Switch-reference as a new diagnostic for morphological person-based split ergativity

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Overview: There has been much discussion in generative literature concerning the nature of person-based ergative splits, a phenomenon observed in a number of languages in which case-marking varies depending on nominal class. Some have claimed the phenomenon is syntactic in nature, meaning that different classes of nominals are assigned different cases in syntax (Merchant 2006, Coon & Preminger 2012, Deal 2015, a.o.). Others have claimed that the case split is the result of morphological rules realizing abstract case differently on different classes of nominals, which nonetheless receive the same abstract case in syntax (Goddard 1982, Legate 2005, 2008, 2014, a.o.). Recent work by Deal (2015) in response to Legate (2014) has proposed that person-based ergative splits are not a unified phenomenon: it is syntactic in certain languages and morphological in others. In view of the need to verify this claim and provide a crosslinguistic typology of person splits, the goal of our work is twofold: the first is to show that the nature of the ergative person-split in Panoan languages is morphological, the second is to introduce a novel syntactic diagnostic to verify this claim.

Data: The following paradigm illustrates the person-split in the Panoan language Yawanawa. Other Panoan languages with similar splits include Shanenawa (Candido 2004), Yaminawa, and Wariapano (Valenzuela 2000). Participant pronouns follow a NOM-ACC pattern of case-marking, 3rd person singular pronouns follows a ERG-ABS pattern, and 3rd plural pronouns are tripartite. Glosses express the assumption that the system of abstract case is tripartite (ERG-NOM-ACC) across the board, with morphological syncretism responsible for the person-split.

(1)   a. **Ẽ/Mĩ/Nũ/Mã**   yawa   rete-a.   (participant pronoun as transitive subject)
        1s/2s/1p/2p.ERG wild.boar kill-PRF
        'I/You/We/Y'all killed a wild boar.'

        b. **Ẽ/Mĩ/Nũ/Mã**   pake-a.   (participant pronoun as intransitive subject)
        1s/2s/1p/2p.NOM   fall-PRF
        'I/You/We/Y'all fell.'

        c. Yawã   **ea/mia/nuke/matu**   naka.   (participant pronoun as object)
        wild.boar.ERG   1s/2s/1p/2p.ACC   bite.PRF
        'The wild boar bit me/you/us/y'all.'

(2)   a. **Atũ/Ahãu** yawa   rete-a.   (non-part. pronoun as transitive subject)
        3s/3p.ERG wild.boar kill-PRF
        '(S)he/They killed a wild boar.'

        b. **A/Ahu**   pake-a.   (non-part. pronoun as intransitive subject)
        3s/3p.NOM fall-PRF
        '(S)he/They fell.'

        c. Yawã   **a/atu**   naka.   (non-part. pronoun as object)
        wild.boar.ERG 3s/3p.ACC bite.PRF
        'The wild boar bit him(her)/them.'

Proposal: In addition to Legate's diagnostics, the switch-reference system (SR) of Panoan languages can provide independent evidence for the morphological nature of the languages' person split. SR is a syntactic mechanism that indicates whether or not a nominal argument in one clause points to the same entity as a nominal argument in a structurally adjacent clause (Jacobsen 1967, Finer 1984, a.o.). In Panoan languages, the SR morpheme that indicates coreference between subjects (same-subject, SS) covaries in form according to the case of the subject in the superordinate clause (Valenzuela 2003, Baker 2014). This is shown for Yawanawa in (3); the adverbial clause (in brackets) is kept constant to show that the case of its subject is not relevant for determining the shape of the SS morpheme.

(3)   a. [*pro* yuma pi-**ashe**/*shũ]   Shukuvena   mai kiri ka.
         pro fish   eat-SS.**NOM**/SS.ERG Shukuvena.**NOM** down.river go.PRF
         'After eating fish, Shukuvena went down river.'
    b. [*pro* yuma pi-**shũ**/*ashe]   Shukuvenã   ea   kena.
         pro fish   eat-SS.**ERG**/SS.NOM Shukuvena.**ERG** 1s.ACC call.PRF
         'After eating fish, Shukuvena called me.'

We assume that SR morphemes are complementizers (Finer 1984) in adverbial clauses and that they come with two φ-seeking probes: one probes downwards into its c-command domain and the other probes upwards into the superordinate clause, as shown in the structure below (Camargo-Souza 2016, Hanink & Arregi 2017). Nothing in our proposal hinges on this multiple-Agree operation, however: any account of the observed morphological covariation between a SS morpheme and the superordinate subject will serve our purposes (for instance, Baker and Camargo-Souza in prep. propose that an operator in Spec,CP is controlled by the matrix subject and copies its features).
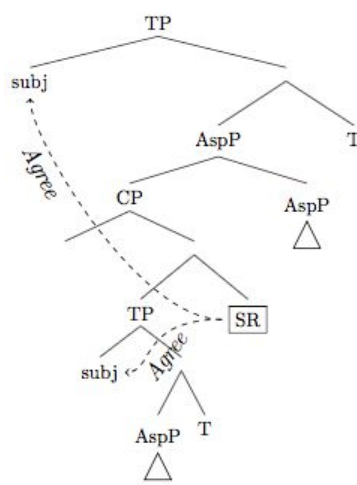
The crucial fact for us is that the allomorphy of the SS morpheme does not vary with respect to person, as shown in (5). In (5a) the NOM form of SS must be employed, whether the matrix subject is a participant or a non-participant pronoun. Similarly, in (5b), only the ERG form of SS is grammatical, independently of the matrix subject being 1st or 3rd person. This supports the claim that all pronouns in equivalent grammatical function are assigned the same abstract case in syntax and that the person split observed results from morphological syncretism.

(5)
a. **Ẽ/A**   mai kiri   ka   [*pro* shanaihu nuku-**ashe**/*shũ].
   1s/3s.**NOM** down river go.PRF pro chief   meet-SS.**NOM**/ERG
   '**I/He** went down river after meeting the chief.'
b. **Ẽ/Atũ**   yuma pi-a   [*pro* shanaihu nuku-**shũ**/*ashe].
   1s/3s.**ERG**   fish eat-PRF pro chief   meet-SS.**ERG**/NOM
   '**I/He** ate fish after meeting the chief.'

Theoretical implications: Our proposal contributes to the larger discussion of person-based case splits and has a number of broad implications. We replicate Legate's findings in Panoan languages, adding these to the typological set of languages with morphological person splits. We also expand on Legate (2008, 2014) by introducing agreement on SR morphemes as a novel syntactic diagnostic for the evaluation of the nature of person-splits. In addition, this work contributes to the overall discussion of case theory because it shows that tripartite case systems (ERG-NOM-ACC) are much more common than what was previously believed. This affects our conception of case theory, since traditional Agree-based theories of case assignment (Chomsky 2000, 2001) can't easily account for tripartite systems.

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