Ergative as a default case:
Evidence from a Georgian dialect

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What’s inside

• Original fieldwork data on a Georgian variety spoken in Turkey
• Ergative case in this dialect cannot be an inherent or dependent case.
  → it is a default case à la Marantz (1991); Bobaljik (2008)
• Extensions to Differential Subject Marking in Turkish (Kornfilt 2009)

1 A brief reminder on Ergative case

• Consider the two (idealized) case systems below, where α is typically labelled ERGATIVE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>L₁</th>
<th>L₂</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External Arg.</td>
<td>Internal Arg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transitives</td>
<td>α</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unergatives</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unaccusatives</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

  • The visible difference between L₁ and L₂:
    – Transitivity is relevant in L₁ → ERG only appears on transitive subjects.
    – Transitivity is irrelevant in L₂ → ERG appears on all and only external arguments.

  • L₂ supports the idea that ERG is an inherent/thematic case [e.g. Woolford (2006)]
  • L₁ supports the idea that ERG is a dependent case that is ‘assigned’ to one of the two DPs in a case-competition domain. [e.g. Baker (2015)]

  • Basic predictions:
    – if ERG is inherent, it should occur only on external arguments
    – if ERG is dependent, it should occur only if there is another case-competitor

  • Baker and Bobaljik (2017):
    – It is not true that ERG is restricted to external arguments.
      * data from applicative constructions in Shipibo, Kalaallisut, Chucki
    – unergatives in L₂ might be concealed transitives
      ⇝ if so, there is no good reason for ERG to be inherent in any language.

  • Next:
    – Data from a nonstandard Georgian dialect
      where I show that ERG is neither dependent nor inherent.
2 Data from a nonstandard Georgian variety

- The data presented here\(^1\) comes from a nonstandard Georgian variety (henceforth IG).
  - My language consultant Cemal Baştürk (male, 58) is from Inegöl, Turkey and is a Turkish-Georgian bilingual from birth.\(^2\)

- IG has a unique property that sets it apart from Standard Georgian, which exhibits an L\(^2\) type ergativity \((\text{Harris, 1982})\).
  - IG is just like Standard Georgian except for the fact that the internal argument of unaccusatives can also bear \textit{erg} \((\text{1c})\).

\begin{align*}
\text{(1) a. } & \text{Ba˘gv-} \text{ma} \text{xink'al-i } \text{ç'ama} \\
& \text{child-ERG xink'al-NOM ate} \\
& \text{‘The child ate the xink'al.’} \\
\text{transitive} \\
\text{b. } & \text{˘garç-} \text{ma}/*-i \text{it'ira} \\
& \text{baby-ERG/*NOM cried} \\
& \text{‘The baby cried.’} \\
& \text{unergative} \\
\text{c. Ert-} \text{i/} \text{ma} \text{ber-i/} \text{ma} \text{mok'da} \\
& \text{one-NOM/ERG old-NOM/ERG died} \\
& \text{‘An elderly person died.’} \\
& \text{unaccusative}
\end{align*}

- Preliminary Hypothesis:
  - The L\(^2\)-type ergativity in IG is decaying into the nominative-accusative alignment.
  
  \[
  \begin{array}{c|c|c|c|c|c|c}
  \text{IG}_\text{decaying} & \text{EA} & \text{IA} & \text{IG}_\text{emerging} & \text{EA} & \text{IA} \\
  \text{transitives} & -\text{ma} & -\text{i} & \text{transitives} & -\text{ma} & -\text{i} \\
  \text{unergatives} & -\text{ma} & \text{unergatives} & -\text{ma} & \text{unaccusatives} & -\text{ma} \\
  \text{unaccusatives} & -\text{i} & \text{unaccusatives} & -\text{ma} & \text{\textless{}-}\text{ma} \text{is \textit{erg}} & \text{\textless{}-}\text{ma} \text{is \textit{nom}}
  \end{array}
  \]

  - Accordingly, we (at best) predict synchronic optionality between two grammars.
  - However, the \textit{erg} vs. \textit{nom} marking on IAs of unaccusatives is \textbf{not} optional!

- We find obligatory \textit{erg} marking on the internal argument of unaccusatives in the contexts where it is \textbf{specific}.
  [comparable to specificity-driven differential object marking in Turkish \cite{Enç,1991}].

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\(^1\) Part of the data that appears here was first reported in \cite{Öztürk et al.,2011}.

\(^2\) In the community of 4th-5th generation Georgian immigrants in Inegöl and villages around it, various nonstandard varieties of Georgian co-exist among the remaining fluent speakers.
• Evidence from scope:
  – When the indefinite IA of an unaccusative predicate scopes above negation, it has to bear ERG.

  (2) a. Ert-\textit{ma} ber-\textit{ma} ar-mok’da
      one-ERG old-ERG NEG-died
      ‘An elderly person did not die.’

  b. *Ert-i ber-i ar-mok’da
      one-NOM old-NOM NEG-died
      Intended scope [one>not]

• Evidence from possessives:
  – The IA of an unaccusative predicate obligatorily appears in ERG when it is a possessive structure.

  (3) a. çem tsxen-\textit{ma} mok’da
      my-ERG horse-ERG died
      ‘My horse died.’

  b. *çem-i tsxen-i mok’da
      my-NOM horse-NOM died
      Intended: ‘My horse died.’

• Evidence from linear position:
  – The IA of an unaccusative predicate that appears to the left of a locative phrase has to receive ERG marking.

  (4) a. ba˘gv-\textit{ma} ts’q'al-şi çavarda
      child-ERG water-in fell
      ‘The child fell into water.’

  b. *ba˘gv-i ts’q'al-şi çavarda
      child-NOM water-in fell
      Intended: ‘The/a child fell into water.’

  – No comparable restriction holds for a noun that occurs to the right of a locative phrase.

  (5) Ts’q'al-şi (ert-i) ba˘gv-i çavarda
      water-in one-NOM child-NOM fell
      ‘A child fell into water.’

• Finding: ERG in IG appears on specific internal arguments of unaccusatives, in addition to external arguments.
3 Ergative in IG cannot be dependent or inherent case

- **Why can’t ERG in IG be an inherent case?**
  - ERG can appear both on agentive arguments of unergatives as in (6) and on nonagentive arguments of unaccusatives as in (7).

(6) bağv-**ma** bağ-şi itamaşa  
child-ERG garden-in played  
‘The child played in the garden.’

(7) bağv-**ma** ts’al-şi çavarda  
child-ERG water-in fell  
‘The child fell into water.’

  - That is, it can appear both on external arguments and internal arguments.
  - Hence, it is impossible for ERG to be an inherent case assigned to a class of arguments that occur in a particular theta position.

- **Why can’t ERG be a dependent case**
  - Assume for the sake of argument that ERG in IG is a dependent case.

(8) a. If NP₁ c-commands NP₂ and both are contained in the same domain (say, clause), then value the case feature of NP₁ as ergative  
b. Otherwise NP is nominative/absolutive. [Baker and Bobalijk (2017):2]

  - Accordingly, in a transitive configuration where there are two DPs that compete for case, the higher DP gets the dependent case, hence ERG. This is borne out:

(9) Bağv-**ma** xink’al-i ç’ama  
child-ERG xink’al-NOM ate  
‘The child ate the xink’al.’

  - In an unergative configuration with a single DP, we predict that ERG will not surface. This is NOT borne out:

(10) a. bağv-**ma** i-tamaṣ-a  
child-ERG VAL-play-PST.3SG  
‘The child played.’  

  - To tackle this general problem that “active-ergative” languages [Woolford, 2015] exhibit, [Baker and Bobalijk (2017)] propose that unergatives in such languages can have concealed transitive structures.
For example, Nash (2017) argues for Standard Georgian that the culprit for the erg on external arguments in unergatives is the valency/reflexive prefix i- (cf. (10)), which she assumes to be a case-competitor. *same data in IG*

(11) 

\[ \text{DP} \]
\[ \text{case competitor} \leftarrow \text{ERG} \]
\[ \text{VP} \]
\[ i- \]
\[ \text{play} \]
\[ \text{case competitor} \leftarrow \text{(NOM)} \]

- This proposal, even if it is on the right track, CANNOT extend to unaccusatives.
- There is simply no way to invent a lower case-competitor for the internal argument. Hence the erg on specific unaccusative subjects cannot be a dependent case.

(12) ba˘gv-
\[ \text{ma} \]
\[ \text{child-ERG} \]
\[ \text{ts’q’al-} \]
\[ \text{si} \]
\[ \text{water-in} \]
\[ \text{ç}a-vard-a \]
\[ \text{dir-fall-PST.3SG} \]
\text{‘The child fell into water.’}

4 Ergative as a default case

- What could possibly unify erg on external arguments and specific IAs of unaccusatives?
  - Following Diesing (1992); Bhatt and Anagnostopoulou (1996), I assume that specific nominals cannot remain in VP.
  - Hence, both EAs and specific IAs are outside the VP.

- Proposal: IG has two case-competition domains (henceforth phases), as proposed for languages that exhibit specificity-related differential object marking (Baker & Vinokurova 2010).
  - [phase\textsubscript{2} external argument] [phase\textsubscript{1} internal argument ]
  - assumption: specific IAs raise to phrase\textsubscript{2}\textsuperscript{3}

- In the spirit of Baker and Atlamaz (2013) and Imanishi (2014), I argue that erg in IG is a default case in phase\textsubscript{2} while nom in IG is a default case in phase\textsubscript{1}

(13) Summary of the proposal

a. Case Domains: [phase\textsubscript{2} EA [phase\textsubscript{1} IA ]]
b. (i) default case in phase\textsubscript{1} is NOM
   (ii) default case in phase\textsubscript{2} is ERG

\textsuperscript{3} As far as I can see, there is no reason to assume that an EPP-like feature that overtly moves DPs out of the VP. Accordingly, when the IA of an unaccusative verb is NOM and non-specific, it has never left the VP.
• Since EAs will be generated in phase₂, they get the default case ERG.

(14) ba˘ gv-ma i-tamaş-a
   child-ERG VAL-play-PST.3SG
   ‘The child played.’

• When IAs are not specific, they remain in phase₁ and get the default case in that domain, namely NOM.

(15) ts’q’al-¸ si ba˘ gv-i çavarda
   water-in child-NOM fell
   ‘A child fell into water.’

• When IAs are specific, they raise to phase₂ and get the default case in that domain, namely ERG.

(16) ba˘ gv-ma ts’q’al-¸ si çavarda
   child-ERG water-in fell
   ‘The child fell into water.’

• Hence, ERG as a default case correctly predicts its distribution in IG.

• A caveat: What happens when we have two DPs in phase₂, namely an EA and a specific IA?
  – This is a configuration where we should observe a dependent case on one of the DPs!
  – However, both specific and non-specific objects get NOM.

(17) Ba˘ gv-ma xink’al-i ç’ama
    child-ERG xink’al-NOM ate
    ‘The child ate xink’al,’ or
    ‘The child ate the xink’al.’

  – ERG-ERG strings are impossible.

(18) a. K’ats-ma axor-¸ si dzrox-eb-i dak’la
    man-ERG barn-in cow-PL-NOM killed
    ‘The man killed the cows in the barn.’

   b. *K’ats-ma axor-¸ si dzrox-eb-ma dak’la
      man-ERG barn-in cow-PL-ERG Killed

  – A search for a dependent case from ditransitives proves irrelevant, as ditransitives are formed via applicatives which assign DAT.

(19) Kal-ma k’ats-sa ts’q’ali minda vo u-txr-a
    woman-ERG man-DAT water I.want COMP APPL-tell-PST.3SG
    ‘The woman told the man that she wants water.’
• If there is in fact no dependent case defined for IG\(^4\) one possible remedy to this glitch comes through with these two assumptions:

1. (Re-)evaluate case values in each phase [see e.g. Chen (2018)\(^5\)]
2. A case value can be assigned to maximally one DP within a domain

• In other words, the derivational rewriting of the case values (i.e. NOM to ERG) is enforced unless it leads to the ERG-ERG sequence.
  – Hence, when phase\(_2\) has 2 DPs, ERG on the EA and NOM on the IA are preserved.
  – When phase\(_2\) has one DP, ERG appears on that DP.

• An important piece of evidence for this comes from psych-predicates that assign dative case to experiencers. In this configuration, when the IA raises to phase\(_2\), it receives ERG:

(20) Kal-sa tav-ma dzalian u-qˈvarda
woman-DAT REFL-ERG much APPL-loved
‘The woman loved herself a lot.’ cf. (18)

• Open eds, future directions
  – interaction with agreement, to evaluate the potential of agreement-dependent case
  – morphological causatives to search for a dependent case
...

5 Extensions to Differential Subject Marking in Turkish [disclaimer: sketchy]

• A crucial component of the proposal regarding ERG in IG is the idea that different case domains can have different case defaults.
• This proposal makes a testable prediction on differential subject marking in general.
• To illustrate, I briefly discuss differential subject marking in nominalized clauses in Turkish, described in depth in Kornfilt (2009).
  – As shown in [21], specificity-driven differential object marking [NOM vs. ACC] (Eng 1991, Baker and Vinokurova 2010) is still active in nominalized clauses. Moreover, we see that the subject receives GEN, unlike in finite clauses (Kornfilt 2003).

    Hale [Helin-GEN one nurse-ACC wait-NOML-3SG-ACC] said
    ‘Hale said that Helin waited for a (specific) nurse.’

    Hale [Helin-GEN one nurse-NOM wait-NOML-3SG-ACC] said
    ‘Hale said that Helin waited for a nurse.’

\(^4\) An alternative: if a dependent case is defined and it oddly needs to be syncretic with NOM.
\(^5\) Chen (2018) argues on the basis of Amis (Austronesian) data that case assignment may apply to a single DP more than once.
(22) (Tentative) Proposal for Turkish nominalized clauses:  
[cf. Baker and Vinokurova 2010]

a. GEN is the default case in phase$_2$,
b. NOM is the default case in phase$_1$,
c. ACC is the dependent case that shows up iff two DPs are in phase$_2$

- Provided that there are two distinct default cases in nominalized clauses, we predict that IAs of unaccusatives can be subject to differential marking, depending on specificity:
  - When IAs of unaccusatives are NOM, they have non-specific interpretation (23).
  - When they are specific (24) they have to bear GEN case.

(23) Hale [bu hastane-ye bir hemşire-ø gel-dığ-in-i] biliyor mu?
    Hale [this hospital-DAT one nurse-NOM come-NOML-3SG-ACC] knows Q
    ‘Does Hale know that a nurse came to this hospital?’ [obligatorily non-specific]

(24) Hale [bir hemşire*(nin) bu hastane-ye gel-dığ-in-i] biliyor mu?
    Hale [one nurse-GEN this hospital-DAT come-NOML-3SG-ACC] knows Q
    ‘Does Hale know that a nurse (one of the nurses) came to this hospital?’ [specific]

- To conclude, for differential subject marking, it is sufficient for there to be two case-competition domains with distinct default cases. Both Turkish nominalizations and IG meet these conditions.

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References


6 Native speakers’ intuitions seem to vary on whether genitive marking on unaccusative subjects entails specific interpretation. I leave this to future work.


