

Is ergative case structural or inherent: Evidence from intransitive verbs

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The ergative case on subjects has long posed a taxonomic problem, at least within Chomskyan assumptions (Chomsky, 1986). Is it structural, associated with a grammatical position, the subject (specifier of TP), or is it inherent? There are two distinct interpretations of what *inherent* case is. On one interpretation, any exceptions to ergative case making makes it an inherent case. Transitive verbs which may not have ergative case, or intransitive verbs which may, are in fact typical exceptions in many morphologically ergative languages. On the other hand, a case may not be structurally related because it is tied to a specific thematic role, such as agent, source or experiencer. Ergative case in many Indo-Aryan languages is subject to exceptions, including a small number of intransitive verbs, but I will argue below that it is not associated with the agentive thematic role. So there is a fundamental contradiction in the definition of inherent case, at least in these instances.

Ergative case marking of the transitive subject should be simply a variation on case marking, like the familiar nominative-accusative case pattern for transitive verbs. In the majority of languages with ergative case, the grammatical functions of subject and object are the same as in nominative languages; in syntactically ergative languages, the clause structure is not quite the same—it is somewhat different but not completely so (Ura, 2001). The ergative case is essentially the case of the transitive subject, like the nominative case, which in Minimalist analyses is a feature associated with Tense. So comparing nominative-accusative languages with morphologically ‘shallow’ ergative languages, there should be just some sort of switch of a parameter for case valuing. Within generative grammar there have been numerous and not very satisfactory attempts to keep the grammatical functions constant while varying structural case checking. See Ura (2001) for proposal which invokes several parameters which can be related to different aspects of the subject grammatical function, as well as Ura (2006), which proposes a parameter for split ergativity based on perfective aspect.¹

Nominative case on subjects is clearly not theta-related and therefore nominative is a structural case associated with the specifier of TP. Subjects often have reference to agency and volition, but not always: the subject may refer to an experiencer, a cause or even a recipient, and in the passive, to a theme or patient. Ergative subjects may refer to agents, or experiencers, causes and recipients; examples may be found in a morphologically ergative language such as Hindi-Urdu (Davison, 2004). In Hindi-Urdu, the aspect marking on the finite verb

¹ See also Dixon (1994) for an appendix summarizing analyses of the ergative case in a variety of syntactic theories and approaches.

determines whether ergative case is realized. Hindi-Urdu and most other Indo-Aryan languages have split ergativity, so that a nominative-accusative sentence structure coexists with ergative nominative/accusative case marking.

It would seem that the subject should consistently have structural case, in the unmarked situation. Inherent case *-koo* for experiencers and the goal does occur on subjects. But there are complications in the distribution of ergative case in Hindi-Urdu, as there are in other ergative IA languages and other ergative languages of other families. Certain apparently transitive verbs lack ergative case on the subject, or have it only optionally. In HU, these verbs include *laa-* ‘bring’, *samajh-* ‘understand’, *bhuul-* ‘forget’, *jiit-* ‘win’, and *haar-* ‘lose’ (Montaut, 2004).² Furthermore, certain apparently intransitive (and unergative) verbs do have ergative subjects, at least optionally. Where these verb are not actually transitive verbs with cognate objects, they are exceptions to the generalization that the ergative case is the case of the transitive subject.

For example, Basque is a non-split ergative language which has some ergative intransitive verbs. In most cases, ergative case marking can be explained as some sort of transitive subject marker. But as Laka (2005) succinctly argues, there is a small number of genuinely intransitive verbs, such as *eski* ‘ski’ and *disdira* ‘shine’ (intrans.), which have ergative subject marking (Laka, 2005: 379-380). No other factors can be found to explain them away, so that they are genuine exceptions, with agentive semantic interpretation, and so both parts of the inherent case definition apply: exceptions and theta-relation.

The Indo-Aryan languages typically have some kind of ergative subject marking on transitive subjects, surveyed in detail in Verbeke (2013). The exceptions are the ‘eastern Hindi’ languages such as Magahi and Maithili, though the related language Kurmali has the transitive subject *-e* suffix (Mahto, 1989). The eastern languages Bangla and Oriya lack ergative marking, though alone among the eastern languages, Asamiya has the ergative suffix *-e* on transitive subjects (Verbeke, 2013). Interestingly, this subject was once found in Bangla; Verbeke cites Chatterji (1926: 741) in noting that this suffix had been lost in western Bangla in Chatterji’s time but was still found in eastern Bangla. It is still found exceptionally in contemporary Bangla on human nouns which are plural and indefinite:

- (1) *lok-e* *brisTi-r* *por* *khokono-khokhono* *akas-e* *ramdhonu* *dakh-e*
 people-ERG rain-GEN after sometimes sky-LOC rainbow see-PRS.3SG
 ‘People sometimes see a rainbow in the sky after rain.’
 (Chatterji, 1926: 105 cited in Verbeke, 2013: 142)

Languages with ergative transitive subjects typically have ergative marking on ‘unergative’ intransitive verbs, sometimes showing a split marking, with ergative on all unergative verbs and nominative/absolutive on unaccusative verbs, sometimes marking intransitive verbs with volitional subjects, or fluid intransitive subject marking (Dixon, 1994). Asamiya, like other IA languages with ergative subject marking, has a small number of intransitive verbs which take ergative subjects. These include *naas* ‘dance’, *xator* ‘swim’, *haaMh* ‘laugh’, and *juuj* ‘fight’ (Amritavalli & Sarma, 2002). Other IA languages also have a small number

2 See Davison (1999) for a comparison of Hind-Urdu with Marathi in which transitive verbs may lack ergative case on the subject.

of unergative verbs which optionally have ergative subjects in sentences with perfective aspect. Punjabi has *thuk-Naa* ‘spit’, and *nicch-Naa* ‘sneeze’, apparently among others which are not cited (Bhatia, 1993: 86). There are also bivalent verbs like *mil-Naa* ‘meet’, *laau-Naa* ‘bring’, and *bol-Naa* ‘talk’ which do not have ergative subject marking. These exceptions to transitive subject ergative marking in Punjabi look very much like the exceptional verbs in Hindi-Urdu.

The exceptional intransitive verbs in an ergative language have special import for the parameterization of transitive subject case. In Bobaljik (1993), the case of intransitive verbs subjects shows which functional projection, AGR1 or AGR1, is active, and therefore whether the language is ergative or not. Paradoxically, case on intransitive subjects determines the parameter which is responsible for the case of the transitive subject.

An exhaustive list of verbs is given in Montaut (2004: 180-181) of the intransitive, verbs which optionally allow ergative subjects. These verbs, which Montaut characterizes as ‘physiological instant processes which cannot be controlled’, are listed in (2):

- (2)
- a. *chiiMk-naa* ‘sneeze’
 - b. *khaaMs-naa* ‘cough’
 - c. *muut-naa* ‘urinate’
 - d. *hag-naa* ‘defecate’
 - e. *matalaa-naa* ‘vomit’
 - f. *Dakaar-naa* ‘belch’
 - g. *bhauNk-naa* ‘bark’

The verbs (2a), (2b), (2f), and (2g) could be characterized as aspectually semelfactive, bounded but not telic (Kearns, 2011: 166-167). If these verbs are unergative, it means in general Chomskyan terms that the vP hosts a specifier which is the subject.

Many ergative subject languages have this kind of exceptional verbs which appear to be intransitive, but they may be explained as a verb which have unexpressed or incorporated cognate objects (Hale & Keyser, 1993). In fact, many of these verbs do have noun cognates (3), as do many other verbs in Hindi-Urdu. For example, the transitive verb *pheer-naa* ‘turn’ (trans.) has a related noun *pheer* ‘(a) turn, revolution’.

- (3)
- a. *chiiMk* f. ‘a sneeze’; N-ko *chiiMk aa-naa* ‘sneezing come to N, N sneezes’
 - b. *khaaMsii* f. ‘a cough’; N-ko *khaaMsii aa-naa* ‘coughing come to N; N coughs’
 - c. *muut* m. *urine muut maar-naa* ‘beat urine; urinate from fear’
 - d. –
 - e. *matalii* f. ‘nausea’
 - f. *Dakaar* f. ‘a belch’; *Dakaar lee-naa* ‘take a belch, belch’
 - g. *bhauM* m. (?) ‘noise a dog makes barking, woof’

The nouns in (3) are taken, from McGregor (1993) (except for *bhauM*). They show that these nouns are not cognate objects of unergative verbs, like ‘dance a dance of victory, danse a waltz’ (Hale & Keyser, 1993). Rather, if they are used with a verb, it is intransitive in (3a), (3b), with a dative experiencer subject. Experiencers are non-volitional. The noun in (3f) combines with *lee-naa* ‘take’, to form a complex predicate which has a *-nee* subject. Even

bhauM ‘woof’ does not occur as the object of *bhauMk-naa* ‘bark’. The onomatopoetic noun combines with *kar-naa* ‘to do’ to form a complex predicate.

- (4) kuttee=nee *bhauM*-*bhauM* **bhauMk*-aa/ *ki*-yaa
 dog=erg woof woof bark-perf do-perf
 ‘*The dog barked woof, a bark’; ok: ‘The dog did barking’ (R. Bhatt, R Ranjan pc.)

So the verbs in (2) do not form a class of covert transitives which take cognate objects, though there are for the most part related nouns (3). The class of optionally ergative intransitive verbs is not a class of covert transitive verbs. Even if it were, there would need to be an explanation of why the ergative case is optional.

So if the verbs in (2) are not covertly transitive, are they volitional? If so, then the ergative case on the (intransitive) subject would be an inherent case associated with the agent role. I have asked speakers of Hindi or Urdu whether dogs bark on purpose. They said that they don’t, because barking is just something which dogs do, perhaps in reaction to something. In a sample of sentences with *bhauMk-naa* as a main verb provided by Peter Hook, there are both *-nee* and nominative subjects, with no discernable differences of agency. (5) is a contrasting pair, with a nominative subject (5a) and an ergative subject in (5b):

- (5) a. us=see ghooRee bidak ga-ee aur us=par kuttee *bhauMk*-ee
 3s=from horse.M.PL shy go-PF.M.PL and 3s=on dog.M.PL bark-PF.M.PL
 ‘The horses shied at him and the dogs barked at him.’
 (December 16, 2012, Navbharattimes. india times.com)
 b. agar kuttee=nee *bhauMk*-aa hoo-taa too coorii bhii nahiiM hoo-tii...
 If dog.M.PL=ERG bark-PF.M.PL be-IMPF.M.PL then robbery.F emph not be-IMPF.F
 ‘If the dogs had barked, then the robbery wouldn’t have happened...’
 (October 21, 2009. manojifofsblogspot.com/2009/10/blogpost_21.html)

So it appears that *=nee* subjects of *bhauMk-naa* are not volitional in contrast to nominative/unmarked subjects.

The verbs *chiiMk*, *khaaMs*, *muut* ‘sneeze, cough, urinate’ denote verbs of bodily function which are not fully under an agent’s control, but there is some leeway in where and when they are performed. In such cases the vector verb *lee-naa* ‘take, do for one’s own benefit’ are used, and this verb requires a *-nee* subject. For examples, *khaaMs lee-naa* ‘cough take-INF’ and *chiiNk lee-naa* ‘sneeze take-INF’ are appropriate if one wants to avoid sneezing or coughing where it is inappropriate; for example, in someone else’s face, or in certain contexts where there must be quiet (Rajesh Bhatt p.c.). The *-nee* verb *maar-naa* ‘beat’ combines with the optional *-nee* verb *muut-naa* ‘urinate’, to express a reflex action out of fear (Nespital, 1997: 1023). The transitive vector verbs *lee-naa* ‘take’ and *maar-naa* ‘beat’ which require *-nee* add a kind of choice in the first instance but not in the second, though the ergative case appears on the subject in both instances.

The optional *-nee* verbs do not in and of themselves show a consistent contrast between volitionality when *-nee* is used and non-volitionality when it is absent. This small exceptional class of intransitive, unergative verbs does not seem to be proof that the ergative case is an inherent case with a link to the agent semantic role, when used with either transitive or

intransitive verbs. Rather, these exceptions look like the usual irregular collection of ergative intransitives which turn up in many morphologically ergative languages, if not in most of them.

There is an additional possibility for some speakers. Some unergative verbs may be cases of ‘fluid S’ marking (Dixon, 1994: 71, 78-83). The ergative case may be used if the subject refers to a volitional actor. Butt (2006) allows for this possibility in the representation of a verb – if it is intransitive, the semantic role of agency may be present. There are just a few examples cited: the verbs *roo-naa* ‘cry’ (Butt, 2006: 170) and *cillaa-naa* ‘shout’. The speakers I have consulted do not accept these verbs with *-nee*. But is it likely that there is some variation among speakers; for those who do use *-nee* in this way, it would be useful to see what range of verbs has this property. Another possibility suggested by Ura (2006: 130) is that agency may be added to a verb which is neutral for agency by an agentive adverb ‘deliberately’. Non-*nee* intransitives like *nahaa-naa* ‘bathe’ (oneself) can combine with a vector verb *lee-naa* ‘take, do for oneself’, which is a *-nee* verb (R. Rajan, p.c.).

Many languages with ergative case on the transitive subject also have small set of exceptional intransitive verbs, which require or allow ergative subject marking. Typically, the class of such verbs found in one ergative language does not match the class of similar verbs in another language. A close examination of the small class of optionally ergative intransitives in Hindi-Urdu show no consistent association with the agent theta role, in fact the reverse. The use of the ergative seems to be completely optional, unless a transitive vector verb like *lee-naa* ‘take’ is combined with the verb. These transitive vector verbs are not necessarily agentive, a property consistent with the general property of *-nee* on transitive verbs.

I conclude that ergative in Hindi-Urdu case meets only the criterion of exception, but is independent of the agent theta role. To generalize, the current definition of inherent case is flawed. If uses of the ergative case in a language show exceptions, it does not automatically follow that ergative is connected to the agent theta role.

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