

# Marked nominative as a type of ergative

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# Most common alignment systems

► Nominative - Accusative: **A**, **S**, **O**

(1) *Sakha (Turkic)* (Vinokurova 2005 via Baker 2015: p.1)

a. **Min** kel-li-m.

I.NOM come-PAST-1SS

'I came.'

b. **Min** oloppoh-u aldjat-ty-m.

I.NOM chair-ACC break-PAST-1SS

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► Ergative - Absolutive: **A, S, O**

(2) *Tsez (Nakh-Daghestanian)* (adapted from Polinsky & Potsdam 2001: p.586)

- a. eniy-**ā**      **ziya**      **b-iser-si**  
mother-ERG cow.III.ABS III-feed-PST.EVID  
'The mother fed the cow.'
- b. **ziya**      **b-ik'i-s**  
cow.III.ABS III-go-PST.EVID  
'The cow left.'

# Markedness

- ▶ Ergative and accusative are usually marked, while nominative and absolutive are usually unmarked.
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- ▶ In Agree-based theories, it is common for ergative and accusative to be associated with  $v$ , and for nominative and absolutive to be associated with T (Legate 2008 a.o.).
  - ▶ Even though there is no clear theory of markedness in these approaches, the case associated with T is usually the unmarked one.

# Marked nominative

- ▶ These systems have what looks like nominative - accusative alignment for morphological case and agreement
  - ▶ ...but nominative is always (morphologically) marked and accusative is unmarked.

## (3) *Kipsigis (Nilotic)*

- a. Ø-é-è            nè:gà            sòmók-ú    pé:k.  
 3-drink-IPFV goats.NOM three-NOM water  
 'The three goats are drinking water.'
- b. Ø-rúj-tó:s        nè:gà            sòmók-ú.  
 3-sleep-PL.IPFV goats.NOM three-NOM  
 'The three goats are sleeping.'

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  - ▶ "Where there is a case system, the only case which ever has only zero allomorphs is the one which includes among its meanings that of the subject of the intransitive verb" (Greenberg 1966: p.95).



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- ▶ It is not entirely clear how our theories of Case can account for marked nominative.
  - ▶ Baker (2015) and van Urk (2015) are, to my knowledge, the only existing generative analyses.

# This talk

- ▶ Marked nominative systems are problematic (or at least very surprising) for existing theories of case if they are treated as nominative - accusative systems with a 'markedness reversal'.
- ▶ I argue instead that such systems are a type of ergative - absolutive alignment, with ergative being assigned to noun phrases in SpecVoiceP (Woolford 1997, Aldridge 2004, Legate 2008, Coon 2017 among many others).
  - ▶ These languages possess an 'expletive' Voice head with an EPP requirement satisfied by movement of the internal argument of unaccusative verbs (Deal 2019, Lee 2023 a.o.).

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  - ▶ These languages possess an 'expletive' Voice head with an EPP requirement satisfied by movement of the internal argument of unaccusative verbs (Deal 2019, Lee 2023 a.o.).
- ▶ If the analysis is on the right track, marked nominative would be an example of ergative case assigned to a DP in the absence of a case competitor.
  - ▶ This would constitute an argument against dependent case theories of ergativity as the only analysis of ergativity (Baker & Bobaljik 2017 a.o.).

# Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Typology
- 3 Marked nominative is not nominative
  - Morphological problems
  - Syntactic problems
- 4 Marked nominative is ergative
- 5 An argument against Dependent Case Theory
- 6 Agreement in marked nominative languages

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# Marked nominative is rare

- ▶ Marked nominative systems are common in languages spoken in East Africa.
  - ▶ They are attested primarily in Nilo-Saharan (Eastern Sudanic branch) and Afro-Asiatic (Omotic and Cushitic branches) languages (König 2006, Dimmendaal 2014).
  - ▶ It seems to be an areal phenomenon: “within the border region of Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia, there are only languages with marked-nominative systems” (König 2006: p. 698).
- ▶ These systems are virtually unattested outside of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>König (2006) cites the Yuman languages of California, the Oceanic language Houailou, the Australian language Malak-Malak, and Old French as possible candidates. Baker (2015) analyzes Choctaw as marked nominative as well.

# Marked nominative in Nilo-Saharan

- ▶ In this talk, I focus on marked nominative in Nilo-Saharan languages.
  - ▶ Most data come from Kipsigis (Southern Nilotic; Kenya). Unless indicated otherwise, these data come from my fieldnotes.
- ▶ Some properties of marked nominative in Nilo-Saharan:
  - ▶ All languages with this system have either V1 or V2 word order.
  - ▶ Case is usually expressed tonally.

# Marked nominative in Kipsigis

- ▶ In Kipsigis, nouns have a fixed LH<sub>0</sub>L melody in the nominative, while their tonal shape is unpredictable in the unmarked case (Toweett 1979, Kouneli & Nie 2021).

## (4) Unmarked vs. Nominative tonal shape (Kouneli & Nie 2021:p.e118)

pé:k	H	pè:k	L	'water'
là:kwé:t	L.H	là:kwè:t	L.L	'child'
ηó:ktá	H.H	ηò:ktà	L.L	'dog'
sògàró:k	L.L.H	sògàrò:k	L.H.L	'sugar'
mágásé:t	H.H.H	mágàsè:t	L.H.L	'skin'
sòlóptʃá:t	L.H.H	sòlóptʃà:t	L.H.L	'cockroach'
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- ▶ Nouns that begin with the prefixes *kɪp-/tʃɛ:p-* only change the tone of the prefix from L to H in the nominative.

### (5) **K**ɪp-làngàt → **K**íp-làngàt

- ▶ There is case concord within the DP, and numerals take a suffix (in addition to tonal changes).

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# Marked nominative as nominative

- ▶ Most common hypothesis: marked nominative systems are regular nominative - accusative systems which display an unusual markedness pattern (sometimes called a 'markedness reversal').

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- ▶ Most common hypothesis: marked nominative systems are regular nominative - accusative systems which display an unusual markedness pattern (sometimes called a 'markedness reversal').
  - ▶ "The Russian example illustrates the cross-linguistically typical nominative-accusative pattern; Harar Oromo instantiates a morphologically less-frequent pattern where the nominative is overtly marked, but the accusative is not." (Polinsky & Preminger 2014: p.2)
  - ▶ "One possible alternative is to view "marked nominative" [...] simply as a nominative, assigned at Spec-TP, and allow for languages to treat nominative case as a marked structural case." (van Urk 2015: p.92; see also Keine & Zeijlstra (to appear))

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# Nominative as an oblique

- ▶ Morphologically, nominative in these languages patterns with oblique cases.
  - ▶ In some languages, it is syncretic with genitive and/or with the case that is assigned by prepositions (e.g., Dinka; van Urk 2015).
- ▶ These syncretism patterns go against well-established typological generalizations about case syncretism, and it is not clear how they would be explained in morphological theories that rely on containment (e.g., Caha 2009).

# There is no accusative

- ▶ More problematic for a theory of markedness reversal is the status of the “accusative”.
- ▶ No Nilo-Saharan language ever marks accusative morphologically. This includes languages like Ateso (Eastern Nilotic; Kenya/Uganda), which mark not only nominative but also genitive, locative and instrumental case (Barasa 2017).
- ▶ In all Nilo-Saharan languages, the “accusative” form of the noun is the citation form and it is also used in a number of other syntactic contexts (König 2006, 2008, Handschuh 2014, Baker 2015).

- (6) Nominals in predicative position  
Applied arguments  
Complements of prepositions  
Topicalized subjects  
Vocatives

# Uses of the unmarked form of the noun in Kipsigis

(7) *Kipsigis*

- a. **Kà:né:tî:ndét** Tjé:bê:t.  
teacher                      Cheebeet.NOM  
'Cheebeet is a teacher.'



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- c. Ká-Ø-tjap-e Kíbê:t amitwa:gik **ák** **Kìplàngàt**.  
 PST.CURR-3-make-IPFV Kibeet.NOM food with Kiplangat  
 'Kibeet made food with Kiplangat.'

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 'Kibeet is eating ugali.'

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- e. **Kìbê:t**, nó:!  
 Kibeet come  
 'Kibeet, come!'

# Accusative = Absolutive

- ▶ It is clear that the accusative in those languages is not just *morphologically* unmarked. It behaves like the unmarked/default case.
  - ▶ This is why “absolutive” is a term often used in the literature to describe this form of the noun in marked nominative languages (e.g., Dimmendaal 1983 on Turkana).

# Markedness reversal in Dependent Case Theory

- ▶ ‘Standard’ versions of Dependent Case Theory (e.g., Marantz 1991), cannot explain this pattern (=nominative - accusative system, with accusative being the unmarked/default case).
- ▶ This is why Baker (2015) modifies Dependent Case Theory to analyze marked nominative systems:
  - ▶ Negative c-command: If an NP is not c-commanded by another NP in its domain (=TP), assign (“dependent”) nominative.
- ▶ This analysis can account for the data, but:
  - ▶ It relies on the somewhat non-standard notion of negative c-command.
  - ▶ “Dependent” case is no longer dependent.

# Markedness reversal in Agree-based theories

- ▶ Any theory of Case in which DPs can acquire case features in the syntax can potentially account for the morphological data *if* massive syncretism is assumed between accusative and all other contexts in which the unmarked form of the noun is used. But:
  - ▶ Most theories of syncretism (especially those relying on containment) would not work without further modifications.
  - ▶ I think that we would be missing a generalization, especially since the same syncretism pattern would have to hold simultaneously in a number of languages.

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# The problem in a nutshell

- ▶ In the most standard analysis of nominative - accusative alignment, both subject - verb agreement and nominative case assignment are associated with T.
- ▶ There is independent evidence that at least in Kipsigis (Bossi & Diercks 2019) and Dinka (van Urk 2015), T is dissociated from case and agreement.

# Dinka

- ▶ Dinka (Western Nilotic; South Sudan) is a V2 language, where post-verbal subjects bear marked nominative (called ‘genitive’ by van Urk 2015) and pre-verbal subjects are unmarked for case.

- (8)
- a. Àyén à-**càm** cuïin nè pǎal.  
Ayen 3S-**eat.sv** food P knife  
‘Ayen is eating food with a knife.’
  - b. Cuïin à-**céem** Áyèn nè pǎal.  
food 3S-**eat.ov** Ayen.GEN P knife  
‘Food, Ayen is eating with a knife.’
  - c. Pǎal à-**céemè** Áyèn cuïin.  
knife 3S-**eat.oblv** Ayen.gen food  
‘With a knife, Ayen is eating food.’  
(van Urk 2015: p.61, emphasis in the original)

# Dinka

- ▶ van Urk (2015) argues that the verb in Dinka moves to C.
- ▶ He shows that SpecCP is a position with mixed A -  $\bar{A}$  properties in the language, and in his analysis C (and not T) has a  $\phi$ -probe responsible for  $\phi$ -agreement on the verb and (unmarked) nominative on the DP that occupies SpecCP.
  - ▶ “I show that genitive subjects undergo movement (to SpecTP), but argue that this is unrelated to case assignment.” (van Urk 2015: p.86)
- ▶ Marked nominative is a last-resort case assigned to post-verbal subjects, since they have failed to be licensed by C.

# Kipsigis

- Kipsigis is verb-initial, but there is flexible word order post-verbally (Bossi & Diercks 2019).

- (9) a. Kò:-Ø-tfó:r      **Kíbê:t**      ràbí:ník ámùt.      VSO-Adv  
 PST.REC-3-steal Kibeet.NOM money yesterday  
 'Kibeet stole the money yesterday.'
- b. Kò:-Ø-tfó:r      **ràbí:ník** **Kíbê:t**      ámùt.      VOS-Adv  
 PST.REC-3-steal money Kibeet.NOM yesterday  
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- c. Kò:-Ø-tfó:r      **ámùt**      **Kíbê:t**      ràbí:ník. V-Adv-SO  
 PST.REC-3-steal yesterday Kibeet.NOM money  
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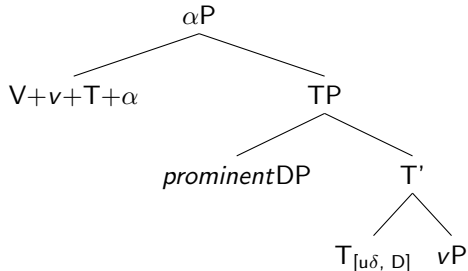
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- ▶ Bossi & Diercks (2019) argue that the post-verbal flexibility in word order is due to discourse-based scrambling.
  - ▶ Important observation: discourse-prominent items occupy the immediately post-verbal position (**IPP**) and this position is restricted to nominals.

# Kipsigis

- ▶ In their analysis, the verb moves to a projection  $\alpha$  above T but below C (Miyagawa 2009).

(10) Bossi & Diercks 2019 (adapted from p.1):



- ▶ T is a composite probe with a feature  $\delta$  (=discourse prominence) and D (=nominals). Discourse-prominent DPs move to SpecTP (see also Scott 2021).

# Kipsigis

- ▶ If this analysis is correct, it means that SpecTP is occupied by:
  - ▶ The subject in VSO clauses.
  - ▶ The object in VOS clauses.
  - ▶ (The temporal adverb in V-Adv-SO clauses).
- ▶ But note that the subject always bears marked nominative irrespective of word order. Similarly, agreement is always with the subject.
  - ▶ T is dissociated from case (and agreement) in Kipsigis.

# Interim Summary

- ▶ In the only existing analyses of clausal syntax in Nilotic languages, T is not associated with case or agreement and SpecTP is not a position dedicated to subjects.
  - ▶ This is not what we expect if marked nominative is nominative assigned by T.
- ▶ Marked nominative systems are equally problematic for Dependent Case Theory, since it is the accusative that behaves as the unmarked/default case.



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# Marked nominative is ergative

- ▶ **Proposal:** marked nominative systems should be viewed as a type of ergative - absolutive alignment.
  - ▶ Marked nominative = ergative (extended to subjects of intransitives)
  - ▶ Unmarked case = absolutive

# Marked nominative is ergative

- ▶ Under such a view:
  - ▶ The markedness pattern is no longer surprising.
  - ▶ The marked nominative - genitive syncretism is no longer surprising.
  - ▶ It is no longer surprising that marked nominative (=ergative) is not connected to T.
  - ▶ We do not need to modify Dependent Case Theory along the lines of Baker (2015).
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  - ▶ We do not need to modify Dependent Case Theory along the lines of Baker (2015).
  - ▶ We do not need to modify our theories of morphological case syncretism.
- ▶ Also note that it is hypothesized that marked nominative in Eastern Sudanic has evolved from either genitive or instrumental markers (Dimmendaal 2014, Casaretto et al. 2020).
  - ▶ The genitive/instrumental - ergative syncretism is widespread in ergative - absolutive languages and is often taken to be the historical path for ergative marking (Polinsky 2016 a.o.).
- ▶ Some Nilotic languages have been claimed to display ergative alignment (e.g., Päre; Andersen 1988).

# Remaining puzzle

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- ▶ (Why is verbal agreement uniformly with the subject?)

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- ▶ Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there is not a single study of unaccusativity in Nilo-Saharan languages and it is quite difficult to identify unaccusativity diagnostics in these languages:
  - ▶ “There do not seem to be *any* grammatical properties in the language that distinguish a class of unaccusative verbs from one of unergatives.” (Cable 2012: p.658 on Dholuo; emphasis in the original)
  - ▶ The analyses of Western Nilotic clausal syntax in van Urk (2015) and Cable (2012) do not work well for unaccusatives (under standard assumptions - see Keine & Zeijlstra to appear).



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  - ▶ The analyses of Western Nilotic clausal syntax in van Urk (2015) and Cable (2012) do not work well for unaccusatives (under standard assumptions - see Keine & Zeijlstra to appear).
- ▶ I have argued in the past that Kipsigis syntax is very sensitive to transitivity, but not to the unaccusative - unergative distinction and I hypothesized that it lacks true unaccusative verbs.

## But I was wrong: Kipsigis has unaccusatives

- ▶ Kipsigis has an external possession construction, where the possessor is expressed as an applied argument of the verb.

(11) Kò:-á-mwé(t)-tʃi            Tʃè:bê:t íŋgòráik.  
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- ▶ External possessors in the language are restricted to internal arguments, which can be used as an unaccusativity diagnostic (similar to Hebrew; Borer & Grodzinsky 1986 a.o.).

(12) a. Kà-∅-méj-**tʃí**      **Tʃè:bê:t** ɲò:ktà. *Unaccusative*  
 PST.REC-3-die-APPL Cheebeet dog.NOM  
 'Cheebeet's dog died.'

b. ∅-tjén-**tʃín**      **Tʃè:bê:t** là:kwè:t. *Unergative*  
 3-sing-APPL.IPFV Cheebeet child.NOM  
 'The child is singing for/on behalf of Cheebeet.'  
 # 'Cheebeet's child is singing.'

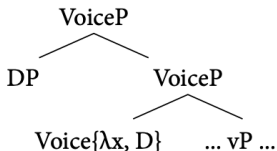
# Theoretical assumptions: Voice

- ▶ I assume that external arguments are introduced by Voice (Kratzer 1996).
- ▶ I follow an increasing body of literature that argues for a dissociation between syntactic and semantic transitivity (e.g., Schäfer 2008, Alexiadou et al. 2015, Kastner 2020, Nie 2020, Deal 2019, Lee 2023).
  - ▶ The EPP requirement of Voice is independent of its ability to assign an (agent) thematic role.

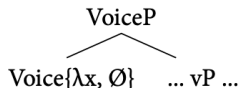
# Typology of Voice heads

(13) Possible Voice heads (Alexiadou et al. 2015: p.109)

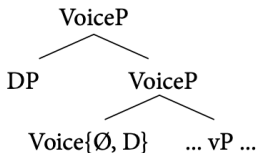
a. thematic active Voice



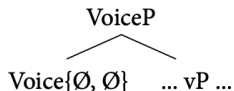
b. thematic non-active Voice



c. expletive active Voice



d. expletive non-active Voice



► Languages vary in which Voice head(s) they possess.

# Theoretical assumptions: ergativity

- ▶ I assume that ergative case is assigned to DPs in SpecVoiceP (Woolford 1997, 2006, Legate 2008, Coon 2017 among many others).

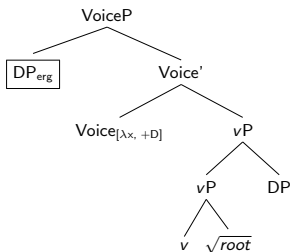
# Putting the pieces together

- ▶ I assume that Voice heads in Kipsigis (and other marked nominative languages) *always* have an EPP requirement.
  - ▶ In the case of transitive and unergative verbs, the EPP requirement is satisfied by merging an external argument and assigning a thematic role to it.
  - ▶ The DP in SpecVoiceP is assigned ergative (=marked nominative) case.

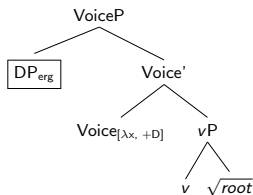
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(14) Transitive subjects:



(15) Subjects of unergatives:

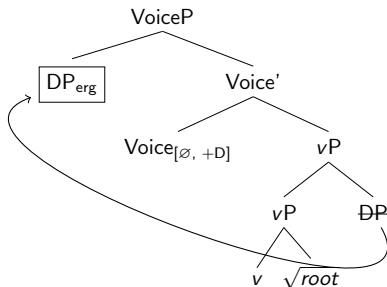




## Putting the pieces together

- ▶ In the case of unaccusative verbs, the EPP requirement is satisfied by movement of the internal argument to SpecVoiceP.
- ▶ This unaccusative Voice head does not assign a thematic role, but it does assign ergative case - a property of all Voice heads in the language.

(16) Subjects of unaccusatives:



# Themes in SpecVoiceP?

- ▶ Movement of the internal argument of unaccusatives to the specifier of an expletive Voice head has recently been proposed for Nez Perce (Deal 2019), Korean (Lee 2023), and Mandarin (Hopperdietzel 2024).
  - ▶ Lee (2023) argues that honorific nominative case in Korean is uniformly assigned in SpecVoiceP. His analysis is thus very similar to the one proposed here for marked nominative.
  - ▶ Deal (2019) argues that the argument of unaccusatives in Nez Perce moves to SpecVoiceP in the presence of an applicative. It is assigned ergative (and controls agreement) from that position (but her analysis of ergativity is different from the one proposed here - see Deal 2010, 2019 for details).

## Back to unaccusativity diagnostics

- ▶ Even though further research on individual languages is needed, the analysis proposed here may help us understand why it is so difficult to distinguish between unergatives and unaccusatives in Nilo-Saharan languages.
  - ▶ The derived position of unaccusative subjects is the same as the base generation position of unergative subjects.

## Predictions: Voice heads without an EPP feature

- ▶ In my analysis, ergative(=marked nominative) marking on subjects of unaccusatives crucially relies on the presence of a Voice head that requires a specifier, but does not assign a thematic role to it.
- ▶ **Prediction:** if a language uses an expletive non-active head (or no Voice head at all) for unaccusatives, we expect an active alignment system.

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- ▶ **Prediction:** if a language uses an expletive non-active head (or no Voice head at all) for unaccusatives, we expect an active alignment system.
  - ▶ Ateso (Eastern Nilotic) is a candidate for such a system (though further work is needed to confirm whether the case split tracks the unaccusative - unergative split).

## Ateso

(17) *é-míná àbèrù*            *èkílkòkít.*

3-loves woman.NOM man.ABS

'The woman loves the man.'

(18) *é-móŋ-í*    *àbèrù.*

3-cry-IPFV woman.NOM

'The woman was crying.'

(19) *kí-cék-í*                    *àbérù.*

3SG-tremble-IPFV woman.ABS

'The woman is trembling.'

(adapted from Barasa 2017: p. 206, 209)

## Predictions: Voice heads without an EPP feature

- ▶ The other specifier-less Voice head in Alexiadou et al.'s typology is what they call the 'thematic non-active' Voice head, i.e., a Voice head that assigns a thematic role, but does not syntactically project a specifier.
  - ▶ This Voice head corresponds to (a type of) passive.
- ▶ **Prediction:** If a marked nominative language has such a Voice head in its inventory, the theme should not be able to get ergative(=marked nominative).

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  - ▶ This Voice head corresponds to (a type of) passive.
- ▶ **Prediction:** If a marked nominative language has such a Voice head in its inventory, the theme should not be able to get ergative(=marked nominative).
  - ▶ Interestingly, Southern Nilotic, Eastern Nilotic, and Surmic languages either lack a passive or have a non-promoting passive.
  - ▶ Western Nilotic languages have been described as having a passive, but there are confounding factors when it comes to evaluating the prediction (e.g., agents in by-phrases are marked with 'marked nominative' and themes move to SpecCP, where they are unmarked for case).
  - ▶ There is, to my knowledge, no generative analysis of passive constructions in any Nilo-Saharan language, so this is an obvious area for further research.



# Summary

- ▶ Voice in marked nominative languages always requires a specifier.
- ▶ In the case of transitives and unergatives, this requirement is satisfied by external Merge (accompanied by thematic role assignment). In the case of unaccusatives, the requirement is satisfied by internal Merge.
- ▶ Ergative (=marked nominative) is uniformly assigned in SpecVoiceP.

## Side note: Is ergative inherent in my analysis?

- ▶ Short answer: I'm not sure.
- ▶ Longer answer: it depends both on how the term is defined and on what its theoretical implications are.
  - ▶ In my analysis, ergative does not go hand in hand with thematic role assignment.
  - ▶ DPs can also 'raise' to ergative (by moving to SpecVoiceP), which makes ergative look more like a structural case.
  - ▶ But ergative case assignment is restricted to a particular head - one that *usually* assigns a thematic role.
  - ▶ Woolford (2006) does allow for inherent dative on moved indirect objects.

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Typology
- 3 Marked nominative is not nominative
  - Morphological problems
  - Syntactic problems
- 4 Marked nominative is ergative
- 5 An argument against Dependent Case Theory**
- 6 Agreement in marked nominative languages

# Non-dependent ergative

- ▶ If marked nominative systems are in reality a subtype of ergative - absolutive systems, then marked nominative would be an example of ergative case that is assigned in the absence of a second NP.
  - ▶ In other words, it would be an example of non-dependent ergative.
- ▶ This pattern is problematic for dependent case theories of ergativity.
  - ▶ In fact, marked nominative systems are problematic for dependent case theory more generally, which is why Baker (2015) develops a version of this theory that uses negative c-command.
- ▶ Even though the alternative view is usually the analysis of ergativity as an inherent case assigned by Voice, there are also analyses of ergativity that treat it as a structural case associated with various types of agreement configurations (e.g., Deal 2010, Clem 2019, Clem & Deal 2024).

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## Marked nominative and $\phi$ -agreement are (somewhat) independent

- ▶ In most marked nominative languages, agreement is always with the subject.
- ▶ While the subject is usually marked ergative, it appears in the unmarked case if it appears before the verb. This does not have an effect on agreement.

- (20) a. Kò:-Ø-tʃó:r      **Kìbê:t**      ràbí:ník ámùt.  
 PST.REC-3-steal Kibeet.NOM money yesterday  
 'Kibeet stole the money yesterday.'
- b. **Kìbê:t** kó kò:-Ø-tʃó:r      ràbí:ník ámùt.  
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- ▶ The only exception is Dinka (and possibly other Western Nilotic languages), where verbs agree with the DP that occupies SpecCP.
- ▶ Additionally, in Eastern Nilotic languages, verbs agree with both subjects and objects (and there is a person hierarchy system).

# Agreement with the subject

- ▶ For those languages where agreement is with the subject, the simplest hypothesis is that T agrees with the highest DP, which will always be the DP in SpecVoiceP.
  - ▶ Under such an analysis, marked nominative languages are languages with morphological ergative but nominative - accusative alignment for agreement.



# Agreement with the subject

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  - ▶ Under such an analysis, marked nominative languages are languages with morphological ergative but nominative - accusative alignment for agreement.
- ▶ But remember that for Kipsigis in particular, there is some evidence that T is not involved in agreement.

# Agreement in Kipsigis

- ▶ An alternative is that subject - verb agreement in Kipsigis reflects agreement between Voice and its specifier, as argued for example for Mayan by Coon (2017).
- ▶ Possible support for this analysis comes from the position of subject agreement prefixes on the verb, which follow both tense and negation in the verbal complex.

(21) T Neg **Agr** V Asp  
 ka- ma- **ki-** tjen- i  
 PST- NEG- 1PL- sing- IPFV  
 'We were not singing.'

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# No Case Before The Verb

- ▶ Marked nominative is lost when the DP appears *before* the verb.
- ▶ This is a very robust property of marked nominative systems in Nilo-Saharan, which König (2008) calls the ‘No Case Before the Verb’ generalization.
- ▶ Using the ergative terminology, we observe the following pattern:

(22) V SERG O  
S V O

- (23) a. Kò:-Ø-tʃó:r      **Kíbê:t**      ràbí:ník úmùt.  
PST.REC-3-steal Kibeet.NOM money yesterday  
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- ▶ This pattern obviously requires an explanation - a non-trivial task given the inherent-like analysis of ergativity presented here.

# The pre-verbal position

- ▶ We only have data on the syntactic properties of the pre-verbal position in three Nilotic languages (Kipsigis, Dinka, Turkana), but in all three, this position has been identified as SpecCP and it has been shown that DPs move there (van Urk 2015, Driemel & Kouneli 2022, Bossi 2023).
  - ▶ In all three languages, movement to SpecCP is driven by information structure features (topic in Kipsigis, focus in Turkana, underspecified in Dinka).
  - ▶ In all three languages, SpecCP shows mixed A -  $\bar{A}$  properties.
  - ▶ Dinka is the only language where there is  $\phi$ -agreement between C and the DP that moves to its specifier.
  
- ▶ Because of the agreement facts in Dinka, van Urk (2015) argues that DPs in the language agree with C and are assigned (unmarked) nominative.
  - ▶ This could in principle be extended to the other languages, though some modifications would be in order since agreement is always with the subject (and never with the DP in SpecCP) in those languages.
  - ▶ The problem for my analysis remains, however: if marked nominative (=ergative) is assigned in SpecVoiceP, this would mean that it has to be overwritten.

# Evidence for overwriting?

- ▶ Stranded quantifiers could provide evidence for case overwriting:

(24) **Là:yó:k** kó kà-Ø-ám kímpé:t **tùyúl**.  
 children TOP PST.CURR-3-eat ugali all.NOM  
 'The children ate all ugali.'