Person-Case Effects in Tseltal: What PCC in Ergative Languages Looks Like

Controversy surrounds two central questions in the theory of case and agreement: (A) the proper explanation for the ubiquitous *person-case constraint* (PCC; Bonet 1991), which prohibits 1/2-person direct objects in the presence of an indirect object; and (B) the nature and source of *ergative* case. Some, but not all, recent accounts of PCC attribute the effect to a single head checking features of multiple goals (Anagnostopoulou 2003, 2005; Béjar & Rezac 2003 *vs*. Bonet 1991, Adger & Harbour 2007, *i.a.*) Likewise, some accounts analyze ergative as an inherent case assigned by *v* to its specifier, but this too is controversial (Woolford 1997, Legate 2008 *vs*. Marantz 2000, Bobaljik 2008, *i.a.*) This paper argues that the interaction of PCC with ergative agreement in *Tseltal* (Mayan, Mexico; author's fieldwork) narrows down the space of viable proposals, providing simultaneous support for multiple-agree theories of PCC and inherent-case theories of ergative case.

Multiple agree accounts of PCC crucially propose that the φ-feature [person] on an NP needs licensing, and that a probe's second instance of Agree cannot license 1st or 2nd person. In an accusative language, if the φ-probes include finite T and *v* (but not Appl)*,* we expect to find PCC effects mainly in ditransitive configurations — since it is *v* that will find itself the sole available probe for two NPs in its domain. In an ergative language, if the inherent-case proposal is correct, *v* does not probe its domain or assign structural case. This leaves finite T as the only source of structural case for lower nominals that might otherwise have been separately probed by *v* — which predicts in turn that PCC effects should arise whenever finite T must probe more than one such nominal. This configuration should arise, for example, in cases of non-finite complementation in an ergative language, whenever the subordinate clause contains a nominal direct object — and matrix finite T must probe a higher nominal before it reaches this direct object.

In this paper I show that Tseltal confirms this prediction. Like accusative languages, Tseltal shows a PCC restriction in mono-clausal ditransitives (1). Crucially, however, Tseltal also shows the PCC effect in bi-clausal constructions involving non-finite "clauselet" embedding (2-3) — so long as the matrix verb's other argument is absolutive (2), and not ergative (3). This is explained as follows. Tseltal ergative is an inherent, θ-related case assigned by *v*, a claim independently supported by the absence of raising to ergative in Tseltal (*vs*. Artiagoitia 2001, Rezac 2006 on Basque). If θ-related case on a nominal is realized as a phasal PP (Rezac 2008), then Tseltal ergative NPs are expected to be invisible to higher φ-probes. In (2a-b), there is a single φ-probe: the matrix T, which is the source of absolutive agreement. 2a is a raising construction, so the probe's first agreement target is the clauselet subject. The matrix T continues to probe, finding the embedded object and agreeing with it. Because this is T's second agreement relation, the [person] features of the embedded object cannot be licensed, yielding a PCC restriction. The situation is different if the embedding verb assigns inherent ergative to its subject, as in (3). Here the matrix subject receives ergative from the matrix *v*, and is thus invisible to the φ-probe on matrix T. Consequently, the first agreement target reached by matrix T is the embedded object. Consequently, its [person] features can be licensed, and no PCC restriction is observed. As expected, absolutive agreement with the embedded object is realized on the matrix verb. This account makes two other correct predictions: first, that other quirky-subject embedding verbs also fail to exhibit PCC effects; and that PCC holds in Tseltal ditransitives regardless of whether the ditransitive clause is active or passive (4). Finally, note the crucial role played by the proposal that θ-related ergative case on Spec, *v*P is invisible to φ-probes in Tseltal. If it were visible, PCC effects would surface in simple transitive clauses. These are in fact the properties of the Icelandic quirky-subject construction, as analyzed by Anagnostopoulou (2005; also references therein) — now distinguished from Tseltal transitive clauses by one parameter (Rezac 2008).

(1) a. lah y-ʔaʔ-b-at   j-k'oht mut
         PFV ERG:3-give-APPL-ABS:2 1-NC   chicken
         'He gave you a chicken'

     b. * lah y-ʔaʔ-b-at   joʔon(-eʔ)
         PFV ERG:3-give-APPL-ABS:2 me(-CL)
         'He gave you me'

(2) a. yakal-on ta   spetel   te   alal-eʔ
         PROG-ABS:1 PREP ERG:3-hug-NF DET baby-CL
         'I am hugging the baby'

     b. * yakal-on ta   spetel   ja7at(-eʔ)
         PROG-ABS:1 PREP ERG:3-hug-NF you-CL
         'I am hugging you'

(3) a. j-k'an   spetel   te   alal-eʔ
         ERG:1-hug   ERG:3-hug-NF DET man-CL
         'I want to hug the baby'

     b. j-k'an-at   spetel   (ja7at-eʔ)
         ERG:1-hug-ABS:2 ERG:3-hug-NF you-CL
         'I want to hug you'

(4) a. ʔaʔ-b-ot-on   me   mut-eʔ
         give-APPL-PASS-ABS:1   DET chicken-CL
         'I was given a chicken'

     b. * ʔaʔ-b-ot-on   jaʔat-eʔ
         give-APPL-PASS-ABS:1 you-CL
         'I was given you'

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