Morphological ergativity

Morphological Egativity in Dyirbal

Syntactic ergativity

Split morphological ergativity

Syntax-morphology "competition"

I-language
Chapter 9 Ergativity Discussion

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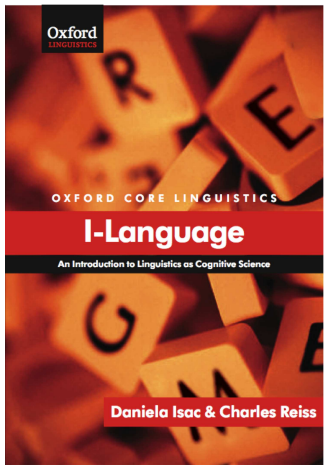

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The enormity of the task facing us in arguing for universal grammar . . .

Honesty and humility in the face of the data:

- how linguists reason about data patterns;
- the tension that arises from the complementary goals of developing a theory of Universal Grammar and accounting for the diversity of the world's languages; and
- once again, the idea that our minds construct linguistic representations—the analysis is not "in the signal".

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Transitivity

- *Mary yawned* (no arguments within the VP)=Intransitive
- *Mary kicked him* (one argument within the VP)=Transitive
- *Mary gave him the cold shoulder* (two arguments within the VP)=Ditransitive

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What is *he*?

He kicked the frog.

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Describing a constituent like *he*

- it is a pronoun, which is a kind of NP
- it is the SUBJECT of the sentence
- it is the AGENT of the action described
- it is in the NOMINATIVE CASE, as opposed to a form like *him*

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Agreement in English

	Present	Past
Singular	*He sees John*	*He saw John*
Plural	*They see John*	*They saw John*

Subject-verb agreement in two Latin tenses

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	Present		Future	
	Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
1^{st}	amō	amāmus	amabō	amabimus
2^{nd}	amās	amātis	amabis	amabitis
3^{rd}	amat	amant	amabit	amabunt

First person, non-singular forms in three languages

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	Mohawk	Tok Pisin	English
1, DU, EXC	iakenihiá:tons	mitupela raitim	we write
1, PL, EXC	iakwahiá:tons	mipela raitim	〃
1, DU, INC	tenihiá:tons	yumitupela raitim	〃
1, PL, INC	tewahiá:tons	yumipela raitim	〃

Hungarian verbs

Verb	*I V an X*	*I V the X*	*I V you*
send	küldök	küldöm	küldelek
watch	lesek	lesem	leslek
await	várok	várom	várlak

NOMINATIVE AND ACCUSATIVE CASE

dominus master NOMINATIVE	servum slave ACCUSATIVE	audit hears	*the master hears the slave*
servus slave NOMINATIVE	dominum master ACCUSATIVE	audit hears	*the slave hears the master*
dominus master NOMINATIVE		venit comes	*the master comes*
servus slave NOMINATIVE		venit comes	*the slave comes*

NOMINATIVE AND ACCUSATIVE CASE

dominus	servum	audit	*the master hears the slave*
master	slave	hears	
NOMINATIVE	ACCUSATIVE		
servus	dominum	audit	*the slave hears the master*
slave	master	hears	
NOMINATIVE	ACCUSATIVE		
dominus		venit	*the master comes*
master		comes	
NOMINATIVE			
servus		venit	*the slave comes*
slave		comes	
NOMINATIVE			

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Yup'ik Eskimo (Alaska)

a.	Doris-aq ayallruuq	'Doris travelled'
b.	Tom-am Doris-aq cingallura	'Tom greeted Doris'
c.	Tom-aq ayallruuq	'Tom travelled'
d.	Doris-am Tom-aq cingallura	'Doris greeted Tom '
e.	Ayallruu-nga	'I travelled'
f.	Ayallruu-q	'He travelled'
g.	Cingallru-a-nga	'He greeted me'

Two case marking patterns

	Yup'ik	Latin
Object (O)	*-aq*	*-um*
Subject of intransitive (SI)	*-aq*	*-us*
Subject of transitive (ST)	*-am*	*-us*

Two case marking patterns

Yup'ik		Latin
ERGATIVE	ST	NOMINATIVE
ABSOLUTIVE	SI	
	O	ACCUSATIVE

English transitive alternation

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Transitive	Intransitive
a. Davey and Sami grow pansies there	Pansies grow there
b. They grow them there	They grow there

Hypothetical English′ transitive alternation

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Transitive	Intransitive
a. Davey and Sami grow pansies there	Pansies grow there
b. They grow them there	Them grow there

Tense-split system in Georgian

a. student-i midis — 'The student goes'
   student-NOM goes

b. student-i ceril-s cers — 'The student writes the letter'
   student-NOM letter-ACC writes

c. student-i mivida — 'The student went'
   student-ABS went

d. student-ma ceril-i dacera — 'The student wrote the letter'
   student-ERG letter-ABS wrote

Agentivity-split system

Lakhota (United States)

a-ma-ya-phe	'you hit me'
DIR-1SG-2SG-hit	
wa-0-ktékte	'I kill him'
1SG-3SG-kill	
0-ma- ktékte	'He kills me'
3SG-1SG-kill	
ma-hîxpaye	'I fall'
1SG-fall	
ma-t'e'	'I die'
1SG-die	
ma-čáča	'I shiver'
1SG-die	

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More Lakhota

wa-škate ‘I play’

1SG-play

wa-nûwe ‘I swim’

1SG-swim

wa-lowă ‘I sing’

1SG-sing

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Theta-roles (Thematic roles) are defined semantically

- Agent
- Instrumental
- Patient
- Benefactor (Recipient, Goal)
- Theme
- Location

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

Non-agent subjects

- He was kicked by the frog.
- He saw the frog.
- He heard the frog.
- He fell off the wall.

NP vs. V marking split in Managalasi

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

a. a vaʔ-ena — ‘you will go’
   2SG go-FUT:2SG

b. na vaʔ-ejo — ‘I will go’
   1SG go-FUT:1SG

c. nara a an-aʔ-ejo — ‘I will hit you’
   1SG 2SG hit-2SG-FUT:1SG

d. ara na an-iʔ-ena — ‘you will hit me’
   2SG 1SG hit-1SG-FUT:2SG

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Two patterns in a single language—Managalasi 1st singular

Pronouns		Verb Markers
nara	ST	*ejo*
na	SI	
	O	*i?*

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

English	Dyirbal	gloss
she *saw him*	ɲuma yabuŋgu buran	'mother saw father'
she *returned*	yabu banaganʸu	'mother returned'
he saw **her**	yabu ɲumaŋgu buran	'father saw mother'

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Ergative-Absolutive Case Pattern

ɲuma	yabuŋgu	buran	'mother saw father'
father	mother	saw	
ABSOLUTIVE	ERGATIVE		
yabu		banagan	' mother returned'
mother		returned	
ABSOLUTIVE			

Case patterns

	English	Dyirbal
Transitive subject	she	yabuŋgu
Intransitive subject	she	yabu
Object	her	yabu

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To note:

- Languages differ w.r.t. marking of intransitive subjects
- SUBJECT is not a primitive

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Interpretation of phonetically null elements

- English
  - He saw her and ∅ returned. = 'He saw her and HE returned.'
- Dyirbal
  - F. saw M. and ∅ returned. = 'He saw her and SHE returned.'

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Subject gapping

- A gapped subject needs an antecedent in the same CASE

Pronouns in Dyirbal

English	Dyirbal
we saw you	ŋana n^{y}urrana buran
we returned	ŋana banagan^{y}u
you saw us	n^{y}urra ŋanana buran

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Split ergativity

	English	Dyirbal pronouns	Dyirbal nou
Transitive subject	we	PRONOUN	NOUN-ŋgu
Intransitive subject	we	PRONOUN	NOUN
Object	us	PRONOUN-na	NOUN

How abstract is syntactic ergativity?

Morphological ergativity

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

- In Dyirbal, pronouns behave like English pronouns morphologically
- How do they behave syntactically?

How abstract is syntactic ergativity?

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

Very abstract!

- we saw you = ŋana n^{y}urrana buran
- we returned = ŋana banagan^{y}u
- ŋana n^{y}urrana buran banagan^{y}u
  - = we saw you and ? returned.

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Syntactic ergativity despite the morphology

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

- The missing subject should be NOM, and there is an appropriate antecedent, ŋana, however
- ŋana nʸurrana buran ? banaganʸu
  - can only be interpreted as
  - ŋana nʸurrana buran nʸurra banaganʸu
- and not as the expected
  - ŋana nʸurrana buran ŋana banaganʸu

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Ergative/absolutive syntax trumps morphology

	ŋana	nʸurrana	buran	∅	banaganʸu
morphology	NOM	ACC		NOM	
syntax	ERG	ABS		ABS	

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

- The missing NOM subject pronoun must be interpreted as coreferential with the ACC object pronoun of the preceding clause
- even though they would DISAGREE in surface form.

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Abstractness in morphosyntax

The syntax is ergative/absolutive even where the surface morphology is nominative/ accusative.

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Syntax-morphology "competition"

Equivalence classes and abstractness

- Words are abstract—imposed on the signal by your mind
- Constituency (structure) is abstract—no trees in the signal
- Even the overt morphology is not enough to predict syntactic behavior

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Conclusions

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Questions

- Does theory need all these categories?
  - Grammatical functions like SUBJECT and OBJECT
  - Morphological Case forms like NOMINATIVE and ACCUSATIVE
  - Thematic roles like AGENT and THEME
  - Syntactic categories like N, NP, V, VP
- If thematic roles are unnecessary, what is going on in Lakhota?
- If they are necessary, why are they ignored in determining case in other languages?
- Can a phenomenon like ergativity be correlated with culture/worldview?
  - Think about split systems

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