

THE ROLE OF BASQUE IN MODERN LINGUISTIC THEORY

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Abstract

Basque has recently lost its central position in controversies over «ergativity», chiefly in favor of the Australian language Dyirbal, which has seemed to some scholars more ergative syntactically than Basque (though less fully ergative morphologically). When it is realized that Dyirbal is much less ergative syntactically than previously thought, it is worth again considering Basque as an extreme case (though only in morphology), and reflecting on possible relationships between its case marking and other typological features within the language. Several such are considered; the most promising correlation involves morphological ergativity, focus by preverbal position, subject and object concord, and deletability of independent noun phrases.

General remarks

All of us who participated in this memorable congress were keenly aware of its symbolic importance as part of a broad, and difficult, cultural renaissance. Only our sharing of this feeling could have held us together despite the wide divergences in our interests and theoretical orientations. Basque has, of course, for many years been the object of intensive philological analysis by (professional and amateur) specialists, and also the target of occasional forays by «general» linguists looking for a set of easily digested facts to be put to use in theoretical discussions. Although I am a philologist at heart, in view of the present state of my knowledge of Basque I must here behave as a theoretician, discussing the general interest of certain relatively well-known Basque data.

Earlier papers with similar titles, Schuchardt's «Das Baskische und die Sprachwissenschaft» (1925) and Uhlenbeck's «La langue basque et la linguistique générale» (1948), rambled over such diverse topics as sound symbolism, the passivity of the verb, and diffusion between Basque and Romance. I

will deal here, however, with a specific cluster of features including theme and focus structures, case morphology, passive and antipassive rules, and coreference-sensitive rules like Equi (deletion of coreferential noun phrase). These features now constitute a fairly well-defined problem area and are covered by a substantial theoretical literature.

Ergativity

Of course, the dominant question is that of ergativity. This old controversy has recently had a resurgence; «ergativity» is the title of one large book and two major theoretical articles which have appeared very recently. But the nature of the controversy has changed.

Formerly it was thought that languages were either ergative (i.e., with ergative/absolutive morphology) or accusative (with nominative/accusative morphology). Now we know that many other kinds of system are attested (split-intransitive, direct-inverse, etc.), and that many languages have distinct cooccurring case systems (nouns distinct from pronouns, past or perfect distinct from other tense/aspect categories, etc.). Curiously, Basque turns out to be perhaps the most thoroughly ergative, lacking any significant splits of this kind.

Moreover, the debate about the «passivity» of the verb in ergative languages is now reformulated in terms of how «deep» or fundamental ergativity is in languages with ergative morphology. What I call *strong* theories argue that ergativity is of profound significance in at least some languages (though not necessarily all with ergative morphology); *weak* theories, on the other hand, reject the view that ergative vs. accusative languages are sharply distinct.

One reason why the issue has not been resolved is that the proponents of strong theories have not presented especially clear concepts and operational criteria. Some ostensibly strong theories simply claim that morphological ergativity itself inherently represents a distinct kind of semantic association from that found in accusative languages, but these arguments beg all the major questions and we will not consider them here. The serious strong theories usually make one or another of these claims: a) in some languages S_i and O are treated like each other and unlike A in syntactic rules; b) in some languages S_i and O are preferred thematic (topical) noun phrases. S_i = intransitive subject; O = transitive direct object; A = transitive subject.)

Even these definitions are rarely given as such and are often applied in a highly flexible fashion. *Absolutive*, the allegedly important combination of S_i with O, may turn out to be operative in terms of underlying, «shallow», or surface structure. «Ergative» syntax may be discerned by proponents of strong theories when underlying (or «initial») S_i and O are treated alike, or when the linguist interprets a given rule as a mechanism for putting noun

phrases with some shared property in surface S_i or O position. More often than not, alleged deep ergativity turns out to be based on a chaotic combination of such considerations.

The most common current opinion seems to be that «ergative» syntax is rare, but does occur. Languages like Basque are commonly regarded as having ergative morphology but largely «accusative» syntax, in which «subject» (S_i/A) and object (O) are basic units. However, there has until very recently been a substantial consensus to the effect that the Dyirbal language of Australia (Dixon 1972) is fully ergative syntactically.

I have elsewhere reexamined the Dyirbal data (Heath 1979), and have expressed the view that its syntactic ergativity has been seriously misrepresented. Several widely repeated claims about its Equi rule, its demonstrative morphology, and rules for conjoining of clauses, are factually false. The facts which are correctly cited, particularly involving antipassive rules, are «ergative» only from a particular interpretative perspective; the formulation of the rules does not involve treating S_i and O as a unit, and the function is either to demote underlying O (A can also be dropped, but S_i cannot) or to specify that the underlying A is coreferential to a nuclear NP (S_i , O, or A) in a given matrix clause or other clause of reference. Detailed analysis of patterns of usage of the antipassive rules show that they are not mechanisms for putting «topical» noun phrases in absolutive case, nor mechanisms for creating strings of clauses with shared absolutive noun phrase; they have these effects in many cases but they are governed more directly by other, functional considerations. This is not the place to repeat all of the arguments, but Bascologists concerned with ergativity should be put on notice that the existence of strongly ergative languages elsewhere in the world is in serious doubt. My own belief is that strong ergativity theories are incorrect, and that no language has been shown to have «deep» ergativity in syntax or discourse structure (except by imposition of arbitrary criteria), and I do not believe that ergative-to-accusative typologies (continuous or graded) are useful in syntactic investigation.

The role of Basque

On the one hand, one job that Basque specialists have is to provide data in a convenient form for general theoreticians who do not know the language but need data from many languages. On the other hand, in trying to fulfil this obligation there is a danger that resulting publications will be of the «Gerber's Strained Basque» type, in which the data are mashed into a kind of baby food for easy consumption. The main problem is that such publications tend to reflect a specific range of interests characteristic of a given, pre-existing «theory» like relational grammar or what-have-you. My suggestion is that specialists (I use the term loosely in order to include myself in it) should aim at showing how certain interesting typological features of Basque interact

with *other* typological features of the same language; either in structural or (as I prefer) functional terms. Generalizations which emerge from such analysis (e.g., identification of patterns of functional complementarity relating a constellation of idiosyncratic features) should then be presented, and the general theoreticians should be challenged not merely to show how they can «handle» the individual features but also to account for the larger, configurational patterns. Experts in particular languages often have greater insight into grammatical dynamics than theoreticians and there is no reason why the former should be consigned to the position of servants feeding data to the theoreticians; there should be give-and-take.

Returning to the specific matter at hand, it is time to reexamine Basque morphological ergativity. When it is realized that the supposed syntactic ergativity of languages like Dyrbal is largely illusory, it is appropriate to return to the more conventional but still entirely unresolved question of the dynamics behind simple morphological ergativity. Since it now seems that Basque, despite centuries of profound diffusional pressure from neighboring accusative Romance languages, is perhaps the most thoroughly ergative language in its morphology, it deserves a conspicuous place in this study.

Let me say at the beginning that I reject out of hand the old contention that ergative morphology represents a distinctive Weltanschauung, perhaps associated with mixed-up theories of «causality» among cave men or hunters and gatherers. Such views are normally presented by linguists who have never seen real hunter-gatherers, and probably never seen a photograph of them or read a book about them; the most recent example is Plank (1979), unfortunately the lead article in a prestigious collection of articles on ergativity. The problem with such statements is not that they verge on racism but rather that they are ignorant and completely misguided. The suggestion that Basque ergativity is a relic of a pre-agricultural past is too ludicrous to deserve serious consideration.

Instead of connecting ergativity with some external mental or cultural phenomenon, why not connect it with other features of the language in which it occurs? There are a number of traits of Basque which come to mind: a) «free» word order and the expression of focus; b) verbal concord for several nuclear cases (not just subject); c) deletability of independent noun phrases; d) occurrence of a partitive case; e) genitivation of O (but not S_i or A) noun phrases in complement clauses in northern dialects; f) patterns of syncretism (homophony) of number and case suffixes; g) passive and antipassive rules; h) functioning of grammatical relations in coreference-sensitive rules like *Equi*. Can some or all of these features be seen as coexisting more comfortably with ergative morphology than with alternative patterns, so that we can glimpse the outlines of a larger, functionally integrated and efficient system?

Word-order, concord, deletability

The first three features, (a-c), are best considered together. It is immediately apparent that (b) and (c) are related to each other functionally; the occurrence of verbal concord (marking pronominal category of all primary noun phrases) frequently makes possible the deletion of independent pronouns or descriptive noun phrases, especially when their referents have already been introduced earlier in the discourse.

Word-order is «free» in the sense that various combinations of *S_i* and Verb, or of A, O, and Verb, occur. However, verbs (usually really a verb complex with a verb root in participial form, marking aspect, and a juxtaposed inflected auxiliary) normally do not occur sentence-initially when other major constituents are present. The most common order of elements in transitive clauses when all are present is A-O-Verb, while intransitives are usually *S_i*-Verb; Basque is thus predominantly an SOV language in the usual formulaic system.

Moreover, it is well-known (de Rijk 1969, Brettschneider 1979, etc.) that in positive sentences, Basque tends to put a focused constituent in preverbal position; that is, if there is a true nonverbal focus the element in question is regularly just to the left of the verb.

1. *gizon-a-k* *seme-a* *ikus-i* *d-u*
 man-Def-Erg son-Def seen he has him
 «The man has seen the (i.e., his) SON.»
2. *seme-a* *gizon-a-k* *ikus-i* *d-u*
 son-Def man-Def-Erg
 «The MAN has seen the (i.e., his) son.»

Since SOV is the predominant order, it follows that O is more commonly associated with focus than is A. Indeed, this seems to be a general characteristic of focus systems; I have noticed a similar asymmetry in the Australian language Ngandi, in which O and non-nuclear noun phrases and adverbs are more commonly focused than is A.

On the other hand, thematicity is characteristic (so far as I know, universally) of A rather than of O. Hence SOV order is not merely consistent with the language-particular tendency of Basque to put focused material just in front of the verb, it is also consistent with the widely-attested tendency to put old, presupposed, thematic material at the beginning of sentences (Kuno's «from-old-to-new principle»). As in other languages with verbal concord, thematic noun phrases are highly subject to deletion when redundant. Consequently, the basic transitive pattern can be represented as (A)-O-Verb, corresponding to (*S_i*)-Verb for intransitives, suggesting that A not only tends to precede O but (like *S_i*) is more often deleted than O. I should stress that I am not presenting these as empirical facts derived from calculations based on a Basque textual corpus. They should be rigorously

tested, but they seem to me to be probably correct, and I will now comment on their implications for ergativity if they are correct.

The primary surface test for morphological ergativity is whether S_i is identical to A or to O; hence S_i is pivotal. However, in dynamic terms the primary question is whether, within the transitive syntagm, A or O is to be morphologically unmarked; whichever achieves this distinction is perforce identified with S_i since the latter is ordinarily unmarked within its syntagm.

Now, given a basic transitive structure (A)-O-Verb, with A deleted more often than O, it may be advantageous to apply the unmarked (here zero absolutive) case to O. This need not mean that O is any more central, in discourse or syntax, than A, but may be a simple function of more frequent surface occurrence. It seems more natural (because more efficient) to use the unmarked case for a category whose surface occurrence is very frequent on the surface. Of course, there may be other factors at work favoring ergative morphology; for example, immediate preverbal position of O may induce a limited bonding with the verb (cf. the notion of «verb phrase» including O in generative grammar), hence a sort of proto-compounding discouraging complete suffixal inflection of the O (cf. omission of accusative suffix for indefinite direct object in Turkish, which has SOV order).

The partitive case

For a general treatment of the partitive with many examples see de Rijk (1974). In its most common function partitive *-(r)ik* is added to a noun whose existence or quantity is in question, mainly in negative and interrogative clauses; cf. English *any* in *I don't have any money* or *Do you have any money?*. With possible occasional exceptions, the partitive is limited to S_i and O nouns, which thus would otherwise be in the (zero) absolutive case. It is possible that the regular case system, in which just S_i and O have zero case suffix, is in a harmonious relationship to the presence of a partitive case, if we suppose that the addition of a partitive element on top of a marked case suffix would be morphologically awkward and if we suppose that it is morphologically preferable to add the partitive marker to an unsuffixed stem rather than having it dislodge a prior case suffix.

A useful comparison can be made with Finnish (Itkonen 1979). Although this language has no other notable ergative features, it again has a partitive used in O and (existential) S_i categories. Since the partitive typically involves existential focus, its association with S_i and O conforms to the correlation made above between O (vs. A) and focus, and these phenomena appear to be independent of which case-marking system a language has. It appears, then, that associating partitive with S_i and (especially) O is independently justified, and that it may favor or at least harmonize with case-marking systems in which S_i and O are (elsewhere) given zero affix. (In

Finnish we have nominative S/A suffix zero and accusative suffix *-n*, but the latter suffix is dropped when redundant, as in imperatives; the language thus does not have ergative morphology as does Basque, but its particular type of accusative system is one which does not inhibit partitive formations. I do not claim that all languages with productive partitive affixes have ergative morphology).

Genitivization

Genitivization of the O (but not S_i or A) occurs in infinitive clauses in the Labourdin dialect, and in a wider range of complement clause types moving eastward to the Souletin dialect (Heath 1974). Thus from *aita-k seme-a ikus-i d-u* «The father has seen the son» we get infinitive *aita-k seme-a-ren ikus-te-a* «the father's seeing the son», where in contrast to the English translation it is «son» rather than «father» which turns up in the genitive in Basque. (In southern dialects this genitivization does not occur; absolutive *seme-a* «son» marks the object both in the finite and in the infinitive clause).

Since S_i is not genitivized (*seme-a joa-te-a* «the son's going», with non-genitive «son» in Basque), the effect is to create a local subsystem in which each of S_i, A, and O has a distinctive inflection. This has advantages since in infinitives, unlike the case with finite clauses, it would not always be possible to decide whether a given absolutive noun phrase was S_i or O, the usual supplementary clues from pronominal concord in the verb being absent. The genitivization rule thus extends the prior ergative morphology in a specific context where such extension is desirable, and by patching up a possible functional defect it can be said to be in a harmonious functional relationship to the ergative morphology. (A similar result could be obtained with initial accusative morphology and a rule genitivizing A but not S_i. I am unaware of any language with this particular type of rule, and in Basque with SOV order this rule would increase the average distance between the genitive noun phrase and the nominalized verb and would have other possibly adverse consequences.)

Syncretism

Patterns of syncretism in suffixal morphology (Jacobsen 1974) are found in most dialects. Generally absolutive plural is identical to either ergative singular or ergative plural, but not both in the same dialect. Merger of plurals cutting across case categories occurs in other languages, but of course the identity of absolutive plural with ergative singular is a Basque idiosyncrasy, due most likely to language-specific historical phonological mergers. From the point of view of information transfer, such mergers are inherently disfunctional, but because of redundancy provided by verbal concord the possibility of real ambiguity is limited. Since such syncretism presupposes an

initial array of categories including cases it is meaningless to speak of dynamic interactions between it and ergative morphology. It does seem, however, that syncretism was one factor which was responsible for the development of the northern genitivization rule (see above).

Passive and antipassive rules

The applicability of the terms *passive* and *antipassive* to Basque constructions has been extensively debated (Jacobsen 1969, Bollenbacher 1977, Zytzar 1978, Rebuschi 1978 and 1979, Brettschneider 1979, etc.). Since there are some remaining factual questions, notably in the light of Rebuschi's recent findings, I cannot purport to offer a conclusive summary here but will instead comment on the implications of such rules for morphological ergativity.

The passive with copula and participle is not very common in traditional Basque texts and is usually considered to be modeled on the familiar participial passives of neighboring Romance languages. Of more significance is the mediopassive, involving complete omission of the ergative (agent) noun phrase in most instances; it is common and important but quite distinct from the more flexible English-type passive. A mediopassive example is Axular's *zer ere eskiribatu-ko bai-ta euskara-z* 'whatever will be written in Basque'. So far as I can tell, neither passive nor mediopassive is used systematically to convey nuances of thematic and/or focus structure.

Full-fledged antipassives are likewise hard to find. There is a purely verb-internal, formal «antipassive» of sorts in past tense forms like *n-u-en* «I had him», where instead of 3Sg absolutive prefix *d-* and 1Sg ergative suffix *-t* (as in present tense *d-u-t* «I have him», variants *d-e-t*, etc.) we get what appears to be 1Sg absolutive prefix *n-* and no 3Sg element. Although this does seem to be a kind of antipassive, it has no effect on independent nouns or pronouns, and even within the verb there are transitive features: the stem remains transitive *-u-*, and shows the usual shift to *-itu-* with plural object as in *n-itu-en* «I had them». The Basque form is thus similar to the verb-internal morphological «antipassive» forms in Chukchee (Comrie 1979).

The constructions resembling true syntactic antipassives are those with *ari* and the like: *ogia-a ja-ten ari d-a gizon-a* «the man is (in the process of) eating the bread». This construction seems similar in meaning, form, and text-frequency to the French type *être en train de*. Like the French form, it is syntactically a complex structure with main and subordinated clauses; instead of demoting the O (here «bread») to a nonnuclear case we simply have the O trapped in the subordinate clause while the A of that clause also shows up as the S_i of the main clause. Hence the appearance of «man» in absolutive case in the example just given is due directly to its status as the only nuclear NP in the main clause, whereas in the usual antipassive construction the shift of A

to absolutive (as S_i) is correlated with the simultaneous demotion of O to dative or the like. It may be that some of the alternative antipassive constructions uncovered by Rebuchi are of a different structure, but I would like to know more about their distribution across dialects (including texts from earlier periods) and their frequency before assigning them great importance in the present context.

In general, it is difficult for me to observe any major functional or other connection between the particular array of passive/antipassive rules in Basque and morphological ergativity. The mediopassive seems to be the most common and most widely distributed of the constructions mentioned, but its functional connection is not so much with a specific system of case categories as it is with a verbal concord system which clearly distinguishes transitive from intransitive constructions (regardless of the technique for accomplishing this). The relatively marginal status of other passive and antipassive rules is to be explained, as indicated in part by Brettschneider (1979), with reference to the existence of alternative mechanisms for marking theme and focus (preverbal position, anaphoric *beralbere*, contrastive *ere*, etc.).

Grammatical relations in Equi-type rules

Finally, there is the question whether morphological ergativity can be connected in some way with the operation of grammatical relations in rules like Equi which involve the referential relationship of pairs of noun phrases in two clauses. It seems to have been the hope of proponents of some strong theories of ergativity that languages could be found in which S_i and O were grouped together in the operation of such rules, in contrast to the usual pattern in European languages whereby A and S_i (subject) form one unit and O another.

As far as Basque is concerned, it is by now quite clear that syntactic ergativity in this sense is not present to a significant degree; the rules in question operate largely in terms of the same $A = S_i/O$ equation seen in the adjoining languages. Equi with main «verbs» like *nahi/nai* «to want» deletes coreferential S_i or A but not O in the subordinated clause. Gerundial clauses with suffix *-(r)ik* or its dialectal counterparts regularly require subject/subject coreferentiality (with allowance for occasional exceptions). The northern genitivation rule clearly distinguishes O from S_i . These facts are acknowledged by other Bascologists, apparently with the sole exception of Hester (1978), whose data bear little resemblance to those presented by other specialists and whose interpretations are frequently bizarre.

Perhaps the only important cross-clause operation involving $A/S_i = O$ (hence ergative vs. absolutive) is the formation of causatives with *erazi-arazi*, where underlying S_i and O both end up as surface O of the resulting single clause, while underlying A in the subordinated clause ends up

as dative on the surface. However, a useful connection of this with morphological ergativity is vitiated by the fact that the same construction occurs in many other languages, including French (with *par* instead of dative for underlying A), cf. *j'ai fait ouvrir la fenêtre (par Pierre)*.

In general, I feel that connections between morphological case systems and such syntactic phenomena have yielded a singularly meager harvest despite the intensive efforts of several scholars. The difficulty, it seems to me, is that the search has been for some kind of homology between the morphology and syntax—the idea has been that languages strive toward achieving *structural parallels* in morphology and syntax. I prefer instead to look for direct, functional interactions. In the present context, I would point out that Equi type rules, whether with «verbs» like *nabilnai* «to want» or with gerundial *-(r)ik* and the like, typically delete the A (but not O) in transitive clauses. We thus have the same tendency seen above (section on «Word-order, concord, deletability») for A to be absent more often than O (though not because A is more peripheral or less important than O). In this event, there may be some functional value in assigning the zero morphological case to the O, in its capacity as the most common surface independent noun phrase of the transitive structure. Again, S_i is automatically entitled to the zero case within the intransitive syntagm since a marked case is unnecessary.

Conclusion

It should be apparent that the foregoing remarks are of an exploratory nature. My point of departure is the observation that Basque is more thoroughly ergative in morphology than any other language I know. Moreover, allegations that some other languages, such as Dyrbal, are sharply more ergative syntactically seem to me false or at least grossly overstated. Consequently, Basque ergativity ought again to be a focus of attention on the part of case theoreticians. Most languages with ergative morphology really have split systems of various kinds, whose fundamental characteristics have now been satisfactorily explained (especially by Silverstein 1976), but since Basque lacks clear splits of this kind it cannot be accounted for by the same theoretical perspective. My basic suggestion is that the Basque case system is not to be explained by direct reference to nuances of semantic structure (as in Silverstein's model for split systems), nor by reference to alleged «ergative» features in syntax (which are largely nonexistent). Rather, I have suggested that the formal markedness of A vis-à-vis O in the transitive syntagm (from which the O=S_i equation emerges) is related to asymmetries in surface deletability whereby A is more easily omitted (due to Equi in subordinated clauses, and due to the greater thematicity of A vs. O in main clauses in natural discourse); possibly the greater average distance between A and verb vs. O and verb is also relevant. At any rate, I hope to encourage other

specialists to adopt a similar heuristic approach, even if their specific conclusions diverge from mine.

What kind of general theory can emerge from studies of this type? First, it must be admitted that we are dealing with very complex functional systems and subsystems in which feedback loops are subtle, often indirect, and nonquantifiable. Insights come in spurts of imagination rather than from systematic inductive procedures. Testing of hypotheses is difficult because we are dealing with integrated complexes of many linguistic features and because a wide range of such complexes occurs in human languages, making it difficult to «isolate variables» in the usual fashion. Nevertheless, this approach to case systematics seems to me superior to the prevailing theoretical paradigms, which typically begin with arbitrary delimitations of range of interest, concentrate on dubious structural homologies across domains rather than on direct functional interactions, and tend greatly to exaggerate typological differences between ergative and accusative languages.

LABURPENA

Euskarak galdu du bere toki nagusia «ergatibotasun»-aren arloan izaten diren eztabaidetan, toki hori hartzen duela Australiako Dyirbal hizkuntzak; hizkera honek, zenbait jakintsuren iritziz, ematen du euskara baino ergatiboagoa sintasian (morfolo-gian euskara bezain ergatiboa ez izan arren). Baina kontuan hartzen badugu Dyirbal ez dela sintasian lehen uste zen bezain ergatiboa, merezi du berriz ere kontsideratzea euskara buru-buruko kasu bat bezala (morfolo-gian bakarrik bada ere); merezi du ere ikuskatzea ia badagon erlaziorik ergatiboaren ezaugarri morfolo-giko horren eta beste tipologi ezaugarriren batzuen artean, euskararen barruan. Holako zenbait azterten ditugu; erlaziorik prometa-garrienak hemen ikusten ditugu: morfolo-giazko ergatibota-sunean, zenbait hitz aditz aurrean ipini beharrean, sujetu eta objetu arteko konkor-dantzia, eta bere-buru diren izen esaldiak urragarri izatean.

RESUMEN

El vascuence ha perdido últimamente su puesto central en la controversia sobre la «ergatividad», en favor, sobre todo, del idioma australiano Dyirbal, que ha parecido a algunos sabios más ergativo sintácticamente que el vascuence (aunque menos plenamente ergativo morfológicamente). Cuando se observa que el Dyirbal es mucho menos ergativo sintácticamente de lo que se pensó en un primer momento, vale la pena considerar de nuevo al vascuence como un caso límite (aunque sólo morfológicamente), y reflexionar sobre posibles relaciones entre su marca de caso (ergativo) y otros rasgos tipológicos dentro del idioma. Se consideran varios de ellos; la correlación más prometedora afecta a la ergatividad morfológica, al foco con posición preverbal, a la concordancia entre sujeto y objeto, y a la posibilidad de suprimir las frases nominales independientes.

RÉSUMÉ

Le basque a perdu récemment sa place centrale dans la controverse sur l'ergativité au bénéfice, surtout, de l'idiome australien appelé Dyirbal, qui, selon certains savants, serait plus marqué que le basque par son ergativité syntaxique, même si

morphologiquement, il est moins pleinement ergatif. Quand on observe que le Dyrbal a une syntaxe beaucoup moins ergative qu'on ne l'a cru d'abord, il vaut la peine de considérer le basque comme un cas-limite –du moins morphologiquement– et de réfléchir sur des relations possibles entre ce cas particulier –l'ergatif– et d'autres particularités typologiques à travers cet idiome. On étudie certaines d'entre elles; la corrélation la plus prometteuse concerne l'ergativité morphologique, la position devant le verbe du focus, la concordance sujet-objet et la possibilité de supprimer les phrases nominales indépendantes.

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