

Ergative and pseudo-ergative in basque

Basque is rather well-known as a language of the ergative type. Other than that it is not very well known at all. Despite a long tradition of serious local and international scholarship, it is not as well studied as it ought to be. For students of Romance linguistics it is a goldmine. For workers in the field of generative grammar and phonology it offers a host of revealing problems. For the Universal Grammar enthusiast it offers some headaches.

One very limited problem in the field of grammar is that of the so-called ergative case. In this paper I would like to discuss one aspect of that problem: ergatives which are not ergatives. Although I ultimately hope to make a contribution to one aspect of Universal Grammar, this paper will be confined to discussion of the ergative as it appears in Basque¹.

In the standard grammar of Basque, Pierre Laffitte's *Grammaire Basque*—a splendid work in many respects—the ergative case is called *le cas actif* and is described as «sujet de verbe transitif ou complément d'agent d'un verbe passif»². Laffitte thereby sidesteps rather neatly—with the elegance of a Frenchman and the directness of the Basque—one of the fruitless theoretical battles of pre-generative grammar. This battle had been going on since the time of von Humboldt and van Eys.

If one approaches Basque grammar from the point-of-view of the grammar of Western European tradition, one is forced to make a choice between the ergative as the subject of a transitive verb or as the complement of the agent of a passive verb. (Incidentally a verb without an active transform.) The categories of Western grammatical tradition simply do not fit. Why do some transitive verbs turn up with subjects which are not in the ergative case? And, on the other hand, why do we find no active verbs corresponding to the posited passive set of verbs? Although some

1. This paper was originally prepared for and presented at the Summer Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, July 25, 1969, at the University of Illinois at Urbana.

2. PIERRE LAFITTE, *Grammaire Basque (Navarro-Labourdin Littéraire)*, (Bayonne: Editions des Amis du musée basque, 1962), p. 55. John Anderson recently tried to handle such traditional notions within the framework of generative grammar in an article entitled "Ergative and nominative in English", *Journal of Linguistics* 4(1968), pp. 1-32. Despite his very ingenious argument, he did not come very far. I venture to say that his superficial with Basque led him astray.

estimable scholars held fast to the passive theory, among them Schuchardt, Bouda, and Lafon³, they have been hard put to explain what happened to the active voice.

In 1931 Pierre Lafitte spoke out against the passivity theory, and in no uncertain terms⁴. Yet the battle continued until the early Sixties. The penultimate cry of despair came from Martinet in 1958 in an article called «la construction ergative», with the statement, «One must not forget that the elementary structure of the sentence is not identical from one language to another»⁵. In a later article «le sujet comme fonction linguistique et l'analyse syntactique du Basque», 1962, he continues the discussion of the difficult plight⁶. What Martinet failed to state was that the conceptual framework of traditional grammar had only led into a cul-de-sac. A rather grotesque but well-meaning example of the cul-de-sac is to be seen in Pierre Naert's short study, «Le verbe basque est-il passif?» of 1956⁷. In the study he makes the pointed statement: «We have no feeling of the passive nature of the Basque verb». In more contemporary terms, the native speaker of Basque finds the passive conception of the Basque verb to be counter-intuitive. And the Basque speaker is right. Naert did not examine this intuition for what it was worth. Instead he shuffled about in traditional terminology and came up with a new monstrosity, a *genitivoid* to substitute for the otherwise harmless ergative. Deeper investigation of this dead-end will not repay our trouble.

I would like to look at a few sentences of what might for the nonce be called the true ergative.

aitak ogia jan du 'Father has eaten the bread'.
gizonak zakurra ikusi du 'The man has seen the dog'.

3. HUGO SCHUCHARDT, *Baskische Studien I, Über die Entstehung der Bezugsformen des baskischen Zeitworts* in *Denkschriften der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien*, XLII (no. 3), (Vienna, 1893).

"Das baskische Zeitwort und Julien Vinson", *ZRP* 18(1894), pp. 532-538.

KARL BOUDA, *Das transitive und das intransitive Verbum des Baskischen* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevermaatschappij, 1933).

RENÉ LAFON, "Remarques sur la phrase nominal en Basque", *BSL* 47(1951), pp. 106-125.

"Comportement syntaxique, structure et diathèse du verbe basque", *BSL* 50(1954), pp. 190ss.

4. PIERRE LAFITTE, "Pour ou contre la passivité du verbe basque", *Gure Herria*, mai-juin, 1931, pp. 263ss.

5. ANDRÉ MARTINET, "La construction ergative et les structures élémentaires de l'énoncé", *Journal de Psychologie* 55(1958), pp. 377-392.

6. ANDRÉ MARTINET, "Le sujet comme fonction linguistique et l'analyse syntaxique du basque", *BSL* 57(1962), pp. 73-102.

7. PIERRE NAERT, "Le verbe basque, est-il passif?" *Studia Linguistica* 10(1956), pp. 45-49.

And a third example with an embedded sentence.

bobendun zarela bertzek dute frogatu behar
'Others have to prove that you are guilty'.

The traditional slant is that the subject of these sentences is marked by a special case-ending, *-k*. And that the forms marked by this case stand in contrast to the subjects of such sentences as

aita etxerat etborri da 'Father has gone home'.
aita ziburra da 'Father is wise'.

In these sentences the subject of the verb is not marked by any overt case form. This is often interpreted as a \emptyset -case ending. The form without the overt case ending occurs also in the position traditionally described as the direct object.

aitak OGIA jan du
gizonak ZAKURRA ikusi du

Many Basque grammarians rather paradoxically call this case the *nominative*.

This is the game known as 'find the subject'. The first step in the formulation of PS rules, $S \longrightarrow NP + VP$, is a formalization of the traditional point of departure. The step that determines what is NP and what is VP is necessarily intuitive. If we take Pierre Naert seriously, native Basques deny this intuition. Martinet (1962, p. 74) sums it up very neatly in the statement: «... le basque appartient à un type de langue qui ignore le syntagme sujet-prédicat et qui construit régulièrement ses énoncés par déterminations successives d'un prédicat d'existence». He reveals a rather important point in this case. The necessity for determining a subject and its predicate or a topic and its comment or substance and attributes is not so much a matter of grammar, as of cultural bias. The intuition that there must be a subject of which something is predicated is the result of cultural training. Martinet with his customary acumen has made the futility of the search for predicate quite concrete for us. I submit that Fillmore's insights into case grammar offer us a way out of the fix — at least for grammarians concerned with Basque⁸.

8. Fillmore's case grammar is expounded in four papers:

"Toward a modern theory of case", *The Ohio State University project on linguistic analysis*, Report no. 13(1966), pp. 1-24.

"A proposal concerning English prepositions", *Georgetown Monograph series on Language and Linguistics*, no. 19(1966), pp. 19-33.

"The grammar of Hitting and Breaking", *Working Papers in Linguistics*, Report no. 1(1967), Ohio State University.

"The case for case", in *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, ed. Emmon Bach and Robert T. Harms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 1-88.

The last of these essays is the best known. Despite the brevity of his essays, they

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A quiet perusal of Chapter 20 of Lafitte's *Grammaire Basque*, entitled «Generalites sur le verbe», shows us the perplexities that conscientious application of the traditional approach leads us into. One of the distinctions one finds so puzzling is the difference between verbs that are transitive and those that are used as transitives. Basques do not need such guide-posts and the foreigner is gaffled.

If we assume for Basque a Fillmore-type base, our terminological difficulties are immediately set aside. The relationship of the two sentences that follow is cleared up at once:

oibanean galdu da 'He went astray in the forest'.
oibanean galdu du 'He lost it in the forest'.

To explain the first sentence as a kind of passive is worse than no explanation. Although English offers some plausible translations —much more so than French— in the form of 'He is lost in the woods.' and 'He lost it in the woods.', neither the inappropriate label nor the foreign paraphrases contribute to the grammatical explanation. According to Fillmore's hypothesis, we are given the base: Sentence is rewritten as Modality plus Proposition. Modality is rewritten as a set of features, [tense], [mood], etc. Proposition is rewritten as Verb plus one or more case categories. For all the sentences above we can posit the case categories [agentive] and [objective]⁹. The agentive case appears in NP's on the surface overtly

have been extremely influential. His "deep case" hypothesis has been incorporated into the new comprehensive cooperative work, *Integration of Transformational Theories on English Syntax* prepared October 1968 under Contract no. AF 19(528)-6007 by the University of California at Los Angeles under the direction of Robert P. Stockwell, Paul Schachter, and Barbara Hall Partee. It is a compendious work of 1057 pages, formally called the UESP Grammar. In it the deep case hypothesis is systematically applied to the facts of English. A neat summary of Charles Fillmore's notions are found on page 9. "Fillmore in four papers has argued that the functional relations of constituents of a sentence are simply defined by a set of functional primitives that dominate NP's. These cases define such functions as dative, instrumental, locative, agentive. Fillmore claims that the subject of a sentence is a derived relation, not a relation of the deep structure. It turns out that this is true of the object, too. ...Fillmore has suggested that there are a number of additional cases any of which might be present or absent in any given language, but all of which would be described and defined in a general theory of language".

9. Where Fillmore uses the term, objective, the UESP Grammar uses the term, neutral, saying, "the case associated most closely with the verb itself, and least interpretable independently of the verb", p. 9. Fillmore places one important restriction on the occurrence of case categories, "The sentence in its basic structure consists of a verb and one or more noun phrases, each associated with the verb in a particular case relationship. The 'explanatory' use of this framework resides in the necessary claim that although there can be compound instances of a single case (through noun phrase conjunction) *each case relationship occurs only once in a simple sentence*" (italics mine), *The case for case*, p. 21. The assumption receives its epistemological justification on page 24 of the same essay, "The case notions comprise a set of universal, presumably innate, concepts which identify certain types of judgments human beings are capable of making about the events that are going on about them, judgments about matters as who did it, who it happened to, and what got changed".

marked with *-k*, identified before as the ergative case. The objective case appears there with no overt case marker. The difference between the two sentences above is the presence or absence of the category [agentive] in the deep structure of the sentence. The greater number of verbs in Basque appear on the surface accompanied by an auxiliary verb. (I shall leave out of this discussion that limited number of root-inflecting or primitive verbs). This auxiliary contains all the features Fillmore ascribes to the Modality, [negation], [tense], [mood], [aspect], and, in addition, pronominal elements of concord for what are called in traditional terms subject, direct object, indirect object, and allocution. (The latter element indicates the number, sex, and social standing of the person you are addressing. It occurs in every verbal form in independent clauses of a particular stretch of discourse. Its use is dictated by rather subtle social considerations.) The order of elements in the auxiliary depends directly upon the presence or absence of the category [agentive] in the deep structure of the sentence. This gives rise to two distinct conjugations of the auxiliary verb, the so-called transitive and intransitive conjugations. The surface conjugations of these auxiliaries become rather elaborate. L'abbé Inchauspe's important work, *Le verbe basque* (Paris, 1885), contains 500 densely printed quarto pages of non-repeating paradigms. However, it will become quite clear that we cannot posit transitive and intransitive in the deep structure. The apparently quite different Basque auxiliaries are the result of the operation of grammatical processes very near the surface.

One fact consistently overlooked by grammarians of Basque is that the presence of [allocutive] in the base triggers the same order of elements as the presence of [agentive]¹⁰. Consider these sentences: *zakurra galdu duk* and *zakurra sartu duk*. Without a context, the first sentence might be read either as 'You have lost the dog'. or 'The dog is lost'. The second sentence might be read either as 'You have driven the dog in'. or 'The dog has come in'. (In the second interpretation of each sentence respectively, the element lacking in the translation can be expressed only with the very clumsy paraphrase: 'I am addressing a man whose relationship to me is somewhat like that of a blood-brother'.)¹¹ This is not so disturbing because [+A] (agen-

10. I have skirted the problem of whether [allocution] is to be first rewritten as a category of the Proposition or as a feature of Modality. For the purposes of this paper, I have sneaked it into the Proposition. Andrew Rogers pointed out to me this difficulty in a private communication. He argued for [allocution] as a feature of Modality. I am inclined to think that he is right.

11. One further vexing aspect of the ambiguities generated in the conjugation of the Basque verb is to be found in the sentence, *zakurra ikusi dik* 'He has seen the dog (I am talking to a male)' and 'He has seen your dog'. Cf. Latin *canem tibi vidit canem tuum vidit*. (I am indebted to Luís Michelena for this sentence and the two preceding ones). Two new ambiguities meet us eye to eye. In the first place, we find the ambiguity of the surface representation of allocution and the dative relationship. And in the se-

tive) is present in both sentences. In the sentence *zakur haundia duk* the process I am pointing out becomes very evident. This sentence may be interpreted 'You have the big dog'. or 'It is a big dog'. The same sentence in the feminine singular and the polite singular reads *zakur haundia dun* and *zakur haundia duzu*, respectively, with the same built-in ambiguity. Schuchardt tried unsatisfactorily to explain these away as *eigentliche* and *uneigentliche Bezugsformen*, interpreting *duk*, *dun*, and *duzu* as kinds of periphrastic ways of saying 'it is' by saying 'you have it'¹². On the contrary, the grammatical rules of Basque automatically produce these forms. The conjugation of all Basque verbs give us numerous examples of these ambiguities. The morphology of the auxiliary is not our primary concern here. However, the fervent and poetic cry of Inchauspe that the two conjugations of the Basque verb are really one is vindicated. Any analysis of the verbal auxiliary in Basque must take into account the elements of the base. Otherwise the interminable paradigms remain opaque and unexplained.

It is really exceptional when the case-frame in any particular verb in Basque is obligatorily marked [+A]. Even these verbs show vacillation and uncertainty. Lafitte calls these verbs deponents. His list includes some twenty-eight verbs. He says, «Nous appellerons déponents quelques verbes les caractérisiques des verbes transitifs, mais qui ont un sens intransitif». A good three-quarters of these so-called deponent verbs show the vacillation in form we are talking about without at the same time showing any particular difference in meaning¹³. For example the verb *argitu* 'to shine, to give forth light'. This seems to be according to everybody's intuition an intransitive verb. Yet we find the sentence:

iguzkiak argitzen du eta zerua argitzen da.

'The sun is shining away and the sky is sparkling'.

In contrast, when the verb frame of the greater number of verbs shows the variation [\pm A] —reflected on the surface as the presence of an overt

cond place, we find the double interpretation placed upon the dative element. The matter of the 'possessive dative' is an important one that is discussed at length by Fillmore, *The case for case*, pp. 61-81. A most valuable work in regard to this problem is Wilhelm Havers, *Untersuchungen zur Kasussyntax der indogermanischen Sprachen* (Sstrassburg: Karl Trübner, 1911) where the *dativus sympatheticus* is treated at extraordinary length.

12. SCHUCHARDT (1893), p. 10.

13. LAFITTE (1962), pp. 189-90, and p. 341. The verbs are *afaldu* 'to eat dinner', *argitu* 'to shine, to glow', *askaldu* 'to eat breakfast', *beilatu* 'to ait up', *berandu* 'to grow late', *buhatu* 'to blow', *dirdiratu* 'to shine, to glow', *distiratu* 'to flash, to sparkle', *dudatu* 'to doubt', *eman* 'to blow (of the wind)', *erreusitu* 'to succeed', *hartu* 'to take root', *gosaldu* 'to eat breakfast', *iduritu* 'to resemble', *ihardoki* 'to resist', *irakitu* 'to boil', *iraun* 'to last', *izarniatu* 'to sparkle, to shimmer', *jazarri* 'to resist', *kurritu* 'to run', *laboratu* 'to labor, to drudge', *lakhetu* 'to be pleased', *luzatu* 'to drag out', *pausatu* 'to alight', *perdatu* 'to become green', *usatu* 'to do something habitually'.

ergative marker and as a different order of elements in the auxiliary— the sentence with the same NP's present will have an entirely different interpretation. E.g., *zakurrak galdu du* and *zakurra galdu da* are quite different in interpretation. The difference in meaning is generated by regular grammatical processes which reflect different case assignments in the base. This group of verbs is indecisive in this respect.

The situation is particularly clear in the case of the class of verbs meaning 'to love, to like, to be pleased' and 'to hate, to find repugnant, to dislike'. Since most speakers are given to hyperbole, it is impossible to distinguish the meanings more succinctly.

Although Lhande's dictionary dictates at one point that *laket* occurs only with the intransitive auxiliary and that *maite* occurs only with the transitive, some of the entries contradict the restriction set on *laket*.

laket bazaitzu 'If it is pleasing to you'. (intransitive)
bekhatuan laketzen zaio 'It pleases him (to remain) in sin'.
 (intransitive)

but,

segur naiz nik ere hantxet laket nezakela
 'I am sure that I would like it there'. (transitive)
laket dut heiekin 'I like it (to stay) with them'. (transitive)

The verb of contrary meaning *biguin* 'to dislike' shows the same variation:

biguintzen zaizkit plazerak
 'The pleasures displease (or disgust) me'. (intransitive)

but,

haren egiteak biguintzen ditut
 'I dislike his goings-on'. (transitive)

On the other hand, *maite* 'to like, to love' is used only with the transitive:

nik zakurra maite dut 'I like the dog'.

The same holds true for *plazer* 'to be pleased, to be happy with'.

This verb turns up primarily in polite phrases:

plazer baduzu 'If you like'. (transitive)
plazer dut zure ezagutzea 'Pleased to meet you'.

A very striking member of the group of deponent verbs is *irakitu* 'to boil'. In anybody's terms the verb 'to boil' is intransitive¹⁴. However, it occurs

14. An historical explanation for this fact is that formally *irakitu* is a factitive of undetermined derivation.

only with the so-called transitive auxiliary and with an overt ergative marker. The closely related *erre* 'to burn', for example, is not so limited. We find

urak irakitzen du 'The water boils'.

in contrast to

biltzen baitute hiraka eta suan erratzen
 'They gathered weeds and burned them in the fire'.
 (transitive)

and

mendi handia suz erratzen zen
 'A great mountain burned with fire'.

I suggest that a Fillmore-type base yields the best explanation of this state of affairs: It is the simplest and yields the most fruitful generalities. We could formalize the verb-frames in the following manner, positing what seems hat this moment to be the best frame for all verbs.

P[V [O (A) (D) (Al) ()]], where V=verb, O=objective, A=agentive, D=dative, Al=allocutive.

As a matter of fact, the order of elements in the Basque verbal auxiliary is for both transitive and intransitive:

[O+V+(D)+(Al)+(A)].

There are some striking variations and deviations that seem to be conditioned by different modality features.

This framework permits us to predict the possibilities for all verbs except the small class we are discussing here. For example *galdu* in the examples above realizes [V+O] and [V+O+A], respectively. The possibilities [V+O+D], [V+O+Al], [V+O+A+D], [V+O+A+D+Al] can be and are realized as:

[V+O+D] *galdu zait* 'It has gone astray for me'.
 [V+O+Al] *galdu duk* 'It has gone astray'. '(I am addressing male in familiar fashion.)'
 [V+O+A+D] *galdu dauiat* 'I have lost it for you'.
 [V+O+A+D+Al] *galdu dautak* 'He lost it for me. '(I am addressing that same male.)'

If we kept on calculating possibilities, we could with reasonable certainty find concrete realizations of every last one of them.

In the group of verbs under discussion, the normal possibilities are blocked or subject to abnormal restrictions. For the group of verbs *maite*, *plazer*, *laket*, and *higuin*, we must posit P[V+O+D] where the verb is

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occupied by an adjective. On the surface it would seem at first glance that we would have to posit P[V+O+A]. This leads to too many complexities. They are to be avoided only by assuming that [D] turns up on the surface as an ergative. For *laket* and *biguin* the choice is optional. It can turn up on the surface as an overt dative or ergative. In very practical terms we can indicate this in the lexicon. Lhande does this with exasperating thoroughness.

I call this group of verbs pseudo-ergative.

The normal operation of regular grammatical processes yields varying interpretations of sentences and the verbs they contain. It is a systematic variation depending upon whether [A] is present in the proposition of the base. On the other hand, verbs which are pseudo-ergative or sometimes pseudo-ergative yield no perceptible difference in interpretation either way. We have to deal with two kinds of meaning. Meaning which is generated by the grammatical system. And meaning which is a reflection of the real world. In the case of these verbs, the nature of real phenomena invalidates the meaning that grammatical processes generate. At the end of the grammatical process there is an Either-Way situation. The Either-Way choice is a matter of performance, of style. Abbé Lafitte says, «ces verbes marquent en général une certaine continuité, une certaine insistance». This is a stylistic statement. The variation in performance emphasizes certain elements of experience that exceed the limits of grammatical expression. Formal grammar can up to a certain point show the limits within which stylistic variation operates and what makes the variations possible. In a certain group of verbs in Basque such a variation is possible. And that is the group I call pseudo-ergative. Ergativation of certain NP's in certain sentences under permissible circumstances is a stylistic device made available to the speakers of Basque by the normal grammatical processes of the language. Historically, I suggest that this may have been a still-born subjectivizational process that very feebly associated subject with ergative.

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Terence H. Wilbur admite que el vascuence es lengua catalogada como activa. Sin embargo, es menester plantearse una cuestión previa: ¿Qué se debe entender por tal, que el sujeto activo lo es de un verbo transitivo o de un verbo pasivo, como complemento de agente? No está totalmente claro y basta

para verlo algunos casos de conversión de activa en pasiva y viceversa, irregulares.

En 1931, Pierre Lafitte se pronunciaba en contra de la teoría de la pasividad del vascuence. Martinet y Pierre Naert parecen llegar a un callejón sin salida. «El vasco pertenece a un tipo lingüístico que ignora el sintagma sujeto-predicado y que construye sus proposiciones por sucesivas determinaciones de un predicado de existencia», dice Martinet. Pero a Wilbur esta necesidad lingüística no le parece asunto gramatical, sino prejuicio cultural.

La mayor parte de los verbos en vasco van acompañados por un verbo auxiliar, que contiene los elementos atribuidos por Fillmore a la «Modalidad» y los pronominales de concordancia —que tradicionalmente llamaríamos sujeto, complementos directo e indirecto...—. Hay un grupo de verbos de calificación difícil, que Lafitte llama «deponentes», porque tienen un sentido intransitivo. Tres cuartas partes de ellos son efectivamente intransitivos, sin variación en el significado sea cual sea la conjugación. Pero en los verbos que traduciríamos por «amar, desear, agradar» y sus contrarios —que muchos no precisarían sino echando mano de paráfrasis— el caso es más claro.

Wilbur precisa el alcance de los verbos activos y pseudo-activos, siendo estos últimos los que Lafitte concreta como verbos que en general señalan una cierta continuidad e insistencia», aunque esto al autor le parece un recurso estilístico.