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: For each set of data, identify the type of case or agreement pattern observed:

   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 ['e Tolu].
      past kill a the youth e Tolu
      ‘Tolu killed the youth.’
   d. na’e tmate’i ['e he talavou].
      past kill a Tolù e the youth
      ‘The youth killed Tolu.’

   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.’

1Based on an exercise by Jason Merchant
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 hiwes pit’iin?
   where is girl
   ‘Where is the girl?’ (intransitive)

b. pit’iin-im paa’ya’xna picpic-ne.
   girl found cat
   ‘The girl found a cat.’

c. ‘aayat-om paa’ya’xna 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.

• **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-\textsc{erg} Gia-\textsc{dat} pictures-\textsc{abs} show\textsubscript{II}
   ‘Nino showed the pictures to Gia.’
   (ditransitive)

b. Es saxl-i ivane-s auenda.
   this house-\textsc{abs} Ivan-\textsc{dat} built\textsubscript{II}
   ‘This house was built for Ivan.’
   (passive)

c. Vano-m ipikrs marikaze.
   Vano-\textsc{erg} think\textsubscript{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,\textsc{vP}). Case which is associated with a particular thematic role — here, \textsc{erg} is for agents — is called **inherent case**.\footnote{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.}

  ▶ Aside: We know that neither nominative nor accusative is inherent in English. Why?
**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 aveneb-s.  
      Nino.nom Gia-dat pictures-dat show₁  
      ‘Nino is showing pictures to Gia.’ (ditransitive)
   b. Es saxl-i ivane-s auendebea.  
      this house-nom Ivan-dat built₁  
      ‘This house will be built for Ivan.’ (passive)
   c. Vano pikrobs marikaze.  
      Vano.nom think₁ 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. T always has [Case:nom]; in ergative languages, we refer to nominative as absolutive.

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


