Ergativity

1 Patterns of case and agreement

So far, we have discussed languages with nominative/accusative *alignment*. There are also languages with different patterns of case and agreement morphology. Which NPs are grouped together according to this morphology?

(1)

	Nominative/accusative:	Ergative/absolutive:
transitives:	subj obj	subj obj
intransitives:	subj	subj

Exercise:[1] For each set of data, identify the type of case or agreement pattern observed:

(2) **Tongan (Austronesian: Oceanic):** (Churchward 1953 in Dixon 1994: 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 tmate'i ['a e   talavou] ['e Tolu].
       PAST kill   A the youth   E Tolu
       'Tolu killed the youth.'

    d. na'e tmate'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: 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.'

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

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

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

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

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

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[1]Based on an exercise by Jason Merchant

(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'yax̂na picpic-ne.
   girl   found   cat

   'The girl found a cat.'

c. 'aayat-om paa'yax̂na pit'iin-ine.
   woman   found   girl

   'The woman found the girl.'

Examples like Nez Perce are called <u>tripartite</u> .

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.

- Last class: A proposal for nominative/accusative languages like English:

  – T has [Case:NOM]
  – *v* has [Case:ACC], which correlates with introducing an agent [uN] (Burzio's Gen.)

- We know that Case-assignment via Agree could be limited in its "direction." Two common configurations:

  – 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).
  – *Spec-Head*: Case-assignment is always from a head with [Case:...] to a N with [uCase:___] in its specifier.

- What head assigns ergative case? What head assigns absolutive?

2.2 Ergative is inherent

There are three case markers in Georgian: *-i* (∅ for names), *-s*, and *-m*.

(7) **Georgian series II tenses:** (Harris, 1981; Aronson, 1982 in Marantz, 1991)

    a. Nino-m gia-s surateb-i avena.
       Nino-ERG Gia-DAT pictures-ABS show$_{II}$

       'Nino showed the pictures to Gia.'   (ditransitive)

    b. Es saxl-i ivane-s auenda.
       this house-ABS Ivan-DAT built$_{II}$

       'This house was built for Ivan.'   (passive)

    c. Vano-m ipikrs marikaze.
       Vano-ERG think$_{II}$ Marika-on

       'Vano thought about Marika.'   (intransitive + PP)

- Georgian in Series II tenses (simple past and aorist) is ergative (*-m*) / absolutive (*-i*/∅).

- **But!** In (7c) the subject Vano — the only NP argument — is ergative. This is different than the intransitive subject in (7b). 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*.[2]

  – Aside: We know that neither nominative nor accusative is inherent in English. Why?

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[2]But there is a recent line of work that suggests that ergative is not always an inherent case; see e.g. Deal (2019) and references there.

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

(8) **Georgian series I tenses:** (ibid.)

    a. Nino   gia-s   surateb-s   avenebs.
       Nino.NOM Gia-DAT pictures-DAT show$_I$

       'Nino is showing pictures to Gia.'   (ditransitive)

    b. Es saxl-i   ivane-s auendeba.
       this house-NOM Ivan-DAT built$_I$

       'This house will be built for Ivan.'   (passive)

    c. Vano   pikrobs marikaze.
       Vano.NOM think$_I$ Marika-on

       'Vano is thinking about Marika.'   (intransitive + PP)

Important fact: "In Georgian, dative and accusative morphological case have fallen together into what's called the dative case." (Marantz, 1991: 234)

- We can describe Georgian as *split ergative*: it's nominative/accusative in Series I (present, future, ...) and ergative/absolutive in Series II tenses.

▶ Note that Series I nominative is the same as Series II absolutive!

Proposal (absolutive): Absolutive is nominative.[3] T always has [Case:NOM]; in ergative languages, we refer to nominative as absolutive.

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[3]This appears correct for some but not all ergative languages. In some ergative/absolutive languages, absolutive case has a different source: see Legate (2008).

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