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The bigger the inventory, the bigger the legacy: Syntactic ergativity as epiphenomenon of feature (non)-inheritance

**Keywords:** syntactic ergativity; feature inheritance; wh-/phi-features; case assignment; A/Ā-movement; feature (un)interpretability and valuation

**Outline** A subset of morphologically ergative languages exhibits a ban on Ā-movement (relativization, interrogatives, etc.) of transitive subjects. I examine all barred types of ergative extraction, along with their repair strategies (antipassivization, resumption, etc.) in 24 languages from 10+1 families (Table 1), and suggest the following generalization: syntactic ergativity (SE) emerges in those configurations where the complementizer (C) head lacks (usually) a wh-feature, or alternatively, phi-features in need of valuation (Table 2). **Theoretical background** I adopt a system of C-to-T (and v-to-V) inheritance of phi (φ) and Case (K) features (Chomsky 2008), with two crucial assumptions: (i) the presence of at least one uninterpretable feature [*u*F] on phasal heads is a prerequisite for their specifier to be a legitimate final target of movement involving valuation; (ii) [*u*φ] and [*u*wh] are not universally available, but may be absent in some languages, as tested by certain diagnostics: morphological overtness subsumed to the lexicon for the former, or properties linked to the latter, like superiority effects (vs. multiple fronting), landing sites, DP/non-DP asymmetries and binding. **Proposal** I propose that SE arises as an epiphenomenon of the configuration-specific parameter on availability of uninterpretable wh- or φ-features: the presence of both entails no extraction ban, as the availability of [*u*wh] permits [*u*φ]/K to be inherited by T, and SpecCP to host the Ā-extracted argument; the absence of one of the two features causes the relevant restriction, the parameter holding not only across but also language-internally; the absence of both should render clause-bound final movement of the argument (or operator) to SpecCP impossible. Similarly, if some language lacks [uwh] on C, but forms, say, content interrogatives either in-situ or by means of a distinct trigger (e.g., Focus), SE should not emerge, as in Eskaleut or Austronesian languages. **Analysis** In syntactically ergative languages, C involves a single uninterpretable feature (usually [*u*φ]), along with any interpretable operator (Op) feature [*i*F] (e.g., Q, Rel), as it lacks [*u*wh]. If a DP contains an equivalent Op [*u*F], feature inheritance is obviated and C keeps its [*u*φ]/[K] bundle so that its specifier can be licensed to host the moving DP, otherwise the latter will fail to land to SpecCP and value its operator [*u*F]. Phi-agreement and absolutive (ABS) assignment therefore take place at CP, to which the object has to successively-cyclically raise for case. Yet, if the subject (already ergative-marked by v\*) carries an Op [*u*F], then it will compete with the internal argument at the edge of v\*, and the former would always be prioritized to raise to SpecCP due to higher specificity (being endowed with more features that match C, viz., [K] and [Op], even if case-marked), which results in valuing its own [*u*F], but also in saturating C’s [K] (a possibility independently motivated by case stacking) and stranding the object caseless, whose unvalued [*u*K] leads the derivation to crash at the interfaces. **Predictions** (i) If a marked ABS language involves inverse ABS assignment by v\* (and of ERG by C/T), a lack of [uwh] on C should restrict Ā-movement of the ABS: Roviana (Corston 1996) is likely to fit this profile. (ii) If ABS is assigned at SpecCP, then this position should (partly) exhibit A-properties: in Tagalog (1), a fronted interrogative pronoun shows no Weak Crossover effects. (iii) If a [*u*wh] was somehow involved in an otherwise wh-less syntactically ergative construction, then SE should disappear: the single counterexample (2) to the general absence of ergative extraction in Shipibo internally-headed relative clauses exceptionally contains an overt wh-element. (iv) If a morphologically ergative language shows evidence of absolutive assignment to the object by a lower head (v\* or V), then SE should not emerge, which seems to hold for languages like Warlpiri and Niuean (Legate 2006). (v) If a NOM-ACC language lacked [*u*wh], it should impose some equivalent restriction on Ā-movement of the object across the subject. Late Archaic Chinese (Aldridge 2010) and Slovenian (3) (Hladnik 2015) are plausible candidates. **Conclusion** SE reduces to a side-effect of the lack of uninterpretable features on C (viz., [*u*wh] or [*u*φ]) *qua* triggers, constraining C-to-T feature inheritance, and resulting in both case assignment and operator-feature agreement taking place at the phase head, which is thus rendered a mixed A/Ā position. .

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| ****Language family**** | ****Syntactically ergative**** | ****Syntactically non-ergative**** |
| Austronesian | Balinese, Indonesian, Seediq, Tagalog |  |
| Chukotko-Kamchatkan | Chukchi (in relativization) | Chukchi (in wh-questions) |
| Eskaleut | Inuktitut, South Baffin, Greenlandic |  |
| Katukinan | Kanamari |  |
| Nakh-Dagestanian |  | Hunzib, Ingush, Lezgian, Tsez |
| Oceanic | Roviana |  |
| Pama-Nyungan | Dyirbal | Ngiyambaa, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri |
| Pano-Tacanan | Shipibo-Konibo |  |
| Polynesian | Tongan | Niuean |
| Tsimshianic | Gitskan |  |
| Language isolate | Trumai | Basque |

Table 1: Morphologically ergative languages examined

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *****+φ***** | *****-φ***** |
| ***+wh*** | -SE (e.g. Warlpiri, Basque, Chukchi wh-questions) | **+SE** (e.g. Kanamari) |
| ***-wh*** | +SE (e.g. Greenlandic/Chukchi relative clauses, Tagalog, Shipibo) | **Prediction**: no clause-bound movement to SpecCP, whether +SE (e.g., wh-in-situ or pseudo-clefts in Tongan), or -SE (e.g., Japanese) |

Table 2: Interaction between availability of [*u*wh]/[*u*φ] on C and syntactic ergativity

# Examples

1. Tagalog (Miller 1988, pp. 113-114)

*Sinoi ang yumayapos sa=anak niyai?*

who NOM IMPF.AV-hug DAT=child 3.SG.GEN

‘Whoi hugs heri daughter?’

1. Shipibo-Konibo (Valenzuela 2003, p. 473)

*[Jawerato-n-ki yokat-ai] ja meni-kati-kan-ai.*

which-ERG-INT ask-PPl:ABS 3:ABS give-PST4-PL-INC

‘They gave her (her daughter) to whoever asked for (her).’

1. Slovenian (Hladnik 2015, p. 27)

a. *prijateljica, ki \_\_NOM igra šah*

friend.FEM that play.3SG chess

‘the friend who plays chess’

b*. prijateljica, ki \*(jo) pogrešam*

friend.FEM that she.ACC.CL miss.1SG

‘the friend who I miss’

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