SHORT REPORT

On ergativity in Bumthang

CATHRYN DONOHUE   MARK DONOHUE

The University of Hong Kong and   *The Australian National University*
The Australian National University

This report investigates the uses of the ergative case marker in transitive clauses in Bumthang, a language of Central Bhutan. We discuss the conditions under which the ergative is required and show that a simple analysis involving multiple influences models the data. Previous studies have shown that variable case marking may be determined by syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic factors, but in Bumthang we see that ALL of these factors play a role in determining the use of the ergative case marker. We hope that our analysis will prove useful for understanding the variable uses of the ergative case marker in Himalayan and other languages as well as providing interesting challenges for formal models of case marking.*

Keywords: variable case marking, ergative case, differential subject marking, information structure, Bumthang, Bhutan, Tibeto-Burman

1. INTRODUCTION. In this short report we discuss variation in the use of the ergative case in Bumthang, a little-known East Bodish language of central Bhutan. We show that a number of different factors must be examined, including verbal lexical semantics and the animacy of the arguments, as well as clause-level factors such as tense-aspect-mood (TAM) and information structure, to evaluate whether an ergative case is required in any particular sentence.

Ergative case, by definition, is used to overtly mark the subject of a transitive verb (an A, in the 'A, S, P' terminology introduced by Comrie (1978)). There is a considerable literature on studies of ergativity, but it is not our goal to review that here. What is relevant is that in ergative languages, there is often a 'split' in the morphological marking, with some transitive subjects receiving ergative case and some not. Previous work has identified a number of factors involved in the variation in ergative marking: tense/aspect (past or perfective clauses are more likely to show the ergative), argument semantics (third persons are more likely to be marked with the ergative than the more 'animate' local persons), and verbal semantics (low-transitive verbs are less likely to involve ergative marking (see, among others, Dixon 1979, 1994, McGregor 2009, Silverstein 1976, and the papers in Donohue & Wichmann 2008).

South Asian languages have featured in the development of theories and accounts of ergativity, with lively discussion of the role of TAM-splits (e.g. Mohanan 1994 for Hindi), verbal semantics (e.g. Tournadre 1991, among other works, for Tibetan), and argument semantics (e.g. DeLancey 1981). LaPolla (1995) presents results of a survey of ergative marking in 151 Tibeto-Burman language varieties. He posits a continuum between two types of agentive marking: 'systemic', which is structurally determined, and

'nonsystemic', which is used only for argument disambiguation. Following from this, an agent marker (typically described as an ergative case in the literature on Himalayan languages), in the simplest case, marks an Agent, while an ANTI-ERGATIVE marks a highly animate argument as NOT the agent of the predicate. This optionality of case marking, conditioned by factors other than just argument structure, is discussed in more detail for a wider range of languages in McGregor 2010.

In this paper we show that ALL of these factors play a role in determining the use of the ergative case in Bumthang and provide an explicit account of their interaction—noting that a strict hierarchy is involved, with some factors from one category, such as TAM, taking priority over argument-related factors, while other TAM factors are subordinate to argument-related factors.

We first present examples of contrastive sentences that must occur with, or without, ergative case (§2). We then present a range of data illustrating the variable use of the ergative case dependent on word order, with word order mediated by information-structure constraints (§3). Section 4 elaborates further on the semantic and pragmatic factors that underlie the variation in ergative marking, and in §5 we compare our data to other accounts of case-marking variation, including a brief survey of earlier accounts of languages of the Himalayan area, showing how our account fits in with observations made by earlier authors dealing with what appear to be similar phenomena.

2. BUMTHANG MORPHOLOGICAL ESSENTIALS. Bumthang is a Tibeto-Burman language of central Bhutan, described by van Driem (1995, 2015). We report here on fieldwork from the variety spoken in Ura, in the southeast of the language's range (van Driem's description appears to be largely based on the Chumey variety).[1] The basic word order (as attested through textual frequency and via elicitation) is SOV, and core arguments exhibit ergative/absolutive morphological alignment for the default case.[2] With NPs the absolutive is morphologically unmarked, as seen on the NP *utui sawar* in 1, while the ergative inflects with *-i* (and occasionally *-lé*, which is an uncommon but fully productive alternative to *-i*, favored in some collocations such as *maé-lé* rather than #*maé-i* for phonetic reasons), seen in *utui sawari* in 2.[3] Throughout, we do not gloss the unmarked form of nouns with a case label, since not being marked does not necessarily imply an 'absolutive relation' (that is, being an S or P) as there is not a one-to-one relationship between the morphological form, the syntactic role, and the grammatical function.[4]

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[1] Data on Bumthang was originally collected from native speakers of the Ura dialect in Canberra by the second author over the period 2013–2015 and was confirmed in Ura and Tang while on field trips in 2014. The initial consultants were highly educated, and fully competent in English as well as having varying levels of proficiency in (numerous) other languages of Bhutan, including (but not limited to) Dzongkha, Tshangla, and Nepali (as well as other dialects of Bumthang). Later consultants whose judgments are reported here are all from Ura and come from a mixture of backgrounds, including those with no formal education, but who nonetheless have some degree of proficiency in at least one other regional language, as is normal in Bhutan. Recordings of our elicitation sessions are available at PARADISEC (http://www.paradisec.org.au). Recordings of the Bumthang textual materials we have gathered can be found under 'Texts' at the Bumthang website: http://tibetoburman.linguistics.anu.edu.au/Bumthang/.

[2] Dative case can be used to mark the objects of a low-transitive clause, on a lexical basis, but our focus here is on variation in the use of the ergative.

[3] In some instances the Tibetan-derived ergative *-gi* is used. The circumstances in which this is preferred are not yet fully understood, but it is clear that they occur in a more marked register than clauses without the *-gi*. We do not have any evidence to suggest that the use of *-gi* is not assigned in accordance with the principles laid out here, but many details remain to be investigated.

[4] The orthography used largely follows van Driem (1995, 2015). Most symbols correspond to the IPA symbols, with the following exceptions: <é> (van Driem's <e>) and <ó> represent /e/ and /o/, which contrast with

(1) Monovalent clause: unmarked subject
    Utui sawar   mae-nang-o   ra-s.
    that wild.dog house-inside-DAT come-PSNL.PFV
        'That wild dog came into the house.'
(2) Bivalent clause: ergative-marked subject
    Utui sawar-i   onga-gambo tra-zé.
    that wild.dog-ERG child-PL   look.at-CMPL
        'That wild dog stared at the children.'

With pronouns, the absolutive forms as well as the ergative forms must be considered to be marked for case, as they are not all predictable from the base forms of the pronouns (inferred from the forms found across the ergative, dative, and genitive pronominal paradigms), nor do they match any 'base form' (for instance, the base for the 1SG is *nga*, with both the absolutive and ergative derived from this form). The pronominal paradigms for subjects and objects are shown in Table 1.

	ABSOLUTIVE CASE			ERGATIVE CASE	
	SG	PL		SG	PL
1ST	ngat	nget	1ST	ngai	ngi
2ND	wet	win	2ND	wi	wini
3RD	gon	gone	3RD	goni	gonegi

TABLE 1. Personal pronouns in Bumthang.

Examples 3–6 show the use of SV order with monovalent clauses and SOV order with bivalent clauses. These examples are all drawn from texts, showing that while ellipsis is common (as seen in 3, 4), so too are fully instantiated sentences, at least in some genres. We can also see the use of the ergative case on subjects of bivalent clauses (e.g. 5, 6). These examples are textually instantiated proof of the examples seen earlier in 1 and 2.

(3) tshé-ning nen thek ngat   gae-mo …
    then-ABL day one 1SG.ABS go-when
        'Then one day, when I went (to my friend's house) … '   (Scary dog 6)
(4) mo __ krong-é   trandu krak-sa   bu-mo …
    HES   village-GEN near   reach-IPFV do-when
        'and when (it) started getting close to (the houses in) the village … '
(5) tshémin boi-**lé**   gon   klep-si   blék-sé.
    but   ball-ERG 3SG(.ABS) push.down-SEQ leave-CMPL
        '… but the ball pushed him down.'   (Winter snowballs 15)

<e> (van Driem's <ä>) and <o> (/ɛ/ and /ɔ/, respectively). The graphs <t, d, n> represent dental stops [t̪, d̪, n̪], and <r> is rhotic, varying between alveolar [ɾ r] and retroflex [ɻ ɽ] articulations, with complex conditioning factors. The digraphs <ny, ng> represent /ɲ/ and /ŋ/, respectively, and <sh> represents [ɕ], while <zh> represents the same consonant in a low tonal register. Aspiration is shown with a following <h>, so that <th> represents [t̪ʰ]. Consonant sequences with <-r> are all clusters. Tone is not marked, since more than two contrasts are found in the Ura variety and the question of tonal interaction across morphemes is not yet clear. Some aspects of our phonological analysis differ from van Driem's, in part reflecting dialectal differences.

We use the following abbreviations: ABL: ablative, ABS: absolutive, CMPL: completive, EQUAT: equative, COP: copula, DAT: dative, ERG: ergative, GEN: genitive, HES: hesitation, INT: interrogative, IPFV: imperfective, IRR: irrealis, PFV: perfective, PL: plural, PSNL: personal involvement, REL: relative, SEQ: sequential, SG: singular.

(6) tshé-ning gon-**i**   ngat   mae-rdo gae bu-zé.
     then-ABL 3SG-ERG 1SG.ABS house-DAT go do-CMPL
       'Then she took me into the house.'   (Scary dog 24)

While the case marking and word-order norms presented are attested in both elicited materials (e.g. 1–2) and naturalistic texts (e.g. 3–6), the rest of this paper draws primarily on elicited examples, since they have been carefully constructed to control for pragmatic context and thus identify the different conditioning factors in determining whether a subject bears ergative case.

3. CASE AND POSITIONAL LICENSING. While Bumthang is an SOV language, other word orders are attested in natural speech. After SOV clauses, OSV and OVS orders are relatively common among sentences with two overt arguments, with examples of these word orders shown in 7. Example 8 confirms the possibility of ellipsis of arguments in a clause, provided their identities have already been established.

(7) a. Gon-i   khambu si-na.
         3SG-ERG apple   pick-PFV
           'He picked apples.'
    b. Khambu goni sina.
    c. Khambu sina goni.
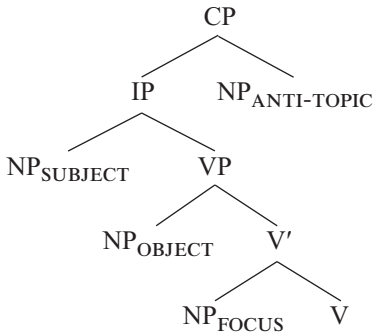(8) a. __ Khambu sina.
    b. Goni __ sina.
    c. __ __ Sina.

These different word-order possibilities are not, however, equal in terms of pragmatic import. Example 7a is the most 'neutral' of the orders, both in terms of frequency, prescriptive salience, and lack of implicature. The OSV order seen in 7b has strong identificational focus on the subject: 7b is an appropriate response to a question such as 'Who picked the apples?', or can be used to correct an assertion about who had picked the apples ('It wasn't me; HE picked the apples'). The OVS order seen in 7c presents the subject as an antitopic: the apple-picking is the new information, and *goni* is already assumed information and could almost as easily have been elided, as shown in 8a and 8c. Example 8b is a more appropriate response than 7b to a question about the identity of the person picking the apples, a topic that is discussed more in §4.1.

It is important to note that any subject outside of the canonical SOV configuration must bear the ergative case. We take this to reflect different licensing conditions corresponding to different positions of the clause, for which we propose a structure along the lines of that shown in 9.

The tree is minimally articulated because nothing hinges on the exact model we use here. The key is that ergative case is required when the transitive subject appears external to the IP in the postverbal antitopic position, or internal to the VP in the preverbal focus position (see also §4.1).[5] In sum, ergative case marking is obligatory when the transitive subject occurs somewhere other than in the canonical [Spec, IP] position.

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[5] Evidence for the structure in 9 includes: separate intonation breaks frequently appearing between the IP and following material, and the optionality of that position; the uninterruptability of the elements in the V′; the appearance of adjuncts and obliques inside the VP, including allowed intrusion between the NP object and the V′; and the appearance of temporal expression inside the IP, but outside and to the left of the VP.

(9) The structure of the clause (and beyond) in Bumthang

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                         CP
                    ┌─────┴─────┐
                   IP         NP_ANTI-TOPIC
              ┌─────┴─────┐
           NP_SUBJECT    VP
                    ┌─────┴─────┐
                 NP_OBJECT     V′
                          ┌─────┴─────┐
                       NP_FOCUS      V
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The sentences from 7 and 8 are repeated in 10 with the structural relations made explicit.

(10) a. [$_{CP}$ [$_{IP}$ Goni [$_{VP}$ khambu [$_{V'}$ sina]]]].   SOV

 b. [$_{CP}$ [$_{IP}$ [$_{VP}$ Khambu [$_{V'}$ goni sina]]]].   OS$_{FOCUS}$V

 c. [$_{CP}$ [$_{IP}$ [$_{VP}$ Khambu [$_{V'}$ sina]]] goni].   OVS$_{ANTITOPIC}$

 d. [$_{CP}$ [$_{IP}$ [$_{VP}$ Khambu [$_{V'}$ sina]]]].   OV

 e. [$_{CP}$ [$_{IP}$ Goni [$_{VP}$ [$_{V'}$ sina]]]].   SV

 f. [$_{CP}$ [$_{IP}$ [$_{VP}$ [$_{V'}$ Sina]]]].   V

These examples show that case is required for noncanonically positioned (that is, pragmatically charged) subjects. A subject NP in the immediately preverbal focus position, or in the postverbal antitopic position, must be marked with the ergative case. This is not yet a full account of variation in Bumthang case marking, however. We still find variation in the case marking of arguments in the canonical [Spec, IP] position, to which we turn next.

4. Variation in ergative marking.

4.1. Information structure. The function of an argument in the clause has an impact on its case marking. The different clauses in 11 below are not simply random variants of each other. Although both are grammatical, they have very different information-structure content. Example 12a is one way to ask a question that focuses on the identity of the (transitive) subject. This sentence illustrates the 'inverted', apparently OSV, word order that is obligatory when questioning the identity of the subject. We can see that the question word, necessarily bearing (interrogative) focus, must appear immediately preceding the predicate (see 9 and 10b), even if this requires violating the SOV word order (note the ungrammaticality of 12b).

The response to such a question does not show the variation in case marking seen in 11.[6] Rather, the response with an absolutive subject, shown in 12c, is infelicitous. In response to a question about the identity of the transitive subject, necessarily using the ergative version of the interrogative pronoun, the new information must be presented with ergative case, shown in 12d. Alternative felicitous responses to 12a are given in 13: the answer can mirror the apparent OSV order of the question (13a), or can consist only of the new information, in this case the pronoun (13b).

(11) a. Nget   khwe thong-sang.
        1PL.ABS water drink-IRR
          'We will drink water.'

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[6] The variation in 11 depends on whether the sentence is a 'plain' irrealis clause, which calls for an absolutive subject, or a clause with a pragmatically focused subject.

  b. Ngi khwe thong-sang.
    1PL.ERG water drink-IRR
     'We will drink water.'

(12) a. Q: Khwe aji thong-sang?
      water who.ERG drink-IRR
      'Who will drink the water?'

  b. A: *aji khwe thongsang

  c. A: #nget khwe thongsang

  d. A: Ngi khwe thongsang.

(13) a. A: Khwe ngi thongsang.

  b. A: Ngi.

  Another very common strategy used to form questions with transitive predicates is to turn the predicate into a headless relative clause, and then ask a question using an equative clause with a nominal predicate; the question word must still appear immediately preceding the inflecting predicate. Instead of 12a, the same question could be asked as in 14a, with a possible response shown in 14b.

(14) a. Khwe thong-khan ae yo?
    water drink-REL who.ABS INT
     'Who is (the one) who (will) drink water?'

  b. (Khwe thong-khan) ngat wen.
     water drink-REL 1SG.ABS EQUAT.COP
     'I am ((the one) who (will) drink water).'

These questions might be analyzed as clefts, since the focused element would be expected to be preverbal (see 9). While interesting, these alternatives do not bear on the issue of case-marking variability, since equative clauses of the type shown in 14b do not license any case other than the absolutive.

4.2. ASPECT. Verbal aspect is also a relevant factor in understanding the variability of case marking in Bumthang, as indicated by the examples in 15 and 16 below. In 15 we see a contrast between a perfective and an imperfective clause, reflected in the morphology on the verb and in the choice of case marking on the first-person subject (see Table 1 above).[7]

(15) a. Nga-i phrum tup.
    1SG-ERG cheese cut:PSNL.PFV
     'I have cut the cheese.'

  b. Ngat phrum tup-sa.
    1SG.ABS cheese cut-IPFV
     'I am cutting the cheese.'

  c. *ngat phrum tup

  d. *ngai phrum tupsa

In 16a a verb in the perfective aspect REQUIRES ergative case on the subject, while in 16c the same clause, but irrealis, REQUIRES an absolutive subject.

(16) a. Gon-i zama zu-na.
    3SG-ERG rice eat-PFV
     'S/he has eaten (the) rice.'

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[7] The 'personally involved' perfective aspect (PSNL.PFV) is normally marked with -*s* on the verb, but an inviolable constraint against complex codas rules out the possibility of it being overtly expressed on verbs with final codas, hence the verb in 15 which 'inflects' for perfective by the use of the verb root alone.

  b. *gon zama zuna
  c. Gon   zama zu-sang.
      3SG(.ABS) rice   eat-IRR
        'S/he will eat rice.'
  d. *goni zama zusang

4.3. ANIMACY. Animacy is relevant to the case marking of agents in two ways. The person of the subject is relevant, with a binary split between first and second persons ('local' persons) and third persons. The examples in 17 show that otherwise identical clauses require ergative case for third persons, while not allowing it for local persons.

  (17) a. Gon-i   zama zu-na.
           3SG-ERG rice   eat-PFV
             'S/he has eaten (the) rice.'
       b. Ngat   zama zu-s.
           1SG.ABS rice   eat-PSNL.PFV
             'I have eaten (the) rice.'
       c. *gon zama zuna
       d. *ngai zama zus

There are no differences between different kinds of third-person arguments for case-marking purposes. The difference between pronoun and noun (phrase), definite and indefinite, specific and nonspecific does not affect the choice of ergative or absolutive case marking in Bumthang. Similarly, there are no differences in case marking between first and second persons; 17b and 17d show the ungrammaticality of ergative case with a first-person subject, and the same judgments are found with second-person subjects: *Wet zama zuna* 'You have eaten the rice' is acceptable with the absolutive, but #*wi zama zuna* is infelicitous with the ergative.

   However, the number of the subject is also relevant. In 18 we see that, without a change in the assignment of pragmatic functions to arguments, changing the number of the agent from singular to plural changes the choice of case marker from ergative to absolutive (18d would be acceptable if the subject was in focus).

  (18) a. Nga-i   shra tup.
             1SG-ERG meat cut:PSNL.PFV
               'I have cut the meat.'
       b. Nget   shra tup.
             1PL.ABS meat cut:PSNL.PFV
               'We have cut the meat.'
       c. *ngat shra tup
       d. *ngi shra tup

Number has only been observed to have an effect on case-marking choices for local persons in Bumthang.

4.4. INHERENT ASPECT. The inherent aspectual properties of the predicate also play a role in determining the case marking in the clause. In 19 we can see that the same subject, the same object, the same pragmatic content, and the same clausal aspect can result in different case selection on the agent, depending on the lexical aspect associated with the verb. In 19a the telic verb *tup* 'cut' licenses an ergative subject, but in 19b we see an absolutive subject, associated with the atelic verb *zu* 'eat'. Example 19c is ungrammatical, and in the absence of some form of focus such as that described in §4.1, a sentence such as 19d is not felicitous. This pattern can be found throughout the lexicon, where the case-marking options of a subject are restricted by a verb's inherent aspect.

(19) a. Nga-i   phrum tup.
      1SG-ERG cheese cut:PSNL.PFV
       'I have cut the cheese.'
   b. Ngat   phrum zu-s.
      1SG.ABS cheese eat-PSNL.PFV
       'I have eaten (the) cheese.'
   c. *ngat phrum tup
   d. #ngai phrum zus

5. UNDERSTANDING VARIABLE ERGATIVE MARKING IN BUMTHANG. As has been shown in the previous sections, there are a number of factors involved in the use of ergative case in Bumthang. In this section we show the subtle interactions of these factors in the form of a decision tree.
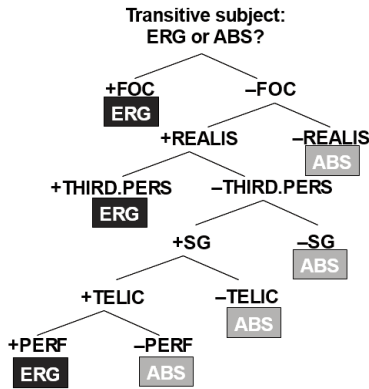

FIGURE 1. Decision tree of variable ergative marking in Bumthang.

As shown in 12, if the subject is focused, as is the case for the WH-question 'who', the subject occurs in the immediately preverbal position and must bear ergative case. For unfocused arguments, there are several other choices to make.

In clauses in the irrealis mood, the subject bears absolute case, as discussed in §4.2 and illustrated with examples 16c and 16d. Exceptions to this, such as 11b, are felicitous only under the condition that the subject is in focus.

When the clause is realis, however, the subject bears ergative case with an atelic verb only if that subject is third person, as shown in the contrast between first and third person in examples 17a and 17b. With a telic verb, shown in 15, even a local person requires ergative case, unless it is plural (shown in 18), and with a singular local person subject, the aspect has to be perfective for the ergative case to be assigned. Imperfective aspect requires the absolute case as in 15 and 16.

This is a complex set of cooccurrence restrictions, but as we can see, many of the reported variables that have been found to influence the choice of ergative case in different languages appear to be at work in case selection in Bumthang.

6. ERGATIVITY IN THE HIMALAYAS. Many have observed that the ergative case marking in languages of the Himalayas is not straightforward and does not occur on all transitive subjects. However, analyses of the exact distribution of the ergative case have varied. We have shown that, pace earlier literature, it is not the case that Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayas employ systems of case that are difficult to capture using traditional terminology. Indeed, we have been able to unravel the ordered set of con-

straints that operate in the selection of ergative case in Bumthang with reference only to fundamental linguistic concepts.

Earlier work surveying a range of languages has touched on many of the points that we have illustrated for Bumthang. In LaPolla's (1995) survey he noted that ergative marking correlates with noncanonical word orders. Examining his typology further, it is clear that Bumthang falls somewhere in the middle of his 'systemic–nonsystemic' continuum, not mandating an across-the-board use of the ergative case marker for all transitive subjects, but not restricting its use to disambiguation either. As we have seen, the ergative is used in Bumthang when it is required by one of several relevant factors.

Chelliah and Hyslop (2011) edited a thematic issue of *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* examining the question of variable case marking in languages of the Himalayas, including the phenomenon in Kurtöp, a neighbor of Bumthang (see also Hyslop 2010). While much discussion and variation is found in these articles, it also seems that there was little attempt to regularize terminology and description, making it difficult to compare the different accounts. We suspect that, if probed a little further, it may be the case that other languages of the Himalayas also exhibit nested effects of the kind we have described for Bumthang.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS. In Bumthang, 'ergative' does not just mean 'subject of a transitive clause'. Rather, the use of this case depends on the complex interaction of a set of properties that allude to the higher agency of the argument in the clause. As has been shown for other languages, arguments that are higher on the animacy scale (see e.g. Silverstein 1976) are typically more likely to have an effect on the other argument in a transitive clause, and are thus more likely to be marked as agents with a case that very often grammaticalizes to become an ergative marker (e.g. DeLancey 1981, Du Bois 1987). This is true, too, in Bumthang. Rather than being stipulative, however, this is a consequence of the combination of the person hierarchy and the discourse salience of participants (and the likelihood of their appearing in focus).

We are currently investigating case marking on the subjects of intransitive clauses, to see the extent to which the ergative can be used on the argument of a monovalent predicate, so often considered a quirk in the grammar, but for which there is often a semantic generalization (e.g. Donohue 2004 on Basque, and Donohue 2008). Preliminary results suggest that there is some conditional usage of the ergative case marker on the sole argument of an intransitive verb, but the conditions, while similar, are not structured in the same way that we have seen for the transitive subjects. Minimally, we anticipate that this short report may help shed light on the complex factors potentially involved in variable case marking in other languages and provide a revised set of desiderata for those working on case theory.

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[cdonohue@gmail.com]   [Received 6 June 2015;
[mark@donohue.cc]   accepted 23 November 2015]