

## There is No Absolutive Case

In this paper, we argue that absolutive case, that is an abstract Case for intransitive subjects and transitive objects, does not exist. Our proposal supports a separationist theory of morphology, whereby abstract syntactic Case is realized morphologically as faithfully as possible based on the morphological resources of the language (e.g. Halle & Marantz 1993)

**The Proposal** We demonstrate that languages that *prima facie* exhibit absolutive case fall into one of two categories: (1) absolutive as nominative, or (2) absolutive as a morphological default. In addition, we follow Woolford 1997, *inter alia*, in analysing ergative as inherent case on (transitive) thematic subjects.

**Absolutive as Nominative** (see e.g. Murasugi 1992, Bittner 1994, Ura 2001) In this class of languages, what has been called "absolutive" is structural nominative Case. The inherent case-marked transitive subject (A) fails to satisfy the properties of the head of TP; the transitive object (O) is not assigned accusative case by transitive *v*; therefore, T licenses structural nominative Case on O. The intransitive subject (S) is assigned structural nominative Case by T. Absolutive-as-nominative languages typically exhibit subject agreement marking triggered by transitive objects. Such languages include Hindi (Mahajan 1990), Archi (Kibrik 1979, van Valin 1981). These form part of a larger class of languages with nominative objects in the presence of inherent case-marked subjects, including Icelandic (e.g. Andrews 1976, Thrainsson 1979, Zaenen et al 1985, Sigurdsson 1989, 2002, Holmberg & Hroarsson 2003), Tamil (Ura 1996, Lehmann 1993), Russian (Bailyn 1991).

**Absolutive as Morphological Default** In this class of languages, what has been called "absolutive" is structural nominative Case on S, and structural accusative Case on O. Transitive *v* licenses structural accusative case on O; the inherent case-marked A satisfies the properties of T. S is assigned structural nominative Case by T. Therefore, syntactically, we have an ergative-nominative-accusative language. However, the language lacks both accusative case morphology and nominative case morphology. Therefore, both S and O are morphologically realized by the morphological default case. We provide evidence for absolutive-as-morphological default languages from Warlpiri, Niuean (reinterpreting Massam to appear), Enga (data from Li & Lang 1979, van Valin 1982). Absolutive-as-morphological default languages do not otherwise exhibit morphology for accusative case or for nominative case. They may exhibit subject agreement triggered by A and S, and object agreement triggered by O (Warlpiri, Enga). The object of prepositions may bear "absolutive" (that is, accusative Case realized by the default case morphology) (Warlpiri, Niuean, Enga), as may applicative objects (Niuean). If one case is unavailable in nonfinite clauses, it is "absolutive" on S that is unavailable (that is nominative Case licensed by (finite) T) whereas "absolutive" on O is available (that is accusative Case licensed by transitive *v*) (Warlpiri, Enga). Such languages form part of a larger class of languages with accusative objects in the presence of inherent-case marked subjects, including Kuku-Yalanji, Ngiyambaa, Waga-Waga, Warrgamay, Yidiny, Cashinawa (Dixon 1994), Kham (Bittner 1994, Watters 1973), Nez Perce (Woolford 1997, Carnie & Cash (to appear), Faroese (Woolford 2003, Barnes 1986).

**Further Predictions** Finally, we consider a prediction of the analysis for split ergative languages. For any tense/aspect-based split ergative language with overt accusative case or nominative case morphology, the language must be an absolutive-as-nominative language. This is because if the language has accusative case or nominative case morphology in the morphological inventory for a particular DP-type, it could not insert a morphological default instead. Morphological realization of syntactic features is governed by the Subset Principle (Halle 1997, also Kiparsky's (1973) Elsewhere Condition). We demonstrate that the prediction is confirmed for a range of ergative languages.

Select Data:

Archi

- (1) Buwa d-irXin  
mother(II).ABS IIsg-work  
"Mother works"
- (2) Buwa-mu Xalli b-ar-Si b-i  
mother(II)-Erg bread(III) IIIsg-bake-Prog IIIsg-Aux  
"Mother is baking the bread"

Warlpiri

- (3) ... kurdu-ku/\*kurdu jarda-nguna-nja-rlarni  
child-DAT/\*child.ABS sleep-lie-Nonfinite-NoControl  
"... while the child (was) sleeping"
- (4) ... karnta-patu-rlu miyi/\*miyi-ku purra-nja-puru  
woman-PI-Erg food.ABS/\*food.DAT cook-Nonfinite-Temporal  
"... while the women (are) cooking food"

Niuean

- (5) Ne ahu e ia e tau: toa aki e akau  
Past slay ERG(PN) he ABS(CN) PI hero with ABS(CN) stick  
"He slayed the heroes with a club"

Enga

- (6) Baa-mE menA dOko pyA-la-nya mAsi-ly-a-mo  
he-ERG pig.ABS DEF kill-Infinitive-desire think-Pres-3sg-Particle  
"He wants to kill the pig"

References:

Carnie, Andrew & Phillip Cash. to appear. Tree-Geometric Relational Hierarchies and Nuumiipuutlmt (Nez Perce) Case. In Alana Johns, Diane Massam, & Juvenal Ndayiragije (eds) Ergativity. Kluwer.

Massam, Diane. to appear. Neither Absolutive nor Ergative is Nominative or Accusative. In Alana Johns, Diane Massam, & Juvenal Ndayiragije (eds) Ergativity. Kluwer.