Why is there NOM-NOM but no ERG-ERG?

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This paper investigates a typological gap in double case arrays, where the internal and external arguments of a transitive clause exhibit the same case marking. While languages permit NOM-NOM (e.g. Japanese, Korean), ACC-ACC (e.g. Icelandic) and ABS-ABS (e.g. Shipibo) case arrays, ERG-ERG constructions are entirely unattested. This typological gap, which I call the Single Ergative Generalisation (SEG), has serious implications for our theory of ergative case assignment.

I argue that given the SEG and syntactic operations such as Multiple Agree (Hiraiwa 2001), ergative case cannot be structural. However, neither does ergative case behave like a typical inherent or lexical case. I instead propose that ergative case is a *configurational* case, meaning that it is assigned based on the content of the constituent it merges with; I suggest that this constituent is minimally an external argument-introducing head, a bare $i*$ à la Wood & Marantz (2015).

Ergative is not structural: Japanese permits a range of double nominative constructions as in (1). To capture this, Hiraiwa (2001) proposes that a probe ϕ-feature on finite T can enter into a Multiple Agree relation with the goal ϕ-features of the internal and external arguments simultaneously.

(1) Hiromi-ga syuwa-ga   deki-ru.
     H-NOM   sign.language-NOM   capable-PRES
     'Hiromi can use a sign language.'

Multiple Agree assigns case to DPs in a certain syntactic relation to their case-assigning functional head and is thus limited to structural cases (Marantz 1991, Bittner & Hale 1996), e.g. nominative in (2). If ergative case were structural, then we would expect ERG-ERG arrays to be possible under Multiple Agree. However, these are unattested, suggesting that ergative is not a structural case.

Ergative does not look inherent: Inherent cases depend on lexical predicates and the theta-roles they assign (Mahajan 1990, Woolford 1997); inherent ergative case is typically associated with agents and causers, though languages can differ (Plank 1979). The important point here is that in nominative-accusative languages, inherent cases can normally be assigned in *any* syntactic position. Yet ergative case only ever appears on external arguments, such as agents and causers, and never on simple internal arguments. Ergative therefore does not behave like a typical inherent case.

Ergative is configurational: I propose an analysis of ergative case inspired by Wood & Marantz's (2015) configurational approach to the thematic interpretation of external arguments, in which a single external argument-introducing head $i*$ assigns to the second constituent it merges with the θ-role implied by the first constituent it merges with. In (2a), for example, the external argument DP is interpreted as an agent because it merges with a bare $i*$ that has already merged with a VP. $i*$ functions as a Voice head in (2) but can introduce e.g. applied arguments in other configurations.

(2)   a.   Configurational theta-role assignment   b.   Configurational ergative case

Ergative case assignment can be conceived of in a similar way. In split-S languages like Basque, any external argument introduced by a bare $i*$ is marked ergative, including unergative subjects and inanimate causers. In non-split languages like Shipibo (Baker 2014), ergative is assigned when $i*$ merges with a VP already containing another DP, deriving the lack of intransitive ergative subjects.

This approach unifies ergative case assignment for both types of languages and predicts the frequent association of ergative case with agent and causer theta-roles as well as on possessors.

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