

# **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.

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\* This paper is a major revision of a paper originally prepared with Dr. M. Lalitha Murthy of the University of Delhi. She, however, cannot be held in any way responsible for the major changes in the Minimalist analysis that have resulted in the present version. Nevertheless, the basic insights and the fundamental principle involved is as much due to her as to the present author.

## Consider

- (1) **Zova-cu** [Abs. case] **amah<sub>i</sub> leh amah<sub>i</sub> a-in kaap**  
 Zou he and he 3 sg refl. shoot  
 Zou shot himself.
- (2) **Zova-n** [Erg. case] **lekhaton amah<sub>i</sub> leh amah<sub>i</sub> 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<sub>i</sub> leh amah<sub>i</sub> amahi ah a-in thon**

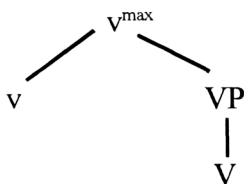
A transitive subject should be marked for the ergative case; but in (1), where the patient/agent (subject/object) pair are the same referentially, the subject is in the absolutive case. In (2) it is the IO that the subject is identified with, and here ergative case is on the subject. Why?

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  $\theta$ -marked by V and gets case marked when raised; and the subject gets  $\theta$ -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*  $\theta$ -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  $\theta$ -marked as the spec of a higher, abstract  $v$ , in the structure of a ‘Larson shell’:

(3)



This is assumed, first because  $V$ , having already  $\theta$ -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  $\theta$  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*  $\theta$ -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  $\theta$ -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*  $\theta$ -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

strongly suggest that the absolutive is the case morphology simply of those arguments that are  $\theta$ -marked in spec of VP. Notice that this is consistent with the hypothesis that objects of transitive verbs are, at any rate at an appropriate level of representation, namely at the point where they receive Case, subjects of statives. If this is correct, it follows that these languages are not merely *morphologically* ergative; they are syntactically ergative. I provide detailed evidence for this assertion elsewhere (1995), but it is at least minimally sufficient to have shown that the absolutive Case is precisely the Case, *structurally defined*, of the DP Case marked in the position of a specifier of v-max.

It is necessary to take note of a problem raised by the foregoing in the light of Chomsky's treatment (1995: 358) of transitive constructions. He postulates that DO starts out, as in standard accounts, in complement of V, where it gets its  $\theta$ -role. It then raises to an inner specifier of v-max (headed by the light verb, *v*), where, it is assumed, it checks a 'strong feature' of *v* and is thus 'frozen in place', so that only the DP in the outer specifier of v-max, c-commanding the former DP, gets  $\theta$ -marked here and is alone attracted to spec of T for case-checking. However, for the languages under examination here it is clear that this will not work, both because of the overriding fact of object agreement in Lai and because of the more general fact (dealt with elsewhere) that the surface word orders SOV and OSV are (in Burmese even more than in Chin-Mizo) as nearly as possible indistinguishably acceptable, without any firm evidence of the latter order amounting to fronting, topicalisation or highlighting of DO. Clearly, we must in some way be able to say that both of these DP arguments are attracted to (multiple) specifiers, where at very least both check for the agreement features. Possibly, after all, this is all that need be said, namely, that DO (or in ditransitive constructions, IO) is not frozen in place because, though only the outer spec of v-max is available for being attracted to T *for checking Case*, the Object is attracted to spec of T for checking agreement. This is at any rate the cheapest solution, requiring only trivial extension of already standardised Minimalist assumptions. On this view, transitive verbs have their direct objects as complements after all; the objects are Case-marked/checked

internally to v-max (the chain-condition satisfied because there is a non-trivial chain between the complement of V and the inner spec of v-max).

Alternatively, if we suppose that the facts about verb stem alternation with respect to the relative constructions on objects of transitive verbs require that objects are in every sense underlyingly subjects of stative verbs, then we need to say that the object starts out as a specifier of V itself, getting  $\theta$ -marked there and case-marked/checked at spec of v-max. This is, of course, equivalent to claiming that the underlying structure of the relationship between an object and its verb is that of an unaccusative construction. In particular, it goes along with the idea that only unaccusatives are simple VP structures, without anything like the structure of (3) (Chomsky 1995: Ch. 4, §6; Hale and Keyser 1993). It is only such intransitive verbs that can have subject arguments in spec of V proper, but then, by a trivial simplifying assumption, one would wish to claim, perhaps, that *all* intransitives in the language are unaccusatives, a thoroughly unexpected conclusion but one elsewhere suggested by the facts about Lai Chin verb stem alternation (Lehman N.d.). I am quite unable at this point to try and resolve this issue or decide between the two stated alternatives.

Now, finally, let us reconsider (1). Here Zou  $\equiv$  Zou, bearing the identical referential index, i. At TP, V+ DO agree and thus share (check for), amongst other things, referential index agreement (amongst the features of identification interpreted on DPs). Then, V finds agreement with a subject NP, and finds this agreement sharing to involve index 'i' already registered, cumulatively (V, or rather the V-T complex, bears cumulative  $\phi$ -feature marks that must include the information about what case has been assigned to which NP with which agreement is registered). It therefore can read out the fact that some NP (i) already bears absolutive case. This is sufficient to block assignment of ergative case.

The intuitive principle is the disjoint reference rule, namely, that one must expect at least subject and object to be referentially disjoint. Hence, in the case of (1), where they are not disjoint, *ergative is to be blocked because the absolutive case of the DO*

*will take precedence over the ergative case of the subject* (lexical over structural case?), and V-T will compute this as above. However, as to (2), assuming a Larson-shell treatment of the lexical case assignment of IO NP's, V will *not* compute that it has checked agreement with an NP bearing the same index as the NP being checked for agreement in a chain whose foot is at spec of V; thus ergative case marking is not blocked. The principle invoked here is not different in spirit from a generalisation made years ago by Keenan (1974) to the effect that one should expect an ergative language to, in effect, lose ergative marking of a transitive subject if subject and direct object are coreferential. In fact Keenan said that, in such cases, the direct object is 'lost' so that the sentence becomes effectually an intransitive sentence.<sup>1</sup> This cannot be exactly right for the Mizo data, since the object is not lost syntactically. Nonetheless, at some, say logico-semantic level of representation (LF?) something of the sort seems effectively correct. Certainly that distinction between agent and patient, though not between syntactically defined subject and object, relatively to the DJR, collapses.

We must still, of course, account for agreement with IO, in as much as, if IO exists, overt morphological agreement is with this argument and not with DO. So IO 'raises' to T because the strong agreement features of T ensure precisely two specifier positions for TP, and only the two highest DP arguments in the shell raise (assuming, for various reasons that IO is the specifier of a higher dummy *v* than that defining the DO in the Larson shell (Larson 1988, 1990) — possibly according to some principle of economy of movement, say, that, if there are only two specifier positions defined on TP, only the structurally nearest relevant arguments may raise to fill them. The strong features being thus satisfied, as to DO, its case is checked only by the aforementioned covert raising of its Formal Features to T. As for IO, the computation registers its oblique (non absolute) case (see Lehman 1996 for the demonstration that the *v* whose specifier argument is IO requires the DP to be embedded in a PP, and that the oblique case, in Mizo marked by adding *-n* to the 'post demonstrative' *-cu* or the deictic particle replacing it, is uniquely the case taken by a complement of a postposition). Thus the DJR

fails to apply to block ergativity, and hence there is no requirement to treat the two arguments as commuting with one another in spite of their referential identity. In the case of a ditransitive construction, the principle ensuring that absolutive takes precedence over ergative marking remains for the time being at least obscure. Just possibly, the fact that the oblique case requires that the DP be embedded in a PP entails that, in spite of the fact that, for full DPs at least, even the oblique case, like the ergative mark properly contains the post demonstrative (*-cu* or its equivalent deictic) that, by itself marks ergative case morphologically,<sup>2</sup> the postposition governing the oblique case blocks simplification of the ergative marking, if, indeed, the principle that applies is simply morphological simplification: of the two case marks available for the two arguments in a commuting relationship under the DJR, choose the one that is the simplification of the other.

In the preceding connection (again thanks to Tom Givón for the observation) it is not an accident that these languages do not allow dative promotion or dative shift. With dative promotion, after all, the IO even in English escapes from its prepositional phrase; were this to be possible in Mizo or Lai Chin one would have to expect the possibility of loss of ergative marking on reflexive sentences of type (1), above, and in fact in ergative languages with dative promotion in fact ergativity is lots in such cases. I am prepared to entertain the idea that the impossibility of dative promotion in Mizo etc. is not unconnected with the fact that these are 'serial verb languages'. Perhaps the need to maintain a distinctive marking of IO arises on the basis of the fact that in serial verb languages DO and IO are commonly arguments of distinct verbs in the main verb string. I cannot examine this at the present time, however.

I close, finally, with a further remark concerning ergativity and Case, motivated by the paper by Bedell on the Lai Chin passive construction (Bedell 1996). There, it is argued, correctly I believe, that *-nih* cannot be in itself a case marker because, in passive constructions in Lai, it marks an agentive 'by phrase', though the syntactic subject is clearly the DP representing the



patient, as the clitic agreement marking on the finite verb show. For example,

- (5) **Biak Thawng nih Par Zing cu a-hnamh**  
 Biak Thawng erg Par Zing abs. he kissed [her]  
 Biak Thawng kissed Par Zing.

but

- (6) **Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih hnamh a-si**  
 Par Zing abs. Biak Thawng -by kissed she-is  
 Par Zing was kissed by Biak Thawng.

It is hard to maintain a coherent position by claiming that *-nih* is sometimes a case marker and sometimes something else, even if it can be shown that commonly ergative marking may derive etymologically from, say, instrumental postpositions etymologically. It is simpler to suppose that however one accounts for *-nih* in (6) applies also to its use in (5) and, hence, in the Lai equivalent of (2). Were *-nih* a postposition, one would then say that the ergative function of a transitive subject has to be marked by an agentive postposition. However, in the case under examination here one cannot motivate treating it as a postposition, especially in view of the fact that generally there is only one postposition in the language (*-ah*) and that it requires the DP to be in the oblique case. Rather, the fact that *-nih* commutes with post demonstratives such as *-cu* leads me to suggest that in Lai *-nih* is a post demonstrative (specifier of DP) that serves to mark ergativity. In Mizo, of course, considering that ergativity can append to the spec of DP (*-cu + -in > cun*), one must say that the ergative mark is indeed a Case marker. This difference between Lai and Mizo works out neatly; we now see independently how it is that in Mizo ergative marking can co-exist with the spec of DP, namely, commuting with the absolutive case marking, whilst in Lai, though *-cu* can in some instances replace *-nih* it cannot coexist with the latter, even though *-cu* co-exists with the oblique case marker (*-cun*).

- (7) **inn cun-ah**  
 house the loc/dat  
 at the house/to the house

One concludes that Case markers as such occupy a morphological slot positioned after the spec of DP and immediately before a postposition. In addition it is most probable that Lai *-nih* is the sort of spec of DP well known in Burmese, which serves sometimes to mark agentivity and source, though what it really is a mark of contrastive or focal emphasis (Lehman 1973). Thus, Burmese *-ka*, as in

- (8) **N+ka**

can mark N as an agentive subject, but can also mean 'from N', though only as a contraction from the obviously focal-contrastive

- (9) **N+ka nei-pi**  
 remain perf. asp.  
 having been [at] N

as in

- (10) **yan-goun ka**

- (10') **yan-goun ka nei-pi**  
 Rangoon ! stay perf.  
 from Rangoon

- (11) **thu ka la-te**  
 he/she ! come realis modal  
 he came/comes

where, interestingly in the present connection, *-ka* can in fact occur on any NP/DP *except* a DO, and where, furthermore, it is clearly not a postposition, as can be shown from the fact that it fails to induce secondary creaky tone on a noun preceding it, as do the undoubted postpositions marking locative and goal-dative arguments

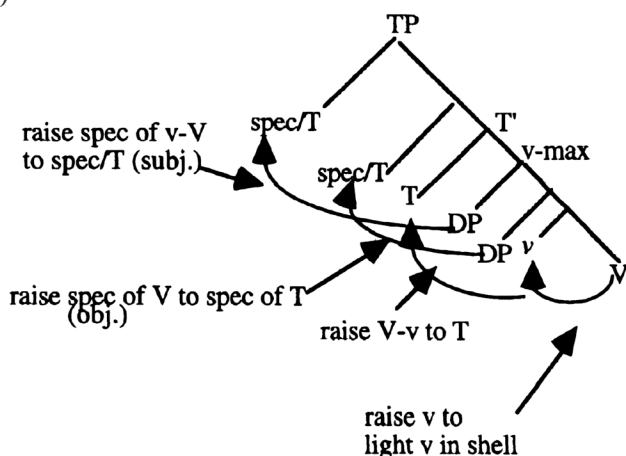
- (12) **thu. kou ... thu. hma**  
       to him               with him

and where, again as in Chin and Mizo, Burmese has postnominal specifiers of DP, with which *-ka* commutes. Moreover (Lehman 1985) I have shown elsewhere that Burmese was formerly ergative and indeed marked ergativity in the spec of DP slot precisely the way Lai and Mizo do even now.

In any event, one has, in the face of Bedell's observation, got to draw a distinction between two related but nonetheless distinct questions: (a) Are Lai or Mizo ergative languages syntactically? and (b) Are the elements that mark ergative and absolutive arguments case markers morphosyntactically? It seems abundantly clear that the answer to (a) is 'Yes. These are syntactically ergative languages'. This is especially clear now that I have shown above that *-cu* +0 is uniquely the mark of a DP argument functioning absolutely as subject of an intransitive-unaccusative verb. It seems equally obvious that, as to (b), in Lai certainly, neither mark is inherently a case marker as such.

The following, then, is the schematic of the computation for a simple ditransitive construction, with regard specifically only to the agreement facts and leaving open the question whether objects of transitive verbs are underlying complements of V or not:

- (13)



## Notes

1. I am grateful to Tom Givón for reminding me of Keenan's generalisation during the discussion that followed the oral presentation of this paper.
2. The matter is more subtle in Lai Chin, where ergative *-nih* completely replaces post demonstrative *-cu*; one may, however, rely upon the observation that there are Lai transitive constructions that are not reflexive but which nonetheless allow the subject to be marked with *-cu* instead of *-nih* to motivate the claim that the ergative marking in some sense properly subsumes that of the absolutive.

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