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A case distinction between unaccusative and unergative subjects in Assamese

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Assamese (a language of Northeastern India) appears to distinguish subjects of unaccusative and unergative verbs via case-marking. The nominal inflection *-e* occurs only on unergative subjects ((1b)):

- (1) a. Ram pore / poribo / poril
Ram falls will fall fell
- b. Ram-e doure / douribo / douril
Ram-e runs will run ran

Subjects of transitive verbs are also marked with *-e*.

- (2) Ram-e kaam kore / koribo / koril
Ram-e work does will do did

Other verbs whose subjects fall into the classes illustrated in (1-2) reinforce the intuition that the non-occurrence of *-e* is linked to unaccusativity. (*-e* has the variants *i* and *ye, we* after vowels: *lora* ‘boy’ ~ *lorai*, *sowali* ‘girl’ ~ *sowaliye*, *tutu* (a name) ~ *tutuwe*. It appears on 2nd and 3rd person pronouns; 1st person pronouns exhibit no change.)

verb class (1a): *xuu-* ‘sleep’, *mor-* ‘die’, *aah-* ‘come’, *boh-* ‘sit’, *upaj-* ‘be born’, *jie-* ‘live’,
baas- ‘be safe’, *uTh-* ‘get up’, *jaa-* ‘go’

verb class (1b): *naas-* ‘dance’, *xator-* ‘swim’, *hāāh-* ‘laugh’, *juuj-* ‘fight’

verb class (2): *maar-* ‘beat, kill’, *saa-* ‘see’, *kaT-* ‘cut’, *jokaa-* ‘tease’, *likh-* ‘write’, *khaa-* ‘eat’

The data in (1) are of interest in realizing a well-known distinction between external and internal arguments through case marking: only unergatives and transitives have “real” subjects in the sense that they are projected as external arguments; the subjects of unaccusatives are underlying objects. Basque is reported to similarly distinguish external and internal arguments by ergative and absolutive case respectively (Laka 1993).

Traditionally, the \emptyset case on subjects of verb class (1a) is called ‘absolutive,’ and the *-e* of verb classes (1b) and (2) is called ‘nominative’ (see Goswami 1982:264 ff.); no ergative case is postulated in Assamese. But there is some reason to relabel *-e* “ergative.” A significant observation of Goswami’s is that “*-e* expresses instrumental case also” (example from Goswami):

- (3) *haat-e* ‘by hand, by the hand’.

This suggests that *-e* is linked to agentivity, and is consistent with its incompatibility with unaccusative subjects; in conjunction with the link between the Hindi ergative *-ne* and the Sanskrit instrumental, this leads to the proposal that *-e* is an ergative case.

Assamese also has an accusative case *-(a)k* on objects, but it appears overtly only on proper nouns and “particularized or emphasized” common nouns (examples from Goswami):

- (4) a. *ami bisnu-k puza karo* ‘We worship Vishnu’
 b. *moe lora-k matiso* ‘I have invited the boys (and not the girls or old persons)’

Under the conditions noted above (reminiscent of corresponding conditions in Hindi-Urdu), accusative *-(a)k* also appears on the logical object of the passive, and on the causee in causatives. In the causative sentences (5) below, notice that the case distinction between unaccusative and unergative subjects is neutralized when they appear as causees. The erstwhile subjects, the proper noun *Pona*, are all marked accusative, by *-(a)k*.

- (5) a. $V_{\text{unaccusative}} + \text{caus}$ *Ram-e Pona-k pelai* ‘Ram makes Pona fall’.
 b. $V_{\text{unergative}} + \text{caus}$ *Ram-e Pona-k dourai* ‘Ram makes Pona run’.
 c. $V_{\text{transitive}} + \text{caus}$ *Ram-e Pona-k kaam korowai* ‘Ram makes Pona work’.

Assamese (then) has a “mixed” nominative-ergative case system, which has an ergative, an absolutive, and an accusative. But it apparently has no nominative.

References

- Goswami, G. C. (1982) *Structure of Assamese*, Department of Publication, Gauhati University, Assam.
 Laka, I. (1993) “Unergatives that assign ergative, unaccusatives that assign accusative”, *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 18: 149-172.