

Typology I: Solution to Homework for Session 7

(All of these could be exam questions.)

- 1. Explain the term “ergative” in terms of the three universal core roles.** The term “ergative” is only used in certain case alignment systems where the S and A roles are not expressed by the same case, i.e. if the subject is expressed by different cases in intransitive and transitive sentences. In such systems, “ergative” denotes the case which is used to express the A role, i.e. the subject of transitive sentences.
- 2. Why would you be surprised to find a nominative-accusative language that marks the nominative with some prefix, but leaves the accusative case unmarked? By an analogous argument, explain what you would expect in an ergative-absolutive language.**
A nominative-accusative language expresses two roles (S and A) with the nominative case, and only one role (O) with the accusative case. Since every sentence has a subject, there will be far more NPs in the nominative than in the accusative case. Explicitly marking the nominative would therefore violate the general principle of language economy. It would mean a waste of effort to use a case marking in two thirds of the cases, and to use the shorter form to express a less common relation.
In an ergative-absolutive language, the absolutive is the case which covers two roles, and we would therefore expect the ergative case to be marked, and the absolutive case to be unmarked.
- 3. What is split ergativity? Why is it such a common phenomenon?**
Many ergative languages only use the ergative-absolutive system in some types of sentences, while at the same time using a nominative-accusative system in others. The boundary in such split case alignment systems can often be described in terms of NP semantics, using a definiteness hierarchy and an animacy hierarchy. The more definite and the more animate the Agent is, the more likely it is to be expressed by a nominative, whereas the ergative case is more likely for an inanimate or less definite Agent. This phenomenon can be explained by language economy, which often results in a tendency to only mark unusual configurations. The ergative is usually expressed by a case marker, whereas the nominative is not (see Exercise 2). This leads to a preference for the nominative to be used for NPs where agency can be expected, whereas the ergative is used for the unexpected case (an inanimate or remote Agent doing something).
- 4. Here are three example sentences from Chechen, a major North-east Caucasian language with basic word order SOV. Decide which alignment system the language uses, and justify your answer.**
 - Marjam jilxira. “Marjam cried.”
 - Cicko ch’aara bu’u. “The cat eats a fish.”
 - Marjamas cicig doexkira. “Marjam sold a cat.”

With the given knowledge of word order, it is reasonable to assume that *Marjam* and *Marjamas* are two different forms of the name “Marjam”,

whereas *cicko* and *cicig* are two different forms of the word for “cat”. The first sentence is intransitive, so “Marjam” is in the S role. The third sentence is transitive, so “Marjam” is again the subject, but this time in the A role. Since different forms are used for “Marjam” in the S and A roles, we can be sure that Chechen does not have a nominative-accusative system, and that *Marjamas* is the ergative form of *Marjam*. We would then also predict *cicko* to be in the ergative case in the second sentence, although we do not find the same case ending. In the third sentence, the cat is in the O role and has the form *cicig*, which we can assume to be the absolutive or the accusative case. Unfortunately, these data do not allow us to decide whether we are dealing with an ergative-absolutive or a tripartite system here. To decide this, we would need another sentence where the cat is in the S role. However, given our typological knowledge about the uncommonness of tripartite systems, it is still reasonable to assume that Chechen is most probably an ergative-absolutive language.