

Optionality and Referentiality

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This study deals with the notion of optionality vis-à-vis the phenomenon of ergative assignment in languages through the concept of clause internal CP and adjunction. Optional ergative case-marking can be defined as the “situation in which the ergative marker may be present or absent from the Agent NP without affecting the grammaticality or interpretation of the clause in terms of who is doing what to who.” (Mcgregor, 2009: 493). Some languages, such as Nepali, Sylheti show evidence of optional use of ergative marker(s) synchronically. Additionally, such optionality is also seen diachronically in languages like Old Bangla in a similar constructions. By similar construction, I mean there is no change in verbal agreement system (as seen in (1)-(2b) and (3)-(4)). In (1-2b), subject agreement in Sylheti is seen unlike (3-4), where we see object agreement in Old Bangla. Departing from such data, the primary question that this paper looks at is how can the narrow syntax explain optional/ pragmatic ergativity? In connection to this question, I also probe, in the words of Chomsky (2012), “the questions of why Case exist at all” as the theoretical motivation of case is hard to define.

The examples (1) and (2b) below are essentially the same sentences. But (2b) is grammatical whether the subject NP *faruk* is unmarked or marked with *-e*, unlike (1). In case of (1), with no pragmatic context like in (2a), the subject NP *faruk* should always be marked with an ergative marker *-e*. Again in (3-4), free variation is seen and both are grammatical. This entails the question of how does a single system afford such free variation? To answer this question, I deliberate on pragmatic ergative (Hyslop 2010, Dubois 2017 a.o.) for (3-4) where the presence or absence of ergative markers depends on the pragmatic context of the construction. Therefore, the discourse information plays a major role in case-assignment. For Old Bangla, I propose that here the ergative marker is actually an adjunct (Mahajan, 1997 a.o.) and relate it to language in change phenomenon. The concept of the optional ergative has not been discussed in the prior generative literature concerning pragmatic ergativity. Therefore, to discuss this type of optionality, I elaborate on the importance of the CP Layer, i.e. the information and discourse layer. Following Belletti (2004 a.o.) and Jayseelan (2001), I propose that there is an intermediate CP in the TP spine, i.e. the internal CPs. In connection to such a dynamic role of the CP layer, I push Hinzen’s ‘referentiality’ to the ‘internalist’ enquiry and as a grammatical concept in the system. The system uses the CP layer to ground the motivation of referentiality behind the existence of ‘case’, which is referentiality of DPs involved. I take nominative- absolutive as default case (Falk, 1997), and to denote the notion of referentiality, the system uses the ergative and accusative case as the non-default counterparts.

Therefore, an activated TP-internal CP changes the nature of T versus an inactive TP internal-CP. The ‘defective’ T in activated TP-internal CP acts differently than standard probe T. The standard T assigns nominative case vis-à-vis Agree (Chomsky 1998, 2000 a.o.). However, the ‘defective T’, unlike the standard T, assigns the non-nominative case, i.e. structural ergative case in the example seen below. In case of Old Bangla, ergative being an adjunct contributes to the fact that is optional and does not participate in agreement. So in synchronic stages, most Bangla has lost ergative alignment behave differently as seen in Sylheti.

I connect the reason for the existence of case in the theory of Minimalism (Chomsky 1995, 2000 a.o.) is the notion of ‘referentiality’ (Hinzen, 2014). I, taking the ‘referentiality’ concept

from Hinzen (ibid), propose that all the functional phrases of vP, TP along with CP are involved in case assignment. I also argue that optionality in grammar can be defined in two ways, with particular reference to the ergative case with are Nepali, Sylheti and Old Bangla.

Some evidence of optional ergativity is:

1. *faruk -e samos-e bat kha-e*
 faruk-ERG spoon-INST rice eat.Pres-3
 ‘Faruk eats rice with spoon’

- 2.a. *ke samos-e bat kha-e?*
 who spoon-INS rice eat.Pres-3
 ‘Who eats rice with a spoon?’
- 2.b. *faruk /faruk-e samos-e bat kha-e*
 faruk.NOM/ faruk-ERG spoon-INST rice eat.Pres-3
 ‘Faruk eats rice with spoon’ Sylheti

3. *aji bhushuk=∅ bangali bhaili*
 Today bhushuk.ERG inferior-being.F.S become.Pst.F.S.
 ‘Today bhushuk became bengali/ inferior’ (Carya 49)
4. *kanh-ẽ pothi padhili*
 Kanhe-ERG book.F read.Pst.F
 ‘Kanha read a book’ (Chatterji,1926: 742)

Selected Reference:

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