

Another look at the ergative case

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Abstract

Austronesian languages have generated extensive discussion of ergativity and ergative case assignment. With respect to individual languages of the family, the debate centers around the determination of whether they are ergative (Malagasy, Tagalog, Seediq, Fijian, Karo Batak, Tukang Besi, and others); this debate has been caused, in part, by the use of different criteria of ergativity by different researchers. Interestingly, however, there has been no disagreement on certain negative evidence of ergativity: researchers agree that Indonesian and Micronesian languages are not ergative. Incidentally, all of these languages are SVO, not verb-initial. Using this observation as one of my starting points, I will bring together several descriptive generalizations concerning ergative languages, namely:

- (1) There seem to be no morphologically ergative languages that are SVO.
- (2) The ergative case always has overt morphological marking.
- (3) In the majority of ergative languages, the ergative DP is inaccessible for A-bar movement. (I will present cross-linguistic data to support this claim.)

Principally using data from Western Polynesian languages, whose status as morphologically ergative languages is not in doubt, I will propose a new explanation for the assignment of the ergative case and, building on it, I will attempt to demonstrate that these generalizations are related. Specifically, I will argue that these generalizations can all be explained by recognizing that ergatives are not DPs, as previously analyzed, but in fact PPs. The conclusion is that morphological ergativity in verb-initial languages is not accidental (see also Chung 2006). However, verb-final languages with morphological ergativity require a different analysis, which will be sketched in the talk; if this proposal is on the right track, it lends new support to the idea that morphological ergativity is not a uniform phenomenon cross-linguistically. Finally, I will also show that the proposed account of ergative case assignment meshes well with diachronic accounts of ergativity (Kuryłowicz 1964, Comrie 1978, Dixon 1994, McGregor 2009).

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