

FIRST CAMBRIDGE COMPARATIVE SYNTAX CONFERENCE
(CAMCOS 1), 18TH-19TH MAY

Cam bridge Co mparative S yntax

Programme

18 May: CamCoS warm-up event

4-5pm: **Michelle Sheehan** (Cambridge) – Syntactic ergativity beyond the transitive clause

5-5.30pm: **Alison Biggs** (Cambridge) – Detransitivising constructions in ergative languages

5.30-6pm: **Ian Roberts** (Cambridge) – The Smuggling approach to ergativity: pros and cons

6-7.30: *Drinks reception in English Faculty*

7.30: *Meal at India House*

19 May: CamCoS

9-10am: **Geoffrey Khan** (Cambridge) – Ergativity in Neo-Aramaic

10-11am: **Roberta D'Alessandro** (Leiden) – An external look at ergativity: comparing ergative languages and Italian dialects

11-11.30am: *Coffee*

11.30am-12.30pm: **Milan Rezac** (Paris VIII) – The structural ergative of Basque: Ergative-absolutive alternations and the nature of structural Case

12.30-2pm: *Lunch*

2-3pm: **Jessica Coon** (McGill) – Taking “ergativity” out of split ergativity: A structural account of aspect and person splits

3-4pm: **Itziar Laka** (UPV/EHU) – Ergativity from within

4-4.30pm: *Coffee*

4.30-5.30pm: **Lisa Travis** (McGill) – When a language becomes or ceases to be ergative

5.30-6pm: Closing discussion

Post-conference party

Abstracts

Geoffrey Khan (Cambridge) – 9-10am

Ergativity in Neo-Aramaic

Morphological ergativity is attested in all Neo-Aramaic dialects of the North-Eastern Neo-Aramaic (NENA) group, which comprises over a hundred different dialects spoken by Jewish and Christian communities originating in the border areas of Turkey/Iraq/Iran. Historically, Aramaic (Semitic) is nominative-accusative, and ergativity developed through contact with ergative Iranian languages, especially Kurdish, which is spoken by the Muslim population of the region. Ergativity developed in the perfective aspect only, and is marked by verb-agreement rather than Case. NENA dialects can be divided into three types according to their degree of ergativity, reflected by differences in the distribution of the ergative marking of intransitive verbs. In dialects exhibiting the highest degree of ergativity, which I call Split-S, the ergative marker is restricted to transitive and unergative verbs, and is not found with unaccusative verbs. In a second type of dialect, which I call Dynamic-Stative, the ergative marker is also optionally found with unaccusative verbs. Dialects exhibiting the lowest degree of ergativity, Extended-Ergative, mark all intransitive subjects as ergative. This is surprising from the perspective of theories of ergativity, since it contradicts Marantz's Generalization, and suggests that ergative Case is not inherent but structural.

Roberta D'Alessandro (Leiden) – 10-11am

An external look at ergativity: comparing ergative languages and Italian dialects

Some upper southern Italian dialects exhibit syntactic characteristics that are uncommon within the Romance group. Such characteristics are more readily found in ergative languages. This paper addresses these unusual patterns, in particular person-driven auxiliary selection, split differential object marking and omnivorous agreement, with the aim of identifying the clustering microproperties that bring about both the "split ergative" and the unusual agreement patterns in the Italian dialects at issue. The presence of an "extra" head has previously been proposed both for the analysis of ergative languages (Laka 2006, Coon 2011) and for the analysis of agreement patterns in southern Italian dialects (D'Alessandro 2011). Here, I will show that the two pictures can be combined and that this extra head is the key to solving both the unusual agreement patterns in Italian dialects and TAM-driven split ergativity.

Milan Rezac (Paris VIII) – 11.30am-12.30pm

The structural ergative of Basque: Ergative-absolutive alternations and the nature of structural Case

This talk develops (i-iii):

(i) In Basque there exists structural rather than solely inherent ergativity, in the specific sense of the structural-inherent divide where structural relations are independent of Merge upon *c/s*-selection and can accordingly span indefinite phrase-structural distance through Agree(\pm Merge). Evidence comes from the core distinctions between these dependency types, including ergative-absolutive alternations due to raising-to-ergative of internal arguments with sensitivity to intervention effects, absolutive Exceptional Case Marking of external arguments, ergative agreement at a phrase-structural, cross-clausal distance, and ergative-absolutive alternations due to person-hierarchy restrictions (Rezac, Albizu, and Etxepare 2011, Rezac 2011). Thus structural Case systems cannot be reduced to a nominative-accusative basis with an inherent ergative, as recent work proposes (Woolford 2006, Legate 2008). Rather, the Basque ergative-absolutive system is significantly parallel to nominative-accusative ones: absolutive/accusative reflects *vP*-internal Agree(\pm Merge), ergative/nominative T-related Agree(\pm Merge) (Laka 2000).

(ii) The Basque structural ergative nevertheless differs from structural nominative, accusative and absolutive: while all four allow agreement at a distance (Agree), structural ergative case assignment requires movement to the ergative locus (T_{ERG}). (Rezac, Albizu, and Etxepare 2011)

(iii) An analysis of (ii) is sketched that assimilates structural ergative assignment to “raising to the object of a preposition” and similar phenomena, in a system where Merge both in selection (external Merge) and upon Agree (internal Merge) adds a structural shell to the selectee based on properties of the probe/selector.

Laka 2000. Theta-blind Case. In *Arguments and Case*. John Benjamins.

Legate 2008. Morphological and abstract case. *Linguistic Inquiry* 39.

Rezac, Albizu and Etxepare 2011. The structural ergative of Basque and the theory of Case. Ms. CNRS & UPV-EHU.

Rezac 2011. *Phi-features and the modular architecture of language*. Springer.

Woolford 2006. Lexical Case, inherent Case, and argument structure. *Linguistic Inquiry* 37.

Jessica Coon (McGill) – 2-3pm

Taking “ergativity” out of split ergativity: A structural account of aspect and person splits (collaborative with Omer Preminger)

It has been noted that while many languages show ergative-absolutive patterning (an alignment of grammatical roles in which intransitive subjects pattern with transitive objects, and differently from transitive subjects), very few or perhaps no languages are *consistently* ergative (Moravcsik 1978). Instead, ergative systems are characterized by "splits", in which part of the grammar follows an ergative pattern, while another part shows non-ergative patterning.

In this talk I survey split systems and show that the appearance of split ergativity is epiphenomenal: ergative marking is lost in certain domains due to differences in structure which cause transitive subjects to behave as intransitive subjects. Furthermore, the structural differences which trigger splits are also present in nominative-accusative systems. Here the "splits" are obscured because both transitive and intransitive subjects (by definition) pattern alike. I offer a proposal for why these structural differences appear in only certain aspects and with certain types of NPs. Under this account, the large number of splits in ergative systems does not reflect any underlying instability in ergativity (contra van de Visser 2006). Rather, languages can be seen as following either a consistently ergative or consistently accusative alignment.

Itziar Laka (UPV/EHU) – 3-4pm

Ergativity from within

I will discuss aspects of the interplay between language processing and parametric variation, focusing on ergativity. I will present recent results from experimental work on Basque that appear to be at odds with some widely held assumptions on language processing, regarding the relative ease of processing subject vs. object gap clauses, and the status of the subject initial preference as a general strategy for sentence processing. I will argue that general processing strategies do interact with parametric specifications of grammar yielding different specific effects for different types of languages. As a consequence, processing mechanisms should be stated in terms more abstract than subject/object as characterized in nominative languages. I will also present results from studies on Basque/Spanish and Spanish/Basque bilinguals processing agreement and case in Basque, which reveal that parametric variation leaves a detectable neural trace, and more specifically that ergativity/nominativity have a significant impact in native vs. on-native language representation in the brain.

Lisa deMena Travis (McGill) – 4.30-5.30pm

When a language becomes or ceases to be ergative

In this paper I explore two issues related to ergativity – both of which have to do with the apparent ergative continuum and how languages can be minimally different in a system of macroparameters. One issue developed from the personal experience of working for thirty years on Malagasy – a language that has recently been claimed to be ergative (e.g. Aldridge 2011). The first question I raise in this context is why the determination of the ergativity status of a language can be so unclear. The second question that I raise is whether, if Malagasy is ergative, an analysis that has been proposed for Malagasy can be extended to other ergative languages. I look particularly at Q'anjob'al, an ergative Mayan language, and propose that the Agent Focus construction in this language (Coon et al. 2011) can provide insight into slight variations among ergative languages. I propose that by viewing Malagasy as a Clitic Left Dislocation language (Travis 2006) and Q'anjob'al as having a Clitic Doubling construction, one might be able account for similarities and differences between the two.

In the second part of the paper, I investigate the ergativity continuum within the Austronesian language family. Chung (1977) offers some insight into this question by showing how, on the surface, Nom/Acc languages can look quite similar to Erg/Abs languages within Polynesian languages. We can see in the schema below that the difference between these two language types rests on subtle distinctions between case markers and prepositions, and the grammatical use of verbal morphology.

ACCUSATIVE	TRANSITIVE	PASSIVE
	Verb AGENT <i>i</i> PATIENT Subj Obj	Verb+ <i>Cia e</i> AGT PATIENT Oblique Subj
ERGATIVE	ANTI-PASSIVE	TRANSITIVE
	Verb AGENT <i>i/ki</i> PATIENT Subj Oblique	Verb <i>e</i> AGT PATIENT Subj Obj

I investigate the distribution of the basic characteristics of ergative languages given in the table above, in particular whether or not the Patient of an anti-passive construction or the Agent of the transitive construction is oblique. I will also track other characteristics (extraction restrictions, anaphor realization, scope facts) across a sampling of Austronesian languages with the goal of better understanding microvariations within the ergativity parameters, and thereby better understanding ergativity itself.

REFERENCES

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- Chung, Sandra (1977). On the Gradual Nature of Syntactic Change. In C. Li (ed.), *Mechanisms of Syntactic Change*, 3-55. Austin: University of Texas.
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University.

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