

REDUCED STRUCTURES AND ERGATIVITY

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We point out similarities between seemingly unrelated constructions, i.e. Romance reduced participial constructions and ergative constructions in Hindi-Urdu and Georgian, and argue that they are not random but are explained by the hypothesis that all natural languages share a common ergative core which is completed according to parametric choices that lead to either nominative/accusative alignment or to ergative/absolutive alignment.

Properties of Bare Noun Reduced. Cecchetto and Donati (2024) attribute the properties I. to IV. to Italian reduced participial constructions like ‘*bambina guarita*’ produced in a context like (1). They label this type of reduced sentence as ‘Bare Noun Reduced’ (cf. Viganò et al. 2024 for an experimental investigation of the same structures).

(1) Hai notizie dall’Italia? Ragazza guarita (ma il ragazzo è ancora malato)
have news from Italy? Girl.F.SG recover-PPRT.F.SG (but the boy is still sick)
‘Did you get any news from Italy? The girl recovered (but the boy is still sick)’

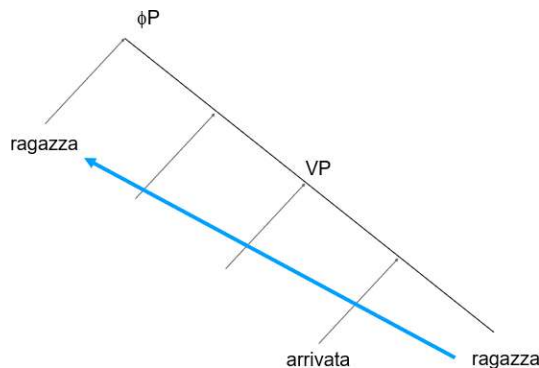
- I. Only unaccusative and passives past participles are allowed
- II. The interpretation is obligatory perfective
- III. The verb is morphologically impoverished (i.e. no subject agreement)
- IV. vP and higher projections are absent (not even *si*-unaccusatives are allowed).

Properties of ergative structures. In many languages, in ergative/absolutive alignment:

- There is perfective aspect (imperfective aspect triggers a nominative/accusative alignment).
- the perfective form that triggers ergative/absolutive is morphologically simpler than the imperfective form that triggers nominative/accusative.

These properties are shared by Bare Noun Reduced and ergative structures and we will explain why it is so.

Analysis of Bare Noun Reduced. Following Cecchetto and Donati, we assume that in Bare Noun Reduced only a VP is projected, where the unaccusative verb assigns a theta role to its sole argument, which, being a bare NP (as opposed to a DP), does not need case. This NP moves to the edge of the VP as the result of the probing of the past participle and they share *phi*-features. At this stage the shared *phi*-features provide the label and the resulting object can be interpreted as a sentence, as proposed by Chomsky (2019).



The core observation: *Perfective is the absence of an aspectual specification.* The semantic interpretation (Event Time properly included in Topic Time) is a default (Bennett & Partee 1978, Bohnemeyer & Swift 2004). What looks like ‘perfective’ aspect in Bare Noun Reduced and in ergative constructions in Georgian and Hindi-Urdu is just agreement morphology. This is transparently true for Georgian and Hindi-Urdu where there is no dedicated exponent for perfective aspect. The perfective as default idea also receives support from acquisition studies which show that children acquire full competence with imperfective structures later (avg. age 9.2) than with perfective structures (avg. age 5.10) (Stuart and van der Lely 2015).

We make the following assumptions:

At most one structural case can be assigned within the same local domain/phase. This principle prevents simultaneous licensing of two structural cases in a local domain that we identify as the complement of the phase. We state this as an assumption but note that this holds for most standardly assumed systems of case assignment.

No ASP → no vP phase. Without ASP, the clause contains only one phase (the entire clause) (Laka 2007, Coon 2010, Coon & Preminger 2012). A corollary of this system is that in structures that contain no ASP head, like Bare Noun Reduced and ergative structures, two structural cases cannot be assigned, because they would be assigned in a local domain. Perfective is the absence of ASP and hence the whole clause counts as one domain. In Bare Noun Reduced, this problem is obviated because the argument is an NP, which, as opposed to a DP, does not need case (also, an external argument is allowed if it is within a *by*-phrase, since the case problem is fixed by the preposition). In ergative structures the problem is obviated because an *inherent* case (ergative) is available for one of the two DPs. Only a single structural case is assigned phase internally.

Extension to ergativity. In ergative languages like Hindi and Georgian, the same reduced VP as in Italian Bare Noun Reduced is embedded under *v*, which introduces the external argument. Ergative is inherent and assigned by *v*, while absolutive is structural and assigned by T. Crucially, ASP is absent in perfective clauses, eliminating the *vP* phase boundary and enabling T to reach the internal argument. If *v* did not license ergative in a perfective clause and instead licensed accusative, the subject would need to be case-licensed by T. This would mean two case licensers in one domain, which we have noted is not possible. In imperfective clauses, ASP is present, introducing a phase boundary that blocks T from accessing the internal argument (Nash 2017). As a result, the switch to the nominative/accusative alignment is forced: nominative is assigned to the external argument at the phase edge (where it is accessible under the Phase Impenetrability Condition), and *v* assigns accusative internally.

Conclusion. Italian Bare Noun Reduced constructions exhibit the same constellation of properties that characterize perfective ergative structures cross-linguistically: perfective interpretation, reduced morphology, and restricted case licensing. These parallels follow from a deeper principle: the absence of an ASP head yields a reduced structure with no internal phases. Consequently, ergativity is not an exotic alignment restricted to certain typological groups but emerges naturally under structural and aspectual reduction. Even Romance languages, traditionally categorized as purely nominative–accusative, have an ergative core.

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