The Internal Ergative Subject Hypothesis

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to provide an adequate analysis of ergativity. As expressed in the title, the main thesis defended here will be the following: the difference between ergative languages and accusative languages consists in the manner of projecting the external argument, the subject, in the two language types. While subjects are projected external to VP in accusative languages, subjects in ergative languages are projected VP-internally.

Let us first offer a formal definition of ergative and accusative languages, adopting Dixon’s 1979 standard definition:

A language is **ergative** if it treats the object of a transitive verb (O) and the subject of an intransitive verb (S) alike—leaving apart the subject of a transitive verb (A).

A language is **accusative** if the object of a transitive verb (O) is treated differently from the subject of a transitive verb (A) and from the subject of an intransitive verb (S).

The term *treatment* will imply throughout the whole discussion, first and foremost, **morphological marking**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>Accusative System</th>
<th>Ergative System</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>Ergative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(S) Absolutive</td>
<td>(O)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Accusative</td>
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In (2), I provide an example of an accusative language, English, where the object *her* is morphologically distinguished from the subject—*she*—of a transitive verb *kick* and the subject of an intransitive verb *arrive* (2b). In (3) an example of an ergative language, Yup’ik, is presented, where the subject of the transitive verb ‘eat’—*angute-m*—is treated differently than the morphologically unmarked *qungiq*, which functions as the subject of the same verb in its intransitive use in (3b) and as the object of the transitive ‘eat’ in (3a).

*I would like to thank J. Guéron, K. Hale, R. Kayne, A. Marantz, D. Pesetsky, A. Rouveret, P. Schlenker and K. Wexler, as well as the audience at NELS 26 for the most fruitful discussion and interesting questions, comments and objections. All errors and shortcomings are solely my own.*
2. Two types of approaches to ergativity

In studies pertaining to ergativity the principal issue has always been whether to consider this phenomenon as arising from a fundamental deep difference from an accusative system or whether to attribute the difference between the two language types to superficial factors largely due to some slight divergence of a morphosyntactic nature.

Let us refer to the first account of ergativity as a Mapping Parameter. Following this analysis, ergative and accusative languages map their main arguments, object and subject, differently at D-structure. In accusative languages, the transitive verb first merges (in Chomsky’s 1995 sense) with the object and the resulting structure merges later with the subject. In ergative languages however, the transitive verb first merges with the subject (or, more precisely, with the agent) and the result merges with the object. Consequently, the external argument is the semantic subject in accusative languages and the semantic object in ergative languages. Analyses along these lines were advanced by de Rijk (1966) and Marantz (1984). The Mapping Parameter approach to ergativity captures the basic fact that special morphological marking on an argument represents its syntactic proximity to the verb. Clearly, the Mapping Parameter presents ergative languages to be very different from accusative languages. However, careful scrutiny of ergative languages points in the opposite direction. In fact, ergative languages basically display the same syntax as accusative languages (cf. Nash 1995). Furthermore, no ergative language seems to have idiomatic expressions where subjects (Agents) and the verb are grouped together forming a semantically indivisible entity, leaving the object as a variable constituent. This very basic property, traditionally used since Marantz (1984) as evidence for the logico-semantic locality, indicates that subjects and verbs are not merged as sisters at D-structure in the ergative system.

The second approach to the phenomenon of ergativity may be labeled as a Case Parameter. Departing from the idea that cases assigned to main arguments in both language types, i.e. Nominative, Accusative, Ergative and Absolutive, are structural cases and as such, need to be licensed (or, checked) by functional categories, the proponents of this approach aim to reduce the accusative-ergative contrast to the core properties, especially to the strength and to the hierarchical site, of the functional category responsible for the assignment of obligatory case.

Case Parameter approaches can be further roughly subdivided into two lines of inquiry. The first group of analyses equates Absolutive case to abstract Accusative, i.e. considers it as a structural verbal case. Assuming that there are two functional categories that check structural cases, it is hypothesized that Absolutive case is obligatorily or always realized in ergative languages because the case-features of the verb (or,
alternatively, the AGR projection that checks verbal case-features) are strong. Accusative languages, on the contrary, have strong Tense-features (or, the strong AGR projection immediately dominating Tense that checks them). That is the reason why Nominative, the Tense case, is uniformly and always assigned in accusative languages. These types of analyses were defended by Bobaljik (1993), Chomsky (1993), and Laka (1993).

The main problem with these types of analyses concerns the notion of deactivation of a functional head or of the case-features associated with it, in the environments where only one structural case is assigned, i.e. in monovalent clauses. In other words, the issue is to elucidate the principles that prevent the realization of Accusative and Ergative cases in monovalent structures in each language-type. The deactivation of verbal case-features in accusative languages is directly linked to lexical-selectional properties of the verb. Thus, as monovalent verbs have weak Accusative case features (or, are associated with the weak lower AGR), this case is not obligatorily realized in all the clauses. As for ergative languages, it is not clear how to link the deactivation of the Tense (upper AGR) case-features, which license Ergative, by the present hypothesis, to the verbal valence. We certainly do not want to claim that Tense case-features are neutralized—and Ergative thus may be non-realized—in these languages if the verb selects one argument. Rather, the deactivation of Tense case-features should be correlated to notions such as the finiteness/non-finiteness of a clause.

According to the second type of inquiry within the Case Parameter approach, Ergative is brought closer to the abstract Accusative case, i.e. it is viewed as a verbal case. Morphologically, this means that the unmarked case forms, Nominative and Absolutive, used for citations in both language-types are licensed by Tense. Proponents of this line of analysis (Murasugi 1993, Jelinek 1993, among others) propose that Ergative and Accusative are checked in the same functional category, TransitivityP (or, AspectP), universally contingent on transitivity, structurally dominating VP and selected by TP. Why is it that different types of arguments—objects in accusative languages and subjects in ergative languages—raise to this projection? According to Murasugi (op. cit.), this contrast should be attributed to the relative strength of different functional categories in the two systems. She assumes that the strong features of a given functional projection (FP) attract the highest projected argument from the VP. In accusative languages Tense case-features are strong and they must always be obligatorily checked. In ergative languages, it is Transitivity features that are strong and so need be checked by the highest argument. This kind of argumentation, which admits that subjects are licensed lower than objects (the latter raising to TP by LF), cannot account for the basic hierarchical superiority of the subject over the object in ergative languages, without further stipulations. Moreover, this analysis loses the correlation between the notion of obligatory Case and the uniform strength of the corresponding functional category. TransP is strong in ergative systems, yet, being contingent on the verbal valence, it is not always instantiated. In the Bobaljik-Chomsky approach, discussed above, the obligatory lower AGR, which is responsible for the Absolutive case-licensing, is always instantiated and is conceptually independent of the verbal valence considerations.

In yet other analyses which group Ergative and Accusative cases together but which do postulate the existence of different (values of) functional categories in the two systems, Ergative and Accusative are defined as “dependent” or marked structural cases assigned under government (“case-binding”, in Bittner & Hale's terminology): Accusative is realized as a result of verb-government of the internal argument whereas Ergative is assigned to the external argument in VP by INFL-government. (Bittner & Hale 1995, Marantz 1991).
Clearly, each of all these theories succeeds in accounting for a considerable number of differences between ergative and accusative languages. However, all these analyses which treat Ergative case either as a morphological realization of abstract Tense case or of abstract verbal case are faced with the following challenges:

(i) The notion of Structural Case (in Vergnaud’s sense) was originally conceived to convey the idea of Abstract Case. Indeed, Nominative, Absolutive and Accusative are quite commonly morphologically unrealized or unmarked (as in English, Haitian or Chinese). However, this is not true for Ergative which is *always morphologically realized* as a Case-marker (as in Inuit, Georgian or Dyirbal) or as a verbal affix (as in Abkhaz, Abaza or Sacapultec Maya). Ergative case, unlike Nominative or Accusative, is always morphologically distinguishable from Absolutive. This obligatory contrast between the two cases assigned to the main arguments is not uniformly attested in accusative languages, where the morphological shape of subject and object DPs are identical. Thus, no ergative language counterpart of English is attested. (Dixon 1994).1

(ii) The Ergative case-marker has further functions in many languages. For example, the same marker that appears on agents of transitive clauses appears on Locative arguments in Avar, on instrumentals in Udi, and is homophonous with the Genitive case-marker in Lak and in Inuit. Traditional literature on ergativity distinguishes between Ergative case-markers which have the unique function to mark agents of transitive clauses and Ergative case-markers that serve other functions as well, by labeling the former “non-cumulative Ergative” and the latter “cumulative Ergative” (cf. Cikobava 1967).

(iii) In the literature on ergativity (cf. Dixon 1994, Bittner & Hale 1995, Mahajan 1993), it has been often observed that ergative languages represent a puzzling gap with regard to word-order possibilities. Curiously, while both SOV and VSO ergative languages are attested, no ergative language is known which manifests strict or preferred (unmarked SVO) order. Dixon (1994:50) notes:

“In fact, I know of no language, in which constituent order is the only or the major mark of core syntactic functions, that has an ergative pattern, SV/OVA or VS/AVO. What about languages where syntactic function is shown by case inflection (or particles or adpositions) on an NP, or through cross-referencing on the verb? Surely some of these languages should have a preferred constituent order on an ergative pattern. In fact, languages with intra-clusual ergativity seem seldom to have a preferred verb-medial constituent order...”

Taking all these facts into consideration, I would like to propose that the phenomenon of ergativity, and the Ergative case particularly, cannot be explained in terms of a structural Case Parameter. Ergative is not a structural case, checked or licensed in a particular functional category, nor is it a formal feature inherent to a particular constituent, be it Aspect, Verb, Tense, etc. Rather, Ergative is best analyzed as a *lexical* case and, consequently, differences between ergative and accusative languages cannot be reduced to the parametric variation of *Structural* Case assignment or checking. By lexical case, I roughly assume the morphological marking on a given DP which is linked to or conditioned by certain lexical specifications or particularities of the verb.

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1Moreover, no language is known, to the best of my knowledge, where full DP main arguments are morphologically indistinguishable (as is the case in French and in English) while *pronominal main arguments* manifest ergative alignment, i.e. the morphological shape of the subject pronoun varies depending on its occurrence in a transitive or in a monovalent clause.
3. The Internal Ergative Subject Hypothesis

At this point, I would like to advance a Case-free analysis of ergativity. Particularly, I would like to suggest that ergative and accusative languages do not share the same D-structure, or do not look alike at the level of Merge, prior to any syntactic movement. The leading assumption is that the principal difference between ergative and accusative languages reduces to the way the subject of a transitive verb (A) is merged in a simple sentence. In accusative languages, the subject (Agent) is projected external to VP as the specifier of a functional category which selects VP. In ergative languages, the subject is projected VP-internally, as the highest adjunct (specifier) of the lexical VP-projection. This idea can be summarized as the Internal Ergative Subject Hypothesis. It follows then that the External Subject Hypothesis is valid in accusative systems only while the Internal Subject Hypothesis is valid in ergative languages only. This is represented schematically in (4), and it is unclear at this point whether the VP in each system is head-initial or head-final.

![Diagram of Accusative and Ergative Languages]

Importantly, the \textit{Internal Ergative Subject Hypothesis} (IESH) argues for the fundamental validity of Marantz's (1984) Ergative Parameter, yet it is free from the shortcomings of the latter. Both approaches claim that ergative and accusative languages have different D-structures which result from the different merging sites of the Agent. In ergative languages, subjects are more closely associated with the lexical verb than in accusative languages. However, unlike Marantz's Ergative parameter, IESH does not imply that objects are differently projected in ergative and accusative languages. In both language-types they are merged as the sister of the lexical verb. Consequently, Agents are always merged higher than objects. This accounts for the fact that Ergative DPs manifest universal "subject" properties such as reflexive binding, subject-control, etc. (cf. Anderson 1976, Dixon 1994)

4. Ergative languages as unaccusative systems

In many traditional studies of ergativity as well as in a number of recent treatments of the phenomenon, ergative languages are characterized as 'unaccusative', i.e. the basic feature which makes them look so different from accusative languages is the inability to assign Accusative case to the object. (cf. Bok-Bennema 1991, Bittner & Hale 1995).
To a certain degree, this property of ergative languages follows straightforwardly from IESH. In fact, Kratzer (1994) and Chomsky (1995) argue that Agents are not projected internal to VP; but as arguments of a ('quasi')-functional category located lower than T (labeled Voice by Kratzer and y by Chomsky) to which the lexical verb (V) must raise in the course of derivation. (For Chomsky, who basically follows Hale & Keyser's (1993) analysis of the articulated structure of VP, y has the semantic specification of an abstract causative verb which thematically introduces the Agent argument).

Chomsky further specifies that while y is obligatorily present in transitive and unergative clauses, it is absent in unaccusative clauses where a lexical verb heads a VP directly selected by T. Kratzer explicitly argues that Voice, besides its semantic role which consists of introducing the external argument, performs another function as well, namely it assigns (licenses) the structural Accusative case. Thus, Kratzer' functional category has a double function and, in fact, performs the two requirements of Burzio's generalization: it introduces the external argument and it licenses Accusative. Kratzer's proposal allows us to establish a greater symmetry between the two structural cases, Nominative and Accusative, both are inherent formal features of the interpretable functional categories, Tense and Voice respectively; lexical categories cannot be endowed with formal case-features and hence are not structural case-assigners.  

Now if we transpose the above observations to ergative languages, we are in a position to naturally account for the unaccusativity of these languages. According to IESH, the lexical verb is not selected by the functional category which introduces the external argument, because such a category is simply absent from the inventory of functional categories available in ergative languages. Consequently, the internal—Object—argument cannot be licensed by the verbal structural case either. In other words, ergative languages indirectly confirm the validity of Burzio's generalization. If a category x does not project the external argument, x does not assign Case to the internal argument. However, the category x is not identified as a lexical verb, as Burzio did in his time, but with its functional alter ego F (whose label is of little relevance at this point). Furthermore, as ergative languages crucially lack this second (lower) functional category F, we understand why Ergative Agents, which are generated as the specifier of a lexical rather than a functional projection are thematically rather than structurally licensed.

A question arises at this point. Given that objects cannot be assigned the verbal case in ergative languages, do they have to raise to the first available functional category, Tense, to be assigned the Tense case? In other words, the question is: How is Absolutive (the Tense-case) licensed in "unaccusative ergative languages? I would like to suggest that the licensing of Absolutive should be analyzed in the same fashion as the licensing of Nominative in unaccusative constructions in accusative languages. I assume that A-movement of arguments does not necessarily take place for Case-reasons. Arguments are assigned Nominative or Absolutive by default, as these cases are always available in

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2 Notice that Chomsky (1995) also, rather indirectly, allows y to check the verbal case-features. Namely, he claims that if the object overtly raises to (the outer) SPEC of y in order to check strong D-features (as is the case in Icelandic object-shift configurations), it automatically gets, by virtue of movement, its Accusative case-feature checked as well, as a free-rider.

3 The present analysis is quite compatible with Bittner & Hale's (1995) account of ergativity, where the unaccusativity of transitivel verbs in ergative languages results from the lack of a functional category D associated with them, and which is on the other hand obligatorily adjoined to transitive verbs in accusative languages.
finite clauses, due to the mere configurational presence of T. Nash (1995) suggests that argument movement cannot be due to Case reasons but is triggered by interpretative considerations. We may conjecture then, adopting Chomsky's 1995 insight, that Nominative case features will be checked as a feature at LF (note that feature checking is divorced from argument raising, at LF), if it has not been checked prior to LF as a free rider due to the overt movement of the argument in question (triggered by specificity considerations, for example).

5. IESH accounts for the lack of SVO (verb-medial) ergative languages

The next question to be addressed is whether IESH can account for the absence of verb-medial ergative languages. To this end, I would like to suggest that the absence of the lower functional category in ergative languages may be at heart of this typological puzzle. According to our hypothesis, in accusative languages, the functional category in question projects the external argument as its specifier. We may further conjecture that the lexical verb must raise to this functional head, and this movement is independent of the further movement of V+F to T. Why should this movement be obligatory in all accusative languages? One possibility is to adduce the obligatory V-movement to the abstract affixal character of the head in question. Alternatively, and this second possibility being more plausible, the movement may be forced for predication reasons. That is, this movement will differ from checking-induced type of movement and will be triggered by the necessity stemming from the Predication Theory: the lexical predicate has to head the projection whose sister is the subject of predication. We may push the point further and assume that at the moment of lexical insertion (which is probably postsyntactic, cf. Halle & Marantz 1993) verbs are directly lexicalized (inserted) in this functional category. Whatever the correct reason for the obligatory V-F association might be, the resulting configuration will have the order S-V+F-O, notwithstanding whether the object is generated as the lefthand or righthand sister of V. This point is summarized in (5).

Turning now to ergative languages, we predict that no tight configurational relation may exist between the subject and the verb, because the subject is not a specifier of a functional category attracting the lexical verb. Not only the lexical verb does not have to raise closer to the subject, but in fact it may even not do so, as no head position is available next to the subject. Notice that this line of reasoning crucially presupposes that the verb and the subject do not stand in the standard SPEC-HEAD relation from the beginning, at the VP-level. That is, we implicitly assume that (6a) but not (6b) is an
available option in ergative languages. In order to be justified, this last point needs further elaboration.

(6)

a. VP
   Agent
   Object  Verb

b. VP
   Agent
   Verb  Object

We have seen that ergative languages may display either SOY or VSO orders. I would like to suggest, abstracting away from many important factors (cf. Nash 1995), that SOY order may basically reflect the fact that the lexical verb stays in situ, while VSO order shows that the verb has raised to T, in ergative languages. Both options are summarized in (7). In order to explain why the in-situ option yields SOY order rather than SVO order, I would like to suggest that objects probably merge with the verb from the left universally. That is, the most basic VP-order turns out to be OV and not VO, contra Kayne (1993), but in line with Kayne (1995). The conclusion is that SVO order is not a primitive, yet it is necessarily instantiated in accusative languages due to the presence and the attraction force of the functional category F. (I, of course, abstract away from the fact that possible subsequent movements of the V-F complex and of the main arguments may yield various word-orders in accusative languages).

(7)

TP
   VP
      T
         Agent
           [S]
             O
             V

SOV

TP
   VP
      V+T
         Agent
           [S]
             O
             t

VSO

6. On monovalent clauses in ergative languages

Unergative and unaccusative verbs display the same structural behavior in ergative: the sole argument (S) of monovalent clauses is invariably marked with Absolutive in Tongan, (8a) and in Inuit, (8b).

(8)  a. Na'e alu 'a-Tevita ki Fisi
    [Tongan]
    PST go ABS-David to Fiji
    David went to Fiji

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b. *Arnaq yurat-tuq*
   womanABS dance-IND3sg
   The woman danced

(Bok-Bennema 1991:2)

Basque and Georgian are special among ergative languages in that the case-marking of the sole argument is sensitive to the semantic type of intransitive verbs. In unergative clauses in Basque and Georgian, the subject is assigned Ergative and in unaccusative clauses it is marked Absolutive, as is demonstrated in (9a, 10a) and in (9b, 10b), respectively.

(9) a. *emakumea-k barre egin du*
   woman-the ERG laugh done has
   The woman has laughed

b. *emakumea erori da*
   woman-the-ABS fallen has
   The woman has fallen

(Laka 1993:151-152)

(10) a. *Kac-ma ITira*
   hommeERG pleurerAORagr
   The man cried

b. *Kac-i movida*
   manABS comeAORagr
   The man came

In this section, our goal is to show that IESH can account for the identical treatment of the sole argument in monovalent clauses in ergative languages. The main idea is that while the sole argument is projected in different positions in accusative languages, depending on the semantic type of an intransitive verb, the sole argument in ergative languages is always projected in the same fashion, this fact being morphologically reflected by its invariant case-marking. The exceptional cases of Georgian and Basque will be explained separately.

Since Hale and Keyser’s (1993) analysis of monovalent verbs it is known that unergative and unaccusative verbs do not project VPs in the same way. While the argument of an unaccusative verb, e.g. *arrive*, is projected VP-internally, as the subject (structurally, the specifier) of the projection headed by the verb, the argument of an unergative verb, e.g. *work*, may not occupy a VP-internal position. It is base-generated “external” to VP. The unergative VP is headed by a light verb which selects an incorporated activity-depicting noun as its complement. In other words, unergative clauses are hidden transitive configurations. According to the authors, the light transitive verb in question may not have its specifier filled at D-structure by the subject as it does not head a predicational domain.

In the same vein, Chomsky (1995) also proposes that unergative and unaccusative clauses have quite different structures. Namely, unaccusative verbs head VPs which are directly dominated by Tense, whereas unergative clauses contain another, lower, functional category *y*, which, as we have seen, is always present in transitive clauses. Like Hale & Keyser, Chomsky’s analysis implies that the sole argument of unergative and unaccusative clauses is projected in different sites: as the specifier of a lexical VP in
unaccusative clauses and as the “external” specifier of a functional category in unergative clauses.

At this point, let us make the following conjecture: in order to be selected by a functional category, a (lexical) VP must be formally branching. Non-branching categories are “invisible” for categorial-selection. Therefore, if \( y \) selects \( VP \), the \( VP \) must contain a head (\( V \)) and an argument (\( NP \)). The presence of this functional category ensures that overtly monovalent unergative clauses have radically different underlying structures from monovalent unaccusative clauses: the former are underlingly transitive and the latter underlingly intransitive. This is schematically represented in (11). What an *underlingly transitive clause* means here syntactically is that it has the subject projected “externally” to the minimal lexical domain, as the specifier of a functional category.

(11) Unergative clauses in accusative languages

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           EP
             F
        Agent [S]    VP
             NP    V
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Unaccusative clauses in accusative languages

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           VP
             Theme [S]    V
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What about ergative languages, which, according to IESH, crucially lack the type of functional category whose specifier can be filled by the base-generated subject? IESH presupposes that subjects in ergative languages must be always mapped VP-internally. As no principle may force the merging of a thematic agent with a branching category (in our case, with a branching verb-projection) rather than with a head within the same lexical domain, it is predicted that unergative and unaccusative clauses will have the same underlying structures in ergative languages: the sole thematic agent and the sole thematic patient (theme) will be merged alike, as sisters of a monovalent \( V \). So we arrive at the conclusion that unergative constructions cannot be “hidden” transitive clauses, in ergative languages, precisely because the option of projecting the subject externally to the lexical VP-domain is not available in this language-type. In fact, Hale & Keyser’s and Chomsky’s analyses of unergative clauses, as seen above, seem to be inapplicable to ergative languages, according to IESH: “hidden” transitive clauses can exist only in languages where external agents are structurally VP-external. (The term “hidden transitive clauses” is understood as intransitives at Spellout but transitives for interpretative reasons, i.e. at LF). The structural representation of unergative clauses in ergative languages is much “poorer” than in accusative languages, due to the absence of an additional functional category, as summarized in (12).

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4 No formal principle bans the *adjunction* of a constituent to a head rather than to a phrasal category. That is, when the head \( x \) (\( V \)) merges with a constituent \( y \) (\( NP \)), it is irrelevant whether \( y \) is defined as the specifier or the complement of \( x \). The notions of specifier/adjunct and of complement only becomes relevant when \( y \) is merged with a branching phrasal category: \( y \) is a complement if it merges with a projecting head, \( y \) is a specifier/adjunct if it merges with a branching phrasal category.
Let us turn now to the special behavior of Basque and Georgian unergative clauses. As the sole argument of unergative clauses bears Ergative, Basque and Georgian seem to treat unergative clauses as transitive. How is this possible, given the above conclusion that monovalent clauses can be underlingly transitive only when the subject is projected VP-externally? There is robust empirical evidence that unergative clauses are not "hidden" but overtly transitive structurally both in Basque and in Georgian (cf. Uribe-Etxebarria (1989), Laka (1993), Nash (1995)).

Concerning Basque, let us just note two factors which will help us distinguish this language from other ergative languages: (i) Basque, like Dutch and Italian, manifests auxiliary selection. Unergative verbs are accompanied with the transitive auxiliary homophonous to the main verb *have* while unaccusative verbs are accompanied with the intransitive auxiliary *be*. To the best of my knowledge, no other ergative language seems to display auxiliary selection so overtly. (ii) In Basque, many unergatives are not simplex verbs but complex expressions containing a determinerless noun depicting an activity and the light verb 'do', as illustrated in (13). The last factor is taken by Basque scholars to play a crucial role in triggering the intransitive split—unergatives are formally transitive verbs where the activity depicting nominal is O and the Ergative NP is A.

Georgian differs from Basque in many respects: Georgian does not instantiate auxiliary selection and all verbs have synthetic forms in main tenses, i.e. unergative clauses do not "look" transitive at the first sight. However, while unergative verbs are "well-behaved" in the imperfective tenses (present, past), (14a-h), they display quirky behavior in the perfective tenses (aorist, future), (14c-d). This quirky behavior can be roughly characterized as follows: in the punctual, as opposed to the dynamic-progressive, tenses, the unergative verbal form obligatorily contains the extra prefix *i-:

(12) Monovalent clauses in ergative languages

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<td>NP</td>
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(13) *emakume-a-k barc egin du*

woman-the ERG laugh done has

The woman has laughed (Laka 1993:151-152)

(14) a. *Bavsvi Tir-i-s/ myer-i-s/ceKv-av-s/musa-oh-s/
    child NOM cry-TS-3sg/sing-TS-3sg/dance-TS-3sg/work-TS-3sg/
    tamas-oh-s/laParaK-oh-s
    play-TS-3sg/speak-TS-3sg
    The child is crying/is singing/is dancing/is working/is playing/is speaking
b. Bavsvi Tir-o-da/m ŋer-o-d-a/ceKv-av-d-a/musa-ob-d-a
tamas-ob-d-a/laParaK-ob-da
play-TS-IRR-3sg/speak-TS-IRR-3sg
The child was crying/was singing/was dancing/was working/
was playing/was speaking

c. Bavsvma i-Tir-a/i- ŋer-a/i-ceKv-a/i-musaw-a/
childERG SE-cry-AOR3sg/SE-sing-AOR3sg/SE-dance-AOR3sg/SE-work-AOR3sg
i-tamas-a/i-laParaK-a
SE-play-AOR3sg/SE-speak-AOR3sg
The child cried, sang, danced, worked, played, spoke

d. Bavsvi i-tir-eb-s/i- ŋer-eb-s/i-ceKv-eb-s/i-musa-[w]-eb-s/
i-tamas-eb-s/i-laParaK-eb-s
SE-play-TS-3sg/SE-speak-TS-3sg
The child will cry/will sing/will dance/will work/will play/will speak

The properties of the prefix i- are extremely complex, but in its function it can be
compared to the reflexive se in Romance (hence, the gloss SE). i- and se signal the
lexical “absence” of a structurally present argument in the clause. As structurally licensed
arguments are assigned (structural) Case, i- and se also “absorb” the structural case of the
missing argument.

I would like to suggest that i- affixed on unergative verbs in the aorist and future
in Georgian “absorbs” the object case (absolutive in the aorist and dative/accusative
in the future) and semantically functions as a delimiter of dynamic atelic verbs. Its lexical
specification [+person] imposes the coreference between i- and the agent. Thus the sentence
John worked would be literally, but counterintuitively, rendered as “John
worked [himself]” in Georgian. Although the analysis of i- in Georgian unergative
constructions is far from being complete and well-understood, it still enables us to reach
the following conclusions: (i) unergative constructions in the aorist are not formally
intransitive because i- spells out the structural presence of the “other” argument in the
clause; (ii) the presence of i- is independent of ergativity, as the affix also appears with
unergative verbs in the future tense which follows the nominative/accusative pattern.
Consequently, the presence of i- is contingent on the perfective/punctual rather than the
durative character of the tense employed.

To conclude, the special behavior of unergative clauses in Basque and Georgian
not only does not weaken the present analysis of monovalent clauses in ergative
languages but, in fact, endorses it. The “apparently” sole thematic agent of unergative
clauses is assigned Ergative simply because Basque and Georgian, unlike many other

5One wonders why Georgian unergative clauses in the accomplished tenses are so different from their
Romance counterparts, which seem never to make use of se in the parallel cases, e.g. *Jean s’est travaillé,
*Jean se travailla. The significant divergence between Georgian and French consists in the fact that an
unergative clause in the aorist fails to be interpreted as describing a dynamic activity predicated of the
subject in the past in Georgian. Rather, it describes the fact that the activity in question took place in the
past—started and ended—under the full control of the agent. For further elaboration of these questions,
see Nash (1995).
ergative languages, fail to treat unergative verbs as formally monovalent. Consequently, unergative clauses are overtly transitive in these languages: “the other” semantically vacuous argument is formally spelled out as an activity depicting nominal in Basque or as an affix with the sole formal specification [Person] in Georgian.

7. Morphological evidence for IESH

The present proposal finds direct empirical support from the verbal morphology of Georgian. Georgian can be defined as a partial ergative language. The Ergative-Absolutive case-array occurs in the aorist and subjunctive, while in other tenses Georgian displays the “accusative” behavior. Interestingly, the split in the case-system is morphologically reflected in verbal forms. Namely, the shape of verbs differs in the two case-systems: the verb is ‘barer’ in the ergative system than in the nominative system, where it contains an extra morpheme, traditionally referred to as Thematic Suffix (TS). This is illustrated in (15). Likewise, the verbal forms in (16) that lack TSs will occur with Ergative subjects, whereas those that contain TSs will obligatorily occur with Nominative subjects:

(15)

a. Gogo- xe da=xαT-a
girl-ERG tree-NOM PREV=draw-[AOR]sg
"The girl drew// draw(subjunctive) a tree"

dα=xαT-o-s
PREV=draw-SUBJ-sg

b. Gogo xe-s da=xαT-av-s
Girl-NOM tree-OBJ PREV=draw-TS-[PRES]sg
"The girl will draw// was drawing a tree"

da=xαT-av--d-a
draw-TS-IRR-sg

(16)

a. Cr-a

cut-[AOR]sg

cut-SUBJN-sg

cut-TS-[PRES]sg

cut-TS-IRR-sg

b. asen-a

build-[AOR]sg

build-SUBJN-sg

build-TS-[PRES]sg

build-TS-IRR-sg

The examples above suggest that the shift from one case-system to the other should be tied to the instantiation of TS in the verbal form. What are the properties of this morpheme? I would like to suggest that TS is the overt manifestation of the functional category other than Tense. This is so, because it does not change from one tense to another, i.e. is present in both the present and past imperfective tenses, and can furthermore co-occur with another temporal/modal morpheme, such as the irrealis marker -d-, (16). Assuming with Chomsky (1995) that there are at most two functional categories projected in simple declarative sentences, Tense and x (or the category we have been labeling as F throughout the whole discussion), we are led to conclude that TS should be best characterized as the morphological spell-out of the latter category. And indeed, its presence in the Georgian clause has the same effect as in any accusative system: (i) it licenses Nominative subjects and (ii) it makes available Objective (or Accusative) Case for the direct object. Furthermore, the presence of TS modifies the aspectual properties of the lexical V; its affixation adds a process/atelic character to an inherently perfective verbal root which expresses a resulting state. (17) schematically summarizes this conclusion:
References:


Chomsky, N. (1995) Chapter 4 of *The Minimalist Program* (forthcoming), Ms. MIT.


https://scholarworks.umass.edu/nels/vol26/iss1/15

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