Problems for an Account of Mizo (and Lai Chin) Case Marking in Minimalist Syntax

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It is fairly well known that Mizo, Lai Chin and related languages generally mark the subject of a transitive verb with a morphological case (ergative) distinct from the case (absolutive) of the object and of the subject of an intransitive verb. Nevertheless, transitive subjects are not always given ergative case, and it is possible to raise interesting questions about the syntax of case in these languages, and indeed about the syntax of case more globally if we examine some critical instances where in fact a transitive subject cannot be given ergative case. Such questions turn out to be most conveniently and productively raised if one assumes the recently developed framework of Minimalist syntax (Chomsky 1995), which is assumed here, and indeed that framework itself is usefully explored in certain of its aspects having to do not only with case marking but also with the relationship between syntax and morphology by means of an analysis of the Mizo constructions in question. Amongst such questions is whether ergative case is merely morphological or whether the language is syntactically ergative: does the syntax in general treat the relevant arguments the same way as they would be treated in a nominative-accusative case marking language, or are there specific syntactic operations sensitive to the specific ergative-absolute case marking distinction? I shall not, however, do more than touch on the latter question in the present paper.

Consider

(1) **Zova-cu** [Abs. case]   amah$_i$ leh amah$_i$ a-**in**   kaap
     Zou   he   and he   3 sg refl. shoot
     Zou shot himself.

(2) **Zova-n** [Erg. case] lekhaton amah$_i$ leh amah$_i$ a-**in** thon
                             letter   send
     Zou sent himself a letter.

where (a) *amah leh amah* is an adverbial or parenthetical element, and (b), in (2), though somewhat redundantly perhaps, one could have an overt indirect object, such as *amah* -ah (*ah* the postposition indicating, amongst other things, directionality), as

(2') **Zova-n** [Erg. case] **lekhaton amah$_i$ leh amah$_i$ amahi ah a-in thon**

A transitive subject should be marked for the ergative case; but in (1), where the patient/agent (subject/object) pair are the same referentially, the subject is in the absolutive case. In (2) it is the IO that the subject is identified with, and here ergative case is on the subject. Why?

Apparently if S and DO are referentially the same, this blocks ergativity. But how is this to be achieved within the Minimalist syntactic framework, computationally?

In a paper on Lai Chin verb-and-argument structure (Lehman 1995, under major revision as 1996) it is argued that, if we adopt the VP internal subject hypothesis, then the DO is lexically θ-marked by V and gets case marked when raised; and the subject gets θ-marked externally to V (say, as a subject of a light verb, *v*) and gets case marked on checking at a spec/T (assuming that Agr functional categories are to be eliminated from the theory, (Chomsky 1995: Ch. 4, §10.1). That is, ergative is the Case mark for an NP *not* θ-marked by the main verb, V. I also submit that (cf. Chomsky 1995: §6) there are excellent language specific reasons as well as general reasons to suppose that the

subject of a transitive verb is Θ-marked as the spec of a higher, abstract v, in the structure of a 'Larson shell':

(3)

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            Vmax
           /    \
          v      VP
                 |
                 V
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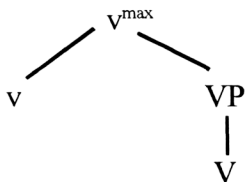
This is assumed, first because V, having already Θ-marked an argument (the object DP) cannot mark its external argument, which must then be marked by a higher 'dummy' v. Secondly, one must keep it in mind that the very notion of transitivity and/or agentivity (itself a Θ relation — cf. Hale and Keyser 1993) seems to implicate a relation between the subject and object such that the former is understood as 'causing' the latter to be in the 'state' of which it is patient, goal or theme. In Chin and Mizo languages there is in fact ample evidence for this analysis. I have elsewhere (Lehman 1996) observed, in connection with verb stem alternation, that the 'second stem' of a transitive verb has the essential properties of a stative verb, so that, for instance, when a relative clause is constructed in Mizo with the head of the construction referentially identical with the object of the interior clause, the verb of the interior clause has to be in the second stem, which then serves as a sort of passive adjective

(4)　　ka-uí　　　lei-khàh
　　　　my dog　　bought-dem
　　　　the dog I bought

with the verb 'to buy' appearing in second stem form, with the patient preceding as is characteristic of a noun-plus-attributive adjective construction in this rigidly V-final language.

On the view under examination the object also moves to a spec of TP (assuming the now generally accepted view that allows multiple specifiers), where it also enters into the checking domain

for Case. Notice that this is a non trivial proposal. In a language like English, which also lacks the morphological evidence for construing transitive verbs as underlyingly stative, the object DP does not raise overtly, and checking for Case is thought to be managed by covert formal feature raising only, targeting the T-Vb complex directly. It is in languages of the Chin-Mizo kind, which also have overt object agreement morphology, that we need to postulate the mechanism outlined immediately above. Moreover, the appearance of both subject *and* object in a specifier position of TP is thoroughly consistent with the independently motivated hypothesis of transitives as underlyingly stative: in some very real sense, logico-semantic as well as syntactic, both the raised arguments have, in their respective ways, subject properties.

The consequence of all this is that ergative Case is seen to be simply the Case of the external argument, more exactly, of the argument that is *not* θ-marked by V, and this is readily accommodated in the present theory because the spec-head relation can, in effect, recover this information in the checking domain for case (TP) in as much as it can 'read' the chain (CH_{DP}) whose head is spec of TP and whose foot is the trace, t, from which the DP has been raised. Put another way, perhaps, the relationship between Case checking and θ-marking independently requires that a well formed CH_{DP} be visible to the computation.

The morphology of the absolutive is now seen to be just the default morphology of the case *position* in spec/DP (see Lehman 1996 for the right-edge position of spec of DP), 'inserted' from the D head of DP under the usual spec-head agreement relation. It marks no especial case, structural or inherent; it is present (only underlyingly in Lai Chin) even in ergative DPs. But a DP subject of a transitive verb gets, at least additionally, ergative marking because, through its Chain, when Case is checked/assigned at spec/T it is 'seen' that it was only *externally* θ-marked. More exactly, of course, it is the post-DP formative *-cu* that I have just accounted for, which can be replaced by more obviously deictic elements. The absolutive itself is identified morphologically as (or by) the absence of any postpositional affix on this element.

Now, elsewhere (Lehman N.d.) I argue that the morphological facts about case marking as outlined just above