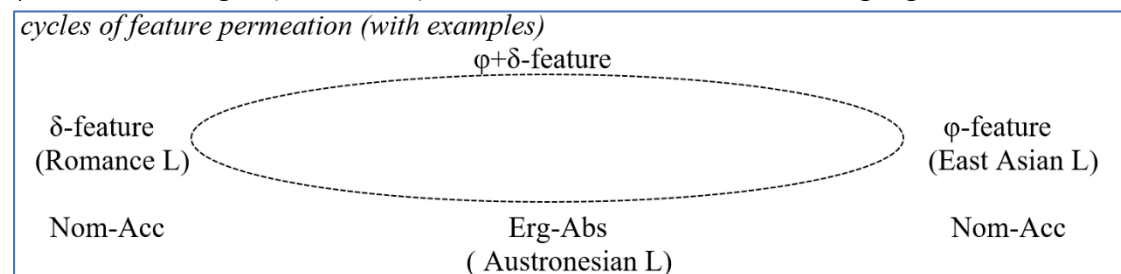


Ergative-Absolutive vs. Nominative-Accusative: Cycles of Feature Permeation

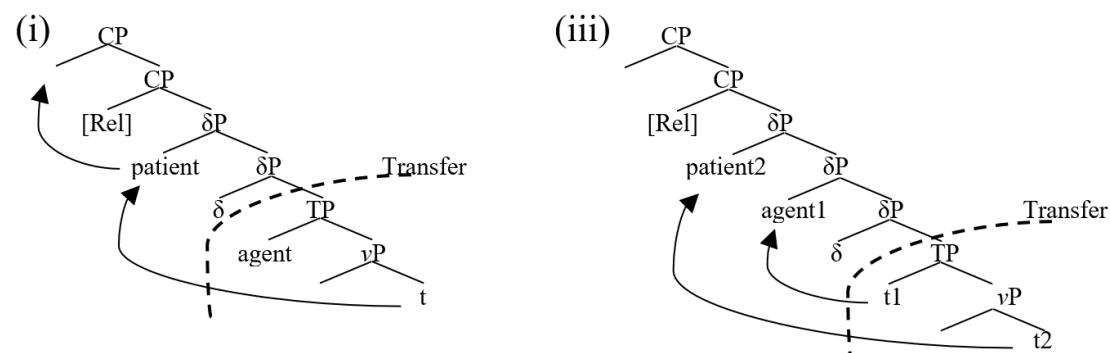
The distinction between Ergative-Absolutive languages (EAL) and Nominative-Accusative languages (NAL) is long-standing. NAL demonstrate Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977), i.e., subjects are easier to relativize than objects, whereas EAL may show the reverse pattern called Syntactic Ergativity (SE; Polinsky 2017), suggesting that objects in these NAL are structurally higher than subjects. Previous accounts argue that Ergatives are licensed at $v/AgrO$, whereas Absolutives at $T/AgrS$ or $v/AgrO$, depending on verb's transitivity (Murasugi 1992, Aldridge 2004). However, they either fail to predict that Absolutives can appear in non-finite clauses where no $AgrS$ exist (Tagalog), or that Ergatives are still lower when Absolutives are also licensed at $v/AgrO$.

Proposal: EAL and NAL are different stages in the recurring cycle of feature permeation. Syntax functions on grammatical features, and grammaticalization introduces new feature sets. When only one feature set exists ($\phi = \{[Person], [Number], [Gender]\}$, e.g.), NAL emerges (Romance languages, e.g.); When another set (call it δ) is introduced and the two sets co-exist, EAL emerges (Austronesian); when δ eliminates ϕ , NAL re-emerges (East-Asian). The source of δ is discourse/ language use.



Features need checking. Three possibilities exist regarding EAL's δ : (i) Only objects bear interpretable δ ($i\delta$); (ii) Only subjects bear $i\delta$; (iii) both could bear $i\delta$. $i\delta$ is the goal for the higher uninterpretable δ ($u\delta$) to probe, standard assumption for Agree. Considering that ϕ and δ compete, it is reasonable to assume that $i\delta$, the discourse-oriented late-comer, spawns higher than $u\delta$, i.e., closer to the discourse layers. Just like ϕ , $u\delta$ poses phase δP .

For (i), only objects can move to the specifier of δP and later undergo relativization; The subject is transferred with the phasal complement and hence unavailable (Phase Impenetrability Condition, Chomsky 2001). This is the case of Dyirbal (Dixon 1972). For (iii), subject and object can both move out and undergo relativization, demonstrated by Warlpiri (Aldridge 2008).



(ii), 'only subjects can be relativized', is unattested for EAL. Extra-syntax factors gives this asymmetry between subjects and objects. The δ -movement of subjects are always

string-vacuous and thus disfavored, e.g.. Note that no AgrS is assumed here, and only (i) is predicted to rigidly derive SE, where the object is always higher; The previous approaches' problems are hence avoided. This paper supports the idea that Erg/Abs are not true structural Case as Nom/Acc are. Erg/Abs are licensed inherent-case-like.

Support: That all EAL are split is directly captured: EAL means two sets co-exist, so it must be split. Moreover, adopting Pan's (2019) Subjectivity Scale Constraint, the discourse-oriented δ P should appear more in matrix clauses, a prediction shared by Dixon (1994) based on Pări where matrix clauses allow Ergative-Absolutive, but subordinate clauses only Nominative-Accusative; This fact also supports this paper's stance that Ergative-Absolutive are not true structural Cases. That EAL involves diachronic change is previously reported (Anderson 1977, Comrie 1978, Payne 1980, a.o.). Moreover, this paper supports the idea that the Chinese may be (split) EAL, in agreement with Miyagawa's (2010) idea that East-Asian languages are discourse-feature-driven.