1 Ergative vs. accusative patterns

1.1 Morphological nominative-accusative

Subjects (of intransitives), Agents and Objects (of transitives)

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{transitive} & \text{intransitive} \\
\hline
\text{A} & \text{O} & \text{S} \\
\text{agent} & \text{object} & \text{subject}
\end{array}
\]

In English, the A and S participants receive the same Case—they sound the same—while the O participant receives a different Case from A & S. (A & S: I, he, she, you; O: me, her, him, you)

Nominative-accusative case marking

\[
\begin{align*}
(2) & \quad \text{a. domin-us ven-it} \\
& \quad \text{master comes} \\
& \quad \text{b. serv-us veni-t} \\
& \quad \text{slave comes} \\
& \quad \text{c. domin-us serv-um audi-t} \\
& \quad \text{master slave hears} \\
& \quad \text{d. serv-us domin-um audi-t} \\
& \quad \text{slave master hears}
\end{align*}
\]

So, here we see: –us markes S and A, –um marks O. That is, nominative and accusative.
1.2 Morphological ergative-absolutive

Dyirbal

(3) a. ñuma bamaga-n’u
    father returned
    ‘Father(S) returned.’

b. yabu banaga-n’u
    mother returned
    ‘Mother(S) returned.’

c. ñuma yabu-ŋgu bura-n
    father mother saw
    ‘Mother(A) saw father(O).’

d. yabu ñuma-ŋgu bura-n
    mother father saw
    ‘Father(A) saw mother(O).’

We see two forms:

‘mother’:
    yabu (S or O)
yabu-ŋgu (A)

‘father’:
    ñuma (S or O)
ñuma-ŋgu (A)

(Dyirbal: Cairns Rain Forest, Australia)

Ergative-absolutive case marking

‘mother’ yabu (S or O) yabu-ŋgu (A)
‘father’ ñuma (S or O) ñuma-ŋgu (A)

So, in Dyirbal, S and O are grouped together (marked the same way) to the exclusion of A. (Whereas English and Latin group S and A together to the exclusion of O.)

Dixon (1994) estimates that 25% of the world’s languages have ergative patterns of this sort.

1.3 Syntactic nom-acc pattern

Agreement

(4) a. domin-ī veni-unt
    masters come

b. serv-ī domin-um audi-unt
    slaves master hear

c. serv-us domin-ōs audi-t
    slave masters hear
Number agreement on the verb (audi-t vs. audi-unt) varies with the nominative argument.

**Conjunction/subordination: English**

(5) [I returned] and [ _ saw him]
(6) [I saw him] and [ _ returned]

Abstractly:
[S verb] and [A S verb O] Missing A will “take over” S
[A verb O] and [S_A verb] Missing S will “take over” A

Again: S and A act together… O acts different.

**1.4 Syntactic erg-abs pattern**

**Conjunction/subordination: Dyirbal**

(7) ḋuma banag-n’u yabu-ŋu bura-n.
    father(S) returned mother(A) saw
    ‘Father(S) returned and mother(A) saw him(O).’
(8) ḋuma yabu-ŋu bura-n banaga-n’u.
    father(O) mother(A) saw returned
    ‘Mother(A) saw father(O) and he(S) returned.’

Abstractly:
[S verb] and [A verb O_S] Missing O will “take over” S
[A verb O] and [S_O verb] Missing S will “take over” O

Again: S and O act together… A acts different.

**1.5 Summarizing nom-acc vs. erg-abs**

Ergative/absolutive and nominative/accusative

English/Latin [SA] vs. [O] nominative-accusative pattern
Dyirbal [SO] vs. [A] ergative-absolutive pattern

Absolutive case marking on S and O (but not A)
Ergative case marking on A (but not S and O)
**Nominative** case marking on S and A (but not O)

**Accusative** case marking on O (but not S and A)

**Morphological and syntactic ergativity**

(9) Morphological ergativity  
   a. English: NOM-ACC marking on pronouns.  
   b. Latin: NOM-ACC case marking.  
   c. Dyirbal: ERG-ABS case marking (–ŋgu = ERG).

(10) Syntactic ergativity  
   a. Latin: verbs agree with S & A (NOM) but not O.  
   b. English: Missing referents: S & A (NOM) but not O.  
   c. Dyirbal: Missing referents: S & O (ABS) but not A.

2 Ergative splits

**Ergative splits**

It turns out that in a lot of languages that show ergative patterns, this pattern only appears in part of the grammar. Commonly, the part of the grammar that is ergative is defined by things like the tense/aspect, main/subordinate clauses, or features of the S/A/O arguments.

Even Dyirbal, which is very ergative, shows occasional bits of nominative-accusative patterning. And even English, which is very accusative, shows occasional bits of ergative-absolutive patterning.

**Morphological nom-acc in Dyirbal**

(11) a. ṇana banaga-n’u  
     we-all(S) returned  

   b. n’urra banaga-n’u  
     you-all(S) returned  

   c. n’urra Nana-na bura-n  
     you-all(A) us-all(O) saw
d. ḋana n’urra-na bura-n  
   we-all(A) you-all(O) saw

Look: ḋana is ‘we-all’ in S and A, ḋana-na is ‘we-all’ in O. N’urra is ‘you-all’ in S and A, n’urra-na is ‘you-all’ in O. That’s a nominative-accusative pattern.

**Syntactic erg-abs anyway**

(12) a. ḋana banaga-n’u n’urra bura-n  
    we-all(S) return you-all(A) saw  
    ‘We-all(S) returned and you-all(A) saw us-all(O).’

   b. n’urra ḋana-na bura-n banaga-n’u  
    you-all(A) us-all(O) saw returned  
    ‘You-all(A) saw us-all(O) and we-all(S) returned.’

So even in that case where Dyirbal was morphologically nominative-accusative it is still syntactically ergative.

**English ergative**

(13) a. escapee  
    S: x escaped.

   b. employee  
    O: Starbucks employed x.

   c. employer  
    A: x employed John.

(14) a. the destruction of the house (by the hurricane)

   b. the arrival of the hurricane

So, even in English there seems to be a tiny bit of morphological ergativity: [SO] –ee vs. A –er. Or [SO] of in nominalizations.

Thus: Ergativity is not really a language-wide characteristic—it is a characteristic of subparts of languages (and the size of those subparts differ).

**Split on tense/aspect: Georgian aorist**

Georgian, Hindi have a split on tense/aspect. Here’s Georgian.

(15) Georgian Aorist

   a. Student-i mivida.  
      student-ABS go(AOR)  
      ‘The student went.’
Split on referential features

Silverstein (1976) does a fairly complex and in-depth analysis of a large number of languages (most of them Australian), and comes up with something like the following hierarchy.

**Animacy hierarchy**

1/2 person pronouns > human noun > animal noun > inanimate

Along with this goes the observation that in a transitive construction, the subject is generally higher on this hierarchy than the object: *John hit the rock*. The ergative splits that Silverstein observes are ones that tend to mark deviations from this.

**Inverse in Algonquian**

One relatively well-known example of a split (although not in case marking) occurs in Algonquian languages, where “direct” forms correspond to having a subject higher in animacy than the object, and “inverse” forms correspond to the reverse. Fox:

(17) ne -waapam -aa -wa.

1sg see DIRECT 3

‘I see him.’
Case marking conditioned on animacy

- Mark O that is high in animacy (accusative)
- Mark O that is high in definiteness (accusative)
- Mark A that is low in animacy (ergative)

These are generally determined independently, so you get ergative case on any A that is below a certain degree of animacy, regardless of the O; and you get accusative case on any O that is above a certain degree of definiteness or animacy, regardless of the A.

Dyirbal again

(19) balan dyugumbil baŋul yaŋugu balgan.
    woman-ABS man-ERG hit
    ‘The man hit the woman.’

(20) ṇadya ḭinuna balgan.
    I-NOM you-ACC hit
    ‘I hit you.’

(21) ḭayguna baŋul yaŋugu balgan.
    I-ACC man-ERG hit
    ‘The man hit me.’

(22) ḭadya bayi yaŋa balgan.
    I-NOM man-ABS hit
    ‘I hit the man.’

3 Explaining ergativity

Attempts to explain ergative syntax

There have been quite a number of different attempts to try to explain the syntax of ergative languages and how the case marking (and other) facts might be derived.
There isn’t really a lot of consensus on how it should work (or even whether different ergative languages work the same way as each other).

3.1 Johns 1992

**Inuktitut: Possessives and relative/ergative marking**

Johns (1992) goes through some discussion of the case marking and syntax in Inuktitut.

(23) Jaani-up  tako-ja-a-nga
    John-REL  see-PASS.PART-3s/1s
    ‘John saw me.’

(24) Jaani-up  nasa-a
    John-REL  hat-3s
    ‘John’s hat’

**Inuktitut: relatives**

(25) anguti-up  kapi-ja-a
    man-REL  stab-PASS.PART-3s
    ‘the one that the man stabbed’ (lit. ‘the man’s stabbed one’)

(26) anguti-up  qimmi-a
    man-REL  dog-3s
    ‘the man’s dog’

(27) angut  [ arna-up  kuni-ga-a]
    man-ABS  woman-REL  kiss-PASS.PART-3s.ABS
    ‘the man who the woman kissed’

**Inuktitut: Johns’ (1992) analysis**

(28) a. anguti-up  nanuq  kapi-ja-a]
    man-REL  bear-ABS  stab-PASS.PART-3s.ABS
    ‘the man stabbed the bear’

b. anguti-up, nanuq  t, kapi-ja-a

c. ‘the bear is the man’s stabbed one’
3.2 Mahajan 1997

Two generalizations

Mahajan (1997) highlights two generalizations about languages and ergativity.

(29) Ergative case-marking patterns are found only in verb-peripheral languages (in SOV and VSO languages—verb medial languages [SVO] are never ergative.

(30) A lexically distinct form of the verb *have* is generally missing in verb-peripheral languages. That is, *have* is generally confined to SVO languages.

**Hindi**

Hindi is ergative in the *perfect tenses* (common among Indic Indo-European languages).

(31) Raam-ne bhinḍiyāā pakaayii hē
Ram-ERG okra cook-PERF is
‘Ram has cooked okra.’

(32) Raam aayaa ḫē
Ram come-PERF is
‘Ram has arrived.’

(33) Raam bhinḍiyāā pakaataa ḫē
Ram okra cook-IMPERF is
‘Ram cooks okra.’

Mahajan considers the ergative suffix to be a postposition.

**Comparing Hindi and French**

(34) Raam-ne vah kitaabē pər’īī hē.
Ram-ERG those books read be
‘Ram has read those books.’ Hindi

(35) Jean a cuit les tomates
Jean has cooked the tomatoes
‘John has cooked the tomatoes.’ French
Mahajan takes the view that all languages should be underlying the same—these two sentences have the same meaning, and should have the same structure underlingly. The French sentence has *have*, the Hindi sentence does not. The Hindi sentence has ergative marking, the French sentence does not.

**Hindi/SOV**

Suppose the Hindi sentence looks something like this. The ergative marker is a postposition, which means that the subject is a PP. Assume that the subject moves from a lower position (Cf. English *The students have all left*).

**Hindi possession**

Although we were looking at the auxiliary *have* meaning in the previous sentences, it is also interesting to note that Hindi (like a lot of languages) represent possession with (not *have*, but) *be* and a location.

(36) larkee-kee paas kuttaa hai.
boy.OBL-GEN proximity dog is
‘The boy has a dog’ (lit. ‘By the boy is a dog.’)

So it isn’t all that strange for something like a PP to be the “subject” of a *be* construction like this.

**Other examples of possession via be + P**

(37) u menja byla sestra.
at 1st.GEN was sister.NOM
‘I had a sister.’

(38) larkee-kee paas kuttaa hai.
boy.OBL-GEN by dog is
‘The boy has a dog.’

(39) yaan huntul ciimin ti? in-paapa.
be one horse P my-father
‘My father has a/one horse.’
(40) Liisa-lla on mies.
Lisa-ADESSIVE be man
‘Lisa has a husband.’

Finnish

Portuguese, both options

(41) a. O menino tem fome.
the child has hunger
‘The child is hungry.’ Portuguese

b. O menino esta com fome.
the child is with hunger
‘The child is hungry.’

(42) o menino_i esta [com t_i] fome.

French/SVO

Now, let’s look at French. Suppose that since in Hindi we have a PP subject underlingly, we must have one in French too. But what appears in the subject position in French is just the NP. And the verb is have. Well. What might be happening?

Hint: â+le=au; de+le=du.

French/SVO

Now, the proposal: English have and French avoir and the corresponding words in other languages with have are conflations of be and a preposition.

So, in an SVO language like French, the P is next to be and so can fuse with it.
The generalizations again

(43) Ergative case-marking patterns are found only in verb-peripheral languages (in SOV and VSO languages—verb medial languages [SVO] are never ergative.

(44) A lexically distinct form of the verb *have* is generally missing in verb-peripheral languages. That is, *have* is generally confined to SVO languages.

Unergative vs. unaccusative

Intransitives fall into two classes: “unaccusatives” and “unergatives.”

Unaccusatives  *fall, sink, melt, . . .*

Unergatives  *dance, walk, . . .*

In Hindi, ergative marking is never possible in the subject of unaccusatives. In Romance languages, auxiliary *have* is not possible with unaccusatives (you get *be* instead).

(45)  

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Jean a marché.</td>
<td>‘Jean walked.’ (<em>have</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Jean est tombé.</td>
<td>‘Jean fell.’ (<em>be</em>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So: unaccusatives don’t take this kind of PP argument (in general). Also: reflexive clitics in Italian/French force *be*; the reflexive morpheme in Inuit blocks ergative.

Problems

Mahajan’s (1997) proposal is only a proposal—there are a number of things that don’t yet fit, and more work needs to be done to see if there is something subtle at work.

- Dutch, German are SOV (at least in embedded clauses) yet they have *have* and do not display case ergativity.
- Kashmiri (V2, but appears to be ergative).

Mahajan makes some suggestions, but in general it is left for further work.

Also

Both Johns’s (1992) and Mahajan’s (1997) proposals aim to account for the syntactic distributions, but there is still a question of how/why there are ergative splits.
References