The absence of an implicit object in unergatives: New and old evidence from Basque

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Abstract

Basque unergatives have long been held as evidence that unergative verbs have implicit objects. Recently, it has been shown that the presence of absolutive agreement-morphology in Basque is not a reliable indicator of a successful agreement relation with a nominal target. Building on this, I present two new arguments (and one old one) that Basque unergatives lack an implicit object.

Since the subject of these verbs is nonetheless ergative-marked, these facts furnish an argument against a *case-competition* account of ergative case in Basque (i.e., against ergative being a *dependent case*). At first glance, this seems to favor an account of ergative as *inherent case*. However, previous work on Basque provides evidence against such an account; this evidence comes from raising-to-ergative constructions, and the existence of ergative-marked arguments that are unambiguously Themes.

These facts therefore point to the need for a new theory of ergative case that is compatible (at the very least) with: **(i)** the existence of ergative noun-phrases without a case-competitor; **(ii)** the assignment of ergative case in non-thematic positions; and **(iii)** a lexically-determined distinction between unergatives and unaccusatives.

I conclude by discussing what such a theory of ergative case might look like.

KEYWORDS: *unergatives*, *argument-structure*, *ergativity*, *dependent case*, *inherent case*

1. Introduction

It is often assumed that clauses whose main predicate is an unergative verb, particularly in Basque, contain either an overt direct object (as in (1a)), or—if the surface structure does not obviously contain such an element (as in (1b))—an "implicit" or phonologically-null direct object (Bobaljik 1993, Hale & Keyser 1993, Laka 1993, Levin 1983, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Uribe-Etxebarria 1989, among others).[1]

(1) *THE UNERGATIVE ALTERNATION*

a. *LIGHT-VERB CONSTRUCTION*
Jon-ek dantza egin d-ϕ-u-ϕ. (Basque)
Jon-ERG dance do 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'Jon danced.'

b. *SIMPLEX UNERGATIVE VERB*
Jon-ek dantzatu d-ϕ-u-ϕ.
Jon-ERG dance-PRT 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'Jon danced.'

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[1] Legend: ABS=*absolutive*; ADV=*adverb*; ART=*article*; AUX=*auxiliary*; BEN=*benefactive*; DAT=*dative*; ERG=*ergative*; GEN=*genitive*; HAB=*habitual*; LOC=*locative*; NMZ=*nominalizer*; NOM=*nominative*; PRT=*participle*. The notation "*ϕ*" represents a phonologically-empty exponent.

Thus, the existence of alternations such as (1a–b) has been taken to reflect a fundamental similarity between the two structures.

In the light-verb construction (in (1a)), there is obviously a direct object present: while the semantically-contentful predicate is the nominal *dantza* ('dance'), it is quite uncontroversial that—syntactically speaking—the main verb in (1a) is the light-verb *egin* ('do'). In terms of its syntactic properties, then, the construction in (1a) is quite plainly a *transitive* one.[2]

As already pointed out by López & Austin (1997), examples like (1b) behave at least in part as though the nominal (*dantza* 'dance', in (1b)) has *incorporated* into a node in the extended verbal projection (Baker 1988)—which suggests that in this construction, there should be no full-fledged noun-phrase to function as the direct object of the verb. It might still be the case, however, that examples like (1b) involve a phonologically-null cognate object (as argued by Bobaljik 1993). In this paper, I present arguments that the construction in (1b) in fact lacks a direct object entirely (implicit or otherwise), contra earlier claims. Evidence for this comes from several sources: the existence of unergative verbs that can appear in the construction in (1b), for which there is no corresponding nominal in the language (Laka 2006); the non-dependency of the construction in (1a) on the nominal nature of the verbal complement, as demonstrated by the iterative/repetitive construction (Etxepare 2003); and the ability of subordinating verbs that take an ergative subject to co-index absolutive arguments of embedded verbs on the upstairs auxiliary (Etxepare 2006, Preminger 2009).[3]

2. The *Implicit Object* Conjecture

As mentioned in the introduction, it has been hypothesized that even those unergative constructions which do not involve a light-verb (e.g., (1b), above)—henceforth, *simplex unergatives*—contain an "implicit" or phonologically-null direct object:

(2) *THE IMPLICIT OBJECT CONJECTURE* (Bobaljik 1993, Hale & Keyser 1993, Laka 1993, Levin 1983, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Uribe-Etxebarria 1989, *i.a.*)
All unergative verbs have direct objects

Apparent support for (2) comes from the morphological form of the auxiliary verbs in examples like (1a–b)—in particular, the fact that simplex unergatives (like (1b)) take the same auxiliary form as light-verb unergatives (like (1a)).

There are at least two properties of the auxiliary verbs in (1a–b) that have been highlighted in this regard. First, it has been noted that both (1a) and (1b) take the "transitive" variant of the Basque auxiliary (constructed from **edun(/ukan)* 'have', rather than *izan* 'be'). Second, it has been noted that both in (1a) and in (1b), the auxiliary exhibits "absolutive agreement". I address these two properties in turn.

[2] Dissociations of this sort—between the element that contributes the open-class, lexical meaning of event predication (i.e., *dancing*, *jumping*, etc.), and the element that functions as the "main verb" in a given clause—are not uncommon (see for example Coon 2010a,b).

[3] A reviewer points out that the alternation exemplified by (1a–b) is not fully productive in the language—there are many verbs that can appear in the light-verb construction for which there is no corresponding simplex unergative. As the reviewer notes, it is not entirely clear whether this in itself constitutes an argument against the idea that a construction like (1a) reveals the underlying nature of a construction like (1b).

2.1. *Transitive* vs. *Intransitive* Auxiliaries

The *transitivity*-based characterization of the form of the auxiliary verb presupposes that the choice between **edun(/ukan)* ('have', the so-called "transitive auxiliary") and *izan* ('be', the so-called "intransitive auxiliary") is, in fact, regulated by transitivity. There is a rich tradition, in the linguistic study of Indo-European languages in particular, of relating auxiliary selection—namely, the choice between *have*-type and *be*-type auxiliaries—with transitivity in general, and with the presence of an underlying object in particular (see, for example, Burzio 1986 and related work). If the same principles extend to Basque, it would be reasonable to take the facts regarding auxiliary selection as an indicator for the transitivity of the verb, and thus for the presence of an (implicit) object.

In Basque, however, transitivity turns out to be an inadequate predictor of auxiliary selection. In particular, it has been argued that a better predictor of which auxiliary root is chosen—**edun(/ukan)* ('have') or *izan* ('be')—is the presence of an ergative agreement target (Laka 1996), or simply the presence of ergative agreement-morphology elsewhere in the morphological domain of the auxiliary (Arregi 2004).

As an example of where these explanations make predictions that diverge from those made by transitivity-based explanations, consider *allocutive agreement* (Eguren 1995, Oyharçabal 1993). In allocutive agreement constructions, the auxiliary exhibits agreement-morphology that co-indexes the addressee of the speech act. This "additional" agreement-morphology can appear in the ergative agreement slot or the dative agreement slot, depending on which slots are not already occupied by agreement with the nominal arguments of the verb. Consequently, one can find instances of ergative agreement-morphology appearing with verbs that are unambiguously intransitive:

(3) *Jon-ϕ eror-i d-ϕ-u-k*.
Jon(ABS) fall-PRF 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-2sg.ERG
'Jon has fallen. *(2sg allocution)*' [*Arregi 2004:(11a)*]

Crucially, the auxiliary in examples like (3) must be built with the **edun(/ukan)* ('have') root, rather than the *izan* ('be') root (if the example is to contain allocutive agreement in the ergative agreement slot, that is).[4]

Thus, the presence of an ergative agreement target (or simply, ergative agreement-morphology) is a better predictor of which auxiliary root is chosen than the transitivity of the verb. As a result, the choice of **edun(/ukan)* ('have') in both light-verb unergatives (like (1a)) and simplex unergatives (like (1b)) is merely an indication that there is an ergative agreement target (and/or ergative agreement-morphology) in these examples—but this much, of course, is uncontroversial: the fact that these examples contain an ergative subject (and ergative agreement with that subject) is what has led to the classification of these predicates as *unergative* in the first place. It therefore does not bear directly on the presence or absence of an implicit object, which is focus of this paper.

[4]Similar arguments can be made on the basis of *absolutive displacement* (Arregi 2004, Rezac 2007), as well as the impossibility of non-finite **edun* in the synchronic grammar, which I skip here in the interest of space.

2.2. Absolutive Agreement-Morphology

The second property of the auxiliary verb that holds constant across the alternation in (1a–b), and which has been taken as evidence for an implicit object in simplex unergatives, is the presence of "absolutive agreement-morphology". Both in (1a) and in (1b) (repeated here), the auxiliary bears morphology associated with the presence of a *3rd-person singular* absolutive nominal:

(1) a. *LIGHT-VERB CONSTRUCTION*
Jon-ek dantza egin d-ϕ-u-ϕ.
Jon-ERG dance do 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'Jon danced.'

b. *SIMPLEX UNERGATIVE VERB*
Jon-ek dantzatu d-ϕ-u-ϕ.
Jon-ERG dance-PRT 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'Jon danced.'

However, this observation can only be taken as evidence for the presence of an implicit object in simplex unergatives (like (1b)) if one adopts the following linking hypothesis:

(4) *ABSOLUTIVE-AGREEMENT "LINKING HYPOTHESIS"*
absolutive agreement-morphology can only come about as a result of the agreement-probe successfully establishing an agreement relation with an absolutive target

Crucially, I have demonstrated elsewhere (Preminger 2009) that the hypothesis in (4) cannot be maintained in Basque. In particular, there are examples that exhibit absolutive agreement-morphology despite the fact that the agreement relation between the probe and its putative absolutive target has clearly been disrupted.

As an example, consider the data in (5–7), which come from "substandard" varieties of Basque, first discussed from a generative perspective by Etxepare (2006):

(5) *[Miren-entzat harri horiek altxa-tze-n] probatu*
Miren-BEN stone those_{pl}(ABS) lift-NMZ-LOC attempted

d-it-u-zte.
3.ABS-pl.ABS-have-3pl.ERG
'They have attempted to lift those stones for Miren.'
(subject is [*pro*-3pl.ERG])

In these "substandard" varieties of Basque, a pattern of *Long-Distance Agreement* (*LDA*) into nominalized embedded clauses can be observed: in (5), the plural agreement-morphology on the upstairs auxiliary *d-it-u-zte* ('3.ABS-pl.ABS-have-3pl.ERG') is determined by the plurality of the downstairs absolutive argument *harri horiek* ('stone those_{pl}(ABS)'). Note that the embedded absolutive argument in this construction is able to control not only number agreement on the matrix auxiliary, but person agreement as well:

(6) *[Ni altxa-tze-n] probatu na- ϕ- u- te.*
me(ABS) lift-NMZ-LOC attempted 1.ABS- sg.ABS- have- 3pl.ERG
'They attempted to lift me.'
(subject is [*pro*-3pl.ERG]) [*Preminger 2009:(17)*]

In (7), on the other hand, the agreement relation between the upstairs auxiliary and the plural downstairs absolutive argument *liburu horiek* ('book those$_{pl}$(ABS)') has been disrupted by the presence of the dative intervener *lankide-e-i* ('colleague-ART$_{pl}$-DAT'); cf. the oblique benefactive found in the minimally contrasting (5), *Miren-entzat* ('Miren-BEN').

(7) *[Lankide-e-i liburu horiek irakur-tze-n] probatu*
colleague-ART$_{pl}$-DAT book those$_{pl}$(ABS) read-NMZ-LOC attempted

*d-ϕ/*it-u-(z)te.*
3.ABS-sg.ABS/*pl.ABS-have-3pl.ERG
'They have attempted to read those books to the colleagues.'
(subject is [*pro*-3pl.ERG]) [*Preminger 2009:(29, 32)*]

The result, however, is not an absence of absolutive agreement-morphology, but rather absolutive agreement-morphology that reflects default (i.e., *3rd-person singular*) φ-features.[5]

At first glance, it might seem appealing to treat the absolutive agreement morphology on the auxiliary in (7) as an instance of agreement with the propositional complement of *probatu* ('attempt'). Such an approach proves untenable, however, as phrases headed by the locative adposition *-n* never control agreement in Basque. We are therefore forced to the conclusion that the agreement relation demonstrated in examples like (5–6) has simply been disrupted in an example like (7); but crucially, the auxiliary carries absolutive agreement-morphology in the latter case, as well.

With respect to (4), this demonstrates that absolutive agreement-morphology in Basque cannot be taken as a conclusive indicator that agreement has successfully located an absolutive agreement target—undermining the argument that absolutive agreement-morphology in simplex unergatives is indicative of the presence of an implicit object. In fact, given the foregoing discussion, *3rd-person singular* absolutive agreement-morphology (which is what simplex unergatives like (1b) exhibit) is equally expected if simplex unergatives lack an implicit object, since the auxiliary would then fail to locate an appropriate agreement target, resulting in absolutive agreement-morphology that reflects *default* φ-features.

3. Evidence for the Absence of an Implicit Object

The discussion in section 2 focused on demonstrating that neither of the traditionally given empirical arguments for the presence of an implicit object in simplex unergatives is conclusive; it did not, however, provide any evidence to the contrary (i.e., for the absence of an implicit object). This is the focus of the current section.

[5] The auxiliary in Basque never lacks absolutive agreement-morphology, under any circumstances—which, as argued by Preminger (2009), is precisely what one would expect if an absolutive φ-probe is always merged, and failure to locate an appropriate absolutive target results in default (i.e., *3rd-person singular*) absolutive agreement-morphology.

3.1. Simplex Unergatives that Lack Corresponding Nominals

Laka (2006) notes that there is a class of unergative verbs that have no nominal counterparts in the language:

(8) a. *Klara-k ondo eskia-tzen d-ϕ-u-ϕ.*
Klara-ERG well ski-IMPF 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'Klara skies well.'

b. *Eguzki-a-k disdira-tzen d-ϕ-u-ϕ.*
sun-ART$_{sg}$-ERG shine-IMPF 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'The sun shines.' [*Laka 2006:(8a, 9b)*]

The verbs *eskiatu* ('ski') and *disdiratu* ('shine') in (8a–b) are, in the terminology of the current paper, *simplex unergatives*; but Basque does not have nominals *[*eskia*]$_{N^0}$ or *[*disdira*]$_{N^0}$—and consequently, these unergatives are unable to appear in the light-verb construction (cf. (1a), above).[6] If the language has no nominals corresponding to these verbs, it casts some doubt on the possibility that examples like (8a–b) contain an implicit cognate nominal object.

This argument alone, however, is not an indefeasible one: we could imagine that what the language lacks is not exactly the nominal lexical entries for *eskia* ('ski') and *disdira* ('shine'), but rather the ability to pronounce these roots *as nominals*. In that case, when phonologically null (in their role as implicit objects)—or alternatively, when incorporated into a node in the extended verbal projection (in the spirit of Baker 1988)—there would be no obstacle to their pronunciation. Thus, the absence of independently-pronounced nominals corresponding to *eskia* ('ski') and *disdira* ('shine') might not be a direct argument against the presence of an implicit object in examples like (8a–b).

Let us therefore turn to more direct arguments for the absence of an implicit object in simplex unergatives.

3.2. The Iterative/Repetitive construction

Many of the verbs that can appear in the light-verb construction in Basque are also able to appear in a variation of this construction, in which the complement of the light-verb is locative/adverbial, rather than nominal. This variant results in an iterative reading:

[6] An anonymous reviewer points out that *[*disdira*]$_{N^0}$ ('shine') has close counterparts, *distira* and *dirdira*, which *can* function as nominals in the language—including in the complement position of the light verb *egin*. Insofar as these are instances of allomorphy, this undermines the use of *disdiratu* as an illustration of this pattern, concerning unergative verbs that lack a corresponding nominal (though one would wonder, if this were an instance of pure allomorphy, what is the morpho-phonological principle that rules out *[*disdira*]$_{N^0}$ while still ruling in [*disdiratu*]$_{V^0}$). In any event, these concerns do not affect the use of *eskiatu* ('ski') as an illustration of the relevant pattern.

(9) a. *Dantza(n) egin d-ϕ-u-te.*
dance-LOC do 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3pl.ERG
'They danced (repeatedly).'

b. *Laster(ka) egin d-ϕ-u-te.*
run-ADV do AUX
'They ran (repeatedly).'

c. *Borroka(n) egin d-ϕ-u-te.*
fight-LOC do AUX
'They fought (repeatedly).'

d. *Oihu(ka) egin d-ϕ-u-te.*
scream-ADV do AUX
'They screamed/yelled (repeatedly).'

e. *Errieta(n) egin d-ϕ-u-te.*
dispute-LOC do AUX
'They disputed (repeatedly).'

[*Etxepare 2003:(117)*]

What is important to note, for the current purposes, is that the form of the auxiliary remains the same regardless of whether the complement of the light-verb is nominal or adpositional: it remains an **edun(/ukan)* ('have') auxiliary, bearing *3rd-person singular* absolutive agreement-morphology.

Now recall that the argument for an implicit object in simplex unergatives proceeds by parity of reasoning with the light-verb construction: if the form of the auxiliary in the light-verb construction is determined by the nominal complement of the light-verb, there must be a similar nominal complement in the simplex unergative construction—since after all, the auxiliary in the simplex construction has the exact same form.

However, adpositional phrases—such as those headed by *-n* or *-ka*, in (9a–e)—cannot be targeted for agreement in Basque (see Preminger 2009).[7] Consequently, in the locative/adverbial variants of (9a–e), the open-class nominal (e.g., *dantza* 'dance' in (9a)) cannot be the source of absolutive agreement-morphology on the auxiliary.

Thus, even within the light-verb construction, one is forced to admit that absolutive agreement-morphology can come about as a result of something other than agreement with an overt nominal.[8]

[7] Preminger (2009) demonstrates that some adpositions (at least *-n*) in Basque are not locality boundaries (or "phases"). However, this does not mean that their nominal complement can be targeted for agreement (Preminger shows that this option is in fact systematically excluded). It in fact seems plausible that the nominal complement of such an adposition is not a full-fledged DP but some smaller projection, thus not even entering into the calculus of possible agreement targets. If, on the other hand, the nominal complement of the adposition takes its own nominal argument, that argument *can* be targeted for agreement from outside the adpositional phrase.

[8] Marcel Den Dikken (p.c.) suggests that the locative/adverbial variants of (9a–e) might themselves contain an implicit nominal (cognate with the overt complement of the adposition), as in (i)—reminiscent of the English construction *John ate cupcake after cupcake*:

(i) *Dantza-n <dantza> egin d-ϕ-u-te.*
dance-LOC dance do 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3pl.ERG
'They danced repeatedly.'

As Den Dikken himself points out, however, this rendition—while tenable—is rather ad-hoc: it assumes implicit objects *wherever* there is absolutive agreement-morphology but no absolutive nominal (whether in the light-verb construction, or the simplex construction); but as shown in §2.2, absolutive agreement-morphology is not an unambiguous indicator of the presence of an absolutive nominal, in the first place (and crucially, the argument in §2.2 is based on data from outside the empirical domain of unergatives).

The results of section 2.2, on the other hand, provide an immediate explanation for data like (9a–e): the absence of a suitable absolutive agreement target—e.g., if the nominal is enclosed in an adpositional layer—should result in default (i.e., *3rd-person singular*) absolutive agreement-morphology on the auxiliary, exactly as observed.

Note that this approach provides a single explanation for both the behavior of the locative/adverbial versions of (9a–e), and the behavior of simplex unergatives: in both cases, there is no suitable target for absolutive agreement; and thus, in both constructions, the auxiliary surfaces bearing default (i.e., *3rd-person singular*) absolutive agreement-morphology.

3.3. Agreement with low absolutives in "LDA-unergatives"

Another source of evidence for the absence of an implicit object in simplex unergatives comes from the same construction discussed briefly in section 2.2, involving agreement into nominalized embedded clauses:

(10) *[Harri horiek altxa-tze-n] probatu d-it-u-zte.*
stone those$_{pl}$(ABS) lift-NMZ-LOC attempted 3.ABS-pl.ABS-have-3pl.ERG
'They have attempted to lift those stones.'
(subject is [*pro*-3pl.ERG]) [*Etxepare 2006:(85a)*]

As before, the plural agreement-morphology on the upstairs auxiliary *d-it-u-zte* ('3.ABS-pl.ABS-have-3pl.ERG') is determined by the plurality of the downstairs absolutive argument *harri horiek* ('stone those$_{pl}$(ABS)'), resulting in what has been called *Long-Distance Agreement* (*LDA*).

Let us now consider the matrix clause of (10) in detail. The subject of the matrix clause is ergative (in this case, *pro*-3pl.ERG, discernible through the ergative agreement-morphology on the auxiliary). Recall the *implicit object conjecture*, repeated here:

(2) *THE IMPLICIT OBJECT CONJECTURE* (Bobaljik 1993, Hale & Keyser 1993, Laka 1993, Levin 1983, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Uribe-Etxebarria 1989, *i.a.*)
All unergative verbs have direct objects

If unergatives necessarily had a direct object—in other words, if projecting an ergative subject were contingent on the presence of an object, overt or implicit—then the only way the subject of (10) could be ergative is through the presence of an implicit direct object of the matrix verb *probatu* ('attempt'). Crucially, however, a direct object in the matrix clause would be a canonical agreement target for absolutive agreement; it would therefore be entirely surprising that the absolutive agreement-morphemes on the matrix auxiliary in (10) are available to co-index the absolutive DP in the nominalized embedded clause—rather than showing *3rd-person singular* agreement with the aforementioned implicit object, as is the case in the light-verb construction (e.g., (1a), in §1).

On the other hand, if simplex unergatives systematically lack an implicit object, then this behavior is entirely expected: since the projection of an ergative argument is not contingent on projecting an implicit absolutive argument, there is no absolutive argument in the matrix clause. The absolutive agreement-morphemes on the matrix auxiliary are therefore free to co-index the embedded absolutive DP.

A potential objection to this line of reasoning involves the size of the domain relevant to the *dependency* of ergative case (Marantz 1991). There certainly exist instances in which the

case-marking on one noun-phrase appears to depend on the presence of another, but the two nominals participating in this calculus do not have to be co-arguments, strictly speaking. For example, Marantz (1991) argues that accusative case (in nominative-accusative configurations) depends on the presence of a non-oblique case-competitor, in much the same way as (2) assumes regarding ergative case; and there certainly are instances in which two noun-phrases participating in this dependency calculus are not strictly co-arguments:[9]

(11) He_{NOM} expects [her_{ACC} to win].
case-dependency

It is therefore conceivable to analyze (10) along similar lines, asserting that embedded nominalized clauses of the sort we see in this example do not constitute a boundary for the case-dependency calculus. Thus, (10) would comply with (2), by virtue of the downstairs absolutive DP satisfying the requirement of an "object" to exist alongside the upstairs ergative argument.

This approach makes a prediction that the presence of an absolutive DP in the embedded nominalized clause would be a sufficient condition for (non-oblique) noun-phrases in the matrix clause to surface with ergative case. The reason is the following: multiple absolutive noun-phrases in a single case domain are normally impossible; thus, if there is one absolutive nominal in the relevant domain, a second (non-oblique) nominal in the same domain must surface with *dependent case* (Marantz 1991), which in this instance means ergative.

This prediction, however, is demonstrably false:

(12) *[Liburu-a irakur-tze-n] saiatu dira pro-3pl.ABS.*
book-ART_{sg}(ABS) read-NMZ-LOC tried 3pl.ABS.be
'They tried to read the book.' [*Etxepare 2006:(53a)*]

The subject of the matrix clause in (12) is absolutive (in this case, *pro*-3pl.ABS, discernible once again through the absolutive agreement-morphology on the auxiliary). Thus, it seems that embedded nominalized clauses of this sort do not constitute a single case-competition domain with their subordinating clause.[10]

This reaffirms that the behavior of examples like (10) can indeed be taken as an argument against the view that ergatives cannot be projected without the presence of an implicit direct object.

4. Interim Summary, and Consequences for Theories of Ergativity

The preceding two sections have dealt with establishing that simplex unergatives in Basque do not require the presence of an implicit object. Section 2 argued the inadequacy of existing

[9]The validity of this example depends on an analysis of ECM that does not involve *raising-to-object*, of course (cf. Postal 1974).

[10]It is not inconceivable that (12) contains some phonologically-null structure that is absent in (10), and that this additional structure renders the embedded clause in (12) a separate case-competition domain from the matrix clause, contra the state of affairs in (10). However, the overt material involved in the embeddings in (10) and (12) is identical. Thus, the burden of proof lies with one who would argue for such phonologically undetectable structural differences between (10) and (12). I thank Marcel Den Dikken for helpful discussion of this point.

arguments for the presence of an implicit object in this construction, while section 3 provided evidence that a derivation in which an implicit object is absent must at least be possible (if not necessary).

This result has particular consequences for existing theories of ergativity. Consider first a theory of ergative case based on *case-competition* (Marantz 1991). In this system, ergative case comes about when two non-oblique noun-phrases are present in the same domain. The results of section 3 therefore stand in direct opposition to such a theory: it was shown that projecting an ergative argument is *not* contingent on the presence of any other noun-phrase—in particular, an implicit object need not be present—showing that ergative case arises even in the absence of a case-competitor.

An alternative theory of ergativity, which fares much better with respect to the data discussed so far, is the theory of ergative as *inherent case* (Aldridge 2004, Legate 2008, Woolford 1997; and on Basque in particular, see Laka 2006). This theory contends that ergative case is case that is bundled together with a specific theta-role (or set of theta-roles)—in much the same way as dative, for example, is cross-linguistically often bundled together with the thematic role of GOAL.

This approach raises two important questions:

(13) *QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE* INHERENT CASE *APPROACH TO ERGATIVITY*
   a. What is the thematic role / set of roles with which ergative case is bundled?
   b. Does ergative case in Basque exhibit other characteristics of *inherent case*?

Consider first (13a). An initial attempt at characterizing the thematic conditions on ergative case assignment might be to assume that ergative case is bundled together with any and all AGENT roles. This initial characterization, however, both over-generates and under-generates:

(14) a. *[Liburu-a irakur-tze-n] saiatu dira.* *[=(12)]*
   book-ART$_{sg}$(ABS) read-NMZ-LOC tried 3pl.ABS.be
   'They tried to read the book.'
   (subject is [*pro*-3pl.ABS]) [*Etxepare 2006:(53a)*]
   b. *Ura-k irakin d-ϕ-u-ϕ.*
   water-ERG boil 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
   'The water has boiled.' [*Holguín 2007:(24b)*]

The example in (14a) shows an AGENT argument (the subject of *saiatu* 'try') that receives absolutive case, rather than ergative (see Oyharçabal 1992 for further discussion). The example in (14b), on the other hand, shows an argument that is clearly a non-AGENT, which nonetheless bears ergative case.

It seems to me that in order to account for examples like (14a–b), the thematic criteria on ergative case assignment need to be loosened to such an extent that they no longer provide any concrete predictions on when a subject will and will not bear ergative case.[11]

[11] Recall that under the current proposal, the *3rd-person singular* absolutive agreement-morphology on the auxiliary in (14b) is not an indication of the presence of an absolutive argument, as it just as easily could have come about as the result of a failure to locate an absolutive agreement target.

The second question (in (13b)) raised by the *inherent case* approach to ergativity pertains to the distribution that inherent case is expected to have. If ergative case is inherent case, and inherent case is bundled together with a theta role, it follows that ergative case should never be assigned to a constituent in a non-thematic position.[12]

This expectation is not borne out. Artiagoitia (2001) discusses a class of verbs in Basque that exhibit what looks like raising out of a finite clause. Adopting Artiagoitia's terminology, I refer to this class as *irudi* verbs; the relevant verbs are *irudi* ('to seem'), *iduri* ('to picture'), and *eman* ('to seem').[13] Consider the following contrast:

(15) a. ***Jokalariren*** ***bat*** *Rojorekin* *minduta* *d-a-go-ela* *ematen*
player **one(ABS)** Rojo.with hurt 3.ABS-COP-sg.ABS-COMP seem
d-ϕ-u-ϕ.
3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'It seems that some player is upset with Rojo.' { *seem* > ∃: ✓ ; ∃ > *seem*: ✗ }

b. ***Jokalariren*** ***bat-ek*** *Rojorekin* *minduta* *d-a-go-ela* *ematen*
player **one-ERG** Rojo.with hurt 3.ABS-COP-sg.ABS-COMP seem
d-ϕ-u-ϕ.
3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG
'Some player seems upset with Rojo.' { *seem* > ∃: ✓ ; ∃ > *seem*: ✓ }

[*Artiagoitia 2001:(42a–b)*]

The case-marking found on the bolded DP *jokalariren bat* ('player one') in (15a–b) co-varies with its position: in (15a), this DP remains in the embedded clause, and bears absolutive case; in (15b), on the other hand, this DP is in the subject position of the matrix clause, and bears ergative case.

The scopal facts in (15a–b)—and in particular, the availability of the «*seem* > ∃» reading of (15b)—indicate that the upstairs subject position is not a thematic position, ruling out for example analyses of (15a–b) in terms of *(backwards-)control* (see Artiagoitia 2001, Rezac 2006 for a more detailed discussion).

Artiagoitia provides additional evidence that the subject position of *irudi* verbs is not a thematic position. For example, as shown in (16a), this position cannot accommodate an empty category that participates in a control relation—in contrast with the subject position of weather predicates, for instance, as exemplified by (16b).[14]

[12]Note that this holds even in a system that allows theta roles to be assigned to a constituent after movement (as in, e.g., Hornstein 2001 and related work). It is still the case that a position in which no theta role is available is not expected to be a locus for inherent case assignment.

[13]The verb *eman* has another usage, in which it means 'to give'. As Artiagoitia (2001) shows, the unique behavior exhibited by the *irudi*-class of verbs is strikingly absent from *eman* when it is used as 'give'.

[14]There are other arguments put forth by Artiagoitia (2001) to show that the subject of *irudi* verbs is never an underived (i.e., thematic) subject. I have chosen to highlight the particular arguments surveyed in the main text because I find them to be the most resistant to confounds.

(16) a. * EC_i *Jon nekatuta d-a-go-ela* *ematen d-ϕ-u-ϕ*
Jon tired 3.ABS-COP-sg.ABS-COMP seem 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG

[EC_i *[lan handirik egin ez d-ϕ-u-ϕ-ela]* *eman arren].*
work big-PRT do no 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG-COMP seem despite
Intended: 'It seems John is tired despite seeming that he hasn't done much work.'

b. EC_i *ezin d-ϕ-u-ϕ* *elurra egin* *[* EC_i *hotzik egin gabe].*
not 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-3sg.ERG snow make cold-PRT make without
'It can't snow if it's not cold.'

Given that the subject position of these verbs is non-thematic—and given that in (15a–b), ergative case on the subject arises only when it moves into the upstairs clause—we have an argument for ergative case being assigned in a non-thematic position, contra to the prediction that an *inherent case* theory of ergativity would generate.

We have seen two potential problems for the theory of ergative as *inherent case*: **(i)** the unclear delineation of the set of thematic roles associated with ergative case in Basque; and **(ii)** the apparent availability of ergative case in certain non-thematic syntactic positions. Having demonstrated the incompatibility of *case-competition* approaches to ergativity (Marantz 1991) with the data presented here—in particular, the ability to project an ergative argument in the absence of a case-competitor—this seems to point to a need for a new theory of ergativity. While I cannot provide an explicit theory of this kind at this point, one can state what the desiderata are for an empirically-adequate theory of ergativity:

(17) *DESIDERATA FOR AN EMPIRICALLY-ADEQUATE THEORY OF ERGATIVITY*
a. compatible with simplex unergatives lacking an implicit object
b. compatible with assignment of ergative case in a non-thematic position
c. compatible with lexically-dependent triggering of ergative case

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Of these other arguments, one class is a set of diagnostics meant to show that even when the complement of an *irudi* verb appears to be a bare predicate, it is actually a larger constituent (namely, a small-clause), out of which the surface subject has raised:

(i) *Jon-ek [*t *(lagun) zintzo-a]* *d-irudi-ϕ*
Jon-ERG person honest-ART_{sg}(ABS) 3sg.ABS-seem-3sg.ERG
'John seems like an honest person.' [*Artiagoitia 2001:(5), annotations added*]

The tests in this class include: the inability of nominalized *irudi* verbs to assign inherent genitive to their complements; the inability of *irudi* verbs to form verb-complement compounds; the inability of a plural nominal in the complement position of an *irudi* verb to determine plural absolutive agreement on the matrix auxiliary/finite verb; and finally, the impossibility of using a partitive determiner in the complement position of an *irudi* verb. While these results are consistent with Artiagoitia's conclusion, they may also stem from differences between argumental and predicative DPs. While Artiagoitia (2001:ff. 6) explicitly recognizes this confound with respect to the inherent genitive diagnostic, I believe its scope extends to this entire list.

Another class of diagnostics put forth by Artiagoitia exhibit behavior that is consistent with the subject of *irudi* verbs being non-thematic, but would also be consistent with the subject receiving a thematic role from the *irudi* verb, so long as that role is not AGENT. These include the inability of *irudi* verbs to undergo agentive nominalization (à la *-er* nominalizations in English), as well as the impossibility of using *irudi* verbs with the causativizer, *-arazi*.

The motivation for these desiderata is as follows: (17a) is needed to account for the data discussed in section 3; (17b) is needed to account for data such as (15–16), above; and (17c) is needed to capture distinctions such as (10) vs. (12), repeated here:

(10) *[Harri horiek altxa-tze-n] probatu d-it-u-zte.*
stone those$_{pl}$(ABS) lift-NMZ-LOC attempted 3.ABS-pl.ABS-have-3pl.ERG
'They have attempted to lift those stones.'
(subject is [*pro*-3pl.ERG]) [*Etxepare 2006:(85a)*]

(12) *[Liburu-a irakur-tze-n] saiatu dira.*
book-ART$_{sg}$(ABS) read-NMZ-LOC tried 3pl.ABS.be
'They tried to read the book.'
(subject is [*pro*-3pl.ABS]) [*Etxepare 2006:(53a)*]

It seems that the contrast between the ergative case borne by the matrix subject in (10) and the absolutive case borne by the matrix subject in (12) must boil down to some difference between the lexical entries of the respective verbs, *probatu* and *saiatu*.

Thus, a possible (if not entirely satisfying) theory of ergativity might involve a dedicated projection, call it *ErgP*, where ergative case is assigned. Assuming that ErgP itself is divorced from the assignment of thematic roles—and thus, that [Spec,ErgP] is filled by movement—we could begin to account for patterns such as (15–16), above.

The difference between a pair of verbs like *probatu* and *saiatu* (in (10, 12), above) would amount to whether or not a verb-phrase anchored by the verb in question can stand in a selectional relation with Erg^0. Note that this kind of selectional mechanism is not unlike what is normally assumed regarding the relation between transitive-agentive v^0 and certain verbs—to account, for example, for the difference in behavior between a verb like *devour* and a verb like *arrive* in English (namely, that a verb-phrase anchored by *devour* can only be selected by a transitive-agentive v^0, whereas a verb-phrase anchored by *arrive* cannot be selected by that kind of v^0).

Finally, there would be no immediate obstacle to Erg^0 selecting a *v*P anchored by a V^0 that introduces no arguments at all; the v^0 head would introduce an AGENT argument, which would then move to [Spec,ErgP] to receive ergative case. This would give rise to a one-place unergative verb without a direct object (implicit or otherwise), as in the data discussed in section 3.

The theory sketched above leaves much to be desired. First and foremost, it appeals to a dedicated projection, *ErgP*, that is not otherwise motivated. One might explore the possibility that the so-called **edun(/ukan)* ('have') auxiliary is none other than the overt manifestation of Erg^0 in Basque—a move which would fare quite well in capturing the distribution of this auxiliary in the language (see the discussion in §2.1).

Second, it leaves open the question of why the set of intransitives selected by Erg^0 overlap, to an overwhelming degree, with the set of predicates that participate in the light-verb construction (though not perfectly; see §3.1); and why the set of intransitives that cannot be selected by Erg^0 overlap, to a large degree, with the set of predicates that exhibit syntactic unaccusativity, cross-linguistically.

Third, it is not immediately clear what the *ergativity parameter* would amount to, within such a theory. One attempt might be to reduce the ergativity parameter to the presence or absence of Erg^0 in the lexicon of the language in question; but note the following: labels aside, Erg^0/ErgP amounts to a projection that attracts DPs to its specifier via movement, where they are assigned a dedicated case-marking—which is exactly the behavior of (tensed) T^0/TP in a nominative-accusative system. It seems, then, that the crucial difference between Erg^0/ErgP and T^0/TP would be that the former can enter into lexically-specified, idiosyncratic selectional relations with particular predicates, while the latter cannot (which amounts to saying that Erg^0/ErgP is a lexical projection, while T^0/TP is a functional one). This characterization, in turn, suggests that the *ergativity parameter* would not be a language-wide discrete setting, but rather something that is amenable to gradual, lexically-driven change (as more and more predicates, or fewer and fewer predicates, enter into a selectional relation with Erg^0).

As pointed out by a reviewer, certain instances of cross-dialectal variation in the behavior of intransitives may provide support for this view of ergativity as lexically-driven, and subject to gradual change. As shown in (18–20), there are verbs that pattern as unergatives in some dialects of Basque, but as unaccusatives in others:

(18) a. *borrokatu d-ϕ-u-t* (Western and Central dialects)
fight 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-1sg.ERG
'I have fought.'

b. *borrokatu n-aiz* (Eastern dialects)
fight 3sg.ABS-be
'I have fought.'

(19) a. *urten d-ϕ-u-t* (Western dialects)
go.out 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-1sg.ERG
'I have gone out.'

b. *irten n-aiz* (Central and Eastern dialects)
go.out 3sg.ABS-be
'I have gone out.'

(20) a. *bazkaldu d-ϕ-u-t* (Western and Central dialects)
lunch(v). 3.ABS-sg.ABS-have-1sg.ERG
'I have eaten lunch.'

b. *bazkaldu n-aiz* (Eastern dialects)
lunch(v). 3sg.ABS-be
'I have eaten lunch.'

Importantly, these contrasts are probably not a matter of underlying differences in the grammars of the relevant dialects, since the lines of division are not the same for each of the verbs in question.

This certainly does not represent an exhaustive list of the questions and issues that a theory of this sort would raise. I leave these to be addressed in future research, which will hopefully lead to a theory of ergativity that is both predictive and empirically adequate, with respect to the kind of data discussed here.

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