

“Optional” ergativity in Tibetan as AGREE-based dependent case

Introduction. Theories of ergative case assignment have traditionally centered on two approaches: its association with the external argument’s θ -position (Legate 2006, 2008), and the local configurational relationship between two nominals (Marantz 1991; Baker 2014). However, Ü-Tsang (Standard) Tibetan poses a significant challenge to both perspectives due to the apparent optionality of ergative case (McGregor 2010, DeLancey 1984, 2011, among others). This talk proposes that the observed optionality in Tibetan ergativity can be explained by the string-vacuous movement of the subject that evacuates it from the ERG-assigning domain. Specifically, I present novel fieldwork data that supports an AGREE-based analysis of dependent case: dependent ERG is mediated by the Voice head, which allows ERG and ABS to be assigned non-simultaneously. In Tibetan, the transitive subject (agent or non-agent) may be morphologically marked ERG, or they may be left unmarked as ABS in a *biabsolute* construction. ERG morphology is also restricted to transitive subjects.

(1) Optionality of ERG morphology

[tenzin-(**ki**)] [mogmog] za gi dug
Tenzin-(**ERG**) momo eat.IMPF IMPF DIRECT.IMPF

‘Tenzin is eating momos.’

Previous analyses internal to Tibetan view the ergative morpheme as pragmatically-conditioned or simply a focus marker. Cross-linguistically, the loss of ergativity is attributed to biclausality triggered by a restructuring head (Laka 1996; Coon 2013; Baker 2014). However, my data show that focus is not a necessary condition for ERG, and optionality is not limited to certain predicates that select complements of different sizes. Pragmatics-based accounts also fail to explain the interaction between aspect split and optionality.

Novel data. Two previously unobserved syntactic restrictions suggest height differences between ERG vs. ABS subjects: First, topicalized high temporal adverbs before subjects block biabsolute constructions (see (2)). Second, VoiceP-level event nominalization blocks biabsolute constructions (see (3)). Tibetan optional ergativity is thus best explained if DP_{EA} may move out of VoiceP to be licensed by higher heads.

(2) **tering** [tenzin-ki/*tenzin] [mogmog] za gi dug
today Tenzin.ERG/*Tenzin.ABS momo eat.IMPF IMPF DIRECT.IMPF
‘Today, Tenzin is eating momos.’

(3) [tenzin-ki/*tenzin] [mogmog] za **sa**
Tenzin.ERG/*Tenzin.ABS momo eat.IMPF **NMLZ**
‘the place where Tenzin eats momos’

In addition, ABS subjects are followed by a prosodic pause, further suggesting a phrasal boundary between the ABS subject and the rest of the clause, assuming the edges of phonological constituents match those of syntactic XPs (Selkirk 2011). While it is possible to imagine a biclausal alternative with a base-generated ABS topic, it fails to explain the aspect split.

Case probe stacks. I cast the analysis in an AGREE-based dependent case theory, building on Poole (2024) (see also Clem and Deal to appear for a similar view). Probes exist as an extrinsically-ordered stack on a head (in this case, Voice) as $\pi_1 < \pi_2 < \dots < \pi_n$, such that π_n is only active after π_{n-1} has been valued and is deactivated, i.e. ① always precedes ② in (4). In contrast with Poole, this analysis treats Tibetan ABS as a structural case instead of a default to all caseless DPs, and claims that the same DP may be visible to subsequent probes on the same head.

(4) [VoiceP [DP_{EA}] [[Voice { [ABS] < [DEP] }]]]
①
②

The [DEP] probe is responsible for the optionality of ergative morphology: when the probe is present, DP_{EA} is licensed in-situ, receiving ERG by AGREE if the [ABS] probe has already been satisfied by some other DP; In the

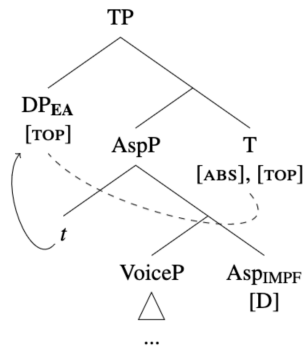
absence of [DEP], DP_{EA} must be able to move up to be licensed by higher heads. I will further argue that ABS is also assigned by T, giving rise to biabsolute constructions when DP_{EA} moves out. This analysis conforms to Yuan (2022)’s view of case assignment: A clause is bifurcated into two distinct domains. Crucially, each domain may calculate its own dependent case configuration.

Bifurcating the clause with Asp. In Tibetan, ergative marking is optional only in the imperfective aspect. In the perfective, ergative marking is obligatory. Therefore, the perfective clause in (5) is contrast with (1).

- (5) [tenzin-ki/*tenzin] [mogmog] zä song
 Tenzin-**ERG**/*Tenzin.**ABS** momo eat.PERF DIRECT.PERF
 ‘Tenzin ate momos.’

I adopt the view that Asp is a phase head (Wurmbrand 2014; Bošković 2014; Harwood 2015). While phases must have an edge feature, Asp_{PERF} is defective and does not license a DP in its specifier. The movement step triggered by the edge feature on Asp_{IMPF} allows DP_{EA} to be able to escape VoiceP in order to be licensed. Therefore, only DP_{EA} on the phase edge becomes visible to [ABS] on T. On the other hand, Asp_{PERF} does not provide such licensing environment, forcing a local ERG subject.

(6)



When the [DEP] is absent, derivations may crash when nominals are unlicensed. That is, when DP_{EA} does not move to Spec, AspP in order to be able to be accessible to T. Due to the lack of licensing ability of Asp_{PERF}, [DEP] must be present for perfective clauses. Compared to restructuring analyses of aspectually split ergativity, this account provides a principled reason why aspectual splits always retain ergative patterning in the perfective aspect crosslinguistically (Dixon 1979, Coon 2013).

Subjects of biabsolute constructions in Tibetan often receive a topic interpretation, while ergative ones may not (Agha 1993; Garrett 1998). Tibetan topicalization shows A-properties, cf. Hindi (Mahajan 1990). I argue that a feature [TOP] on T may trigger A-movement, see (6).

Comparison to classic dependent case. The AGREE-based dependent case account I have proposed is not a representational variant to the classic dependent case framework. First, it enables a non-simultaneous assignment of ERG and ABS, rendering the upward directionality of the dependent case a byproduct of the specific configuration of the two probes. It is possible for an in-situ DP_{IA} to receive ERG after an applied argument unlocks the [DEP] probe. Dependent analyses of ERG successfully predict patterns of applicative of unaccusative constructions such as (7) (Baker 2014; Deal 2019). Moreover, the AGREE-based analysis predicts ERG subjects without requiring DP_{IA} to move past the beneficiary: the newly activated [DEP] probe would probe past the applied argument already assigned ABS, and it then assigns ERG to the caseless DP_{IA}. Second, because the edge feature on Asp_{IMPF} only allows one DP to evacuate VoiceP, the analysis predicts that DP_{EA} must be licensed in VoiceP in case of object shift, which requires it to be assigned ERG. It provides a theoretical explanation for what is usually described as the “disambiguation” function of Tibetan ERG case in non-canonical word orders (LaPolla 1992, 2004; DeLancey 2011 among others). This phenomenon is in fact typologically common (see e.g. Clem and Deal to appear). In (8), the OSV word order involves an object fronted for topicalization to Spec, TP through Spec, AspP, which requires the local DP_{EA} to be ERG.

- (7) Obligatory ERG on Appl of Unaccusative (8) Obligatory ERG in scrambled OSV

ngä/*nga ril dgos
 1SG.ERG/*1SG.ABS fall APPL

[cha]_i [kho-ki/*kho] t_i zo gi red
 tea_i 3SG-ERG/*3SG.ABS t_i make IMPF INDIR

‘I will fall (on behalf of you).’

‘Tea, he’s making it.’

Selected References. DeLancey 2011. “Optional” “ergativity” in Tibeto-Burman Languages. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*. • McGregor 2010. Optional ergative case marking systems in a typological-semiotic perspective • Poole 2024. Dependent-case assignment could be AGREE. *Glossa*. • Yuan 2022. Ergativity and object movement across Inuit. *Language*.