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There is no Absolutive Case

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There is No Absolute Case

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1 Introduction

This paper claims that absolute case, an abstract case assigned to the intransitive subject (S) and transitive object (O), does not exist. Instead, ergative-absolutive languages fall into two classes. In one class, which I illustrate with Georgian (South Caucasian; data from Harris 1981, Hewitt 1987), "absolutive" is abstract nominative case assigned by T to S and O (cf. *inter alia* Murasugi 1992, Bittner 1994, Bittner and Hale 1996a,b, Ura 2001). In the other class, which I illustrate with Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan, South-West, Ngarga), Niuean (Austronesian, Polynesian, Tongic; data from Massam to appear, Seiter 1980), and Enga (Trans-New Guinea, West-Central; data from Lang 1973, Li and Lang 1979, van Valin 1981), T assigns abstract nominative case to S and v assigns abstract accusative case to O; since these languages lack nominative and accusative case morphology, both nominative and accusative are realized as a morphological default = "absolutive". I follow Woolford (1997), among others, in claiming that ergative is inherent case, licensed by v.

The proposed absolutive as morphological default languages require that the traditional distinction between abstract and morphological case must be maintained (contra Marantz 1991, and Bobaljik 2005). Although the distinction between morphological and abstract case is standardly assumed for nominative-accusative languages (like English), the relevance of this distinction has not been pursued for ergative-absolutive languages; instead, previous analyses assume that the syntax must assign the same case to S and O (see

Levin and Massam 1985, Bok-Bennema 1991, Murasugi 1992, Bobaljik 1993, Bittner 1994, Bittner and Hale 1996a,b, Ura 2001, inter alia). I argue that this has seriously undermined efforts to understand ergative-absolutive languages, in particular the absolutive as morphological default languages. Specifically, I claim that abstract case determined in the syntax is realized in the morphology according to the Elsewhere Principle (Pāṇini, Kiparsky 1973, Halle 1997).

Section 2 provides evidence for the analysis from nonfinite clauses, other DP objects, and agreement. Section 3 provides additional evidence for the necessity of distinguishing morphological from abstract case in ergative-absolutive languages, examining case mismatch patterns in three Pama-Nyungan languages. Section 4 discusses the localization of the distinction between the two types of ergative-absolutive languages.

2 Absolutive as Nominative versus Morphological Default

2.1 Predictions for Nonfinite Clauses

In some languages, nominative case is assigned by both finite and nonfinite T (European Portuguese). In many other languages, however, abstract nominative case is dependent on finite T. Consider the predictions for ergative-absolutive languages in which nominative case is dependent on finite T. In an absolutive as nominative language, both absolutive case on S and absolutive case on O are nominative case licensed by finite T. Thus, neither will be available in nonfinite clauses. In an absolutive as morphological default language, in contrast, only absolutive case on S is abstract nominative case licensed by finite T; absolutive case on O is abstract accusative case licensed by v. Therefore, I predict that absolutive case on S will be unavailable, whereas absolutive case on O remains available, in nonfinite clauses.

Let us first consider the absolutive as morphological default languages. The prediction is borne out in Warlpiri. In Warlpiri, intransitive subjects cannot bear absolutive.[1] Instead, intransitive subjects bear dative:

(1) Kurdu ngaju-nyangu-lu   paka-rnu, [**ngaju-ku**
     child   1sg-POSS-3pl.SUBJ hit-PAST [**I-DAT**
     jarda-nguna-nja-rlarni.]
     sleep-lie-NONFIN-OBVC]
     'They hit my child, while I was asleep.'

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[1]In a corpus of 80000 sentences, I found no such examples. Simpson (1991:107) reports that rare examples are found, but that such examples are judged ungrammatical.

In contrast, transitive objects uniformly bear absolutive, and may not bear dative:

(2) Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku
man-PAUC-ERG PRESIMPF-3pl.SUBJ-3pl.OBJ bullock
turnu-ma-ni, [karnta-patu-ku/karnta-patu-rlu
muster-NPAST [woman-PAUC-DAT/woman-PAUC-ERG
miyi/*miyi-ku purra-nja-puru.]
food.ABS/*food-DAT cook-NONFIN-TEMPC]
'The men are mustering cattle while the women are cooking the food.'

Transitive subjects (A) may bear either ergative or dative:

(3) a. Kurdu-lpa manyu-karri-ja, [**ngati-nyanu-rlu**
child-PASTIMPF play-stand-PAST [**mother-POSS-ERG**
karla-nja-rlarni.]
dig-NONFIN-OBVC]
'The child was playing, while his mother was digging (for something).' (Laughren 1989:[44a])
b. Nyalali-rli ka warlu yarrpi-rni, [**karnta-ku**
girl-ERG PRESIMPF fire.ABS kindle-PAST [**woman-DAT**
kurdu-ku miyi yi-nja-rlarni.]
child-DAT food.ABS give-NONFIN-OBVC]
'The girl is building a fire, while the woman is giving food to the baby.' (Hale 1982:[139b])

This pattern is exactly as predicted. In addition, dative case is available on A and S because nonfinite clauses in Warlpiri are nominalized (Simpson 1991; for example nonfinite verbs undergo both verbal and nominal reduplication patterns, and bear case suffixes), and the subjects of nominals receive dative case:

(4) [**Karnta-ku** jaja-ngku] ka
[**woman-DAT** maternal.grandmother-ERG] PRESIMPF
yunpa-rni
sing-NPAST
'The woman's grandmother is singing' (Laughren 2001, pc)

Like Warlpiri, Enga exhibits a distinction between the licensing of absolutive on S and absolutive on O in nonfinite clauses. Absolutive case is available for O in nonfinite clauses in Enga:

(5) akáli dokó-mé [**dokosáa dokó**   kánj-a-nya]
     man DET-ERG [**doctor   DET.ABS** see-INF-DESID]
     más-í-á.
     think-PAST-3sg.SUBJ
     'The man wanted to see the doctor' (L&L 319)

However, absolutive Case is not available for S. To express an overt S, a
finite complement clause must be used in place of the infinitival:

(6) namba-mé [émba   Wápaka pú-p-í   lá-o]
     I-ERG   [you.ABS Wabag go-PAST-2sg utter-COMP]
     mási-ly-o
     think-PRES-1sg
     'I want you to go to Wabag' (L&L 317)

The prediction cannot be tested in Niuean. In Niuean, nominative case
isn't dependent on the finiteness of T; all cases are available in nonfinite ("sub-
junctive") clauses:

(7) a. Kua kamata [ke   hala he   tama e   akau]
         PERF begin   [SBJV cut   ERG child ABS tree]
         'The child has begun to cut down the tree' (M [21])
     b. Maeke [ke   nofo a   Pita i Tuapa]
         possible [SBJV stay ABS Pita at Tuapa]
         'Pita can stay at Tuapa' (M [19])

Turning to Georgian, an absolutive as nominative language, we predict
that if not all cases are available in nonfinite clauses, both absolutive on S
and absolutive on O will not be available. This prediction is borne out. In
Georgian, there are two relevant nonfinite verb forms: the nominalized verb
(traditionally termed the "masdar"), and the infinitive (traditionally termed the
"future participle in adverbial case"). The nominalized verb does not allow
absolutive, either on S or O. Instead, S and O are marked genitive, while A
appears as the complement of a postposition:

(8) a. [(monadir-is mier) **datv-is**   mok'vla   am t'qeši]
         [(hunter-GEN by)   **bear-GEN** killing.NOM this woods.in]
         ak'rdzalulia
         forbidden.it.is.I.2
         'Killing bears in this woods is forbidden'

> b. [**tamad-is**   damtknareba   supraze] uzrdelobaa
>   [**tamada-GEN** yawning.NOM table.on] rudeness.it.is.I.2
>   'It is rude for the *tamada* to yawn at the table'

Thus, the nominalized verb involves nominalization of the verb, which then combines with its arguments as a noun rather than a verb. This is in contrast to Warlpiri, in which nominalization at the verb phrase level, after the verb has combined with O (and optionally A) as a verb. The proposed analysis explains why Georgian cannot have Warlpiri-style nominalization at the verb phrase level: this would leave O without abstract case, since O is dependent on finite T for case.

Similar patterns obtain for the infinitive, which is used for purpose clauses with PRO subjects. Again, the object cannot appear with absolutive case, and instead must be marked as genitive:

> (9) c'avedi   t'qeši   [**datv-is**   mosak'lavad]
>   I.went.II.2 woods.in [**bear-GEN** to.kill]
>   'I went into the woods to kill a bear' (H 155)

2.2 Prediction for Other DPs

The analysis also predicts a distinction between absolutive as nominative and absolutive as morphological default languages with respect to other DPs in the clause. In absolutive as nominative languages, absolutive is nominative case licensed by T and therefore limited to one DP in a clause, either S or O. In absolutive as morphological default languages, on the other hand, any DP bearing an abstract case feature that lacks a distinct morphological realization will be realized as the morphological default, hence absolutive. Here we consider specifically objects of postpositions and applicative objects (including the double object construction).

In Enga, the objects of postpositions bear "absolutive", as do the objects in the double object construction:

> (10) a. akáli dokó-mé [**énda**   kandaó] pií
>   man DET-ERG [**woman.ABS** toward] word.ABS
>   le-ly-á-mo
>   say-PRES-3sg.SUBJ-SP
>   'The man is telling something to the woman' (L&L 318)

b. namba-mé **énda   dóko**   *mená dóko*
   I-ERG   **woman DET.ABS** *pig* *DET.ABS*
   maí-y-ó
   give-PAST-1sg.SUBJ
   'I gave the pig to the woman' (L&L 312)

Similarly in Niuean, the object of (benefactive, comitative, instrumental) prepositions appear in "absolutive", as do applicative objects:[2]

(11) a. Ne tohitohi a   Sione [aki **e   pene**]
         PST writing ABS Sione [with **ABS pen**]
         'Sione is writing with a pen' (M [8])
      b. Gahua a   au [ma **e   tagata kō**]
         work ABS I   [for **ABS man   that**]
         'I work for that man there' (S 36)

(12) Ne ahu aki e   ia e   **akau** e   tau toa
      PST slay with ERG he **ABS club** ABS PL hero
      'He slayed the heroes with a club' (M [14])

In Warlpiri, the prediction for applicative and postpositional objects is either borne out or cannot be tested. Double objects and applicative objects in Warlpiri receive dative case, which has a distinct morphological realization (*-ku*). Warlpiri lacks independent postpositions; however it exhibits "semantic case" morphemes, which may plausibly be considered suffixal postpositions. If so, their objects bear absolutive case: *ngurra-kurra* 'camp.ABS-to', *ngarna-ngurlu* 'plant.base.ABS-from'.

In Georgian, on the other hand, absolutive is nominative, and therefore limited to either S or O. Objects of postpositions, suffixal or independent, do not bear absolutive case, but instead bear dative, genitive, instrumental, or adverbial case: *om-is semdeg* 'war-GEN after', *kalak-s-ši* 'city-DAT-in'. The second object in a double object construction receives Dative:

(13) nino-m   ăcvena   surateb-i   **gia-s**
      Nino-ERG she.showed.him.it.II.2 pictures-NOM **Gia-DAT**
      'Nino showed the pictures to Gia' (H 40)

In addition, Georgian exhibits split ergativity. Examples to this point have been in tense/aspect series II, including the aorist and the optative. In

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[2]Although when the object of a benefactive or comitative preposition is a proper name, the absolutive is zero. This seems phonologically motivated for benefactives, although not for comitatives.

tense/aspect Series I, which includes the present, future, imperfect, conditional present subjunctive, and future subjunctive, ergative is not assigned.

(14) a. glex-i   tesavs   simind-s **Series I**
     peasant-NOM he.sows.it.I.1 corn-DAT
     'The peasant is sowing corn'
   b. glex-ma   datesa   simind-i **Series II**
     peasant-ERG he.sowed.it.II.1 corn-NOM
     'The peasant sowed corn'

Crucially only one absolutive case marked DP is possible in each clause. In Series I, A bears absolutive, so O cannot. Instead, O receives structural dative case from v.

2.3 Interaction with Agreement

Consider the interaction between case marking and agreement in the two types of ergative-absolutive languages. Cutting across the two types is an independent parameter of variation: in some languages, inherent case may trigger agreement, whereas in other languages inherent case may not trigger agreement.[3] In absolutive as morphological default languages, if the inherent case-marked A may trigger agreement, both A (ergative) and S (nominative, realized morphologically by absolutive) will trigger subject agreement. O may either trigger no agreement, or may trigger distinct object agreement. This A/S subject agreement pattern is found in Warlpiri and Enga. In Warlpiri, A and S trigger subject agreement, and O triggers distinct object agreement:

(15) a. **Ngajulu-rlu-*rna*-ngku**   nyuntu   nya-ngu
     I-ERG-*1sg.SUBJ*-2SG.OBJ you.ABS see-NPAST
     'I saw you'
   b. **Ngaju-*rna***   parnka-ja
     I.ABS-*1sgSUBJ* run-PAST
     'I ran'
   c. Nyuntu-rlu-npa-*ju*   **ngaju** nya-ngu
     you-ERG-2sgNOM-*1sgOBJ* **I.ABS** see-NPAST
     'You saw me'

In Enga, A and S trigger subject agreement; O does not trigger agreement.

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[3] In fact, the variation is more fine-grained in that different inherent cases may behave differently in a single language.

(16) a. **namba-mé** énda   dóko   mená dóko
          I-ERG   woman DET.ABS pig   DET.ABS
          maí-y-*ó*
          give-PAST-*1sg.SUBJ*
          'I gave the pig to the woman' (L&L 312)
      b. **nambá** p-e-*ó*
          I.ABS go-PAST-*1sg.SUBJ*
          'I went' (L&L 317)
      c. akáli dokó-mé   mená dóko   **namba-nyá**
          man DET-ERG pig   DET.ABS **I-BEN**
          sambe-k-e-á
          buy-BEN.INCL-PAST-3sg.SUBJ
          'The man bought the pig for me.' (L&L 312)

In a morphological default language in which the inherent case marked A may not trigger agreement, only S triggers subject agreement. This pattern is found in Niuean:[4]

(17) a. *Nofo* agaia nakai e   **matua fifine haau** i Mutalau?
          live still Q   **ABS parent female your** in Mutalau
          'Does your mother still live in Mutalau (village)?'
      b. *No-nofo* agaia nakai e   **tau ma-matua haau** i Mutalau?
          PL-live still Q   **ABS PL PL-parent your** in Mutalau
          'Do your parents still live in Mutalau (village)?' (S 62)
      c. *Mate* tuai **a   ia.**
          die PERF **ABS she**
          'She's dead'
      d. *Ma-mate* tuai **a   laua**
          PL-die PERF **ABS they.DUAL**
          'They are dead' (S 62)

(18) a. *Moua* oti e   maua   mo Sione e   tau mata afi
          get all ERG we.DUAL.EXCL with Sione ABS PL piece fire
          'Sione and I have already won all the matches' (S 67)
      b. *Volu* nakai he   tau fānau e   fua niu?
          grate Q   ERG PL children ABS fruit coconut
          'Are the children grating (the fruit of the) coconut?' (S 70)

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[4]The agreement facts in Niuean are complicated by the existence of lexical exceptions; Seiter (1980) reports two verbs that allow agreement with A, and a small class of verbs that allow agreement with O (he provides two). See that work for details.

In absolute as nominative languages, if the inherent case marked A cannot trigger agreement, "absolutive agreement" results, subject agreement triggered by S and O. If the inherent case marked A can trigger subject agreement, then T enters into two relationships in a transitive clause, one with A and one with O (which it assigns nominative case). Georgian is of this latter type, T agreeing with both A and O. The A and O features compete for morphological realization across a prefix and suffix position (for discussion see e.g. Anderson 1992, Halle and Marantz 1993, Stump 2001; also McGinnis 2001, Trommer 2002).

(19) 'draw' aorist

\ Obj Subj	1sg	1pl	2sg	2pl	3
1sg	–	–	g-xat'e	g-xat'e-t	v-xat'e
1pl	–	–	g-xat'e-t	g-xat'e-t	v-xat'e-t
2sg	m-xat'e	gv-xat'e	–	–	ø-xat'e
2pl	m-xat'e-t	gv-xat'e-t	–	–	ø-xat'e-t
3sg	m-xat'a	gv-xat'a	g-xat'a	g-xat'a-t	xat'ava
3pl	m-xat'-es	gv-xat'-es	g-xat'-es	g-xat'-es	xat'av-es

Notice, for example, that the prefix position realizes object agreement features of 1st and 2nd person objects, but subject agreement features with 3rd person objects. A preliminary analysis of these agreement morphemes follows: 1pl Obj ↔ *gv-*, 1sg Obj ↔ *m-*, 2 Subj ↔ *ø-*, 2 Obj ↔ *g-*, 1 Subj ↔ *v-*, 3 pl Subj ↔ *-es*, pl ↔ *-t*.

3 Split Ergativity in Pama-Nyungan

Pama-Nyungan languages commonly show split ergativity based on nominal-type; thus certain nominals inflect according to an ergative-absolutive pattern, while others show a nominative-accusative pattern. I claim that abstract case assignment is uniformly ergative on A, nominative on S, and accusative on O; only the morphological realization of these abstract cases varies across nominal types.

In Djapu (Pama-Nyungan, Yuulngu; data from Morphy 1983), human and higher animates inflect on an ergative-nominative-accusative pattern, pronouns inflect on a nominative-accusative pattern, and other nominals inflect on an ergative-absolutive pattern, including *wh*-words (except *yol* 'who'), determiners/demonstratives, lower animates, and inanimates. All elements of a DP, whether continuous or discontinuous, must be marked for case, and these must

all match in case.

(20) a. rdaykun-garri-nyara-y   nganapurr
          sun-enter-NMLSR-TEMP we.EXCL.NOM
          ganggathi-rr-ny   **ngula-ngur Gurrumuru-ngur**
          get.up.and.go-UNM-PRO **there-ABL Gurrumuru-ABL**
          'We left Gurrumuru at sunset' (39)
      b. bala ngayi   ga:rri-nya-mara-m   birrka'mirr
          then he.NOM enter-NMLSR-CAUS-UNM anything.ABS
          rdung'rtung   **ngurikal-yi**   **yolngu-wal**
          palpitating.ABS **that.OBL-ANAPH person-OBL**
          'Then he puts some other palpitating thing into that person' (40)
      c. djamarrkurli' Milyin-gu   nhina-'nhina   **ngunha**
          children.ABS Milyin-DAT sit-REDUP.UNM **that.LOC**
          gali'-ngur
          side-LOC
          'Milyin's children are sitting over there' (43)

However, the combination of a demonstrative (ergative-absolutive), and a human noun (ergative-nominative-accusative) results in case mismatches:

(21) a. wungay'   marrtji-nya   **ngunhi-ny-dhi**
          honey.ABS go-PAST.NONINDIC **that.ABS-PRO-ANAPH**
          yolngu-n   wapirti
          person-ACC stingray-spear.PL-NMLSR-INHAB-ACC-PRO
          warrtju-na-puyngu-nha-ny weka-nha
          give-PAST.NONINDIC
          'We would go and give honey to those people who were spear-
          ing stingrays [lit 'to those stingray-spearing people')' (Morphy
          1983:110)
      b. ngayi   ngunhi nganya   nguli   buthuwa-ny
          he.NOM THAT him.ACC IRREAL give.birth.to.UNM-PRO
          ngunhi-yi   **yutjuwala-n**
          that.ABS-ANAPH small-ACC
          '... when it gives birth to the small one' (129)
      c. **dhuwa   nhe**   yurru lili   dha:parng   rongiyi-rr
          this.ABS you.NOM FUT   HITHER unsuccessful return-UNM
          'YOU will return empty handed [but not I]' (84)

Thus, *ngunhi-ny-dhi yolngu-n* 'that person', for example, illustrates ab-
solutive as a morphological default for a subsection of the Djapu grammar:

the demonstratives. For the realization of 'person [Accusative]', the morphology provides a case-invariant realization of 'person' *yolngu*, and an accusative suffix for human nouns *-nha* (which contrasts with for example the ergative *-dhu*, the dative *-gu*, and the ablative *-galngur*). For the realization of 'that [Accusative]', the morphology provides no accusative form (although it does provide for example an ergative form *nguringi*, a dative form *nguriki*, and an ablative form *ngurikalangungur*). Thus, the morphological default ("absolutive") *ngunhi* is inserted.

Similar data obtains in Kugu Nganhcara (Pama-Nyungan, Middle Paman, Smith and Johnson 2000), and Margany (Pama-Nyungan, Maric, Breen 1981). These differ from Djapu in that no nominal type has morphological realizations for all three of ergative-nominative-accusative. However, case mismatches again indicate that all three are indeed assigned. These case mismatches result from the combination of pronouns, which inflect on a nominative-accusative paradigm, and nouns/adjectives/demonstratives, which inflect on an ergative-absolutive paradigm.

(22)   *Case Mismatches in Kugu Nganhcara*

    a.   **nhi-la   pukpe-ng** *nhu-nha kuyu*   yuku
         3sg-NOM child-ERG *3sg-ACC woman.ABS* thing
         muka-ng-nha   peka
         stone-ERG-3sgACC throw.at
         'The child threw a stone at the woman' (390)

    b.   **nhi-la   pama-ng** *nhi-ngu pukpe-wu* ku'a waa-ngu
         3sg-NOM man-ERG *3sg-DAT child-DAT* dog give-3sgDAT
         'The man gave a dog to the child' (401)

(23)   *Case Mismatches in Margany*

    a.   matya **ngaya**   balga-nnganda-la yurdi,
         before **1sg.NOM** hit-HAB-PAST   meat/animal.ABS
         nhanga-nggu
         young-ERG
         'I used to kill a lot of kangaroos when I was young' (307, 336)

    b.   **gurruny-dyu ngaya**   dhumba-:nhi
         alone-ERG   1sg.NOM build-RecPast
         'I built it on my own' (342)

    c.   **nhuwa   nhula**   dhana-li-nhi   **gubaguba,**
         that.ABS 3sg.NOM stand-PROX-PRES **old.man.ABS**
         wawungga
         behind.ABS
         'That man behind us is very old' (321)

4 Localization

Finally, I would like to consider the localization of the distinction between absolutive as nominative languages and absolutive as morphological default languages. I propose that the distinction be placed within the lexical entries of the v head that introduces the external argument (cf. Bowers 1993 PredP, Chomsky 1995, Collins 1997 TrP, Kratzer 1996 VoiceP, Marantz 2001). Absolutive as morphological default languages exhibit two v: (i) v_{TRANS}–assigns a θ-role to the thematic subject, assigns inherent ergative case to the thematic subject, licenses structural accusative case, and combines with a transitive verb; (ii) $v_{INTRANS}$– assigns a θ-role to the thematic subject, and combines with an intransitive verb. Absolutive as nominative languages have the same $v_{INTRANS}$, but their v_{TRANS} is different in that it does not license structural accusative case. Georgian exhibits an additional v_{TRANS} used in tense/aspect series I, which assigns a θ-role to the thematic subject, licenses structural dative case, and combines with a transitive verb.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that ergative-absolutive languages should be classified into two distinct classes, one in which absolutive corresponds to structural nominative, and the other in which absolutive is a morphological default disguising structural nominative on S and structural accusative on O. One result of this analysis is that absolutive as an abstract case may be eliminated. More crucially, the analysis of absolutive as morphological default languages requires the existence of both morphological and abstract case, and requires that morphological case be an imperfect realization of abstract case, this realization dependent on the morphological resources of the language.

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