

## **The Role of Subject Argument Case Assignment: Comparing Native Vs. Non-Native Speakers of Urdu**

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### **Abstract**

Urdu assigns the nominative case, ergative case, dative case and other postpositional cases in subject argument position. Nominative and ergative cases occur with the finite verb and vary according to tense and aspect in Urdu. But dative case is the semantic case and associated with experience and goal.

This paper discusses the case pattern of subject argument in respect of native speakers and non-native speakers of Urdu. Urdu is the split-ergative language, it takes ergative case with perfective aspect and past tense in transitive verb. But the non-native speakers (who do not have ergative case in their languages) use nominative case in the context of ergative case. On the bases of this system, the present paper explores the idea that ergative case is the structural case because it is replaced by the nominative case which is the structural case (Mahajan (1990), Butt (2004) Davison (2000)). Further support comes from the 'Woolford's (2006)' diagnostic tests. She presents six diagnostic tests (in the Icelandic language) to check whether ergative case is the inherent case related to theta role or the structural case related to the syntactic position. But Woolford's (2006)' diagnostic tests are not fully applicable in Urdu/Hindi.

**Keywords:** Ergative case, Nominative case, Structural and Inherent case Assignment, Native and Non-Native speakers of Urdu.

### **Introduction**

Urdu and many Indo-Aryan languages have the distinct case marking property for subject and object. Subject case marking varies from nominative to ergative, transitive finite verb with the imperfective aspect takes the nominative case while the transitive finite verb with perfective aspect takes the ergative case. On the other hand different object marking depends on the animacy and

specificity (Aissen 2003). Therefore, direct object assigns the dative case if it has animate and specific argument, otherwise, it simply assigns the nominative case.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether ergative case is structural or non-structural case in Urdu. Hence, we used the data of both the native and non-native speakers of Urdu, and we discern that the non-native speakers (who do not have ergative case in their native language) do not acquire ergative case when they learn Urdu as a second language. Although, they simply acquire nominative case instead of ergative case, as we know that the nominative case is structural case in Urdu (Mahajan (1990), Butt (2004), Davison (2000)). However, they cannot replace ergative case with dative case which is the non-structural case in Urdu/Hindi (Aissen (2003)). Therefore, we assumed that only structural case is being used as alternative with structural case. Consequently, this alternation process (ergative and nominative) has explored the idea that the ergative is the structural case because it used as the alternative with nominative case.

Butt (1995) and Mahajan (1990) consider ergative case as non-structural case because it is related to agent theta role. Mohanan (1994) gives three properties of non-structural case; (a): it is related to theta role, (b): it is not assigned by the functional head AGR and TENSE. (c): it has been assigned by the specific lexical item (verb and preposition). But the Davison (2000) argues that ergative case is not associated with theta role and it is checked by the functional head TENSE and ASPECT. On the bases of Davison's observation, we determine that ergative case is sensitive with TENSE and ASPECT and it is assigned by the transitive v and perfective aspect with the association of tense.

Mahajan's proposal advocated that the case and phi features of subject and objects determine separately with the help of head-AGR projection. But, in the minimalist programme the case is assigned within the verbal projection through the case and agreement feature on the TENSE and light verb v.

## 2. Split Ergativity

Urdu is the split ergative language which is based on the ASPECT or it is called aspect-based split ergative language (Mahajan (1990), Butt (2004), Bhatt (2007)).

In Urdu case assignment on the subject of finite transitive verb is inflected with the occurrence of different aspects. In non-perfective aspect the subject receives the nominative case but in the perfective aspect it takes the ergative case instead of nominative case.

For instance:

a. Si:ta-ne a:m kha-ya

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seeta-Erg mango-Nom eat.perf.  
'seeta ate the mango.'

- b. Si:ta a:m kha-e-gii  
Ram-Nom mango-Nom eat. Imper. Fut.  
'Ram will eat the mango.'

The overt case marked NP does not agree with the heads ( $T^\circ$  &  $V^\circ$ ). Ergative subject (DP) does not agree with verb, because it is overtly marked with the case clitics 'ne', so the verb has the agreement relation with non-overtly case marked Nominative argument which occurs on the object position. If the object argument is also overtly case marked to exhibit specificity and occur with dative 'ko', the verb has default agreement (3 pers.M.S.). For instance:

- c. siitaa-ne roti kha-ii  
Sita-F-ERG bread,Nom,F.Sg eat-PERF-F-SG  
'Sita ate bread.'
- d. seeta-ne meera-ko pi:ta-aa  
Seeta-F-ERG Meera-F-ACC hit-PERF-M-SG  
'Sita hit meera'

### 3. Case Realisation on Subject with Transitive Compound Verb (V1+V2) by the Urdu L1 Speakers

Ergative subject also appears with compound verb (V1+V2) <sup>2</sup>, when the both verbs are transitive, and the second verb is in perfective aspect. If either of the verb is intransitive with ergative subject the sentence will be ungrammatical.

- (3) a. unaccusative compound verb: nominative subject

Mahesh phal khaa ga-yaa/bait.h-aa  
Mahesh fruit eat GO-Pfv/SIT-Pfv  
'Mahesh ate up the fruit.'

- b. transitive compound verb: ergative subject

Mahesh-ne phal khaa daal-aa/li-yaa  
Mahesh-Erg fruit eat. PUT-Pfv/TAKE-Pfv  
'Mahesh ate up the fruit.'

(Bhatt (2007:6))

When the V2 (light verb) is inflected from intransitive to transitive, the subject case will also be changed from nominative to ergative respectively. Therefore, the ergativity of the subject case depends on the transitivity of the V2 light verb. We cannot assign ergative subject when main verb occurs as intransitive, even though, we have some exceptional intransitive verb ‘khansna’ *cough* ‘chhinkna’ *sneeze* which assigns ergative subject (Butt & Mahajan). So, there is no need to inflect the main verb (V1) because the ergative subject is restricted with the transitive verb only.

#### 4. Case Assignment on the Subject with Transitive Compound Verb for Non-Native speakers of Urdu

Non-Native Speakers of Urdu like Bangla and Bhojpuri do not use ergative subject with transitive compound verb (kha-liya). But for standard Urdu the occurrence of ergative subject with transitive compound verb is necessary.

Example:

- a. hum phal kha-liye Urdu non-native speakers  
 we-Nom fruits Acc eat take-trans-prf  
 ‘we ate up the fruit.’

The above sentence (a) is ungrammatical for the native speakers of Urdu. They used ergative case instead of nominative case with the transitive compound verb (kha-liya). See the example below.

- b. hum-ne phal kha-liye Urdu native speaker  
 we-Erg fruits Acc eat take-trans-prf  
 ‘we ate up the fruit.’

Non-native speakers of Urdu cannot replace ergative case with dative case. As we know that dative case is non-structural case. Therefore, structural case (ergative) can only be replaced with the structural case (nominative). See the example (c) below.

- c. \* hum-ko phal kha-liye Urdu L2 speaker  
 we-Dat fruits Acc eat take-trans-prf  
 ‘we ate up the fruit.’

The above sentence (4 c) is not acceptable for non-native speakers. So, here we used this approach as a diagnostic test to check whether the ergative case is the structural case or not? Because it can only be replaced by the structural case (nominative), when there is no ergative case

in his/her mother tongue. It will be shown in the section (5) that we do not have the ergative subject in the Bangla. So the Bangla speakers are unable to learn ergative case, while they learn Urdu/Hindi.

### 5. Case Assignment on Subject position in Bhojpuri and Bangla

Bhojpuri and Bangla languages are spoken in Bihar and West Bengal. But the people of those states also speak Urdu as a second language and most of the speakers have Urdu as their first language. Here, we consider only those people who speak Urdu as the second language. Modern Bengali has lost this pattern that transitive perfective verb takes the ergative case while the transitive non-perfective verb is restricted to the nominative case and shows the same kind of subject case-marking which is nominative case for its non-perfect and perfect subjects (Bhatt (2007):17). Initially, they could not acquire ergative marker in subject position while they speak Urdu in which we have ergative case with certain verbs. Because there is no ergative case in their languages (see the example (a)). They might be acquiring ergative case in the later stage. Therefore, they replace ergative case by the nominative case due to lack of ergative case in their mother tongue. For example:

a. a:mi: si:ta:-ke: dekh-chi:  
I-NOM Seeta-ACC see-1-SG-PRES  
'I see Sita.'

b. a:mi: si:ta:-ke: dekh-i:am  
I-NOM seeta-ACC see-1-SG-PAST  
'I saw Sita.'

c. anu si:ta-ke: dekh-lo  
Anu-FEM-NOM Seeta-ACC see-3-SG-PAST  
'Anu saw Sita.'

(Bhatt (2007):17)

In the above example we have nominative-accusative pattern of case and agreement marking in all tenses and aspects. Here we noticed that there is no ergative marking in the Bangla.

### 6. Difference Between Structural Case and Non-Structural Case in Urdu

The structural case is assigned by structural position and it is not based on the theta-role. But non- structural case is theta-related case and it is assigned by the lexically-selected item (Davison 2004).

Davison (2004) categorizes nominative (on both position subject as well as object), ergative (in subject position), genitive (for the DP and non-finite clause), and dative (in the direct object position) as structural cases; in contrast, dative (in the indirect objects as a goal/beneficiary and subject of experiencer), and genitive (for possession) are categorised as non-structural and theta-related/lexically selected. Mahajan (1990) and Butt and King (2004) considered ergative case as inherent case because it is related to theta agent position. Mahajan (1990) further argues that ergative case may be of both types structural and non-structural. Structural case is assigned on the both (subject and object) positions, Spec-AGRP, SPEC-IP positions for the subject structural case and complement of the V position for the object. On the other hand non-structural case is assigned by the specific lexical item i.e. verb.

### 7. Woolford Diagnostic Tests to Test Ergative Case as Structural Case

Woolford, Ellen (2006) used the diagnostic tests to distinguished structural case from non-structural case. These tests are not fully reliable to test the ergative case in Urdu to distinguish structural case from non-structural case. His first diagnostic test ‘case preservation under A-movement’ (non-structural case always preserved under A-movement but the structural case is not preserved) is not reliable for ergative case because ergative case occurs on the external argument position. Therefore, it cannot be retained in the passive sentence because ergative case is realised on the adjunct position after the movement operation.

We used another diagnose to test whether the ergative case is a structural case because Urdu L2 speaker used nominative case instead of ergative case in the context of compound transitive verb. As only structural case can be alternated with structural case, therefore, we can say that ergative case is the structural case. Because Butt and king (2006) make the same claim in favour that ergative case is the non-structural case because it is alternated with dative case. E.g.

a. nadya=ne zu ja-na hai  
 Nadya.F=Erg zoo.M.Loc go-Inf be.Pres.3.Sg  
 ‘Nadya wants to go to the zoo.’

b. nadya=ko zu ja-na hai  
 Nadya.F=Dat zoo.M.Loc go-Inf be.Pres.3.Sg  
 ‘Nadya wants/has to go to the zoo. Butt and King (2001)

But this alternation of ‘ko’ and ‘ne’ occurs because of the influence of Punjabi language (Ranjan (2006):17). We have the dative marker ‘nu’ in Punjabi language, due to this ‘nu’ dative marker most of the Urdu speakers from Punjab region used ‘ko’ and ‘ne’ in the alternation only with infinite verb. For instance:

- a. Sali:m-ne        roti                                kha-ii  
 Saleem-F-ERG bread,Nom,F.Sg eat-fin-PERF-F-SG  
 'Saleem ate bread.'
- b. \*Sali:m-ko        roti                                kha-ii  
 Saleem-F-DAT bread,Nom,F.Sg eat-fin-PERF-F-SG  
 'Saleem ate bread.'
- c. Sali:m-ne        roti                                kha-ni                                hai  
 Saleem-F-ERG bread,Nom,F.Sg eat-inf-F-SG                                be(Aux)  
 'Saleem ate bread.'
- d. Sali:m-ko        roti                                kha-ni                                hai  
 Saleem-F-DAT bread,Nom,F.Sg eat-inf-F-SG                                be(Aux)  
 'Saleem ate bread.'

In the above examples, we observed that ergative and nominative alternation is possible only with the transitive infinite verb and not with the transitive finite verb. The infinite verb environment is restricted to the dative subject. But in the (7 c & d), the alternative use of dative and ergative is due to the Punjabi influence, which we have discussed earlier.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, we noticed that we cannot replace ergative case with dative case if the speaker's mother tongue does not have ergative case. But it could be replaced by the Nominative case. Therefore, we can say that the structural case can only be replaced by the structural case, and here the dative case is non-structural case. Hence ergative case (structural case) cannot be replaced by the dative (non-structural case). Through the analysis of data from both speakers (Urdu L1 & Urdu L2), we have found some reasons why the ergative case is only replaced by the nominative case in the context of transitive compound verb.

- Both cases (ergative & nominative) are the structural case.
- There is no ergative case in his mother tongue.
- It can be speculated that only structural case (ergative) can be replaced by structural case (nominative).

So, we used this approach as the diagnostic test to justify that the ergative case is the structural case. Because Urdu L2 speaker (from Bangla and Bhojpuri) used nominative case (structural) instead of ergative case.

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