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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)

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Madia} & \text{inun} & \text{sunia-n} \\
\text{disi} & \text{wa-mis-bu-ki} \\
\end{array}
\]

Madia and Sunia-erg hammock.nom make-hab-pl-ass

‘Mary and Sonia make hammocks’
Kuikuro (Karib, Brazil)

\[ \text{ukasii heke u-tekuhesu-kijii} \]
work erg 1-worry-tr

‘Work worries me’

Basque

\[ \text{Gilza-k atea ireki zuen} \]
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 \( \theta \)-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 \([-\text{cause}]\) arguments. In Reinhart’s framework, the primary \( \theta \)-feature \([\text{cause}]\) 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:

\[ \text{Ergative} \rightarrow \text{[+cause]} \]

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

References


