

# Is Ergative the same as accusative?

Peter W. Smith | p.smith@em.uni-frankfurt.de

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Last week we saw that one of the responses to Marantz, 1991, Legate, 2008, was to claim that though Marantz predicts that nominative and absolutive behave in the same way, they don't appear to.

Rather, absolutive will differ from nominative at times. Furthermore, not all absolutives are treated the same language internally: sometimes an absolutive argument in a certain position can factor in to a grammatical process, whereas at others it does not.

The conclusion that Legate reaches is that `NOMINATIVE`  $\neq$  `ABSOLUTIVE`.

## 1 Does Ergative = Accusative?

Woolford, 2006 argues that they are not the same thing. Rather, she argues for `ERGATIVE` is a type of non-structural case.

Marantz, 1991 effectively treats `ERGATIVE` and `ACCUSATIVE` as structural cases: they are not assigned to a particular  $\theta$ -role (according to Marantz) and their use is governed by structure. `ACCUSATIVE` appears on objects because it is assigned downwards, whereas `ERGATIVE` appears on subjects because it is assigned upwards.

However, Woolford notes that according to various diagnostics, `ERGATIVE` appears to behave like a non-structural case.

- (1) Two types of nonstructural Case
  - Lexical Case: Idiosyncratic, lexically selected case
  - Inherent Case: Case inherently associated with certain  $\theta$ -positions

## 2 Structural versus Non-structural Case

The most widely recognised test for whether a case is structural or not is preservation under A-movement. We know that `DATIVE` can be preserved in Icelandic under passive movement.

- a. Þeir skiluðu Maríu bókinni.  
 they returned Mary-DAT book-the-DAT  
 'They returned the book to Mary.'  
 (Jónsson 1996:137)
- b. Maríu var skilað þessari bók.  
 Mary-DAT was returned this book-DAT  
 (Jónsson 1996:139)

(2)

In German as well, dative case can be retained under passivisation:

- (3) a. Sie hilft ihn.  
 she helps him.DAT  
 'She helps him.'
- b. Ihm wird geholfen  
 he-DAT is helped  
 'He was helped.'

Note that this test does not help us with ERGATIVE, since the external argument disappears in passivisation.

We can run the test with raising constructions however. Dative case is retained in raising:

- (4) a. Barninu batnaþ i veikin  
 child-DAT recovered-from disease.NOM  
 'The child recovered from the disease.'
- b. Barninu virþist [t hafa batnaþ veikin]  
 child.DAT seems have recovered-from disease.NOM  
 'The child seems to have recovered from the disease.'

Woolford notes that in Tongan, ERGATIVE is retained under raising.

- (5) a. 'E lava ['o ako 'e Pita 'a e lea faka-Tonga]  
 AUX possible C learn ERG Peter ABS the language Tongan  
 'Peter can learn Tongan.'
- b. 'E lava 'e Pita ['o ako 'a e lea faka-Tonga]  
 AUX possible ERG Peter C learn ABS the language Tongan  
 'Peter can learn Tongan.'

## 2.1 Case of the external argument

It is known that in nominative–accusative languages, NOMINATIVE must be assigned to finite Spec,TP unless there is a lexical case assigned there. That is, there is no possibility that another structural case (i.e. accusative) can take priority over NOMINATIVE in this instance.

However, ERGATIVE can take the place of ABSOLUTIVE in Basque (crucially only for an AGENT):

- (6) a. Ni etorri naiz  
I.NOM come AUX  
'I came.'  
b. Gizona-k kurritu du  
man-ERG run AUX  
'The man ran.'

## 2.2 Allowing for nominative objects

Nominative objects in Icelandic are allowed only if the subject is marked with a non-structural case.

Nominative objects are not licensed if the subject has a structurally accusative subject:

- (7) a. Hann hafði i talið [Jóni hafa verið gefnir þessir sokkar]  
he.NOM had believed John.DAT to-have been given these socks  
'He believed John to have been given these socks.'  
b. 'Eg hafði i talið Maríu vita svarið  
I.NOM had believed Mary.ACC to-know the.answer.ACC  
'I believed Mary to know the answer.'

ABSOLUTIVE is allowed in object position when there is an ergative subject. This is not so surprising, but it is a contrast with ACC, which does not license nominative objects.

## 3 Is ACCUSATIVE ever correlated with agreement?

We saw a couple of weeks ago that there are problems with assuming that ACCUSATIVE is directly correlated with agreement.

However, Baker, 2015 argues that Mangarayi (Merlan, 1982) might be a language where accusative case and agreement are directly intertwined.

Object agreement markers will always track the features of the accusative object.

- (43) a. *Dawuyan-yiri+wa-ni jarbiñ-gayanñan.*  
 1sS/3pO-see-PAST young.man-ACC.PL  
 'I saw the young men.'  
 (Merlan [1982: 61])
- b. *Dali-na ñala-bugbug wuran-jirag malam-gara-ñan.*  
 F.NOM-DIS F.NOM-old.person 3sS/3dO-eat man-DU-ACC  
 'That old woman ate the two men.'  
 (Merlan [1982: 91])

They cannot agree with a dative, even when they bear the same  $\theta$ -role (they are both goals here, but the latter is dative).

- (45) a. *Bu? ñan-wu-na ñan-bayi (Ø-ñani). (ACC goal)*  
 show 3sS/2sO-AUX-PAST 2s.ACC-FOC N.ABS-language  
 'He showed/taught YOU (language).'  
 (Merlan [1982: 103, 65])
- b. *Wula-niri-j ñanju (Ø-mawuj). (DAT goal)*  
 3pS/3sO-bring-PAST me.DAT N.ABS-vegetable.food  
 'They brought me vegetable food.'  
 (Merlan [1982: 65–66])

The same thing happens with psych verbs. Objects in ACCUSATIVE will control object agreement on the verb, whereas objects in DATIVE will not.

- (45) a. *Bu? ñan-wu-na ñan-bayi (Ø-ñani). (ACC goal)*  
 show 3sS/2sO-AUX-PAST 2s.ACC-FOC N.ABS-language  
 'He showed/taught YOU (language).'  
 (Merlan [1982: 103, 65])
- b. *Wula-niri-j ñanju (Ø-mawuj). (DAT goal)*  
 3pS/3sO-bring-PAST me.DAT N.ABS-vegetable.food  
 'They brought me vegetable food.'  
 (Merlan [1982: 65–66])