Non-canonical Case Patterns in Accusative and Ergative Paradigms

In ergative languages, the subject of an intransitive sentence is usually marked with the same (Absolutive) case as the object of a transitive sentence. Aldridge (2004), analyzing case-marking patterns in Austronesian languages, suggests two types of ergative languages. In one group, traditional subject properties, such as possibility of PRO-drop and being an antecedent for reflexives, are on the absolutive argument. In the other group, those properties are shared by ergative subjects of transitives and absolutive subjects of intransitives. She argues that in the languages of the 1st group, absolutive case is assigned by T, while in the languages of the 2nd group, it is assigned by v for transitive verbs, and by T for intransitives. Most Nakh-Daghestanian languages are of the 2nd type, see diagnostics in (1) and (2). Here and in the following glosses roman numerals represent noun classes, or genders.

(1) Ergative subjects can control PRO
   a. laha   berku   a<b>u
       girl(II).SG.ERG  pasty(III).SG.ABS  <III.SG>make.PFV
       ‘The girl has made pasties.’
   b. laha-s [ PRO  berku  a<b>a-s ]  kl’an  ke-r
       girl(II).OBL.SG-DAT  pasty(III).SG.ABS  <III.SG>make-INF  like  AUX-IPFV
       ‘The girl likes making pasties.’

(2) Ergative subjects can antecede reflexive pronouns
   Razhab-ii   žu.žu-či/*j       ø-uwox-i.
   Razhab-ERG  REFL.ABS-EMPH  I-kill-PST.W
   ‘Razhab killed himself.’

This study makes some modification to Aldridge’s analysis to accommodate Biabsolutive Constructions (BC) in Caucasian languages. (3a) shows a BC in Avar (Forker 2010), a Nakh-Daghestanian language, where the agent, as well as the theme, is absolutive. For Aldridge, ERG is an inherent case assigned by v, which potentially has a trouble capturing the pattern in (3). If ERG is an inherent case, it is unclear how it is lost in (3a).

(3) a. hel   nux   ha-b-ule-l   r-ugo
    they.ABS  way(III).ABS  make-III-PRT-PL  PL-AUX
    ‘They are in the state of building a road’
   b. hez   nux   ha-b-ule-b   b-ugo
    they.ERG  way(III).ABS  make-III-PRT-III  III-AUX
    ‘They are building the road’

The interpretations provide a clue. It is observed that BC indicates a property of an individual, rather than an on-going action. We suggest that a feature on a higher functional head (Asp), rather than v, is responsible for the choice between ERG and ABS. Given that BCs have gnomic (generic+habitual: Carlson, 1982) interpretations, we argue that when the gnomic feature is introduced on Asp, it suppresses ERG and assigns ABS to the external argument. Similar pattern is attested with Korean Double Nominative Constructions (DNC), as in (4b).

(4) a. Jean-uy atul-I   chwukku-lul ha-n-ta
    ‘Jean’s son plays/is playing soccer’
   b. Jean-I atul-I   chwukku-lul ha-n-ta
   ‘(lit.) Jean’s son is a soccer player’

The DNC in (4b) means either Jean’s son is an athlete or plays regularly, which supports the idea that non-canonical case patterns are related to the aspectual properties of the sentence.

The sentences in (3) are derived as in (5a). Following Aldridge (2004), v assigns ABS to Theme, and T is inactive. Agent receives its case from Asp: following the proposed modification, if it is specified with [AGENTIVE], it assigns ERG. If it is [GNOMIC], it assigns ABS. Two possible patterns are ERG(Agt)-ABS(Th) and ABS(Agt)-ABS(Th), respectively.
In intransitives, $v$ does not assign ABS. ABS is assigned to Theme by T, as suggested by Aldridge, unless Asp is activated by a [GNOMIC] feature to assign ABS. In the latter case, T is defective, and does not assign case. Notice that in both cases, the only argument of the verb receives ABS, even though it is assigned by different heads. Sentences with an experiencer subject pattern with intransitives. In the proposed analysis, it is not transitivity but agentivity that determines case patterns. ERG is assigned by [AGENTIVE] Asp head. ERG is not available, since experiencer verbs are not selected by Asp with [AGENTIVE]. Following Landau (2010), we assume that experiencers are generated lower than theme. We also argue that DAT is assigned by V. Otherwise, we would be left with only one (ABS) case assigner: either Asp if it is [GNOMIC] (and T is defective), or T if Asp is not [GNOMIC]. The derivation would crash, since the experiencer would be caseless. We correctly predict that ABS(Exp)-ABS(Th) is ungrammatical, see (6). If V assigns DAT to the Experiencer, the remaining case assigner (Asp or T) assigns ABS to the Theme. Therefore, the only possible pattern for experiencer constructions is DAT(Exp)-ABS(Th), although it can be derived in two ways.

(6) *ked hago ø-ik-o        gol
   girl he(I)  1-see-IPFV.CVB  bePRS
   ‘The girl is seeing him.’

   B-NOM/DAT tiger-NOM afraid-DECL  J-NOM/DAT sister-NOM exist-DECL
   ‘Bill is afraid of tigers.’          ‘John has a sister.’

Interestingly in Korean, experiencer verbs can be realized either as DAT(Exp)-NOM(Th) or NOM(Exp)-NOM(Th) (DNC), as shown in (7). In Korean, T does not become defective even if Asp is active, but remains a NOM assigner, which is how the DNC in (4b) is derived. The DAT(Exp)-NOM(Th) pattern is derived in the same way DAT-ABS pattern is derived in Nakh-Daghestanian. However, even if V does not assign DAT to the Experiencer, the derivation could still succeed, if both T and Asp assign NOM, giving rise to the DNC pattern, absent in Nakh-Daghestanian for experiencer verbs.

**Selected References**