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The Case of Euskara (aka Basque)

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**THE ACCUSATIVITY/ERGATIVITY BALANCE
IN A NON-SPLIT ERGATIVE LANGUAGE
The Case of Euskara (aka Basque)* †**

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The algorithmic or computer metaphor
has gone as far as it can in linguistics,
and it hasn't gone very far.

Anonymous

il ez da eta ez da ilko guk ez badugu nai,
bizi irritaz zegoen gure maitasun zai
Lizardi

Dedicated to the martyrs of *Gernika*,
On the 50th anniversary of the massacre.

1. The aim of this paper is to provide an understanding of the diachronic and synchronic forces behind the 'personality' of the ergative system of Basque. Basque has a **fully morphologically ergative** system but is, at least to a great extent, **syntactically accusative** (cf. Anderson 1976)¹. We know that this pattern of morphological ergativity without syntactic ergativity is the norm in most ergative languages. Unfortunately, this has led many to think that ergative (E: S_t) and absolutive (A: S_i and O) are not important or 'relevant' categories in language. In addition, a great number of ergative languages are not fully ergative, but only partially ergative, or **split ergative**². Added to these facts is the statistical and diachronic evidence that an accusative state of affairs is more stable than an ergative state of affairs. All this has reinforced the belief that ergative morphology is the leftover of the diachronic processes which give rise to ergative systems, and nothing else. This is true to a degree, but the reality is much more complex. In truth the systemic forces for ergativity and for accusativity are constantly at play in all languages. I will try to show that ergative-absolutive morphology is quite meaningful in Basque. Basque is a **non-split** ergative language in which the categories ergative (E) and absolutive (A) are motivated by the semantic categories patient and agent. However, in order to maintain a formally tidy system the semantic motivation of these categories has been weakened to a considerable extent.

2. **RELATIONS INSIDE THE CLAUSE.** At the heart of understanding grammar is the problem of the relationship between **semantic** (thematic, role) **relations**, like agent and patient, **discourse-pragmatic relations**, like topic and focus, and **grammatical(ized) relations**, like subject, object, ergative, and absolutive. I will adopt a view in which the pragmatic and the semantic forces coexist at the same level of representation, for each clause in context, but which are somehow subject to the grammaticized requirements of the lexical representations and the grammatical constructions of the language. In other words, this view places "emphasis on the logical independence of semantic and discourse factors together with their cross-linguistic tendency to be coded together in grammatical relations" (Nichols & Woodbury 1985:3).

For example, a major pragmatic relation, variously known as *topic*, *theme*, or *pragmatic peak* (cf. Foley & Van Valin 1984), which is behind the clause level

theme-rheme, or *topic-comment* split, is in some languages (so-called configurational, in fashionable terminology) grammaticized (perhaps to different 'degrees') into the subject-predicate (NP-VP) construction³. In spite of this grammaticalization into 'default' grammatical relations and constructions, the semantic and pragmatic motivating forces continue to exist in the background and typically there exist grammaticalized lexical and syntactic ways of overriding the default relations (e.g. the *passive* and *topicalization* constructions).

The two major pragmatic relations I take to be **topic** (theme, pragmatic peak) and **focus** (new information, contrast, etc.). And the two major semantic relations, **agent** and **patient**, defined in a loose way since these categories have cognitively relevant prototypes but subsume a wide range of cases⁴. This doesn't mean that every sentence has to have a topic or focus phrase, nor does it have to have an agent or a patient, but again, these are cognitively and linguistically relevant categories which motivate grammaticalization patterns, as we will see below. These pragmatic and semantic forces are in a sense 'competing', in DuBois' (1985) sense, for the morphological, categorial marking of relations in all languages⁵.

3. HOW DO LANGUAGES BECOME ERGATIVE? In order to understand ergativity we must understand the diachronic ways in which languages become ergative. Basically the first step consists of turning what in an accusative language is the direct object into the subject and pragmatic peak of the clause in a large and consistent number of cases. This can happen for instance when a *passive construction* becomes the preferred structure in sentences where the object is more *topic-worthy* than the subject⁶. The result is that the old 'subject' becomes an obliquely marked NP. Another instance in which objects become subjects and subjects obliques is when an *oblique possessive construction* becomes generalized for uses other than to indicate possession, as for instance to indicate perfective aspect (cf. Anderson 1977:340).

The characteristic of these ergative-absolutive (E-A) constructions is that they are **patient centered**. Initially only a minority of objects qualify for this construction and the selection has to do with high affectedness, saliency, high referentiality, etc. of the patient, all characteristics which have been identified elsewhere with 'good' patienthood and high transitivity (cf. Hopper & Thompson 1980). Things may remain like this and we will have a split ergative system, and very likely the system will find an objective means of deciding in which cases the ergative-absolutive construction is used and in which ones the subject-object construction is used⁷. One typical solution is to put the new construction to a specific use related to some aspect of high transitivity and patient affectedness, the most common use being to indicate perfective aspect or past tense (for examples see Anderson 1977).

The specialization of the E-A construction, especially if its use is extended to patients that are not very 'deserving' topic, creates a problem with the reference-pragmatic forces. Since the obliquely marked NP (the ergative NP) will in many cases be even more topic-worthy than the unmarked NP (the absolutive NP), it will have more in common with the subject of intransitive predicates (absolutive constructions) (the default topic there) than the absolutive of transitive predicates (ergative-absolutive constructions).

What sort of **solutions** do languages give to this 'problem', or state of affairs? Commonly a language keeps the ergative-absolutive construction for a special purpose but turns the obliquely marked NP into the default grammaticized pragmatic peak (i.e. the **pivot** or 'subject'). This means that ergative morphology is kept but accusative syntax prevails. Languages where the semantic motivation for the E-A construction is not totally lost have ways of demoting objects which are not worthy

of pivot status, the best known case being the *antipassive construction*, by means of which the ergative marked NP receives the unmarked absolutive case and the unworthy patient is either turned into an oblique argument or incorporated into the verb. The few syntactically ergative languages (if there are any besides the well-known Dyirbal, cf. Dixon 1979) may be languages in which the mentioned reanalysis has not occurred and in which the absolutive is still the default topic, although there are topicality (themacity) related restrictions as to what can and cannot be marked absolutive.

4. THE FORCES FOR ACCUSATIVITY AND ERGATIVITY. What we have just seen is only half of the story. How we get from here to a fully ergative system, like the one in Basque, is the other half. I claimed above that subject is the grammaticized version of the pragmatic category topic. That explains why the cross-linguistic characteristics of subjects found by Keenan (1976) are pragmatic, topicality-related ones. Even in languages that have a syntactic category subject, prototypical examples of the category are topical NPs. English happens to have stretched the boundaries of the category to allow for instance NPs with an indefinite referent (i.e. poor topics) to be subjects, but still, these cases are uncommon statistically (cf. e.g. Givón 1979:26-8), and in some cases they are even blocked (e.g. subjects of *tough* predicates cannot be indefinite, although they can be generic). Coincidentally, the arguments that have been put forth against the syntactic ergativity of languages like Basque are all based on phenomena where topicality is the relevant grammatical force (e.g. *control* or *Equi-NP deletion*, and *imperative deletion*), and, not surprisingly, languages that have specialized the E-A construction (i.e. all except for Dyirbal and perhaps other languages in transition) fail the test, for neither the category *ergative*, nor the category *absolutive* reflect the pragmatic force of topicality⁸.

I have claimed that grammaticized topicality is what is shared by subjects (S_i and S_t). The question now is: what is shared by intransitive subjects (S_i) and direct objects (O), that makes absolutive (A) a valid grammatical category, especially in a fully ergative language, like Basque, without splits, and without even an antipassive construction? Keenan (1984) has argued that there is a great degree of semantic similarity and shared properties which "are broadly characterized in terms of bondedness to the verb, thematic role, and control phenomena" (1984:197). My feeling is that there is a grain of truth to this, but that Keenan exaggerates the similarity between the class of objects and the class of intransitive subjects. The class of objects can be argued to be rather coherent semantically. The class of intransitive subjects, however, is much more varied, with a subclass being closely related semantically to the class of objects (cf. Perlmutter's 1978 'unaccusative', or *patientive*, predicates), and another major subclass being closer semantically to the class of transitive subjects (cf. 'unergative', or *agentive* predicates). This means that the *semantic motivation* is split for accusativity and ergativity. As for the *pragmatic motivation* we already saw that the grammatical category subject is built upon the pragmatic category topic. The import of the other major pragmatic category, namely focus, is perhaps harder to determine, but in preliminary studies of Sacapultec, DuBois (1985) has found that the category absolutive is very highly correlated statistically in discourse with new information, and therefore with what could be called 'focality'.

Without denying the importance of the relationship between the pragmatic category focus and the category absolutive, I would like to argue that at least in Basque the grammatical category absolutive is centered around the semantic category patient. The connection, however, could be said to be a tenuous one. Just

as **English** has 'stretched' the category **subject** to allow non-topical cases, and to be superseded by, or coexist with, topics produced by e.g. Topicalization, **Basque** has stretched the boundaries of the category **absolutive** to include rather poor examples of the category patient. The weakening of the semantic motivation has been in the interest of creating a tidy and symmetrical formal system. As for the category ergative, it has a semantic core which is the semantic categories agent and cause. In other words, Basque is very much a **role-dominated** language in the sense of Foley & Van Valin 1984 (cf. e.g. Brettschneider 1981:230-2).

5. SOME PRECONDITIONS FOR THE ERGATIVITY OF BASQUE.

Before turning to some of the reasons for my claim that the category absolutive in Basque is the grammaticization of the semantic category patient, I would like to consider two major preconditions for the stability and fullness of this ergative system (cf. Txillardegui 1978, Trask 1981, and Brettschneider 1984).

First of all, Basque is a non-configurational language (no VP constituent) which uses word (constituent) order in the clause to mark pragmatic relations (cf. De Rijk 1972, Mitxelena 1981), namely **topic** (*mintzagaia* in Basque), **focus** (*galdegaia* in Basque), and **given**. Schematically, the pragmatic main-clause constituent order is the following:

- (1) a. [S TOPIC ...]
 b. [S FOCUS Verb ...]
 c. [S Verb GIVEN/OLD/HEAVY]

Degrees of topicality and 'focusality' are reflected, for instance, by the degree to which there is a pause following the topic or preceding the focus. Any phrase (not just major arguments) may be topicalized or focused, but neither category is obligatory in any one sentence. Also, question words, as well as answers to these questions, are always in focus position, with or without a phrase in topic position as well. Having such a fluid way of marking the pragmatic peak allows the case marking system to reflect the semantic relationships at the basis of the ergative and absolutive relationships⁹. This ordering and relations apply mainly in main clauses. Topic-Fronting and Focus-Positioning (cf. De Rijk 1978) are unbounded operations, i.e. bounded only by Ross-type constraints. Non-main clauses tend to be more often verb-final since in them the verb serves a delimitative function.

Another important feature of Basque is that the verb codes, or shows **agreement** for three participants: the ergative (E), the absolutive (A), and the dative (D). Not surprisingly then, Basque is a **three-way pro-drop** language. Also, the Basque **conjugation** is mostly periphrastic, with only a handful of verbs, which includes the auxiliaries, having some additional simple forms inflected for tense and nominal agreement. The periphrastic forms consist of one of the verb's non-finite forms, plus an auxiliary, either an intransitive auxiliary (derived from the verb for *be*) or a transitive one (derived from the verb for *have*). The dative argument can always be added 'for free' as an optional benefactive, except in the cases when it is an obligatory argument of the verb (a 'true' dative). There are five non-finite forms of verbs (of which the perfective participle is the citation form)¹⁰. The morphological configuration of most of the inflected forms is **A-root-(D)-(E)**¹¹. That is, in every inflected form there are coreferenced on the verb: (a) always an absolutive participant, (b) an ergative participant only when such a participant is called for by the valence of the verb, and (c) a dative participant occasionally as an obligatory part of the valence, but otherwise as an optional argument, with a benefactive sense.

Here are three random versions of one sentence exemplifying word order varieties:

- (2) (a) **Jon-ek Miren-i liburu-a ekarr-i dio (neutral order)**
 Jon-E Miren-D book-A-DEF bring-PERF A3s-AUX(present)-D3s-E3s
Jon has brought a/the book to Miren
- (b) **Miren-i, Jon-ek ekarr-i dio liburu-a**
 Miren-D (Top) Jon-E (Foc) bring A3s-AUX-D3s-E3s book-A-DEF (Giv)
To Miren, it is Jon who has brought her a/the book
- (c) **Miren-i ekarr-i dio Jon-ek liburu-a**
 Miren-D (Foc) bring-PERF A3s-AUX-D3s-E3s Jon-E book-A-DEF
It is to Miren that John has brought a/the book

The following two sentences exemplify the addition of a dative as a *benefactive* participle to any sentence that doesn't already have a 'regular' dative:

- (3) (a) **Txakurr-a hil da**
 dog-A-DEF die-PERF A3s-AUX
The dog has died
- (b) **(Ni-ri) txakurr-a hil zait ("benefactive" D)**
 I-D dog-A-DEF die-PERF A3s-AUX-D1s
The dog has died 'on' me

6. THE BASIS OF ERGATIVITY IN BASQUE. The E-A construction has commonly been associated with transitivity and with different aspects of high transitivity, e.g. perfectivity of the action, total affectedness of the object, agent/cause acting on an object, etc. (cf. Hopper & Thompson 1980). There are several central types of two-place predicates which prototypically fit the E-A construction, namely (using Lyons' 1977:491 terminology) **operative** predicates: AFFECT(AGENT, PATIENT), **factitive** predicates: PRODUCE(CAUSE, EFFECT), and **operative-factitive** predicates: PRODUCE(AGENT, EFFECT). These are central transitive predicates which give us the prototypical members of the category *ergative*, i.e. agent and cause, and of the category *absolutive*, i.e. patient and effect, or affected patient and effected patient. Other types of predicates which are made to fit the E-A construction in Basque bring new extensions to the categories *ergative* and *absolutive* which are overwhelmingly motivated, that is, non-predictable but 'explainable' extensions, of the central cases (cf. Lakoff's 1987 *radial categories*).

The formal tidiness of the E-A construction in Basque can be seen clearly in two major types of 'valence' alternations with patient-centered predicates: (a) the **anticausative (optional-agent) alternation**, (called the patient-subject construction by van Oosten 1984) and (b) the **indefinite-agent alternation**. These alternations, common to most languages, are associated in accusative languages with transitive and intransitive uses of certain classes of predicates, the *break* class (*I broke the glass*, vs. *the glass broke*), and the *cut* class (*I cut the cake* vs. *cake cuts easily*). In both cases there is an obligatory patient, and a deletable agent. The difference is that in the intransitive version of predicates of the *cut* class an agent is implied, whereas no agent or cause is implied in the intransitive version of predicates of the *break* class.

In Basque, as in English, there is no special morphology to mark these alternations¹². But unlike English, Basque has no structural or relational changes in the sentence other than the addition or subtraction of a participant and its accompanying coreferencing on the verb. Furthermore there are no restrictions on the application of either of these 'rules' or 'valence-changing' operations¹³. The following pair is an example of the **anticausative alternation**:

- (4) (a) **Edalontzi-a apurtu da**
 glass-A-DEF break-PERF A3s-AUX
The glass has broken
- (b) **Jon-ek edalontzi-a apurtu du**
 Jon-E glass-A-DEF break-PERF A3s-AUX-E3s
Jon has broken the glass

The next two, are an example of the **indefinite agent alternation**¹⁴:

- (5) (a) **Jon-ek ogi-a moz-tu du**
 Jon-E bread-A-DEF cut-PERF A3s-AUX-E3s
Jon has cut the bread
- (b) **Ogi-a moz-tu da**
 bread-A-DEF cut-PERF A3s-AUX
The bread has been cut; someone has cut the bread

Both of these predicate classes involve a patient and agent/cause, coded as absolutive and ergative participants, respectively, the former being indispensable and the latter dispensable.

In addition Basque also has a **synthetic causative** alternation formed by means of the verb-turned-suffix *erazi*, "to cause/make". Also here, the 'operation' consists of adding an ergative participant, the 'cause', to the 'basic' sentence. If there is an ergative in this basic, non-causative sentence, it gets 'demoted' to dative, while the absolutive NP, the patient, always keeps its case, as it is the center of the clause. The following pair shows an 'intransitive' sentence and a causative expansion of it:

- (6) (a) **Miren dend-eta-ra joan da**
 Miren-A store-PL-DIRECT go-PERF A3s-AUX
Miren has gone shopping
- (b) **Jon-ek Miren dend-eta-ra joan-erazi du**
 Jon-E Miren-A store-PL-DIRECT gone-cause-PERF A3s-AUX-E3s
Jon has made Miren go shopping

And the the next pair shows what happens to an ergative NP in a causative expansion:

- (7) (a) **Miren-ek jan du ogi-a**
 Miren-E eat-PERF A3s-AUX-E3s bread-A-DEF
Miren has eaten the bread
- (b) **Jon-ek Miren-i jan-erazi dio ogi-a**
 Jon-E Miren-D eat-cause-PERF A3s-AUX-D3s-E3s bread-A-DEF
Jon has made Miren eat the bread

Finally I will give one more example of a similar productive alternation. It involves verbs derived from directional phrases, tha is **directional verbs**, which involves a valence alternation, depending on whether 'self-movement' or 'other-movement' is involved, e.g.

- (8) (a) **Jon etxe-ra-tu da**
 Jon-A house-DEF-DIRECT-PERF A3s-AUX
Jon has entered the house
- (b) **Jon-ek txakurr-a etxe-ra-tu du**
 Jon-E dog-A-DEF house-DEF-DIRECT-PERF A3s-AUX-E3s
Jon has put the dog in the house

All the examples that we have seen involve what could be called the **add-an-argument** strategy. This strategy is not restricted to the ergative. As we saw

above, benefactive datives are also freely added (as in Spanish), and in some conservative dialects there is a special way to add the interlocutor's gender to the valence of the clause¹⁵.

7. EXTENDING THE ABSOLUTIVE AND ERGATIVE CATEGORIES.

In the examples that we have seen so far the absolutive and ergative NPs were rather uncontroversial patients and agent/causes. In order to maintain a stable formal system however, these grammatical categories have been extended to include more marginal examples of patients and agent/causes. For example, **thematicity** is not a factor for membership in the categories, unlike in ergative languages with an NP-split, where whether an NP can be an absolutive may depend on its *intrinsic thematicity* (with respect to a motivated thematicity scale) or its *relative thematicity* (with respect to the other NPs in the clause). Also, in Basque membership in the category absolutive is not dependent on the relative **affectedness** of the patient, or some related notion, like perfectiveness, as in ergative languages with a tense/aspect/mood split, nor is the relative agentiveness or intentionality of the agent a factor deciding membership in the ergative category. Still, the core of the two categories is semantic, with conventionalized, motivated, though not predictable, extensions (cf. Lakoff 1987).

If we take the prototypical **agent** to be a highly referential, volitional and intentional cause of a change on an object, then we can easily see that the category ergative in Basque includes some quite 'wimpy' agents, including *effectors* (as opposed to *affectors*), *experiencers*, and *possessors*, the latter two presumably motivated by the fact that these roles entail control over the experience, and over an object¹⁶. Still, there are limits, and Basque does not easily allow, for instance, instrumental ergatives in the same way that many languages, like Spanish, do not allow instrumental subjects of the *the key opened the door* type (cf. Fillmore 1968) unless they are highly topical.

On the other hand, if we take the prototypical **patient** (and therefore the prototypical absolutive in Basque) to be a highly referential, perhaps animate or human, object totally affected by the action, then also here we find that in Basque the category absolutive has been stretched to include things that case grammarians would have called something other than patient. For example, absolutive patients can be *effected* (as opposed to *affected*) *objects*, *source* (of experience) *objects*, and even *possessed objects*, these last two included for the same reason that experiencers and possessors are ergative, namely the 'control' link to the category.

8. THE ULTIMATE EXTENSION.

In Section 4 I said that there was an obstacle to the semantic motivation of a category that groups intransitive subjects and direct objects together, namely that for a class of intransitive predicates (broadly speaking, Perlmutter's 1978 *unergatives*) the semantic role associated with their 'subjects' resembles more that of the class of transitive subjects, because of the volitionality and agentivity associated with them. Interestingly, Basque has 'found' a way of reducing the functional load of such predicates (that is, predicates with only one, rather agentive, volitional, or causative participant), by 'transforming' many such predicates into **pseudo-transitive predicates**, with a *transitive verb* (typically *egin*, "make/do"), plus an *indefinite absolutive NP*¹⁷, which is typically what could be called a generic (non-referential) **effected object** (commonly deverbal noun, cf. English *swim* vs. *take a swim*, and *cough* vs. *give a cough*). Many languages have such alternative paraphrases (cf. e.g. for English Cattell 1984), but what is interesting here is that Basque, which has a productive way of making verbs out of nouns, has a large set of such pseudo-transitive predicates which do not have

a parallel one-argument ('intransitive') verb. A sample of these verbs is given in the Appendix, but crucially they include involuntary bodily function predicates (cf. DeLancey 1985¹⁸), e.g. *amets egin*, dream-A-INDEF make, "to dream", communication predicates, e.g. *hitz egin*, word-A-INDEF make, "to speak", and many other action predicates, like *lan egin*, work-A-INDEF make, "to work".

What happens here is that the language 'prefers', because of the semantic forces motivating the grammatical category system, to allow even non-referential effected absolutes (a natural extension of the effected patients we saw above) and non-volitional, but causative, ergatives (also a natural extension), rather than to allow agentive or causative absolutes¹⁹.

9. ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF STABILITY. There are some additional factors about Basque which I believe are important for maintaining a stable formal ergative system.

Word Order. Trask (1979) has claimed that "ergative languages nearly always have the basic word order SOV, occasionally VSO, but virtually never SVO" (p. 385)²⁰. Why this might be so is not too hard to imagine: SV(O) order always reflects the crystallization of the pragmatic topic-comment pattern, in both transitive and intransitive sentences, whereas S(O)V order (as well as VS(O) order, to some extent) allows intransitive subjects to have it both ways structurally, that is, to be in preverbal position, like the other absolutes (objects), and to be in sentence initial position, like other subjects (ergatives).

The Partitive Case. Basque has a case which we haven't mentioned, namely the *partitive* (-ik ending), which is pretty much in complementary distribution with the *absolute*, which it replaces in negatives, questions, and exclamations, somewhat in the same way that English *any* is in complementary distribution with *some*. So we could argue that the partitive case 'respects' absolutes by treating them all alike and differently from ergatives²¹.

Reflexives. Many languages use intransitivizing mechanisms to convey reflexives. Spanish, for example, uses basically the same *se* construction to convey anticausatives, indefinite agents, and reflexives (3rd person). Other languages, like English, use pronominal participants as place holders. Basque uses the former strategy (intransitivizing) with a few verbs, e.g. *garbitu*, "to wash vs. to wash up", with the ergative argument being left out of the auxiliary, but for the most part Basque is like English in that it uses a reflexive NP. It could be argued that the intransitivizing method 'respects' subjects while the dummy NP method 'respects' agents and patients.

10. A SOURCE OF INSTABILITY IN THE SYSTEM. Finally I would like to look at one source of instability for this delicate formal ergative system, which works against its balance, and which, given the sociolinguistic factors surrounding Basque at present, puts it in danger of collapsing. But first I would like to mention the very important **functional load** factor in the maintainance of the system. In Basque, as in all languages, there is plenty of variation, like different words/phrases, constructions, and strategies to convey similar thoughts. Some of these 'respect' or encourage the ergative-absolute system, while other forces pull the system in a different direction (i.e. Dubois' 1985 *competing motivations*), and thus contain the seeds of change. Much work needs to be done still to identify and evaluate this variation. For instance, some of the pseudo-transitive predicates may be giving way to simple one place predicates²².

But let's go back to our one likely major problem. As I mentioned above, only a few verbs in Basque have simple, that is, non-periphrastic, verb forms²³. These forms express the imperfective aspect. For example, from the verb *e-torr-i*, "to come", we get forms like *n-a-tor*, A1s-PRES-come, "I am coming", and from *e-karr-i*, "to bring", we get a form like *d-akar-kizu-t*, A3s-bring-D2s-E1s, "I am bringing it to you." Now, the 'new' way of expressing the imperfective for the rest of the verbs is a periphrastic, analytic one, by means of a the verb *ari*, "to be busy, occupied", to which the clause is subordinated. For instance, from the verb *j-aik-i* "to rise, get up", we get the imperfective *jaiki-tzen ari da*, rise-IMPERF busy 3sA-AUX, "s/he is getting up". Notice, however, that *jaiki-tzen* is a nominalized sentence, subordinated to *ari*. And as long as *ari* is a separate and 'higher' verb, its auxiliary, the only auxiliary, does not code the lower verb's arguments, but only one absolutive argument, which *controls* the 'main' verb's, *jaiki*'s, absolutive argument. But when the lower verb is not intransitive, as in (9), but transitive, as in (10), the upper absolutive argument controls the lower ergative argument, and it looks like we have two absolutives in one sentence. Notice the bracketing, or configuration, in the clauses with *ari*, which doesn't exist in the other clauses.

- (9) (a) **Jon jaiki da**
Jon-A rise-PERF A3s.AUX
Jon has gotten up
- (b) **Jon [s jaiki-tzen] ari da**
Jon-A rise-IMPERF engaged A3s.AUX
Jon is getting up
- (10) (a) **Jon-ek liburu-a irakurr-i du**
Jon-E book-A-DEF read-PERF A3s.AUX.E3s
Jon has read a/the book
- (b) **Jon [s liburu-a irakur-tzen] ari da**
Jon-A book-A-DEF read-IMPERF engaged A3s.AUX
Jon is reading a book

Observe that in (10b) (i) the agent participant of *irakurri* ("to read") is not marked ergative, because it is really the absolutive argument of *ari* ("be busy"); (ii) the absolutive object of *irakurri* ("to read") is not coded in the auxiliary, since the verb that has the object ('irakurri') does not have an auxiliary verb of its own; and (iii) the lower or dependent clause is a unit for word-order purposes, that is, the object ('liburua') in (10b) is not free to move about the sentence by itself, unlike the same object in (10a).

I would not say that we have an actual aspectual split here yet, since this construction is fairly recent, and is still not very frequent. That is this construction does not have a great functional load and it hasn't been fully incorporated into the language yet. At this point two things could happen. First, and most favorably from the point of view of the ergative system, **verb union** could result, by which *ari* would become a modal particle or affix on the verb, and this would allow the 'real' verb's participants to be coded on the auxiliary, (in Trask's 1981 words, they would *penetrate*) and would get rid of the lower sentence node (and its boundaries). This solution would not be a new one, since this has happened in several cases in Basque, most clearly and fully in the case of the synthetic causative which we saw above, in which the causative verb *erazi*, was, for all practical purposes, reinterpreted as a suffix, which adds an argument to the valence of the verb²⁴. Some telling evidence that this solution is starting to be envisioned by some speakers is that several recent grammar instruction books (e.g. Salaburu-Etxeberria 1981) prescriptively discourage such usage.

Now, because the *ari* construction expresses the imperfective, which is low in transitivity, there is a possibility that it will not be reinterpreted and that what Trask 'penetration' of the lower predicate's arguments to be coded in an upper auxiliary, will not take place. As I said, it is my impression that until recently this construction was not very common. However, one can see that it is a favorite among the growing non-native, Basque speaker population, perhaps because of the degree to which the verbal paradigm is simplified this way. Thus, the formal or structural consequences of the generalization of the *ari*-construction, if carried to an extreme, could be twofold: (a) erosion of the ergative absolutive distinction in one sector of the language along aspectual lines, i.e. non-perfectives would have a nominative-accusative construction; and (b) the creation of a verb phrase where now there is none, from the lower embedded sentence, giving the language verb phrase configurationality.

11. CONCLUSION. I have tried to show in this paper that Basque has a delicate morphological system which reflects an underlying semantic reality. The topic or pragmatic peak, which is the major source of subject effects, is not grammaticized because it is indicated by word order. The semantic motivation for this ergative-absolutive system, which are the semantic notions *patient* and *agent/cause*, have been 'watered down' however, through automatization (i.e. lexicalization of the grammatical relations ergative and absolutive), and through motivated extensions, in order to maintain a formally tidy system. Finally, I have shown that this system is in danger of collapsing, and I have identified one major likely source of erosion.

Appendix

CRY negar egin, lit. "make tears"	SMILE irri egin, lit. "make smile"
LAUGH barre egin, lit. "make laughter"	WALK (ibili), bide egin, lit. "make way"
SLEEP lo egin, lit. "make sleep"	JUMP jauzi egin, salto egin, etc.
SNEEZE usin egin, domistikun egin	URINATE pix egin, txiza egin
VOMIT oka egin, goitikatu, okatu	DEFECATE kaka egin
SNORE zurrunga egin, zurrungatu	MAKE NOISE zarata/zarotots/hots egin
COUGH eztulu egin	TURN (AROUND) bira egin, lit. "make turn"
YAWN aharrausi egin	VOTE botu eman, boza eman
STINK usaina bota, usan egin,	BLOW ONE'S NOSE zintz egin, lit. "make snot"
-----	FUCK larrua jo ("hit the skin"),
SPEAK hitz egin, lit. "make word"	txotxoka egin, larrutan egin, naka egin
WORK lan egin, lit. "do work/job"	MASTURBATE kanpaia jo ("play the bell")
SLEEP lo egin, lit. "make sleep"	REST atsedan hartu ("take a rest")
SCREAM oihu egin, lit. "make scream"	TAKE A NAP biago egin
SWEAR zin egin, lit. "make swearing"	WANT gura/nahi/gogo(a) ukan,
SAY GOODBYE agur egin,	lit. "have desire/want"
lit. "make greeting".	OBEY esana aditu, lit. "to hear the said"
LEAVE alde egin, lit. "make way/side"	BARK ahansi egin, zaunka egin
ESCAPE ihes egin, lit. "make escape"	PAY ATTENTION buru-belarri egin,
WINK keinu egin, lit. "make wink"	lit. "make head-ear"
RUN korrika egin,	SIP, DRINK zurrut egin
laster egin, lit. "make fast"	

Notes

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† The French word *Basque*, and the Spanish *vasco*, are related to Latin *vasco*, their name for a region of the Basque land in present day Navarre. The Basque name, perhaps related, is *eusk-ar-a*, (also *eusk-er-a*, or *esku-ar-a*), adj. *eusk-al* (or *esku-al*), "the Basque way/manner". Another possible etymology for Basque is Bq. *baso-ko*, "of the mountain/forest". The name for a Basque person is *euskaldun*, "one who possesses the Basque way/language", and the name for the country and the nation is *Euskal Herria*, "people/country of the Basque way/language". *Euskadi* is the name of the autonomous Basque region in Spain, first between 1936 and 1939, and then again since 1979.

1. I will not define here *syntactic ergativity*, nor will I argue against the validity of the label with respect to Basque, as I believe that Anderson's facts were basically right. However, there is a lot more going on, as I hope it will become clear by the end of this short paper. For arguments against labeling Basque as syntactically accusative, see Bosson 1984.

2. There are two types of splits. One is the NP split in which the E-A pattern is used when the A is high in thematicity as indicated cross-linguistically by some version of Silverstein's (1976) hierarchy, like for instance DeLancey's (1981) explanatorily appealing one. Exactly what the cutoff point is varies from language to language, that is, it is grammaticized for the purpose of automaticity. The other type of split is the tense/aspect/mood (TAM) split. Here the E-A construction is used for certain tenses or aspects or moods, while the N-A construction is used in the rest of the cases. It has been argued (e.g. Tsunoda 1981) that Active/Stative languages are really split ergative languages with a verbal split, which could perhaps be collapsed, semantically, with the TAM split.

3. This caveat is important. If 'configurationality' was an all-or-none category, one would not expect to find the fierce arguments seen recently as to whether a particular language is or isn't configurational.

4. By this I mean two things. First we have cases that deviate minimally from the prototype. An involuntary agent (e.g. *Pat accidentally killed Lou*) is not the best example of the category agent. Secondly, we have something like the macroroles Actor and the Undergoer in Foley & Van Valin (1980, 1984), which subsume what could be seen as motivated separate roles. It should be clear that here we are not talking about 'classical' categories, but about 'prototype-exhibiting' categories as studied in prototype semantics (cf. e.g. Fillmore 1982, Lakoff 1987). What I mean is that, for instance, the semantic categories Patient and Agent have central, or prototypical, cases, which are cognitively based and may be, in some way, 'universal'. However, the extensions from these central cases, while always motivated, may vary greatly from language to language.

5. I am grateful to Sandy Thompson for bringing to my attention DuBois' fascinating paper. DuBois argues for the discourse motivation of E-A patterning in Sacapultec, a language of Guatemala, and couches all this in an illuminating theory of functional motivation of grammar. My argument here, on the other hand, will be about the role of verb semantics in motivating the ergative system of Basque.

6. An example of this in English would be the fact that *I got run over by a car*, is more 'natural' than its paraphrase, *A car ran over me*.

7. For some reason, languages shy away from requiring too much decision making of this type on-line, and lean towards having automatic grammaticized encodings (cf. Givón 1979).

8. In Givón's words: "The great bulk of so-called subject properties used to define the behavior of "deep" ergative languages turn out to be pragmatic topic properties, associated with deletion under identity in various grammatical environments (see Dixon, 1972 as well as Heath 1979)." (Givón 1984:166).

9. Incidentally, the relatively high occurrence (statistically speaking) of 'SOV order' in Basque (cf. De Rijk 1969) simply reflects the fact that when we have an ergative NP and

an absolutive NP (not a common occurrence) in the default case, the ergative NP is topic(al) and the absolutive NP is focus(al). (For an somewhat different view, see Bretschneider 1981).

10. The non-finite forms of the verb are: (1) the stem or so-called infinitive, e.g. *apur*, "break"; (2) the perfective participle, which is the citation form, consisting of stem + {tu/du, i, n}, e.g. *apur-tu*, "broken"; (3) the verbal noun, consisting of stem + suffix t(z)e, e.g. *apur-tze*, "breaking"; (4) the imperfective participle, consisting of verbal noun + n (locative, indefinite declension), e.g. *apur-tze-n*, "breaking"; and (5) the future participle, consisting of the perfect participle + one of the genitive suffixes (ko/go, en), e.g. *apur-tu-ko*, "to break".

11. This is not always transparent, however, because of diachronic phonological muddling.

12. Many languages have special morphology for either transitivity or intransitivity of a verb, and commonly the same mark is used to mark both anticausative and indefinite agent (e.g. Spanish).

13. Notice that in English the indefinite-agent construction is restricted to cases in which the focus is on the manner in which the action is carried out.

14. This is the closest that Basque gets to having a passive, given that this indefinite agent construction (or valence-change) can be seen as an agentless passive. However, some linguists have managed to find in Basque one or two sentences of similar, stative clauses, in which an agent is included (though not coreferenced on the verb). This fact, together with some faulty data in the literature, has been responsible for all the recent, misled talk about the Basque 'passive'. For a short and clear exposé, see Trask 1985.

15. This is done by means of a of a special mark on the verb, with gender agreement being coded, e.g.

- (a) Jon etorri da: "Jon has come" (interlocutor neutral)
- (b) Jon etorri duk: "Jon has come (and you are a man)"
- (c) Jon etorri dun: "Jon has come (and you are a woman)"

16. In some ergative languages it makes sense that the possessor should be ergative by the simple reason that the ergative construction arises from a periphrastic possessive construction. In Basque, possessor ergatives are especially common because of the phenomenon known as **possessor ascension**, whereby a possessor argument of a participant is coded on the clause using the 'add-a-participant' strategy mentioned earlier, e.g.

- (a) **Seme-a Amerik-eta-n dago**
son-A-DEF America-DEF-PL-LOC A3s-be(stative)
The (our) son is in America
- (b) **(Hai-ek) seme-a Amerik-eta-n dute** ("possessive" E)
they-E son-A-DEF America-DEF-PL-LOC A3s-AUX-E3p
Their son is in America

Notice that a similar strategy is available in English (e.g. *We have a son in America*) just in case the 'possessed' NP is indefinite. Still, the construction is much more common in Basque, since this is the only way that 'genitive' arguments can be relativized (in conservative dialects only co-indexed arguments, A, E, and D, can be relativized, with other cases being relativizable if the case is identical in both the outside and the relative clauses). The benefactive dative can also be used in a similar way when the verb is not stative, i.e. when there is a real agent involved in the predication, even if it is not coded ergative, e.g. with *joan*, "to go", intransitive with agentive absolutive:

- (Gu-ri) **seme-a Amerik-eta-ra joan zaigu**
(we-D) son-A-DEF America-DEF-PL-DIRECT go-PERF A3s-AUX-D1p
Our son has gone to America

17. Just as the perfective participle is the citation form of the verb (cf. Note 10), the definite declension (singular/plural) is the default or citation form of nouns. Actually, the number of domains in which the indefinite declension is used has been diminishing in recent times. It is typical also that a absolutive participant will be introduced in its definite form even if it is the first time it is mentioned. However, the numeral *bat*, "one" can be used to emphasize indefiniteness, e.g. *liburu-a ikusi dut*, "I have seen the/a book", vs. *liburu bat ikusi dut*, "I have seen one/a book".

18. According to DeLancey 1985, these are a crucial class of predicates about which active/stative languages cannot 'agree' whether they are active or stative. DeLancey argues that this is explained by the fact that for some such languages intentionality, a possible first step in a causative chain, is relevant whereas for other languages it is not obligatorily so.

19. An interesting class of predicates in this respect is the weather predicates. These too are two-place predicates, the absolutive NP being the meteorological effect, and the ergative NP being a mere marking on the verb, e.g. *euri-a egi-ten du*, rain-A-DEF make-IMPERF 3sA-AUX-3sE, "it rains", literally "he/she/it makes rain". This extra argument perhaps was at one time an 'understood' argument, but it's hard to say.

20. When talking about ergative languages it is common to speak of S(O)V order instead of speaking, more accurately, of (E)AV order, because of the syntactic bias mentioned above.

21. Also, this partitive may be a factor in preventing object assimilation of the generic effected objects we saw above (which display absolutely no case or other marks), by endowing them with a non-zero ending in the mentioned contexts. Also important in preventing such phonological or morphological assimilation of these objects is the fact that they may be in other than preverbal position, e.g.

- (a) Jon-ek hitz egin du, "Jon has spoken".
Jon-E word-A make-PERF AUX
- (b) Jon-ek ez du hitz-ik egin, "Jon hasn't spoken (a word)".
Jon-E not 3sA-AUX-3sE word-PART make-PERF
- (c) Jon-ek ez du egin hitz-ik, "Jon hasn't spoken (a word)".
Jon-E not 3sA-AUX-3sE make-PERF word-PART

22. A way in which these pseudo-transitive predicates are less than perfect is that for imperfective situations, some of them have a way of becoming one place predicates by 'turning' the 'fake' absolutive into an adverb, e.g.

- (a) *dei egin du*: call-ABS make-PERF 3sA-AUX-3sE, "s/he has called"
- (b) *dei-ka ari da*: call-ADV busy(IMPERF) 3sA-AUX, "s/he is calling"

23. The number has been diminishing in historical times (which for Basque means going back about 500 years), and it is set at 20 now, although even some of these are definitely falling into disuse.

24. The diachronic shift from verb to suffix is shown in the following schema:
 $E_i [S (E_j) A_k V]_m \text{ erazi } A_m \text{-AUX-} E_i \longrightarrow E_i (D_j) A_k V \text{-erazi } A_k \text{-AUX-}(D_j)\text{-}E_i$

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