

Morphological and Abstract Case

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This article examines the relationship between abstract and morphological case, arguing that morphological case realizes abstract Case features in a postsyntactic morphology, according to the Elsewhere Condition. A class of prima facie ergative-absolutive languages is identified wherein intransitive subjects receive abstract nominative Case and transitive objects receive abstract accusative Case; these are realized through a morphological default, which is often mislabeled as absolutive. Further support comes from split ergativity based on a nominal hierarchy, which is shown to have a morphological source. Proposals that case and agreement are purely morphological phenomena are critiqued.

Keywords: ergativity, Warlpiri, Niuean, Enga, Hindi, Pama-Nyungan, Icelandic, inherent Case, quirky Case, morphological case, abstract Case

1 Introduction

This article explores the relationship between abstract Case and morphological case. I argue that abstract Case features are determined syntactically and realized in a postsyntactic morphological component. This morphological realization of abstract Case features is governed by the Elsewhere Condition (Anderson 1969, Kiparsky 1973, Halle and Marantz 1993, Halle 1997), resulting in an imperfect relationship between syntax and morphology, but one that is as faithful as possible given the morphological resources of the language. The data used in the argumentation come primarily from ergative languages.

I identify a class of prima facie ergative-absolutive languages in which absolutive—that is, a case that groups together intransitive subjects and transitive objects—does not exist, either as an abstract Case or as a morphological case. Instead, the “absolutive” is the default morphological realization of abstract Case features, used when no realization of the specific Case feature is available. This morphological default is inserted for both nominative Case on the intransitive subject and accusative Case on the transitive object. The situation is thus entirely parallel to that

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Glosses in some examples have been regularized for clarity. In Pama-Nyungan language examples, *rC* indicates a retroflex consonant, *Ch* indicates a dental consonant, *Cy* indicates a palatal consonant, and *ng* is the velar nasal. In Indo-Aryan language examples, capitalization indicates a retroflex sound, and repetition of vowels indicates length.

of English nouns, for which nominative Case on the subject and accusative Case on the object are both morphologically realized by a (null) default. I refer to this class of ergative-absolutive languages as *absolutive as a morphological default* (ABS = DEF).

Not all ergative-absolutive languages fall into this class. For other languages, the standard identification of absolutive with nominative is appropriate (see, e.g., Murasugi 1992, Bittner 1994, Bittner and Hale 1996a,b, Ura 2001). At times, I highlight the contrasts in behavior between ABS = DEF languages and these *absolutive as nominative* (ABS = NOM) languages.

Note that for neither of these classes of ergative-absolutive languages is the concept “absolutive” meaningful. One may reasonably question whether the concept is meaningful in any ergative-absolutive language. I conjecture that it is not, that the absolutive is a spurious generalization that has been obscuring a variety of interesting case-marking patterns. Verifying this conjecture for the full range of ergative-absolutive languages, however, is well beyond the scope of this article.

My explication of ABS = DEF languages includes languages that show an ergative split based on a nominal hierarchy. This type of split ergativity has generated diverse proposals: functional (e.g., Moravcsik 1978, Comrie 1989, Dixon 1994), diachronic (e.g., Garrett 1990, Lightfoot 1999), and syntactic (e.g., Jelinek and Carnie 2003, Kiparsky 2004, Carnie 2005a, Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 2006). I show that this type of split ergativity requires a morphological explanation.¹

The theoretical framework employed here incorporates a broadly minimalist syntax bifurcating toward phonetic interpretation at PF and semantic interpretation at LF. Two types of abstract Case features are assigned in the syntax: (a) inherent Case (in the sense of Chomsky 1986), assigned to a DP in its merged position, which is also the position that determines thematic interpretation (Hale and Keyser 1993, 2002, Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001, 2004); (b) structural Case, assigned on the basis of closest c-command to a DP in an A-position²—thus, I apply Chomsky’s (2000, 2001, 2004) Agree operation to Case. Morphology is situated on the branch leading toward PF. I adopt Late Insertion of functional items (see Halle and Marantz 1993, Marantz 1995, Chomsky 2001, 2004; see also Anderson 1992, Beard 1995, for related theories): phonological material is inserted in the morphology to realize bundles of syntactic features. This Vocabulary Insertion proceeds according to the Elsewhere Condition; thus, the lexical item that realizes the largest subset of the syntactic features is inserted.

Section 2 provides evidence for languages in which absolutive is a morphological default. It considers the available case morphemes, DPs without abstract Case, absolutives in nonfinite clauses, additional absolutive DPs, and agreement patterns. The existence of the ABS = DEF class constitutes the first demonstration of the close but imperfect relationship between abstract Case and morphological case. Section 3 extends this analysis to explain split ergativity based on the nominal hierarchy in Pama-Nyungan languages; DP-internal case mismatches are shown to be

¹ See Aissen 2003 for a morphological approach using Optimality Theory.

² Not m-command.

particularly revealing. Section 4 contrasts the proposed analysis with purely morphological analyses of agreement and case, arguing that in fact syntax plays a crucial role. Section 5 concludes.

2 The Natures of Absolutive Case

In this section, I provide evidence for ABS=DEF languages—languages in which T assigns nominative Case to the intransitive subject (S) and v assigns accusative Case to the transitive object (O). In this class of ergative-absolutive languages, nominative case morphology and accusative case morphology are lacking. Thus, when Vocabulary Insertion applies, the Elsewhere Condition determines that both nominative and accusative abstract Case are realized through a morphological default, the “absolutive,” since no more specific compatible lexical item is available. In this section, I discuss four such languages: Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan, South-West, Ngarga), Niuean (Austronesian, Polynesian, Tongic; data from Seiter 1980, Massam 2006), Enga (Trans-New Guinea, West-Central; data from Lang 1973, Li and Lang 1979, Van Valin 1981), and Hindi (Indo-Aryan; data from Mahajan 1990, Mohanan 1994).³ These contrast with ABS=NOM

³ For alternative analyses of ergativity in these languages, see these works, among others: for Warlpiri, Simpson 1991, Bittner and Hale 1996a,b; for Niuean, Massam 2006; for Enga, Li and Lang 1979, Van Valin 1981; and for Hindi, Mahajan 1990, 2000, Mohanan 1994, Butt and King 2004, Davison 2004, Anand and Nevins 2006.

A reviewer asks about the relationship between the analysis proposed here and Bittner and Hale’s analysis. For Bittner and Hale, absolutive is nominative, where both are analyzed as the lack of Case (more specifically the lack of a Case projection, KP). This is perhaps similar to the present approach, which considers absolutive to be morphology that does not realize Case features, although on the present account absolutives do have Case. A significant difference between Bittner and Hale’s analysis and the proposed analysis is that on Bittner and Hale’s analysis, all absolutives are licensed identically, through government by C (or the Case head K in gerunds). On the analysis proposed here, absolutive on S is licensed by T, whereas absolutive on O is licensed by v. This distinction becomes important in gerunds, which lack T but contain v. See section 2.3 for discussion. Licensing of ergative is also different in the two systems: in Bittner and Hale’s system, ergative is licensed by I (T), whereas in the system proposed here, ergative is inherent Case licensed by v. This contrast is also important in gerunds, which lack T but contain v; see section 2.3. Bittner and Hale’s system does not provide for a nonidentical relationship between abstract Case and morphological case, and thus their system could not extend to the data considered in section 3.

While Bittner and Hale claim that the subject is licensed in situ in Warlpiri, there is evidence for a grammatical subject (as distinct from the thematic subject) (see, e.g., Hale 1983, Simpson and Bresnan 1983, Bittner and Hale 1996a, Legate 2002b, 2003b). Thus, Bittner and Hale propose EPP-driven movement of the single argument of unaccusative verbs to adjoin to VP, the position where they generate thematic subjects. This is also the position that they associate generally with the requirement of the Extended Projection Principle that clauses must have subjects. On the present assumption that the EPP requirement is associated with Spec,TP, this means that subjects in Warlpiri raise to Spec,TP (see also Legate 2002b, 2003b). Bittner and Hale provide one argument that this position is located inside VP (other arguments concern the posited coindexation relationship between I and V): that absolutive subjects may take scope below VP-level adverbial preverbs, (i). Such data are compatible with EPP-driven movement to Spec,TP, on the now-standard assumption that A-movement may undergo reconstruction.

- (i) *Kurdu jinta ka yarda-yula-mi.*
child one.ABS PRES.IMPERF again-cry-NONPAST
 ‘Again, some child is crying.’ *or*
 ‘There is some child who is again crying.’
 (Bittner and Hale 1996a:567)

Finally, the two types of ergative language identified by Bittner and Hale (1996a)—*raising* and *transparent*—do not correspond to the two types of ergative language discussed here—ABS=DEF and ABS=NOM. For Bittner and Hale, the defining characteristic is that *raising* languages like Inuit exhibit syntactic ergativity, while *transparent* languages like Warlpiri do not. The availability of syntactic ergativity, however, seems to cut across my two types. For example, Dyirbal, famous for its syntactic ergativity, is classified as an ABS=DEF language on my analysis. See Legate 2007 for an analysis of Dyirbal morphological and syntactic ergativity within the framework proposed here.