albanian (Indo-European):**

a. Vajza vjen.
   the.girl(f) come.3s
   ‘The girl comes.’

c. Vajza çon shoku-n.
   the.girl(f) take.3s the.friend(m)
   ‘The girl takes the friend(m).’

b. Shoku vjen.
   the.friend(m) come.3s
   ‘The friend(m) comes.’

d. Shoku çon vajzë-n.
   the.friend(m) take.3s the.girl(f)
   ‘The friend(m) takes the girl.’

(5) **Hindi (Indo-Aryan):**

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’yañna picpic-ne.
   girl found cat
   ‘The girl found a cat.’

c. ‘aayat-om paa-‘yañ-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, ...)

i. Nino gia-s surateb-s ačveneb-s.
   Nino.nom Gia-dat pictures-dat showI
   ‘Nino is showing pictures to Gina.’ (ditransitive)

ii. Es saxl-i ivane-s aušenda-bas.
    this house-nom Ivan-dat builtI
    ‘This house will be built for Ivan.’ (passive)

iii. 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)

i. Nino-m gia-s surateb-i ačvena.
   Nino.erg Gia-dat pictures-abs showII
   ‘Nino showed the pictures to Gina.’ (ditransitive)

ii. Es saxl-i ivane-s aušenda-bas.
    this house-abs Ivan-dat builtII
    ‘This house was built for Ivan.’ (passive)
iii. Vano-\textit{m} ipikrs marikaze.  
\textit{Vano-erg} think\| Marika-on  
‘Vano thought about Marika.’ (intransitive + PP)

- We can describe Georgian as \textit{split ergative}: it’s nominative/accusative in Series I and ergative/absolutive in Series II. (And note that Series I \textit{nom} looks morphologically the same as Series II absolutive: names are unmarked.)

- **But!** In \((7\text{iii})\) the subject Vano — the only DP argument — is ergative. This is different than the intransitive subject in \((7\text{ii})\). What’s the difference?

  - Ergative case is specifically associated with agents (Spec,\textit{vP}). Case which is associated with a particular thematic role — here, \textit{erg} is for agents — is called \textit{inherent case}.\(^3\)
    - We know that neither nominative nor accusative is inherent in English. Why?

**Proposal:** Transitive/(unergative) \textit{v} in ergative languages (Georgian II) has [Case:\textit{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 \textbf{ABS = NOM}

Recall that the morphology of \textit{abs} and \textit{nom} in Georgian split-ergativity shows that \textit{ABS = NOM} across Georgian I and II.

**Idea:** \textit{ABS = NOM}; \textit{T} always has [Case:\textit{abs/nom}]. (EPP movement not shown here.)

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Transitive:}
    \begin{itemize}
      \item TP
      \item T
      \item [Case:\textit{abs/nom}]
      \item vP
      \item [Case:\textit{erg}]
      \item NP
      \item [uCase: \underline{__}]
      \item VP
      \item V
      \item NP
      \item [uCase: \underline{__}]
    \end{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Unaccusative intransitive:}
    \begin{itemize}
      \item TP
      \item T
      \item [Case:\textit{abs/nom}]
      \item vP
      \item [Case:\textit{erg}]
      \item V
      \item NP
      \item [uCase: \underline{__}]
      \item VP
      \item V
      \item NP
      \item [uCase: \underline{__}]
    \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

\(^3\)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, uϕ:__], 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.
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

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 an **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:**

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.
References


