Case marking and sensitivity of little v: evidence from dialectal variation in Basque (and beyond)

1. Introduction. This paper presents an analysis of possible parameters of variation in terms of case marking and sensitivity of little v, on the basis of distinctions between subject case marking and auxiliary selection in eastern and western dialects of Basque. My account aims to provide a model which can be used to build up a cross-linguistic typology of case marking and auxiliary patterns and offers an alternative approach to understanding differences between ergative and accusative case systems.

2. Data. Basque exhibits an ergative-absolutive case system in which (very generally speaking) intransitive subjects receive the same case value as transitive objects, i.e. absolutive case (null suffix). Subjects of transitive verbs are marked for ergative case (suffix –k); (1).

(1)  
(a) Medikua-k pirata-Ø beldurtzen du  
    doctor-ERG pirate-ABS frighten AUX-have  
    ‘The doctor frightens the pirate’

(b) Pirata-Ø abiatzen da  
    pirate-ABS depart AUX-be  
    ‘The pirate departs’

(Santesteban et al. 2010)

The subject of an unaccusative verb (such as abiatzen ‘depart’ in 1b) is categorically assigned absolutive case in all dialects of Basque. There is variation between western and eastern dialects, however, with respect to case marking on the subjects of unergative verbs. In western dialects, unergative subjects align with transitive subjects, i.e. they take ergative case marking. In eastern (and some central) dialects, however, unergative subjects align with unaccusative subjects and direct objects, i.e. they receive absolutive case. This distinction is illustrated with unergative ‘dance’ in (2).

(2)  
(a) Western Basque
    Peru-k dantzatu du  
    Peter-ERG danced AUX-have  
    ‘Peter has danced’

(b) Eastern Basque
    Peru dantzatu da  
    Peter-ABS danced AUX-be  
    ‘Peter has danced’

(Aldai 2008)

The distinction in case marking in (2) is mirrored in auxiliary selection. Western Basque (WB) unergatives (2a) are found with the same auxiliary as transitive verbs (‘have’) whilst Eastern Basque (EB) unergatives pattern with unaccusatives in auxiliary selection, appearing with the auxiliary ‘be’ (2b).

3. Analyses. EB case marking typically patterns with that of other ergative languages such as Warlpiri and Bandjalang (Pama Nyungan). Legate (2002) claims that transitive v in such languages is able to assign both ergative and accusative case, whilst intransitive v has no case value. This analysis of ergativity, however, does not account for the difference in case marking of unergative and unaccusative subjects in WB. I propose that WB can be analysed as a nominative-accusative language in which ergative case is assigned by finite T and absolutive by v. Crucially, I suggest claim that WB constitutes a counter-example to Burzio’s (1986) generalisation in that it crucially lacks a non-case assigning little v. In other words, unaccusative v is able to assign case to an internal theme DP (unlike nominative-accusative languages such as English).

In order to account for both cross-dialectal and cross-linguistic variation in case marking patterns, syntactic analyses must first distinguish between different types of sensitivity of little v. EB, and other ergative languages such as Warlpiri distinguish between transitive v and intransitive v in terms of availability of case values (ergative and accusative case being available on transitive v but not intransitive v). Such languages can be said to show sensitivity to argument valence. By contrast, v in nominative-accusative languages (E.g. English) is sensitive instead to the thematic types of arguments present, such that accusative case is only available on agentive v (i.e. that which introduces an agent/external argument) but not on non-agentive v. I argue, on the basis of auxiliary selection in unergative clauses...
(‘have’ as opposed to ‘be’, cf. (2a)) that WB also patterns this way. The differences between EB and WB are summarized in (3).

(3) (a) Western Basque – argument type-sensitive v

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>v TYPE</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Auxiliary</th>
<th>Case on v</th>
<th>Verb types affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agentive</td>
<td>edun (‘have’)</td>
<td>Acc</td>
<td>Transitive, Unergative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-agentive</td>
<td>izan (‘be’)</td>
<td>Acc</td>
<td>Unaccusative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) Eastern Basque – argument valence-sensitive v

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>v VALENCE</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Auxiliary</th>
<th>Case on v</th>
<th>Verb types affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 arguments</td>
<td>edun (‘have’)</td>
<td>Erg, Acc</td>
<td>Transitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 argument</td>
<td>izan (‘be’)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Unergative, Unaccusative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I suggest that auxiliary selection occurs by virtue of an Agree relationship between T and v; i.e. the setting of v (agentive or non-agentive, transitive or intransitive) determines the form of the auxiliary merged in T (‘have’ or ‘be’).

4. Further implications. Taking into consideration cross-linguistic variation in case marking patterns, two criteria must be examined: firstly, is little v in a given language valence-sensitive (e.g. EB, Warlpiri, Bandjalang) or type-sensitive (E.g. WB, English)? Secondly, what are the case values available on each setting of v (e.g. transitive vs. intransitive settings/agentive vs. non-agentive settings)? By accounting for case patterning and auxiliary selection within this framework, we can expect to build up a typology based on the table in (4).

(4) Case marking and v sensitivity

Valence-sensitive v

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case on transitive v</th>
<th>Case on intransitive v</th>
<th>Auxiliary selection</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ergative+ Accusative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Warlpiri, Bandjalang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ergative+ Accusative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>‘have’ – ‘be’</td>
<td>Eastern Basque</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type-sensitive v

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case on agentive v</th>
<th>Case on non-agentive v</th>
<th>Auxiliary selection</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>‘have’ – ‘be’</td>
<td>Western Basque</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main distinctions between what are typically referred to as ‘ergative-absolutive’ and ‘nominative-accusative’ languages therefore, lie in sensitivity of little v (valence versus type) and number of case values available on each setting (transitive versus intransitive, agentive versus non-agentive).

References