

# Tripartite Systems

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## 1 Parameters of variation

As written in Marantz, 1991, the system of Dependent Case very naturally allows for both nominative–accusative alignments and ergative–absolutive alignments.

For a language where dependent case is assigned downwards, we get a nominative–accusative alignment. For a language where dependent case is assigned upwards, we get an ergative–absolutive alignment.

However, this undersells the range of case systems found in languages.

For instance, it is not true that every language has case to begin with, as the following shows from Welsh (Borsley, Tallerman, and Willis, 2007):

- (1) a. Gwellod      hi   ‘r   ddraig  
          see.PAST.3.SG she the dragon  
          ‘She saw the dragon.’
- b. Gwelodd    y   ddraig hi  
          see.PAST.3SG the dragon her  
          ‘The dragon saw her.’
- c. â        ‘r   ddraig  
          with the dragon  
          ‘eith the dragon.’
- d. â        hi  
          with her  
          ‘with her’

No matter the context, the forms of the noun and personal pronoun retain the same form.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The shape of the article changes, due to a phonological process of fortition post-vocally/lention post-consonantly.

Such examples, are easy to handle. All that is necessary is to say that the case algorithm as a whole is not operative in these languages, such that there either is no process of case at all, or that all DPs receive unmarked case.

However, there exists another type of system, that combines both nominative–accusative and ergative–absolutive case alignments, with the result that all arguments A, S and O are distinguished.

## 2 Tripartite Systems

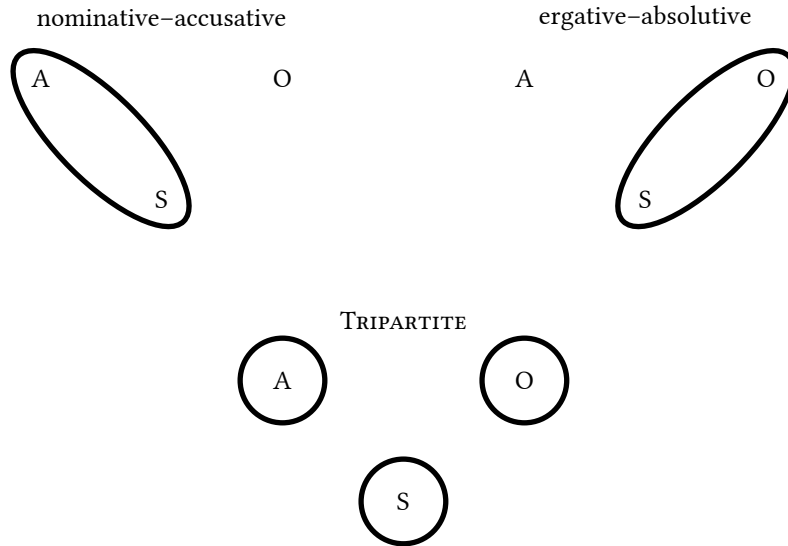
We can see this in Nez Perce:

- (2) a. *sík'em hi-wlekix-tee'nix háamti'*c  
horse 3SUBJ-run-HAB.PL fast  
'Horses run fast.'
- b. *hi-pa-k'oomay-na mamáy'ac*  
3SUBJ-PL-be.sick-PERF children  
'The children were sick'
- (3) a. *pit'íin-im páa-ya<sup>x</sup>-na picpé-ne*  
girl-ERG 3/3-find-PERF cat-OBJ  
'The girl found the cat.'
- b. *sik'é-m-nim kúnk'u péé-wewluq-se timaaníi-ne*  
horse-ERG always 3/3-want-IMPERF apple-OBJ  
'The horse always wants an apple.'

In the examples in (2), we see that there is no morpheme on the subject. However, in the transitive examples in (3), both subject and object have distinct markers. The subjects are marked with *-im*, whereas the objects are marked with *-ne*.

Thus, we have the following:

- (4) Groupings of case marking



For the theory of Marantz, these systems seem to cause a problem. The reason is that there is only one mechanism of dependent case in Marantz's system, and as such it can either go upwards or downwards.

Thus, if we ignore lexical cases, then within Marantz's system the best that we can distinguish is two arguments.

Tripartite systems are also attested elsewhere.

It is possible to model this type of language in a configurational case model. By using the idea that ERGATIVE is an inherent case, Legate, 2008 proposes that many ergative-absolutive languages are in fact of the tripartite systems, it just so happens that the morphemes that spell out the O argument and the A argument just happen to look alike.

This would have the effect that the O argument and the A argument would look alike, though they are syntactically distinct.

### 3 A Dependent Case approach to tripartite languages

Though Marantz's approach struggles to account for tripartite systems, Baker, 2015 offers a way to account for tripartite systems within a dependent case approach.

The key comes from the way that dependent case is formulated. Baker, 2015 notes that we can formulate dependent case theories in the form of two statements. The first says that a DP can receive no marking for case. The second says that in a particular c-command configuration

- (5) Assign DP no case.

- (6) If XP bears a c-command relationship Y to some ZP in local domain WP, then assign case V to XP.

The innovation of Baker's proposal is that it provides a list of variables that can be manipulated. Note though, that the formulation is still very much one of *dependence*. For XP to receive some kind of dependent case, then it must be the case that XP shares some relationship with some ZP.

Now, there are many possible ways that the formulation can be varied. However, key to the discussion here is the following two:

- (7) If XP is c-commanded by ZP, then assign ACCUSATIVE to XP.  
 (8) If XP c-commands ZP, then assign ERGATIVE to XP.

This manner of formulating dependent case allows there to be *two* dependent cases in operation within a particular language.

If a language only makes use of (7), then it will have a nominative–accusative alignment, since assigns a case to the O argument, but not to S or A.

If a language only makes use of (8), then it will have an ergative–absolutive alignment, since it assigns a case to the A argument, but not to S or O.

However, if a language makes use of both (7) and (8), then it will have a particular case for both the O argument, the A argument, and a mark (often null) for the S argument.

### 3.1 Consequences

Note however, a couple of things. It seems to be the case that we need to limit the possible cases that can be used for dependent cases to ERGATIVE, ACCUSATIVE and potentially DATIVE case.

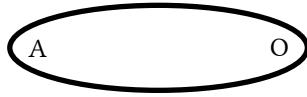
Baker argues that DATIVE could be structural based on Sakha. Dative (one of its uses) is used to mark the agent of a caused action, but only when the root verb is transitive:

- (9) a. Sardaana Aisen-y/\*Aieŋ-ŋa      yta(a)-t-ta  
       Sardaana Aisen-ACC/Aisen-DAT cry-CAUS-PAST.3sS  
       'Sardaana made Aisen cry.' [Sakha]  
       b. Misha Masha-qa    miin-(i)    sie-t-te  
       Misha Masha-DAT soup-(ACC) eat-CAUSE-PAST.3sS  
       'Misha made Masha eat (the) soup.'

Thus, DATIVE could well be structural.

It is an open question whether other questions are similarly structurally governed, but it certainly appears not to be common.

(10)



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In the above language, it could have no system of dependent case, but where a DP is not c-commanded by any other DP, then it receives a particular case that distinguishes it from other DPs.

Such languages do not appear to be attested.

## 4 Further parameters of variation

Baker's formulation leaves open various options for variation.

The direction of the c-command relationship can be varied. So XP can be c-commanded by or c-command ZP.

Furthermore, the case assigned by the relationship can be varied.

Finally, as we will see next week, the domain where the relationship holds can be varied.