When Ergative = Genitive:
Nominals and Split Ergativity

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1. Introduction

While most Mayan languages show an ergative-absolutive pattern of agreement in all main clauses, Chol shows what has been described as an aspect-based split (Quizar and Knowles-Berry 1988; Vázquez Álvarez 2002; Law et al. 2006): perfective clauses show an ergative-absolutive pattern, as in (1), while non-perfective clauses show what appears to be a nominative-accusative pattern, illustrated in (2).[1] Following Mayan literature, I use the theory-neutral labels 'A' and 'B' to mark person morphemes.

(1) *Perfectives* (= ERG-ABS)

    a. Tyi **i**-mek'-e-**yoñ**.
        PRFV **A3**-hug-TV-**B1**
        'She hugged me.'

    b. Tyi wäy-i-**yoñ**.
        PRFV sleep-ITV-**B1**
        'I slept.'
        → | stems = verbal |

(2) *Imperfectives* (= NOM-ACC)

    a. Mi **i**-mek'-**oñ**.
        IMPF **A3**-hug-**B1**
        'She hugs me.'

    b. Mi **k**-wäy-el.
        IMPF **A1**-sleep-NML
        'I sleep.'
        → | stems = nominal |

Like Chol, languages with aspectual splits generally show accusativity in the non-perfective forms. The puzzle arises when we examine the nature of the stem forms. In a variety of unrelated languages, ergativity has been argued to be the result of *nominalization* (Johns 1992; Alexiadou 2001; Salanova 2007). In Chol however, it is the *non*-perfective (accusative-patterning) forms in (2) which are shown to be nominal. The perfective (ergative-patterning) forms in (1) are shown to be truly verbal. Based on the above accounts, Chol is at least superficially the opposite of what we expect.

In this paper I offer an analysis both of the appearance of ergativity in Chol verbal (perfective) forms, as well as the appearance of accusativity in Chol nominal (imperfective) forms. I argue that Chol imperfective stems are formally possessed nominal arguments of a one-place predicate: the aspect marker *mi*. Under this analysis, *all predicates* in Chol show an ergative-absolutive pattern (Coon 2008). Chol ergativity, I propose, is connected to obligatory phrasal predicate fronting in all main clauses.

I argue further the accusativity in Chol imperfective forms is an illusion, resulting from the fact that the set A marker in imperfectives like (2) co-indexes a grammatical possessor, and that ERGATIVE = GENITIVE. Just as ergativity has been recently argued to arise in different ways (Aldridge 2004; Paul and Travis 2006; Legate 2008), a central claim of this paper is that the appearance of accusativity may also have more than one source. While the discussion below focuses on Chol, it aims to provide insights into ergative and accusative systems more generally, and to make testable typological predictions.

[1] Abbreviations in glosses are as follows: 1, 2, 3 = 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person; A = 'set A' (ergative/genitive); AFF = affirmative; B = 'set B' (absolutive); CL = gender clitic; DET = determiner; ITV = intransitive verb; NEG = negation; NML = nominal stem suffix; PL = plural; PRFV = perfective; PREP = preposition; TV = transitive verb.

2. Ergativity & Accusativity

In an *ergative-absolutive* system intransitive subjects are treated like transitive objects—both are marked ABS—to the exclusion of transitive subjects, marked ERG. This pattern is seen in the perfective Chol examples in (3). In a *nominative-accusative system*, as in the Russian sentences in (4), intransitive subjects are treated like transitive subjects (NOM), to the exclusion of transitive objects (ACC). I'll call NOMINATIVE and ABSOLUTIVE *obligatory cases*, since they are present in all clauses in both systems.

(3) *Chol perfectives* (= ERG-ABS)

    a. Tyi **i**-k'el-e-**ety**.
       PRFV ERG3-look-TV-ABS2
       'She looked at you.'

    b. Tyi jul-i-**yety**.
       PRFV arrive-ITV-ABS2
       'You arrived.'

(4) *Russian* (= NOM-ACC)

    a. Košk-**a** vidit myšk-**u**.
       cat-NOM see mouse-ACC
       'The cat sees a mouse.'

    b. Myšk-**a** spit.
   mouse-NOM sleep
       'The mouse sleeps.'

More abstractly, we may think of these two different systems in terms of the relative structural height of arguments: an ergative-absolutive system assigns obligatory (ABSOLUTIVE) case to the *lowest* arguments (transitive objects and intransitive subjects), while a nominative-accusative system assigns obligatory (NOMINATIVE) case to the *highest* arguments (transitive and intransitive subjects). Developing this idea, the *Obligatory Case Parameter* (Bobaljik 1993; Laka 1993, 2000; Rezac to appear) attributes the difference in ergative vs. accusative systems to whether a high head, T^0 or a lower head, v^0 is "active" for obligatory (NOM/ABS) case-assignment, as in (5).

(5) *Obligatory Case Parameter*:

    a. $T^0{}_{NOM}$ = active $\longrightarrow$ *nominative-accusative system*
    b. $v^0{}_{ABS}$ = active $\longrightarrow$ *ergative-absolutive system*

Consider v^0 probing into the transitive and intransitive clauses in (6) and (7). It will pick out the object of the transitive clause and the sole argument of the intransitive clause, and mark them ABSOLUTIVE.[2] This is an *ergative-absolutive* pattern. I leave open the mechanism of ERGATIVE case assignment (a subject of debate in recent literature), i.e. whether it is assigned *relationally* (cf. Marantz 1991), or *inherently* (cf. Woolford 1997; Legate 2008).
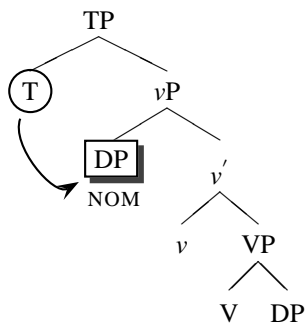
(6) *Transitive*
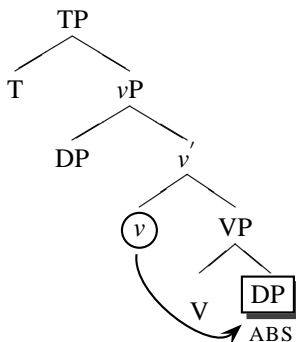
(7) *Intransitive (Unaccusative)*
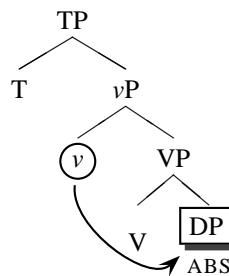
Now consider T^0 looking down on the same structures in (8) and (9). It picks out the *subject* of the transitive clause and the sole DP of the intransitive clause and assigns them NOMINATIVE case. This is a *nominative-accusative* pattern. Again, I leave the assignment of the ACCUSATIVE as a topic for future research.

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[2] Following Rezac (to appear), I assume that if there is no lower DP, as in the case of unergatives, v^0 is allowed to "look up". This will account for languages which assign ABSOLUTIVE to the sole argument of unergatives. In Chol, unergatives are transitive light-verb constructions and the subject is marked ERGATIVE, as in (12b) below.

(8) *Transitive*

```
          TP
         /  \
       (T)   vP
            /  \
         [DP]   v'
         NOM    / \
               v   VP
                  /  \
                 V   DP
```

(9) *Intransitive (Unaccusative)*

```
          TP
         /  \
       (T)   vP
            /  \
           v    VP
               /  \
              V   [DP]
                   NOM
```
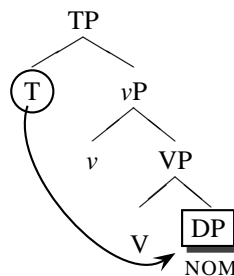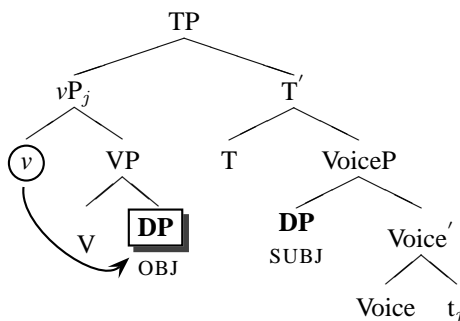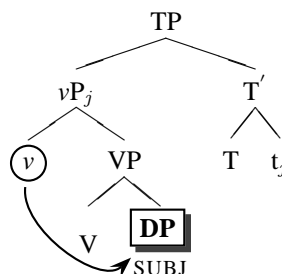
One proposal of this paper is that, at least in some cases, we can predict the setting of the Obligatory Case Parameter based on other aspects of the grammar (see also Coon and Salanova to appear). Specifically, when v^0 and T^0 are in a *local* relationship v^0 *activates* T^0 for obligatory case assignment, and we find accusativity; when v^0 and T^0 are *not* in a local relationship v^0 alone is responsible for obligatory case assignment and we find ergativity (Salanova 2007). Exactly what type of local relationship is required for *activation*—head-movement, morphological merger, adjacency, containment within the same phase—will require further investigation into a variety of languages, and remains open as a topic for future research. Concentrating for now on Chol, we find independent evidence that T^0 is inactive: there is no grammatical tense marking in the language, and v^0-to-T^0 movement is unavailable (Coon to appear). Instead, as discussed in §3 below, vP moves to Spec,TP.

This, however, cannot be the entire story since we see what appears to be a nominative-accusative pattern in Chol imperfective clauses, as in (2) above. I propose in §4 that this is the result of a different process which, like the nominative-accusative pattern in (8) and (9), also involves a high agreement probe: *control*. In control, we again have a *high* element (the controller) establishing a relationship with the closest arguments in the clause. It is thus possible that in a clause that internally shows an ergative-absolutive pattern, *control* from the outside will show a nominative-accusative pattern. These facts, I argue, explain Chol's apparent system of split ergativity.

3. Ergativity in Chol Verbs

Basic word order in Chol (as in Many Mayan languages, cf. England 1991; Aissen 1992) is VOS/VS. A growing body of work analyzes basic word order in some predicate initial languages as the result of *phrasal* fronting of the predicate to a higher clausal position.[3] Evidence for this derivation of VOS order in Chol is found in the placement of adverbs and PP adjuncts, as well as in restrictions on full DP vs. bare NP objects, elaborated in Coon to appear.

Chol perfectives have the structure in (10) and (11). The suffixes found on roots in perfective constructions (*-e* and *-i* in (3)) are generated in v^0. The transitive subject is generated externally to the vP in VoiceP (Kratzer 1994, 1996). vP moves to Spec,TP, resulting in Chol's VOS and VS orders.

(10) *Transitive:*

```
               TP
              /  \
           vP_j    T'
          /  \    /  \
        (v)  VP  T   VoiceP
            /  \    /   \
           V  [DP] DP   Voice'
              OBJ  SUBJ  /  \
                      Voice  t_j
```

(11) *Intransitive:*

```
               TP
              /  \
           vP_j    T'
          /  \    /  \
        (v)  VP  T   t_j
            /  \
           V  [DP]
              SUBJ
```

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[3]See for example Pearson (2001) and Rackowski and Travis (2000) on Malagasy, Massam (2000) on Niuean, Aldridge (2004) on Seediq, and Lee (2000) on Zapotec, among others.

Coon (to appear) suggests that phrasal predicate fronting (rather than simple V^0-to-T^0 movement) occurs in Chol as a last resort, due to a general absence of the head movement in the language. Note that in the above structures, v^0 and T^0 are not in a local relationship. v^0 is thus the "active" case assigner. Chol has no grammatical tense marking, which may be relevant to the status of T^0 as inactive. In both structures, v^0 probes down and assigns the obligatory ABSOLUTIVE case to the first argument in its search domain: the transitive object in (10); and the single argument of the intransitive in (11). In the transitive structure in (10), v^0 is never in a position to c-command the subject and this DP receives ERGATIVE case.

Returning to the puzzle presented in the introduction, we find that there is nothing incompatible in the appearance of ergativity in Chol verbs and ergativity in nominalizations as described, for example, by Salanova (2007) for the language Mẽbengokre. In both types of system, ergativity is the result of a separation of the predicate head from T^0. In Chol perfectives, this comes about by phrasal fronting of the predicate. In Mẽbengokre there is semantic evidence for this separation as the result of nominalization (Salanova 2007). Under this analysis, two apparently very different phenomena, predicate fronting and nominalization, give rise to ergativity (see Coon and Salanova to appear for details).

However, as noted in the introduction, not all Chol clauses appear to be ergative. Imperfectives like those in (2) show a nominative-accusative pattern. In the section that follows I show that Chol imperfective stems are formally nominal arguments of a one-place predicate: the aspect marker *mi*. This predicate *does* show the expected ergative pattern and Chol's ergative split is an illusion.

4. Accusativity in Chol Nominals

While the perfective clauses we've concentrated on so far show the expected ergative-absolutive pattern, non-perfective clauses like the ones in (2) above show what *appears* to be a nominative-accusative pattern. In this section I propose that the Chol imperfective stem forms in (2) are *possessed nominals*. The true predicate is the aspectual marker *mi* (or its allomorph *muk'*). Like other one-place predicates in the language, it shows absolutive agreement with its sole argument (third person = null). The fact that ERGATIVE and GENITIVE are identical in Chol results in the appearance of accusativity.

4.1. Chol Person Marking

In Chol, as in other Mayan languages, grammatical relations are marked on the predicate via a set of agreement affixes, traditionally called 'Set A' (ERGATIVE & GENITIVE) and 'Set B' (ABSOLUTIVE) in Mayan linguistics. In Chol, set A morphemes mark all *external arguments*: transitive subjects, unergative subjects, and possessors, as in (12). Set B morphemes mark *internal arguments*: transitive objects, unaccusative subjects, and themes in predicate nominal constructions, shown in (13).

(12) *Set A ~ ergative/genitive markers:*

    a. Tyi **k**-mek'-e-yety.
       PRFV A1-hug-TV-B2
       'I hugged you.'

    b. Tyi **k**-cha`le k'ay.
       PRFV A1-do   song
       'I sang.'

    c. **k**-chich
       A1-sister
       'my sister'

(13) *Set B ~ absolutive markers:*

    a. Tyi i-jats'-ä-**yoñ**.
       PRFV A3-hit-TV-B1
       'He hit me.'

    b. Tyi wäy-i-**yoñ**.
       PRFV sleep-ITV-B1
       'I slept.'

    c. X-`ixik-**oñ**.
       CL-woman-B1
       'I am a woman.'

Compare, however, the unaccusative intransitives in (1b) and (2b) above. In the perfective we find the single argument marked with set B; in the imperfective with set A. If it is correct that set B marks all internal arguments, and set A marks all external arguments, it is unclear what is happening with the θ-role assignment of *wäy* 'sleep'. This question will be addressed in the remainder of this section.

4.2. Imperfective Stems are Nominal

In addition to the differences in person marking between perfectives and imperfectives, we also find differences in stem morphology. In the perfective in (1b), the root takes a vowel suffix *-i*, proposed above to occupy v^0. In the imperfective in (2b), the root takes the suffix *-el*. Suffixes of the form *-Vl* are found on nominals throughout Chol (Warkentin and Scott 1980) and other Mayan languages (cf. Bricker 1981).

Distributionally, imperfective stem forms appear in the same contexts as nominals; perfective stems like *wäyi* are impossible here, as shown in (14). Similar facts can be shown for imperfective vs. perfective *transitive* stems, though I omit these for space (see Coon to appear).

(14)   a. *In argument position*:

Muk'-äch y-äk'eñ-oñ-la [**wäy-el**] jiñi tyikwal.
IMPF-AFF A3-give-B1-PL sleep-NML DET heat

'The heat indeed makes us tired.' (lit.: ~ 'The heat gives us sleep.')   *[wäy-i]

   b. *With prepositions*:

Ta`-ix   majl-i **tyi**   [**wäy-el**].
PRFV-already go-ITV PREP sleep-NML

'She went to sleep already.'   *[wäy-i]

   c. *Possessed*:

Mach weñ **i**-[**wäy-el**]   ñeñe`.
NEG   good A3-sleep-NML baby

'The baby's sleeping isn't good.'   *[wäy-i]

   d. *With determiners and adjectives*:

Mach weñ **jiñi kabäl** [**wäy-el**].
NEG   good DET a.lot   sleep-NML

'A lot of sleeping isn't good.'   *[wäy-i]

Following Coon 2008, I propose that the stems in imperfective constructions are formally *possessed nominals*. In the imperfective, the set A marker functions in its role *not* as the ERGATIVE (transitive subject) marker, but as the GENITIVE. This is shown, along with more literal translations, in (15).

(15)   *Chol imperfectives*

   a. Mi-Ø   [$_{DP}$ **i**-kuch   ixim **aj-Maria**].
      IMPF-B3   A3-carry corn CL-Maria

   'Maria carries corn.' (~ 'Maria's carrying corn happens.')

   b. Mi-Ø   [$_{DP}$ **i**-wäy-el   **aj-Maria**].
      IMPF-B3   A3-sleep-NML CL-Maria

   'Maria sleeps.' (~ 'Maria's sleeping happens.')

Compare the imperfective constructions in (15) with the possessive phrase in (16):

(16)   **i**-[chich]   **ñeñe`**
       A3-older.sister baby

   'the baby's older sister'

The true predicate in constructions like those in (15) is the imperfective aspect marker *mi*. The proposal is illustrated by the bracketing in (15). In both sentences, the aspect marker *mi* shows set B (ABSOLUTIVE) agreement with its sole argument: the nominal possessive phrases *ikuch ixim ajMaria* and *iwäyel ajMaria*. This is obscured by the fact that the agreed-with phrase is always third person, and third person set B is null in Mayan languages. Thus, while the aspect markers *mi* (imperfective) and *tyi* (perfective) share certain properties—both appear pre-verbally and both have larger CVC allomorphs,

muk' and *ta`*, used when the aspect markers host second position clitics, as in (14a–b)—they are in fact very different. While the perfective marker and its allomorph are simply aspectual particles, the imperfective forms are one-place predicates which show the expected set B (ABSOLUTIVE) agreement with their arguments.

Evidence for the predicative nature of the imperfective comes from certain constructions in which it is able to directly take (non-null) absolutive morphology (Robertson 1980; Vázquez Álvarez 2002; Coon 2008). The nominal verb stem appears subordinated by a preposition, shown in (17a). This construction is impossible with the perfective in (17b).

(17) a.   Muk'-**oñ** tyi   wäy-el.
           IMPF-B1 PREP sleep-NML
           'I sleep.'

     b. * Ta`-oñ   tyi   wäy-el.
           PRFV-B1 PREP sleep-NML

This imperfective predicate may also directly take other eventive DP arguments such as *ja`al* 'rain' or *k'iñijel* 'party', as in (18a). As predicted, the perfective particle *tyi*, along with its allomorph *ta`*, are not possible in this type of construction either, shown by the ungrammaticality of (18b).

(18) a.   Muk'-äch **ja`al** tyi   Chiapas.
           IMPF-AFF rain PREP Chiapas
           'It does rain in Chiapas.'

     b. * Ta`-äch   ja`al tyi   Chiapas.
           PRFV-AFF rain PREP Chiapas

There is also historical support for the predicative nature of *mi* from nearby Yucatec (Bricker 1981, 85), who writes: "Evidence that the aspects that govern the nominative-accusative pattern of pronominal inflection are really the main verbs of complement constructions can be found in Classical Yucatec, where several of the aspectual 'particles' frequently appear as fully inflected auxiliary verbs." While *mi* and its allomorph *muk'* are ergative-absolutive-patterning predicates, *tyi* and *ta`* are simply aspect markers.
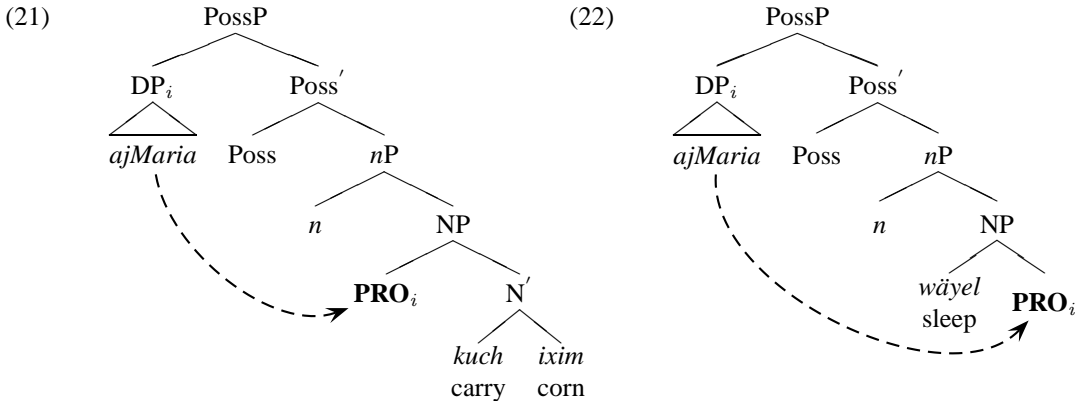
4.3. Ergative = Genitive

To summarize, *mi* is a one-place predicate and shows the expected ABSOLUTIVE agreement with its single argument. In the analysis presented here, the apparent nominative-accusative pattern is found only in the nominal arguments of *mi*, such as those bracketed in (15) above. Recall from the discussion in §2 above that accusativity can be viewed as a *high* probe (e.g. T^0) establishing an agreement relationship with the closest arguments in transitive and intransitive clauses. In this section I show that we also find accusativity as the result of a high *controller*.

Specifically, I propose that the true subjects of the nominal stems in both imperfective constructions in (15) are null PROs; *ajMaria* is *not* an argument of either predicate, but is instead a grammatical possessor which controls the null PRO subjects. The apparent accusativity in the nominal forms in (15) is then straightforwardly explained by: 1. The fact in the forms in (15) the Set A morphemes coindex grammatical *possessors* (*ajMaria*) which control the true subjects (null); and 2. ERGATIVE and GENITIVE are identical in Mayan languages.

Evidence that imperfective constructions involve PRO subjects can be found in constructions with arbitrary PRO, such as those in (19) and (20). In these examples, which use the imperfective (nominal) stem forms, we find no possessor, and consequently no set A agreement:

(19) Mach weñ jiñi [**PRO**$_{ARB}$ jats' ts'i`].
     NEG good DET   hit dog
     'Hitting dogs isn't good (in general).'

(20) Mach weñ jiñi [uk'-el   **PRO**$_{ARB}$].
     NEG good DET cry-NML
     'Crying isn't good (in general).'

The proposal is illustrated by the trees in (21) and (22). Just as *v*P moves to Spec,TP within the clause, *n*P fronts to the specifier of a DP-internal inflectional phrase, resulting in Chol's possessum–possessor order (see example (16)). These possessive phrases can then appear arguments of the one-place predicate *mi*, giving us the imperfective sentences in (15) above.

(21) PossP — DP$_i$ *ajMaria* / Poss' — Poss / *n*P — *n* / NP — **PRO**$_i$ / N' — *kuch* (carry) *ixim* (corn)

(22) PossP — DP$_i$ *ajMaria* / Poss' — Poss / *n*P — *n* / NP — *wäyel* (sleep) **PRO**$_i$

Returning to the perfective and imperfective intransitive sentences from (1b) and (2b), repeated in (23), we have an answer to the question posed at the end of §4.1.

(23) a. *Perfective*:

Tyi [wäy-i-**yety**].
PRFV sleep-ITV-B2

'You slept.'

b. *Imperfective*:

Mi **a**$_i$- [wäy-el PRO$_i$].
IMPF A2- sleep-NML

'You sleep.'

In (23a), the ABSOLUTIVE (set B) morpheme coindexes the true (internal) argument of the verb; in (23b), the GENITIVE (set A) morpheme coindexes the grammatical possessor. The possessor controls the true argument of *wäy*, which is null. The appearance of a nominative-accusative pattern is explained here because agreement is with the *possessor* and ERGATIVE = GENITIVE. Furthermore, the fact that ERGATIVE and GENITIVE are identical is not surprising under this analysis, as they are assigned in identical structural configurations: just as transitive subjects are generated in a *v*P-external VoiceP, possessors are generated in an *n*P-external PossP; just as *v*P fronts to Spec,TP, *n*P fronts to Spec of DP-internal IP; and, just as the transitive *v*P shows set A agreement with the transitive subject, *n*P shows genitive agreement with the possessor (Coon to appear).

5. Conclusion

With Chol's person-marking system as a starting point, this paper proposed a new way to look at morphological systems of accusativity and ergativity. Following the Obligatory Case Parameter, a nominative-accusative system is the result of a high agreement probe (= *active* T^0), while an ergative-absolutive system is the result of a low agreement probe (= *active* v^0). However, as proposed in Coon and Salanova to appear, the setting of this parameter is not arbitrary, but is determined by other independent facts in the language. Specifically, accusativity arises when v^0 and T^0 are in a local relationship, causing v^0 to *activate* T^0 for obligatory (NOMINATIVE) case assignment. When v^0 and T^0 are *not* local, v^0 is the active case assigner and assigns obligatory (ABSOLUTIVE) case.

I argued that *all* predicates in Chol show an ergative-absolutive pattern. Chol is a predicate initial language, with basic VOS/VS order. Because *v*P has fronted to Spec,TP, v^0 does not activate T^0, resulting in ergativity. The imperfective stems in Chol, which have been described as showing a

nominative-accusative pattern, are formally *possessed nominals*. Set A agreement is with the possessor, which controls null arguments in the nominal stem. Control from outside the clause picks out the *highest* arguments, resulting in the appearance of a nominative-accusative pattern. In Chol, the illusion of accusativity arises from the fact that ERGATIVE and GENITIVE are identical, and that the agreed with DP in imperfectives is a possessor, not the subject.

A growing body of work argues that not all verb-initial languages are derived in the same way (cf. Carnie and Guilfoyle 2000, Carnie et al. 2005). If the story presented above is correct, then we have a further diagnostic for distinguishing v^0-fronting vs. vP-fronting languages. In languages which are predicate initial as the result of vP-fronting, v^0 will not activate T^0, so we *expect* to see ergativity.

(24)

v^0-fronting languages	vP-fronting languages
T^0 = active	v^0 = active
NOM-ACC	ERG-ABS
e.g. Arabic, Celtic…	e.g. Chol, Niuean…

The proposal that ergativity results from a disconnect between the predicate head and T^0 also provides an account of languages like Mẽbengokre where we find ergativity in nominalizations (Salanova 2007; Coon and Salanova to appear). More work is needed to determine how well other languages can fit into this typology.

As a final note, in response to the diversity of ergative-patterning languages currently under study, it has been recently proposed that ergativity should not be treated as a unified phenomenon (see e.g. Aldridge 2004; Paul and Travis 2006; Legate 2008). We saw above that *accusativity* can also have more than one source: active T^0 or control.

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