

Ergativity

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1 Is case really syntactic? Marantz, 1991

Many of the arguments for case being a syntactic process center around instances where an apparent failure to license case forces movement.

It is a minimalist conjecture that all movements happen for a reason.¹ Case is what is thought to drive A-movement.²

1.1 Case \neq licensing

Marantz points out various instances whereby morphological case does not line up with syntactic case.

- (1) BURZIO'S GENERALISATION: If a verb's subject position in non-thematic, the verb will not assign accusative case.

Put another way: if a verb doesn't assign an external θ -role, then it doesn't license an object.

However, Marantz shows that, whilst widely held, this is not entirely true:

- (2) It struck **me** that I should have used "Elmer" in this sentence.

- (3) Hanako_i-ga (dorobo-ni) [t_i yubiwa-o] to-rare-ta.
Hanako-NOM (thief-by) [ring-ACC] steal-PASS-PAST

[Japanese]

'Hanako had a thief steal her ring on her.'

Marantz, citing relevant literature, says that accusative case is licensed in (3), even though the verb is passive.

Finally, Marantz (citing Bresnan and Moshi, 1990) shows that in Kichaga, one can passivise a double object verb and leave all object properties on either argument.

- (4) a. N-ä-i-lyi-i-à 'm-kà k-élyà
(He-_i) AgrS_i-AgrO_j-AgrOk-eat-BEN wife_j food_k
'He is eating food for his wife.'

¹Though not everyone fully adheres to this.

²A'-movement is forced due to other reasons, such as information structure considerations.

- b. M-ká n-ä-ï-lyì-í-ò k-élyà
 food_k AgrS_k-AgrO_j-eat-BEN-PASS wide_j
 ‘Food is being eaten for the wife.’
- c. k-élyà k-ï-lyì-í-ò ‘m-kà
 wife_j AgrS_j-AgrO_k-eat-BEN-PASS food_k
 ‘The wife is being beneficially/adversely affected by someone eating food.’

So, we see various instances of verbs without a thematic subject licensing accusative case. The connection between accusative case and non-thematicity of the subject position isn’t as strong as it should be.

Marantz concludes that Burzio’s Generalization can simply be restated as a requirement that sentences have subjects, not about case at all.

- (5) Nominal arguments are licensed by (extended) projection, not by Case or by morphological properties.

1.2 Morphological case isn’t licensing

- (6) a. María óskaði (Ólafi) alls goðs.
 Mary-NOM wished Olaf-DAT everything-GEN good-GEN
 ‘Mary wished everything good for Olaf.’
- b. Þess vas óskað
 this-GEN was wished
 ‘This was wished.’

Genitive case is retained under passivation. There doesn’t then seem to be a direct link between the licensing and case here.

2 ERGATIVE alignment

Indo-European style languages are just one case system found. Abstractly, it can be referred to as a nominative-accusative alignment. What does this mean?

In a nominative-accusative alignment, all else being equal, subjects will always receive nominative case, and direct objects accusative case. Crucially, whether the verb is intransitive or transitive, the subject will be in the same case.

Another case alignment that is found is ERGATIVE. Languages like these differ from Nominative–Accusative style languages in that internal arguments all pattern together. Thus, an intransitive subject (S) will show the same case marking as a direct object (O) of a transitive verb. A transitive subject (A) will be marked differently.

- (7) Groupings of case marking

3 Absolutive \neq Nominative

Ignoring the fact that it can be assigned to an object in a transitive clause, it is tempting to see ABSOLUTIVE as a correlate of NOMINATIVE case. Bobaljik, 1993 notes that both of these cases are always present in a sentence (all else equal), and that both ABSOLUTIVE and NOMINATIVE are relatively frequently zero-marked across languages,

- (10) a. *xinär-en šum banest’a*
 girl-ERG bread.ABSL bake
 [Udi]
 ‘The girl is baking bread.’
 b. *xinär-en šum-ax banest’a*
 girl-ERG bread.DAT bake
 ‘The girl is baking bread.’

Binding facts in ERGATIVE languages consistently show that the ergative argument is structurally more prominent than the absolutive (these facts are from Bobaljik, 1993).

- (11) a. *mutil-ek elkar ikusi dute*
 boys-ERG each.other.ABS see AUX.3sA/3pE
 [Basque]
 ‘The boys saw each other.’
 b. **elkar-rek mutil-ak ikusi ditu(zte)*
 each.other-ERG boys-ABS see AUX.3pA/3sE(3pE)
- (12) a. *Kitia he tama fifine a ia nĩ he fakaata*
 see ERG child female ABS her REFL in mirror
 [Niuean]
 ‘The girl sees herself in the mirror.’
 b. *Ko e tele nĩ kia e koe a koe nĩ?*
 PRES kick EMPH Q ERG you ABS you REFL
 ‘Are you kicking yourself?’
 c. **Koe tele kia e koe nĩ a koe?*
 PRES kick Q ERG you REFL ABS you
 ‘Are you kicking yourself?’
- (13) a. *I-xe y-l-ba-yt’*
 3sF-head(n) 3sNA-3sFE-see-PRES
 [Abkhaz]
 ‘She sees herself’
 b. *s-xe y-z-ba-yt’*
 1s-head 3sNA-1sE-see-PRES
 ‘I see myself.’

4 Configurational case licensing

What Marantz claims is that case is assigned **configurationally**. That is, the grammar looks at a clause as a whole, and assigns cases based on how the cases relate to one another.

Case comes in four types:

- (14) Case Realisation Disjunctive Hierarchy
 - 1. Lexically governed case
 - 2. “Dependent” case (accusative and ergative)
 - 3. Unmarked case (environment sensitive)
 - 4. Default case

- Lexically governed case is case that is licensed by a particular verb, to a particular semantic argument. This takes priority over everything!³

- Dependent case is next.

- Unmarked case is assigned to arguments which receive neither of the other cases.

- Default case is assigned when there is no other mechanism of case assignment available, for instance with hanging topics.

Dependent Case is defined by Marantz as follows:

- (15) Dependent Case is assigned by V+I (i.e. the verb - PWS) to a position governed by V+I when a distinct position governed by V+I is:
 - a. not “marked” (not part of a chain governed by a lexical case determiner)
 - b. distinct from the chain being assigned dependent case.

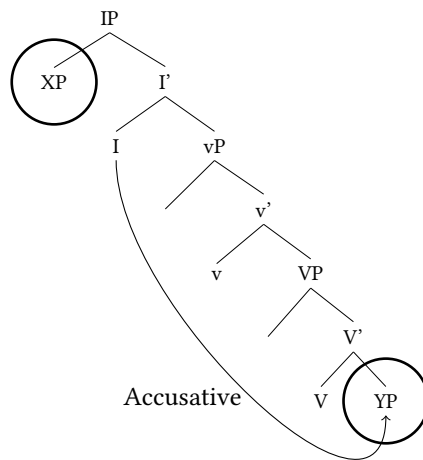
What this means is that dependent case is not assigned to a lexically governed argument (a), and can only be assigned to an argument when there is a distinct argument in opposition to it (b). (b) is a little bit complicated to read. It essentially boils down to dependent case only being assigned when there are two distinct arguments in a clause. Note it also says that lexically governed case is ignored for the purposes of dependent case.

- (16) Dependent case assigned up to student = ERGATIVE
Dependent case assigned down to object = ACCUSATIVE

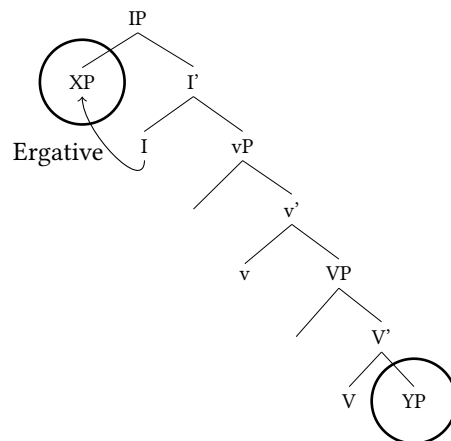
Thus in the following, since there are two distinct arguments XP and YP, Dependent Case will work as follows:

- (17) *Where Dependent Case is Accusative*

³See also Zaenen, Maling, and Thráinsson, 1985 for a similar view about lexically governed case, though working in a different framework.



(18) *Where Dependent Case is Ergative*



References

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