Syntactic ergativity without inversion in Kalallisut

Kalaallisut (Inuit; Greenland) is a well-known example of a syntactically ergative language, serving as a primary example of that language type in Bittner and Hale (1996a,b). An ergative extraction constraint (EEC) is seen in participial relative clauses. RCs of this type allow only absolutives to be relativized.

(1) *Meeqqa-t [$\_\__{erg}$ akornuser-aannga] sinip-put
child-PL.ABS disturb-3PL>1SG.PART sleep-3PL.IND
Intended: 'The children that disturbed me are sleeping.' (Mikkelsen & Thrane 2023)

Analyses of the EEC both internal to Inuit languages (Bittner and Hale 1996b, Yuan 2022) and more broadly (Aldridge 2004, Coon et al. 2014, 2021, Assmann et al. 2015, Clemens and Tollan 2021) standardly appeal to inversion: the absolutive object must obtain an A-position higher than the ergative subject, but object movement over the subject blocks further A' movement by the subject. If, for instance, the object occupies the only specifier of the lower vP phase (Coon et al. 2014), we predict that nothing other than the absolutive can be moved out of vP. This prediction is correct so far as the RC strategy in (1) is concerned. Beyond this type of RC, however, it is broadly incorrect: Kalaallisut transitive subjects may otherwise participate both in A-movement and in A'-movement. We suggest that these facts, together with previously unnoticed case patterns on quantifiers, are best explained if Kalaallisut lacks object-over-subject inversion. Rather, the EEC in (1) reflects a *case-discriminating* A' probe.

Hyperraising. Mikkelsen & Thrane (2023) show that Kalaallisut structures like (2) involve hyperraising to object: *meeqqat* 'the children' originates in the lower clause and A-moves into the matrix. Evidence for movement (rather than prolepsis) comes from island sensitivity, cyclicity (hyperraising may not skip a finite clause), and the requirement of a gap, rather than an overt pronoun, in the lower clause. This movement behaves like A-movement in applying only to DPs, ignoring [*wh*]/[TOP]/[FOC] features, and feeding case/agreement; the hyperraised nominal is absolutive and agrees like an object. This background makes it notable that an embedded ergative subject may hyperraise, as shown in (2). Note that the same factors identify the gap as ergative in (2) as in RCs like (1): the clause bears transitive agreement and the object (overt in (2), *pro* in (1)) is absolutive.

(2) **Meeqqa-t** eqqaama-vakka [$_{CP}$ $\_\__{erg}$ illit ikior-aatsit]
child-PL.ABS remember-1SG>3PL.IND [2SG.ABS help-3PL>2SG.PART]
'I remember that **the children** helped you.' (Mikkelsen & Thrane 2023)

The well-formedness of (2) challenges several accounts of the EEC in (1). It is clearly problematic for the **phase-based view**, given the prediction that only absolutives should be able to exit vP *in any way*. It also challenges Coon et al.'s (2021) more recent **feature gluttony approach**, according to which the EEC reflects a combined A/A' probe operating in a structure where the object occupies the highest A-position: the [A] part of the RC probe finds the object, the [A'] part finds the relative operator subject, and the divergence between the two leads to a violation. Crucial here is that the A-probe always finds the object first; (2) suggests to the contrary that an A-probe above both arguments is able to probe the subject without intervention by the object. Beyond inversion views, (2) is problematic for a **PP-ergative approach** to the EEC, given the prediction that PP-ergatives cannot participate in A-movement (Polinsky 2017). Whatever rules out ergative relativization in (1) does not rule out A-movement in (2).

Focus movement. The focus construction shown in (3) fronts a single focused element, regardless of its case. Fronted ergatives retain ergative case, (3a). In addition to case connectivity, evidence that (A'-)movement is indeed involved here comes from island effects and reconstruction for principles A and C. Such data confirm that non-absolutives are in principle able to undergo A' movement in Kalaallisut. Accordingly, the EEC in (2) must reflect a factor which varies across different A' dependencies—not a general fact about the language's clause structure, e.g. inversion.

(3) a. Naja-m=una meeqqa-t ikior-ai.
Naja-ERG=FOC child-PL help-3SG>3PL
'It was N. who helped the children.'

b. Naja=ana meeqqa-t ikior-aat.
Naja.ABS=FOC child-PL help-3PL>3SG
'It was N. that the children helped.' (field notes)

Case. Inversion-based views of the EEC often connect to the idea that the object receives its case high, e.g. from T, in syntactically ergative languages (Bittner and Hale 1996a,b, Coon et al. 2014, Clemens and Tollan 2021, i.a.); put in Legate's (2008) terms, in languages with an EEC, ABS=NOM. This contrasts with languages in which morphological absolutive is a default form (ABS=DEF) reflecting underlying NOM on intransitive subjects and ACC on transitive objects. Yet Legate (2012) shows that Dyirbal, which has an EEC, is an ABS=DEF language: for some nominals, there are distinct forms for NOM and ACC. The same point can be made for Kalaallisut. The quantifier 'all' has two morphological forms: *tamarmik* for subjects (whether transitive or intransitive), (4a), and *tamaasa* for objects, (4b) (Fortescue 1988).

(4) a. Uninngasu-t tamarmik qannguip-put.
patient-PL all.NOM snore-3PL
'All the patients snored.'

b. Meeqqa-t tamaasa/*tamarmik taku-akka.
child-PL all.ACC/all.NOM see-1S>3P
'I saw all the children.' (field notes)

In addition, overt objects are possible in nonfinite clauses (Bok-Bennema 1991), suggesting objects can be licensed without T. The overall picture is one where objects receive case relatively low in the clause, removing Case as a possible motivation (or source of evidence) for inversion in Kalaallisut.

Capturing the EEC without inversion. Non-inversion-based theories of the EEC include those based on PP structure (see above), antilocality, and case discrimination. On an antilocality approach (Erlewine 2016), (1) reflects attempted movement that is too close, e.g. from subject position in Spec,TP to the landing site of RC operators in Spec,CP. The prediction is that merging additional structure above TP but below CP should obviate the EEC. Negation is a relevant head: Inuit languages generally show T-Neg-C order, where C hosts agreement affixes (Compton 2016). Yet negation does not obviate the EEC.

(5) * Meeqqa-t [$\_\__{erg}$ ikiu-nngik-kaannga] qiap-put.
child-PL help-NEG-3PL>1SG.PART cry-3PL.IND
Intended: 'The children who didn't help me are crying.' (field notes)

This leaves case discrimination approaches, discussed in various forms in the literature (e.g. Otsuka 2006, 2010, Legate 2012, Deal 2016, 2017, Drummond 2023). For Drummond (2023), working in the interaction/satisfaction theory of Agree, absolutive-only relativization patterns result when a probe that moves what satisfies it has a conjunctive satisfaction condition [SAT:REL+ABS]. An ergative relative operator lacks [ABS] and so does not satisfy the probe. Only an absolutive has both [REL] and [ABS] and can be moved by the probe. This analysis is compatible with the view that Kalaallisut clauses generally lack inversion, providing a simple account of (2): the hyperraising probe is [SAT:D], and the ergative moves because it is the highest DP. Similarly, the focus probe in (3) is [SAT:FOC]. The special behavior of RCs reflects the fact that only here is the probe conjunctively satisfied in part by case.

Our analysis brings several **implications for case theory.** First, the absence of inversion in Kalaallisut bears on Yuan's (2022) proposal that Inuit ergative is a dependent case assigned downward to a subject c-commanded by an (inverted) object. We conclude that ergative must be assigned via a different mechanism in this language. Second, our diagnosis of Kalaallisut as ABS=DEF means that [ABS] cannot be the relevant syntactic feature for a case-discriminating probe. Rather, participial RCs in Kalaallisut allow *nominatives* or *accusatives* to relativize. Some feature must be in common to these two. This pattern is surprising on configurational case theories in general (incl. the version used for case discrimination in Deal 2017): we instead expect ergatives and accusatives to pattern together (as dependent cases), whereas nominatives are separate. But it is easily handled on an inherent case treatment of ergative in Kalaallisut: NOM and ACC are structural cases; ERG is inherent; the RC probe is specified [SAT:REL+STRUC], where [STRUC] is a subfeature of all structural cases. This provides suggestive support for the idea that ergative is an inherent case in at least some languages (Legate 2012, Coon 2017).

Selected refs. Deal 2017. Syntactic ergativity as case discrimination. WCCFL. • Drummond 2023. Clause structure and ergativity in Nukuoro. Berkeley dissertation. • Legate 2012. Types of ergativity. *Lingua*. • Mikkelsen & Thrane 2023. Hyperraising in Kalaallisut. CLS proceedings. • Yuan 2022. Ergativity and object movement across Inuit. *Language.*