1 Introduction

In dependent case theory (Marantz 1991, a.o.), morphological (e.g. ERG, ACC) case is assigned on the basis of configurational (c-command) relations between DPs.¹

A theoretical gap: Although it is known that a subset of morphologically ergative languages are syntactically ergative, dependent case theory has previously only focused on the former.

• In syntactically ergative languages, ABS objects raise to a position c-commanding the subject. How does this interact with dependent ERG assignment?

Proposal: In syntactically ergative languages, dependent ERG case is (universally) assigned after object movement.

(1) Object moves to high position

(2) Dependent ERG is assigned

Evidence for this order of operations from two such languages, Inuit and West Circassian.

The downwards directionality of ERG case assignment in (2) is at odds with canonical treatments in dependent case theory.

• On this basis, we caution against the conflation of morphological case labels and directionality of case assignment.

Roadmap:

§2 Theoretical premises
§3 Downwards dependent ERG in Inuit
§4 Extension to West Circassian
A A third case study: Yimas

2 Theoretical premises

2.1 Basics of dependent case

(3) Accusative language:

(4) Ergative language:

Because dependent case is predicated on the co-occurrence between nominals, it is divorced from thematic roles/argument structure, as well as from the functional heads associated with these notions.

A brief illustration:

Though normally associated with transitivity, dependent ERG (and ACC) may surface in unaccusative contexts, so long as another nominal (its “case competitor”) is present.

• Problematic for case theories that utilize functional heads such as v₀ (e.g. Woolford 1997, 2006; Chomsky 2000).

(5) Dependent ERG case in Shipibo:

a. Kokoti-ra joshin-ke fruit-PRT.ABS ripen-PRF

‘The fruit ripened.’
As discussed by Baker and Vinokurova (2010) and Baker (2015), dependent case may also be sensitive to phase boundaries.

- In Eastern Ostyak, object shift to the vP-phase edge triggers dependent erg case on the subject:

\[(6)\]
\[\begin{array}{l}
\text{vP-external phase as domain of case assignment (Eastern Ostyak):} \\
\text{a. Mä t'okâjaälämän } \text{ula } \text{manjäm} \\
\text{we.DU.NOM younger.sister.com } \text{berry} \text{ pick.PST.1PS} \\
\text{‘I went to pick berries with my younger sister.’}
\end{array}\]

\[\begin{array}{l}
\text{b. Mo-yan loya alla jûj kâng } _{\text{amjajaln}} \\
\text{we-ERG them large tree beside } \text{put.PST.3P/O/1PS} \\
\text{‘We put them (pots of berries) beside a big tree.’}
\end{array}\]

(Gulya 1966, cited in Baker 2015)

- See also Yip et al. (1987); Baker (2015), a.o. for other diagnostics of dependent case.

### 2.2 Morphological vs. syntactic ergativity

In addition to morphologically ergative languages like Shipibo, there are syntactically ergative languages (Larsen and Norman 1979; Bittner and Hale 1996a; Manning 1996; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2017).

- It is generally assumed that the latter is a subtype of the former.

**Important distinction:** Morphological alignment refers to case/agreement patterns, while syntactic alignment concerns the clausal organization of nominals.

\[(7)\] Morphological ergativity: \\
\[\text{vP} \leftarrow \text{DP}_{\text{ERG}} \leftarrow \text{vP} \leftarrow \text{DP}_{\text{ABS}}\]

\[(8)\] Syntactic ergativity: \\
\[\text{vP} \leftarrow \text{DP}_{\text{ABS}} \leftarrow \text{DP}_{\text{ERG}} \leftarrow \text{vP} \leftarrow <\text{DP}>\]

Syntactically ergative languages are typified by **high ABS objects**—i.e. ABS subjects and ABS objects occupy a uniform position (e.g. Spec-TP).

- We assume that objects are generated as complements of V\(^0\) and **raise** to their surface position (Bittner and Hale 1996a).

**Question:** How does this movement step affect dependent case assignment? In other words, how does syntactic ergativity interact with morphological ergativity?

**Proposal at a glance:**

- On the basis of two syntactically ergative languages, Inuit and West Circassian, we show that **ERG case is assigned at the clause-level**.
- Thus, case assignment **takes place after object movement**.
- As a result, dependent ERG case is assigned **downwards**, not upwards.
- We derive differences between Inuit and West Circassian based on parameterization of the phasal status of vP.

### 3 Downwards dependent ERG in Inuit

#### 3.1 Syntactic ergativity in Inuit

**Inuit (Eskimo-Aleut):** polysynthetic, with relatively free word order; Mirror Principle-obeying; displays ergative case patterning (Fortescue 1984; Bittner 1994; Dorais 2010; Yuan 2018).

\[(9)\] Ergative case patterning (Kalaallisut):

- a. miiqqat piqqip-put child.PL.ABS healthy-3.P.S
  ‘The children are healthy.’

  ‘Juuna is looking after the children.’

(Bittner and Hale 1996a, b)
Evidence for syntactic ergative structure:

- Relativization available only for ABS subjects and ABS objects, i.e. the highest clausal argument (Murasugi 1997).

(10) a. miiqqat [ __ sila-mi pinnguar-tut ] child.PL.ABS (cc.ABS) outdoors-LOC play-PART.3S.S 'the children who are playing outdoors'

b. miiqqat [ Juuna-p __ paari-sai ] child.PL.ABS Juuna-ERG (cc.ABS) look.after-PART.3S.S/3P.O 'the children that Juuna is looking after'


- ABS objects obligatorily take wide scope, in contrast to antipassive objects (as well as ERG subjects, omitted) (Fortescue 1984; Bittner 1994; Manga 1996).

(11) a. suli Juuna-p atuagaq ataaaq tigu-sima-ngi-laa still Juuna-ERG book.ABS one.ABS get-PERF-NEG-3S.S/3S.O 'There is one (particular) book Juuna hasn’t received yet.'

b. suli Juuna atuakka-mik ataaXi-mik tigu-sima-ngi-laq still Juuna.ABS book-MOD one-MOD get-AP-PERF-NEG-3S.S 'Juuna hasn’t received (even) one book yet.'

- The high structural locus for ABS objects is derived by movement: possible reconstruction (e.g. for NPI-licensing).

(12) kina=luunniit taku-ngi-laa who.ABS=NP1 see-NEG-3S.S/3S.O 'He didn’t see anyone.'

Additional relevant properties:

- The landing site for ABS objects is in the CP-domain (taken here to be Spec-CP for expository ease): correlation with word-final mood-sensitive $\varphi$-agreement (cf. Compton 2016).

(13) ABS objects with $\varphi$-morphology in Spec-CP (Inuktut)

a. Taiití-up Miali taku-qau-janga David-ERG Mary.ABS see-REC.PST-3S.S/3S.O 'David saw Mary.'

b. Taiití-up Miali taku-qau-vauk David-ERG Miali.ABS see-REC.PST-INTERR.3S.S/3S.O 'Did David see Mary?'

- $\psi$P is a phase boundary: Following Bittner (1994), Bittner and Hale (1996a), a.o., objects that raise out of $\psi$P are ABS, while $\psi$P-internal objects are assigned MOD (i.e. antipassive).

Therefore: ABS objects in ergative transitive constructions first raise to the Spec-$\psi$P phase edge, then to Spec-CP.²

(14) CP

DP$_{obj}$

$\psi$P

3.2 ERG is dependent

As shown above, a dependent approach predicts the possibility of ERG case assignment on unaccusative subjects.

- Borne out in Inuit (and related Eskimo-Aleut languages; see Miyaoka 2012 and Baker and Bobaljik 2017 on Central Alaskan Yup’ik):

²While Inuit (and West Circassian) are taken by the authors to be right-headed, all syntactic trees in this talk are represented as left-headed purely for expository ease.
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(15) **ERG case on anticausative subject (Inuktitut):**
   a. *niuvirvik* matui-sarait-tuq
      store.ABS open-early-3.S.S
      ‘The store opened early.’
   b. *niuvirvi-up matu-sarai-gutigi-jangame* Miali
      ‘The store opened early for/because of Miali.’

(16) **ERG case on passivized subject (Inuktitut):**
   a. *ujamik* niuv-iq-ta-u-juq
      necklace.ABS buy-PASS-PART-be-3.S.S
      ‘The necklace was purchased.’
   b. *ujami-up niuviq-ta-u-qatigi-jangit siutirutiik*
      ‘The necklace was purchased with the earrings (i.e. they were purchased at
      the same time).’

   • See also Yuan (2018) for further arguments that ERG in Inuit is dependent.

   **Interim summary:** ERG case in Inuit is dependent, and ABS objects raise to Spec-CP, such that they c-command the ERG subject.

   ⇒ Next: Timing of case assignment vs. movement.

3.3 Case assignment after ABS movement

**Proposal:** Dependent case in Inuit is calculated within the vP-external phase (Bittner and Hale 1996a), after object movement past the subject.

**Evidence from high nominalizations:** Nominalizer -lik (n⁰) Merges in the CP-domain (above e.g. negation).

   • Merging of n⁰ eliminates the Spec-CP landing site for high objects (in situ objects instead receive MOD).
   • Crucially, this also blocks dependent ERG case assignment to the subject.

(17) **a. Taiviti nagli-gi-nngit-ta-lik** Carol-mik
      David.ABS love-TR-NEG-PART-NMLZ Carol.MOD
      ‘David doesn’t love Carol.’
   b. *Taiviti-up nagli-gi-nngit-ta-lik* Kiuru
      David-ERG love-TR-NEG-PART-NMLZ Carol.ABS
      Intended: ‘David doesn’t love Carol.’

   • Crucially, the intermediate Spec-vP stopping point (i.e. the phase edge) is still available—as indicated by the transitive v⁰ -gi (underlined above).
   • Thus, it cannot be that dependent ERG is calculated when the object is in Spec-vP.

   Putting everything together, we propose the dependent case rule in (18):

(18) **DOWNWARD ERGATIVE RULE:** Within a case domain α, if DP₁ is c-commanded by another DP₂, assign ERGATIVE case to DP₁. Otherwise, DP₁ is ABSOLUTIVE.

   In Inuit, α = vP-external phase.

⇒ Next: Variation in the nature of α, due to variation in the phasal status of vP.

4 Extension to West Circassian

Baker (2015): There may be multiple instances of downward dependent case within a single clause.

**How it works:**

In some languages, vP is a “soft phase”, i.e. the contents of its complement (VP) is visible for the purposes of case assignment at the CP level.

This derives double object constructions in accusative languages (e.g. Korean, Cuzco Quechua, and Amharic): ACC is assigned down to both internal arguments.

(19) Cheli-ka [vp Mary-lul panci-lul senmwul-ul hay-ss-ta] (Korean)
    Cheli-NOM Mary-ACC ring-ACC gift-ACC do-PST-DEC
    ‘Cheli presented Mary with a ring.’ (Wechsler and Lee 1996, 635 via Baker 2015, 231)
Reciprocals trigger specialized ‘reciprocal’ agreement, the position of which correlates with the syntactic position of bound pronoun (Letuchiy 2010; Ershova 2019b).

Evidence from unergative and ditransitive verbs: Reciprocal morphology tracks the position of the bound pronoun.

(24) Unergative verb with applied object: ABS binds IO; REC agreement in IO position
a. ꚱ'w- ø- qə- ze- de- ꚱ'w e -ʃ't
   2PL.ABS- DIR- REC.IO- COM- dance -FUT
b. * ze- qə- ꚱ'w- de- ꚱ'w e -ʃ't
   REC.ABS- DIR- 2PL.IO- COM- dance -FUT
   ‘You(pl) will dance with each other.’

(25) Transitive verb with applied object: ERG binds IO; REC agreement in IO position
a. te(ERG) wone-xe-r ꚱ- ze- fe- t- ꚱ' -2 ø - Ł
   we house-PL-ABS 3ABS- REC.IO- BEN- 1PL.ERG- do -RE -Ł
b. * te(1O) wone-xe-r ꚱ- t- fe- ze(ре)- ꚱ' -2 ø - Ł
   we house-PL-ABS 3ABS- 1PL.IO- BEN- REC.ERG- do -RE -Ł
   ‘We built houses for each other.’

**Other evidence that ze(ре)- marks agreement** and not voice or a de-transitivizing operator (Ershova 2019b; cf. Bruening 2004 on Passamaquoddy, Japanese and Chichewa; Labelle 2008 on French):

(i) overt use of reciprocal pronoun
(ii) case marking of antecedent

If extended to cases involving co-indexation of the absolutive theme, it is apparent that ERG and IO are bound by ABS.

⇒ ABS c-commands ERG and IO.

(26) Ergative-absolutive frame: REC agreement in ERG position ⇒ ABS binds ERG
a. ABS- ERG- ꚱø- s- ꚱ ø -Ł
   2SG.ABS- 1SG.ERG- see -PST
   ‘I saw you.’
b. ABS- ERG- ꚱø- ꚱ ø -Ł
   1PL.ABS- REC.ERG- see -PST
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**Dependent case in syntactically ergative languages**

(27) ERG-ABS verb with applied object; REC agreement in IO position ⇒ ABS binds IO

a. **ABS- IO- ERG-**
   t→ ze f j o- $a -i$
   1PL.ABS- REC.IO- BEN- 3SG.EDIT- bring -PST

b. **ABS- IO- BEN- 3SG.EDIT- bring -PST**
   $S/he brought us together (lit. to each other).$)

**Proposal:** ABS raises to Spec,TP c-commanding ERG and IO.

(28)

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**4.2 Multiple ergative case**

**Main claim:** West Circassian presents a case of multiple downward ERG after movement of ABS.

Verbal arguments are assigned one of two core cases:

- -r (absolutive) = subject of intransitive verb (29a) and theme of transitive verb (29b)
- -m (oblique) = agent of transitive verb (29b) and applied objects (29c)

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(29) a. mə pšaše-r dax-ew Ø-qa-š“e
   *This girl-ABS beautiful-ADV 3ABS-DIR-dance
   ‘This girl(S) dances well.’

b. sabojx-ø haxe-r Ø-qa-λe-ø-æ
   child.PL-OBL(=ERG) dog.PL-ABS 3ABS-DIR-3PL.EDIT-see-PST
   ‘The children(A) saw the dogs(O).’

c. ʒeg”ą-ø ʒa-qa-Ø-ø-ŋa-æ-ep
   wedding-OBL(=IO) 1SG.ABS-DIR-3SG.IO-LOC-dance-PST-NEG
   ‘I didn’t dance at the wedding.’

If a clause contains both an applied object and an ergative agent, both are assigned oblique case:

(30) haʃ’ę-ø ʒ’ale-ø $’ą-r
   guest-OBL(=ERG) boy-OBL(=IO) horse-ABS
   Ø-Ø-ʃ’j-a-ø-æ
   3ABS-3SG.IO-DAT-3SG.EDIT-give-PST
   ‘The guest gave the horse to the boy.’ (Arkadiiev et al. 2009, 54)

Since ABS moves to Spec,TP; this case system is readily modeled via the downward dependent case rule in (18) after movement of ABS to Spec,TP.

(31) ERG-ABS verb with applied object:

a. [ABS a$’ jasabojx-ø ] [ERG mə bzaľfrė-ø ]
   that.OBL 3SG.POSS.child.PL-ABS this woman-OBL(=ERG)
   Ø-Ø-ʃ’ʃ-e-ʃ’e-ʃ”a
   3ABS-3SG.IO-BEN-3SG.EDIT-PRG-bring-RE
   ‘This woman brings his/her children to the teacher.’

b. **[DP.abs]** **[DP.abs]**

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**Other evidence for high ABS:** conditions on parasitic gap licensing (Ershova 2019a).
The same rule can equally account for case marking of subject and applied object of unergative verbs:

(32) Unergative verb with applied object:

a. \[\text{ABS} \quad \text{m} \]
\[\text{jal'ahxem} \]
\[\text{boy-ABS} \quad \text{much} \quad \text{3SG.POSS.relative.PL-OBL} \quad \text{telephone.ANS} \]
\[\text{Ø-а-fe-tje-we} \]
\[\text{3ABS-3PL.IO-BEN-LOC-hit} \]

\[\text{This boy calls (lit. rings for) his relatives on the telephone a lot.}\]

b. 

\[\text{TP} \]
\[\text{DP_{abs}} \]
\[\text{m} \quad \text{jal'ahxem} \]
\[\text{boy-ABS} \quad \text{3SG.POSS.relative.PL-OBL} \quad \text{telephone.ANS} \]
\[\text{Ø-a-fe-tje-we} \]
\[\text{3ABS-3PL.IO-BEN-LOC-hit} \]

‘This boy calls (lit. rings for) his relatives on the telephone a lot.’

Summary: If ergative case is assigned down in syntactically ergative languages, multiple downward ergative is predicted. This is confirmed by West Circassian.

5 Conclusion

• In syntactically ergative languages ERG is assigned downwards after movement of the absolutive to a higher position.

• This correctly predicts

  (i) the lack of double absolutive constructions – absolutive is assigned to the single DP that is not c-commanded.

  (ii) the possibility of double ergative constructions – multiple DPs may be assigned downward dependent case within a given case domain.

Cf. morphologically ergative languages like Shipibo (Baker 2015).

• Whether or not a language allows multiple ergatives is determined by the case domain: vP-external phase in Inuit and CP in West Circassian.

Implications

• Dependent case theory: This paper expands the typology of dependent case by filling in a logical lacuna – given the inventory of dependent case, this is a predicted pattern for high ABS languages.

• Case typology: There is no one-to-one mapping between traditional case labels and the syntactic conditions on case assignment. In syntactically ergative languages, ERG=ACC.

• Syntactic ergativity:

  Larsen and Norman (1979); Dixon (1994); Deal (2016); Polinsky (2017): syntactic ergativity effects are only observed in morphologically ergative languages.

  New perspective: syntactically ergative languages need not be morphologically ergative in a theoretically meaningful way.

  Ergative case is parasitic on absolutive movement – a potential path for explaining the typological correlation.

  ⇒ Challenge to case-based approaches to syntactic ergativity (Coon et al. 2014; Polinsky 2016; Deal 2017).

References


Dependent case in syntactically ergative languages

Yuan & Ershova


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A A third case study: Yimas

Yimas (Lower-Sepik language of Papua New Guinea) has three agreement paradigms, analyzed by Yuan (to appear) as doubled pronominal clitics. Data from Foley (1991).

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Crucially, the distributions of the clitic paradigms mirror those of dependent ERG (and DAT) case.

Yimas is syntactically ergative: Based on relativization restrictions targeting ABS subjects and ABS objects (Phillips 1993, 1995)—but also as revealed by clitic displacement effects (Harbour 2008; Yuan to appear).

- Evidence from optional clitic doubling:

(34) a. [impram pay- cu- mpwi] pia- n- kacakapal ['He forgot to carry the basket']

(35) ta- kay- ckam- r- $\eta$kan- mpan- y

NEG- 1P.ERG- show- PERF- PC(ERG)- 3P.DAT- V1.SG(ABS)

‘We few didn’t show them it (the coconut).’

If dependent ERG and DAT in Yimas is calculated within the clitic cluster (Yuan to appear), then it necessarily follows clitic doubling (i.e. movement).