

Passamaquoddy as a Split Ergative Language and Its Consequences for Marantz's Ergative Case Generalization

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Abstract

Although the Algonquian literature generally does not view Algonquian languages as having an ergative-absolutive agreement pattern, I show that Passamaquoddy's agreement is the classical ergative pattern: third person subjects of intransitive verbs agree like objects of transitive verbs. On the view that agreement is the flip side of case, this has important consequences for Marantz's (1991) generalization stating that ergative case never appears on derived subjects. Derived subjects, including non-thematic ones, may agree on the ergative pattern in Passamaquoddy, showing that Marantz's generalization is incorrect. Ergative case is entirely comparable to accusative case in nominative-accusative languages, and must be viewed as a structural case, not as a non-structural case as many have suggested.

1 Passamaquoddy Agreement

In Passamaquoddy, as in many Algonquian languages, third persons agree with the verb on what is generally considered an ergative pattern: subjects of intransitive verbs trigger the same agreement as objects of transitive verbs, while subjects of transitive verbs trigger distinct agreement:¹

- (1) a. opuw-**ok**
sit-**3P**
‘they sit’
- b. k-tokom-a-wa-**k**
2-hit-2Subj/3Obj-PSubj-**3PObj**
‘you (plural) hit them’
- c. ’-tokom-a-wa-l
3-hit-3Subj/ObvObj-**PSubj-Obv**
‘they (proximate) hit him/her (obviative)’

In (1a), the subject of an intransitive verb agrees in a final suffix, which is the same suffix that a transitive object triggers in (1b) (the *o*, phonetically schwa, deletes after a vowel). In contrast, the third person subject of a transitive verb agrees in a prefix (initial [h], written as an apostrophe because it only surfaces via its phonetic effect on a following consonant) and in a non-final suffix, here *-wa* (which is the same suffix that appears in (1b), indexing the subject).

While the Algonquian literature generally does not discuss this in terms of ergativity, the pattern is the classical ergative one. Subjects of intransitives and objects of transitives trigger the same agreement (what could be called absolutive agreement), while subjects of transitives trigger distinct agreement (ergative agreement). Moreover, as in many languages, the ergative pattern is restricted to third person; first and second person subjects of intransitives agree on a nominative-accusative basis:

¹Algonquian languages distinguish one third person in a given domain (typically the clause) as *proximate*; all others must be *obviative*. I indicate proximates as “3” and obviatives as “Obv.” “P” abbreviates *plural* (more accurately, *nonsingular*, since it also appears with duals, as in (1a) and (2)). Letters have their usual values except that <o> is a schwa, <c> is an alveopalatal affricate, and the apostrophe is an initial [h] (see text).

- (2) **kt-opi-pa**
 2-sit-P
 ‘you (dual) sit’

A second-person subject of an intransitive verb triggers the same *k-* prefix as the subject of a transitive verb in (1b), and an allomorph of the *-wa* suffix. (The prefixes are first, second, third person *n-*, *k-*, *’-* before consonants, and *nt-*, *kt-*, *’t-* before vowels.)

In addition, as in many other languages, ergative agreement is limited to certain verbal paradigms; in Passamaquoddy, ergative agreement is limited to certain modes of the Independent Order. Agreement switches to a nominative-accusative pattern in the Subordinative Mode of the Independent Order:

- (3) Subordinative
’t-opi-ni-ya
 3-sit-Sub-3P
 ‘they sit’

In this paradigm, a third person subject of an intransitive verb triggers the same *’(t)-* prefix as the subject of a transitive verb. It also triggers the same suffix, with *-wa* changing to *-ya* following the vowel *-i*. (For more on the morphophonology of Passamaquoddy, see LeSourd 1993. The Subordinative is used for the second of two conjoined clauses; for clauses beginning with certain particles, like *on*, ‘then’; for certain kinds of adjunct questions; and in some other contexts.)

The agreement pattern also switches to a nominative-accusative pattern in all modes of the Conjunct Order:

- (4) Conjunct (here Unchanged Conjunct)
- a. **opi-htit**
 sit-3P
 ‘if they sit’
 - b. **tokom-uk**
 hit-1Subj/3Obj
 ‘if I hit him/her/them’
 - c. **tokom-a-htit**
 hit-3Subj/ObvObj-3P
 ‘if they (proximate) hit him/her/them (obviative)’

The Conjunct Order is exclusively suffixal. The suffix that a third person subject of an intransitive verb triggers in (4a) is the same as that triggered by the subject of a transitive verb in (4c), *-htit* in these examples. The object of a transitive verb is generally not marked in the Conjunct Order (except for person). (The Unchanged Conjunct is used for ‘if’ clauses; the Changed Conjunct, which is the Unchanged Conjunct plus Initial Change, an ablaut process that affects the first vowel of the verb stem, is used in various subordinate clauses, argument wh-questions, relative clauses, and some other contexts.)

I submit that the Passamaquoddy agreement pattern is very naturally viewed as an ergative one. Third person subjects of intransitive verbs agree like objects of transitive verbs. Moreover, as in many ergative languages (see, e.g., Silverstein 1976), there is a person split (first and second person subjects agree on a nominative-accusative basis) and a verbal split (certain forms of the verb agree on the ergative-absolutive pattern, while others agree on the nominative-accusative pattern). I see no reason to think that the pattern is *not* an ergative-absolutive one.

2 Ergative Case and Marantz’s Ergative Case Generalization

Viewing the Passamaquoddy agreement pattern as an ergative one is of interest because it bears on a debate in the literature on the nature of ergative case; namely, the question of whether ergative case is a structural one, or

a non-structural one (“lexical,” “inherent,” or “quirky”). Among those arguing that ergative case is structural are Bejar and Massam 1999; Bittner 1994; Bittner and Hale 1996a, 1996b; Bobaljik 1992, 1993; Davison 1999, 2004; Laka 1993; Marantz 1991; Phillips 1993, 1995. The contrasting view, that ergative case is non-structural, has been argued for by Anand and Nevins 2006; Butt 1995; Legate 2006, to appear; Mahajan 1990; Massam 2002; Mohanan 1994; Woolford 1997, 2006; among others. One of the key points in the debate is the apparent distinction between accusative case and ergative case in how well they correlate with particular thematic roles. Accusative case generally appears on internal arguments of verbs, which typically bear some sort of patient or theme role, but it can also appear on non-thematic objects, such as NPs raised to object (or “exceptionally case-marked” NPs):

- (5) a. I believe **him** to have defeated the trolls.
 b. I believe **there** to have been a riot.

The role of the accusative-marked pronoun in (5a) is agent (of the embedded verb), not patient; and the expletive in (5b), which we can assume to have accusative case although we cannot see it, presumably has no thematic role at all.

In contrast, it has been claimed that ergative case never appears on non-thematic subjects, making ergative case, but not accusative, related to a particular thematic role.² This has been codified as Marantz’s (1991) Ergative Case Generalization:

- (6) Ergative case generalization: Even when ergative case may go on the subject of an intransitive clause, ergative case will not appear on a derived subject. (Marantz 1991, (6))

If Marantz’s generalization is correct, it has been claimed (e.g., Legate to appear), ergative case is crucially different from accusative case; it is closely related to particular thematic roles, and therefore is a non-structural case, not a structural case.

However, Marantz himself points out that the relevant phenomena that would prove or falsify this generalization do not exist. Ergative case is generally limited to transitive clauses. Most verbs with derived subjects are formally intransitive, such as passives, and so the derived subject will not be assigned ergative. Nevertheless, there *should* be some cases where a derived subject could be assigned ergative case, but apparently none have been found.³

This is where viewing Passamaquoddy agreement as an ergative pattern becomes relevant. Algonquian languages like Passamaquoddy have a syntactic process that is useful for testing Marantz’s ergative case generalization. This is what is referred to as an *inverse*, a construction that reverses the prominence of the subject and the object. Now the logical object agrees on the ergative pattern:

- (7) ’-tokom-oku-**wa**-l
 3-hit-ObvSubj/3Obj-3P-Obv
 ‘he/she (obviative) hit **them** (proximate)’

If structural case and structural agreement are simply two sides of the same coin, as many argue (and as is explicitly theorized to be the case in recent work by Chomsky—Chomsky 2000, Chomsky 2001), here is an instance of a non-thematic subject receiving ergative case, as indicated by it agreeing as an ergative. If we look at the agreement patterns in non-inverse clauses in (1), we see that the prefix ’- and the suffix -*wa* are reserved for subjects of transitives. A logical object may trigger this agreement in the derived inverse construction, indicating that, in fact, ergative case/agreement may index a derived subject.⁴ I submit that it is quite natural to think of the Algonquian

²This role is not agent, because ergative case can also appear on instruments, causers of psychological states, and experiencers in some languages. The role is generally thought to be some sort of more vague “external argument” role. See, for instance, Woolford 2006. For extensive arguments that ergative case is *not* related to thematic role, see Comrie 1978.

³Phillips (1995) presents a possible case, that of Yimas (Papuan). In this language, subjects of intransitives, even non-agentive ones (like the subject of the verb meaning ‘die’), can trigger ergative agreement under certain conditions. If the subjects of some nonagentive intransitive verbs are derived, as in the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978), Yimas is also a counterexample to Marantz’s ergative case generalization.

⁴See Bruening (2001, to appear) for arguments that the inverse involves a step of syntactic movement, of the object over the subject.

This type of case has been referred to as “lexical” case, “inherent” case, or “quirky” case; to avoid the question of whether there are different varieties, I will simply refer to “non-structural case.”

If this is the distinction—case not depending on the particular lexical items involved or the particular thematic role assigned, but rather the structure of the clause—then ergative case really has to be viewed as a structural case. There is a prime example in ergative languages of selecting lexical items (verbs) and thematic roles being held constant, but the structure changing just like it does in the passive. This is the antipassive. In the antipassive, the object is removed or demoted to an oblique. In every ergative language, the subject’s case changes, from ergative to absolutive or nominative:⁵

(11) Yidin^y (Dixon 1979, (26–27))

- a. **wagud^ya-ŋgu** d^yugi gunda-l (galba:n-da)
man-Erg tree.Abs cut-Pres (axe-Inst)
‘The man is cutting a tree (with an axe).’
- b. **wagud^ya** gunda-:d^yi-ŋ d^yugi-:l (galba:n-da)
man.Abs cut-AntiPass-Pres tree-Loc (axe-Inst)
‘The man is cutting a tree (with an axe).’

(12) Inuit (Bittner and Hale 1996b, (57))

- a. **Juuna-p** Anna kunip-p-a-a.
Juuna-Erg Anna.Nom kiss-Ind-[+tr]-3S/3S
‘Juuna kissed Anna.’
- b. **Juuna** (Anna-mik) kunis-si-v-u-q.
Juuna.Nom (Anna-Inst) kiss-AntiPass-[-tr]-3Sg
‘Juuna kisses/is kissing (Anna).’

In both pairs of examples, the thematic role of the subject does not change from the active to the antipassive (it is the cutter in Yidin^y and the kisser in Inuit), nor does the verb involved (‘cut’ and ‘kiss’, respectively). If the definition of structural case is accepted to be as it was described above, namely case changing when the structure changes but thematic roles and lexical items are held constant, ergative is structural. (The same facts hold in languages that have ergative-absolutive verbal agreement rather than case assignment to nominals; in the antipassive, the subject agrees as an absolutive, not as an ergative. For some examples from Mayan languages, see Larsen and Norman 1979.)

This conclusion aligns perfectly with the conclusion arrived at above, that Marantz’s ergative case generalization is incorrect. Ergative case is exactly like accusative case in being assigned structurally and not thematically. Derived subjects may bear ergative case, just like derived objects may bear accusative case; and, by the very definition of structural case, ergative case must be structural, just like accusative case.

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⁵For the purposes of this paper, I will follow numerous authors in considering nominative and absolutive to be the same case, the unmarked one. For contrary views, see Legate (2006) and Massam (2006).

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