

Puzzle

- Tibetan ergative morphology is optional, often analyzed as marking pragmatic emphasis, or as focus (McGregor 2010; DeLancey 2011):

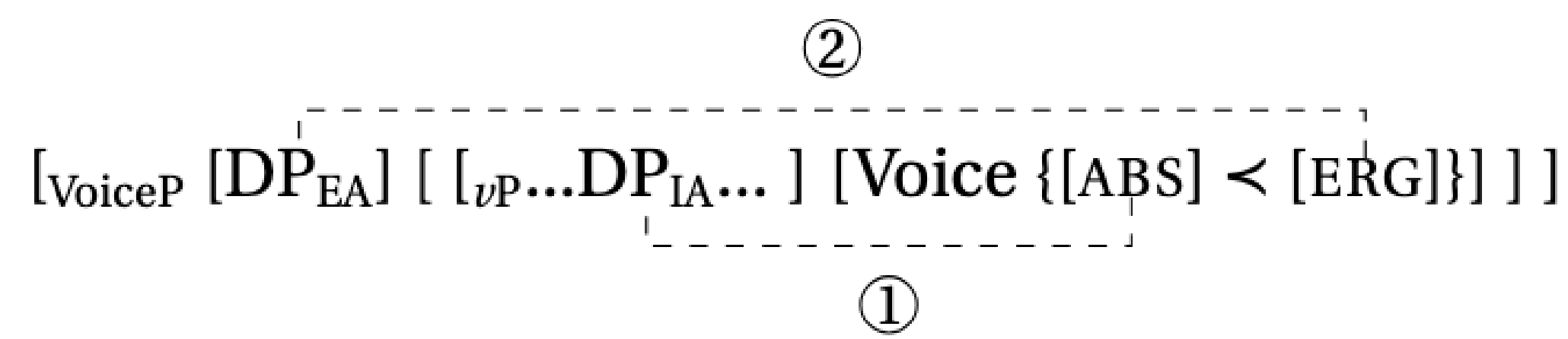
(1) **tenzin-(ki)** ja zo gi dug
Tenzin-(ERG) tea make.IMPf IMPf EVID
'Tenzin is making tea.'

- However, the optionality is syntactically conditioned by aspect and transitivity like normal ERG:

	Transitive		Intransitive	
	Agent	Non-agent	Unergative	Unaccusative
Imperfective	optional	optional	ungrammatical	ungrammatical
Perfective	obligatory	obligatory	ungrammatical	ungrammatical

- Proposal:** The Tibetan ergative...
 - is assigned by Voice via AGREE with a local DP_{EA} (Poole 2024)
 - disappears if the subject escapes VoiceP for licensing by higher heads such as Asp

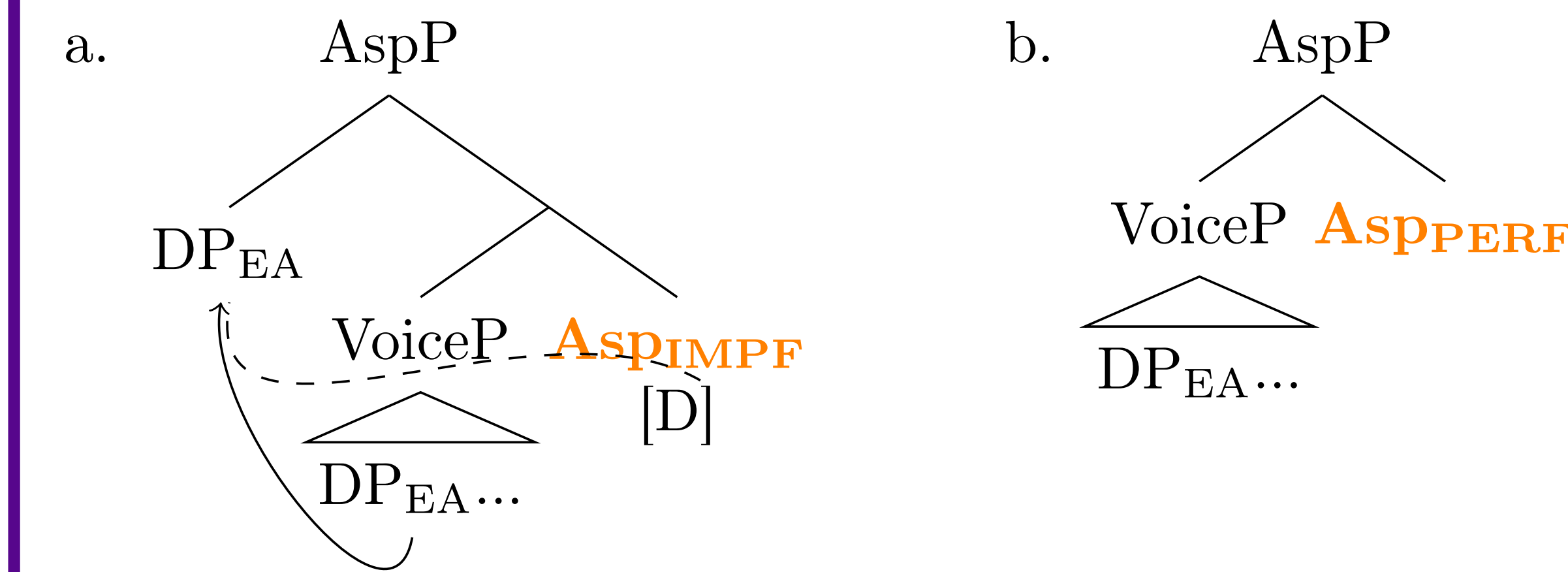
Dependent ERG by AGREE



- Ordered probes:** stack on a head $\langle \pi_1 \prec \pi_2 \prec \dots \prec \pi_n \rangle$, π_n activated only after π_{n-1} is valued
- Spec-head AGREE:** a probe may expand its search domain to scan the specifier
- ABS as structural:** assigned before [ERG] instead of supplied at PF to all caseless DPs
- Licensing of EA:** dependent [ERG] probe is the optional element.
 - When present, it licenses EA in-situ and assigns it ERG
 - When absent, EA would not be licensed in place and has to be licensed by higher heads

Two types of Asp heads: IMPF and PERF

- Optionality of ERG morphology only exists in the imperfective aspect.
- In contrast, all perfective external arguments must bear ERG.
- Proposal:** Asp is a *phase head* (Wurmbrand 2014; Harwood 2015) that comes with a nominal-licensing edge feature, see (a), while Asp_{PERF} is defective and does not license a DP in its specifier, see (b).



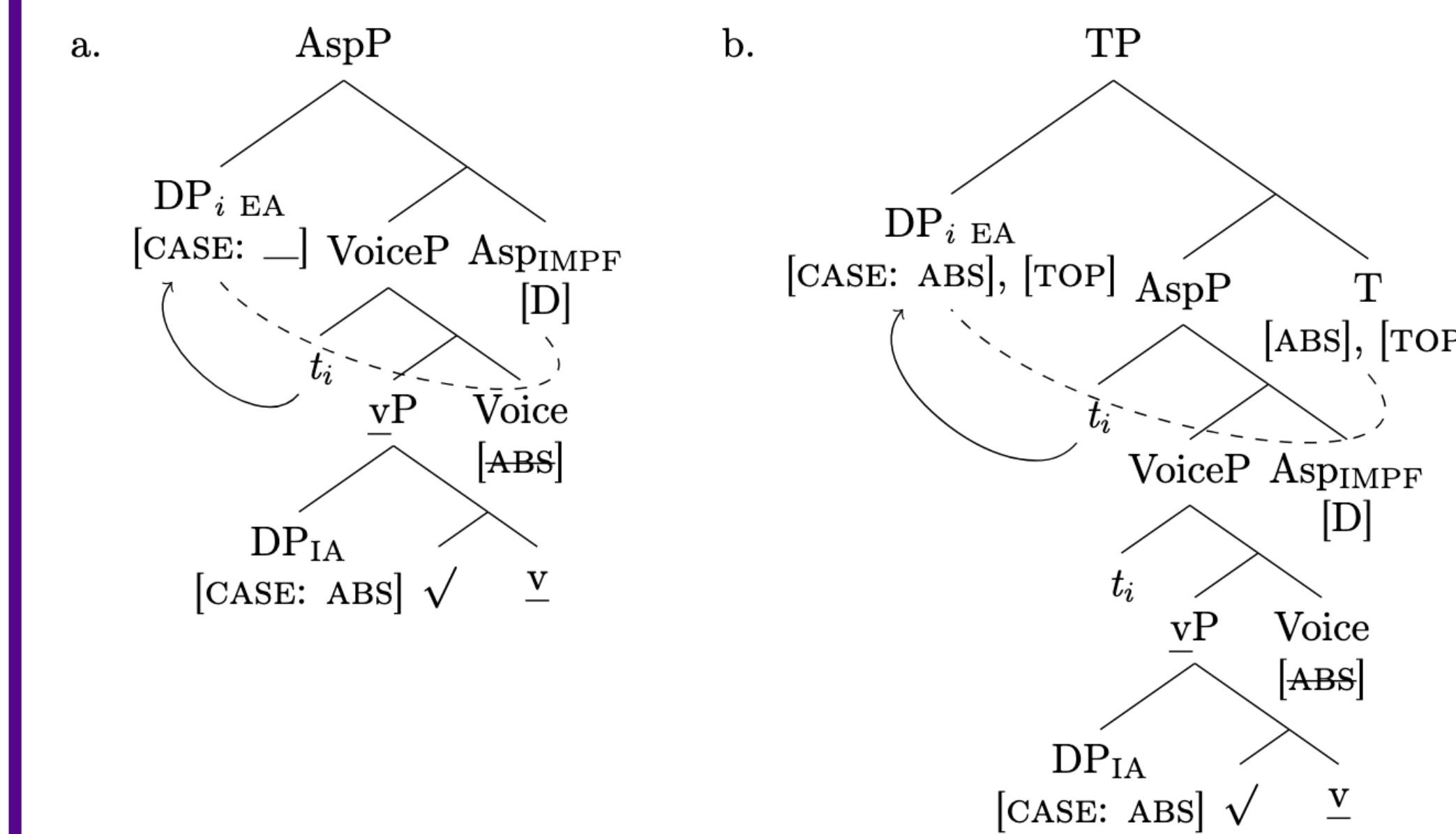
- Nominals must be licensed, or the syntactic derivation crashes at the end. (e.g. Nie 2023)
- EA must compete for licensing by a higher head if unlicensed in VoiceP in the case of (a)
- The movement step triggered by the edge feature allows DP_{EA} to be able to escape VoiceP in order to be licensed. Therefore, the moved DP_{EA} on the phase edge becomes visible to [ABS] in the next phase, currently assumed to be on T.

Data: ABS subjects are higher than ERG ones

- ABS subjects allowed with low temporal adverb, (a); *incompatible* with **topicalized high temporal adverb** that precedes the subject, (b)
 - ABS subjects allowed in high nominalization, (c), yet *incompatible* with **low nominalization**, (d)
- a. [pemä/**pema**] **tering** [cha] zo gi dug
Pema.ERG/ABS today tea make IMPF EVID
'Pema is making tea today.'
- b. **tering**, [pemä/***pema**] [cha] zo gi dug
today Pema.ERG/*ABS tea make IMPF EVID
'Today, Pema is making tea.'
- c. [[pemä/**pema** laphing za] **pa**]
Pema-ERG/ABS laphing eat NMLZ.HIGH
'(The event of) Pema eating laphing'
- d. [[pemä/***pema** laphing za] **sa**]
Pema.ERG/*ABS laphing eat NMLZ.LOW
'The place where Pema eats laphing'
- Phrasal Layering view of nominalization: ABS subject exists when the nominal inherits more verbal structure, enabling DP_{EA} to move up

Sample derivation for imperfective ABS subjects

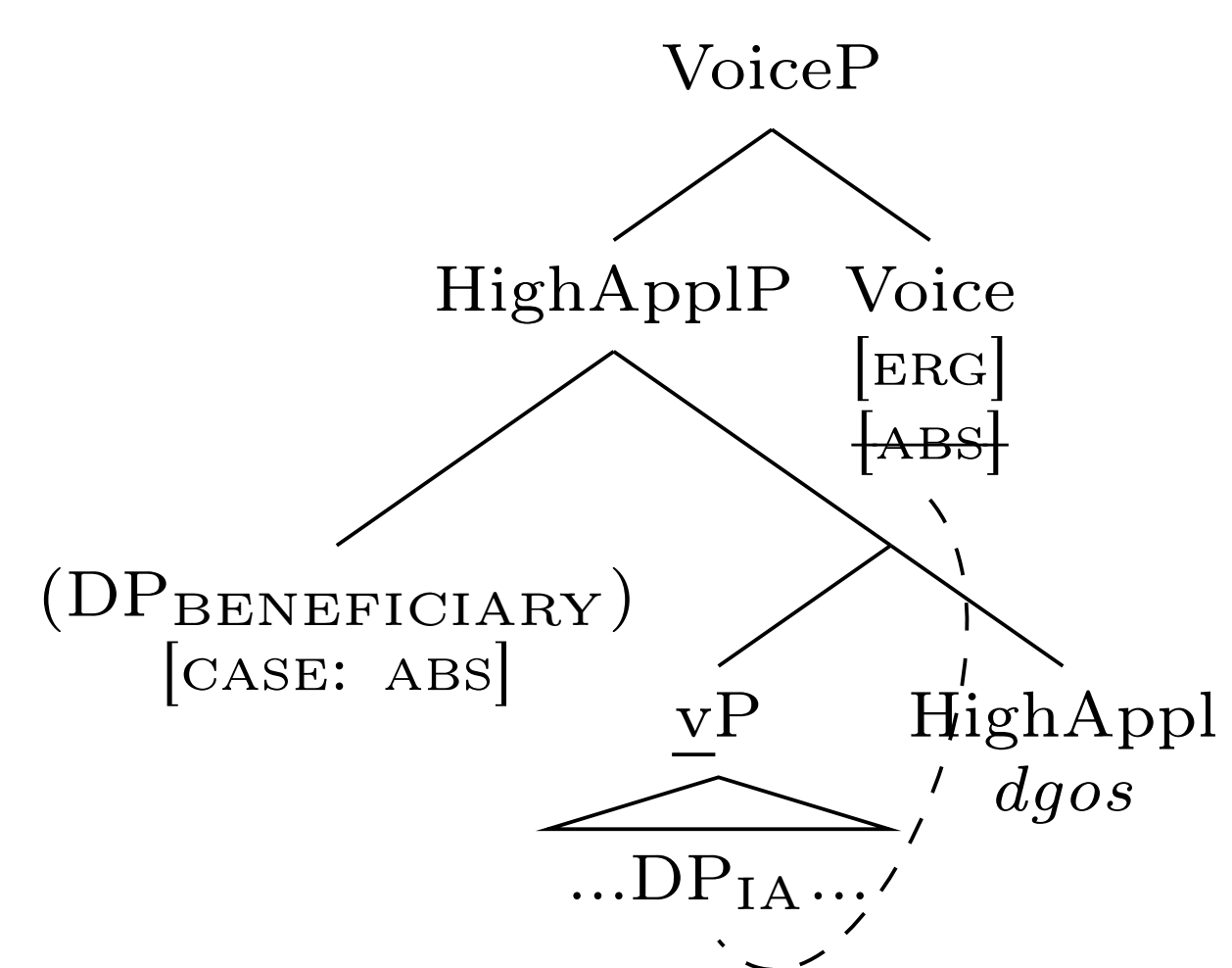
- For derivation of ERG subjects without movement, see the “Dependent ERG by AGREE” section in black.
- Tree (a):** Movement of EA for licensing. When [ERG] probe is absent on Voice, DP_{EA} must be licensed in Spec, Asp before Spell-Out, restricting ABS subjects to the imperfective aspect.
- Tree (b):** Movement of EA for case (and topicalization). EA keeps moving up for discourse purposes.



- When DP_{EA} *does not* move to Spec, AspP in order to be able to access the [ABS] feature on T in the next phase, the derivation crashes (rules out perfective ABS subjects).
- Hypothesis: ABS objects are always topicalized. This resolves the tension between descriptive generalizations and case theory.
- Clause bifurcation:** A clause is bifurcated into two distinct domains. Each may calculate its own dependent case configuration (Yuan 2022).

Prediction: Applicative of Unaccusative

- Raising-to-ergative without raising?**
 - A known problem is that the theme must move over the applied argument, while the applied argument must not. (Baker 2014, Deal 2019)
 - Tibetan sentence-final auxiliary *dgos* introduces an implicit beneficiary, and the unaccusative subjects becomes ERG obligatorily.
 - AGREE-based dependent case assigns [ERG] to DP_{IA} after beneficiary is vacuously assigned case
- a. *ngä/nga ril gi yod
*1SG.ERG/1SG.ABS fall IMPF EGO
'I am falling.'
- b. ngä/*nga ril dgos
1SG.ERG/*1SG.ABS fall APPL
'I am falling (on behalf of you).'
- Classic dependent case theory (Marantz 1991; Baker 2014, 2015) restricts ERG to only be assigned upward, requiring DP_{IA} to c-command the beneficiary



Alternatives and References

- Optimality-based differential case marking:** a purely postsyntactic view of case
- ERG is a focus marker:** predicts ERG morphology to be possible on transitive objects and unaccusatives
- Biclausality triggers loss of ERG:** restricts ERG optionality to certain predicates such as desideratives

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*.