snippets

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A neglected foundation for the distinction between inherent and structural case: ergative as an inherent case.

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In the linguistic literature, ergative has been considered either as a structural or an inherent case. In this squib I provide empirical evidence that ergative is an inherent case.

As is well known, the difference between inherent and structural case has to do with θ-relatedness: an inherent case is always θ-related in the sense that it can only correspond to a given and unique θ-role, whereas a structural case is not θ-related. According to this basic characterization, an instance of structural case can realize both an agent θ-role and a patient θ-role; this is true for nominative, absolutive and accusative.

(1) Nominative as
     a. True agent: in transitive and unergative constructions
     b. Patient: in passive and unaccusative constructions

(2) Accusative as
     a. True agent: in causative constructions
     b. Patient: in transitive constructions

(3) Absolutive as
     a. True agent: in intransitive and antipassive constructions
     b. Patient: in transitive constructions

In contrast, an ergative DP can never correspond to a patient, but only to true agent or agent-like (see below for details) θ-roles.

(4) Ergative as
     a. True agent: in transitive constructions
     b. Patient: never

To be more precise, as exemplified in the data below, ergative can realize agent (5), cause (6) and instrument (7) θ-roles:

(5)   Caxinaua (Pano, Brazil)
        Madia inun sunia-n   disi   wa-mis-bu-ki
        Madia and Sunia-erg hammock.nom   make-hab-pl-ass
        'Mary and Sonia make hammocks'

(6)   Kuikuro (Karib, Brazil)
        *ukasü heke u-tehuhesu-**ki**jü*
        work erg   1-worry-tr
        'Work worries me'

(7)   Basque
        Giltza-k   atea   ireki zuen
        key-erg   door.nom   open aux
         'The key opened the door'

        The – short – distance among these roles has led some linguists to question the
inherent nature of ergative case, because ergative does not correspond strictly to a
unique θ-role. However, rethinking this matter in terms of thematic features, we obtain
an interesting new account. Following Reinhart's (2002) proposal, we can claim that
ergative case realizes only [+cause] arguments. In Reinhart's framework, the primary
θ-feature [cause] characterizes those roles which include the notion of 'cause change',
mainly agent, cause and instrument — but crucially neither experiencer nor patient.
The following implication is then true:

(8)   Ergative → [+cause]

Ergative is, to summarize, restricted to a certain kind of θ-roles, contrasting with
structural cases. This proposal is clearly falsifiable if any ergative language is found to
exhibit ergative case on [-cause] arguments, like patients. As far as I know, such a
language does not exist.

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