

## Ergative is not inherent: Evidence from \*ABA in suppletion and syncretism

Stanislao Zompì (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

**Overview:** I show that case syncretism conforms to the same \*ABA universal observed in case suppletion: no Vocabulary-Insertion rule can apply to both an inherent case and an unmarked core case (nominative/absolutive) without also applying to another core case (accusative/ergative). The case hierarchy that these effects motivate is one where the ergative is consistently put in the same box as the accusative, rather than with inherent cases. This offers a new kind of argument against theories that treat the ergative as just another inherent case.

**Background:** Based on pronominal paradigms from over 160 languages, Smith *et al.* (2016) [[ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/003110](http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/003110)] formulate the following generalization: If a marked core case (ergative/accusative) is suppletive with respect to the unmarked (nominative/absolutive), then all inherent cases are suppletive too. Thus, in absolutive–ergative–inherent triples, we recurrently find AAA, AAB (Wardaman *narnaj–narnajji–gunga*) and ABB (Georgian *is–man–masa*), but never ABA. The same holds of nominative–accusative–inherent. Following Bobaljik (2012), Smith *et al.* (2016) take this as evidence for a universal containment hierarchy.

(1) Smith *et al.*'s (2016) case hierarchy: [[[UNMARKED] ACC/ERG] INHERENT]

**Only one case hierarchy:** This creates a tension with respect to previous results from \*ABA effects in syncretism. Caha (2009), in particular, argued that systematic syncretisms are also constrained to target contiguous portions of a universal case hierarchy. However, his hierarchy differed from Smith *et al.*'s in two respects: (i) it did not reference either ergative or absolutive; (ii) it imposed a much more articulated ordering on inherent cases, as shown in (2).

(2) Caha's (2009) case hierarchy: [...[NOM] ACC] LOC<sub>1</sub>] GEN] LOC<sub>2</sub>] DAT] LOC<sub>3</sub>] INSTR] COM]

Here I solve this tension by showing that, on closer inspection of the cross-linguistic data, (1) actually proves to be the best fit not only for modeling suppletion, but for syncretism too. *Contra* Caha, I show that the accusative can systematically participate in exclusive syncretisms with a variety of inherent cases: dative in Icelandic (Harðarson 2016), ablative/instrumental in Latin, Caha's LOCATIVE<sub>2</sub> ( 'presuppos[ing] that the object is a container or a surface' ) in Classical Armenian. The same variety of syncretisms has long been observed for the ergative too (Dixon 1994:57).

(3)

Icelandic <i>NAME</i> 'old woman'			Latin 'horn'			ISG			Armenian 'nations' 2PL		
NOM	Hild-ur	kerling	ACC	cornū	mē(d)/mēmē	ACC	azg-s	k'ez			
ACC	Hild-i	kerling-u	GEN	cornū-s	meī (mis)	GEN	azg-ac'	k'o			
GEN	Hild-ar	kerling-ar	DAT	cornū	mihi	LOC <sub>2</sub>	azg-s	k'ez			
DAT	Hild-i	kerling-u	ABL	cornū	mē(d)/mēmē	DAT	azg-ac'	k'ez			

For the hierarchy in (1), these are all trivial cases of ABB. Instances of AAB, with syncretism of the core cases, are also commonplace: NOM=ACC in Indo-European neuters, ABS=ERG in many Australian pronouns. In contrast, I claim, the following \*ABA scenario is systematically ruled out:

(4) No systematic syncretism can cover the unmarked core case (nominative/absolutive) and an inherent case without also covering another core case (accusative/ergative).

**Testing the new generalization:** I test this new claim against 100 diverse case-inflecting languages. Following Caha, I intend the generalization as restricted to *nonaccidental* syncretisms, thus including partial syncretisms, but crucially excluding both phonological conflation and accidental homonymy from its scope. Concretely, I mark a syncretism as accidental only if there is

phonological evidence for distinct underlying forms, or if the homonymy involves only one exponent in the language, with no covariation under allomorphy. My search turns up 6 surface counterexamples: 3 of them (Czech, Slovene, Lithuanian) are phonological conflation, while the other 3 (Polish, Georgian, Kashmiri) can all be safely labeled as accidental homonymies. The generalization, together with its suppletion-related twin, is thus a solid candidate for a language universal.

**Ergative is not inherent:** These universals from suppletion and syncretism converge on a case hierarchy where the ergative occupies the same ‘middle field’ as the accusative, instead of patterning with inherent cases. The evidence for this is especially clear in tripartite systems, where ergative and accusative are side by side. Here we find that the ergative can syncretize with the unmarked case to the exclusion of accusative ((5)), and even share the same stem as the unmarked case while the accusative suppletes on its own ((6)). Interestingly, though, this pattern is reversed in (7), showing that ergative and accusative just can’t be universally ordered relative to each other.

(5)	<i>Dhargari</i> 2SG	(6)	<i>Jingulu</i> 2SG	(7)	<i>Dhalandji</i> ‘this’
	NOM    nhurra		NOM    nyama		NOM    nhaa
	ACC    nhurra-nha		ACC    nga(a)nk-		ACC    yi-nha-nha
	ERG    nhurra		ERG    nyama-rni		ERG    yulu

If the ergative were itself an inherent case (Woolford 1997, Legate 2008), it should be the only one able to ‘skip’ the accusative as in (5)-(6) for either suppletion or syncretism. These facts thus offer a new kind of argument against ergative-as-inherent approaches, instead favoring those case-assignment theories that do put ergative and accusative in the same box. Prominent among these is Marantz’s (1991) dependent-case theory, whereby accusative and ergative are both treated as dependent cases—i.e. assigned to nominals that stand in an asymmetric c-command relation to another as-yet-caseless nominal nearby (cf. also Yip *et al.* 1987). In this light, I propose to reformulate the universal case hierarchy as in (8):

(8)    CLAUSAL UNMARKED CASE  $\subset$  CLAUSAL DEPENDENT CASE  $\subset$  INHERENT CASE.

**One sequence per language?** One question that may arise at this point is whether the same variability in ordering that was found in (6)-(7) can also be found within a single language, or whether each language must rather select a single exhaustive case sequence and adhere to it across all paradigms (cf. Johnston 1996, Harðarson 2016). *Contra* Johnston and Harðarson, the Djapu syncretisms in (9) point to the first option: a language can indeed show non-uniform syncretism patterns (NOM=ACC $\neq$ ERG *and* NOM=ERG $\neq$ ACC) as long as they all obey the universal hierarchy in (8).

(9)	<i>Djapu</i>	NOM	yolŋu	‘person’ [+HUMAN]	dhandurruŋ	‘horn’ [-HUMAN]	nhe	2SG
		ACC	yolŋu-y		dhandurruŋ		nhuna	
		ERG	yolŋu-n		dhandurruŋ-dhu		nhe	

**Further implications:** Given the hierarchy in (8), the generalization in (4) can readily be derived within a realizational approach to morphology, whereby multiple exponents can compete for realizing the same bit of structure, and the competition between them is adjudicated by a version of Pāṇini’s Elsewhere Principle. Whether we choose to implement this in terms of the Maximal Subset (DM) or of the Minimal Superset (Nanosyntax), the exponent of ERG/ACC will always be preferred to the one of NOM/ABS as a more highly specified match for the realization of an inherent case. This pattern, however, cannot be captured by less restrictive approaches to syncretism, such as Stump’s (2001) treatment in terms of unconstrained rules of referral. The finding in (4) thus offers a typological argument in favor of the first group of approaches and against the latter.