Ergative as a default case: Evidence from a Georgian dialect

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Introduction: Ergative case marking has been analyzed as an inherent case or as a dependent case (see Baker (2015) for an overview). In this paper, I present original fieldwork data on a Georgian variety (henceforth IG) spoken in Turkey and argue that the ergative case in this language cannot be analyzed as an inherent or a dependent case. I show that a natural analysis for the ergative case in this language is one where it is a default case. Ergative as a default case has also been independently proposed for Kurmanji in Baker & Atlamaz (2013) and for Mayan in Imanishi (2014).

Theoretical Backdrop: Consider the two attested case systems below. Language L₁ supports the idea that ERG is a dependent case that is ‘assigned’ to one of the two DPs in a case-competition domain. This predicts that the external argument (EA) of a transitive verb will bear ERG while the EA of an unergative verb will bear the default/nominative case due to the absence of a competing DP in the domain. Language L₂, which has an active-case alignment system, supports the idea that ERG is an inherent/thematic case assigned to EAs regardless of the transitivity of the clause. Both approaches to ERG case has to say something about transitivity to have a unified analysis of L₁ and L₂ type ergativity.

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Data on IG: IG has a unique property that sets it apart from Standard Georgian, which has an L₂ type split-ergativity (Harris, 1982). IG is just like L₂ except for the fact that the internal argument (IA) of unaccusative predicates were strictly optional, it would be possible to analyze IG as a language whose ergativity is decaying into an accusative alignment. However, the ERG vs. NOM marking on IAs of unaccusatives can also bear ERG, as shown in (1).

(1) Ba˘g-\textit{ma} xink’al-i \textit{ç’a}ma
child-ERG xink’al-NOM ate
‘The child ate xink’al.’

(2) Ert-\textit{i/ma} ber-\textit{i/ma} mok’da
one-NOM/ERG old-NOM/ERG died
‘An elderly person died.’

(3) ğarç-\textit{ma/*-i} it’\textit{ira}
baby-ERG/*NOM cried
‘The baby cried.’

If the ERG vs. NOM marking on the IA of unaccusative predicates were strictly optional, it would be possible to analyze IG as a language whose ergativity is decaying into an accusative alignment. However, the ERG vs. NOM marking on IAs of unaccusatives is not optional. We find obligatory ERG marking on IAs in contexts where they are interpreted as specific. For example, when an indefinite IA scopes above negation, it has to bear ERG, as shown in (4). Similarly, overt partitive structures and possessive structures require ERG on IAs of unaccusatives, as shown in (5) and (6), respectively.

(4) a. Ert-\textit{ma} ber-\textit{ma} ar mok’da
one-ERG old-ERG NEG died
‘An elderly person (one of the elderly people) did not die.’

b. *Ert-\textit{i} ber-\textit{mi} ar mok’da
one-NOM old-NOM NEG died
Intended: ‘An elderly person (one of the elderly people) did not die.’

(5) dzroxebidan ert{-\textit{ma/*-i}} mok’da
cow.PL-ABL one-ERG/*NOM died
‘One of the cows died.’

(6) çem{-\textit{a/*-i}} ba˘g-\textit{ma/*-i} çavarda
my-(ERG/*NOM) child-ERG/*NOM fell
‘My child fell (into something).’

¹My language consultant is from Inegöl, Turkey and is a Turkish-Georgian bilingual from birth.
**Problem:** The ERG case in IG cannot be analyzed as a dependent case or an inherent case. It cannot be an inherent case as specific IAs of unaccusatives bear a different theta role from EAs. It cannot be a dependent case as it also appears on specific IAs of unaccusative verbs, for which there is no possibility of a case competition. Essentially, both approaches to ERG irrecoverably fail.

**Proposal:** I propose that IG has two case-competition domains (henceforth phases), as proposed for languages that exhibit specificity-related differential object marking (Baker & Vinokurova 2010). As schematized in (7a), EAs are generated in phase$_2$ while IAs are generated in phase$_1$. In the spirit of Baker & Atlamaz (2013) and Imanishi (2014), I argue that ERG in IG is a default case in phase$_2$ while NOM in IG is a default case in phase$_1$.

(7) a. Case Domains: [phase$_2$ EA [phase$_1$ IA ]
   b. (i) default case in phase$_1$ is NOM
   (ii) default case in phase$_2$ is ERG
   c. specific nominals cannot remain in phase$_1$

This allows us to account for the distribution of ERG in IG. Since EAs will be generated in phase$_2$, they get ERG. Given (7a) when IAs are not specific, they can remain in phase$_1$ and get the default case in that domain, namely NOM. Specific IAs raise to phase$_2$. This is when we get to see ERG on IAs of unaccusatives.

What happens when we have two DPs in phase$_2$, namely an EA and a specific IA. This is a configuration where we should observe a dependent case on one of the DPs. I tentatively hypothesize that in IG NOM is syncretic with the dependent case.$^2$ Regardless of what is assumed for IAs of transitive verbs, the proposal that ERG in IG is a default case successfully derives its distribution, unlike alternative approaches to ERG.

**Further Evidence:** The idea that different case domains can have different defaults is independently supported by Turkish nominalized clauses. As shown in (8), specificity-driven differential object marking [NOM vs. ACC] (Enc¸ 1991) is still active in embedded clauses. Moreover, we see that the subject receives GEN, unlike in finite clauses (Kornfilt, 2003). Given the mechanics of differential object marking in Baker & Vinokurova (2010), we can argue that GEN is the default case in phase$_2$, NOM is the default case in phase$_1$, and ACC is the dependent case that shows up iff two DPs are in the same phase.

   Hale [Helin-GEN one nurse-ACC wait-NOML-3SG-ACC] said
   ‘Hale said that Helin waited for a (specific) nurse.’
   Hale [Helin-GEN one nurse bkle-di˘g-in-i] said
   ‘Hale said that Helin waited for a nurse.’

Given that there are two default cases in nominalized clauses, we predict that IAs of unaccusatives can be subject to differential marking, depending on specificity. This is borne out. When IAs of unaccusatives are NOM, they have non-specific interpretation (9a). When they are specific (9b) they have to bear GEN case.

(9) a. Hale [bu hastane-ye bir hemşire gel-di˘g-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]
   b. Hale [bir hemşire*(min) bu hastane-ye gel-di˘g-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.

$^2$ Alternative analyses are conceivable. For example, one could assume that ERG on an IA is a derivational-rewrite effect (NOM→ERG), required unless it leads to DP$_{ERG}$-DP$_{ERG}$. This would yield ERG on IAs only when it is the only argument in phase$_2$. 