Origin of Ergative Variation in Austronesian Languages

Aldridge (2004), Legate (2008), and Coon et al. (2011) have demonstrated for several language families that there are at least two types of ergative language, one in which absolutive case is licensed solely by T and one in which *v* (also) plays a role. In this paper, I propose an analysis of ergative variation in Austronesian languages in terms of the availability of a structural case feature on transitive *v*.

One diagnostic supporting the existence of two types of ergativity is the availability of absolutive case in nonfinite clauses. (1) shows that Tagalog allows overt absolutive objects to surface in nonfinite clauses, indicating that the source of absolutive case must be *v* and not T, given that nonfinite T is generally unable to license case. In contrast to Tagalog, the Formosan language Seediq does not allow absolutives to surface in nonfinite clauses. If there is an object, the embedded clause must be antipassive and the object in oblique case. This can be accounted for by positing that T is the sole source for absolutive case in Seediq.

A second argument comes from a little-known type of existential construction common in Philippine languages. In Tagalog, the existence of an individual is asserted by a nominal complement to the existential verb, as in (3a). An event can be asserted to exist with a reduced relative clause complement to the existential verb, as in (3b). The reduced nature of the relative clause In (3b) is suggested by the status of the agent of the embedded verb. Since the agent has ergative case in (3a), it must be contained within the embedded clause, which is transitive. In (3b), the agent appears with absolutive case, indicating that it cannot be contained within the transitive embedded clause but must be located in the intransitive matrix clause.

What is interesting about existentials like (3b) for the purposes of the discussion at hand is that they must make absolutive case available inside the reduced relative clause for the head nominal. This is clear, given that extraction has taken place. As a syntactically ergative language, only absolutives are able to undergo A'-movement in Tagalog, as shown in (4). This restriction also applies in reduced relatives, arguing in turn that case must be available in the clause to license the gap position or dislocated head nominal, i.e. *libro* 'book'.

However, the source of that case cannot be T. The relative clause in nominal existentials like (5a) can contain a temporal adverb, and this adverb can contradict a temporal adverb in the matrix clause. Event existentials can have a temporal adverb in the matrix clause, as in (5b). But the reduced relative in event existentials does not allow a temporal adverb in the embedded clause which conflicts with one in the matrix clause, as in (5c), suggesting the lack of a TP layer in the reduced relative. Consequently, *v* must be available in the reduced relative to supply case to the absolutive. Formosan languages like Seediq, which require T for absolutive case licensing, do not have event existentials like (3b) but require a full (finite) relative clause (of the type in 3a) in order to license a dislocated absolutive argument.

In the analysis, I correlate the difference between Philippine and Formosan languages with diachronic variation. The source of the ergative systems seen in these languages is a clausal nominalization (Starosta et al. 1982, Ross 2009, and others), which I analyze as *n*P in (6a). Genitive case (which is identical to ergative in the modern languages) is assigned to the external argument in *n*P. Since *n* has no structural case feature to license the internal argument, this DP moves to the edge of *n*P to check case with T. Note that absolutives in Seediq appear in clause-final position, suggesting support for the movement based analysis of case. The ergative system arises when *n*P is reanalyzed as *v*P in (6b). Philippine languages, which constitute a lower-order subgroup in the Austronesian family, have undergone a second innovation which fully transitivized this *v*P, resulting in the acquisition of a structural case feature on transitive *v*.

(1)   Nagba-balak   ang   babae-ng   [PRO tulung-an **si**   **Pedro**]
        INTR.PROG-plan   ABS   woman-LK   help-APPL ABS.PN   Pedro
        'The woman is planning to help Pedro.' (Aldridge 2004:105)

(2) a. M-n-osa   [PRO *m*-ari   **patis**   taihoku]   ka   Ape.
        NTR-PRV-go   INTR-buy   book.OBL   Taipei   ABS   Ape
        'Ape went to buy books in Taipei.'   (Aldridge 2004:114)

   b. *M-n-osa   [PRO burig-**un**   taihoku   *ka*   *patis*] ka   Ape.
        NTR-PRV -go   buy-TR   Taipei   ABS   book   ABS   Ape
        'Ape went to buy books in Taipei.'   (Aldridge 2004:115)

(3) a. May   [*libro*-ng   b<in>ili   **ng**   **babae**].
        exist   book-LK   <TR.PRV>buy   ERG   woman
        'There is a book which the woman bought.'

   b.   May   [b<in>ili-ng   *libro*] **ang**   **babae**.
        exist   <TR.PRV>buy-LK   book   ABS   woman
        'The woman bought a book.'

(4) a. isda-ng   b<in>ili   ng   babae   (Relativization on ABS: OK)
        fish-LK   <TR.PRV>buy   ERG   woman
        'fish that the woman bought'

   b. *babae-ng   b<in>ili   ang   isda   (Relativization on ERG: *)
        woman-ng   <TR.PRV>buy   ABS   fish
        'woman who bought the fish'

(5) a. *Kanina*   may   [DP love letter [CP na i-s<in>ulat=niya   **kahapon**]].
        just now   exist   love letter   LK APPL-<TR.PRV>write=3S.ERG   yesterday
        'Just now there was just a love letter which he/she wrote yesterday.'

   b.   [TP *Kanina*   May   [i-s<in>ulat=siya-ng   love letter]]
        just now   exist   APPL-<TR.PRV>write=3S.ABS-LK love letter
        'He/she wrote a love letter just now.'

   c. *[TP *Kanina*   may   [i-s<in>ulat=siya-ng   love letter   **kahapon**]]
        just now   exist   APPL-<TR.PRV>write=3S.ABS-LK love letter   yesterday
        '*Just now, he/she wrote a love letter yesterday.'

(6) a. [TP T[NOM] [nP DP[NOM]   [nP DP[GEN]   [NP N t_{NOM}]]]]   (Clausal nominalization)
   b.   [TP T[NOM] [vP DP[NOM]   [vP DP[GEN/ERG]   [vP V t_{NOM}]]]]   (T-absolutive)
   c.   [TP T   [vP DP[GEN/ERG]   v[ABS]   [vP V   DP[ABS]]]]   (*v*-absolutive)

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