

# On the adpositional nature of ergative subjects: ergative 'case' is not case

## Abstract

This paper argues that ergative 'case' is not a case morpheme, but a morphologically dependent theta-assigning adposition that must attach to the noun phrase it embeds. The proposal explains agreement variation within ergative languages (e.g. ergative agreement, as in Circassian, accusative agreement, as in Warlpiri, and the absence of agreement with the ergative subject, as in Hindi). Specifically, we propose that ergative agreement arises when the verb agrees with the adpositional features and the  $\phi$ -features of the ergative subject, while accusative agreement arises when the verb agrees solely with the  $\phi$ -features of the subject. Ergative subject fails to trigger agreement when the ergative adposition acts as an agreement blocker. Whether or not the ergative adposition blocks agreement depends on the manner in which it combines with the embedded NP, a parameter along which ergative language vary. In addition to accounting for agreement variation in ergative languages, our proposal also accounts for the numerous parallels between ergative subjects and nominal possessors. The second part of the paper explores the roots of these parallels.

KEYWORDS: ergativity, agreement, possessors, case

## 1. Introduction

It is well known from the rich literature on ergativity (Marantz 1984, Bok-Bonnema 1991, 1992, Murasugi 1992, Dixon 1994, Laka 1993, Bobaljik Manning 1996, Woolford 1997, Bittner and Hale 1996a,b, Legate 2005, Aldridge 2006 a.o.) that ergative languages are quite heterogeneous and show particularly significant variation in agreement. Some agree on an ergative pattern, i.e. exhibit different agreement with subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs, as shown in (1) for Circassian.

- (1) a.     $məʔarəse-r$      $ʔex_wexaš$   
         apple-ABS    fell  
         The apple fell.
- b.     $sabij-ər$          $q'ek_waš$   
         boy-ABS        came  
         The boy came.
- c.     $sabij-əm$          $məʔarəse-r$   $je-λaR_w$   
         apple-ABS    3SG.A-see  
         The boy sees the apple. Circassian

Others agree on the nominative-accusative pattern, as in (2) for Warlpiri:

- (2) a. Nyuntulu-rlu ka-**npa**-ju-ngaju-nya-nyi  
 You-erg prs-**2Sg**-1sg-me.abs-see-npst  
 You see me  
 b. Nyuntu ka-**npa**-parnka-mi  
 you.abs prs-**2sg**-run-npst  
 You run. Warlpiri (Bittner & Hale 1996a)

Finally, there are those ergative languages that do not agree with the ergative subject (3):

- (3) Raam-ne roTii khaayii thii  
 Ram-erg **bread-fem** eat-perf-**fem** be-past-**fem**  
 Ram ate bread. Hindi (Mahajan 1990:73)

A no less intriguing fact is that ergative subjects in some languages are similar to possessors in case and agreement (4,5) (Johns 1992, Mahajan 1997, Alexiadou 2001:Ch5). The possessor in (4) and the ergative subject in (5) have the same morphological marking:

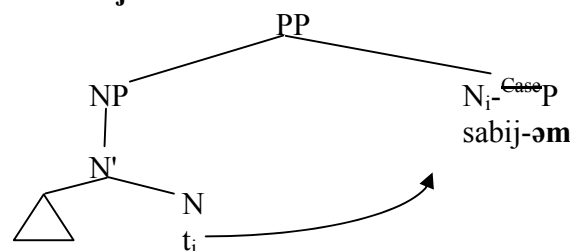
- (4) sabij-**əm** **je** zhe-che  
 boy-**Erg** **3.Sg** run  
 boy's running.  
 (5) sabij-**əm** məʔarəse-r **je**-λaR<sub>w</sub>  
 boy-**Erg** apple-Abs **3.Sg**.A-see  
 The boy sees the apple. Circassian (Grashchenkov 2006)

We will show that the heterogeneity of ergative languages in terms of agreement and the possessor-like nature of ergative subjects are both linked to the same underlying property of ergativity.

## 2. Proposal: Ergative 'Case' Is Not Case, but an Adposition

Building on Nash (1996), Alexiadou (2001), Mahajan (1997), and in part on Johns (1992), we propose that ergative languages lack a thematic transitive  $v_i$ ; as a result, the 'agent'<sup>1</sup>  $\theta$ -role is assigned to the subject by a morphologically dependent adposition, to which we will refer to as the *ergative P*. The P must attach to the noun phrase. One way to do so is incorporation, which makes the P appear as 'case'. This illustrated in (6):

- (6) **PP Ergative subject:**



Circassian

<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'agent' broadly, as a cover term, without limiting it to strictly active verbs.

The thematic dependence of ergative subjects is supported by the fact that while there are languages with ergative subjects in unergatives, shown in (7a) for Basque, no language has ergative subjects in unaccusatives (7b) (Comrie 1989).

- (7) a. Jon-ek saltatu du  
       Jon-erg jump aux.3rdSgTr  
       Jon jumped (*unergative*)
- b. Jon/(\*-ek) etorri da  
       Jon-abs/\*erg come-prtc-perf aux.3rdSgInt  
       Jon came (*unaccusative*) Basque

Our proposal explains this immediately: the former ‘active’ (cf Bittner and Hale 1996a) languages have an underlyingly transitive *v* (Laka 1993). In (7a), the ergative P is required for  $\theta$ -licensing because the unergative *v* is non-thematic. Connections between unergative and transitive verbs are well known outside of ergative languages. For example, in English we have a contrast between (8a) and (8b): an unergative verb takes a cognate direct object, while an unaccusative verb cannot do so<sup>2</sup>:

- (8) a. John ran a good run.  
       b. \*John fell a good fall.

That said, there are ergative languages where the sole subject of an intransitive verb is absolutive/unmarked. We propose that in ergative languages with absolutive subjects of intransitives (9), the *v* selected by the intransitive root *is* thematic, which means that the ergative P is disallowed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Our view of the ergative clause likens it to a passive construction, where the ergative P is almost analogous to the P ‘by’. However, it is known that numerous ergative languages already have a passive construction. So how can we reconcile this fact with our proposal? (We thank Edith Aldrige for this question.) While we concede that our structure of the active ergative clause is similar to a passive, we note that languages often have more than one way to express the passive. Therefore, the existence of the ‘passive’ active clause does not contradict the existence of a regular passive. For example, in Russian there is the passive construction in (i) and the virtually semantically identical ‘-sja’ passive in (ii) and another semantically analogous impersonal null subject construction in (iii):

- (i) Dom byl postrojen v 1900 godu  
       House was built in 1900  
       The house was build in 1900
- (ii) Doma zdes’ strojatsja s kazhdym godom vse xuzhe (etimi idiotami)  
       Houses here build-sja with every year worse and worse (these idiots)  
       With every year houses are built worse and worse here (by these idiots)
- (iii) Doma zdes’ strojat vse xuzhe i xuzhe  
       Houses here build3rdPl all worse and worse  
       They build houses here worse and worse

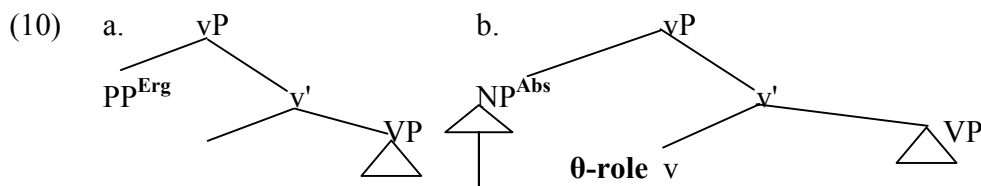
Hence, the passive and the ergative can just as well co-exist in one language.

<sup>3</sup> We suggest here that different *v*-heads may differ not only in the nature of the theta-role they assign (e.g. experience, agent, etc.) but also in their ability to assign a theta-role. This issue needs further investigation, but extends beyond the scope of the current discussion.

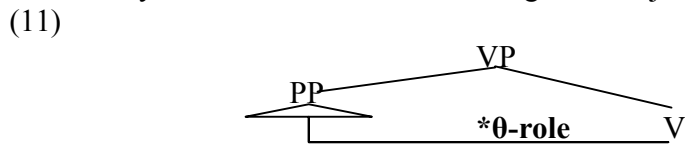
- (9) a. ce=w hek<sub>w</sub>'a t'aro=w  
 one=M man run=M  
 A man runs.
- b. ošu-r bac'a kwa:  
 he-Obl.M-Erg wolf killed  
 He killed a wolf.

Bagwalal, (Kibrik 2001)

The tree structure below shows an ergative intransitive structure and an absolutive one:

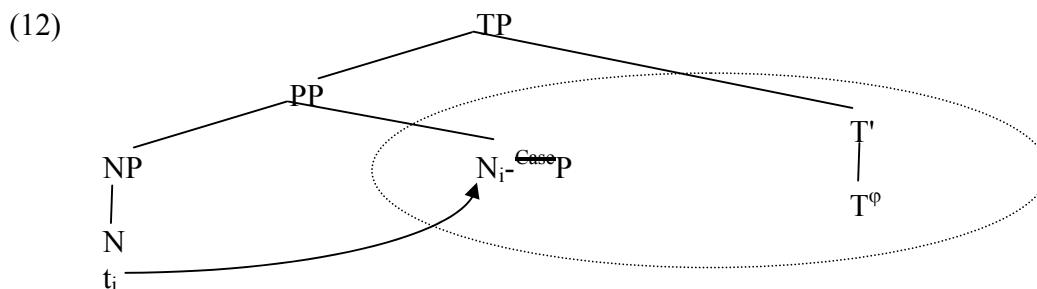


Now, in unaccusatives, the verb  $\theta$ -marks the subject, disallowing the ergative P. Clearly, since ergative “case” is an attached thematic adposition, having the ergative P in a position where a theta-role is also assigned by the verb causes thematic conflict. In (11) we see why unaccusatives cannot have ergative subjects:



### 3. Agreement

Turning to agreement variation in ergative languages (1) – (3) since the P and N form a complex head, the N's  $\phi$ -features are visible to T for agreement as well as for control and binding (cf. Baker 1988). In (12), T values its  $\phi$ -features and checks case on the complex head N-P.

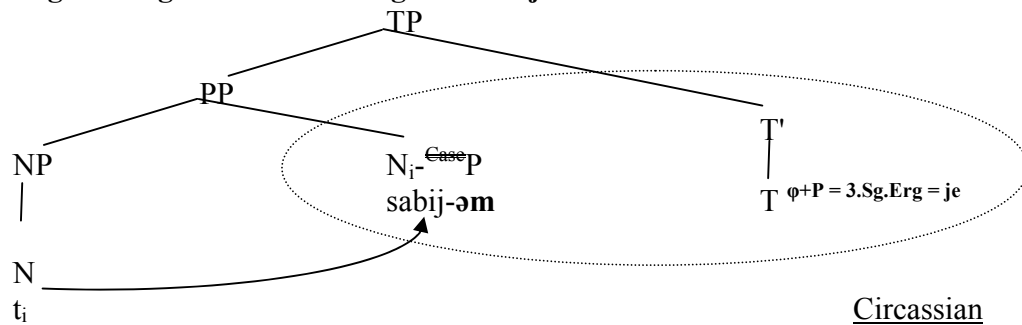


The case feature of the NP is deleted, which is why we do not (usually) observe additional morphology on the ergative subject aside from the incorporated ergative P.

### 3.1 Ergative Agreement

Now, *ergative* agreement arises when the T has uninterpretable  $\phi$ - and P-features that are valued by those of the complex N-P head (13), resulting in a different spell-out from that triggered just by the  $\phi$ -features of the noun phrase.

#### (13) Ergative Agreement with Ergative Subject in Circassian



We would like to point out that since agreement in Minimalism (Chomsky 2000, 2001) is deeply rooted in  $\phi$ -feature checking, different morphological agreement with the subject (or object) that have the same person, gender, and number features should not arise. In nominative-accusative languages, we never see a situation of the kind we see in Basque:

- (14) a. \*John **see** them. (agreement with 'John' is absent)  
 b. John arrives at ten. (agreement with 'John' is present)

Let us dwell on this issue for a moment. Given the Minimalist approach to agreement, where case features do not play a role in influencing the morphological shape of agreement, ergative case on the subject should *never* trigger different agreement morphology on the verb. Ergative agreement patterns are thus completely mysterious, unless there is something markedly different about the ergative subject itself.

Our proposal is that there is in fact something different about ergative subjects – they are PPs. Agreement with a PP can very well be different from agreement with just the noun phrase. This is not unprecedented: in Bantu languages, such as Chichewa, locative subjects that are akin to PPs, trigger different subject agreement than noun phrase subjects. In (15a), the verb agrees with the locative phrase 'ku-mu-dzi', where the agreement-triggering morpheme is the locative marker 'ku' while the class marker for 'village' -'mu' – does not induce agreement. In (15b), we see non-locative agreement between the verb and the DP 'well':

- (15) a. **Ku**-mu-dzi    **ku**-li    chi-ttime  
 17-3-village    17-be    7-well  
 A well is in the village  
 b. **Chi**-ttime    **chi**-li    ku-mu-dzi  
 7-well    7-be    17-3-village  
 In the village is a well    Chichewa (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989, p.2)

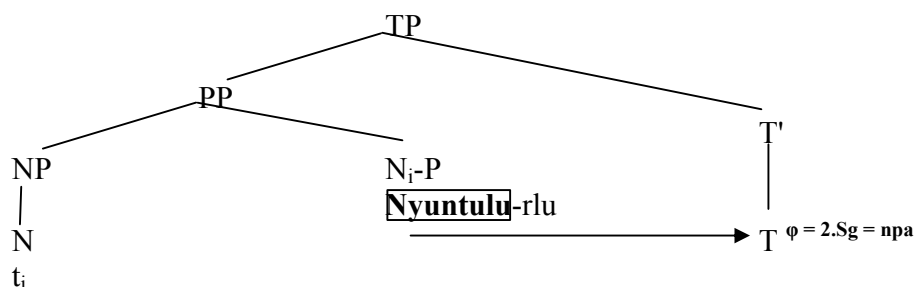
Crucially, according to our proposal, ergative agreement patterns can never arise in nominative accusative languages across the board (modulo locative agreement constructions) (Woolford 1999). That ergative agreement indeed does not occur in nominative-accusative languages is an important universal, discussed in Woolford (1999) and more recently in Bobaljik (2008). Thus, while ergative languages may have ergative or accusative agreement patterns, nominative-accusative languages with overtly realized case systems<sup>4</sup> cannot have ergative agreement patterns, i.e. treat the nominative subject differently than the accusative object with respect to agreement. According to our proposal, in nominative-accusative languages, where the subject of transitive verbs is a noun phrase, not a PP, ergative agreement is impossible: subject agreement morphology is strictly determined by the  $\phi$ -features of the subject only.

### 3.2 'Accusative' Agreement in Ergative Languages

Now, that said, what happens in languages such as Warlpiri, where both transitive and intransitive subjects trigger the same agreement morphology, exhibiting 'accusative agreement patterns'? To this end, we propose that while a PP can trigger different agreement on the verb, it need not do so. If the T does not carry P-features, agreement with transitive and intransitive subjects will be the same: just the noun phrase's  $\phi$ -features are agreeing (2), illustrated in (16).

- (2) a. Nyuntulu-rlu ka-**npa**-ju-ngaju-nya-nyi  
 You-erg prs-**2Sg**-1sg-me.abs-see-npst  
 You see me
- b. Nyuntu ka-**npa**-parnka-mi  
 you.abs prs-**2sg**-run-npst  
 You run. Warlpiri, (Bittner & Hale 1996)

#### (16) Accusative Agreement with Ergative Subject in Warlpiri



<sup>4</sup> Ergative languages that show ergativity solely through agreement such as Jacaltec, for example, may have ergative agreement. How such agreement arises and whether it is agreement in the same sense as that in languages with case systems is a debatable question. See Woolford (1999) for discussion of these languages as well as for a proposal that the ergative agreement in these languages is a clitic rather than an agreement morpheme.

The presence or absence of P-features on T is a parameter along which ergative languages may vary. This kind of variation is neither surprising nor unprecedented: while some languages choose to agree with the entire bundle of the DP's  $\phi$ -features, others choose to agree with just some subset of them. For example, in Russian we see agreement in number, gender, and person between the DP and a past tense verb. In contrast, in Spanish we see just person and number agreement.

### 3.3 No Agreement with the Ergative Subject

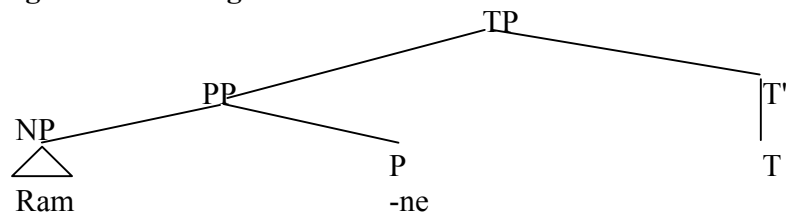
Finally, Hindi (3), repeated below, and Bagwalal, (17), the ergative subject does not agree with the verb at all.

- (3) Raam-ne      roTii      khaayii      thii  
 Ram-erg      **bread-fem**      eat-perf-**fem**      be-past-**fem**  
 Ram ate bread. Hindi (Mahajan 1990:73)

- (17) Anwar-i-r      ganduj      b=aq-una:-X      b=uk'a  
 Anvar-Obl-**Erg**      hole      **Neut**=dig-IPF-CONV      **Neut**=be  
 Anvar dig the hole. Bagwalal (Kibrik 2001)

So far, we have mentioned that the mode by which the dependent ergative P attaches to the verb is incorporation. However, this is not the only way. Another possibility is attaching the ergative P via PF-merger (cf Bobaljik 2002). We propose that in languages where the ergative PP does not agree at all, the ergative P does not incorporate into N, but rather attaches to the noun phrase at PF (a la Bobaljik 2002). In the syntax, the NP and the P are fully separate (18):

- (18) **PF Merger with the Ergative P**



In (18), agreement is impossible: the P blocks T from valuing its  $\phi$ -features with the subject. The same occurs in (17)=(19a). Now, when the P is removed, in (19b), agreement with the auxiliary becomes possible.

- (19) a. anwar-i-r      ganduj b=aq-una:-X      b=uk'a  
 Anvar-Obl-Erg      hole      Neut=dig-Ipf-Conv      **Neut**=be  
 b. anwar      ganduj b=aq-una:-X      w=uk'a  
 Anvar      hole      Neut=dig-Ipf-Conv      **Masc**=be  
 Anvar digs a hole. Bagwalal (Kibrik 2001)

In addition, the adpositional nature of ergative 'case' is confirmed by biabsolutive constructions in Daghestanian languages, where the agent of transitive verbs may be ergative or absolutive. In the latter case the verb agrees with both subject and object. But there is no agreement with the ergative subject, Tsakhur (20) is analogous to (19):

- (20) a. malhammad<sub>y</sub>-ē Xaw alja?-a wo=**d**  
 Muhammmad-**Erg** house Neut.build-Ipf be=**Neut**
- b. malhammad Xaw alja?-a wo=**r**  
 Muhammmad.**Abs** house Neut.build-Ipf be=**Masc**  
 Muhammmad builds a house. Tsakhur (Kibrik, Testelec 1999)

Returning to Hindi, the N's case feature is not visible to T for deletion and is valued by the ergative P in (18). As a result, we can see both the ergative P 'ne' and the case feature '-e' in (21) (it does not happen on all the nouns, though):

- (21) bac-e-ne vs bacc-**aa**  
 Child-Obl-Erg vs Child- Nom  
 (w/o the ergative P, the final vowel is 'aa', vs. 'e') Hindi

There is also other evidence from intervening markers that can separate the N and the ergative 'ne' (Mahajan 1997), which confirms their status as separate syntactic entities.

So far, our proposal leaves on glaring question open: how is binding allowed in ergative constructions in languages such as Hindi when the ergative subject is blocked by a P? While shy of a satisfying theoretical explanation, our argument is that Ps do not always act as blockers for binding even in case when the P and the embedded NP are completely separate phonological and syntactic entities. One example comes from Russian, where subject oriented possessive anaphor 'svoj' can be bound from a PP:

- (22) U Dimy nikogda ne bylo **svoix sobsvennix** deneg  
 To Dima-gen never not was-neut **self'sown** money  
 Dima never had his own money.

Mohanan (1994) discusses similar cases in Hindi with other adpositional subjects, such as the locative PP.

To summarize what we have said so far, the two ways in which the ergative P can attach to the subject and whether the T carries or fails to carry P-features accounts for the agreement variations in ergative languages. Conversely, the absence of such variations in agreement in nominative-accusative languages are explained because the v in these languages is thematic, making the theta-assigning P (and the host of properties that emerge from the presence of such a P) impossible

#### 4. Ergativity and Possession

In this section we turn to the other part of our proposal: the close relationship between possession and ergativity. We then show that the agreement variations discussed above and the possessor-like nature of ergative subject are both attributable to the ergative P.





It must be noted that the P ‘u’ undergoes a shift in meaning from pure possessive P, when it appears in (23a) to a possessor + affectee in verbal constructions such as (24a). Thus, unlike the genitive possessor in (24b), the prepositional possessors involve a special theta-role that is assigned by the P (cf Landau 1999, Pylkkannen 2002 for further discussion of constructions such as (24a)).

From here we see a parallel between external prepositional possessors and ergative subjects. In the verbal construction (24a), the adposition adds a theta-role that is distinct from pure possessor (23), i.e. it is an affectee. In other words, the P ‘u’ has undergone a shift in meaning. Similarly, the ergative P in Circassian (25a = 5) adds a theta-role that has shifted in meaning from a pure possessor to an agent, even though the very same P adds a possessor in nominal constructions (25b = 4):

- (25) a.      **sabij-əm**      **məʔarəse-r**      **je-λaR<sub>w</sub>**  
                  boy-**Erg**      apple-Abs      3.Sg.A-see  
                  The boy sees the apple.

- b.      **sabij-əm**      **je**      **zhe-che**  
                  boy-**Erg**      3.Sg      run  
                  The boy's running.

Circassian

#### 4.2. Possessor Subjects in Ergative Languages

Apart of Circassian, other languages use the same marker for coding adnominal possession and ergative subject, for instance a Daghestanian language Hinalug (see also (Abney 1987) on Yup'ik):

- (26) a.      **Ergative:**  
                  **pHXr,-i**      ink      q'andaetomae      **pHXr,-i**      q'adzh  
                  dog-**Erg**      grass      eat      dog-**Gen**      tail  
                  The dog eats grass.      the dog's tail      Hinalug (Kibrik 1972)

Building on Johns (1992), we propose that transitive sentences in Circassian and Hinalug are parallel to (24a): the Circassian example ‘Boy sees an apple’ in (25a) can be paraphrased as ‘TO boy there is an apple seen’, while the Hinalug (26a) can be paraphrased as ‘TO the dog there is grass eaten’ (cf Johns 1992, Abney 1987, Alexiadou 2001 for similar proposals). Much like Russian that employs the P ‘u’ in possessive and verbal constructions (23, 24), Hinalug and Circassian use the same P in possessives and ergative subjects, triggering the same agreement in both (25, 26).

In sum, the ergative P that is responsible for agreement variations within ergative languages is also responsible for the possessor-like properties of ergative subjects in numerous unrelated ergative languages. Thus, the two persistent properties of ergative languages – agreement variation and the possessor-like subject – that appear to instantiate very different aspects of ergativity, actually stem from the same underlying property of ergative languages: the ergative P.

### 4.3. Ergativity and the Structure of Noun Phrases

Continuing with the parallels between ergative subjects and genitive possessors, we would like to note that both ergative and genitive have another common property: in some languages oblique cases are formed from ergative stems, and in other languages, from genitive stems.

Below is an ergative example from Archi (see also Tabasaran, Bacbi and some others):<sup>6</sup>

(27)

Case	Abs	Erg	Gen	Dat	Equat	Elect
Ending	liq'ʔi	liq'ʔi-li	liq' ʔi-li-n	liq'ʔi-li-s	liq'ʔi-li-qIdi	liq'ʔi-li-qIš

Archi (Kibrik 1977)

Examples of oblique case derivation from genitive may be found, for instance in Basque and Bagwalal (see also some Finno-Ugric like Estonian). In Basque animate nouns derive locative cases from the genitive form that is obligatory with definite plural and optional with singular nominals:

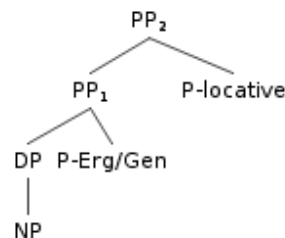
(28)

Case	Abs	Gen	Iness	Elat	Allat	Term
Ending	Mutil	mutil-en	mutil-en -gan	mutil-en -gan-dik	mutil-en -gan-a	mutil-en -gan-aino

Basque (De Rijk 2008)

In line with (Carstens 2000, Grashchenkov 2005, and Asbury 2008) we propose the following structure for ergative(/genitive) noun phrases with silent prepositions (left-branching is used due to the Complement-Head order observed in the majority of such languages):

(29)



The structure in (29) shows how oblique cases, such as locative, can be formed from ergative or genitive stems.

### 5. Consequences: on Ergative P and Polysynthesis

In addition to accounting for agreement variation in ergative languages and the possessor-like properties of ergative subjects, the proposal also explains the surprising fact that Bakerian polysynthetic languages that never have overt nominative-accusative

<sup>6</sup> We are very grateful to Aleksandr Evgenjevich Kibrik, Michael Daniel, Marina Chumakina, Fedor Rozhanskij and Yulia Adaskina who supplied us with a lot of data on case paradigms.

case systems can be ergative-absolutive (Baker 1996). Polysynthetic languages in Baker's sense are a more narrow class than those usually termed polysynthetic. Specifically, a Bakerian polysynthetic language shows obligatory agreement with all the verb's arguments either via morphology or noun-incorporation. Such a language also must lack infinitives, lack non-affixal *self*-type anaphors, and lack certain universal quantifiers such as 'every' (Baker 1996). The defining property of Baker's polysynthetic languages is the Morphological Visibility Condition (MVC) – the obligatory agreement with all of the verb's arguments, stated in (30).

(30) Morphological Visibility Condition (MVC), (Baker 1996, p.17):

*A phrase X is visible for theta-assignment from a head Y only if it is co-indexed with a morpheme in the word containing Y via: (i) an agreement relationship; (ii) a movement relationship.*

Baker (1996: 30) further argues that obligatory agreement with all the verb's arguments in polysynthetic languages absorbs grammatical case. Hence most polysynthetic languages have no morphological case-marking on the argument NPs. Mohawk, a language that has obligatory agreement with subject and object and no case marking at all, shown in (31) is a paradigmatic example of a Bakerian polysynthetic language:

- |      |    |     |                  |    |             |                           |
|------|----|-----|------------------|----|-------------|---------------------------|
| (31) | a. | Sak | rake-nuhwe'-s    | b. | Sak         | ri-nuhwe'-s               |
|      |    | Sak | MsS/1sO-like-hab |    | Sak         | 1sS/MsO-like-hab          |
|      |    | Sak | likes me.        |    | I like Sak. | <u>Mohawk</u> (Baker, pc) |

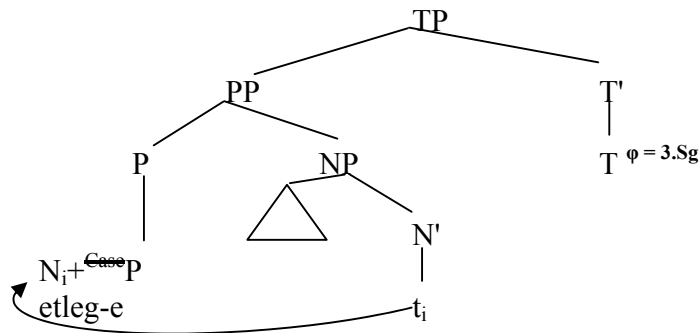
An exception to Baker's claim that agreement absorbs case are polysynthetic ergative languages such as Chukchee (32):

- |      |            |             |      |  |
|------|------------|-------------|------|--|
| (32) | Etleg-e    | chinit-kin  | uwik | wiringe-rke=nin                                |
|      | father-erg | self-poss   | body | defend-pres=3SgSubj/3SgnObj                    |
|      | The father | defends his | body | <u>Chukchee</u> (Baker1996:52; Nedljakov 1976) |

Baker's account of the fact that ergative case is not absorbed by agreement morphology is that ergative case is semantic, and is immune to absorption. But why should semantic case be immune? Our explanation is two-fold. First, the v in ergative languages is non-thematic, so the ergative subject is not an argument of the verb: its case should never be absorbed. Second, even if agreement in polysynthetic languages is so aggressive that it must absorb case on any agreed-with phrase, including non-arguments, ergative subjects would still be immune: ergative 'case' is not a case feature, but a P, and hence cannot be absorbed. The ergative P will remain, creating the appearance of case.

Now, assuming that the preposition in the ergative PP is thematic, we arrive at the conclusion that the NP embedded under the P must either agree with it or incorporate into it to satisfy the MVC (30). In fact, Baker (1996) independently argues that “the argument of the P must either agree with it or incorporate into it, making the P look like a stative verb or a case morpheme” (Baker 1996: 446). The incorporation of N into the P is shown in (33):

(33)



Chukchee

Thus, treating ergative 'case' as an incorporated thematic adposition explains why polysynthetic languages can either have no case marking at all or have ergative 'case systems'.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, we have argued that ergative 'case' is not case, but is a  $\theta$ -assigning P that attaches to the noun phrase. Prior work treats ergative case as structural or inherent *case*, e.g. (Bobaljik 1992, Murasugi 1992, Woolford 1997, a.o.) and is challenged by agreement variation in ergative languages: when ergative and absolutive subjects have the same  $\phi$ -features [cf1], they should trigger the same agreement. Moreover, treating ergative case as nominative case (Bobaljik 1992) does not explain (among other things) why nominative-accusative languages never show the kind of variation in agreement as ergative languages do. The same problem arises for Murasugi (1992) who treats ergative case as accusative. Finally, while theories that view ergative case as inherent (Woolford 1997, Legate 2005) explain why the ergative subject may fail to trigger agreement – this often happens with inherently case-marked subjects – it still does not account for the existence of ergative vs. accusative agreement patterns. In contrast, the current proposal explains agreement variation in ergative languages and connects it to the possessor-like nature of ergative subjects. Finally, as a consequence of our proposal we can explain the surprising fact that polysynthetic languages that can never be nominative-accusative, can be ergative-absolutive.

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