External arguments sorted

Ergatives, datives, and what's in between

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So where does it come from?

Two main approaches

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- 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.)

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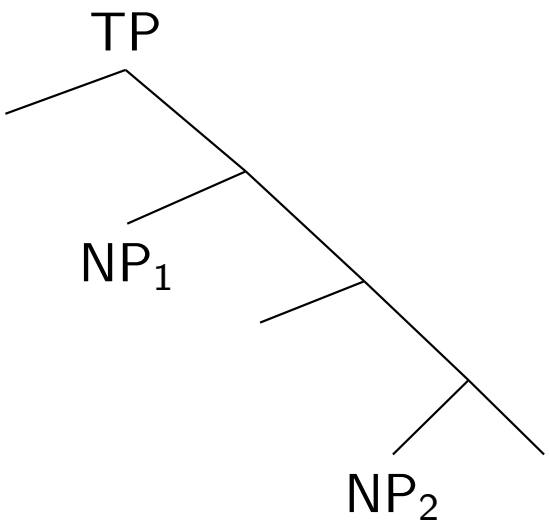

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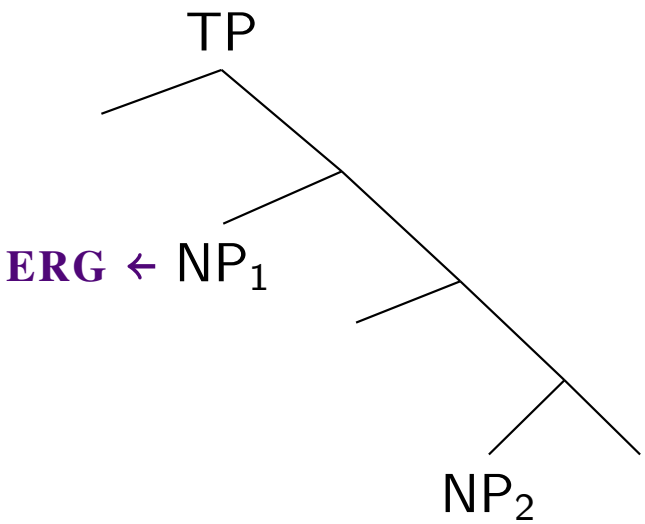

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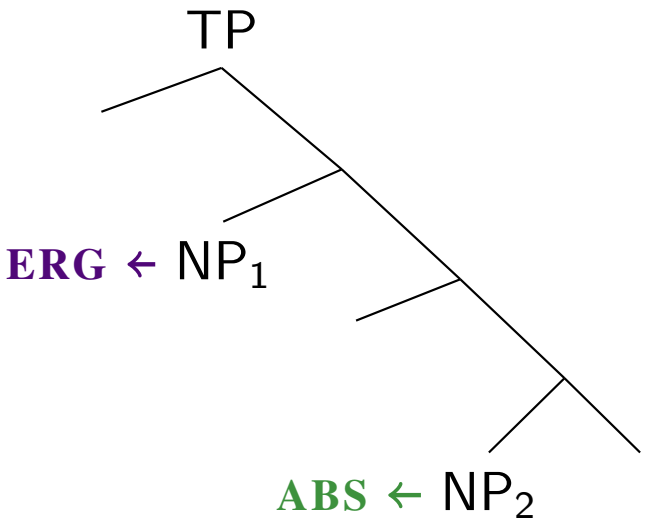

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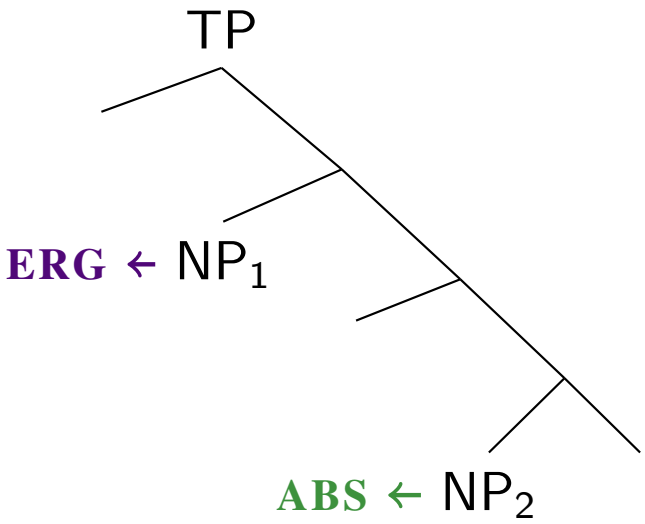

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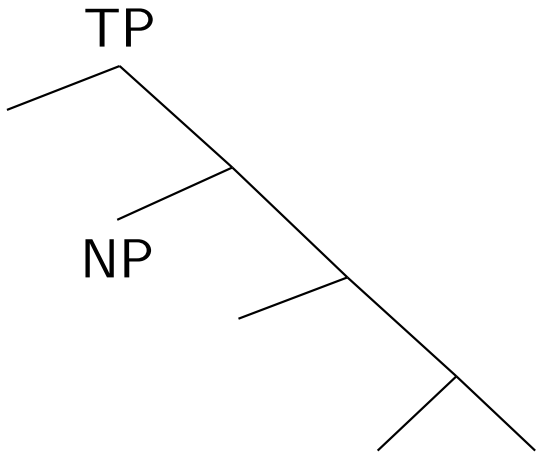

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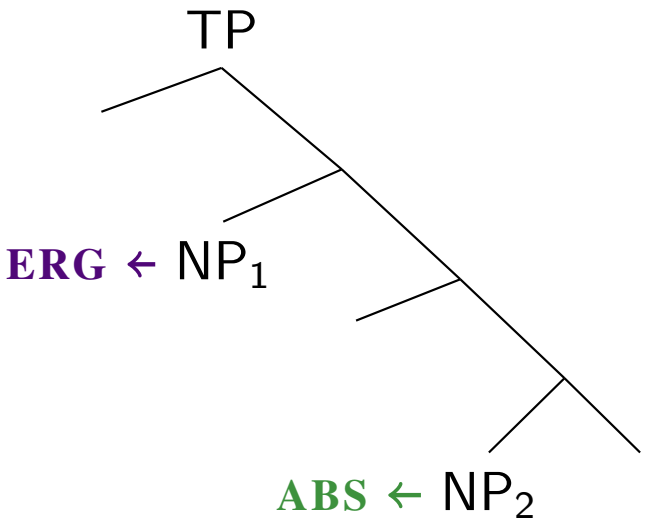

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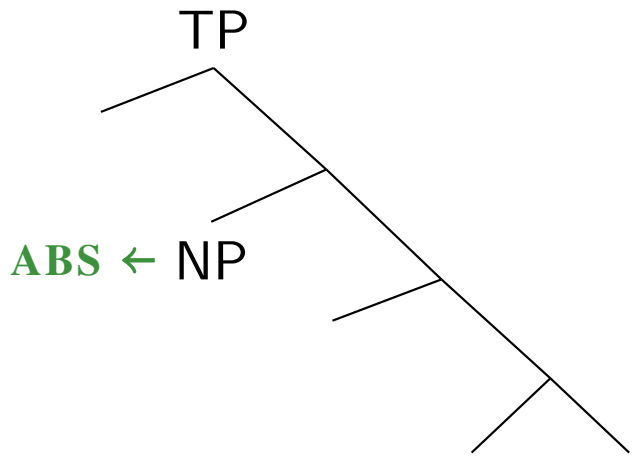

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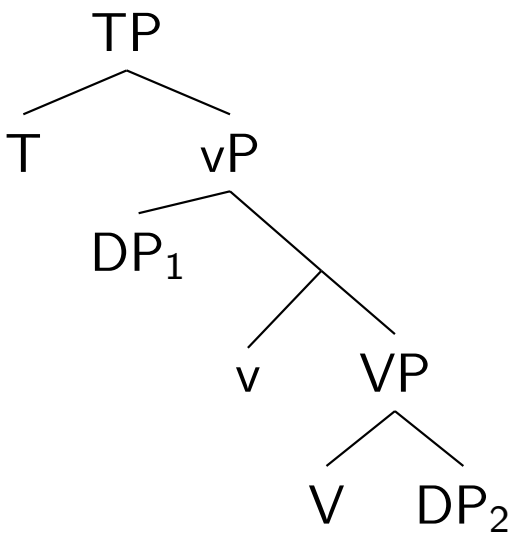

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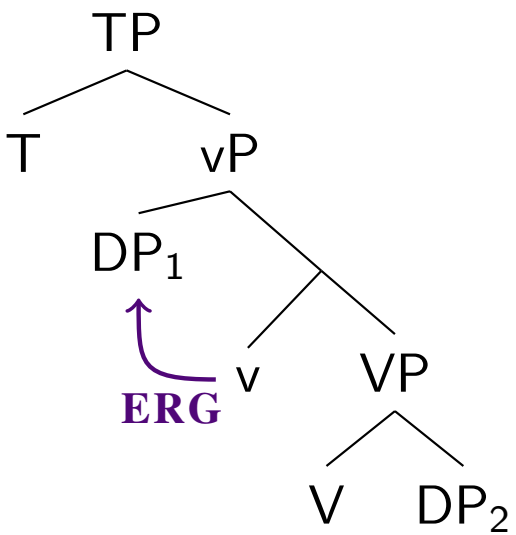

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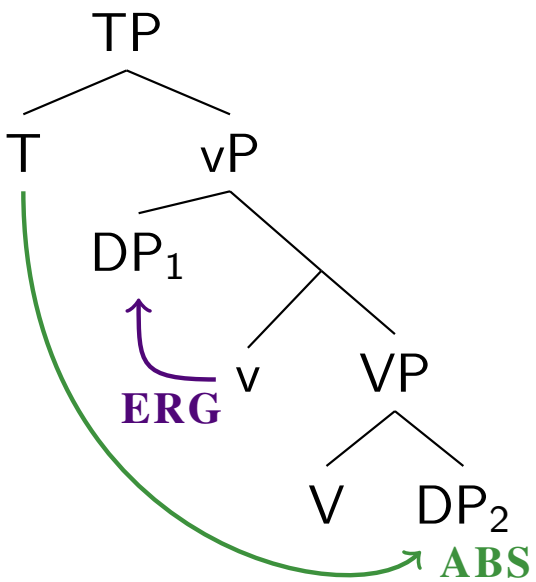

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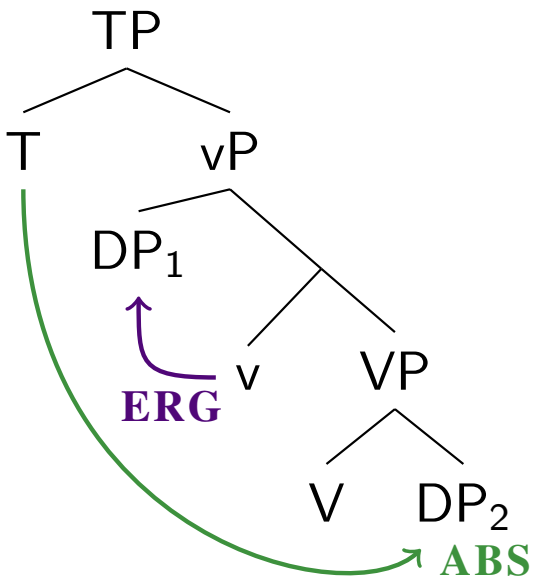

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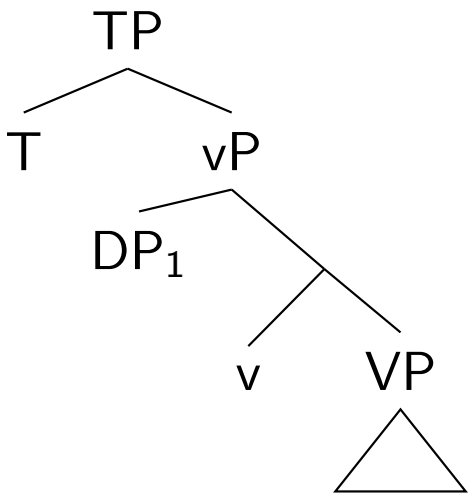

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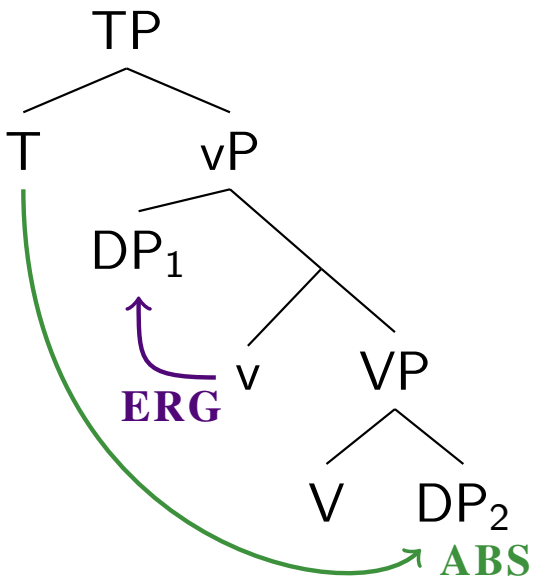

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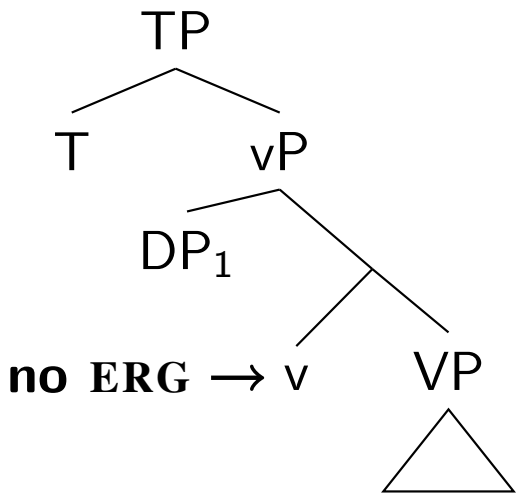

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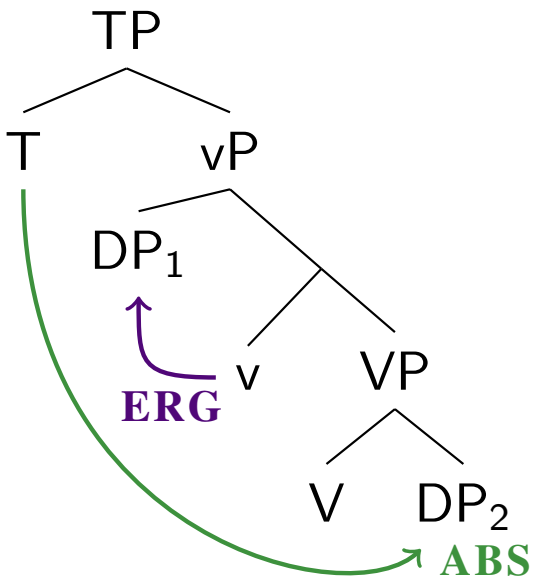

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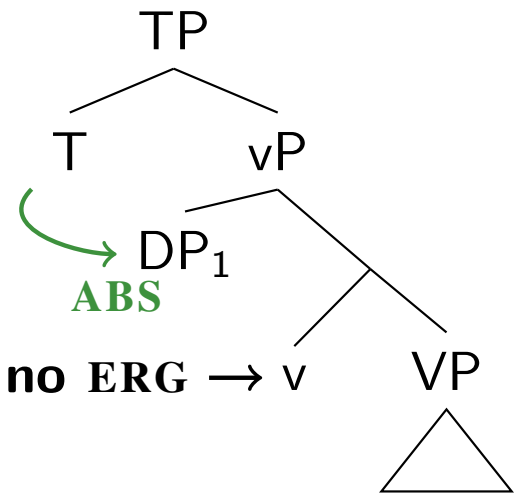

The problem: UTAH and inherent ergative case

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- $\Rightarrow$ Intransitive (unergative) agents should get inherent ERG.
- But this is typologically extremely rare, if at all attested.

My response

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	elsewhere	(no inherent case)
lowest	= experiencers/holders/possessors	→ **dative**

Different positions for ergatives and unergatives

Proposed structure:

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

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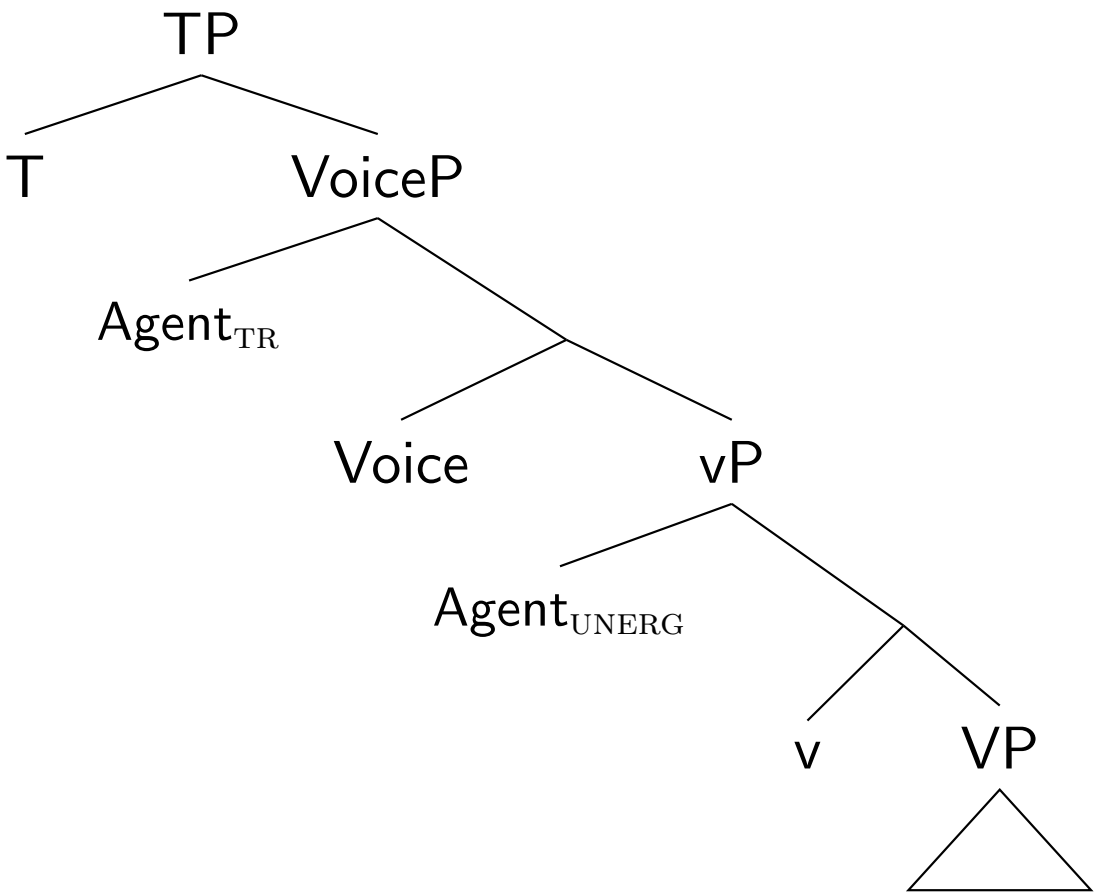

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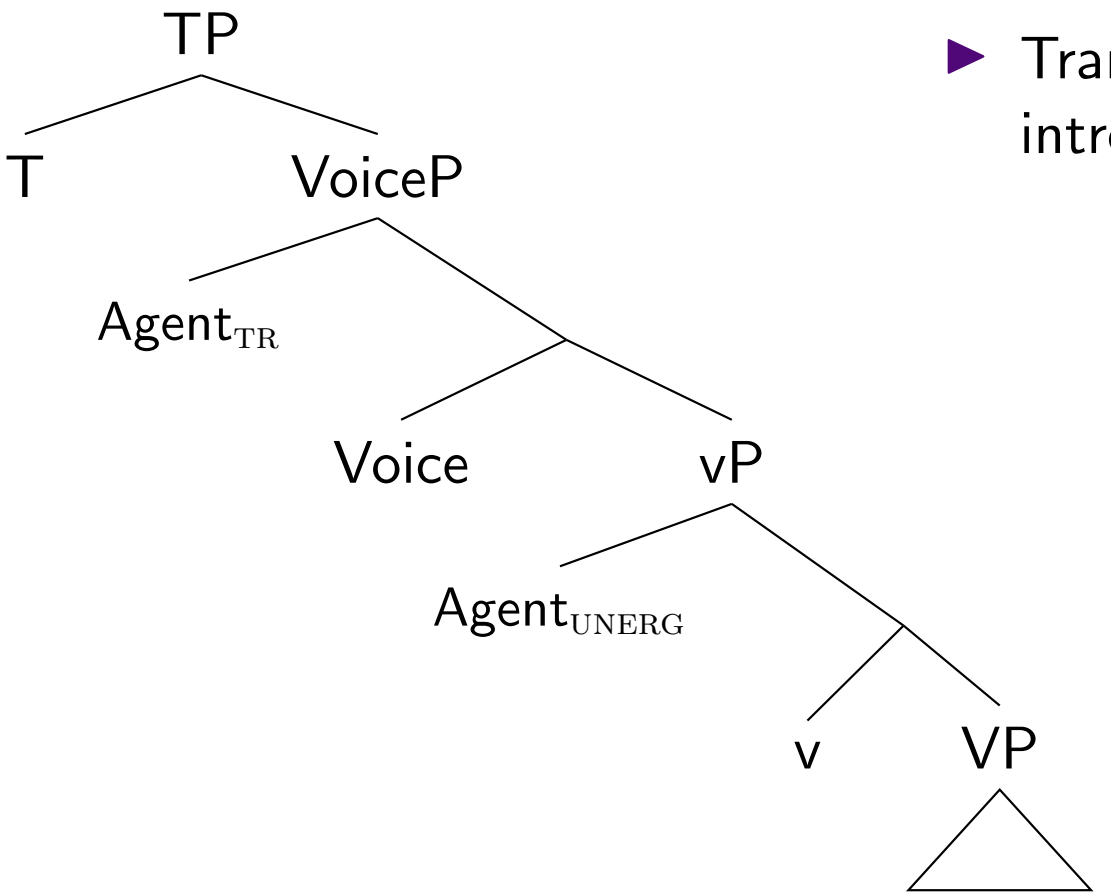

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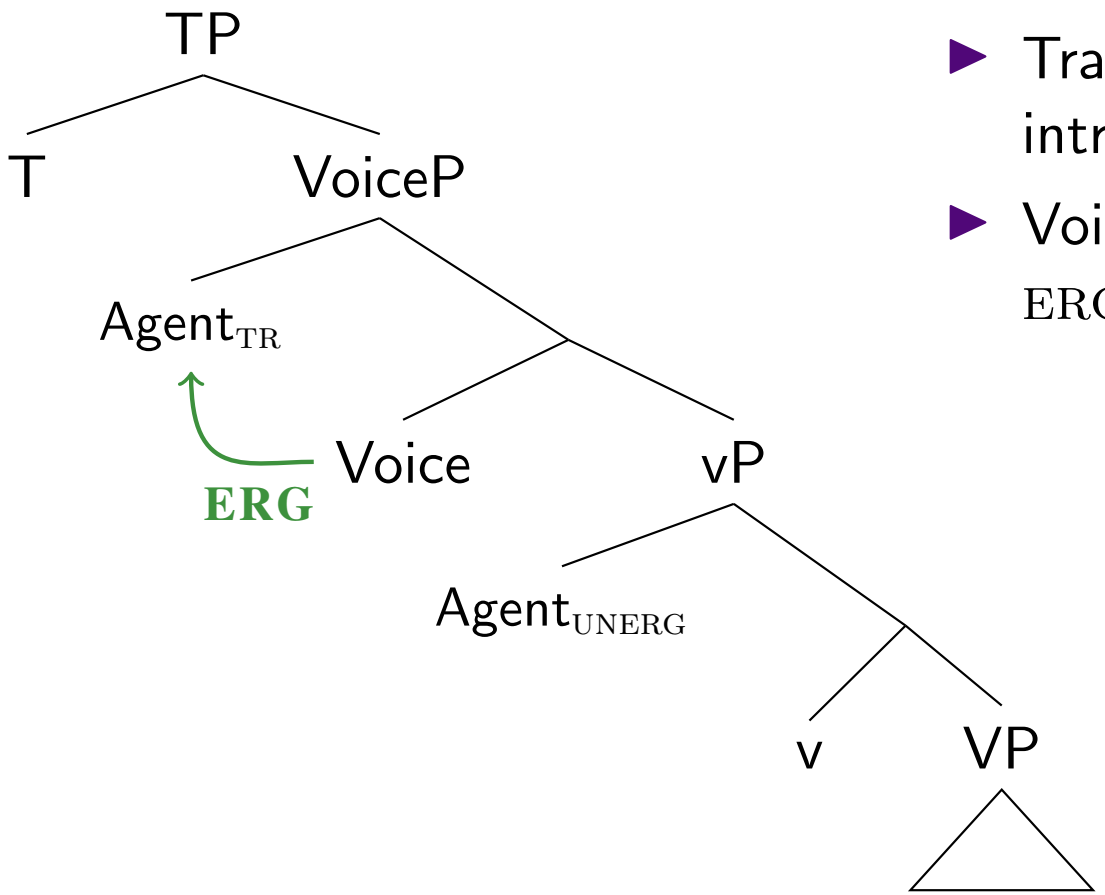

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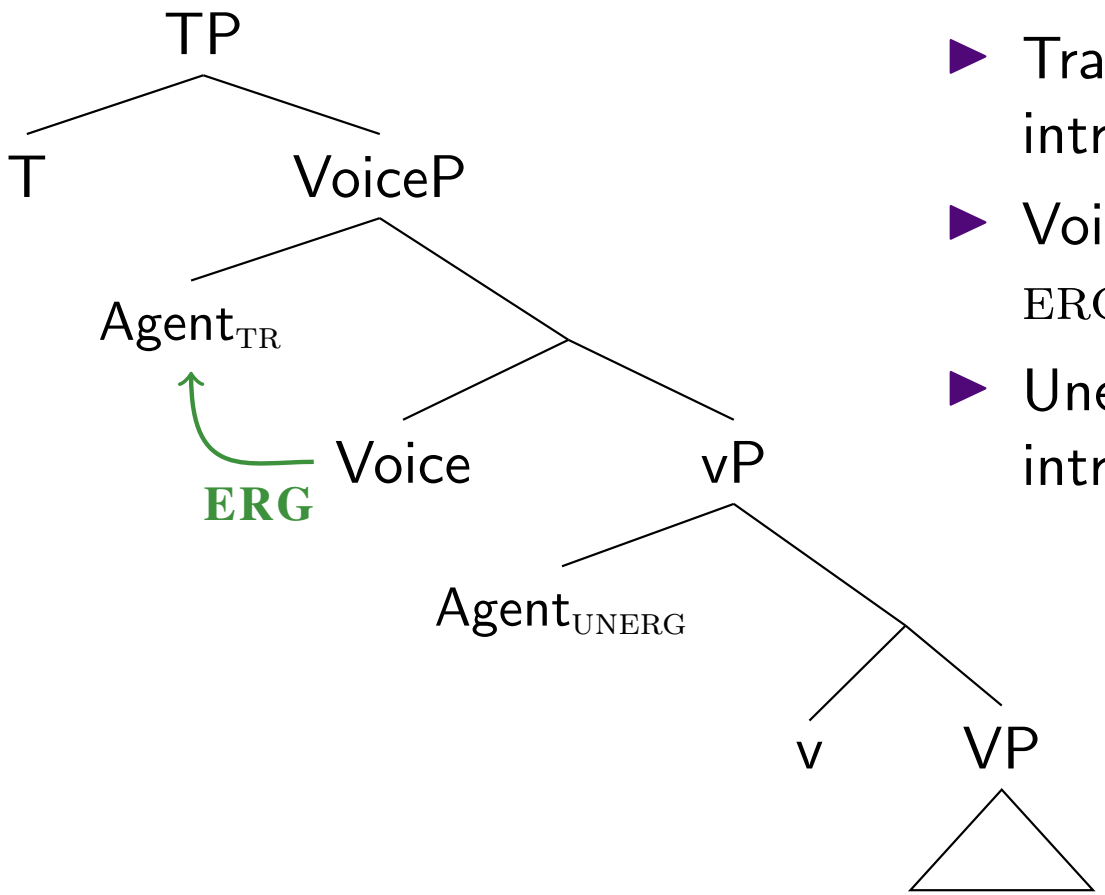

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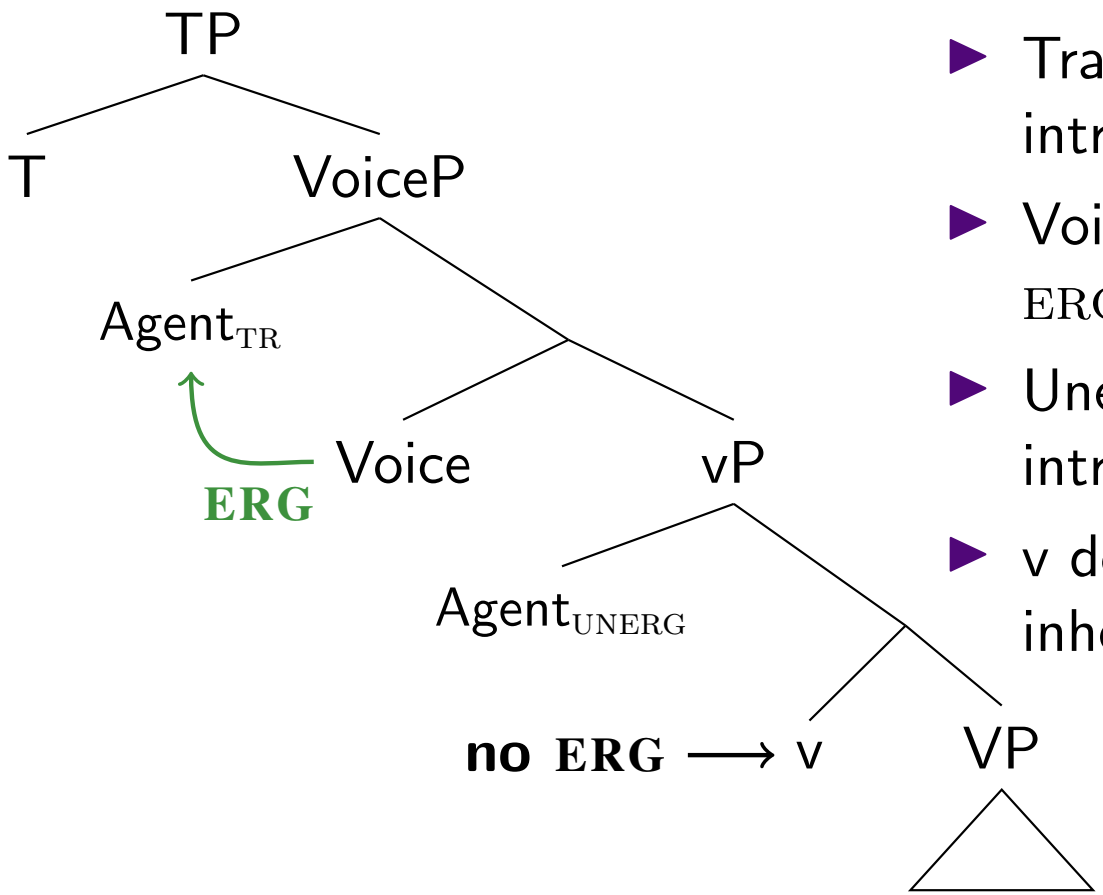

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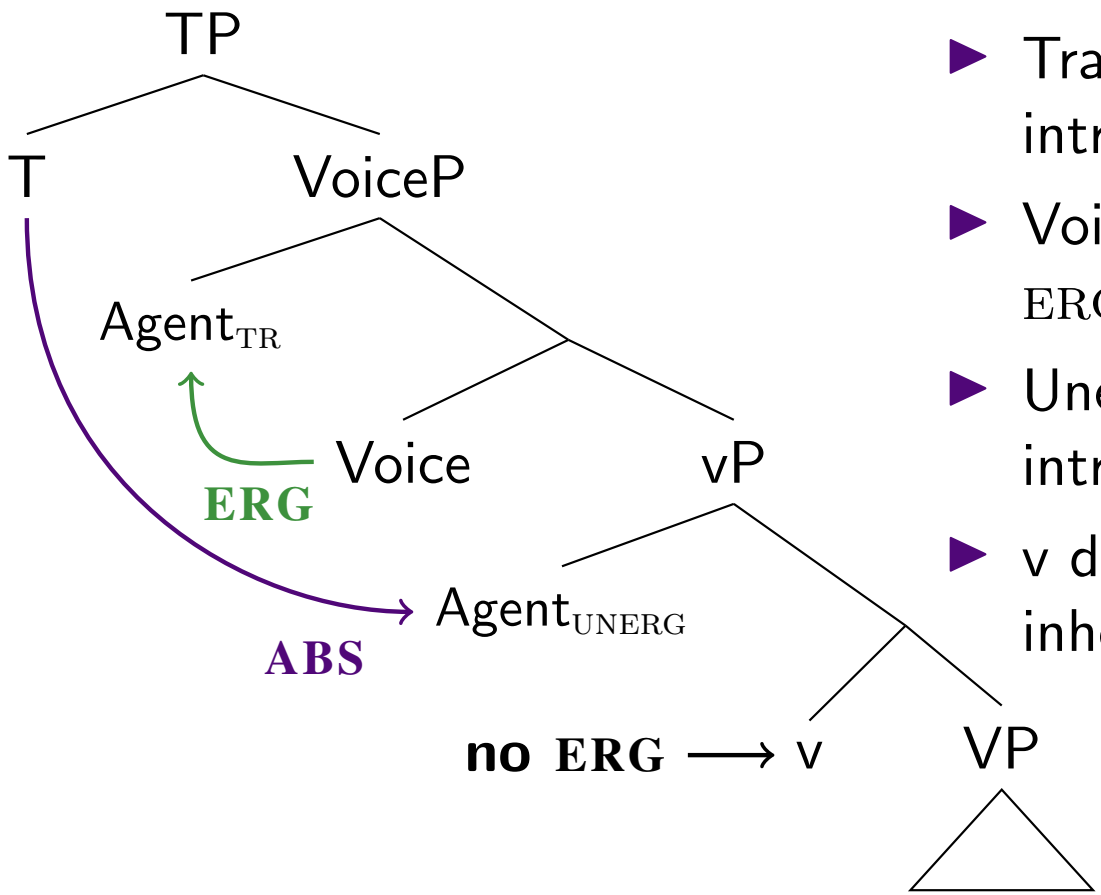

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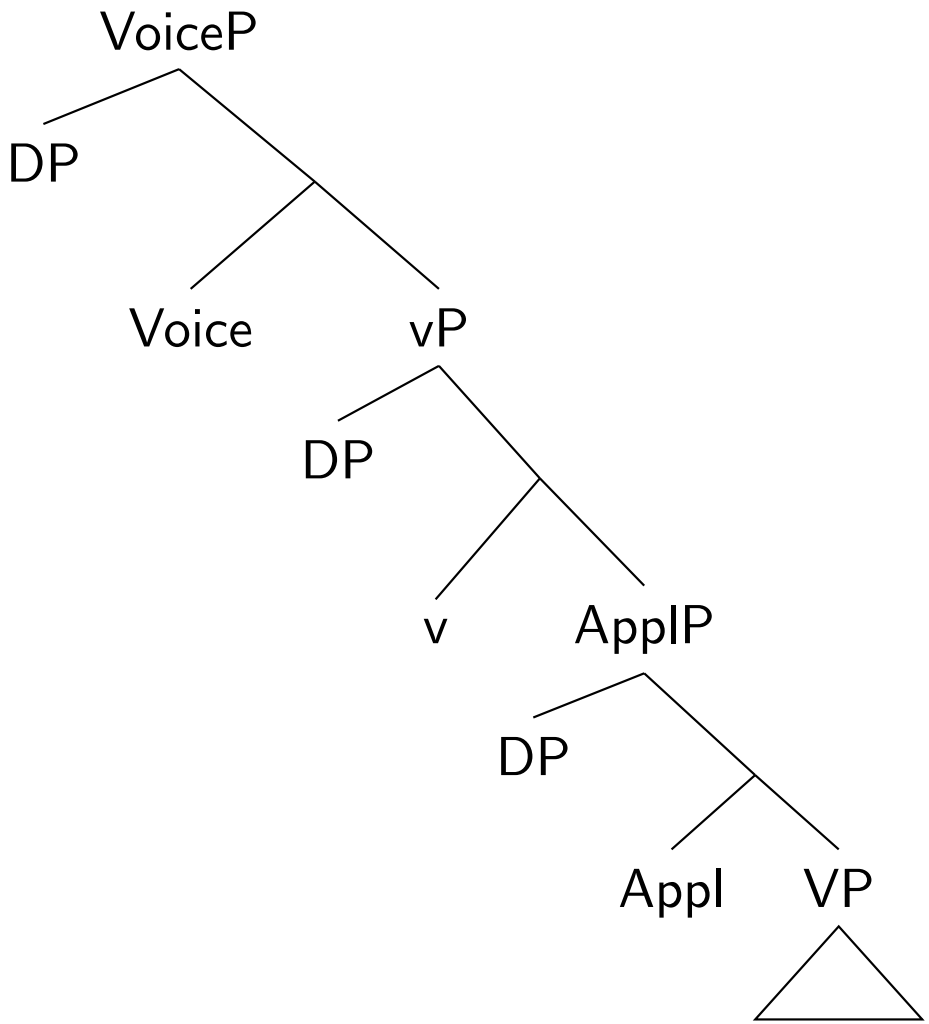

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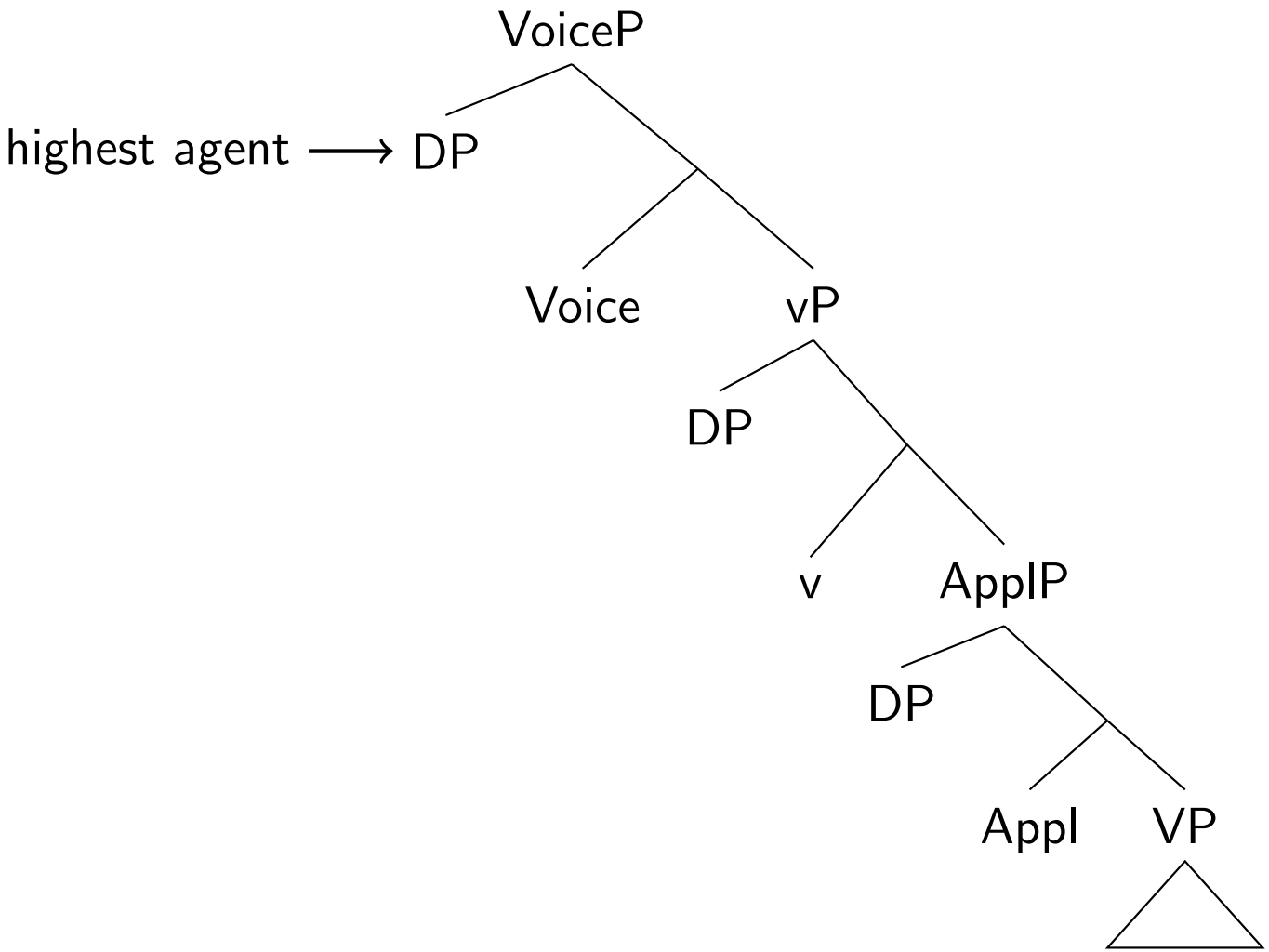

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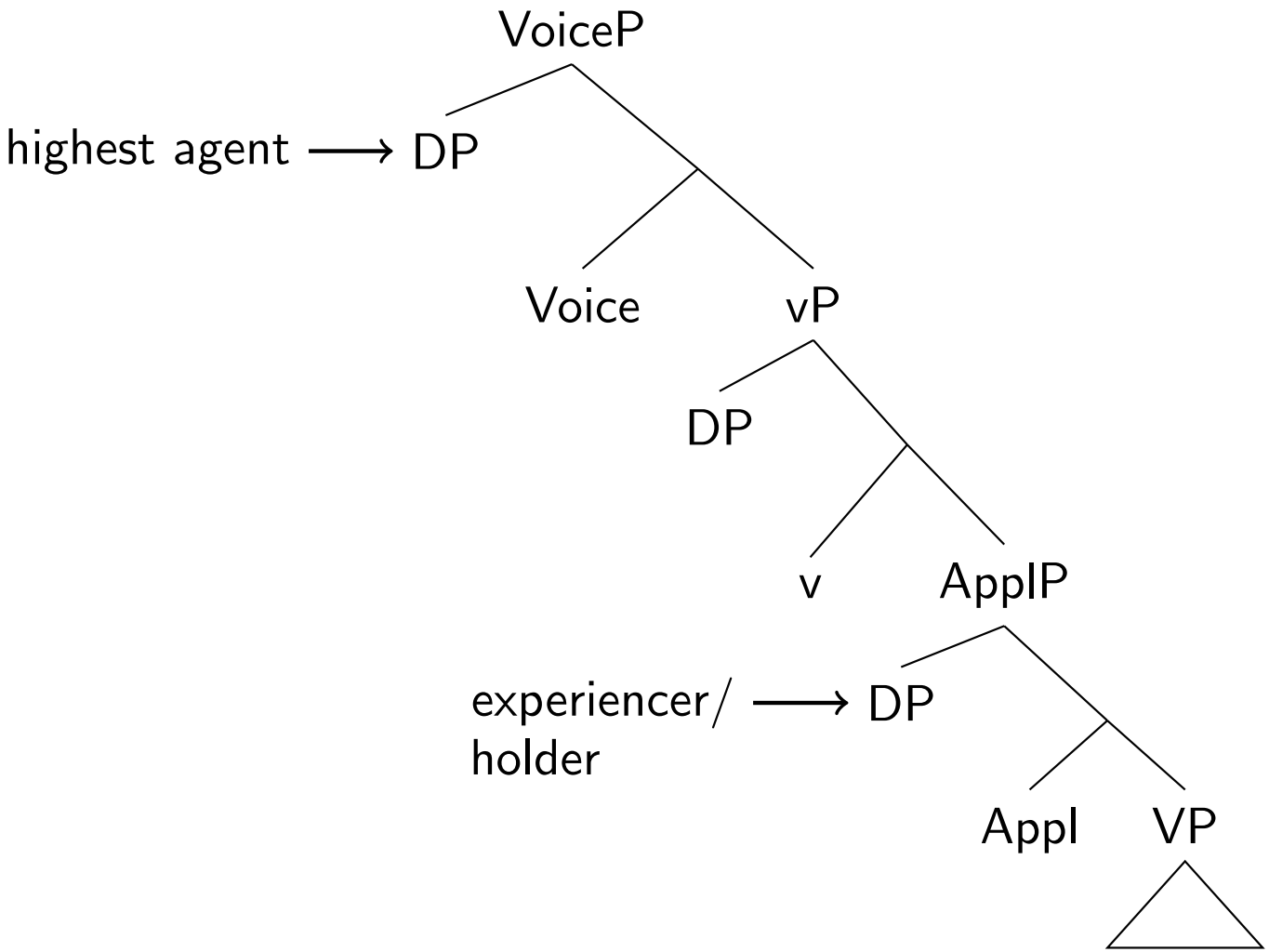

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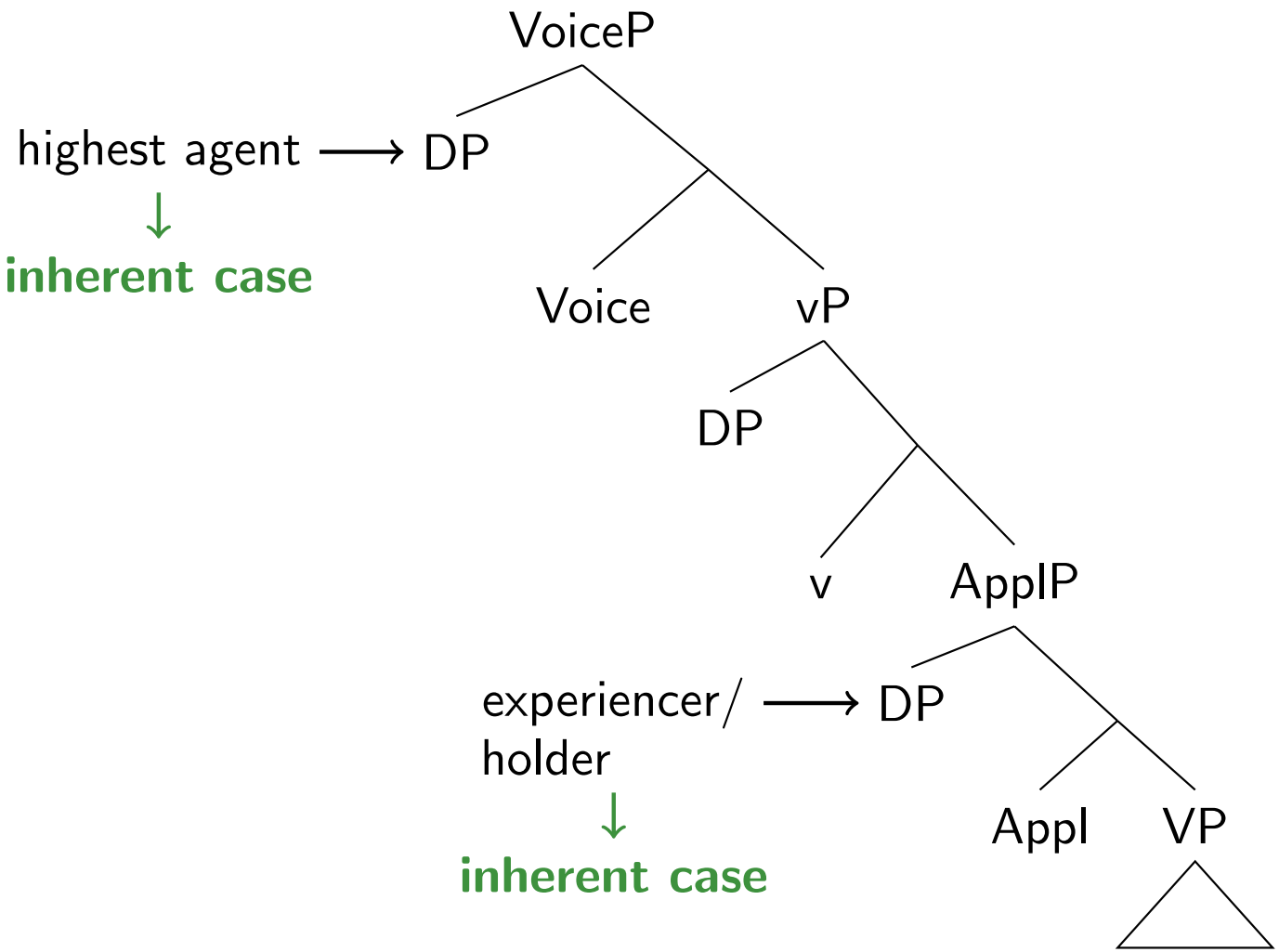

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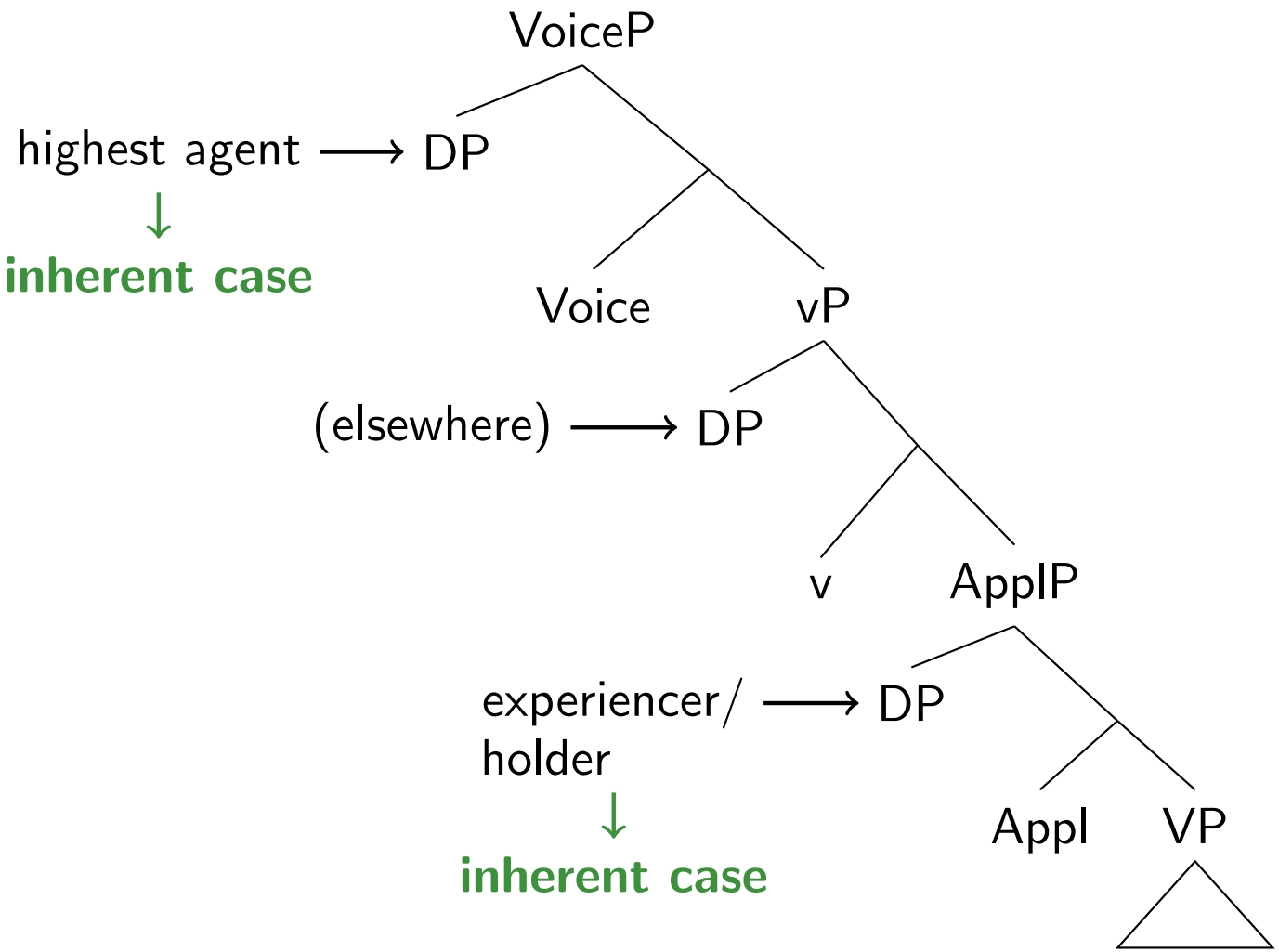

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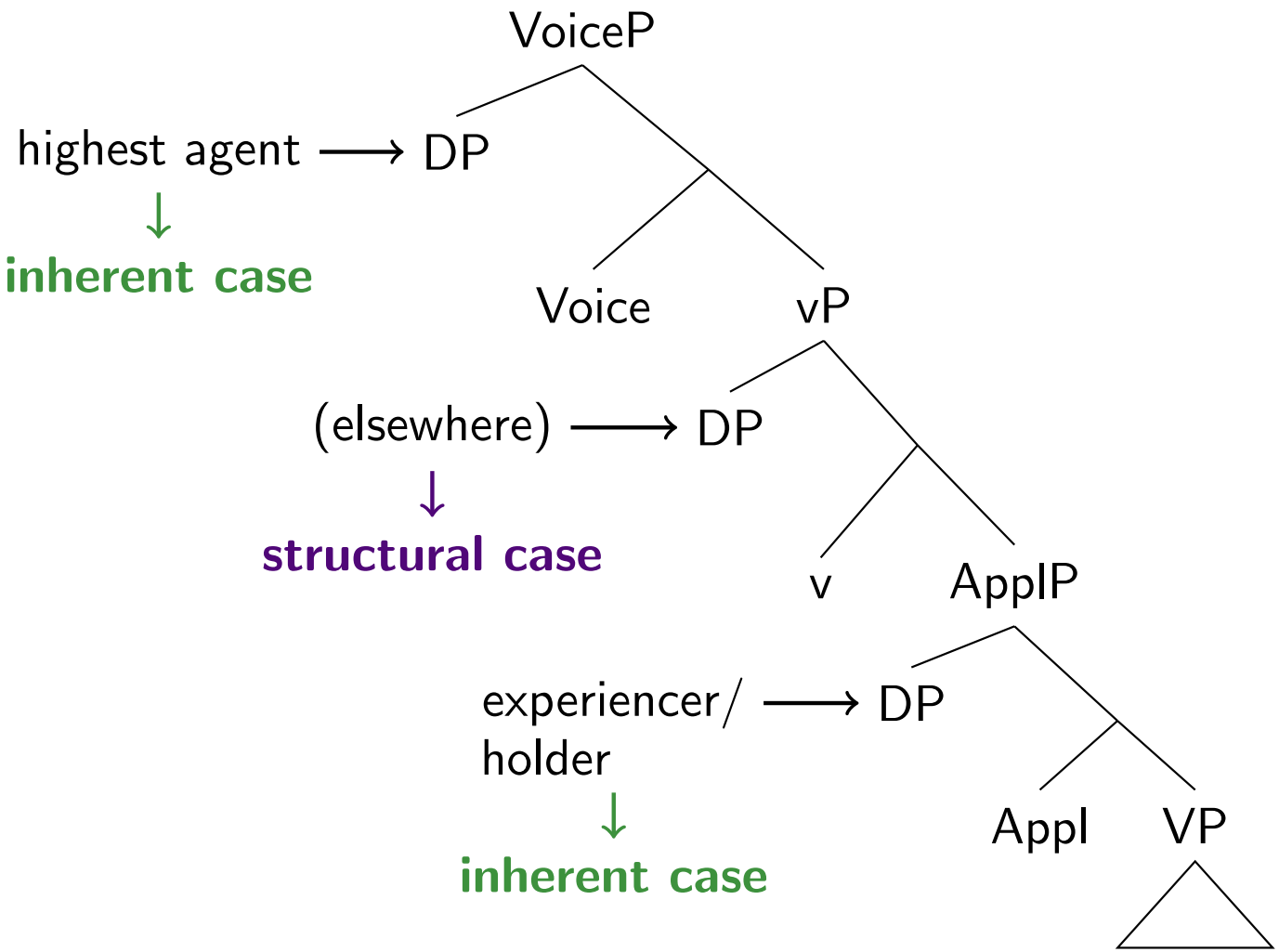

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Roadmap

Background: two positions for agents

Voice and v beyond case: Indonesian

Expanding the typology: "lowest" external arguments

Other (non)challenges

Conclusion

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  3. Ergative associated with higher agentivity

No ergative case in transitivized unergatives

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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

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'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**

No ergative case in transitivized unergatives

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'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

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)*

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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

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

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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

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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

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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.'

*Also object voice (not relevant here).

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Lia sudah **ng-**ambil meja makan-nya.
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Passive: Theme PASS-Verb Agent

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

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

Low agents are incompatible with Voice: *dapat*

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

'I received this book yesterday.'

Low agents are incompatible with Voice: *dapat*

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

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

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

'I forgot the phrase in English.'

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Transitives versus pseudo-transitives

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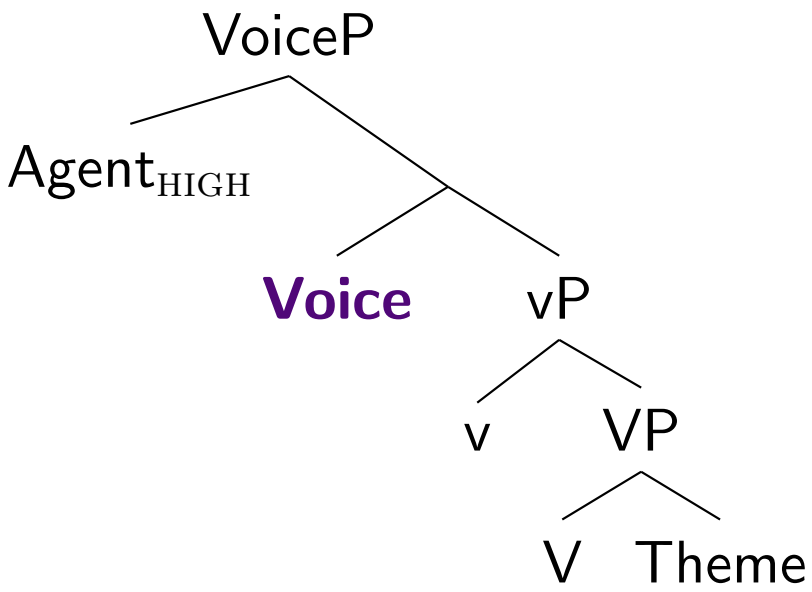
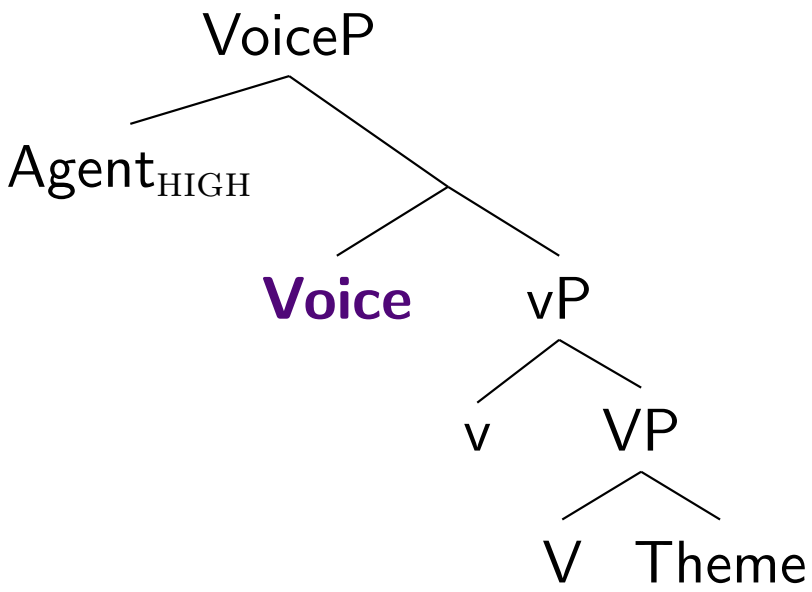
Regular transitives:



Transitives versus pseudo-transitives

Regular transitives:

✓ internal argument



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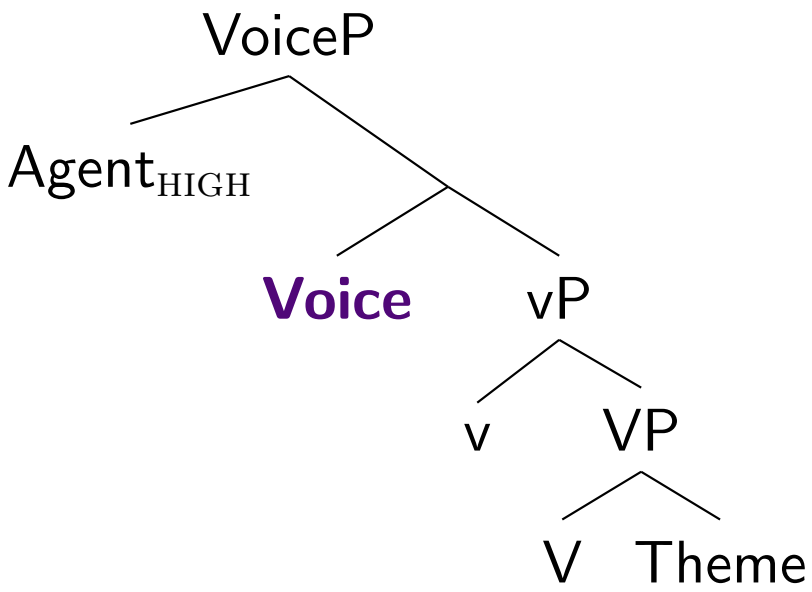

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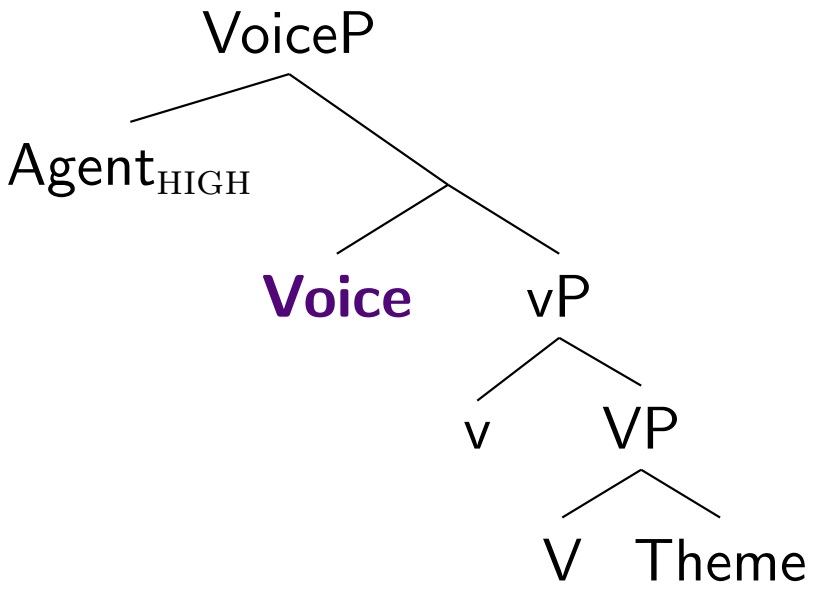

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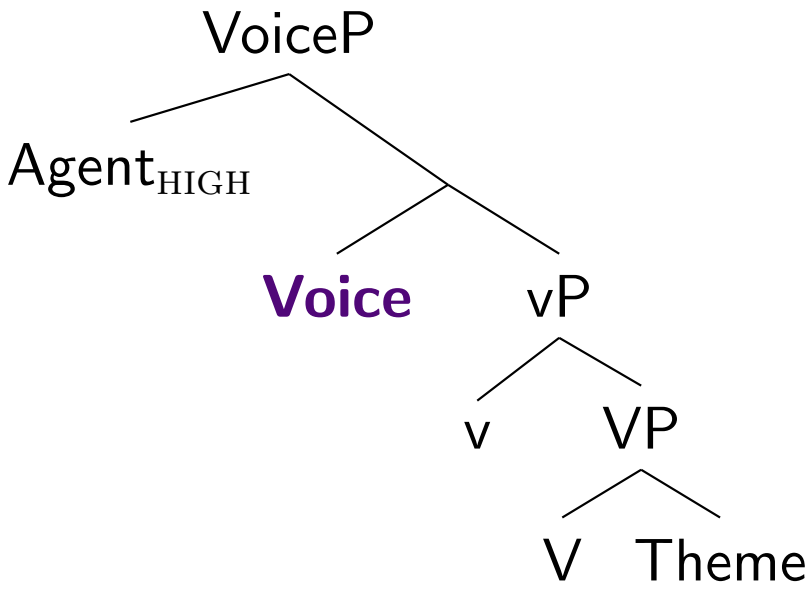

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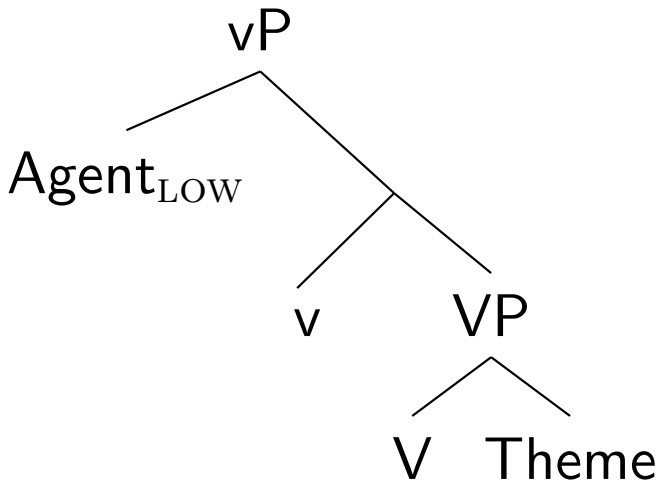

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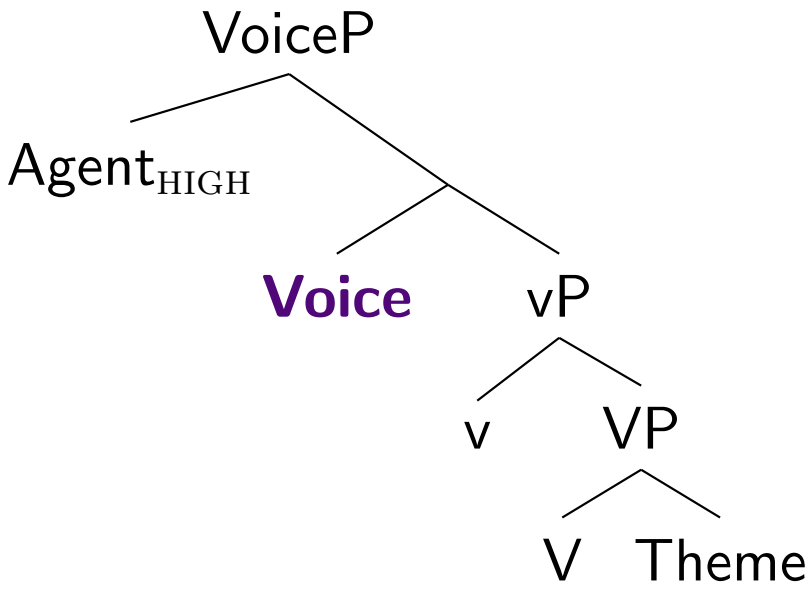

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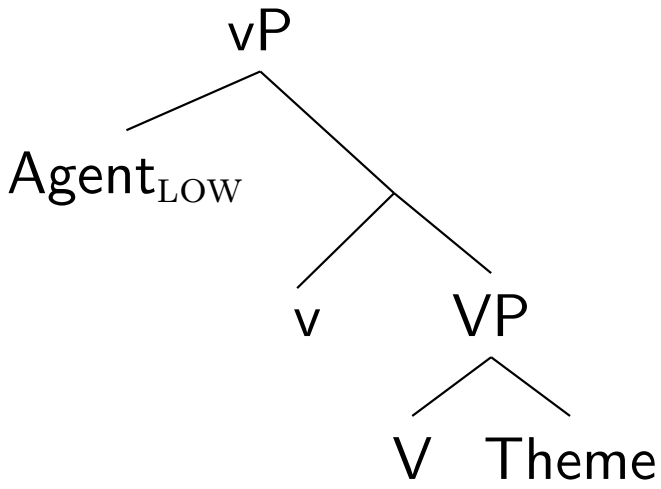

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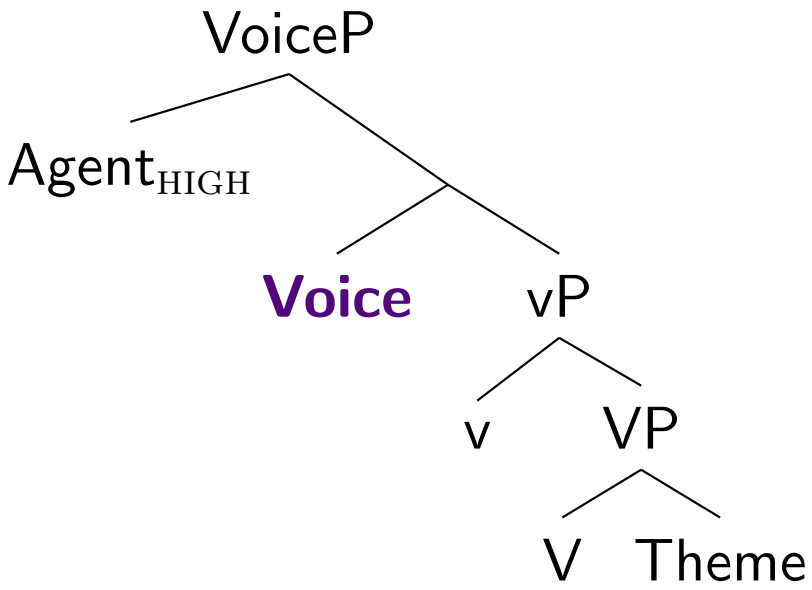

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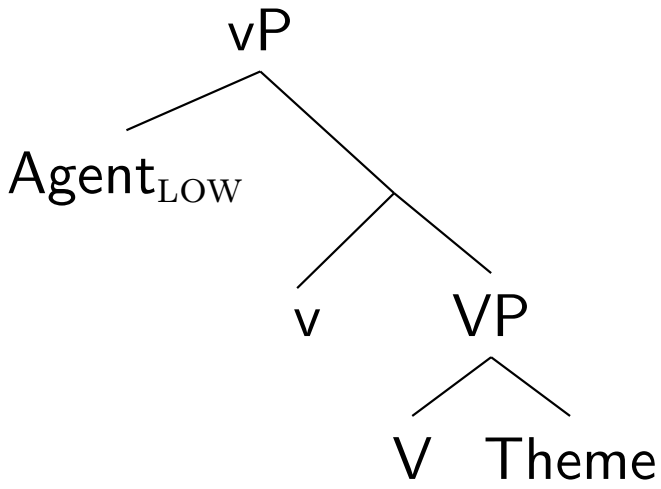

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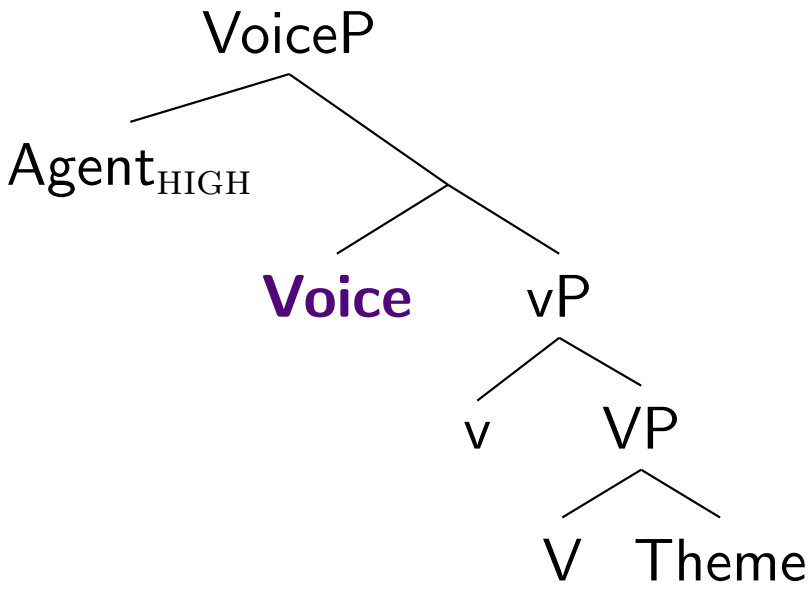

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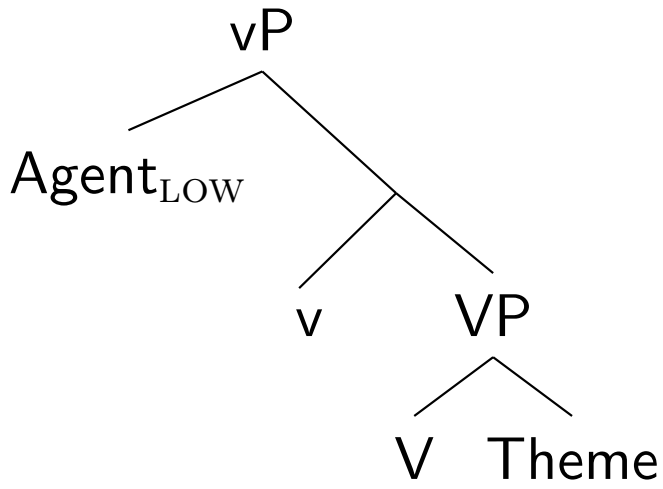

Voice and increased agentivity

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- Pseudo-transitives can be **transitivized** with suffix *-in*.

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’

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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.’

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‘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’

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Aku dapat**-in** buku ini kemarin.
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(after multiple phone calls to the publisher trying to get a copy)

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book this **PASS-receive-TRANS** -the hard

‘This book was hard to get.’

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- Higher agentivity $\rightarrow$ agent introduced by Voice

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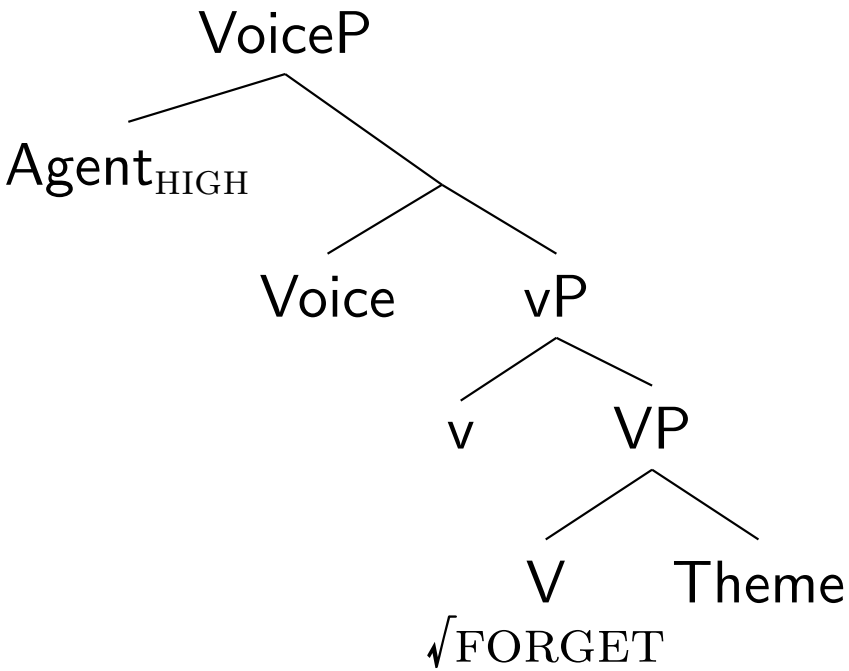
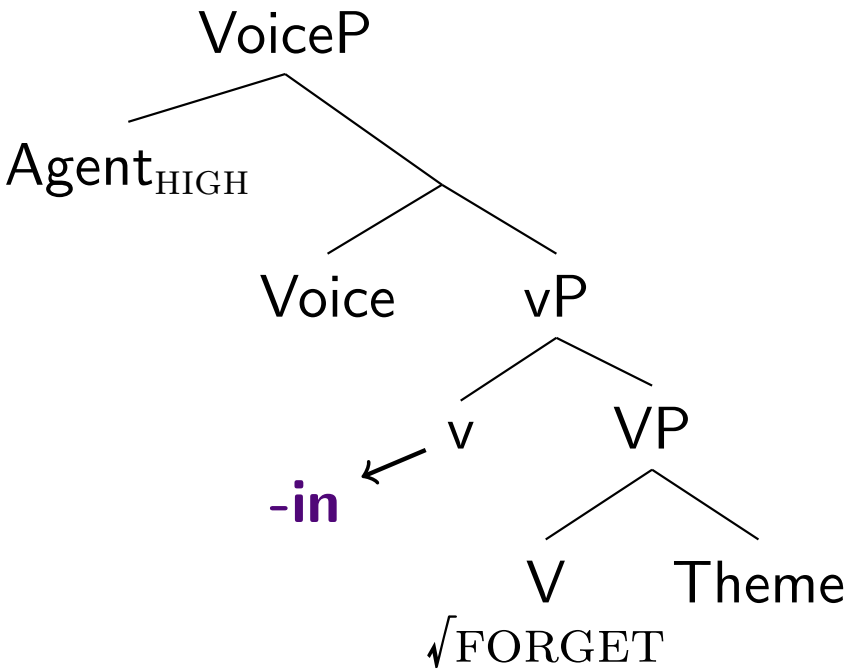


Transitivized pseudo-transitives

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



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  Indonesian $\rightarrow$ impossibility of voice morphology

Unergatives don't contain Voice: *belajar*

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- **Unergative without object:**

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- **Not compatible with voice:**

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

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

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- **Result:** increased agentivity and compatibility with voice.

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

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‘What do you need to study tonight?’

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

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

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⇒ **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

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(cf. Baker and Vinokurova 2010:606; Baker 2015:134-135; Baker and Bobaljik 2017:124)

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- Some external arguments receive inherent case: **dative experiencers**.
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  (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**.

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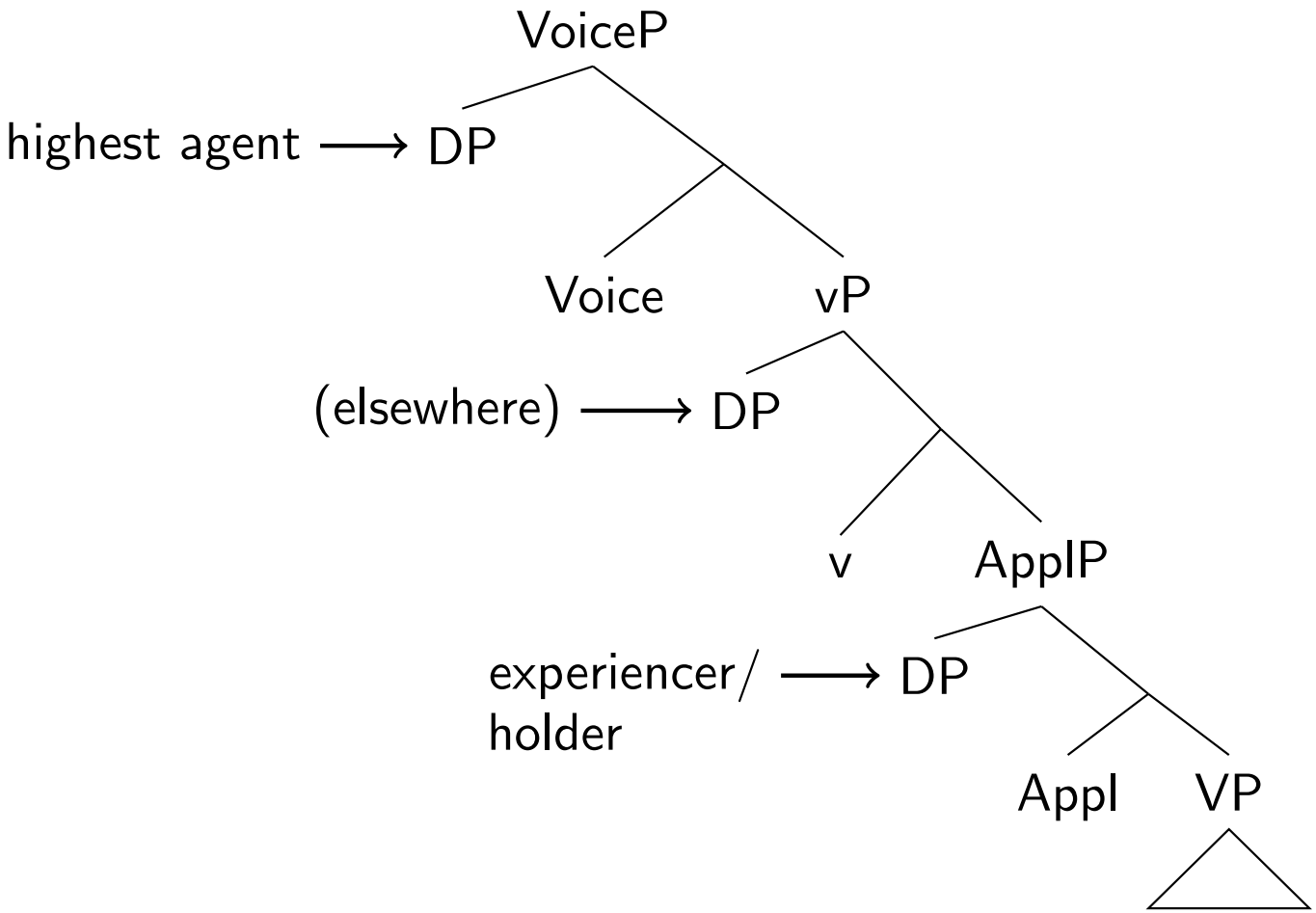
  $\Rightarrow$ never assigned inherent case.

The expanded external argument hierarchy



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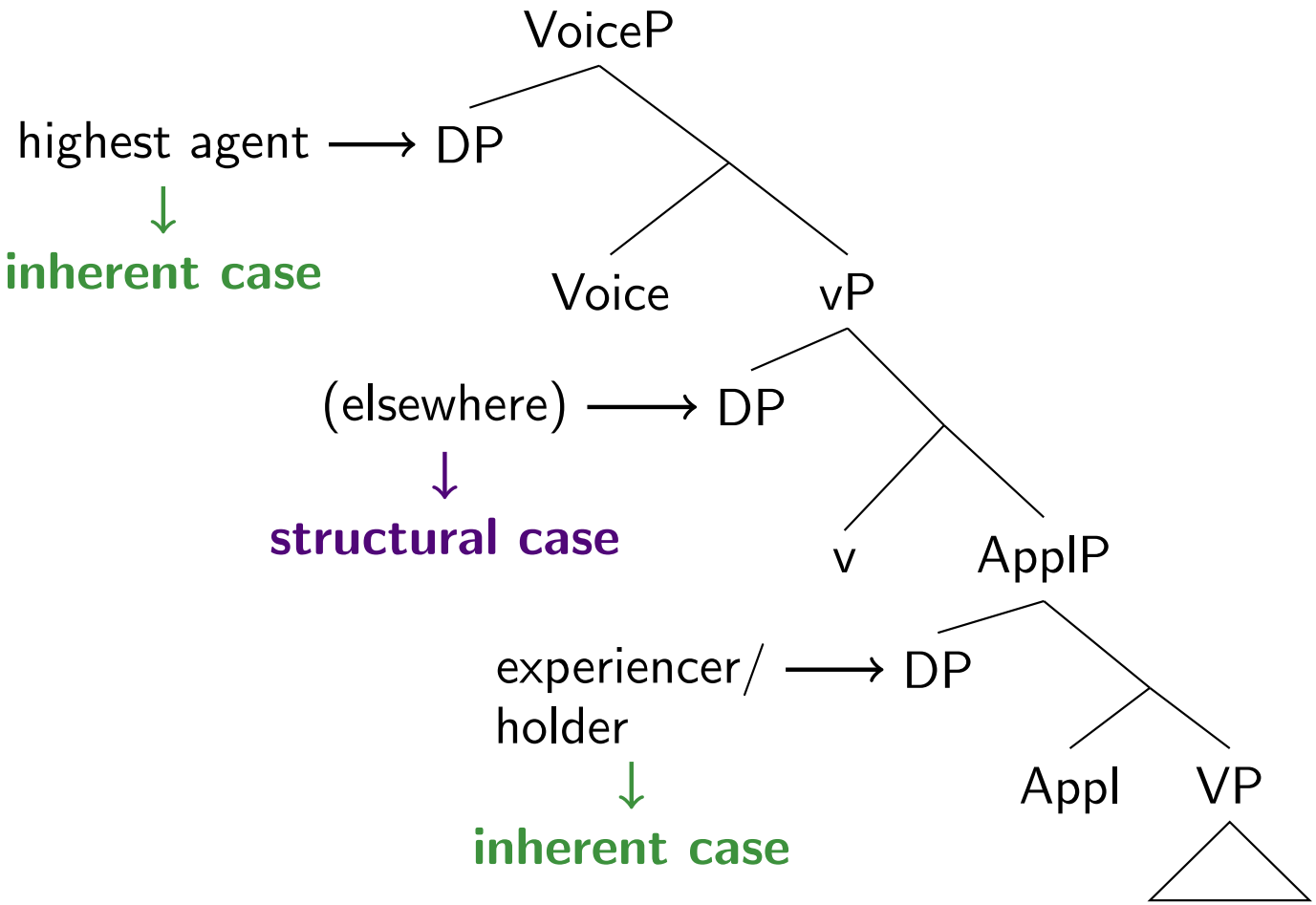

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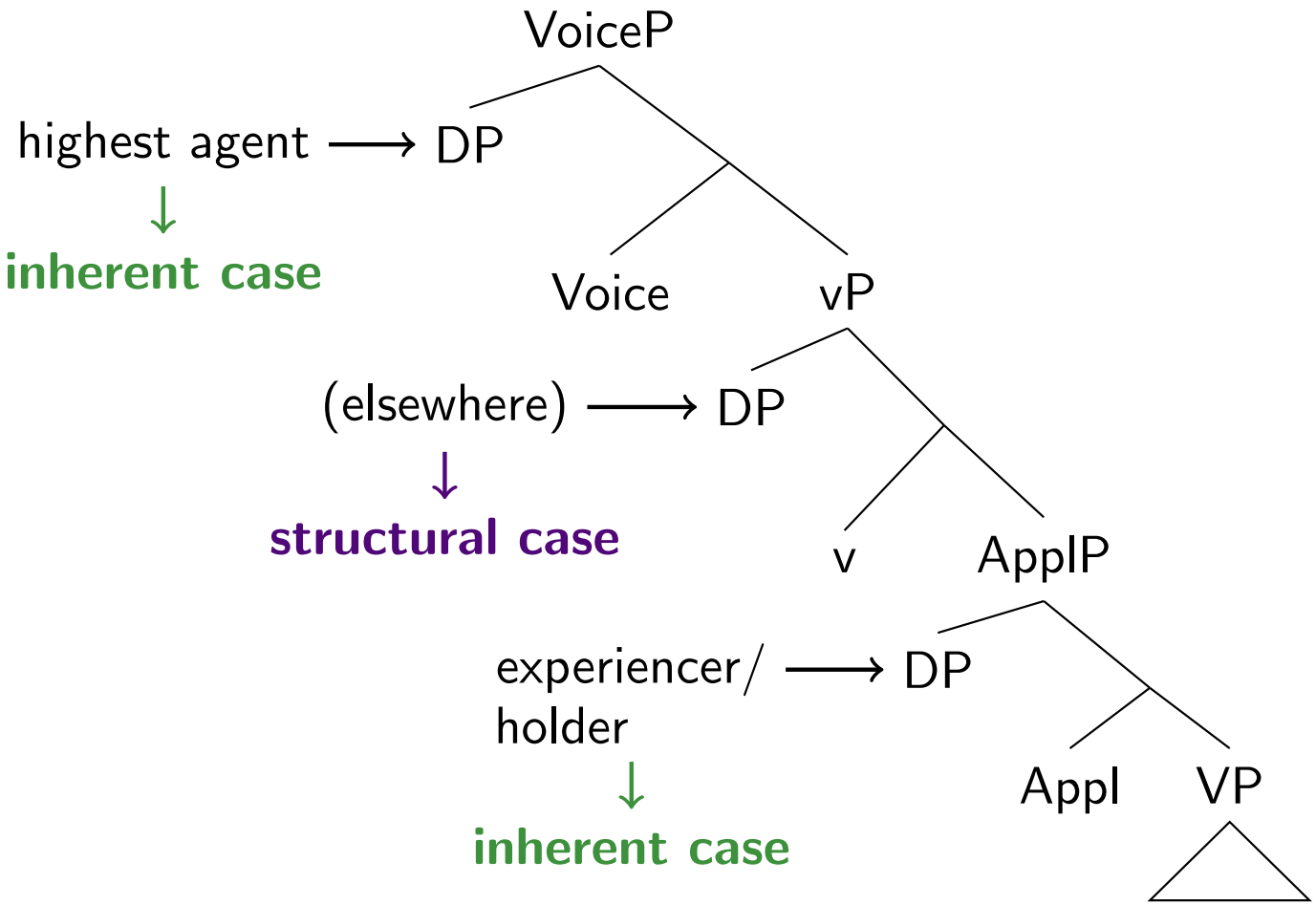

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Lezgian: basic clause structure

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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)

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

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

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

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[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)

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  - DAT is less agentive than ABS
  - Confirmed by possibility of "transitivization" + increased agentivity.

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(Appendix)

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

Other (non)challenges

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2. Transitive verbs without ergative case
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- 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).'

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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

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'This girl is washing the dishes.'

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Dependent case theory pushes the problem down the tree

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If all agents are introduced in the same position,

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Dependent case theory pushes the problem down the tree

If all agents are introduced in the same position,

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why do some themes get oblique and others absolutive?

The case algorithm conundrum

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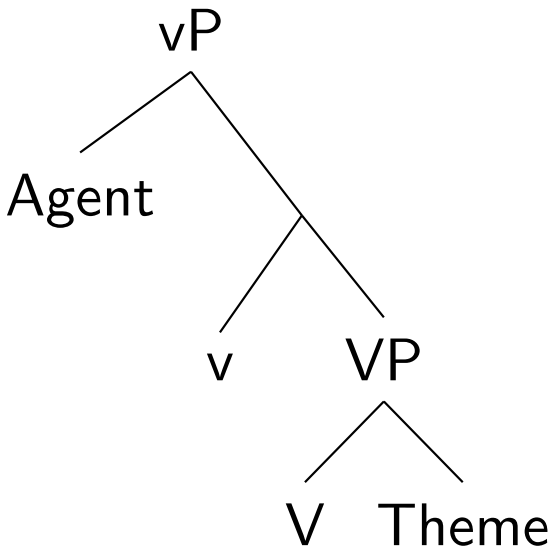
Ergative-absolutive verbs:



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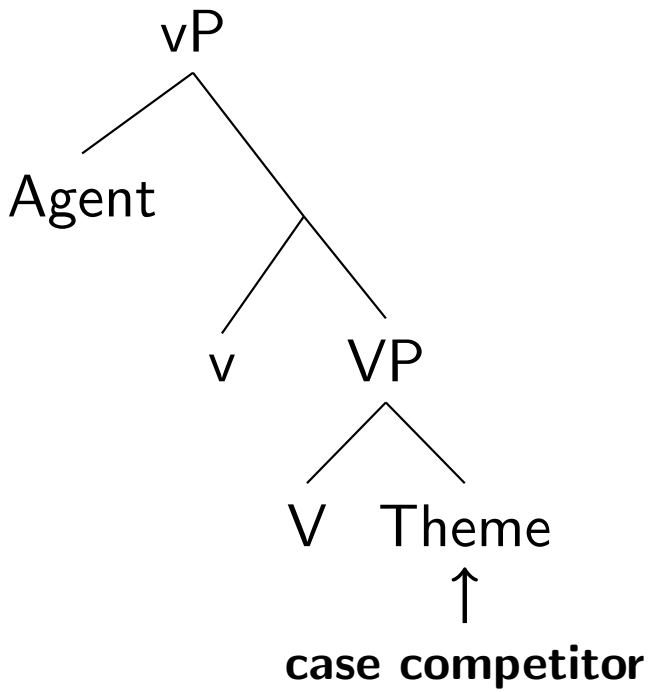

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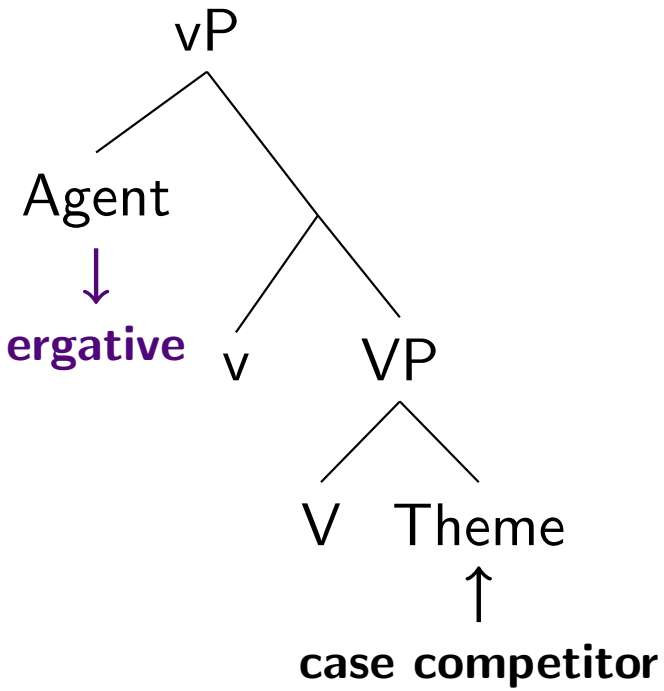

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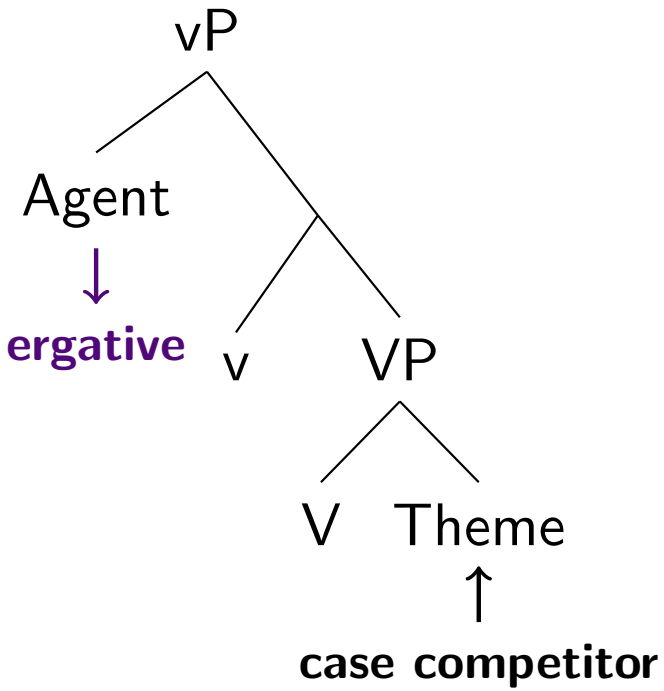
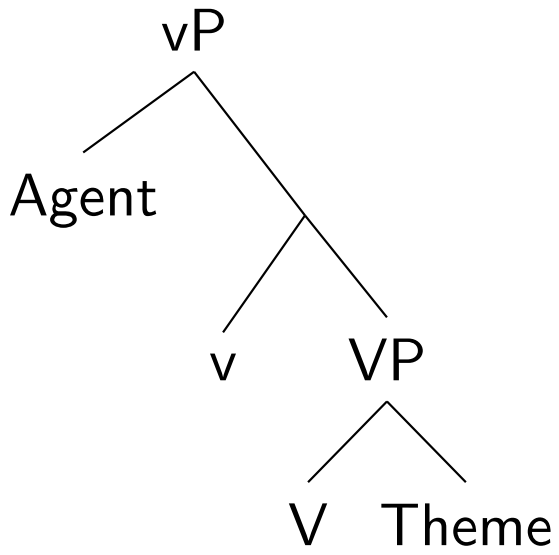


Absolutive-oblique verbs:



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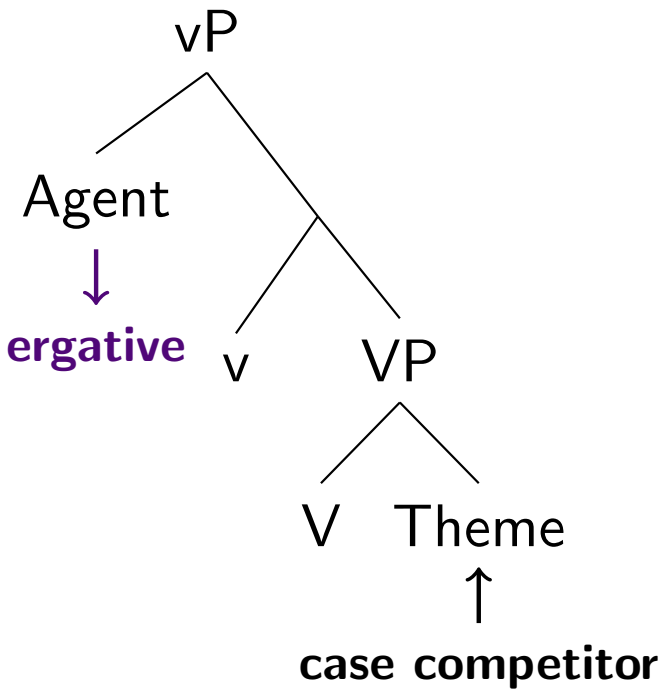

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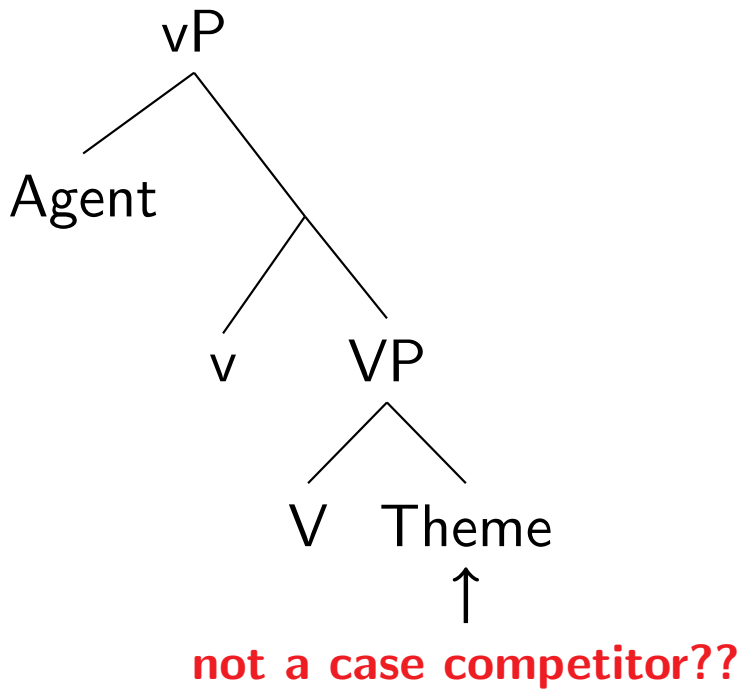

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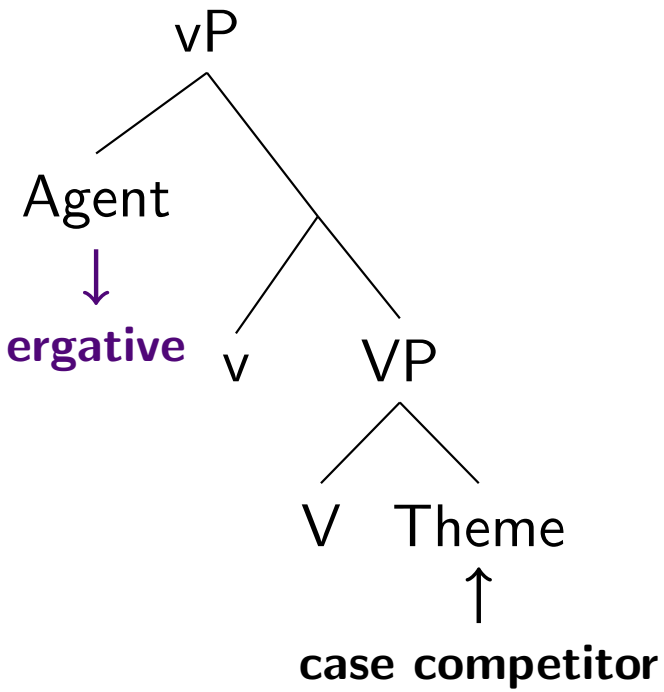

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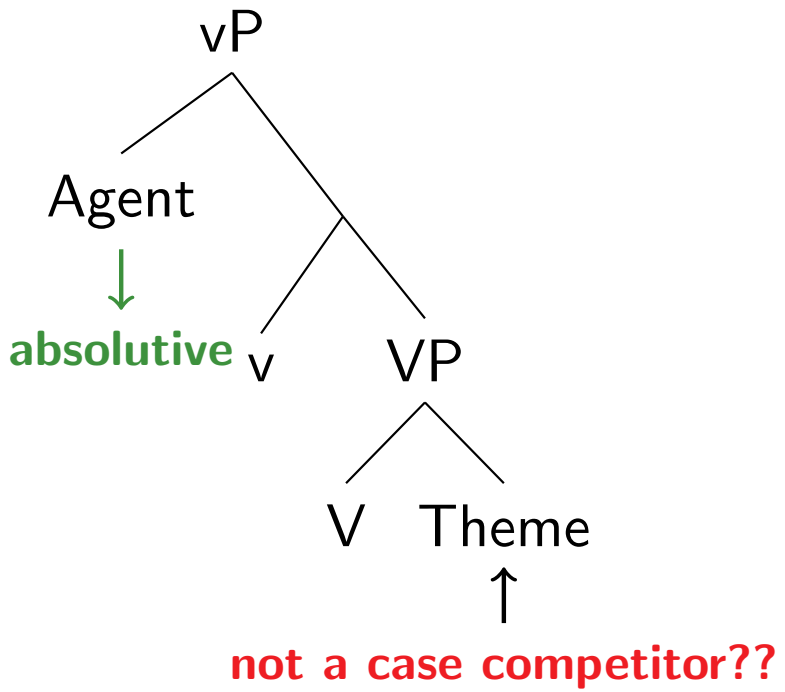

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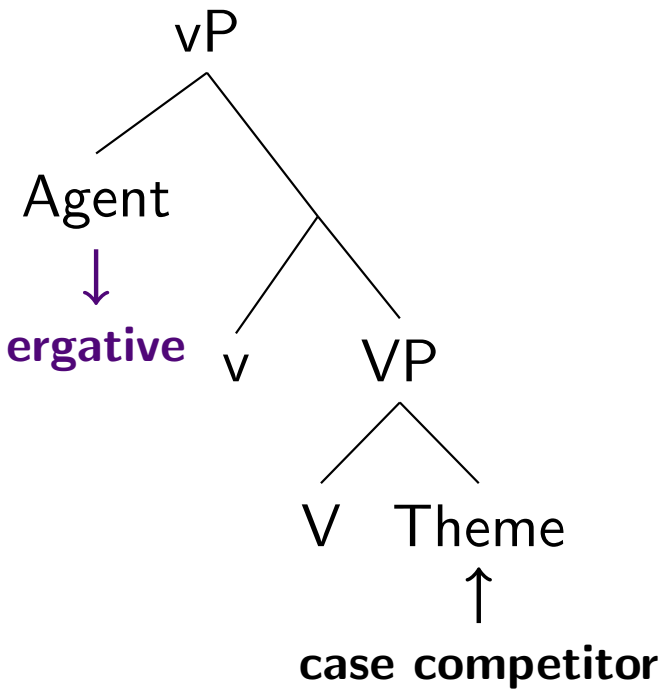

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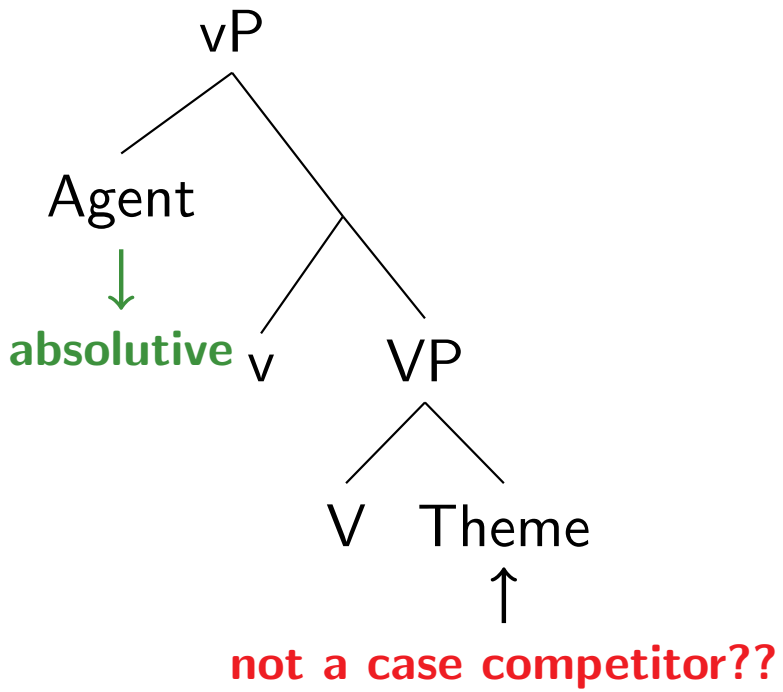

And where does oblique come from?

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

Where oblique case on themes comes from

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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

Background: two positions for agents

Voice and v beyond case: Indonesian

Expanding the typology: "lowest" external arguments

Other (non)challenges

Conclusion

Recap: The challenge we started with

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Argument against inherent ergative case:

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

The takeaway: Inherent ergative case 🤝 UTAH

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My response:

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

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- "Pseudo-transitives" which are not compatible with voice.
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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.

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  - 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

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- **Challenge:** (Baker, 2014; Baker and Bobaljik, 2017; Deal, 2019)
  unaccusative verb + applicative $\rightarrow$ ergative subject

Raising to ergative in Nez Perce

Deal (2019):

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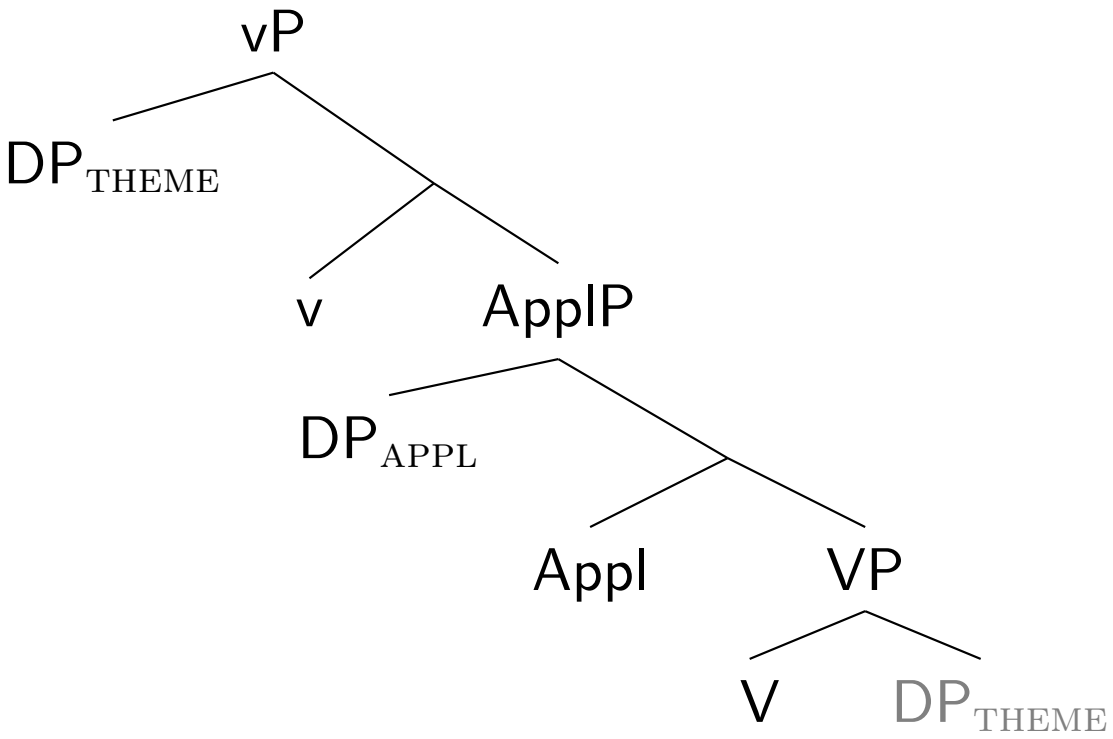
'The women will come to us.'

Raising to ergative in Nez Perce

Deal (2019):

The analysis:



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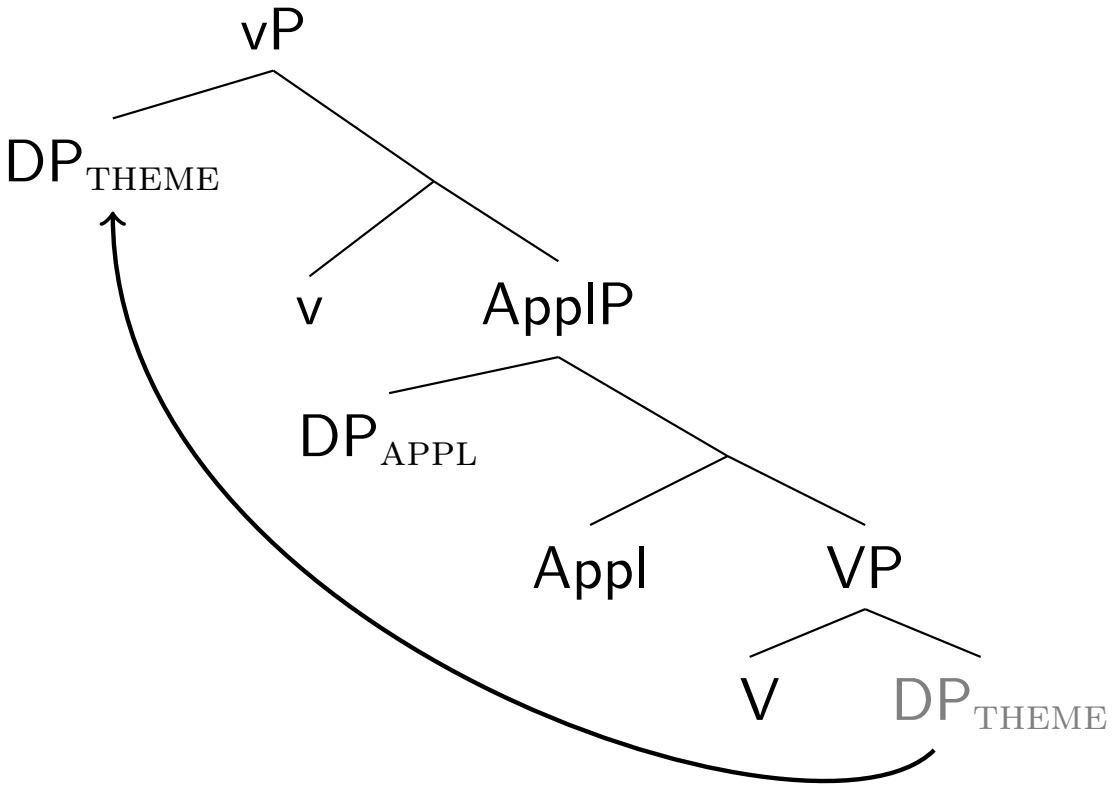

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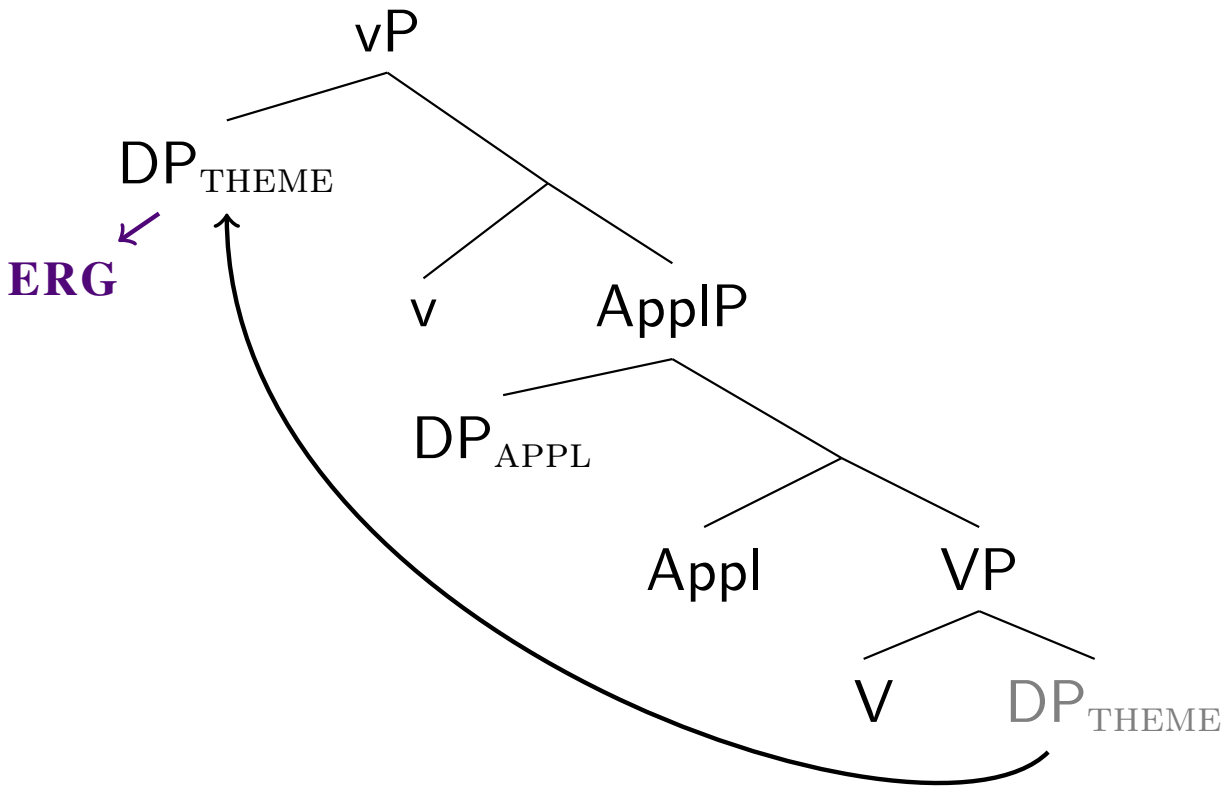

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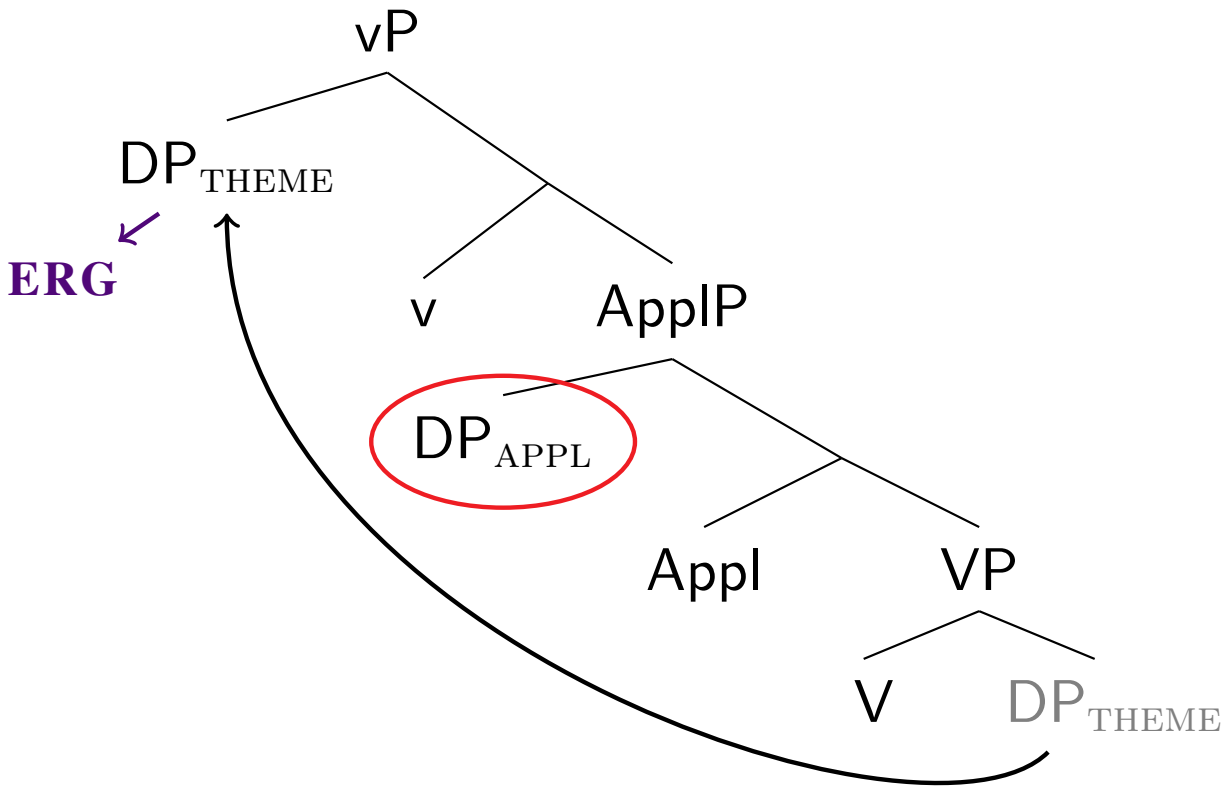

+Some additional assumptions to allow raising over DP_{APPL}.

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

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

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