

# Split ergativity based on nominal type

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## Abstract

This paper argues that split ergativity based on nominal type is a morphological phenomenon, not a syntactic one. We use three tests to identify the source of this type of split ergativity as morphological syncretism: (i) case agreement, (ii) syntactic ergativity, (iii) coordination. We illustrate the complex patterns of attested splits, demonstrating that analyses positing a single dichotomy (e.g. between first and second person pronouns versus all other nominals) are insufficient. A morphological syncretism analysis is provided whereby ergative case is deleted in featurally-marked contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Silverstein's seminal (1976) paper identified a person/animacy hierarchy whereby nominals higher on the hierarchy (e.g. 1st and 2nd person pronouns) are more likely to be marked with accusative case, whereas those lower in the hierarchy (e.g. inanimates) are more likely to be marked with ergative case. Silverstein's hierarchy (1976:122) is reproduced in 1, and illustrated with data from Maragny (Maric: Queensland, Australia)<sup>1</sup> (Breen, 1976, 1981). In Maragny, pronouns inflect according to a nominative-accusative case marking pattern, 2, whereas nominals inflect on an ergative-absolutive pattern, 3.

(1)	Acc		Erg	
			_____	
	+tu		-tu	_____
			+ego	-ego
				'pronouns'
	-----			
			+proper	-proper   _____
				+human   -human   _____
				+animate   -animate
				...
				'nouns'

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<sup>1</sup> We have used the classification of Australian languages from Ethnologue. See Dixon (2002) for an alternative.

- (2) a. matya ngaya balganngandala yurdi  
before 1sg.NOM hit.Hab.Past meat.ABS  
“I used to kill a lot of kangaroos” (Breen, 1981:307)
- b. matya inda nganha wa:la  
before 2sg.NOM 1sg.ACC give.Past  
“You gave me [money] before” (Breen, 1981:306)
- c. ngaya nhunu wabanhi  
1sg.NOM always come.PRES  
“I always come here” (Breen, 1981:306)
- (3) a. nguda-nggu yurdi gamba:nhi  
dog-ERG meat.ABS bury.Rec.Past  
“The dog buried the meat” (Breen, 1981:307)
- b. nguda balga:nhi warngulinhi-ngga  
dog.ABS hit.RecPast bark.Pres-LOC  
“He hit the dog because it was barking” (Breen, 1981:319)
- c. nguda nguna:labanhi  
dog.ABS lie.about.Pres  
“There’s dogs lying around everywhere” (Breen, 1981:323)

In this paper, we examine how person/animacy-based split case marking is synchronically encoded in the grammar, focussing on the distribution of ergative case.<sup>2</sup> Note that the question of grammatical encoding is logically distinct from any potential diachronic and/or functional explanations for the appearance of the pattern (see for example Silverstein, 1976; Moravcsik, 1978; Dixon, 1979; Comrie, 1989; DeLancey, 1981; Du Bois, 1987; Garrett, 1990; Dixon, 1994). For example, suppose it true, following Garrett (1990), that ergative case appears only on inanimates in some languages because the ergative is diachronically reanalysed from an instrumental; we still need to ask how the synchronic grammar of the language encodes the synchronic fact that ergative appears only on inanimates. Or suppose, following Dixon (1979), that elements higher on the hierarchy are more likely to be transitive agents<sup>3</sup> and that it is “most natural and economical to ‘mark’ a participant when it is in an unaccustomed role” (1979:86)<sup>4</sup>; we must still ask how that marking (or lack thereof) is accomplished in the grammar. Thus, we largely leave diachronic and functional considerations aside, since our focus is elsewhere, although we do point out when the data presented impacts such proposals. Specifically, the question we seek to answer is: do nominals fail to bear ergative case morphology because a syntactic mechanism ensures that they do not have ergative case, or because a morphological mechanism ensures that their ergative form is nondistinct (e.g. syncretic with the nominative/absolute)?<sup>5</sup> We argue the latter.

This type of analysis has been explicitly proposed in more descriptive or typological work, by Blake (1977), Goddard (1982), and Comrie (1991) (inter alia) (although not all, see McGregor, 2010). And yet, in the theoretical linguistics literature, this type of analysis has not been widely adopted.<sup>6</sup> Instead, researchers posit various syntactic mechanisms to ensure that DPs high on the hierarchy are not assigned ergative case (see for example Jelinek, 1993; Jelinek and Carnie,

<sup>2</sup> We limit ourselves to languages in which ergative is marked on the DP, rather than marked solely through agreement. The relationship between agreement and case is often complex, resulting in additional indeterminacies for a language without case marking on the DP. See also Keine (2010) for relevant discussion of the interaction between case and agreement and morphological impoverishment.

<sup>3</sup> In some ergative languages, ergative marking is extended to a subset of intransitive thematic subjects, while in others ergative marking is extended to non-agentive thematic subjects (e.g. experiencers). We abstract away from such complications here, since our interest is in the morphological realization of ergative case features, rather than the varying conditions of ergative case feature assignment crosslinguistically.

<sup>4</sup> Although see Wierzbicka (1981) for a criticism.

<sup>5</sup> The case which is found on the intransitive subject and transitive object in some ergative systems is called NOMINATIVE by some researchers; other researchers reserve NOMINATIVE for the case on subjects, intransitive in ergative languages and both intransitive and transitive in nominative languages, and instead use ABSOLUTE for the case found on the intransitive subject and transitive object. Since the case on the transitive object is not our focus here, we use these terms largely interchangeably.

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions are Legate (2008) on a handful of Australian languages, whose general approach we build on here, and the Optimality-Theoretic approaches of Aissen (1999), Malchukov (2008), Woolford (2008), and Keine (2010) (thank you to an anonymous reviewer for bringing Keine’s work to our attention) which assume a morphological approach (we return to comparisons with OT approaches in section 4). An interesting case is Kiparsky (2008). On the one hand, when criticizing the approach of Garrett (1990), Kiparsky states quite clearly the (to our minds) correct position that “high-D nominals do *not* lack ergative case; rather, they have ergative/nominative syncretism, hence *ergative nominals with no overt case marking*—a very different thing” (2008:35, emphasis original). On the other hand, Kiparsky’s own analysis is couched in terms of case assignment to syntactic projections: “Ergative case is assigned to projections of the category N, and not to projections of the category D” (2008:43), hence it seems appropriate to include it with other syntactic analyses.

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