The role of the absolutive object in agreement and displacement

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1. Overview: The goal of this paper is to is to demonstrate a fundamental difference between *ϕ*-agreement and displacement (a.k.a. Ā-movement), as far as concerns the behaviour of ergative NPs. This has key consequences for ongoing debate regarding the source(s) of syntactic ergativity, namely by showing that ERG displacement restrictions - in contrast to ERG *ϕ*-agreement restrictions - do not (necessarily) arise from the properties of the ERG NP alone, but are triggered by an ABS co-argument.

2. Background: It has long been recognised that certain NPs are more accessible than others as targets for Ā-movement and/or agreement. Keenan and Comrie's (1977) typologically motivated 'accessibility hierarchy' of relativization (commonly generalized to other types of Ā-movement, e.g., *wh* question formation) posits that, of all NPs in any given language, grammatical *subjects* are most accessible for displacement, followed by direct objects, and more peripheral arguments and adjuncts, as per (1).

(1) Subject > Direct Object > Indirect objects > Oblique > [....]

The hierarchy in (1) is also adopted in Moravcsik's (1978) typological survey of *ϕ-agreement*, whereby the NP most accessible as a target for agreement is also the subject. More recently, however, (1) has been recast as a hierarchy of *morphological case* rather than (putative) grammatical function. Bobalijk (2008) argues that the most accessible targets for *ϕ*-agreement are not necessarily subjects, but rather, *unmarked* arguments, proposing instead the hierarchy in (2).

(2) Unmarked case (nom, abs) > Dependent case (erg, acc) > Lexical/Oblique case (dat)

In parallel to Bobalijk's hierarchy of morphological case as a determinant for agreement, Deal (2016) proposes that (2) also determines accessibility for *Ā-movement*: the most easily displaced NPs are those which are *unmarked*. Much of Bobalijk and Deal's justification for recasting (1) as (2) draws on *ergative* languages, in which the (transitive) subject does not bear unmarked case; it instead bears ergative (i.e., dependent) marking, while the absolutive object is least marked. In ABS-only agreement languages (e.g., Hindi, Mahajan '90; Tsez, Polinksy & Potsdam '01), the ERG subject never triggers agreement. In "syntactically ergative" languages, (e.g., Tongan, Dyirbal), the ERG subject cannot undergo Ā-movement, while ABS arguments are freely displaced. This indeed suggests that morphological case is the fundamental basis for NP accessibility in *ϕ*-agreement (Bobalijk 2008) and Ā-movement (Deal 2016).

3. Proposal: I argue that, despite these surface similarities, *ϕ*-agreement and Ā-movement are *not* truly analogous. For **Ā-movement**, the *absolutive object* can be demonstrated to play a crucial role: in syntactically ergative Mayan languages, Ā-movement restrictions on the ERG subject no longer hold in the absence of an ABS object. In contrast, absence of an object does *not* render the ERG subject a viable target for ***ϕ*-agreement** in an ABS-only agreement language such as Hindi. I propose that, while (2) captures the inaccessibility of ERG NPs for **agreement** (Bobalijk '08), it does not extend to **Ā-movement** (i.e., contra Deal '16). This strongly supports theories which associate syntactic ergativity with the properties of the ABS NP (e.g., Bittner & Hale '96, Aldridge '04, Coon et al '14, a.o.).

4. Syntactic ergativity in Mayan: So-called 'active' ergative languages (e.g., Basque, Hindi, Georgian) – in which ergative case appears on subjects of *unergative* as well as transitive verbs – could potentially provide insight into the role of the unmarked ABS object on the accessibility of the ERG NP. However, since no *bona fide* active language is known to display syntactic ergativity (cf. Sheehan 2014), the role of the object in Ā-movement is best established by considering a subset of Mayan languages (e.g., Ixil, K'ichee', among others). These languages are both (*i*) syntactically ergative (e.g., (3), (4)) and (*ii*) allow intransitive ergative subjects in certain environments, for example in non-perfective aspects (5), or with pseudo-object incorporation (6) (cf. further discussion in Coon et al. 2014; Assmann et al., 2015).

(3) *Ixil ERG fronting (Ayres, 1981)*

*Ye'l **in** kat **w**-il ex
NEG **1SG** PUNC **1ERG**-see 2ABS.PL
'I didn't see you (pl.)'

(4) *K'ichee' ERG wh-questions (Mondloch 1981 via Aissen, 2011)*

***Jachiin** x-**u**-paxi-j lee laq?
who CP-**3ERG**-break-ACT DET bowl
'Who broke the bowl?'

In environments in which ERG marking is *retained* in the absence of an ABS object, however, **the ergative NP can be displaced**. In Ixil progressive clauses (5), *all* subjects are cross-referenced with ERG marking. While a transitive ERG subject still cannot be fronted (5a), an intransitive one can (5b).

(5) *Ixil (Ayres, 1981): progressive aspect split; ERG marking for **all** subjects*

(a) *ABS object; *ERG fronting*

*Ye'l **in** in **w**-il ex
NEG **1SG** DUR **1ERG**-see 2ABS.PL
'I'm not seeing you (pl.)'

(b) *No ABS object; ✓ERG fronting*

Ye'l **in** in **w**-ok-e'
NEG **1SG** DUR **1ERG**-enter-SUF
'I'm not entering'

Similarly, K'ichee' allows displacement of the ERG NP when the object is *bare* (6b); Coon et al. (2014) propose that the bare (or syntactically incorporated) NP does not receive, or require, ABS case.

(6) *K'ichee'(Aissen 2011, via Coon et al., 2014): ERG case retained when object is incorporated*

(a) *Full ABS object; * ERG wh question*
*__Jachiin__ x-__u__-loq' rii uuq?
__who__ ASP-__3ERG__-buy DET cloth
'Who bought the cloth'?

(b) *Bare (incorporated) object; ✓ERG wh question*
__Jachiin__ x-__u__-loq' uuq?
__who__ ASP-__3ERG__-buy cloth
'Who bought cloth?'

As noted by Coon et al. (2014) and Assmann et al. (2015), ergative movement restrictions in Mayan seemingly cannot be attributed solely to the properties of the ERG NP. These data are potentially still compatible with a markedness approach (Deal 2016), however, if the hierarchy in (2) is essentially *optimality-based*, whereby the viable target for movement is not necessarily an *un*marked NP, but the *least* marked NP (in some domain). This could entail adoption of a Cyclic Agree approach (Bejar & Rezac, 2003), whereby if an Ā-probe *fails* to find an unmarked NP goal – as in (5b, 6b), it may probe again for a *more* marked NP. If (2) is optimality-operative, however, we would expect parallels to (5-6) to obtain in ERG-sensitive ϕ-agreement languages; namely, absence of an ABS NP should allow for an ERG NP to trigger agreement. As evidenced by Hindi (below), however, this is not so.

5. Absolutive-only ϕ-agreement in Hindi: In Hindi – an *active* ergative language - the ERG subject never triggers agreement; agreement targets the ABS NP instead (Mahajan, 1990; Bhatt, 2005, a.o.).

(7) Raam-ne roTii khayii
Ram.MASC-ERG bread.**FEM.ABS** eat.PERF.**FEM.3SG**
'Ram ate bread' (Mahajan 1990:78)

Unlike Ā-movement in Mayan, however, the absence of an ABS object does *not* make an ERG subject a viable target for agreement. I show that ERG-marked feminine unergative subjects do not trigger FEM agreement (8), despite the absence of an object; instead, the verb shows masculine *default* agreement – indicative of a failed Agree operation as per Preminger (2009).

(8) (a) Anya-ne chik-ha/*-hi
Anya.FEM-ERG scream-**MASC.**/*-FEM
'Anya screamed'

(b) Anya-ne muskurah-a/*-i
Anya.FEM-ERG smile-**MASC/***-FEM
'Anya smiled' (author's notes)

It is possible that agreement in (8a, b) is not default agreement, but agreement with a null ABS cognate object. However, the relevant cognate objects for the verbs in (8) are in fact *feminine* (when overt as in (9), FEM agreement appears). If agreement in (8) were targeting a covert object, we would therefore expect it to be feminine, as opposed to masculine – which suggests that agreement in (8) *is* default.

(9) (a) Anya-ne (bhurhi awaz se) **chik** chik-**hi/*-ha**
Anya.FEM-ERG (big voice with) **scream.FEM.ABS** scream-**FEM/*-MASC**
'Anya screamed a (loud) scream'

(b) Anya-ne (xubsurat si) **muskurahaat** muskurah-**i/*-a**
Anya.FEM-ERG (beauty with) **smile.FEM.ABS** smiled-**FEM/*MASC**
'Anya smiled a (beautiful) smile' (author's notes)

Hindi ϕ-agreement therefore strictly adheres to the hierarchy in (2): *only* unmarked NPs are targeted. This suggests that (2) cannot be construed as optimality-based, and cannot account for the restrictions upon ergative Ā-movement in Mayan. More broadly, ϕ-agreement and Ā-movement, despite showing similar effects with respect to morphological case as per (2), are *not* completely analogous.

6. Conclusion: I argue that - insofar as Mayan and Hindi may be viewed as representative of syntactically ergative and non-ergative agreement languages respectively - only ϕ-agreement involves *true* morphological case discrimination as per (2). Ergative displacement restrictions, on the other hand, arise (at least partially) from the presence of an ABS co-argument; this provides strong support for theories which derive syntactic ergativity either from A-movement of the ABS NP (e.g., Bittner & Hale 1996, Coon et al., 2014) or from the unavailability of ABS case if the ERG argument is displaced (Assmann et al., 2015). ♦ ***References:*** Aissen, 2011. *FAMLi Proceedings 1*. ♦ Aldridge 2004, *PhD thesis*, Cornell. ♦ Assmann et al., 2015. *Syntax 18(4)*. ♦ Ayres, 1981. *J. of Mayan Linguistics 2* ♦ Bhatt, 2005. *NLLT 23*. ♦ Bejar & Rezac, 2003. *LI 40* ♦ Bittner & Hale 1996, *LI 27*. ♦ Bobalijk, 2008. 'Where's Phi?' *Phi Theory*, OUP. ♦ Coon et al., 2014. *Linguistic Variation 14*. ♦ Deal, 2016. *WCCFL 34 Proceedings*. ♦ Keenan & Comrie, 1977. *LI 8*. ♦ Mahajan 1990, *PhD thesis*, MIT. ♦ Moravcsik, 1978. *Working Papers on Language Universals 15*. ♦ Polinksy & Potsdam, 2001. *NLLT 19*. ♦ Preminger, 2009. *LI 40(4)*. ♦ Sheehan, 2014. *WCCFL 31 Proceedings.*