

Ergativity in Tongan

by

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Abstract

In an ergative case system, the subject of an intransitive verb (S) and the object of a transitive verb (O) receive the same case, absolutive (ABS), while the subject of a transitive verb (A) receives a special case, ergative (ERG). Given the Principles and Parameters approach (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993), ergative case marking should be derived from a UG parameter. The objective of this thesis is to postulate such a parameter that can account for various case-related phenomena.

In Tongan, an ergative pattern exists also at the syntactic level: S and O are treated as equivalent in some syntactic operations such as relativisation and coordination. I propose that this arises because ERG is a structural case associated with a structural position [Spec, Agrs]. Following Chomsky (1993), I assume that a structural case is assigned by feature checking in a Spec-head configuration. I also assume that only one Agr can be active in intransitive constructions: Agrs in accusative languages and Agro in ergative languages (Bobaljik 1993). However, the current approach differs from the standard account in that case features [ERG/NOM] and [ABS/ACC] are considered to be intrinsic to Agr(s), and not T and V. In effect, each case is associated with a unique structural position: ERG with [Spec, Agrs], ABS with [Spec, Agro] and Null with [Spec, TP]. The Tongan data show that syntactic ergativity arises because the relevant syntactic rules are sensitive to these structural positions.

There are also some phenomena in which S and A are treated as equivalent. I argue that such an accusative pattern arises in ergative languages when a syntactic rule is sensitive to theta-role. The accusative case system demonstrates relative stability because the contrast between the internal argument (O) and the external arguments (S/A) happens to show the same pattern. This hypothesis is also supported by the Tongan data.

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