

On the nature of case in Basque: structural or inherent?

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1. Introduction¹

In this squib I question the hypothesis that case is structural in Basque (Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Fernández 1998 Laka 1993 among others). I claim that case morphology is best explained as inherent (Chomsky 1981,1995); as a direct reflection of thematic role. This view, originally suggested in Levin (1983), has as a consequence that this grammar is not *ergative* in the sense of Bobaljik (1992), Bittner and Hale (1996), Fernández (1998), or Laka (1993, 2000).

2. Case Theory and Structural Case

The main empirical motivation for keeping Case Theory separate from Theta Theory in the *Principles-and-Parameters* model (Chomsky 1981, 1986) is the fact that case and theta role are not equivalent phenomena: an argument bearing a theme theta role can surface as nominative or as accusative (1a,b), and conversely, nominative case can be assigned to either an agent or a theme (1b,c).

- (1) a. She sank.
b. A storm sank her.
c. A storm arose.

In the *Principles-and-Parameters* (P&P) model of grammar, nominative and accusative case are assigned to NPs that occupy specific positions in the syntactic structure at the level of S-structure: nominative is assigned by Infl to NPs in the specifier of IP, and accusative is assigned by V to its complement/sister NP (Chomsky 1981, 1986). This is why nominative and accusative are called *structural* cases: they are assigned to whichever NP sits in the relevant structural position, regardless of the theta role it is assigned at D-structure, and regardless of what category assigns that theta

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role. P&P also differentiates the notions of *structural* and *inherent* case: structural case is dissociated from theta role assignment, but inherent case is indeed equivalent to it, and can only be assigned by a theta role assigner to its assignee. Inherent case then correlates with thematic assignment, and therefore, there can be no dissociation between theta role and inherent case. This distinction between Case Theory and Theta Theory on the one hand, and between *structural* and *inherent* case on the other, is maintained in the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995:114). What varies with respect to P&P are the structural positions where cases are checked: nominative and accusative case checking involve Spec-head relations with Agr_s and Agr_o respectively (Chomsky 1995:173).

3. Nominative and ergative grammars

Given this account of structural case, and following Bobaljik (1992), Chomsky (1995:176) assumes that the different case patterns found in nominative versus ergative grammars arise from the choice of case-checking position in intransitive sentences: if Agr_s is kept active and Agr_o inert, the nominative/accusative case pattern arises, and if Agr_o is kept active and Agr_s inert, then the ergative/absolutive case pattern arises. In this account of nominative versus ergative case patterns, the case names *nominative* and *ergative* turn out to be descriptive labels corresponding to the structural case checked in Spec-Agr_s, and the case names *accusative* and *absolutive* correspond to the structural case checked in Spec-Agr_o. Both parametric choices involve structural case, and therefore it is predicted that dissociations of the sort illustrated in (1) are to be found also in ergative grammars. This is indeed the case, as we see in the following examples from Burushaski (2) and West Greenlandic (3) (from Manning 1996):

- (2) a. Ne hír-e phaló bók-i.
 the_{masc} man_{erg} seed_{pl-abs} sow_{3sg.masc.S}
 ‘The man planted the seeds.’
 b. Ne hir yált-i.
 the_{masc} man_{abs} yawn_{Pret.3sg.masc.S}
 ‘The man yawned.’

- (3) a. Oli-p neqi neri-vaa.
 Oli_{erg} meat_{abs} eat_{ind.tr.3sg.3sg}
 ‘Oli eats meat.’

376 *Itziar Laka*

- b. Oli sinipoq.
Oli_{abs} sleep_{ind.intr.3sg}
'Oli sleeps.'

Examples (2a,b) illustrate the case of an agentive NP *ne hir* 'the man', bearing ergative (2a) and absolutive (2b), and (3a, b) illustrate the same dissociation for the agentive NP *Oli*. If this account of ergativity is correct in its general outline, as I assume, both nominative and ergative grammars are minimal parametric variations within the general mechanism of structural case assignment.

4. Case morphology in Basque: unaccusatives

If we consider the grammatical equivalents of (1) in Basque, we find no direct evidence that case and theta role are dissociated (4):

- (4) a. Txalupa hondora-tu da.
boat_{det.abs} sink_{perf} is
'The boat sank.'
- b. Ekaitz-a-k txalupa hondora-tu du.
storm_{det.erg} boat_{det.abs} sink_{perf} has
'The storm sank the boat.'
- c. Ekaitz-a sor-tu da.
storm_{det.abs} arise_{perf} is
'A storm arose'

In these examples, there is no manifest dissociation between case and theta role: the NP *txalupa* 'the boat', which is a theme in both sentences, bears absolutive case regardless of whether the sentence is intransitive, as in (4a), or transitive as in (4b). On the other hand, the NP *ekaitza* 'the storm' changes case as it changes theta role: in (4b) it is an agent, and carries ergative case, but in (4c) it is a theme, and it carries absolutive case. Given the general account of nominative versus ergative grammars outlined in section 3, the data in (4) are easily accounted for: in ergative grammars absolutive case is the only available case in intransitive sentences, and thus the account predicts the assignment of absolutive in unaccusative predicates like (4a) and (4c), as it predicts the assignment of ergative case to the agent of a transitive predicate like (4b). So far, then, the data in (4) are uninformative as to the nature of case in Basque: the pattern that arises is

the one predicted by most accounts of ergativity (Bobaljik 1992, Bittner and Hale 1996 Fernández 1998, Laka 2000, Nash 1995).

5. Transitive unergatives

Unergative predicates constitute a very relevant piece of data in order to find instances of case/theta role dissociation in ergative languages: if the subject carries absolutive case, then we have a clear instance of case/theta role dissociation, and we can conclude that case is structural (2b), (3b). Consider the equivalent sentences in Basque:

- (5) a. Gizon-a-k aharrausi egi-n du.
man_{det.erg} yawn do_{perf} has
'The man yawned.'
b. Oli-k lo egi-ten du.
Oli_{erg} sleep do_{impf} has
'Oli sleeps.'

If (5a,b) are intransitive, then the ergative case on the subject NPs is not predicted. Uribe-Etxebarria (1989), Bobaljik (1993), Hale and Keyser (1993) and Laka (1993) have argued that (5a, b) are in fact transitive sentences: in (5a) there are two argument NPs, one is *gizona* 'the man' and the other one *aharrausi* 'yawn'. The verb *egin* 'to do' assigns a theme theta role to *aharrausi* 'yawn' and an agent theta role to *gizona* 'the man'. Therefore, both ergative and absolutive case are necessarily assigned (or checked), as in (2a), (3a) and (4b). Similarly, (5b) is a transitive sentence where *egin* 'to do' takes two arguments: *Oli* and *lo* 'sleep'. The works mentioned above provide detailed evidence in favor of this account, which I take to be essentially correct. As in the case of unaccusative predicates (4a,c), the data from these light-verb type unergative predicates can be explained within an account based on structural case, but they do not provide overt evidence of dissociation between case and theta role.

6. The 'ari' progressive

Transitive unergatives are not syntactically equivalent to (2b) or (3b), where an agentive NP carries absolutive case. As first discussed in Levin (1983), the *ari*-progressive construction looks like a candidate for such a case/theta role dissociation:

- (6) a. Gizon-a aharrausi egiten ari da.
 Man_{det.abs} yawn making PROG is
 ‘The man is yawning.’
 b. Oli lo egiten ari da.
 Oli_{abs} sleep making PROG is
 ‘Oli is sleeping.’

Compare (6a, b) with (5a,b): no ergative case is assigned in the progressive sentences. The *ari*-progressive has been argued to be an antipassive by Postal (1977); if this were the case, it would constitute direct evidence that case is structural in Basque because antipassives in ergative languages are in this respect the mirror image of passives in accusative languages: a passive results in the assignment of nominative to a theme, and an antipassive results in the assignment of absolutive to an agent. However, as argued by Hualde and Ortiz de Urbina (1987) and Laka (2005), this construction is not an antipassive: *ari* is an unaccusative verb, meaning ‘to be engaged (in)’. This unaccusative verb assigns a theme role to its NP argument and it takes a locative-like predicate that can (but need not)² be an infinitival clause. In short, the syntactic structure of sentences like (6a,b) is biclausal, and it contains two verbs, as shown schematically in (7) (recall that Basque is head-final):

- (7) NP_i [PP[NP[IP PRO_i NP V] NOM] P_{loc}] V_{ari} INFL

Once we consider the syntactic structure of the *ari*-progressive, we can see that the apparent dissociation between case and theta role vanishes. There are two verbs in this structure: (a) the unaccusative verb *ari* (V_{ari}) in the main clause assigns a theme theta role to its subject (NP_i); this verb also takes a PP ([PP]) headed by the locative postposition *-n*. The complement of the locative postposition is a nominalized clause ([NP]) headed by the nominalizer *-te*, which takes the infinitival sentence headed by the embedded verb (V). (b) the embedded verb (V) heads the nominalized infinitival clause, and it assigns theta roles to its arguments within its own clause. The external argument of this infinitival clause (PRO_i) is controlled by the subject of the main clause (NP_i). Crucially, the matrix subject that surfaces with absolutive case (NP_i) is not an argument of the embedded verb, but of *ari* ‘to be engaged in’. This progressive construction, then, is

² For details on this and other progressive constructions, see Hualde and Ortiz de Urbina (1987) and Laka (2005).

essentially the same as (4a,c): an instance of absolutive case borne by a theme NP. A grammatically minded translation of the sentences in (6) into English makes this point clearer: (6a) is akin to ‘the man is engaged in yawning’, and (6b) literally means ‘Oli is engaged in sleeping’. For the purposes of this squib, the relevant conclusion to be drawn from the study of the progressive is that *gizona* ‘the man’ in (6a) and *Oli* in (6b) are not examples of agent NPs marked with absolutive case. Rather, they are instances of *themes* bearing absolutive, which we find happens consistently, so far, in the grammar of Basque. There is no dissociation between case and theta role in the progressive either.

7. Intransitive unergatives

Let us now consider instances of unergative predicates that show no signs of transitivity. The following data are well known problem cases for all accounts of case in Basque that involve the notion of structural case (Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Bobaljik 1993, Laka 1993, Fernández 1998 among others):

- (8) a. Klara-k ondo eskia-tzen du.
Klara_{erg} well ski_{impf} has
‘Klara skies well.’
b. Erloju-a-k ondo funtziona-tzen du.
Watch_{det.erg} well work_{impf} has
‘The watch works well.’

The sentences in (8) are instances of unergative predicates (Levin 1983, Alberdi 2003), but unlike the light-verb type unergatives we have considered in (5), here there is no sign of transitivity, that is, there is no cognate object that could activate the assignment (or checking) of absolutive case, which would in turn permit the assignment (or checking) of ergative case to the agentive NPs. Recall that in structural-case accounts of ergativity, assignment of absolutive case is required whenever ergative case is assigned. In fact, as we saw in (2b) (3b), ergative grammars systematically assign absolutive case to agentive arguments of intransitive sentences. That is the reason why (8a,b), the grammatical equivalents of (2b) and (3b) are problematic cases: their subjects should display absolutive case, not ergative.

The set of intransitive unergatives is relatively small in the lexicon of Basque (see Alberdi 2003 for a thorough estimation). Since Sarasola 1977, it has been claimed that: (a) all intransitive verbs borrowed from romance

380 *Itziar Laka*

in recent times are like (8) regardless of their conceptual structure; (b) all verbs like (8) are borrowings from romance, and (c) these verbs act like nominative/accusative exceptions in the grammar. Alberdi (2003) argues in detail that there is no empirical basis for such claims; his overview of recent verb-borrowings and their case frames shows that: (a) when an unaccusative verb is borrowed from romance, there is no ergative case on the subject as shown in (9a), and only those borrowed verbs that are unergative behave like (8). As for (b), not all intransitive unergatives are borrowings (9b):

- (9) a. Gizon-a errendi-tzen da.
man_{det} surrender_{i,impf} is.
'The man surrenders.'
- b. Eguzki-a-k disdira-tzen du.
sun_{det,erg} shine_{i,impf} has
'The sun shines.'
- c. *Eguzki-a-k itsaso-a disdira-tzen du.
sun_{det,erg} sea_{det} shine_{i,impf} has
Intended meaning: 'The sun shines the sea.'

The unergative verb *disdira(tu)* '(to) shine' in (9b) is not a borrowing and yet its agentive argument displays ergative case, although the sentence is truly intransitive (9c). These predicates do not constitute a 'borrowed' exception in the grammar; they are unaccounted for within a structural case approach, but are straightforwardly explained if case is inherent.

8. An Inherent case approach to Basque

Most data on case assignment in Basque are not informative on the issue of whether case is structural or inherent in this language: both structural and inherent approaches can explain the case patterns that arise in this grammar (sections 4 and 5); there are no instances where case morphology and theta role are clearly dissociated, which would render the inherent-case hypothesis untenable. Linguists familiar with Basque are aware that truly intransitive unergatives require special provisos or must otherwise directly be acknowledged as flat-out counterexamples to the general case assignment mechanism. A solution to this long standing problem is to turn the tables around and rescue Levin's (1983) original proposal that case is a D-structure phenomenon in Basque (or, in updated terms, that case is inherent, theta-related). A detailed analysis of the *ari*-progressive shows

that it does not pose a problem for this hypothesis, an issue that Levin (1983) wondered about. Once we conclude that progressives do not break the general pattern of case and thematic role correlation we find in this grammar, we can look at truly intransitive unergatives as the crucial evidence that case is inherent. This approach can also account for the fact that case is freely assigned in infinitivals, and could explain why Basque stands as one of the few (if not the only) ergative grammars with no antipassive, and no true case-split, both common features of ergative languages, not to be expected if case is indeed inherent.³

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³ The data and generalizations in this squib hold of western dialects but not of all eastern varieties. As suggested in Aldai (2002), some eastern varieties might well be 'ergative'; Oyharçabal (1993) shows that eastern Basque has absolutive subjects in intransitive unergative predicates; space prevents us from discussing them here.

382 *Itziar Laka*

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