

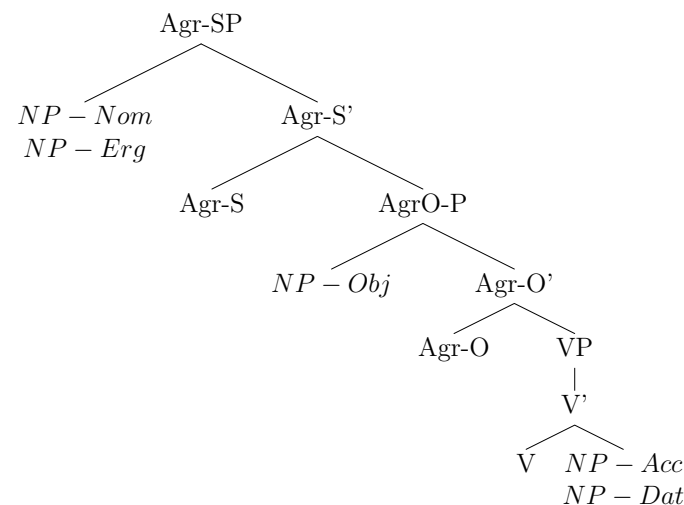
Four-way Case Systems: Ergative, Nominative, Objective and Accusative

Ellen Woolford
1997

Handout by Gina Cook
March 07 2006

INTRANS	Nom = \emptyset	agree = \checkmark
(DI)TRANS	Nom = \emptyset	agree = \checkmark
	Acc = \emptyset	agree = X
	(ACC = \emptyset)	agree = X
(DI)TRANS	Erg = m	agree = \checkmark
	Obj = na	agree = \checkmark
	(ACC = \emptyset)	agree = X
(DI)TRANS	Erg = m	agree = \checkmark
	Obj = na	agree = \checkmark
	(DAT = na)	agree = X

(2) NP positions in the tree:



(3) Translated Tree for where we finished last week?

Three main points using data from Nez Perce¹ and Kalkatungu:

1. Ergative is a lexical case, not a structural case.
2. UG allows for two object case positions,
-Spec Agr-O “objective case”
-inside VP “accusative case”
3. Crosslinguistic Generalization: “in a clause with a lexically cased subject the highest object cannot have structural accusative case.”

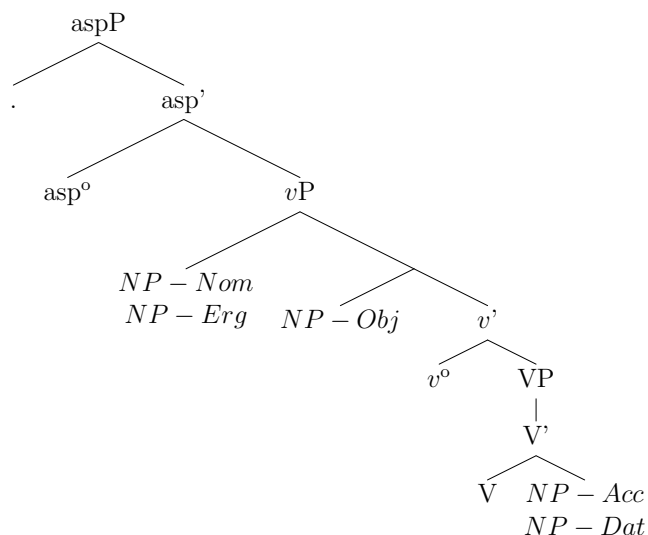
We are only focusing on the first point.

Background

Case theory predicts a lexical or quirky case (assigned at D-structure) associated with agent theta roles. Woolford claims that ergative is associated with agents as much as dative is with experiencer/goals.

(1) Case and agreement in sentence types Nez Perce:

¹Nez Perce is a Sahaptian language spoken in the northwestern U.S.



Section 1.2 Ergative as a Lexical Case

“the correlation between ergative Case and agents is strong enough to justify the view that ergative is the lexical Case associated with agents.”

- ‘Classic’ ergative language - marks only transitive subjects as Erg
- ‘Active’ ergative language - also marks intransitive agents as Erg

“There is a feeling that if the ergative Case were really a lexical Case associated with agents, it would not be limited to transitive clauses...[but this split] is typical of a lexical case”

Non-agentive subjects are often not marked with ergative Case. Instead non-agentive subjects may get dative Case (e.g., Hindi)

When the subject is either dative or ergative, the object becomes nominative and triggers agreement

Syntactic Ergativity, Dixon 1972, 1979

“A language is classified as syntactically ergative if it has syntactic rules that refer to or apply to ergative NPs or absolutive NPs.”

NPs with Lexical/Inherent Case are syntactically Inert in many circumstances. In German only structurally cased objects can passivize.

Bittner and Hale (1996b) argue that Dyirbal is syntactically ergative because nominatives move out of VP, while ergatives remain inside the VP

Split Ergativity

(4) Three types of split:

1. Case is ergative (assigned based loosely on theta role) while Agreement is Nom-acc (associated with structural positions)
2. Case is Erg-Abs while Case is Nom-Acc
3. Person 3rd Erg-Abs while Person 1st/2nd Nom-Acc

[In Hindi] Some verbs, e.g. ‘buy’, never take an ergative subject, even in transitive perfective constructions (Comrie 1984, p. 858). Such lexical exceptions support the idea that the ability to assign lexical ergative Case is part of a verb’s lexical entry ’

(5) Counter example, Hindi perfective ‘buy’ does take an Erg subject:

vo to ma-ne kal khridliya
that(masc) emph I(fem)-erg yesterday bought-masc
”Actually I bought *that* yesterday.”

Summary

Nothing is a problem for her idea that ergative is as much a lexical case as dative is, although she provides no rigorous arguments for anything.

References

Woolford, Ellen. 1997. “Four-way Case Systems: Ergative, Nominative, Objective and Accusative.” *NLLT* 15, 181-227.