

Ergativity as Transitive Unaccusativity

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2007

Abstract

The present paper proposes a non-parametric approach to ergativity. It is argued that ergativity does not depend on a parametric choice, but on morphological properties of certain constructions that are distributed throughout a wide and varied array of languages. The main hypotheses propounded are two: (i) that the notion of ergativity should include not only canonical ergative patterns, but also, as a part of the very same phenomenon, oblique subject constructions (i.e. dative experiencers and so-called quirky subjects), and (ii) that ergativity can be understood as the consequence of a defective accusative case assignment in transitive constructions. In this sense, we propose to consider ergativity in general as *transitive unaccusativity*.

Key words

Syntax, Typology, Ergativity, Unaccusativity, Event Structure, Case Theory, Inherent Case, Ergative, Nominative, Accusative, Absolutive, Parameter, Quirky Subject, Dative Subject, Oblique Subject

1. Introduction

In a paper with a provocative title, Newmeyer (1998) proposed that Universal Grammar determines which grammars are possible, but not which ones are probable (an assertion he has used as the title of a recent essay –Newmeyer 2005). Behind this statement there lies a non-parametric approach to linguistic typology, which is precisely the approach to ergativity I am going to put forward in the present contribution (although not in Newmeyer's usage oriented framework).

In fact, the present proposal is inscribed in general terms in a “neo-constructivist” approach to the relations between lexicon and syntax, and more specifically, in the model Borer (2005a: 15) calls “exo-skeletal”, and that implies that the event structure associated to a given sentence is syntactically configured on functional categories that precisely serve that function.

This model shares with recent developments of Generative Grammar the vision (that can be found already in Borer 1984) that (most) structural differences between languages should not be sought in deep parameters, but in the different way functional categories are expressed in each language and, more concretely, in each type of construction.

In Borer's (2005a, b) model, functional categories such as Tense and Aspect (in sentences) or Number or Definiteness (in DPs) are conceived of as open values that must be assigned range all through the derivation. A notable virtue of this model is that it makes Chomsky's claim that structural differences between languages reduce to morphological differences more falsifiable (and even more explicit), in the sense that

the structural profile of a language is thought to depend on the availability for this language of certain range assigners or of certain phonological manifestations of combinations of heads and range assigners. Simply put, that syntactic differences will depend -to a great extent- on morphological and phonological properties of grammatical formants.

A direct consequence of this approach is that we should not expect a substantial difference between inter-linguistic and intra-linguistic variation, what is specially relevant for our issue, as the typological opposition between ergative and accusative languages is not clear cut: as Dixon (1994) has shown with special explicitness, ergativity is a typically partial phenomenon. In this sense, when we speak about typological differences between languages we are perhaps speaking about types of constructions (although conceived of not as primitives, but as epiphenomenal).

The proposal I am going to put forward in the following pages touches upon that corollary because it implies that ergativity neither depends on a macro-parameter (e.g. about the “activation” of case assigners, as in Bobaljik 1993 or Laka’s 1993 models, nor whether the external argument can or cannot be licensed by agreement, as in Neeleman and Weerman’s 1999 model), nor, of course, on different cognitive or cultural structures, but implies that ergativity just depends on certain morphological properties of certain types of constructions which are distributed, with a varying degree of intensity, across a large number of languages, that implies that ergativity is, in the end, a relatively superficial phenomenon.

More concretely, the main proposals put forward in the present paper are two: (i) that ergativity should be conceived of in a broad sense, including in such notion not only properly ergative patterns, but also, as a part of the very same phenomenon, oblique subjects (typically dative experiencers) and so called quirky subjects, and (ii) that ergativity can be defined as a morphosyntactic phenomenon resulting from the impossibility of accusative case assignment in transitive constructions. In this sense, I am going to suggest a conception of ergativity as *transitive unaccusativity*.

2. Quirky Subjects and Ergativity in Spanish

Let us begin with the analysis of the argument alternation (or variable behaviour) displayed by “psych-verbs” in Spanish (as well as in many other languages), such as *molestar* (‘bother’) or *asustar* (‘frighten’), as observed from (1) to (3) for *molestar*:

- (1) *Los borrachos molestaron a Luisa*
‘the drunks bothered Luisa’
- (2) *A Luisa le molesta que cantes*
‘That you sing bothers Luisa’ (lit. ‘to Luisa bothers that you sing’)
- (3) *Luisa se molesta si cantas*
‘Luisa is bothered if you sing’

That there is a triple argument alternation in (1)-(3) is shown by the fact that the experiencer (*Luisa*) has a different case marking in each example: accusative in (1), dative in (2) and nominative in (3), keeping the verb constant¹.

¹ Excluding *léismo* and *laísmo* (a dialectal phenomenon of confusion between dative and accusative clitic pronouns), the following sentences are unacceptable:

(i) **Los borrachos le molestaron (a Luisa)*

The crucial connexion of these alternations with ergativity rests upon two independent hypotheses: (i) that the dative argument in (2) is not, as traditionally assumed, a dislocated indirect object, but a dative case marked subject (that is, an instance of what has been called a “quirky subject”), and (ii) that this implies that (2) displays an ergative/absolutive pattern of case and agreement marking.

The contrast between (1) and (3) resembles closely the alternation that links expressions like *Luisa abrió la puerta* (‘Luisa opened the door’) and *La puerta se abrió* (‘The door opened’). It is assumed in diverse theoretical models that this alternation must be explained as a process of “promotion” of the internal argument of the transitive sentence (*La puerta*) as the subject of the intransitive one. Henceforth I will assume that the relation between (1) and (3) is a particular case of this alternation. Consequently, we can characterise (3) as an *unaccusative* construction. In the same vein, we can consider the example in (1) as an *accusative* construction of the same verb.

Nevertheless, the characterisation of the example in (2) is not so direct. Spanish grammatical tradition has generally considered that the dative argument in (2), *a Luisa* (‘to Luisa’) is a topicalised indirect object. Besides, the alternation between (1) and (2) has been explained in terms of the agentive or non-agentive character of the verb, in terms of the wilfulness of the event, in terms of the animated or unanimated character of the (nominative) subject, or whether causation is direct or indirect (see Gutiérrez Ordóñez 1999 for a review). Although some of these approaches seem descriptively adequate, neither of them explains why we find precisely a dative/accusative alternation, nor why dative experiencers of the type of *a Luisa* in (2) have typical subject properties, very different from the properties of topicalised indirect objects.

More recently, it has been suggested that the dative *a Luisa* in (2) could be considered as a dative subject, analogous to those profusely studied in Icelandic (specially starting from Zaenen et al. 1985) and also very well known in South Asian languages (see Verma and Mohanan, eds. 1990). The arguments on behalf of considering those and other datives as subjects and not as fronted indirect objects can be found in Masullo (1992, 1993), Cuervo (1999), Campos (1999), Fernández Soriano (1999), and MENDÍVIL (2002), and will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that I am going to operate with a purely descriptive notion of subject, as the syntactically more prominent argument in unmarked word order (external argument), without assuming that *subject* is a grammatical primitive or that it should be identified with a specific structural position².

Some psych-verbs in Spanish (and in many other languages) are “defective”, in the sense that they only allow the configuration of (2). Consider the example in (4):

- (4) *A Luisa le gustan las zanahorias*
 To Luisa Pron.Dat like.PL the.PL carrots
 ‘Luisa likes carrots’

(ii) **A Luisa la molesta que cantes*

² It is important to observe that even those authors who reject that this kind of datives are subjects admit that they really have some properties of canonical subjects. Haspelmath (2001: 69), for instance, concludes that dative experiencers in German, Polish or Italian seem to demand a gradual and prototypical notion of subject. See also Sigurdhsson (2002) and Moore and Perlmutter (2000) for comparisons between the prototypical case of Icelandic with German and other languages, as well as Fasenlow (2002) for German. A similar conclusion is reached by Bayer (2004) when he compares Icelandic with German and other languages. Bayer recognises that the degree of “subjecthood” of German datives is not as robust as it is in Icelandic, but at the same time admits that in German “non-nominatives in experiencer constructions are external arguments” (2004: 60).

As already observed the experiencer *a Luisa* has been considered a dislocated indirect object, while the stimulus *las zanahorias* has been analysed as the subject. It is not strange, as it is *las zanahorias* the DP which agrees with the verb and which shows nominative case.

In Mendivil (2002) it is proposed that the more interesting way to account for both the prominent subject properties of the dative experiencers in (2) and (4) and the very fact that it is the other argument (the CP or *las zanahorias* respectively) which presents the typical coding properties of subjects in Spanish (case and agreement), is to assume that the *gustar*-type verbs (as in (4)) and the dative alternations of the *molestar*-type verbs (as in (2)) follow really an ergative pattern of case and agreement marking.

According to this proposal, both in (2) and in (4) the experiencer is analogous to an ergative subject (although marked with dative case) and the stimulus is an absolutive object (marked with nominative and governing agreement with the verb), what completes the characterisation of the examples from (1) to (3) with an *ergative* construction³.

Actually, constructions with dative experiencers as subjects (or with many typical properties of subjects) are broadly attested in languages from all over the world apart from Icelandic (see the numerous studies collected in Verma and Mohanan, eds. (1990), Aikhenvald, Dixon and Onishi, eds. (2001), Bhaskararao and Subbaro, eds. (2004a, b) or Bossong's (1998) survey).

Abstracting away from the complexity of the data collected in the aforementioned studies and from the diversity of languages included in them, it can be said that they reveal a statistical tendency specially relevant for our concern here: that if we were to find a non-nominative subject (apart from properly ergative ones), it is highly probable that it will be, regardless of the phylo-genetic origin of the language, what we call semantically an experiencer and that it will be marked with dative case⁴.

I have mentioned that the more reasonable treatments of the alternation between (1) and (2) in Spanish grammatical tradition allude to the agentive or non-agentive character of the predicate, suggesting that in (1) there is an external argument that causes a mental state in the experiencer, while it does not happens like that in (2). In fact, following partially Arad (1998), it could be said that psych-verbs can have two essential types of interpretations: agentive and non-agentive. In the agentive reading there is an agent that deliberately does something to produce a change in the experiencer's mental state and there exists a change in the experiencer's mental state. As for the non-agentive reading we can find two situations: (i) what Arad calls an eventive reading, according to which something or somebody causes a change in the experiencer's mental state, but not intentionally and, besides, there exists a change in the experiencer's mental state, and (ii) what she calls a stative reading in which there is neither agent nor change in the experiencer's mental state. It could be said then that the stative reading describes an experiencer's property more than an event. The ergative pattern of (2) and the unaccusative pattern of (3) can present both types of non agentive reading, as observed in (5) and (6) respectively:

- (5) a. *A Luisa le molesta que cantes* (stative reading)
- b. *A Luisa le molestó que cantaras* (eventive reading)

³ As far as I am aware of, Neeleman and Weerman (1999: 191, f.5) are the first ones who consider Icelandic quirky subjects as a kind of split ergativity.

⁴ It seems then that Verma and Mohanan's characterisation holds much more broadly: "In the so-called experiencer subject construction in South Asian languages, the thematically prominent argument, which we expect to be a grammatical subject, is quite often an experiencer, and is marked with the case otherwise associated with indirect objects" (Verma and Mohanan, 1990: 2).

- (6) a. *Luisa se molesta si cantas* (stative reading)
 b. *Luisa se molestó porque cantaste* (eventive reading)

Only the accusative pattern of (1) can present the agentive reading.

In fact, Onishi (2001) states that the main relevant criterion for similar alternations in many other languages is agent's control on the event, according to the following generalisation:

Table 1

Onishi's Generalisation:

"If a language has an extensive system of opposition between constructions with a canonically marked A/S and those with a non-canonically marked A/S, then 'control' is usually the main semantic factor distinguishing them" (Onishi, 1991: 36-37)

I would like to put forward, then, that when the stimulus argument of a *molestar*-type verb is interpreted as an animated agent, it is used a nominative-accusative pattern, in which the stimulus will be a nominative subject interpreted as a controller agent, and the experiencer an affected accusative object. In terms of Dowty's (1991) theory of proto-thematic roles, the stimulus will qualify as proto-agent and the experiencer will qualify as proto-patient. However, if the stimulus is unanimated or does not control the event, the experiencer can be perceived as the most prominent argument, the "sentient" argument (Dowty 1991: 572) *par excellence*. In this case, the alternation will be implemented with an alternative marking system: the unaccusative system of (3) or the ergative system of (2). In this second instance, the dative case is recruited as the analogous case of ergative case for the most prominent argument, and the other argument will have default case, nominative, and, because of that, will govern verbal agreement.

In formal terms, what the unaccusative pattern of (3) and the ergative pattern of (2) have crucially in common is that in neither of them is there an accusative case nor an agentive argument. The concurrence of these two factors in a construction is not casual: it is the concurrence that lies behind the famous *Burzio's generalisation* (Burzio 1986), a concurrence that, as we will see, can permit us to establish a meaningful connexion between unaccusativity and ergativity⁵.

3. Dative subjects and psych-verbs

According to what we have seen up to now, it could be said that psych-verbs, as they are not typically agentive, are prone to ergativity (in this broad sense). The same can be said of the perhaps more studied dative subjects, Icelandic ones. What is of importance now is that the crucial factor for the selection of subject case in this language is agentivity. As Andrews observes, "perhaps the most important regularity is that non-nominative subjects are never true agents" (Andrews 2002: 99)⁶.

⁵ Burzio's generalisation states that only a verb with an external argument can assign accusative case. Holmer (2001) bases himself in the satisfaction or not of this generalisation in order to establish an accusative/ergative parameter. See also Falk (1991) for a similar attempt. The proposal I am going to uphold is more consistent in the sense it predicts the generalisation and it applies to both ergative and accusative languages.

⁶ Interestingly he adds: "The other main regularity is that there is a strong association between the dative case on subjects and the Experiencer semantic role" (Andrews, 2002: 99-100). As can be seen,

In the Icelandic examples of (7) and (8) -parallel to the Spanish ones of (2) and (4)-, the subject has dative case and the direct object has nominative case (default case):

- (7) Icelandic (Sigurdhsson, 2002: 692)
Henni leiddust strákar
 her.DAT bored boys.the.NOM
 'She found the boys boring'
- (8) Icelandic (Sigurdhsson, 1989: 240)
Mir líkudu hestarnir
 me.DAT liked horses.the.NOM
 'I liked the horses'

In (9) we have a Japanese psych-verb again with the experiencer subject in dative and the object in nominative:

- (9) Japanese (Ura, 2000: 96)
Taroo-ni hebi-ga kowa-i
 Taroo-DAT snake-NOM fearful-PRES
 'Taroo is fearful of snakes'

Even more interesting is the contrast between the examples in (10) and (11). In the first one we see that the subject of the Japanese verb 'understand' is marked with dative case, whereas what is 'understood' (the object) is marked with nominative case. However, in (11) we can see that if the subject can be considered as active, then it must be marked with nominative case and the object with accusative:

- (10) Japanese (Ura, 2000: 96)
Taroo-ni eigo-ga dekir-u
 Taroo-DAT English-NOM understand-PRES
 'Taroo understands English'
- (11) Japanese (Ura, 2000: 109)
Taroo-ga eigo-o hanas-u
 Taroo-NOM English-AC speak-PRES
 'Taroo speaks English'

But as Ura (2000) explains, if the verb of (11) has attached the "potential affix" *-(rar)e*, meaning something like 'can speak' (that is, with an insistence in the capability of the subject rather than in its performing), then again the pattern DAT/NOM emerges, as can be seen in (12):

- (12) Japanese (Ura, 2000: 97)
Taroo-ni eigo-ga hanas-e-ru
 Taroo-DAT English-NOM speak-POT(ential)-PRES
 'Taroo can speak English'

In the same vein, Verma (1990) offers the examples of (13) from Bhojpuri (Indo-Arian), in which the same verb alternates according to if the subject smells voluntarily the flowers (13a), in which case the marking is NOM/ACC, or if the subject simply notices the smell of gas (13b), in which case the pattern is DAT/NOM and the verb agrees with the object:

- (13) Bhojpuri (Verma, 1990: 87)
 a. *ham phuul mahaknii*

Andrews' second generalisation agrees with what has been described for Hindi and other South Asian languages.

- I-NOM flower-AC smell-1S-PST
 ‘I smelled the flowers’
 b. *hamraa gais mahakal*
 I-DAT gas-NOM smell-3S-PST
 ‘I smelled gas’

Although, of course, each language has its own restrictions and exceptions, the examples considered up to now and those presented from (14) to (21), all of them strictly parallel to Spanish *gustar* (4), show clearly that the DAT/NOM pattern tends to appear precisely in non agentive psych-verbs. As in the previous examples, in the following ones the subject is marked with dative case and the object with nominative, usually agreeing with the subject.

- (14) Irish (Ritter and Rosen, 2000: 219)
is maith liom é
 is good to.me that
 ‘I like that’
 (15) Northern Havyaka Kannada (Ullrich, 1990: 247)
yenage ista iddu
 I.DAT liking is
 ‘I like it’
 (16) Punjabi (Bhatia, 1990: 181)
ó nuu kataab pasand aaii
 he DATbook.F.S. choice come.PST.3.F.S
 ‘He liked a book’
 (17) Marwari (Magier, 1990: 215)
mha ne jodhpur cokho lage
 me DATJodhpur nice seems
 ‘I like Jodhpur’
 (18) Lithuanian (Haspelmath, 2001: 61)
X man patik
 me-DAT likes
 ‘I like X’
 (19) Marathi (Pandharipande, 1990: 162)
ma-la gana avdta
 I-DAT song likes
 ‘I like the song’
 (20) Hindi (Kachru, 1990: 60)
ramesh ko kaafii pasand nahii
 Ramesh DATcoffee liking not
 Ramesh does not like coffee’
 (21) Russian (Moore and Perlmutter, 2000: 383)
Borisu nravjatsja takie rubaski
 Boris.DAT like.3.S such shirts.NOM.PL
 ‘Boris likes such shirts’

According to the proposal put forward in this paper, all the examples considered, which represent diverse linguistic families and groups (from Spanish to Kannada) should be considered as patterns of split ergativity.

In a recent handbook on case theory, Butt (2006) states that even the more sophisticated typological classifications concerning ergativity (that is, those that go further than the double or triple classification usually found in introductory handbooks), such as Fillmore’s or Bittner and Hale’s ones, are insufficient. The reason for this claim

is that these classifications cannot accommodate the DAT/NOM patterns I have just exemplified⁷.

The present contribution aims to correct this insufficiency rightly pointed out by Butt, but intends to do it in a more interesting way, in the sense that instead of enlarging the typologies or the parametric options, it does it by supplying a unified treatment for all cases.

4. Split Ergativity

Dixon (1994), focussing on “canonical” ergativity (that is, not in the broad sense I am using here as an equivalent expression to ‘transitive unaccusative construction with oblique subject’) has shown there are basically three types of split ergativity: (i) the split that depends on semantic properties of verbs, (ii) the split that depends on properties of subjects, and (iii) the split that depends on the sentence’s tense and aspect⁸.

It must be noted that Onishi’s generalisation (table 1), firstly formulated for dative and quirky subjects, fits to a good extent into the first two classes of split. Simplifying somewhat, the first type of split ergativity corresponds roughly with the already traditional distinction between unaccusative and unergative verbs. As Dixon observes (1994: 77 ff.) in such languages the subject of an intransitive verb will be marked as the agentive subject of transitive sentences if it is agentive, whereas it will be marked as the direct object if the verb is non-agentive. More interesting (at least in relation with the alternation of Spanish *molestar* considered) results the case of “fluid” languages, in which the same intransitive verb marks the subject differently according to if there is an agentive use of the verb or not, as in the Guaraní examples of (22).

- (22) Guaraní (Dixon, 1994: 83)
- a. *che-karu*
‘I (OBJ) am a big eater’
 - b. *a-karu*
‘I (SUBJ) am eating’

In (22a) there is a non-controlling subject, and we find an ergative pattern (because the intransitive subject is marked as an object), whereas in (22b) there is a controller subject and we find an accusative pattern (as the intransitive subject is marked in the same way that a transitive subject).

The second type of split ergativity, which depends on the properties of subjects, is also very relevant in our context. As Dixon (1994) observes, in these languages choosing between an ergative or accusative system depends on the subject’s degree of control, animacy or person features, according to the following *Nominal Hierarchy* (Dixon 1994: 85): first person pronouns > second person pronouns > demonstratives, third person pronouns > proper nouns > common nouns (human > animate > inanimate). For example, Dixon observes that in Dyirbal there is a nominative-accusative system if the subject is a first or second person pronoun, and an ergative system otherwise.

⁷ “even the more complex pictures do not include an account of the systematic appearance of dative subjects, so more work remains to be done” (Butt 2006: 161).

⁸ According to Dixon, there is a fourth type of split, which is based on the difference between main and (some types of) embedded clauses, but available data are so scarce that it will not be considered here. See Dixon (1994: 101-104), who suggests that this fourth type of split ergativity could be based on one or more than one of the other three splits.

It is important to remark that this hierarchy again correlates the degree of agentivity and/or control with ergativity, in such a way that it is much more probable for an argument to receive nominative case if it is first or second person than if it is third person, and not the other way (this is so because features of first and second person usually denote animate and human discourse participants, capable of voluntary actions).

Before we turn to the third type of split ergativity, it is convenient to point to the relevant connexion that exists between these two main types of ergativity (that is, on the one hand, “canonical” split ergativity linked to semantic properties of verbs or to properties of the subject, and, on the other, the existence of non-nominative subjects in nominative-accusative languages) and Onishi’s generalisation (table 1).

The parallelism between these two “kinds” of ergativity is self-evident, although not easy to explicit formally. The essential thing from a descriptive point of view is that split ergativity is sensitive to the same features as the tendency to mark subjects inherently: the degree of control and agentivity of the external argument.

I have advanced the hypothesis that the key to the explanation of this parallelism rests upon the consideration of both phenomena as different instances of the same thing: constructions of transitive unaccusativity, that is, constructions in which, according to Burzio’s generalisation, the absence of accusative case is correlated with the lack of assignation of an agentive thematic role.

Nevertheless, before we give a more detailed shape to this proposal, it may be relevant to pay some attention to the proposal made by Ritter and Rosen (2000), who present a linguistic typology just inspired by the relation between the two main types of constructions discussed up to now (i.e. canonical split ergativity and oblique subjects).

5. I-Languages and D-Languages

Ritter and Rosen (2000) propose that there are two types of languages according to a typology based on event structure: Delimitation languages (D-languages) and Initiation languages (I-languages). They assume that canonical events consist of initiation, duration, and termination, and then that canonical events are transitive accomplishments, as they include necessarily an initiator (typically an agentive subject) and a delimiter (typically a definite object). According to Ritter and Rosen’s proposal, the presence of one of them is enough for the sentence to have event structure. The typology they propose is based, then, on the fact that, so to speak, languages choose if they are delimiter-oriented or initiator-oriented. In this sense, in D-languages only accomplishments and achievements will pattern as events (having both a delimiter) and activities and states will pattern as non-events, whereas in I-languages activities and accomplishments will pattern as events (having both an initiator), and states and achievements will be considered syntactically non-events.

Very interestingly, Ritter and Rosen correlate this supposed orientation with languages’ formal properties. So, they characterise D-languages and I-languages according to the following grammatical properties:

Table 2

(Adapted from Ritter & Rosen 2000: 195)

- | |
|---|
| <p>(a) <i>D-languages (Accomplishments form a natural class with achievements)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Sensitive to semantic and syntactic properties of the object, including: specificity or definiteness, case marking, person (ii) Accusative case may be restricted to delimiting objects (iii) Ergative splits on the basis of perfective aspect / past tense |
|---|

- (iv) Object agreement not specified for person features
- (b) *I-languages (Accomplishments form a natural class with activities)*
 - (i) Sensitive to semantic and syntactic properties of the subject, including: agentivity, animacy
 - (ii) Make a grammatical distinction between topic and subject
 - (iii) Ergative splits on the basis of properties of the subject
 - (iv) Subject and object agreement specified for person features
 - (v) Quirky case subjects, animacy hierarchies

Although I consider the assumption that all these grammatical properties are related to the syntactic codification of events very reasonable and interesting, I would like to show that they keep a much more direct connexion with ergativity than reflected by Ritter and Rosen, and, furthermore, that the distinction between I-languages and D-languages is not justified.

There are several reasons to reject Ritter and Rosen's event-based typology. The first one is that there is not clear why a given language should have to choose between one of the two eventive arguments in order to have eventive structure. The second one, closely related with the former, is that this model implies that, for example, in D-languages (such as English) activities and in general unergative verbs lack event structure, as they have not a delimiter. But it is not clear what this could mean if we compare an English sentence codifying an activity with a correspondent Japanese sentence (because Japanese, according the established criteria is an I-language):

- (23) a. *Ken ran*
 b. *Ken ga hasit-ta* (Shibatani 2001: 307)
 Ken NOM run-PST
 'Ken ran'

If we admit Ritter and Rosen's proposal we must admit that the sentence in (23a) lacks event structure (as according to that proposal in a D-language the presence of a delimiter object is a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of event structure, and the example in (23b) lacks a delimiter object) and admit simultaneously that the Japanese example of (23b) *does* present event structure, as the presence of an initiator argument, like *Ken-ga* in (23b) will be a necessary and sufficient condition to have one. But this is senseless as both sentences have the same event structure (or, if preferred, the same lack of it).

Another reason to reject the proposed typology, in which I am going to focus from now, is the same objection that can be fronted to every holistic typology: that it is quite frequent for a single language to present behaviours coherent with more than one of the defined types.

According to property (aiii) (see Table 2) Ritter and Rosen consider Hindi to be a D-language, as this language presents an ergative split associated to perfective aspect. So, in (24a) we have a nominative-accusative marking linked to imperfective aspect, whereas in (24b) the same sentence but with perfective aspect, displays an ergative-absolutive case marking (and the complex verb agrees with the absolutive object):

- (24) Hindi (Mahajan 1989: 72)
- | | | | | |
|----|------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. | <i>raam</i>
Ram.M | <i>rotii</i>
bread.F | <i>khaataa</i>
eat.IMP.M | <i>thaa</i>
be.PST.M |
| | 'Ram (habitually) ate bread' | | | |
| b. | <i>raam-ne</i>
Ram.M-ERG | <i>rotii</i>
bread.F | <i>khaayii</i>
eat.PERF.F | <i>thii</i>
be.PST.F |
| | 'Ram had eaten bread' | | | |

Ritter and Rosen (2000: 230 ff.) suggest that ergative splits based on tense and aspect are related directly with properties of D-languages that somehow connect definiteness, perfectivity, and accusative case (ai, aii). They base themselves in widely studied phenomena in languages such as Finnish, in which the marking of accusative is restricted to definite objects that delimit the event, whereas indefinite objects of atelic events are marked with partitive case. They also mention Russian and other Slavonic languages in which delimited events and definite objects are associated to verbal perfective markers.

Nevertheless, they recognise that the classification of Hindi (and any other language that have split ergativity on the basis of tense and aspect) presents a problem (in fact, they call it a paradox: “the paradox of tense/aspect ergative splits”, 2000: 230). This is so because the alleged connexion between delimitation, perfectivity, and accusative case predicts that the nominative-accusative pattern should emerge in perfective sentences, just the opposite to what really happens, as seen in (24).

In their own words:

“If tense/aspect split languages are sensitive to perfectivity, they should be D-languages. This leads to the prediction that the nominative/accusative pattern should be associated with D-events, and therefore should obtain in the perfective. However, we find the ergative pattern, not the nominative/accusative one, but in perfective clauses. This constitutes a paradox.” (Ritter and Rosen 2000: 231).

Far from questioning the grouping of Hindi with D-languages (or the proper consideration of splits based on tense/aspect as a defining feature of this type), Ritter and Rosen argue that there are other properties that link Hindi to D-languages, such as the existence of a case marker *-ko* that appears with direct objects when they have specific reading, as in (25a), that objects without *-ko* and without agreement with the verb are unspecific, as in (25b), and that objects agreeing with the verb must have a specific reading, as in (25c):

(25) Hindi (Ritter and Rosen 2000: 231-232)

- a. *siitaa-ne larkii-ko dekhaa*
Sita-ERG girl.F-ko saw.M
‘Sita saw the girl’
- b. *siitaa larkaa dekh rahii he*
Sita boy.M seeing be.F
‘Sita is looking for a (suitable) boy (to marry)’
- c. *siitaa-ne larkaa dekhaa*
Sita-ERG boy.M saw.M
‘Sita saw the (*some) boy’

They also argue in favour of this grouping (and the subsequent adscription of splits based on tense/aspect to this type of languages) the relevant fact that Hindi unergative verbs can take ergative subjects, as in (26), where we observe also that the verb does not agree with the ergative subject:

(26) Hindi (Mahajan 1997: 46)

Kutton-ne bhonkaa
dogs-ERG bark.PERF.M.SG
‘The dogs barked’

According to Ritter and Rosen the hypothesis that Hindi is a D-language explains the absence of nominative, as in D-languages, by definition, the delimiter argument is needed for the availability of the functional category that licenses the initiator argument and nominative case. As the event in (26) is not delimited, according to Ritter and Rosen, it would lack event structure, and there would not be any case for the subject, forcing the ergative marking.

Apart now from the inadequacy of stating that in (26) there is neither event initiator nor event structure, it is interesting to observe that Ritter and Rosen consider this behaviour as a proof of the D-language character of Hindi, as the example would be a “mirror image” of what happens in I-languages, such as Icelandic or Dyirbal, languages in which the subject is marked with quirky (or ergative) case when it is non-initiating, as we have seen in previous sections (recall that these two examples pattern with the two “types of ergativity” discussed earlier in this paper).

But then there emerges a huge problem for the classification of Hindi as a D-language and, by extension, for the adscription of ergative splits based on tense and aspect to D-languages: it is a fact (although not mentioned by Ritter and Rosen) that in Hindi (as we have seen in (20)) the use of dative subjects (that is, an instance of the quirky case phenomenon linked by Ritter and Rosen to I-languages) is very frequent.

In (27) we have two examples from languages that according to Ritter and Rosen belong to the class of I-languages as they have quirky subjects (datives in these cases), among other properties, and in (28) two examples from languages that while presenting ergative splits with basis on tense and/or aspect, they have dative quirky subjects too:

- (27) a. Icelandic (Sigurdhsson, 1989: 240)
Mir likudu hestarnir
 me.DAT liked horses.the.NOM
 ‘I liked the horses’
- b. Japanese (Ura, 2000: 96)
Taroo-ni eigo-ga dekir-u
 Taroo-DAT English-NOM understand-PRES
 ‘Taroo understands English’
- (28) a. Hindi (Kachru, 1990: 60)
ramesh ko kaafii pasand nahii
 Ramesh DAT coffee living not
 ‘Ramesh does not like coffee’
- b. Georgian (Harris, 1984: 284)
me masinve momeconet tkven
 I.DAT immediately 1SG.like.PAS.2PL.IO you
 ‘I liked you immediately’

If, as Ritter and Rosen (2000: 232) state, examples such as those of (27) (I-languages) are mirror images of those of (26) (D-languages), then we should conclude that the example of (28a) is also a mirror image of a D-language, but it is just the same language, Hindi.

By the other hand, the case of Georgian (a language not considered by Ritter and Rosen) makes even clearer that the connexion of D-languages with ergative splits based on tense and aspect is not only paradoxical but inadequate, as in Georgian there is an ergative split based on tense (roughly, present tense sentences are nominative-accusative and past tense sentences are ergative), while the verb class to which belongs the example in (28a) (not surprisingly, the verb ‘like’) presents a pattern parallel to that of the examples in (27) and (28a), with a non agentive subject marked with dative case and a nominative direct object, regardless of tense (see Harris 1984).

Consequently, Ritter and Rosen's typology is not adequate, not only because it determines arbitrarily if sentences have or have not event structure (at the end, there may be different ways of defining 'event structure'), but above all because it predicts contradictorily that the same language (be it Hindi or Georgian) belong simultaneously to both types.

The hypothesis put forward in this paper avoids this contradiction and, as I hope to show, in a certain degree predicts such behaviour, as it implies that both ergativity and quirky (specially dative) subjects are instances of the same phenomenon, that is, essentially, the introduction of the external argument with an inherent case as a consequence of the verb's unaccusativity in certain constructions.

In fact, in a recent paper (that precisely discusses non-nominative subjects in Hindi), Mahajan (2004) formulates the following generalisation, that embraces both canonical ergative subjects in this language (as in the example in (24b)) and dative subjects (as in the example in (28a)):

(29) "Non-nominative subjects in Hindi arise only in non-accusative contexts" (Mahajan 2004: 286)

Mahajan's generalisation does not consider the mechanism of case assignment to non-nominative subjects, but simply reflects the correlation of non-nominative subjects with the absence of accusative case (see Amritavalli 2004 for an approach in terms of unaccusativity to dative subject verbs in Kannada). Mahajan himself justifies his use of the expression "non-accusative" instead of "unaccusative" because of the heavy theoretical load of the term in recent linguistics, and specifies that the use of "non-accusative" is referred to "transitive contexts with a missing accusative Case", whereas unaccusative verbs "are intransitives that do not assign accusative case to their (only) argument" (Mahajan 2004: 296 fn. 2).

Nevertheless, I think that, at heart, it is the very same phenomenon, and because of that I am proposing the characterisation of ergativity (in the broad sense) as *transitive unaccusativity*.

6. Ergativity as transitive unaccusativity

Although Ritter and Rosen's typology seems inadequate as such, the fact is that it makes clear rightly that certain types of constructions in some languages (and not certain languages as a whole), reflect different case marking and agreement systems according to formal properties of the functional categories associated to eventive arguments. The hypothesis I would like to develop, then, is that what is characterised by the properties Ritter and Rosen attribute to I-languages is not a type of language, but a type of construction that spreads throughout languages from over the world and of whatever filiation, and that we can characterise as *ergativity*.

According to this point of view, ergativity would consist simply in the projection of a transitive predication with a verb that because of diverse reasons (mainly historical) cannot assign accusative case⁹.

In this sense, unlike recent approaches that consider ergativity as a formal parameter, such as those of Laka (1993), Bobaljik (1993), Cocchi (1999), Neelman and

⁹ At bottom, this hypothesis could be inscribed in the tradition of the study of ergativity represented in modern linguistics by Anderson, who stated: "this 'fundamental' typological parameter is reduced to a comparatively trivial fact about morphology" (1976: 16-17).

Weerman (1999) or Ura (2000, 2006), the present proposal forms part of what has been called an “unaccusative approach” to ergativity, in the line of work by Bok-Bennema (1991) and the developments by Nash (1996), Bittner and Hale (1996a, b), Mahajan (2004) or Stepanov (2004). As Stepanov observes, echoing Bok-Bennema’s insights, ergativity or inherent marking of the subject (it comes to the same thing in our context) could be seen as a resort to solve the problem of formal unaccusativity in transitive events.

Simply put, the hypothesis I am defending implies that a transitive predication (be it a dative subject construction in Spanish or Russian, an Icelandic quirky subject construction, a perfective sentence in Hindi, or any agentive sentence in Basque) projects with a verb that does not assign accusative case, what causes the external argument to be licensed by an autonomous case assigner. Or in other words, that we are in front of two-argument sentences in which there is only one structural case, nominative (or absolutive, as they are the same).

We needn’t then neither parameters nor defective categories, in contrast to what is habitual in the rest of the approaches I am aware of, which (perhaps Stepanov’s one being the only exception) use one or another (or, frequently, both of them).

Of course that now I have to implement this approach in a coherent and not *ad hoc* model of sentence derivation, what implies no little difficulty. The model I am going to present is far from perfect and theoretically crude (and perhaps old-fashioned), but the reward is great: the elimination of parameters and defective categories in the treatment of a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon.

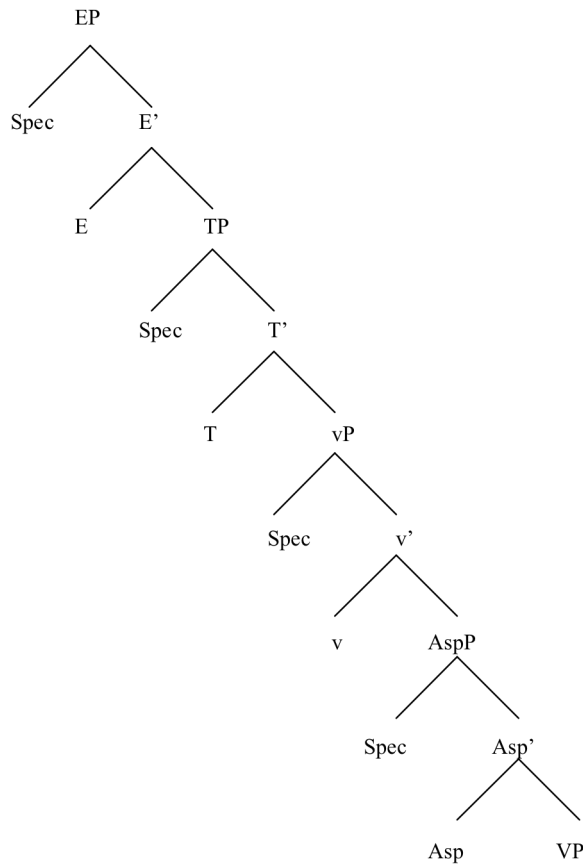
The model of sentence structure in which this view may be implemented could be that of (30), which (in essence and somewhat simplified) is that of Borer (2005a, b) for the projection of event structure on syntax, but with the inclusion of the node *v*, a functional category widely accepted as responsible of the introduction of the agentive argument (see Chomsky 1995: 315-316), which some authors identify with the traditional category of *voice* (see Kratzer 1996)¹⁰.

As can be seen in (30), between *v* and VP I make use of the category Asp (Aspect), following here Borer’s detailed argumentation (and to which I return later). Lastly, the E position in (30) stands for the Event argument of Borer’s model, according to which in [Spec E] the event role Initiator is assigned to any referential argument that has not been interpreted earlier as a Delimiter (and where this argument existentially bounds the event). The discussion to justify this projection is much more complex than what can be presented here. Suffice it to say that this specifier could be the position to satisfy the PPE and that, as a consequence, any SD landing there will gather most properties of what traditionally has been known as a *subject*.

The tree in (30) corresponds to a prototypic accomplishment event, that is, a transitive telic sentence in nominative-accusative construction, such as, for example, *Juan mató a Pedro* (‘Juan killed Pedro’) in Spanish:

¹⁰ Following Chomsky I will use *v* as “the ‘light verb’ head of transitive constructions” (Chomsky 1998: 15), what does not invalidate the association of this head with voice.

(30)



That transitive sentence would be roughly derived as follows: the direct object (*a Pedro*) is generated in [spec Asp] (or moves there from VP); in this position, according to Borer's (2005a, b) model, the DP assigns range to Asp by specifier-head agreement, making it telic or delimited. In this same position, [spec Asp], the argument *a Pedro* is marked with (or checks) accusative case and it is interpreted as a delimiter of the event.

The external argument (*Luis*) is introduced in [spec v] (as v has precisely that function) and receives (or checks) nominative case in [spec T], according to standard assumptions.

Chomsky (1998), as well as other authors, have proposed that Burzio's generalisation could follow from a supposedly double function of the v head, in such a way that this head would have two specifiers: the first one introducing the agentive external argument and the second one assigning (or checking) accusative case. In this sense, the absence of v in unaccusative verbs would explain the correlation pointed out by Burzio. As Bennis observes: "if it is indeed v, and not V, that is able to assign accusative Case, the absence of v has two consequences: there is no external argument and no accusative Case" (Bennis 2004: 86).

Nevertheless, given that the *Asp* head is independently needed (and it is interpretable), and given the clear correlation between accusative case and telicity, it seems reasonable to assume that the position for accusative case assignment is [spec Asp], what permits also to avoid the *ad hoc* hypothesis of a double specifier for v.

Let us also assume, as a crucial auxiliary hypothesis for my theory, the proposal that structural accusative case can be assigned to [spec Asp] *only if there exists v*, what would permit us to derive Burzio's generalisation without recurring to an unexpected

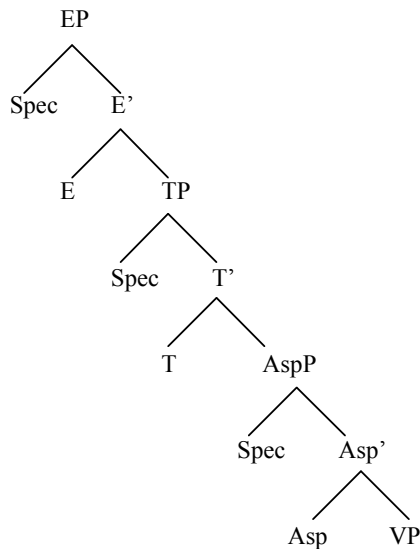
double specifier of *v*. Although justifying this auxiliary hypothesis needs more elaboration, it is possible to relate it to proposals by Chomsky (2004) or Pesetsky & Torrego (2004) according to which the capability of T to assign nominative case depends on the presence of C (a head not represented in our tree for convenience)¹¹.

If, following Pesetsky & Torrego (2004), we assume that nominative case is an element of T uninterpretable in DP, we can also assume (as they do, although with a different notation) that accusative case is an element of Asp uninterpretable in DP (which again is related to the mentioned correlation between telicity, definiteness, and accusative case). The symmetry between both phases is complete, which supports my hypothesis that there is structural accusative case in [spec Asp] only if *v* selects Asp (or, in other words, that as concerns structural case assignment, *v* plays the same role with regard to Asp as C with regard to T).

7. Argument Projection in ergative constructions

The theory of ergativity put forward in previous pages can be made concrete with the assumption that an ergative construction (in that broad sense above-mentioned) implies the projection of a transitive construction *without the expected *v* head* (and accordingly, without *v*P), as reflected in (31):

(31)



Of course, the motivation for the absence of *v* may be different for each type of ergative construction. So, as regards dative and quirky subject constructions that are subject to Onishi's generalisation (see Table 1) and some types of (canonical) split ergativity, the motivation is essentially semantic (there is no agent), while for other types of split ergativity or for uniformly ergative languages, the motivation may be purely morphological, but the formal consequences are the same for all.

¹¹ So, Chomsky observes: "T functions in the Case-agreement system only if it is selected by C, in which case it is also complete [...] Hence T enters into feature checking only in the C-T configuration, and the symmetry is restored: the two phase heads C and *v* are the operative elements" (Chomsky 2004: 115-116). Although with a different formalism, Bittner and Hale's (1996a) proposal for nominative assignment implies a similar correlation.

The hypothesis that an unaccusative (i.e. ergative) transitive construction implies the non-projection of *v*, also forms part of Nash's proposal (Nash 1996). According to Nash, the difference between an accusative and an ergative language is based on the presence or absence of the category *v* in the functional lexicon: "such a category is simply absent from the inventory of functional categories available in ergative languages" (1996: 6). Given that it is usually assumed that *v* is the category introducing the agentive argument, Nash needs to posit that in languages in which *v* is absent, the agentive theta role must be assigned into the VP: "while subjects are projected external to VP in accusative languages, subjects in ergative languages are projected VP-internally" (Nash 1996: 1).

But this theory implies again a "deep parameter" that is not justified independently and that, as is typical of classic parametric theories, does not square well with the usual split character of ergativity. On the contrary, our proposal implies that (frequently within the very same language) some transitive constructions project according to the model in (30) and some other transitive constructions do it according to the model in (31), the absence of *v* being independently motivated in each case.

Bobaljik and Branigan's (2006) approach is a variant of Nash's one. These authors focus on the other function usually attributed to *v*: accusative case assignment. They propose then that *v* does not assign accusative case in ergative languages and that T can check two cases, with two specifiers. This model seems even more stipulating, not only because it does not motivate adequately why *v* does not assign case, but above all because it is not explained why can T check two cases: nominative and ergative (besides, this model implies that ergative case is structural and not inherent, something disputable, as we will see).

As we have seen, what characterises what I have called *ergative constructions* is that the external (or the most prominent) argument bears a marked case (ergative, dative, etc.), whereas the internal argument bears the unmarked or default case (i.e. nominative or absolutive –different terminology for the same thing).

The present theory implies then that ergative case is an inherent, not structural, case. This proposal has been independently supported by, *inter alia*, Oyharçabal (1992), Nash (1996), Woolford (1997), Stepanov (2004), Monrós (2006), and Anand & Nevins (2006), whose arguments are referred to for a more detailed justification.

Any case, it may be suitable to observe now that ergative case, as other inherent cases, uses to be associated to specific semantic roles, typically agentive¹². In the same way, as we have seen before, dative case is associated to experiencers, genitive case to possessors, etc. (see Woolford 1997 and Holmer 2001), what strengthens again my hypothesis that all those cases are instances of the same phenomenon.

As Woolford (1997) observes, the idea that ergative case is a lexical or inherent cases is costless for any case theory:

"Case theory already predicts the existence of a Case whose properties are exactly those of ergative Case. Case theory includes, in addition to its inventory of structural Cases, a series of lexical (also called inherent or quirky) Case that are assigned at D-Structure in conjunction with theta-role assignment. Dative case is a lexical Case associated with goals/experiencers and lexical accusative Case is associated with themes. Note, however, that there is a missing Case in this series – the lexical Case associated with agents" (Woolford 1997: 182).

¹² See Garrett (1990) for a historical research on the origin of ergative case in instrumental cases. Interestingly, Butt (2001: 183) suggests that ergative case in hindi derives from a dative case.

In fact, we should not ignore that the traditional term for ergative case was precisely *agentive case* (*active case* for Hugo Schuchardt; see Butt 2006). According to Butt (2006: 154 ff) the modern term *ergative* originated in a mistake of Schmidt dating back to 1902. It seems that the term ergative was coined for a locative/comitative case in Meriam Mir (an Eastern Torres Straits language) on the basis of the Latin preposition *erga* ‘against, near’. But this language also has an agentive case, that is, what we would call today an ergative case. When Schmidt commented on this language “it seems that [he] remembered the curious fact that Merian Mir had two subject cases along with the term ‘ergative’, but then mixed up the terminology by attributing the locative/comitative ergative to the agentive nominative subject case” (Butt 2006: 158)¹³.

All the same it is rather curious that, in the context of our theory, the label of the properly ergative case was originated in a quirky case of non-agentive subjects.

More interestingly, Anand and Nevins (2006) have presented a good argument in favour of the inherent nature of ergative case using the different syntactic behaviour displayed by absolutive and ergative subjects in transitive constructions of the same language. They explore Hindi alternating subjects such as those in (24), in which the object, so to speak, remains constant. They observe that there are differences in quantifier scope if the subject is nominative (in which case there is allowed an inverse scope reading) or if it is ergative (in which case this reading does not appear). They explain this contrast in their model assuming that the subject ergative case is not structural and then lacks the formal property *Agree*.

By the contrary, in Bobaljik & Branigan’s model (2006) –as well as in Bittner & Hale’s one (1996a), ergative case must be structural, what Bobaljik & Branigan justify adducing that in certain ergative languages agents are absolutive when the verb is intransitive. But this argument does not contradict my hypothesis, as the existence of an agentive argument marked with structural nominative/absolutive just implies the regular presence of *v* in the construction (as *v* would be universal, in front of Nash’s (1996) proposal).

Moreover, the presence of an agentive argument marked with ergative case implies, according to our proposal, that the agentive argument has not been introduced in the derivation by *v* (absent by hypothesis), but by an independent inherent marker, the ergative assigner.

In fact, the scheme in (31) would be adequate not only for ergative structures, but also (and crucially) for unaccusative constructions in the strict sense, such as Spanish *Juan murió* (‘Juan died’) or our example in (3). It follows then that in this sentence the argument *Juan* would delimit the event in [Spec Asp], but as there is no *v*, structural accusative would not be assigned (by my auxiliary hypothesis) and the subject would receive nominative structural case in [Spec T].

On the other hand, unergative verbs in accusative languages, such as Spanish *Rodrigo caminó* (‘Rodrigo walked’) would project as in (30) but without AspP (what allows us to dispense with an unexpected defective or intransitive *v*). So, *Rodrigo* would be introduced regularly in [Spec *v*] and, as external argument, would receive nominative case in [Spec T].

Let us face up now to the projection of ergative constructions (that is, different types of quirky subject constructions and those properly ergative ones). Although, of course, it is to be expected in principle that we will find differences between the diverse types of ergative constructions (in fact, there must be some, given that languages such

¹³ Butt adds that Schmidt probably associated the term *ergative* with the Greek noun *ergátes* ‘worker’, “thus inadvertently coining a new form” (Butt 2006: 158).

as Hindi and Georgian present more than one type), we are going to focus on what they have in common.

Let us consider first how to justify (31) as regards dative subject constructions. Although the typology of these constructions is much more varied and complex than reflected by the examples of Spanish (2), Icelandic (27a), Japanese (27b), Hindi (28a), Georgian (28b), and all the examples from (14) to (21), and although it is also evident that those examples are not identical, it can be said that they represent the most typical pattern. In this pattern, the subject is marked with dative case and objects are nominative (absolutive) and govern verbal agreement (if any). They are also constructions typically non-agentive. This is precisely what motivates Ritter and Rosen's tenet of considering this feature as a defining property of I-languages. According to Ritter and Rosen's (2000) proposal, in I-languages accusative case will be active for the object only if the most prominent argument receives structural nominative case (in other words, that there will be event structure only if there is an initiator). As in quirky subject constructions (as well as in some constructions of ergative splits sensitive to subject properties) external arguments are not true initiators, Ritter and Rosen postulate that they will be assigned inherent case (ergative, dative or other, according to the language or to the type of verb) and accusative case will not be activated. Consequently, the other argument will receive default nominative or absolutive case.

But, as argued above, this implies assuming a different basic structure for I-languages and D-languages. The hypothesis I am developing captures all these facts (relevantly pointed out by Ritter and Rosen) implying that when in certain types of verbs there is not an initiator, the *v* head simply does not project, something reasonable if we consider that *v* has been postulated precisely as an external argument introducer. In such a case, according to our model, the most prominent argument (for example the experiencer *A Luisa* in (4)) will be introduced directly in [Spec E] (or in C-System, this is immaterial now) with its own inherent case assigner, whereas the other argument (the stimulus *las zanahorias* 'carrots') will receive nominative case and will govern agreement in [Spec T], acquiring the formal properties of direct objects in ergative languages (what explains why they have been treated traditionally as subjects of accusative languages).

It is worth noting that the presence of the Asp head in (31) explains why Spanish dative subject constructions (such as *A Luisa le reventó la vejiga en dos horas* 'Luisa's bladder exploded in two hours') or transitive sentences in Basque can be delimited by nominative/absolutive arguments (that in their way to [Spec T] assign range to Asp).

With regard to the proposal of the introduction of the external argument with an autonomous case (and theta role) assigner, it is of relevance Stepanov's (2004) paper, where he argues that ergative subjects enter the derivation post-cyclically:

"I suggest that inherently Case marked ergative subjects, as well as experiencers in English [Stepanov refers to expressions like *John seems to Mary t to be smart*], are not Merged into the structure until *after* the dependency between Tense and object has been established. More precisely, I suggest that inherently Case marked NPs are Merged post-cyclically. Consequently, at the time Nominative is assigned by Tense, there is no intervention effect simply because the potential intervenor -ergative subject- is not yet introduced into the structure" (Stepanov 2004: 371).

Assuming this theory, as well as Mahajan's (1997) analysis of ergative subjects as PPs that do not require case, it can be understood why an inherent case marked subject is not "visible" for T when T attracts the object for case and agreement checking. The same would be applicable to dative subjects of the kind we are

considering, assuming that in essence a dative subject is a PP that do not require structural case and that it is also introduced post-cyclically.

By the other hand, if, as suggested above, absolutive case is formally the same as nominative (default case) (an idea that is neither new; see Nash 1996, Bittner and Hale 1996a), then the unification of the assignation mechanism of both nominative and absolutive by T, regardless of the language or of the type of construction, increases our model's explanatory adequacy, in addition to permit us to explain why the nominative/absolutive argument presents occasionally the syntactic behaviour of subjects (syntactic ergativity).

Actually, the several subject properties (amongst them coding properties) that this nominative/absolutive argument retains in some languages (and that have been profusely used in order to deny the subjecthood of Spanish or German datives –as opposed to Icelandic ones) reveals a scene more akin to what has been described as “syntactic ergativity” than to so-called “morphological ergativity”¹⁴.

What our analysis suggests is that when we consider dative subjects as patterns of split ergativity, we are really pointing to an “initial degree” of ergativity, and therefore that syntactic ergativity reflects a less grammaticalised degree of ergativity, and not, as sometimes suggested, a deeper one.

The present approach could also explain the apparently surprising fact that some “properly ergative” languages present, in addition to ergative subjects, dative subjects, as the above-mentioned Hindi and Georgian (see examples in (28)). We have seen (examples in (24)) that ergativity in Hindi is conditioned to perfective aspect, while in Georgian (see Anderson 1984, Harris 1984) ergativity appears linked to tense. This third pattern of split ergativity is really independent of the properties of subjects, what makes it unsurprising that it may be combined with an ergative split sensitive to subjects' properties (that is, those reflected in other patterns of “canonical split ergativity” and in dative subject constructions).

In both languages there exist DAT/NOM marking patterns that (not casually) appear mostly with psych and perception verbs. If we reconsider the Georgian example in (28b) we can observe, according to Anderson (1984: 173), that this verb (‘like’, of the so-called “class IV”) agrees with the nominative pronoun using subject agreement morphology and agrees with the dative pronoun using indirect object agreement morphology (although it is the dative pronoun which qualifies syntactically as subject), whereas in “normal” Georgian ergative patterns (those based on tense) the nominative-absolutive direct object agrees with the verb using direct object agreement morphology, and not subject agreement morphology.

All this gains sense if we assume that ergativity appears in languages, so to speak, in layers that can superimpose. Dative subject constructions (such as those of Spanish in (2) or (4)) would represent a case of the more recent, less grammaticalised layer of ergativity (that is the layer more connected to verbs and arguments' semantic properties). The second layer, that which is sensitive to tense or aspect (as in Hindi) as well as that which is present almost invariably in some languages (such as Basque), would have a purely morphological conditioning, and would be associated to formal properties of transitive verbs that would be morphologically intransitive (or, if preferred, formally passive or deponent; that is, verbs that formally inhibit the projection of v).

¹⁴ Generally speaking, in “syntactically ergative languages” absolutive direct objects show syntactic properties typical of subjects in nominative-accusative languages, whereas in “morphologically ergative languages” absolutive objects pattern always as accusative objects in ergative-absolutive languages (see Bittner & Hale 1996b and Manning 1996).

But regardless of the degree of grammaticalisation and regardless of the motivation for ergative behaviour, what is of relevance is that the hypothesis that ergative constructions project uniformly according to the scheme in (31) offers a more simple and elegant solution for this complex corner of syntax, and also explains the formal and semantic resemblance between the subjects of unaccusative (ergative!) verbs and the direct objects of ergative constructions.

The fact that some patterns of split ergativity with basis on tense/aspect derive historically through the reanalysis of former passive constructions (as suggested in Anderson 1977 and Trask 1979) makes even more plausible the hypothesis that the inherited morphological features of this inflectional forms imply the non-projection of *v*, a typical head of transitive constructions and lacking, by definition, in passive ones.

Different motivations and different historical paths lead, anyway, to the same result: the subject will have an inherent case marker and the object will be invested with the coding attributes of subjects in nominative-accusative constructions.

8. Some problems and counterexamples

As expected, such a simple (and speculative) hypothesis like the one proposed here has a broad empirical coverage and, consequently, is exposed to many problems and possible counterexamples. Given the available space I will limit myself only to two types of structures that, seemingly at least, challenge the implementation proposed in the preceding sections: (i) ergative constructions with accusative objects and (ii) ergative subjects that agree with the verb.

Examples of the first type can be grouped into two categories: quirky subject constructions with accusative objects and sentences in split ergative languages that mix up both systems.

Let us consider first constructions such as those of Bengali in (32a) (from Bayer 2004: 52-53), where the subject is marked with genitive case and the object with accusative. That this type of construction patterns with those considered above seems clear if we consider its counterpart in (32b), where a more “agentive” reading implies a nominative marking. Although that does not solve the problem, it must be noted that Bayer himself observes that he glosses the object as accusative “without implying that there is an accusative as opposed to dative. Perhaps Bengali has only one ‘objective’ case” (Bayer 2004: 52).

Data provided by Dagsputa (2004: 131) about the same language permit to conclude that Bengali direct objects of oblique subject constructions show differential object marking, as they appear caseless when the objects are unanimated (33a) and accusative marked when animated (32, 33b) (the original’s gloss IND refers to dative/genitive syncretism):

- (32) a. *amar tomake cai*
I.GEN YOU.AC wants
‘I need you (me is in need of you)’
b. *ami tomake cai*
I.NOM you.AC want
‘I want you’
- (33) a. *rinar Dim bhalo lage*
rina.IND eggs good feels
‘Rina likes eggs’
b. *rinar Timke bhalo lage*
Rina.IND Tim.DAT good feels

‘Rina likes Tim’

Although Dagsputa (2004: 131) signals that the animated object of (33b) is marked with accusative, he glosses it as dative, what seems to confirm the vagueness pointed out by Bayer.

A similar problem is posed by Marathi (Wali 2004: 240). The example in (34a) shows that the direct object is marked with absolutive and agrees with the verb, whereas in (34b) the animated direct object bears oblique case (glossed by Wali as accusative, but formally identical to dative) and does not agree with the verb:

- (34) a. *ti-ni pattar phek-l-aa*
she-ERG stone.3SG.M.ABS throw-PST-3SG.M
‘She threw the stone (up)’
b. *ti-ni mulaa-laa phek-l-a*
she-ERG boy.3SG.M.AC throw-PST-NEUT
‘She threw the boy (up)’

The example in (34b) seems to mix up both systems. In fact, Wali (2004: 240 ff) observes that in some dialects the direct object of (34b), *mulaa-laa*, agrees with the verb (rendering *ti-ni mulaa-laa phek-laa* instead of (34b)). Nevertheless, the split ergativity pattern of this language depends on aspect, what allows us to conclude (taking also into account the syncretism with dative case) that we are again in front of a differential object marking phenomenon in an ergative language¹⁵.

Icelandic is a different case. According to Sigurdhsson (2004: 139) this language presents a reduced set of verbs that display an AC/AC pattern:

- (35) *Hana vantadi peninga*
her.AC lacked money.AC
‘She lacked money’

As Sigurdhsson states explicitly (2004 140) these cases are instances of not obviously predictable assignment of inherent case. If so, we could suppose (lacking a more detailed analysis) that these apparent accusative objects are not really structural cases but inherent ones (that is, accusatives whose assignment does not imply of necessity the projection of v).

A hardest problem for the proposed theory (and, of course, for all “parametric” theories –that usually ignore the fact) comes from those languages that present ergative splits associated to the nominal hierarchy. As we have seen in 4, in Diyrbal first and second person pronouns have a nominative-accusative pattern, while nouns have an ergative-absolutive pattern. When nouns and pronouns are combined within the same sentence what results is an apparent blending of both systems (examples from Dixon 1994: 130, adapted transliteration):

- (36) a. *nana numa bura-n*
we.NOM father.ABS see-NON FUT
‘We saw father’
b. *nana-na numa-ngu bura-n*
we-AC father-ERG see-NON FUT

¹⁵ I am assuming here that we are not in front of a structural case but an inherent one, perhaps assigned in Asp by other element (for example an element of prepositional nature, as proposed by Torrego (2002) for prepositional accusative in Spanish). In this sense it could be said that the very notion of broad ergativity I am proposing (which includes quirky subjects) is a type of differential *subject* marking with inherent cases.

‘Father saw us’

The first example, with two “nominatives”, could be considered less problematic if we assume it is derived according to the “normal” scheme in (30), and assuming too that, given that in this language there are no accusative inflected nouns, the object’s realisation in (36a) is that of (default) structural case, just as it happens in English or in whatever else language in which nouns lack case morphology. Nevertheless, the example in (36b) poses a greater problem as far as there appears an accusative case in presence of an ergative case (besides, there is a word order change that places the object before the subject, something that happens when subjects are nouns, but not when they are pronouns). According to the proposed theory, the object in (36b), *nanana*, should not bear accusative case, but absolutive (as the subject of (36a)).

But again we have good reasons to think that (36b) accusative case is not structural, at least in this (syntactically ergative) language. Evidence comes from coordinated structures such as that of (37), again taken from Dixon (1994: 162), where it can be observed that in spite of the pronoun’s accusative marking, for elision purposes the pronoun is treated as an absolutive (equating it to the intransitive subject of the following verb).

- (37) *n’urra* *nana-na* *bura-n* *banaga-n’u*
you we-AC see-NONFUT return-NONFUT
‘you all saw us and we returned’

Lastly, the other set of problems for the proposed theory (in this case for the hypothesis that ergative case is not structural but inherent) is related to the fact that in some languages (as for example in Basque, see Oyharçabal 1992) not only absolutive objects agree with the verb, but also ergative subjects do. This is a problem if we keep on assuming that agreement implies (or reflects) a structural case marking (and consequently, a cyclic derivation). Stepanov (2004: 385) assumes that and then he stipulates that, just like happens in dative subject Icelandic passives, ergative subjects bear both an inherent and a structural case, assigned by T. But then there arises the problem that we need to stipulate that the absolutive object either receives also a structural case from T or it receives it the same way that accusatives in nominative-accusative languages (that is, from v -in [Espec Asp] according to our proposal), what takes us back to “parametric” theories of ergativity.

Although it is possible that, at the end, certain types of morphologically ergative languages might be explained by parametric option (this is what Stepanov 2004: 389 suggests), it is worth to consider a possible alternative that I can only sketch here and that would imply the dissociation between ergative subjects agreement (and, symmetrically, accusative objects agreement) and structural case. Such a possibility follows from Neeleman & Weerman’s model. These authors (1999: 189 ff.) stipulate that “encapsulated” agreement affixes (that is, agreement affixes closer to the root and followed or preceded by other agreement affix) cannot license an argument syntactically. So, in a language with both subject and object agreement, only the outermost affix can identify an argument (the other must be identified by explicit case). This predicts that subject agreement morphology should appear external to object agreement morphology in nominative-accusative languages (as usually happens) and also that object agreement morphology should appear external to subject agreement morphology in ergative-absolutive languages. From a morphological point of view it seems that this is also true (see Dixon 1994 and Bittner & Hale 1996b), as in ergative

languages object agreement markers are usually external to subject ones, disabling them for licensing the external argument.

If this is correct, we would expect the object of a nominative-accusative verb to be licensed by structural accusative case, whereas the subject of the ergative-absolutive verb, even if it agrees, will need an inherent case to be licensed, given the absence of accusative, and given that it is the object which checks nominative in T.

A potential difficulty for this solution is that in ergative languages such as Basque, ergative subject agreement morphemes are suffixes (with some exceptions¹⁶), whereas absolutive agreement markers are prefixes that then do not “encapsulate” the former ones. In any case, the idea that in this language (and potentially in all) the ergative agreement marker is dissociated from case assignment could be supported if we take into account that in diverse proposals pronominal clitics and other affixes have been considered as “inhibitors” of the functional category v, not only in passive and unaccusative constructions, but also in transitive reflexives. Embick (2004), following previous approaches, proposes an analysis of reflexive constructions such as Spanish *María se lava* (‘María washes (herself)’) in which *se* is considered an anaphoric external argument that cliticises on v satisfying its accusative case and forcing the internal argument (*María*) raising to [Spec T]. Although the implications of this “unaccusative” approach to reflexives are controversial, it is interesting when compared to our “unaccusative” approach to ergativity. If we analyse subject affixes in Basque-like languages as elements that saturate v case (or that block its projection, or its effects), then we obtain the desired result.

Another possibility (perhaps complementary) could be Baker’s (2003) proposal on agreement. Baker observes that in Indo-European languages (“from Icelandic in the extreme Northwest to Hindi in the extreme Southeast”, 2003: 122) verbs agree with nominatives (even if they are postverbal), while in Bantu languages agreement is always established with arguments in [Spec T], even if they are oblique. According to Baker (2003: 124), this is like that because in the first type of languages agreement would be associated to case assignment, whereas in the second type it would be associated to the other feature of T, namely EPP. That would imply then that in languages in which the ergative subject agrees, agreement affixes would not be associated to structural case assignment, but to EPP satisfaction. This approach could be in conflict with the hypothesis that ergative subjects are “post-cyclical”, unless we assume (with Borer) that EPP effect has place in [Spec E] (see 30, 31).

Besides, the same solution could be applicable to Icelandic dative subjects, if we admit they agree with the verb¹⁷. All that would enable us to establish an interesting correlative parallelism between the two main types of ergativity we have considered. By the one hand, dative subjects in languages such as Spanish, German or Hindi that do not agree with the verb, are opposed to Icelandic dative subjects, that besides qualifying better as subjects in usual tests, show agreement effects. By the other hand ergative languages whose ergative subjects do not agree with the verb are opposed to ergative languages with subject agreement.

This panorama seems to show intuitively that not-agreeing dative subjects are subjects of the same type than not-agreeing ergative subjects (that is, “less subjects”, while Icelandic dative subjects would be subjects of the same type than agreeing ergative subjects (that is, “more subjects”).

¹⁶ See Bosson (1984) and Fernandez (1999) for a controversy about an apparent split in the morphological ergativity of this language. Basque dative agreement markers are also prefixes.

¹⁷ It has been proposed that they do, although covertly, as this agreement is only detectable indirectly (it prevents person agreement with the nominative argument). See Boeckx (2000).

9. Conclusion

It could be said that the proposal put forward here, according to which ergativity is simply transitive unaccusativity is a step back, a return to the frequently condemned position of Hugo Schuchardt who considered ergative sentences as passives (see Anderson 1976: 7, Bossong 1984: 344 and Manning 1996: 37). But the proposal I have defended here does not really imply that ergative constructions (either Spanish dative subject sentences or Basque transitive sentences) are passive constructions (understanding them as marked or derived constructions), but that because of different and varied causes (much more complex than reflected here) they share with passives some formal properties, crucially unaccusativity (that is, according to the model presented, the absence of v).

The hypothesis that there is not an ergative parameter and the hypothesis that ergative constructions are nothing but the outcome of the interaction of different factors in structures essentially identical makes languages more alike under their apparent and quirky diversity.

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