

Ergative as a default case: Evidence from a Georgian dialect

Ömer Demirok, MIT

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What's inside

- Original fieldwork data on a Georgian variety spoken in Turkey
- Ergative case in this dialect cannot be an *inherent* or *dependent* case.
→ **it is a default case** à la Marantz (1991); Bobaljik (2008)
- Extensions to *Differential Subject Marking* in Turkish (Kornfilt, 2009)

1 A brief reminder on Ergative case

- Consider the two (idealized) case systems below, where α is typically labelled ERGATIVE.

L_1	External Arg.	Internal Arg.	L_2	External Arg.	Internal Arg.
transitives	α	β	transitives	α	β
unergatives	β		unergatives	α	
unaccusatives		β	unaccusatives		β

- The visible difference between L_1 and L_2 :
 - Transitivity is relevant in L_1 → ERG only appears on **transitive** subjects.
 - Transitivity is irrelevant in L_2 → ERG appears on **all and only external arguments**.
- L_2 supports the idea that ERG is an **inherent/thematic case** [e.g. Woolford (2006)]
- L_1 supports the idea that ERG is a **dependent case** that is ‘assigned’ to one of the two DPs in a case-competition domain. [e.g. Baker (2015)]
- Basic predictions:
 - if ERG is inherent, it should occur **only on external arguments**
 - if ERG is dependent, it should occur **only if there is another case-competitor**
- Baker and Bobaljik (2017):
 - It is not true that ERG is restricted to external arguments.
 - * data from applicative constructions in Shipibo, Kalaallisut, Chucki
 - unergatives in L_2 might be **concealed transitives**
 - ↪ if so, there is no good reason for ERG to be inherent in any language.
- Next:
 - Data from a nonstandard Georgian dialect
where I show that ERG is neither dependent nor inherent.

2 Data from a nonstandard Georgian variety

- The data presented here¹ comes from a nonstandard Georgian variety (henceforth IG).
 - My language consultant Cemal Baştürk (male, 58) is from Inegöl, Turkey and is a Turkish-Georgian bilingual from birth.²
- IG has a unique property that sets it apart from Standard Georgian, which exhibits an L₂ type ergativity (Harris, 1982).
 - IG is just like Standard Georgian except for the fact that the internal argument of unaccusatives can also bear ERG (1c).

- (1) a. Bağv-**ma** xink'al-**i** ç'ama
 child-ERG xink'al-NOM ate
 'The child ate the xink'al.' *transitive*
- b. ğarç-**ma**/***-i** it'ira
 baby-ERG/***NOM** cried
 'The baby cried.' *unergative*
- c. Ert-**i**/**ma** ber-**i**/**ma** mok'da
 one-NOM/ERG old-NOM/ERG died
 'An elderly person died.' *unaccusative*

- *Preliminary Hypothesis:*

- The L₂-type ergativity in IG is decaying into the nominative-accusative alignment.

IG _{decaying}	EA	IA	IG _{emerging}	EA	IA
transitives	-ma	-i	transitives	-ma	-i
unergatives	-ma		unergatives	-ma	
unaccusatives		-i	unaccusatives		-ma
↔ -ma is ERG			↔ -ma is NOM		

- Accordingly, we (at best) predict synchronic optionality between two grammars.
- However, the ERG vs. NOM marking on IAs of unaccusatives is **not** optional!

- We find obligatory ERG marking on the internal argument of unaccusatives in the contexts where it is **specific**.
 [comparable to specificity-driven differential object marking in Turkish (Enç, 1991)].

¹ Part of the data that appears here was first reported in Öztürk et al. (2011).

² In the community of 4th-5th generation Georgian immigrants in Inegöl and villages around it, various nonstandard varieties of Georgian co-exist among the remaining fluent speakers.

- **Evidence from scope:**

- When the indefinite IA of an unaccusative predicate scopes above negation, it **has to** bear ERG.

- (2) a. Ert-**ma** ber-**ma** ar-mok'da
 one-ERG old-ERG NEG-died
 ‘An elderly person did not die.’ one>not, *not>one
- b. *Ert-**i** ber-**i** ar-mok'da
 one-NOM old-NOM NEG-died
 Intended scope [one>not]

- **Evidence from possessives:**

- The IA of an unaccusative predicate obligatorily appears in ERG when it is a possessive structure. [likewise quantifier phrases, partitive structures require ERG]

- (3) a. çem tsxen-**ma** mok'da
 my.ERG horse-ERG died
 ‘My horse died.’
- b. *çem-i tsxen-**i** mok'da
 my-NOM horse-NOM died
 Intended: ‘My horse died.’

- **Evidence from linear position:**

- The IA of an unaccusative predicate that appears to the left of a locative phrase has to receive ERG marking.

- (4) a. bağv-**ma** ts'q'al-şi çavarda
 child-ERG water-in fell
 ‘The child fell into water.’ (only the definite interpretation is available)
- b. *bağv-**i** ts'q'al-şi çavarda
 child-NOM water-in fell
 Intended: ‘The/a child fell into water.’

- No comparable restriction holds for a noun that occurs to the right of a locative phrase.

- (5) Ts'q'al-şi (ert-i) bağv-**i** çavarda
 water-in one-NOM child-NOM fell
 ‘A child fell into water.’

- **Finding:** ERG in IG appears on **specific internal arguments of unaccusatives**, in addition to **external arguments**.

3 Ergative in IG cannot be dependent or inherent case

- **Why can't ERG in IG be an inherent case?**

- ERG can appear both on agentive arguments of unergatives as in (6) and on nonagentive arguments of unaccusatives as in (7):

(6) bağv-**ma** bağ-*şi* itamaşa
child-ERG garden-in played
'The child played in the garden.'

(7) bağv-**ma** ts'q'al-*şi* çavarda
child-ERG water-in fell
'The child fell into water.'

- That is, it can appear both on external arguments and internal arguments.
- Hence, it is impossible for ERG to be an inherent case assigned to a class of arguments that occur in a particular theta position.

- **Why can't ERG be a dependent case**

- Assume for the sake of argument that ERG in IG is a dependent case.

(8) a. If NP₁ c-commands NP₂ and both are contained in the same domain (say, clause), then value the case feature of NP₁ as ergative
b. Otherwise NP is nominative/absolutive. [Baker and Bobaljik (2017):2]

- Accordingly, in a transitive configuration where there are two DPs that compete for case, the higher DP gets the dependent case, hence ERG. This is borne out:

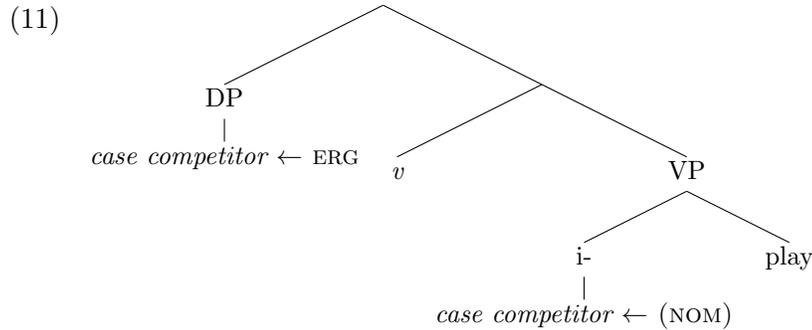
(9) Bağv-**ma** xink'al-**i** ç'ama
child-ERG xink'al-NOM ate
'The child ate the xink'al.'

- In an unergative configuration with a single DP, we predict that ERG will not surface. This is NOT borne out:

(10) a. bağv- ma i-tamaş-a child-ERG VAL-play-PST.3SG 'The child played.'		b. ğarç- ma i-t'ir-a baby-ERG VAL-cry-PST.3SG 'The baby cried.'
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- To tackle this general problem that “active-ergative” languages (Woolford, 2015) exhibit, Baker and Bobaljik (2017) propose that unergatives in such languages can have concealed transitive structures.

- For example, Nash (2017) argues for Standard Georgian that the culprit for the ERG on external arguments in unergatives is the valency/reflexive prefix *i-* (cf. (10)), which she assumes to be a case-competitor. *same data in IG*



- This proposal, even if it is on the right track, CANNOT extend to unaccusatives.
- There is simply no way to invent a **lower case-competitor for the internal argument**. Hence the ERG on specific unaccusative subjects cannot be a dependent case.

(12) bağv-**ma** ts'q'al-ši ça-**vard**-a
 child-ERG water-in DIR-fall-PST.3SG
 'The child fell into water.'

4 Ergative as a default case

- What could possibly unify ERG on external arguments and specific IAs of unaccusatives?
 - Following Diesing (1992); Bhatt and Anagnostopoulou (1996), I assume that specific nominals cannot remain in VP.
 - Hence, **both EAs and specific IAs are outside the VP.**
- Proposal: IG has **two case-competition domains** (henceforth phases), as proposed for languages that exhibit specificity-related differential object marking (Baker & Vinokurova 2010).
 - [phase₂ *external argument* [phase₁ *internal argument*]
 - assumption: specific IAs raise to phase₂.³
- In the spirit of Baker and Atlamaz (2013) and Imanishi (2014), I argue that ERG in IG is a default case in phase₂ while NOM in IG is a default case in phase₁

- (13) Summary of the proposal
- a. Case Domains: [phase₂ EA [phase₁ IA]
 - b. (i) default case in phase₁ is NOM
 - (ii) default case in phase₂ is ERG

³ As far as I can see, there is no reason to assume that an EPP-like feature that overtly moves DPs out of the VP. Accordingly, when the IA of an unaccusative verb is NOM and non-specific, it has never left the VP.

- Since EAs will be generated in phase₂, they get the default case ERG.

(14) bağv-**ma** i-tamaş-a
 child-ERG VAL-play-PST.3SG
 ‘The child played.’

- When IAs are *not* specific, they remain in phase₁ and get the default case in that domain, namely NOM.

(15) ts’q’al-şi bağv-**i** çavarda
 water-in child-NOM fell
 ‘A child fell into water.’

- When IAs are specific, they raise to phase₂ and get the default case in that domain, namely ERG.

(16) bağv-**ma** ts’q’al-şi çavarda
 child-ERG water-in fell
 ‘The child fell into water.’

- Hence, ERG as a default case correctly predicts its distribution in IG.
- A caveat: What happens when we have two DPs in phase₂, namely an EA and a specific IA?
 - This is a configuration where we should observe a **dependent case** on one of the DPs!
 - However, both specific and non-specific objects get NOM.

(17) Bağv-**ma** xink’al-**i** ç’ama
 child-ERG xink’al-NOM ate
 ‘The child ate xink’al.’ or
 ‘The child ate **the** xink’al.’

- ERG-ERG strings are impossible.

(18) a. K’ats-ma axor-şi dzrox-eb-**i** dak’la
 man-ERG barn-in cow-PL-NOM killed
 ‘The man killed the cows in the barn.’
 b. *K’ats-ma axor-şi dzrox-eb-**ma** dak’la
 man-ERG barn-in cow-PL-ERG killed

- A search for a dependent case from ditransitives proves irrelevant, as ditransitives are formed via applicatives which assign DAT.

(19) Kal-ma k’ats-**sa** ts’q’ali minda vo **u**-txr-a
 woman-ERG man-DAT water I.want COMP APPL-tell-PST.3SG
 ‘The woman told the man that she wants water.’

- If there is in fact no dependent case defined for IG⁴, one possible remedy to this glitch comes through with these two assumptions:
 1. (Re-)evaluate case values in each phase [see e.g. Chen (2018)]⁵
 2. A case value can be assigned to maximally one DP within a domain
- In other words, the derivational rewriting of the case values (i.e. NOM to ERG) is enforced unless it leads to the ERG-ERG sequence.
 - Hence, when phase₂ has 2 DPs, ERG on the EA and NOM on the IA are preserved.
 - When phase₂ has one DP, ERG appears on that DP.
- An important piece of evidence for this comes from psych-predicates that assign dative case to experiencers. In this configuration, when the IA raises to phase₂, it receives ERG:

(20) Kal-sa tav-**ma** dzalian u-q'varda
 woman-DAT REFL-ERG much APPL-loved
 ‘The woman loved herself a lot.’ cf. (18)

- **Open eds, future directions**

- interaction with agreement, *to evaluate the potential of agreement-dependent case*
- morphological causatives *to search for a dependent case*
- ...

5 Extensions to Differential Subject Marking in Turkish [disclaimer: sketchy]

- A crucial component of the proposal regarding ERG in IG is the idea that different case domains can have different case defaults.
- This proposal makes a testable prediction on differential subject marking in general.
- To illustrate, I briefly discuss differential subject marking in nominalized clauses in Turkish, described in depth in Kornfilt (2009).
 - As shown in (21), specificity-driven differential object marking [NOM vs. ACC] (Enç, 1991; Baker and Vinokurova, 2010) is still active in nominalized clauses. Moreover, we see that the subject receives GEN, unlike in finite clauses (Kornfilt, 2003).

(21) a. Hale [Helin-**in** bir hemşire-**yi** bekle-diğ-in-i] söyledi.
 Hale [Helin-GEN one nurse-ACC wait-NOML-3SG-ACC] said
 ‘Hale said that Helin waited for a (specific) nurse.’

b. Hale [Helin-**in** bir hemşire-∅ bekle-diğ-in-i] söyledi.
 Hale [Helin-GEN one nurse-NOM wait-NOML-3SG-ACC] said
 ‘Hale said that Helin waited for a nurse.’

⁴ An alternative: if a dependent case is defined and it oddly needs to be syncretic with NOM.

⁵ Chen (2018) argues on the basis of Amis (Austronesian) data that case assignment may apply to a single DP more than once.

- (22) (Tentative) Proposal for Turkish nominalized clauses: [cf. (Baker and Vinokurova, 2010)]
- a. GEN is the default case in phase₂,
 - b. NOM is the default case in phase₁,
 - c. ACC is the dependent case that shows up iff two DPs are in phase₂
- Provided that there are **two distinct default cases** in nominalized clauses, we predict that IAs of unaccusatives can be subject to differential marking, depending on specificity:
 - When IAs of unaccusatives are NOM, they have non-specific interpretation (23).
 - When they are specific (24), they have to bear GEN case.⁶ (Kornfilt, 2009)
- (23) Hale [bu hastane-ye bir hemşire-ø gel-diğ-in-i] biliyor mu?
 Hale [this hospital-DAT one nurse-NOM come-NOML-3SG-ACC] knows Q
 ‘Does Hale know that a nurse came to this hospital?’ [obligatorily non-specific]
- (24) Hale [bir hemşire*(-nin) bu hastane-ye gel-diğ-in-i] biliyor mu?
 Hale [one nurse-GEN this hospital-DAT come-NOML-3SG-ACC] knows Q
 ‘Does Hale know that a nurse (one of the nurses) came to this hospital?’ [specific]
- To conclude, for differential subject marking, it is sufficient for there to be two case-competition domains with distinct default cases. Both Turkish nominalizations and IG meet these conditions.

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⁶ Native speakers’ intuitions seem to vary on whether genitive marking on unaccusative subjects *entails* specific interpretation. I leave this to future work.

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