External arguments sorted

Ergatives, datives, and what's in between

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The question: Where does ergative case come from?

- Nominative-accusative languages: **nominative case** is associated with subjects (both transitive and intransitive).
- Under structural accounts, nominative case is assigned by T/Infl to the closest DP (Spec-Head or through c-command).

The challenge of ergative case

In ergative-absolutive languages, **ergative case** is associated only with **a subset** of subjects (transitive subjects).
⇒ It cannot be assigned like nominative case.

So where does it come from?

Two main approaches

- Ergative is **dependent** on the presence of a second NP.

  (Baker 2014, 2015; Deal 2019; Zompì 2019; Yuan 2018, 2022, a.o.)

- Ergative is **inherent** = assigned to the external argument by the head that introduces it.

  (Nash 1996; Woolford 1997, 2006; Aldridge 2004, 2008, 2012; Massam 2006; Legate 2008, 2017; Coon 2013; Sheehan 2017; Tollan 2018; Ershova 2019, a.o.)

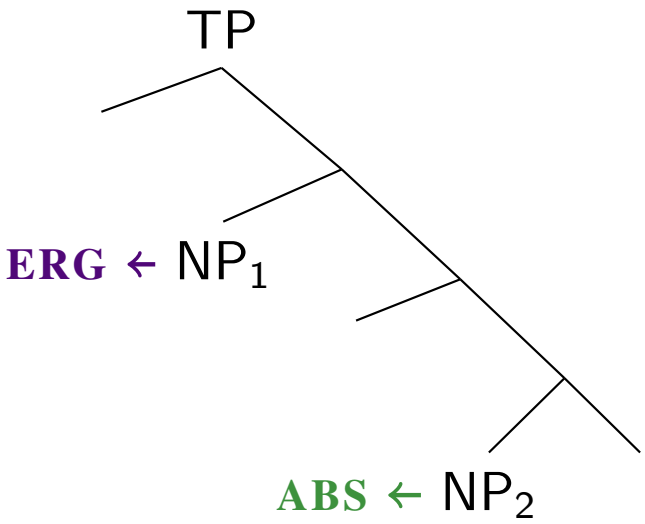
Ergative as dependent

Ergative case assignment rule (Baker and Bobaljik, 2017:112)

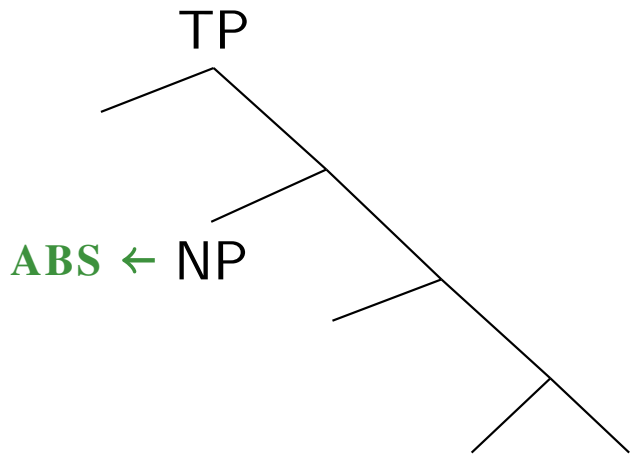
a. If NP_1 c-commands NP_2 and both are contained in the same domain, then value the case feature of NP_1 as **ergative**.

b. Otherwise NP is nominative/absolutive.

Transitive clause:



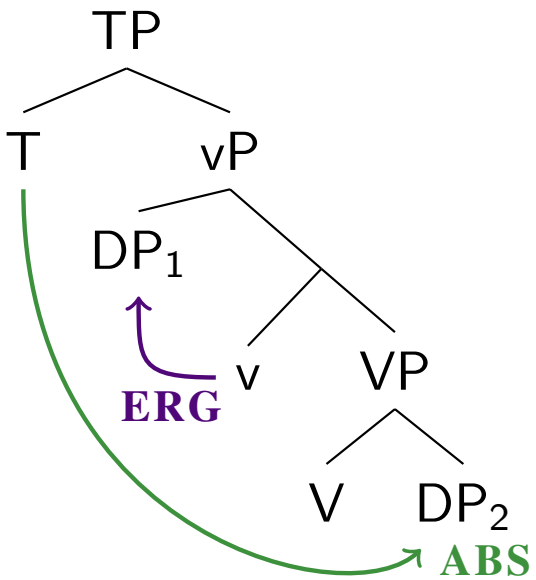
Intransitive clause:



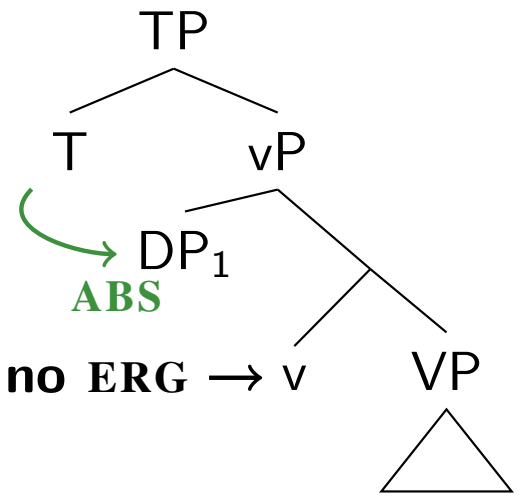
Ergative as inherent

- Ergative case is assigned together with the agent theta-role by the head that selects the external argument (e.g. v).
- Absolutive/nominative/accusative case is structural: assigned by T or v.

Transitive clause:



Intransitive clause:



The problem: UTAH and inherent ergative case

The Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (Baker, 1997:74)

Identical thematic relationships between items are represented by **identical structural relationships** between those items at the level of D-structure.

Baker and Bobaljik (2017):

- All agents are introduced by the same head ($\leftarrow$ UTAH).
- $\Rightarrow$ Intransitive (unergative) agents should get inherent ERG.
- But this is typologically extremely rare, if at all attested.

My response

Main claim

TRANSITIVE AGENT and UNERGATIVE AGENT are **not** the same theta-role.

⇒ They are **not** introduced by the same head.

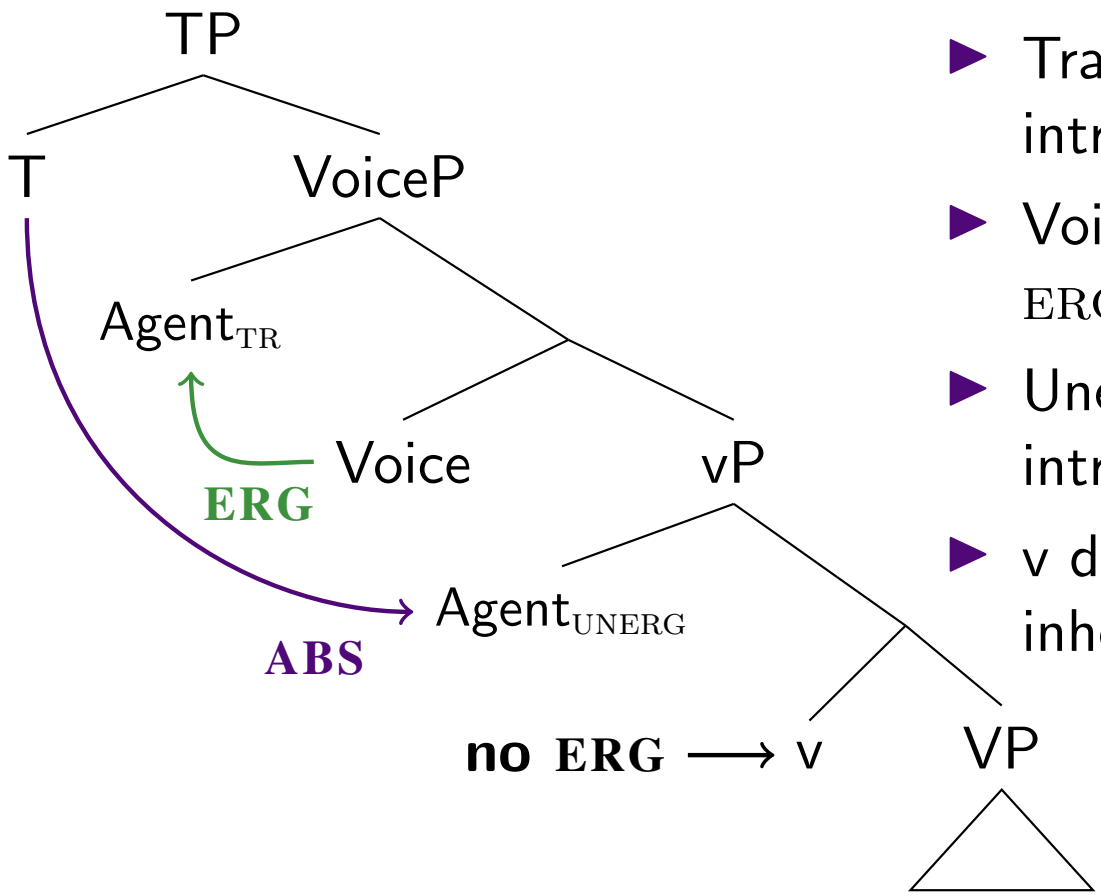
⇒ No challenge for inherent ERG.

- External arguments are introduced **at different heights** depending on **degree of agentivity**.
- Inherent case is associated with **extremes of the hierarchy**:

highest	= high agents	→ **ergative**
	elsewhere	(no inherent case)
lowest	= experiencers/holders/possessors	→ **dative**

Different positions for ergatives and unergatives

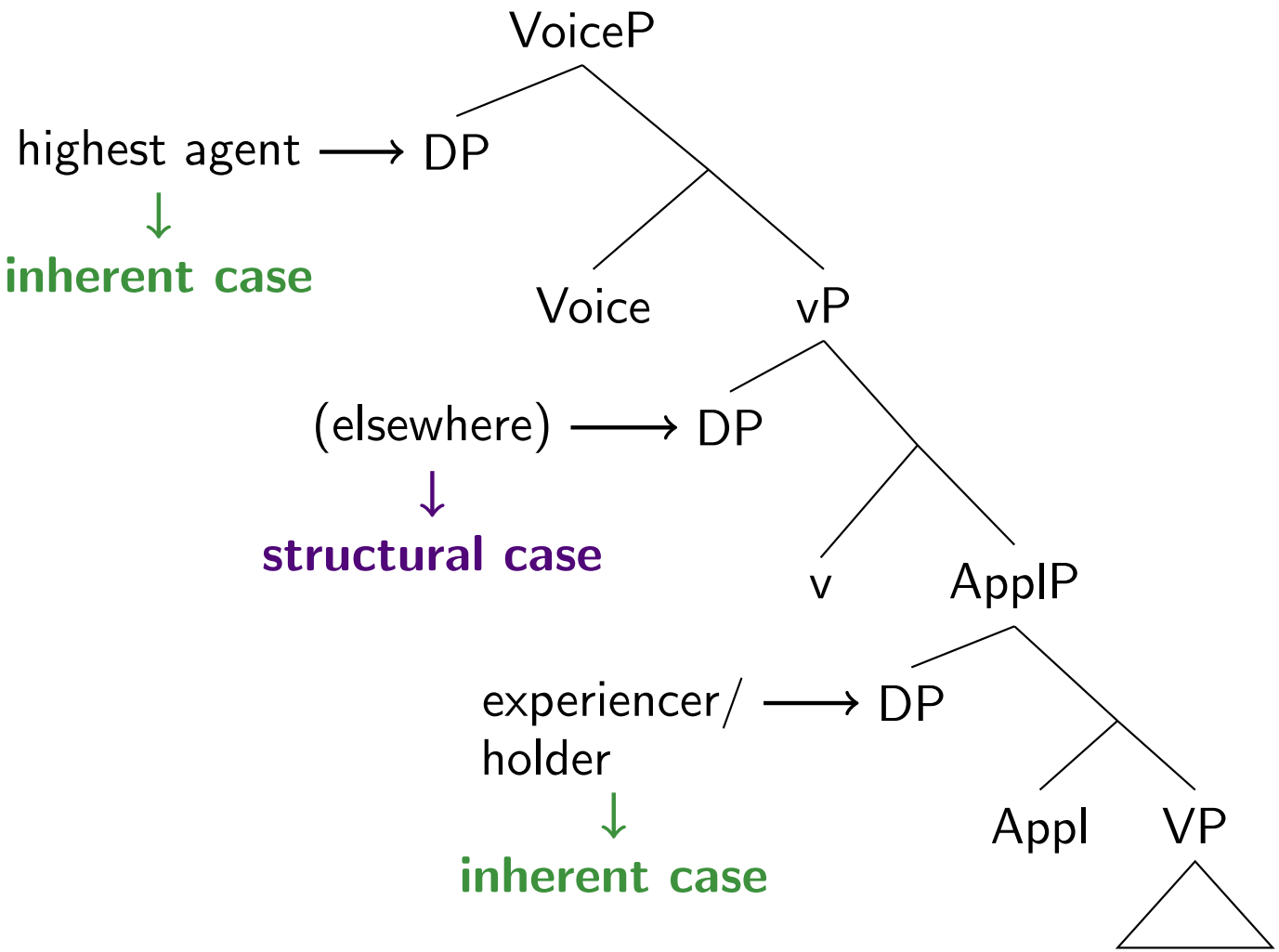
Proposed structure:



- Transitive agents are introduced by Voice.
- Voice assigns inherent ERG case.
- Unergative agents are introduced by v.
- v does not assign inherent case.

(Massam 2009; Tollan 2018; Tollan and Oxford 2018; Tollan and Massam 2022; McGinnis 2022; Ershova 2023; Burukina and Polinsky 2025)

The expanded external argument hierarchy



(Woolford 2006; Wood and Marantz 2015; Sheehan 2017; Cuervo 2020; Nash 2022, a.o.)

Roadmap

Background: two positions for agents

Voice and v beyond case: Indonesian

Expanding the typology: "lowest" external arguments

Other (non)challenges

Conclusion

Roadmap

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High and low agents

Tollan (2018) on Samoan:

(Massam 2009; Tollan and Oxford 2018; Tollan and Massam 2022; McGinnis 2022; Burukina and Polinsky 2025)

- **Two types of external arguments:** (Dowty, 1991)

  proto-high agents = ergative

  proto-low agents = absolutive

- **Evidence:**

  1. Transitivized unergatives $\longrightarrow$ no ergative case
  2. Two-place predicates with low agents
  3. Ergative associated with higher agentivity

No ergative case in transitivized unergatives

Sā kiki **[e** le teine **]** **[** le polo **]**.
PST kick **ERG** the girl the ball.**ABS**

'The girl kicked the ball.' (Tollan, 2018:5) **transitive: ERG agent**

Sā siva **[** le teine **]**.
PST dance the girl.**ABS**

'The girl danced.' **unergative: ABS agent**

Sā siva **[** le teine **]** **[i** le uosi **]**.
PST dance the girl.**ABS** **OBL** the waltz

'The girl danced a/the waltz.' (Tollan, 2018:7)

unergative + object: ABS agent

Ergative case is associated with higher agentivity

ABS agent: lower agentivity

Na va'ai [le fafine] [i le puleā'oga] (i le maketi).
PST see the woman.**ABS** **OBL** the principal OBL the market

'The woman saw the principal (at the market).'
*(∼ **accidentally**; the meeting was spontaneous)*

ERG agent: higher agentivity

Na va'ai [e le fafine] [le puleā'oga] (i lona ofisa).
PST see **ERG** the woman the principal.**ABS** OBL her office

'The woman(ERG) saw the principal(ABS) (in her office).'
*(∼ **intentionally**; the woman visited the principal)* (Mosel and Hovdhaugen, 1992:424)

Argument structure is sensitive to event construal

- **Old observation:** argument structure is sensitive to details of event construal (e.g. telicity, agentivity, animacy, volitionality, affectedness, perspective). (Pesetsky 1982; Dowty 1991; Levin and Rappoport Hovav 1994; Pesetsky 1995; Folli and Harley 2013; Krejci 2020, a.m.o.)

- **Example:** variable **unergative**/**unaccusative** behavior in Italian

Mario **ha** / ***è** continuato.
Mario **have** / ***be** continued
'Mario continued.'

Animate subject → unergative

Il dibattito **è** / ***ha** continuato.
the debate **be** / ***have** continued
'The debate continued.' (Rosen 1984 via Krejci 2020:146)

Inanimate subject → unaccusative

Connection between agents and internal arguments

Dowty (1991): properties associated with **proto-high agents**

1. volitional involvement
2. sentience/perception
3. movement (in relation to another participant)
4. exists independently of the event
5. causes an event or **change of state in another participant**

Connection between ergative case and internal arguments

High (ergative) agents are only compatible with event construals **which involve an affected participant**.

Cf. Öztürk (2021); Nash (2022): all initiators require an internal argument in Georgian and Pazar Laz!

High agents beyond ergativity

- High agents require an internal argument.
- High agents are introduced by Voice.
- Low agents are introduced by v.
- In ergative languages, Voice assigns inherent ergative case.

Prediction: existence of high vs. low agents without ergative case

Confirmed by Indonesian!

Roadmap

Background: two positions for agents

Voice and v beyond case: Indonesian

Expanding the typology: "lowest" external arguments

Other (non)challenges

Conclusion

Jakarta Indonesian: Basic clause structure

- no case or agreement
- word order (generally): SVOX
- Transitive verbs can be **active** or **passive**:*

Active: Agent (ACT-)Verb Theme

Lia sudah **ng-**ambil meja makan-nya.
Lia already **ACT-**take table eat-the
'Lia already took the dining table.'

Passive: Theme PASS-Verb Agent

Meja makan-nya **di-**ambil Lia.
table eat-the **PASS-**take Lia
'The dining table was taken by Lia.'

*Also object voice (not relevant here).

Voiceless transitives

- Most transitive verbs productively combine with active and passive morphology.
- But some bivalent verbs do not ($\approx$ pseudo-transitives).
- **Examples:** *dapat* 'receive', *lupa* 'forget', *bicara* 'speak', *butuh* 'need' **= low agents / experiencers**

(Stevens 1970; Chung 1975; Vamarasi 1999 on Standard Indonesian)

$\Rightarrow$ **these verbs do not contain Voice**

Low agents are incompatible with Voice: *dapat*

Aku **dapat** buku ini kemarin.
I **receive** book this yesterday

'I received this book yesterday.'

* Buku ini **di-dapat** aku kemarin.
book this **PASS-receive** I yesterday

Intended: 'This book was received by me yesterday.'

Low agents are incompatible with Voice: *lupa*

Aku **lupa** istilah bahasa Inggris-nya.
I **forget** phrase language English-the

'I forgot the phrase in English.'

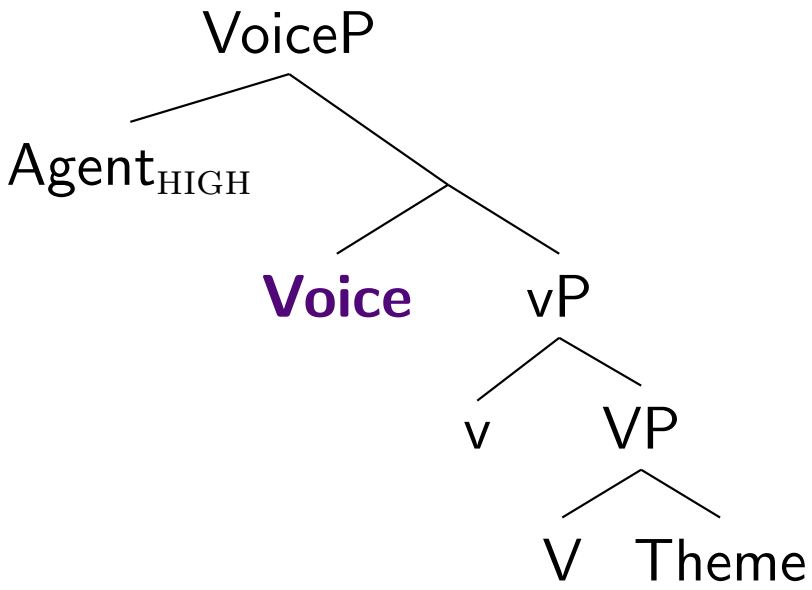
* Istilah-nya **di-lupa** aku.
phrase-the **PASS-forget** I

Intended: 'The phrase was forgotten by me.'

Transitives versus pseudo-transitives

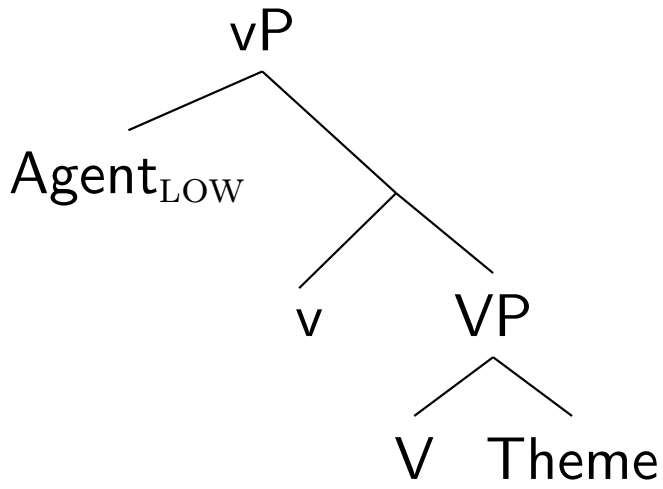
Regular transitives:

✓ internal argument
✓ high agent
✓ voice morphology



Pseudo-transitives:

✓ internal argument
✗ low agent
✗ no voice morphology



Voice and increased agentivity

- Pseudo-transitives can be **transitivized** with suffix *-in*.
- **Result:** increased agentivity and compatibility with voice morphology.

lupa ‘forget’ vs. *lupa-in* ‘erase from memory’

Kejadian itu susah buat **di-lupa-in** Yuni.
incident that hard for **PASS-forget-TRANS** Yuni

‘That incident was difficult for Yuni to erase from her memory.’

\# Istilah-nya **di-lupa-in** aku.
phrase-the **PASS-forget-TRANS** I

Intended: ‘The phrase was forgotten by me.’
(*It’s weird to purposefully erase a phrase from your memory.*)

dapat ‘receive’ vs. *dapat-in* ‘procure’

Aku dapat-**in** buku ini kemarin.
I receive-**TRANS** book this yesterday

✓ ‘I **procured** this book yesterday.’
(after multiple phone calls to the publisher trying to get a copy)

‘I **received** this book yesterday.’
(the publisher sent me a new copy without me asking)

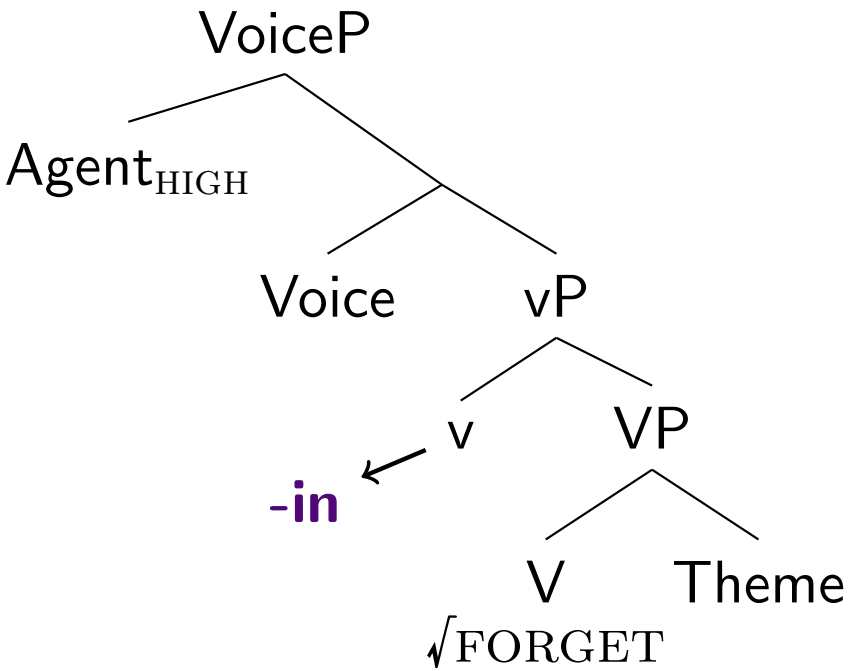
✓ **Compatible with voice:**

Buku ini **di-dapat-in** -nya susah
book this **PASS-receive-TRANS** -the hard

‘This book was hard to get.’

Transitivized pseudo-transitives

- Higher agentivity → agent introduced by Voice
- v is pronounced as *-in* (when adjacent to Voice)



Unergatives don't contain Voice

- Unergative verbs **are not compatible with voice**, even when combined with an object.
- **Examples:**
  belajar 'study', *main* 'play', *nyanyi* 'sing', *nari* 'dance'
- **Same pattern as in Samoan:**

  Samoan $\rightarrow$ absence of ERG

  Indonesian $\rightarrow$ impossibility of voice morphology

Unergatives don't contain Voice: *belajar*

- **Unergative without object:**

  Desi **belajar** dengan keras
  Desi **study** with hard
  'Desi studies very hard.'

- **Unergative with object:**

  Yuni cepet **belajar** huruf-nya.
  Yuni fast study alphabet-the
  'Yuni is learning the alphabet quickly.'

- **Not compatible with voice:**

  * Huruf-nya **di-belajar** Desi.
    alphabet-the **PASS-study** Desi

    Intended: 'The alphabet is being learned by Desi.'

Unergative + Voice = increased agentivity

- Unergatives can be "transitivized" with *-in*, like pseudo-transitives.
- **Result:** increased agentivity and compatibility with voice.

belajar ‘study’ vs. *pelajar-in* ‘peruse / study with intent’

Kamu perlu **pelajar-in** apa malam ini?
you need **study-TRANS** what night this

‘What do you need to study tonight?’

✓ *You have a study plan, with a list of specific topics.*

\# *Generally asking about homework, there is no specific agenda.*

✓ **Compatible with voice:**

Peta-nya perlu **di-pelajar-in**
map-the need **PASS-study-TRANS**

‘We need to study the map (before we go).’

Voice and v beyond ergativity: Summary

Transitive (=more agentive) and **unergative** (=less agentive) agents are introduced by **different heads**:

- High agents by Voice → only compatible with events which include an internal argument.
- Low agents by v → possible without an internal argument.

In Samoan, Voice assigns inherent ergative case.

In Indonesian, Voice is diagnosed with verbal morphology.

Indonesian confirms:

There are two distinct positions for agents, and the higher one requires an internal argument.

⇒ **Inherent ergative case is not at odds with UTAH.**

Roadmap

Background: two positions for agents

Voice and v beyond case: Indonesian

Expanding the typology: "lowest" external arguments

Other (non)challenges

Conclusion

Ergative to agents :: dative to experiencers

Why inherent ergative case cannot be ruled out:

- Some external arguments receive inherent case: **dative experiencers**.
- This is uncontested even in dependent case theory.

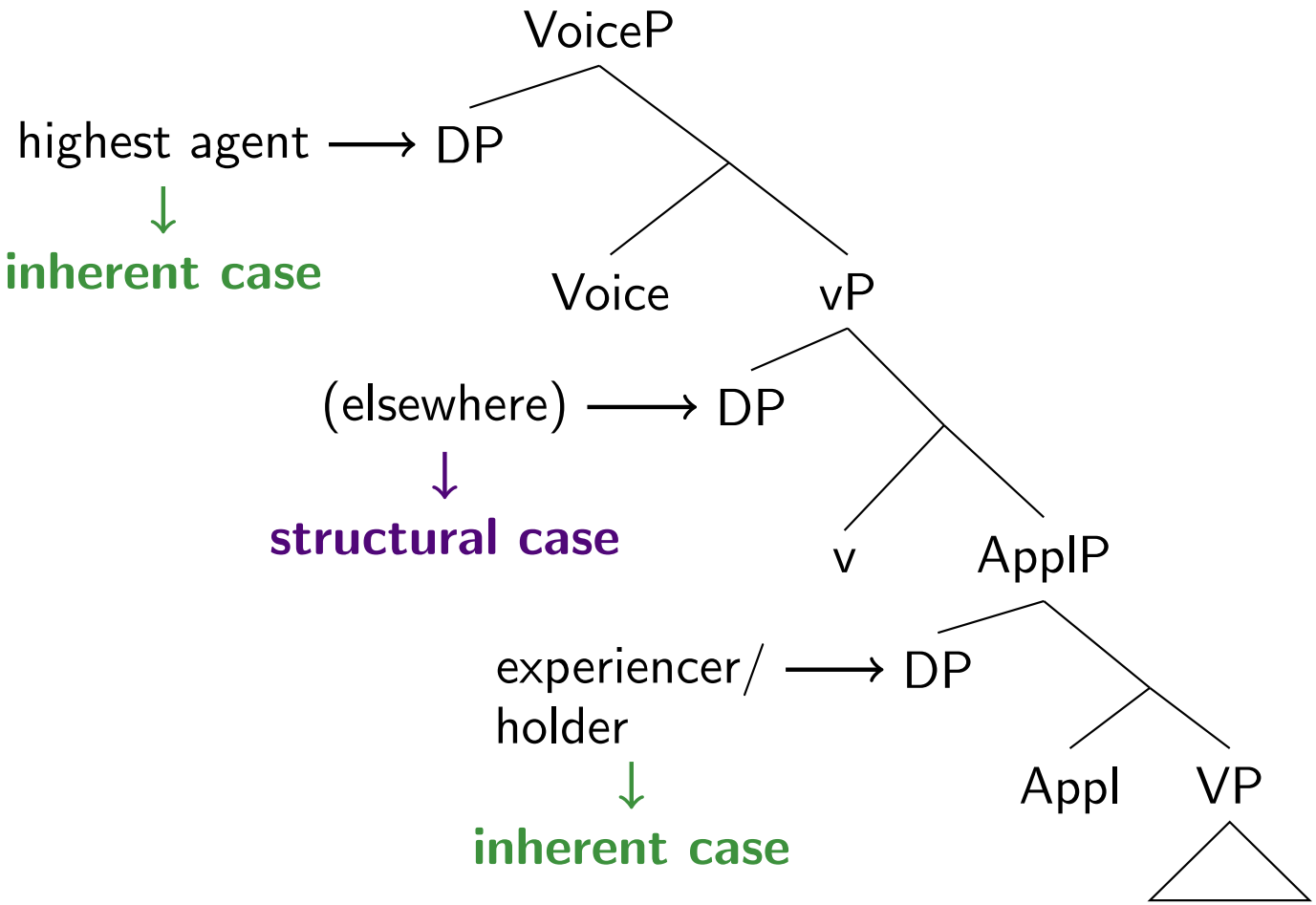
  (cf. Baker and Vinokurova 2010:606; Baker 2015:134-135; Baker and Bobaljik 2017:124)
- If there is dative inherent case, there is no principled way of ruling out ergative inherent case, **except by stipulation**.

The proposed typology

- At least 3 possible external argument positions.
- Inherent case is associated with **more specified** theta-roles: HIGH AGENT and EXPERIENCER.
- Unergative agents are the **least specified**

  $\Rightarrow$ never assigned inherent case.

The expanded external argument hierarchy



(Woolford 2006; Wood and Marantz 2015; Sheehan 2017; Cuervo 2020; Nash 2022, a.o.)

Illustrated with Lezgian!

Lezgian: basic clause structure

- word order: SOV, but others are possible (Haspelmath, 1993)
- no agreement
- ≈ 18 morphological cases
- ergative-absolutive case alignment

Transitive verb: **ERG** agent + **ABS** theme

Alfija**-di**	**maqala**	kxe-na.
Alfija**-ERG**	article**(ABS)**	write-PST

'Alfija wrote an article.' (Haspelmath, 1993:294)

Unergative verb: **ABS** agent

Xup'	raxa-da	**bilbil**	seher	waxtund-a...
PT	speak-FUT	nightingale**(ABS)**	morning(GEN)	time-INESS

'How (beautifully) the nightingale sings in the morningtide,...' (*ibid.*:444)

Other bivalent case patterns

In addition to ERG-ABS transitive verbs, Lezgian also has:

- **ABS-OBL** verbs ∼ **low agents**

  Examples: *qeqyn* 'look for', *kiligun* 'look at', *agaq'un* 'reach', *agatun* 'approach', *χk'un* 'touch', *haltun* 'meet' ...

Sa	q'adar	vaχtunda	**zun**	**vavaj**	k^{w}ax-da.
one	quantity	at.time	I(**ABS**)	you.**SBEL**	lose-FUT

  'In some time I will lose you.' (https://www.lezgichal.ru/node/446)

- **DAT-ABS**/**OBL** verbs ∼ **experiencers**

  Examples: *akun* 'see', *žuʁun* 'find', *k'an-* 'want/love', *či-* 'know', *awa* 'have' ...

[wi	amaldar-wal]		**zaz**	či-zwa.
you.GEN	cunning-NML(**ABS**)		I.**DAT**	know-IPF

  'I know your cunning.' (Alekseev and Šejxov, 1997)

Ergative case is associated with higher agentivity

- Some **ABS-OBL** and DAT-ABS verbs can be "transitivized" with suffix *-(a)r*.
- Result: ERG agent and increased agentivity.

- *kʷaxun* 'lose **(accidentally)**' low agent = **ABS**

Sa q'adar vaχtunda **zun** **vavaj** kʷax-da.
one quantity at.time I(**ABS**) you.**SBEL** lose-FUT

'In some time I will lose you.' (https://www.lezgichal.ru/node/446)

- *kʷadarun* 'discard **(with intent)**' high agent = **ERG**

kʷa.da-**r**-na **wuna** **zun**.
lose-**TR**-AOR you.**ERG** I.(**ABS**)

'You discarded me.' (https://stihi.ru/2016/10/07/9312)

(Haspelmath, 1993:164)

Ergative case is associated with higher agentivity

- Some ABS-OBL and **DAT-ABS** verbs can be "transitivized" with suffix *-(a)r*.
- Result: ERG agent and increased agentivity.

- *žuʁun* 'find **(accidentally)**' experiencer = **DAT**

Zaz [sa ktab] žʁa-na.
I.**DAT** one book(**ABS**) find-AOR
'I found a book.' (Haspelmath, 1993:281)

- *žuʁurun* 'find **(with an effort)**' high agent = **ERG**

[Swas k'anzawaj-**da**] wiči **Ø** žaʁu**r**-aj.
bride want.IPF-PRT-SBST.SG(**ERG**) self(ERG) *pro*(**ABS**) find.**TR**-OPT
'Let him who wants a bride find (her) himself.' (*ibid.*:186)

(Haspelmath, 1993:164)

Summary: inherent case on external arguments

- The possibility of inherent ERG is confirmed by the (uncontested) existence of inherent DAT on experiencers.
- 3 external argument positions:
  1. high agents (**ERG**)
  2. low agents (no inherent case)
  3. experiencers (**DAT**)
- Illustrated with Lezgian:
  - Bivalent verbs with ABS and DAT external arguments
  - ABS is less agentive than ERG
  - DAT is less agentive than ABS
  - Confirmed by possibility of "transitivization" + increased agentivity.

Roadmap

Background: two positions for agents

Voice and v beyond case: Indonesian

Expanding the typology: "lowest" external arguments

Other (non)challenges

Conclusion

Other (non)challenges

1. Raising to ergative → challenge for inherent ergative?
   (Appendix)

2. Transitive verbs without ergative case
   → challenge for dependent ergative?

Reversing the tables: misbehaving transitives

- **Prediction of dependent case:** all transitive verbs should have an ergative subject.
- **Exceptions must:**

  involve lexical or inherent case on the internal argument, or

  a different underlying syntax
- But many ergative languages have productive classes of **"intransitive" bivalent predicates**.

Absolutive-oblique transitives in Samoan

Na va'ai [le fafine] [**i** le puleā'oga] (i le maketi).
PST see the woman.**ABS** **OBL** the principal OBL the market

'The woman saw the principal (at the market).'

Sā mulimuli [le leoleo] [**i** le au gaoi].
PST follow the police.**ABS** **OBL** the robbers

'The police followed the robbers.' (Tollan, 2018:3)

Examples: *fa'alogo* 'hear', *mātamata* 'look at', *fiafia* 'like, enjoy', *alofa* 'love', *mana'o* 'want', *fesili* 'ask', etc. (Tollan, 2018:10)

Absolutive-dative transitives in West Circassian

"Regular" transitive: A = ergative; O = absolutive

	A	**O**	
[	mə pŝaŝe-**m**]	[laʁe-xe-**r**]	**Ø-j-**ethaǯ'ə
	this girl-**ERG**	dish-PL-**ABS**	**3ABS-3SG.ERG-**wash.PRS

'This girl is washing the dishes.'

Bivalent "intransitives": A = absolutive; O = dative

	A	**O**	
[	mə pŝaŝe-**r**]	[haǯ'e-xe-**m**]	**O-ja-**že
	this girl-**ABS**	guest-PL-**OBL**	**3ABS-3PL.IO-**wait

'This girl is waiting for the guests.'

Examples: *jepλən* 'look', *jebewən* 'kiss', *jewen* 'hit', *jeceqen* 'bite', *jeɕeɕen* 'scold', *jeǯen* 'read', *jezeš'ən* 'tire of', etc.

Dependent case theory pushes the problem down the tree

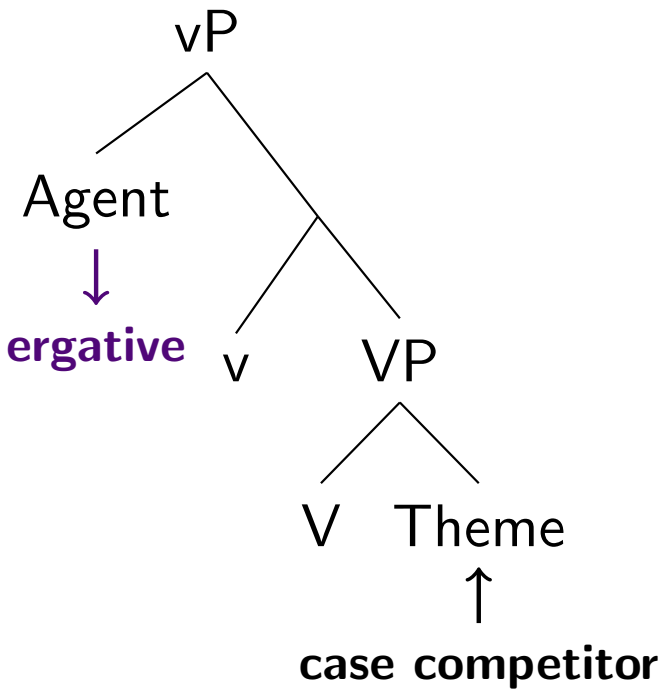
If all agents are introduced in the same position,

and, presumably, all themes are introduced in the same position,

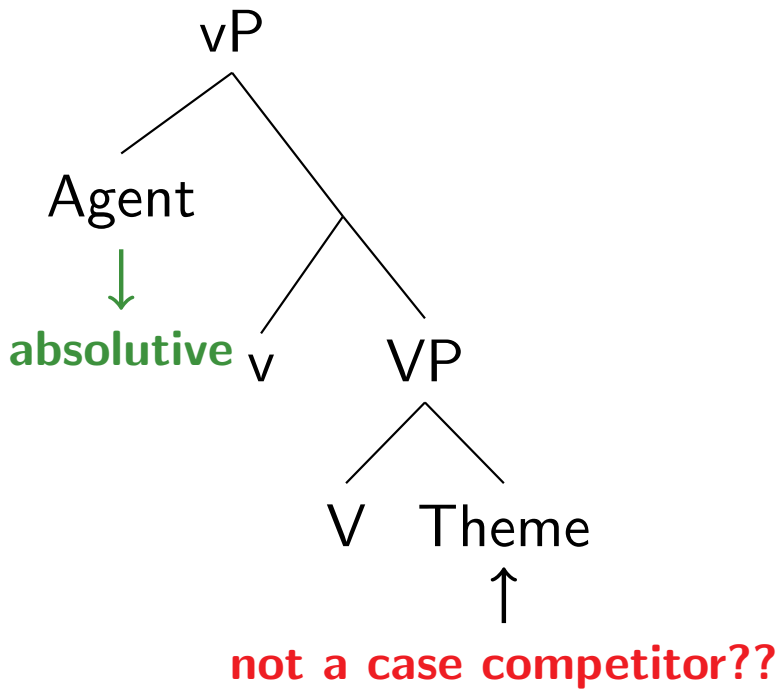
why do some themes get oblique and others absolutive?

The case algorithm conundrum

Ergative-absolutive verbs:



Absolutive-oblique verbs:



And where does oblique come from?

There must be something different about themes?

If agents are the same for ergative-absolutive and absolutive-oblique verbs,

then themes must be different:

- assigned lexical/inherent case

> **Problem:** too systematic and productive!

- introduced by a different head (Appl or P)

> **Problem:** counter to UTAH (+ syntactic evidence?)

But isn't this **the same exact problem** as different case on different agents?

Where oblique case on themes comes from

Tollan (2018):

absolutive-oblique is essentially a **nominative-accusative** pattern

- Burzio's Generalization: v assigns "oblique" (=accusative) if it introduces an external argument.
- For ergative-absolutive verbs:
  v does not introduce an argument ⇒ no oblique case.

Roadmap

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Recap: The challenge we started with

Argument against inherent ergative case:

- Agents are uniformly introduced in by the same head (UTAH).
- If this head assigns inherent ergative case to transitive agents, **it should also assign inherent case to unergative agents**.

⇒ All agents (transitive **and unergative**) should be ergative.

The takeaway: Inherent ergative case 🤝 UTAH

My response:

Transitive agent and unergative agent **are not the same theta-role**.

Supported by:

Samoan (Tollan, 2018): ERG agents are introduced higher than ABS agents

Beyond ergativity: 2 classes of bivalent verbs in Indonesian

- "Regular transitives" which are compatible with voice.
  $\sim$ **high agent in Spec,VoiceP**
- "Pseudo-transitives" which are not compatible with voice.
  $\sim$ **low agent in Spec,vP**

Evidence from bivalent verbs

Both in Samoan and Indonesian, the primary evidence for two types of agents comes from **"misbehaving transitives"**

= bivalent verbs with...

an absolutive agent	(Samoan)
no voice alternations	(Indonesian)

In addition to providing evidence **for inherent ergative case**,

they present a argument **against dependent ergative case**, which predicts that **all transitive verbs** should be ERG-ABS.

Typology of external arguments

- Additional argument for inherent ERG:
  inherent DAT on lowest external arguments (experiencers).
- More specified thematic roles associated with inherent case:

  highest agent → ERG

  experiencer → DAT
- Less specified thematic roles (=unergative agent) do not receive inherent case.
- Illustrated with Lezgian:
  - ABS and DAT external arguments associated with lower agentivity
  - DAT associated with experiencer theta-role
  - can alternate with ERG→ increased agentivity

Thank you!

- West Circassian consultant: Svetlana K. Alishaeva
- Indonesian consultant: Satyawidya Wulansari
- Participants of 24.909 at MIT (field methods course on Indonesian; Spring 2024)
- Participants of 24.956 at MIT (seminar on subjecthood; Spring 2023), especially Will Oxford
- Lenore Grenoble, Alan Yu, Renat Zalov, and the participants of the field methods course on Lezgian in 2014-2015 at UChicago
- Audience and reviewers at CLS 61 and the University of Potsdam

Ergative case in nonthematic positions

- Inherent ergative case is assigned together with the agent theta-role.
- **Prediction:** ergative case should not surface in derived, nonthematic positions.
- **Challenge:** (Baker, 2014; Baker and Bobaljik, 2017; Deal, 2019)
  unaccusative verb + applicative $\rightarrow$ ergative subject

Raising to ergative in Nez Perce

Deal (2019):

- Unaccusative verbs can combine with high applicative.
- **Result:** theme surfaces with ergative case.

Unaccusative: theme is nominative

Ha-'aayat hi-pa-**pay**-no'-kom.
PL-woman.**NOM** 3SUBJ-S.PL-**come**-FUT-CIS

'The women will come.'

Unaccusative + applicative: theme is ergative

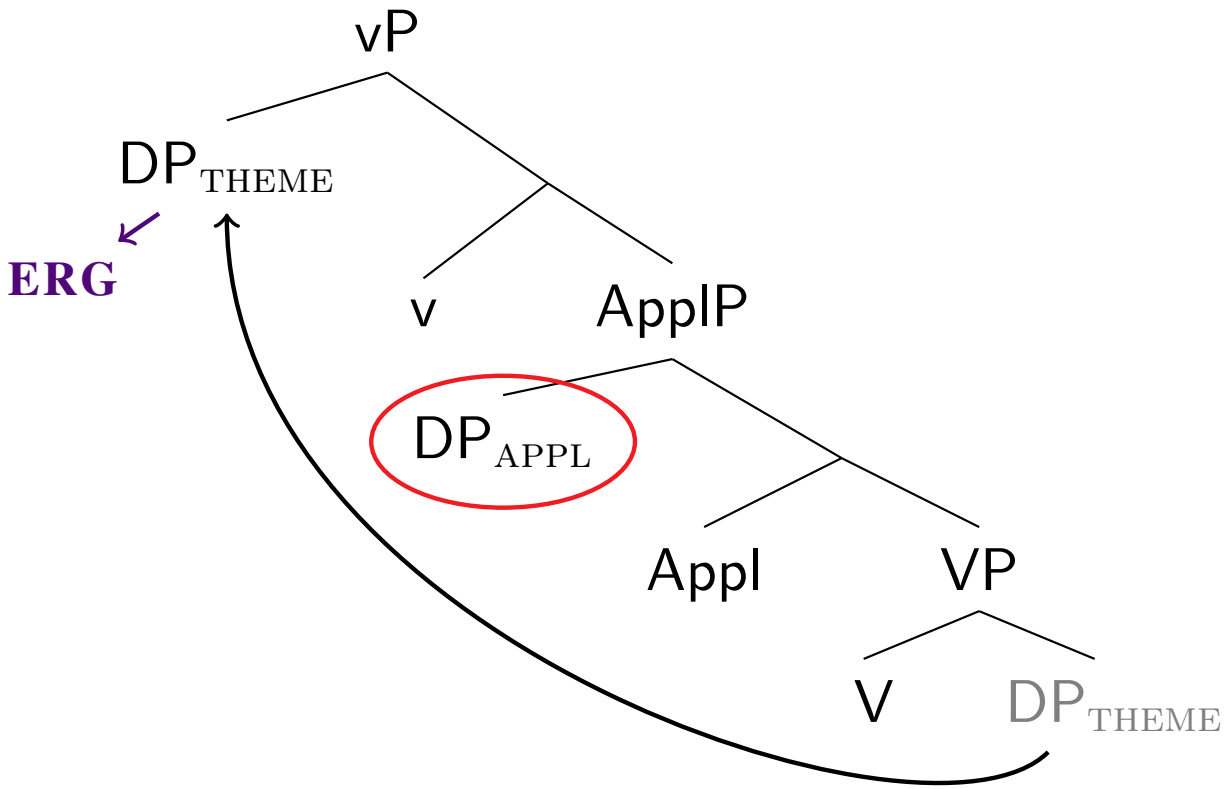
Ha-'aayat-**om** nuun-e hi-pa-naas-**pay**-**noo**-yo'-kom.
PL-woman-**ERG** 1PL-ACC 2SUBJ-S.PL-O.PL-**come**-**APPL**-FUT-CIS

'The women will come to us.'

Raising to ergative in Nez Perce

Deal (2019):

The analysis: theme **raises** to Spec,vP + dependent ergative case



+Some additional assumptions to allow raising over DP_{APPL}.

The alternative: different event construal

My proposal:

In Nez Perce, adding an applied argument forces **an agentive event construal**.

$\Rightarrow$ The argument structure is no longer unaccusative.

Benefits:

- Connection with well-known variability in unaccusative behavior.
- No need to raise over applied argument (locality issue).
- Ergative subject is **generated in Spec,VoiceP**

  $\Rightarrow$ **No challenge for inherent ergative case!**

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