Accounting for Ergativity[i]

How does current language research account for ergativity? This special issue takes this question as its central theme, and does so by bringing together a variety of contributions that provide a wider empirical basis to characterize ergativity, as well as proposals to account for it that come from different areas of language research, including theoretical linguistics, generative typology, language acquisition and language processing. The range of languages considered include, among others, the Caucasian languages Avar and Circassian, the Isolate European language Basque, the Mayan language Chol, the Indo-european Hindi, the Semitic Neo-Aramaic varieties, the Austronesian language Tagalog and the Pama–Nyungan languages Warlpiri and Dyirbal.

The term "ergative" is now a hundred years old, since it was put to use in linguistics by Dirr in 1912 (Manaster-Ramer 1994). So, we are in this sense celebrating the centenary of ergativity. However, the linguistic phenomenon covered by that term was encountered by descriptive linguists and grammarians already centuries ago (Larramendi 1729 for Basque and Fabricius 1801 for Greenlandic were probably the first to describe ergative grammars). Originally, a common descriptive term did not exist, and a variety of different names were given to the case-patterns scholars encountered that did not conform to the nominative-accusative standard set by Latin (Haspelmath 2009). Since the introduction of the term "ergativity" into modern linguistics at the start of last century, it still took more than half a century of arduous descriptive work and typological studies that revealed a fuzzy but consistent pattern, for ergativity enter the central arena of linguistic theorizing. Research on ergativity as a phenomenon that linguistic theory cannot ignore sprung with force in the seventies (Comrie 1978, Dixon 1979), and it has continued to be a lively area of research since then (for recent reviews see Aldridge 2008 and McGregor 2009).

During the last decades, research on ergativity has progressively clarified a number of descriptive/typological matters (types of ergativity, types of phenomena where ergativity surfaces in natural languages, better descriptions of ergative grammars) and has therefore delineated in a sharper way the scientific issues at stake (the status of grammatical relations in linguistic theory, the nature of transitivity, the mapping of thematic roles into grammatical relations, among others). However, there is still no shared understanding on the nature of ergativity, on how to implement it in linguistic theory, and on what impact it may have in other areas of language research. Many questions are still under discussion: is the ergative a structural or an inherent case? What is split ergativity? Are ergative languages mirror-images of accusative ones?

Despite the centrality of the questions it raises, ergativity is still an elusive trait of human language. The challenges that it posses have generated a considerable body of research that has become a valuable source of insight into the nature of language. For instance, ergativity has plainly shown that the traditional, descriptive notion of subject, as inherited from Aristotelian thinking, is inadequate to properly characterize the full realm of argument markings found across languages. Ergativity has therefore forced

linguistics to question the universality of subjects (ever since Anderson 1976), and research on ergativity has been instrumental in the development of a finer and more nuanced understanding of what subjects and objects are, the range of variation that grammars might offer in their distribution and marking, and what their status is within a general theory of human language. In this respect, it is noteworthy that subjects are the only exception to theta assignment by a head within the configurational approach to thematic relations adopted by Chomsky (1995, 2007, 2008) in the Minimalist Program.

Inextricably tied to the question of what subjects and objects ultimately are, language researchers who dwell on ergativity also encounter the challenge of properly characterizing the notion of transitivity, beyond the well-known realm of nominative languages, encompassing ergative languages as well. In a paper entitled "Antipassive and Ergativity in Tagalog", Aldridge centers on the issue of transitivity, and shows how identifying transitive and intransitive clauses is not a straightforward task in Tagalog. There is in fact a long standing controversy in Austronesian linguistics regarding the transitivity of 'actor focus' clauses. Aldridge argues that 'actor focus' clauses pattern with antipassives in other uncontroversially ergative languages, which in turn provides support to the conclusion that they are intransitive in Tagalog. Tagalog's case pattern, Aldridge argues, is accounted for because transitive v in ergative clauses values structural absolutive case with the object DP and assigns inherent ergative case to the external argument in its specifier. Further, in intransitive (including antipassive) clauses, v is intransitive and accordingly has no case features to assign or value. The highest DP in vP values absolutive case with T, and this makes the object in an antipassive dependent on the lexical verb for inherent case.

As discussed by Aldridge in her contribution to this volume, even determining whether a given language is ergative or not can be a contentious issue, which requires a proper inquiry into the very nature of this linguistic trait. Differentially marking transitive subjects and clustering together both intransitive subjects and objects is a hallmark ergative trait, but there are many varieties and flavors of ergativity[1], and a full account of the phenomenon must necessarily include the full range of possibilities it allows for. The general issue of what different varieties of ergative grammars are allowed and why is taken up by Legate in this volume. Building on previous work (Legate 2008), Legate's paper, entitled "Types of Ergativity" builds on the dissociation between syntactically-assigned case and its morphological realization to provide an account of the diversity of specific ergative grammars. The proposal claims that the correlation of absolutive case with nominative is not always appropriate, and in some instances absolutive is a morphological default inserted for syntactically-assigned nominative on the intransitive subject and syntactically-assigned accusative on the transitive object. Legate argues that this hypothesis is supported by the properties of the Warlpiri lexicon, and that it provides a natural account of the purported syntactic ergativity in Dyirbal, which turns out to be the result of a syntactic sensitivity to the nominative and the accusative. In her paper, Legate also provides a detailed discussion of the claim that ergative is an inherent case, as well as the predictions that this hypothesis makes for a general account of ergativity in language.

The picture of consensus that emerges from cross-linguistic research is that ergativity a complex trait, plausibly the result of a combination of more primitive grammatical

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[1] See for instance, the phenomenon of Optional Ergative Marking to which a Special Issue of Lingua was devoted (McGregor and Verstraete 2010), which we do not consider in this issue.

properties. It is thus not surprising that there are different varieties of ergative grammars described in the typological literature, which share some properties but not others. Among the languages that are described as ergative, there are many different types and varieties, which makes it essential that research in this area covers a wide empirical cross-linguistic basis. This intricate diversity within the ergative class is illustrated throughout this volume, very particularly by Doron and Khan, in a contribution entitled "The Typology of Morphological Ergativity in Neo-Aramaic", as they undertake an exploration of a group of dialects of Neo-Aramaic that share some ergative features while diverging regarding others. Neo-Aramaic includes over a hundred different dialects originating in the border areas of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. While all Neo-Aramaic varieties display ergativity in their morphology, the trait developed relatively recently in this language family, descendant of a nominative type. Doron and Khan provide a classification of these varieties in three subtypes according to their degree of ergativity, as reflected in the distribution of the ergative marking of intransitive verbs. At the highest degree, the ergative marker is restricted to transitive and unergative verbs, and not found in unaccusatives. In the second degree, the ergative marker is optionally found with unaccusative verbs, whereas varieties at the lowest degree of ergativity mark all intransitive subjects as ergative. According to the authors, these possibilities suggest that ergative is not inherent but structural, assigned by v, and that the variation between dialects results from the distribution of the v category.

It is a well-known typological observation that ergative languages often display what are referred to as "splits" in the marking of arguments, and the name was created to suggest that under certain conditions these languages turn nominative. Are splits true cases of ergativity turning into nominativity? Or are splits epiphenomena resulting from independent factors? The issue of splits in ergativity is the focus of Coon's contribution, entitled "Split ergativity and transitivity in Chol", where two types of splits are accounted for in the ergative system of Chol, a Mayan language. Chol shows a "split-S" system, because in the non-perfective aspects an aspect-based split obtains, and both transitive and intransitive subjects receive the same morphological marking, that is, in the non-perfective aspects, *all* intransitive subjects pattern with transitive subjects. Extending on Laka (2006), Coon argues that the appearance of these splits results from differences in syntactic structure, rather than from different rules of Case assignment or agreement. Therefore, the pattern found in the "split" fall out from independent facts about the language and neither split represents a departure from ergative marking. A biclausal analysis of split ergativity may also account for splits in a number of other ergative languages, without any need to resort to special rules, and in turn it suggests there might be a grammatical basis for the universal tendency for ergative languages with aspectual splits to always retain the ergative pattern in the perfective aspect.

The grammatical principles and operations involved in ergative case assignment or licensing, and, by extension, in the case patterns found in ergative languages, constitutes a hot spot for research and discussion in linguistics. Several contributions in this issue focus on the question of whether ergative case is structural or inherent, and what the role of v is in ergative case. Preminger, for instance, explores the syntactic structure of unergative predicates in Basque, in the paper entitled "The absence of an implicit object in unergatives". The author argues that a certain class of unergative predicates that have been argued to have a transitive syntactic structure lack an internal argument. This claim has consequences for the pattern of case assignment in Basque, and in particular it

yields as a consequence that ergative must be inherent rather than structural, a contentious issue in Basque linguistics and ergativity research at large. Preminger discusses evidence that either supports or questions the inherent nature of ergative in Basque, and sketches what a theory of ergativity should provide in order to account for the range of facts.

Two other papers explore in detail the nature of ergative case by considering aspects of case marking in Hindi. In the paper entitled "Ergative Case and the Overt Light Verbs in Hindi", Mahajan considers the general issue of how to account for ergative case, and does so by examining patterns of ergative case assignment in Hindi compound verb constructions. These constructions contain predicates composed of a main verb and a light verb, with the light verb inflected. Mahajan argues that overt light verbs in Hindi play a critical role in assigning the ergative case. Specifically, Mahajan proposes that the data patterns can be accounted for if ergative case assignment and external argument introduction are carried out by different light verbs, such that in compound verb constructions with ergative subjects, the external argument is introduced as a PRO in the specifier of v and is controlled by a DP in the specifier of the overt light verb that assigns ergative case to this DP. The proposal thus suggests an architecture of grammar in which thematic roles and case features are always introduced by distinct heads.

The question of the nature of ergative case, whether inherent or structural, and the specific category of the ergative case marker is also explored in depth by Torrego, in the contribution entitled "The Unaccusative Case Pattern of Hindi and Auxiliary be". The paper discusses the unaccusative case pattern of ergative transitive predicates in Hindi, and derives it from a split between the workings of V and the head that introduces the subject. Following a system where object case requires the joint work of v and V, and the proposal by Mahajan that the ergative marker in Hindi is a P, Torrego conceives of P as a Voice head that combines with the v that introduces and case-marks the ergative subject with inherent case. Based on the premises, Torrego provides an approach to the *have-be* alternation that links the aspectual component of *have* to features encoded on v. All these frontier research questions on ergativity criss-cross the various contributions to the volume, and the insights provided by the authors weave a pattern that is a fair reflection of current accord and controversy around this linguistic trait.

An account for the dissociation between case marking and agreement morphology often found in ergative languages is put forth by Markman and Grashchenkov, in their paper entitle "On the adpositional nature of ergative subjects", who argue that ergative markers are morphologically dependent theta-assigning adpositions. The proposal can account for phenomena involving lack of parallelism between agreement and case marking in ergative languages, found in many ergative languages, of which the paper discusses in particular the cases of Circassian, Warlpiri, and Hindi. In this account, ergative agreement obtains when the verb agrees with the adpositional features and the φ- features of the ergative subject, while accusative agreement arises when the verb agrees solely with the φ- features of the subject. Ergative subjects fail to trigger agreement when the adposition acts as a blocker, which in turn depends on the manner in which the P combines with its argument, a parameter along which ergative languages vary. The proposal finds further support in the frequently discussed similarities between ergative subjects and nominal possessors, which the paper explores in detail.

The issue of the status of subjects and objects in ergative languages is tackled from a novel perspective in this volume, that of language processing: Polinsky, Gómez Gallo, Graff and Kravtchenko, in their contribution entitled "Subject Preference and Ergativity", inquire into processing preferences for relative clauses in Avar, a Caucasian ergative language. No differences in reading times obtain between ergative and absolutive object gaps when speakers process relative clauses, but in contrast, clauses containing absolutive subject gaps are processed faster. The authors argue that these results are ultimately due to the interaction of two antagonistic processing strategies, one favoring subject relatives and the other favoring morphologically cued clauses. These two strategies cancel each other out in terms of processing difficulty, which explains why reading times for the ergative subject and absolutive object relative clauses are similar. The results obtained by Polinsky and collaborators are different from what obtains in nominative languages, where a strong subject advantage obtains, and it suggests that the morphological differences between nominative and ergative grammars have an effect in the resulting processing preferences.

Given its complex nature, ergativity also presents challenging questions to the field of language acquisition, even though there are still very few studies on the acquisition of ergativity-related linguistic properties. This volume presents two pioneering instances of this type of study. In the paper entitled "The Case-Agreement Hierarchy in Acquisition", Austin investigates the acquisition of multipersonal agreement morphology in Basque by comparing absolutive and ergative agreement to dative agreement, searching for the factors behind the order of emergence of inflectional morphemes in language. According to Austin's data, production from children acquiring Basque replicates the implicational hierarchy of cases found in nominative languages (Blake, 2001), and thus, the factor that best predicts this developmental order is the complexity of inflectional features of the agreement morphemes, along with the assumption that children acquire the inflectional forms earliest which encode the fewest positive values for features. Importantly, this conclusion is valid regardless of whether the grammar is ergative or nominative.

The second instance of an acquisition study that tackles ergativity is provided by Ezeizabarrena's paper entitled "The (in)consistent ergative marking in early Basque: L1 versus child L2". Ezeizabarrena shows that early language acquisition data reveals an asymmetry in the acquisition of ergativity in the verbal domain as compared to the nominal domain, delayed by a few months. Neither language internal inconsistency nor interlinguistic influence can properly account for this asymmetry, whereby the production of ergative case marking shows a longer period of optionality before its systematically produced by children. These results support the hypothesis that the verbal and nominal domain are distinct morphological phenomena, that are likely dissociated in the architecture of grammar.

Lingua has devoted two previous special issues to ergativity: the first one, edited by Dixon (1987), covered foundational aspects of the syntax, morphology and pragmatics of ergativity in various theoretical frameworks and considering a variety of ergative languages; the second one (McGregor and Verstraete, 2010) was devoted to the phenomenon of optional ergative marking, a discourse-conditioned phenomenon that we have not included in this volume. The contributions in this third issue constitute a selection of the most significant papers presented at the *EHU International Workshop on Ergative languages* that took place in 2009 in Bilbao, at the University of the Basque

Country. We want to thank the authors, who agreed to take part in this special issue, and also the anonymous reviewers that helped make each contribution better. We thank all of them for making this volume possible.

On the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the term "ergative", this special issue presents a current portrait of research accounting for ergativity, were theoretical and typological approaches go hand in hand with experimental studies on acquisition and processing, hopefully opening up new avenues of evidence and research for old standing and far reaching question.

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