Inherent ergative case and the typology of external arguments

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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.)
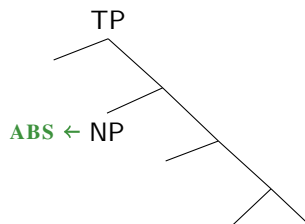
Ergative as dependent

Ergative case assignment rule <small>(Baker and Bobaljik 2017:112)</small>

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.
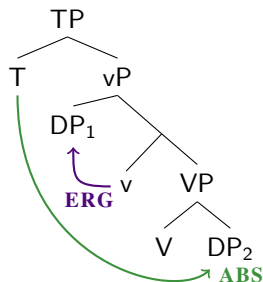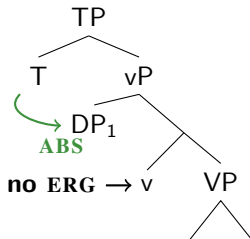
Transitive clause:
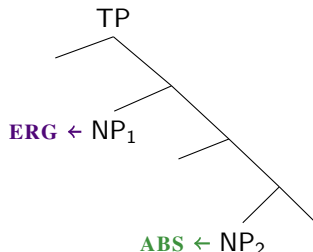
Intransitive clause:

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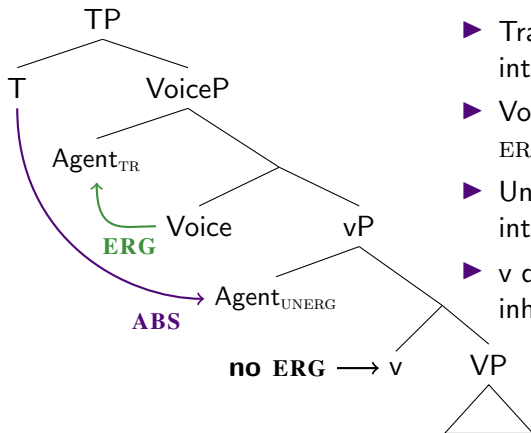
⇒ They are **not** introduced by the same head.

⇒ 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**:

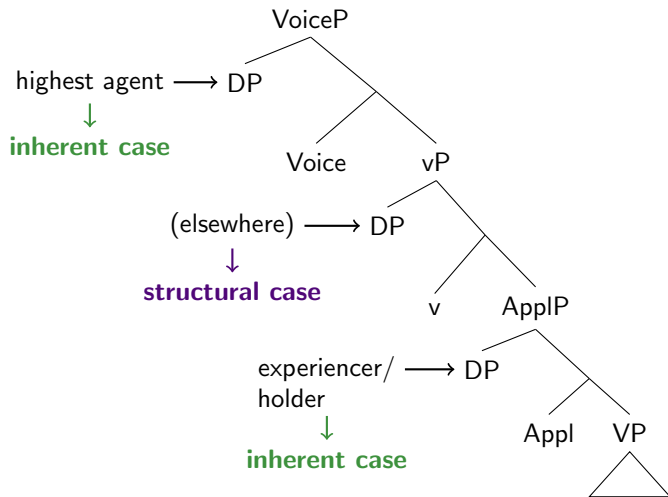| highest | = high agents | → **ergative** |
| | elsewhere | (no inherent case) |
| lowest | = experiencers/holders/possessors | → **dative** |

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

VoiceP

highest agent ⟶ DP
↓
inherent case

Voice vP

(elsewhere) ⟶ DP
↓
structural case

v ApplP

experiencer/ ⟶ DP
holder
↓
inherent case

Appl VP

(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

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

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 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!

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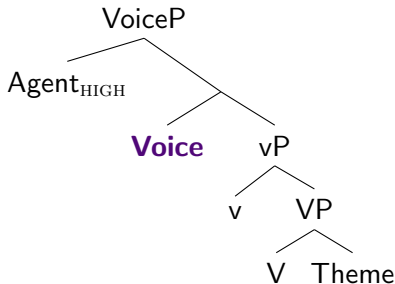
Intended: 'This book was received by me yesterday.'

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.'
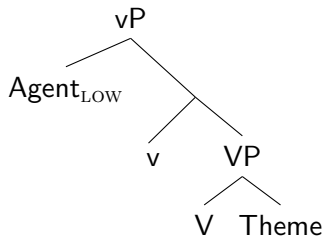
Transitives versus pseudo-transitives

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)
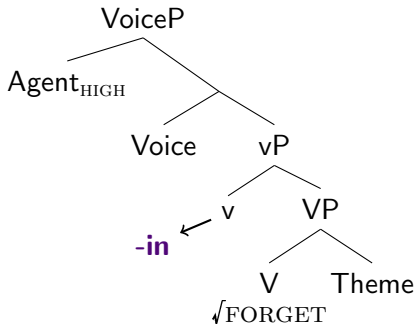
✓ **Compatible with voice:**

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 → absence of ERG

  Indonesian → impossibility of voice morphology

► **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).'

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

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**
$$\Rightarrow \text{ never assigned inherent case.}$$

The expanded external argument hierarchy

highest agent ⟶ DP
↓
inherent case

VoiceP

Voice   vP

(elsewhere) ⟶ DP
↓
structural case

v   ApplP

experiencer/ ⟶ DP
holder
↓
inherent case

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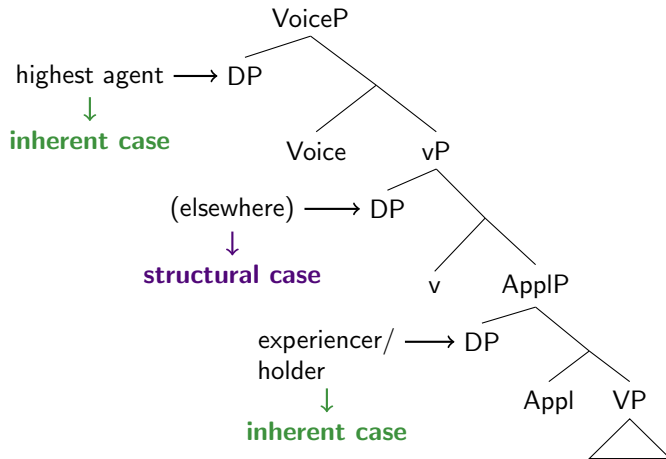
(Woolford 2006; Wood and Marantz 2015; Sheehan 2017; Cuervo 2020; Nash 2022, a.o.)

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 $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ ∼ **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**	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)

▶ **DAT-ABS**/**OBL** verbs $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ ∼ **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 $\boxed{\text{ABS-OBL}}$ and DAT-ABS verbs can be "transitivized" with suffix *-(a)r*.
- ▶ Result: ERG agent and increased agentivity.

- ▶ $k^w axun$ 'lose **(accidentally)**' low agent = ABS

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

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

- ▶ $k^w adarun$ 'discard **(with intent)**' high agent = ERG

k^wa.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   žaʁur-aj.
bride want.IPF-PRT-SBST.SG(**ERG**) self(ERG) *pro*(**ABS**) find-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

1. Raising to ergative $\rightarrow$ challenge for inherent ergative?

2. Transitive verbs without ergative case

$\rightarrow$ challenge for dependent ergative?

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 → 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

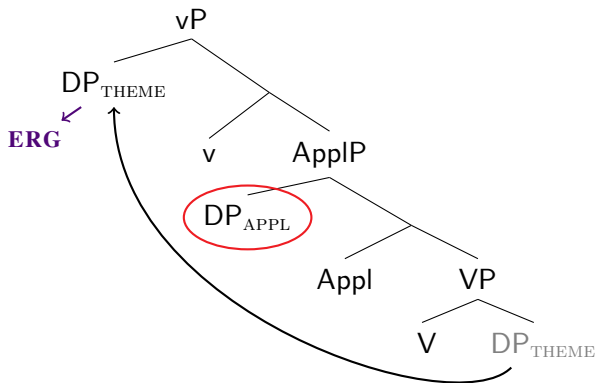Ha-'aayat-**om** nuun-e   hi-pa-naas-**pay-noo**-yo'-kom.
PL-woman-**ERG** 1PL-ACC 2SUBJ-S.PL-O.PL-**come-APPL**-FUT-CIS

'The women will come to us.'

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**.

⇒ 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**

⇒ **No challenge for inherent ergative case!**

▶ **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**.

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)

Absolute-dative transitives in West Circassian

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

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

'This girl is washing the dishes.'

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

     A   **O**
[mə pŝaŝe-**r**] [hač'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', *jeçeçen* 'scold', *ježen* 'read', *jezeš'ən* 'tire of', etc.
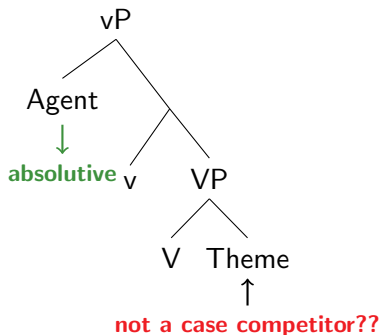
If all agents are introduced in the same position,

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

why do some themes get oblique and others absolutive?

Ergative-absolute verbs:

case competitor

Absolutive-oblique verbs:

not a case competitor??
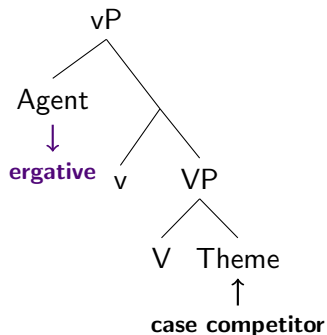
And where does oblique come from?

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):

absolute-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

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.

$\Rightarrow$ All agents (transitive **and unergative**) should be ergative.

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

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