The Impact of Native Speaker Linguists: A Mayan Case Study

Jessica Coon – jessica.coon@mcgill.ca

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Introduction

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- Here I'll talk about syntactic ergativity in the Mayan family. This is collaborative work with. . .

Pedro Mateo Pedro
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Omer Preminger
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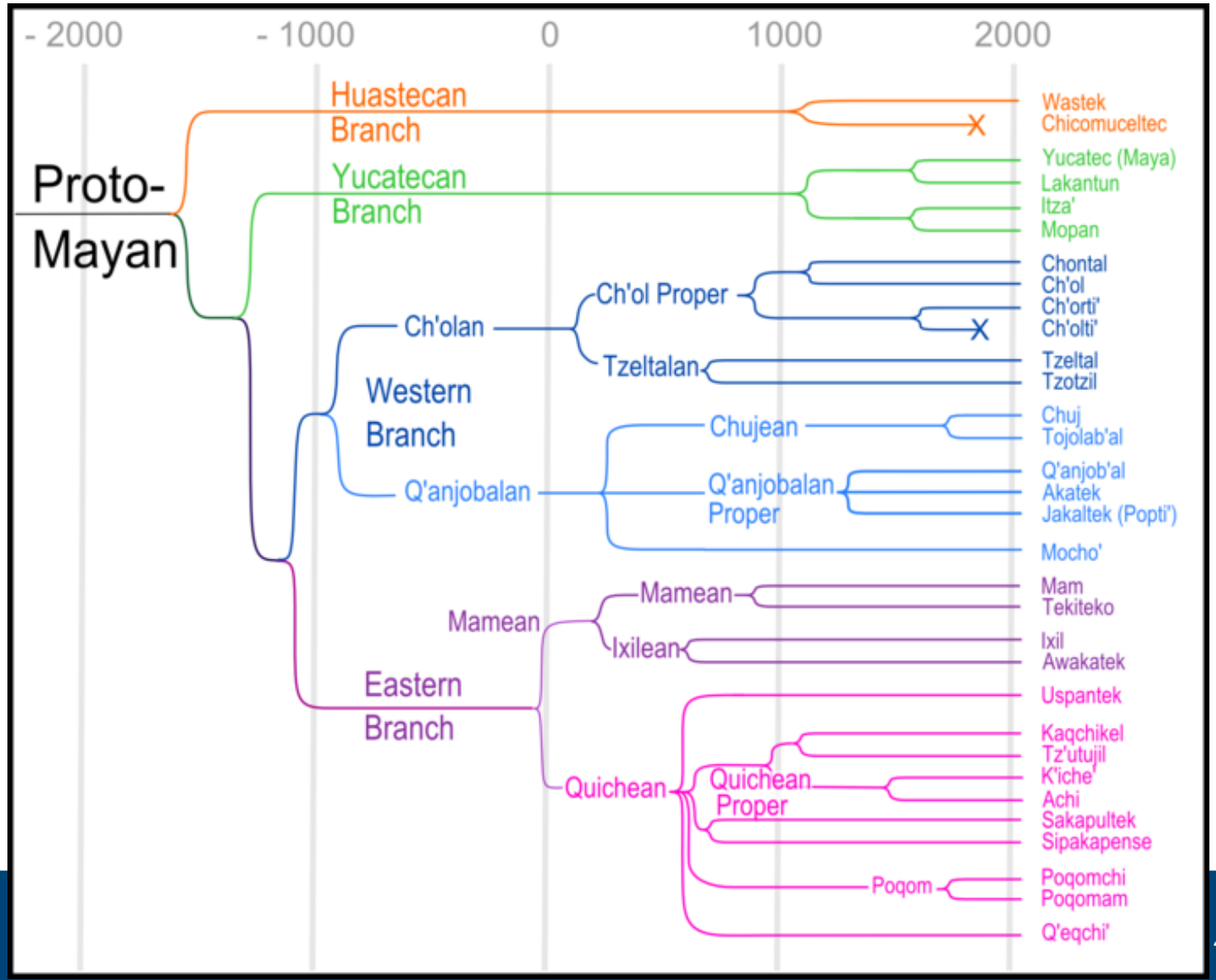
Mayan languages

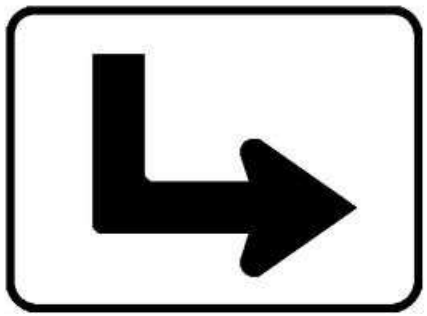
Campbell and Kaufman 1985; image from *Wikipedia*



On the map

(image from *Wikipedia*)

Mexico to MIT



Generative linguistics in Chiapas?

A quote

"The future of American Indian linguistics will depend critically on how successful an effort there is to engage American Indians in the active study of their own languages—not as informants as in the past, but as linguists, philologists, lexicographers, creative writers, and the like. To put it another way, **significant advances in the study of American Indian languages can be made, in my judgement, only when a significant portion of the field is in the hands of native speakers of the languages concerned**"

— *Ken Hale 1972, 87*

Mayan

- In addition to inspiring many others, Hale himself helped train speakers of **Tohono O'odham**, **Hopi**, **Navajo**, **Ahtna**, and others—he also spent time in Guatemala teaching classes to **Maya native speaker linguists**

Mayan

- In addition to inspiring many others, Hale himself helped train speakers of **Tohono O'odham**, **Hopi**, **Navajo**, **Ahtna**, and others—he also spent time in Guatemala teaching classes to **Maya native speaker linguists**
- The contributions of native speaker linguists of **Mayan languages** are perhaps unparalleled in the world of less documented languages (England 2007)

Native speaker linguists in Mexico

CIESAS

- Since the MA in Indoamerican Linguistics program began in 1991, **90 MA theses** have been completed by native speakers of languages of the region, in all areas of linguistics—22 of these are on Mayan languages

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- The first generation of PhDs are now underway

Native speaker linguists in Guatemala

Oxlajuuj Keej Maya Ajtziib (OKMA)

- Reference grammars on **Kaqchikel** (García Matzar and Rodríguez Guaján 1997), **Tz'utujil** (García Ixmata 1997), **K'ichee'** (López Ixcoy 1997), **Mam** (Pérez and Jiménez 1997), and **Poqomam** (Santos and Benito 1998)

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- **Pedro Mateo Pedro** is currently collaborating with people from the *Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín* and CIESAS to build an MA program in Guatemala

FAMLi

The first Formal Approaches to Mayan Linguistics (**FAMLi**) workshop took place at MIT in April 2010

Of the thirty presentations and posters, **half** were presented by native speakers of Mayan languages

FAMLi photos

(photo credits:
Mitcho Erlewine)

Syntactic ergativity

50 Years of Linguistics at MIT

This work is appropriate for this session for two reasons:

1. It would have been impossible without the many contributions native speaker linguists have made to our understanding of Mayan

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The combination of these two lines of work—careful work on under-documented and endangered languages, coupled with formal abstract tools to understand the phenomena under investigation—results in a more complete understanding of the range and limits of cross-linguistic variation

Inspiration

This work begins with the intuition in Pascual's (2007) CIESAS thesis that the suffix ***-on*** in Q'anjob'al should receive a unified analysis

(1) TRANSITIVE SUBJECT EXTRACTION = "AGENT FOCUS"
Maktxel max-ach il-**on**-i?
who ASP-ABS2 see-**SUF**-ITV
'Who saw you?'

(2) EMBEDDED TRANSITIVES
Chi uj [hach y-il-**on**-i].
ASP be.able.to ABS2 ERG3-see-**SUF**-ITV
'She can see you.'

A clue from Tada's (1993) MIT dissertation will help us solve the puzzle

Morphological ergativity

- Mayan languages show morphological ergativity via person marking on the predicate

(3) CHOL

a. Tyi **k**-mek'-e-**yety**.
PRFV 1ERG-hug-TV-2ABS
'I hugged you'

b. Tyi wäy-i-**yety**.
PRFV sleep-ITV-2ABS
'You slept.'

- Clause initial aspect markers = INFL (Aissen 1992)
- "Status suffixes" indicate transitivity = v^0 (Coon 2010; Coon and Preminger to appear)

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High-Abs vs. Low-Abs

- While the basic ordering of morphemes in the verb phrase is fairly consistent across the family, we find variation in the **location of absolutive**

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HIGH:	ASPECT	**ABS**	ERG	ROOT	(VOICE)	SUFFIX
LOW:	ASPECT		ERG	ROOT	(VOICE)	SUFFIX **ABS**

- "HIGH-ABS": absolutive immediately follows the *aspect* marker
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Q’anjob’al vs. Chol

High-Abs

(5) Q’anjob’al

a. Max-**ach** y-il-a’.
ASP-ABS2 ERG3-see-TV
‘She saw you.’

b. Max-**ach** way-i.
ASP-ABS2 sleep-ITV
‘You slept.’

Low-Abs

(6) Chol

a. Tyi y-il-ä-**yety**.
ASP ERG3-see-TV-ABS2
‘She saw you.’

b. Tyi wäy-i-**yety**.
ASP sleep-ITV-ABS2
‘You slept.’

Tada (1993)

- Tada (1993): The location of the absolutive morpheme correlates with the appearance of *extraction asymmetries*:

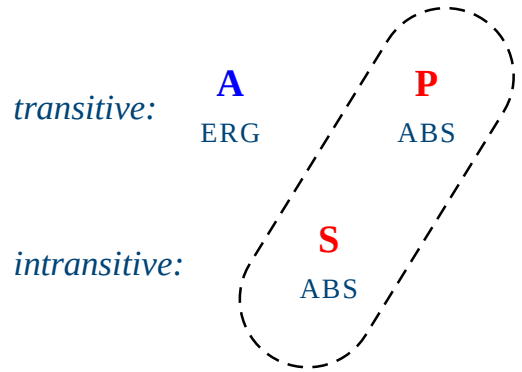
(7) LOCATION OF ABSOLUTIVE AND

	+ASYMMETRIES	-ASYMMETRIES
HIGH-ABS	*Q'anjob'al*, *Akaktek*, Jakaltek, Chuj, Q'eqchi', *Uspantek* Poqomchi', Poqomam, K'ichee', Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, *Sakapultek Sipakapense*, Mam, Awakatek	
LOW-ABS	Yucatec, Ixil	Lakandon, Mopan, *Itza'*, Chol, *Chontal*, Tseltal, Tojol'ab'al

Extraction asymmetries

- In LOW-ABS languages like Chol, all core arguments freely extract for questions, focus, and relativization

(8)



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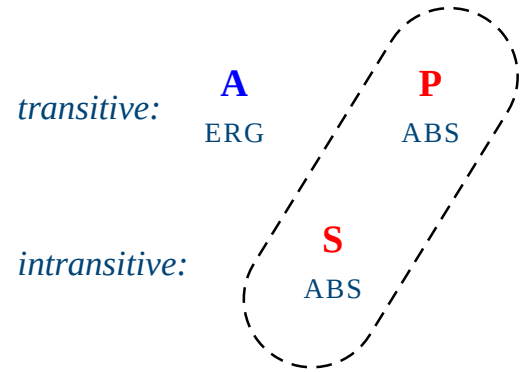

- In HIGH-ABS languages like Q'anjob'al…
  - *absolutive* arguments extract freely
  - *ergatives* do not
  - **=syntactic ergativity**

Syntactic ergativity

(9) CHOL = LOW-ABS

Maxki tyi y-il-ä-**yety**?

WHO ASP 3ERG-see-TV-2ABS

'Who saw you?

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* Maktxel max-**ach** y-il-a'?

WHO ASP-2ABS 3ERG-see-TV

intended: 'Who saw you?'

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- Absolutives are pronominal clitics (e.g. Woolford 2000)
- A first approximation: the high location of the absolutive is *blocking* the ergative from extracting in (10)

The locus of absolutive

- Why is the absolutive high in some languages?

Legate (2002, 2008); Aldridge (2004): What ergative languages have in common is that the ergative argument is licensed in situ (e.g. *inherently* Woolford 1997). **Ergative languages come in two basic types:**

1. **ABS = NOM** — Absolutive is **nominative**; assigned uniformly by the head of the finite clause (=aspect marker Aissen 1992); in a transitive, the subject is skipped
2. **ABS = DEF** — Absolutive is a **morphological default**, assigned by v^0 to transitive objects, but by INFL to intransitive subjects

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Coon, Mateo Pedro, and Preminger (2011): The division between HIGH-ABS and LOW-ABS languages lines up with the different types of ergative languages

	Chol	**Q'anjob'al**
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locus of ABS	ABS=DEF	ABS=NOM
ABS available in non-finite clauses?	yes	no
ergatives extract?	✔	✘

Absolutive = nominative

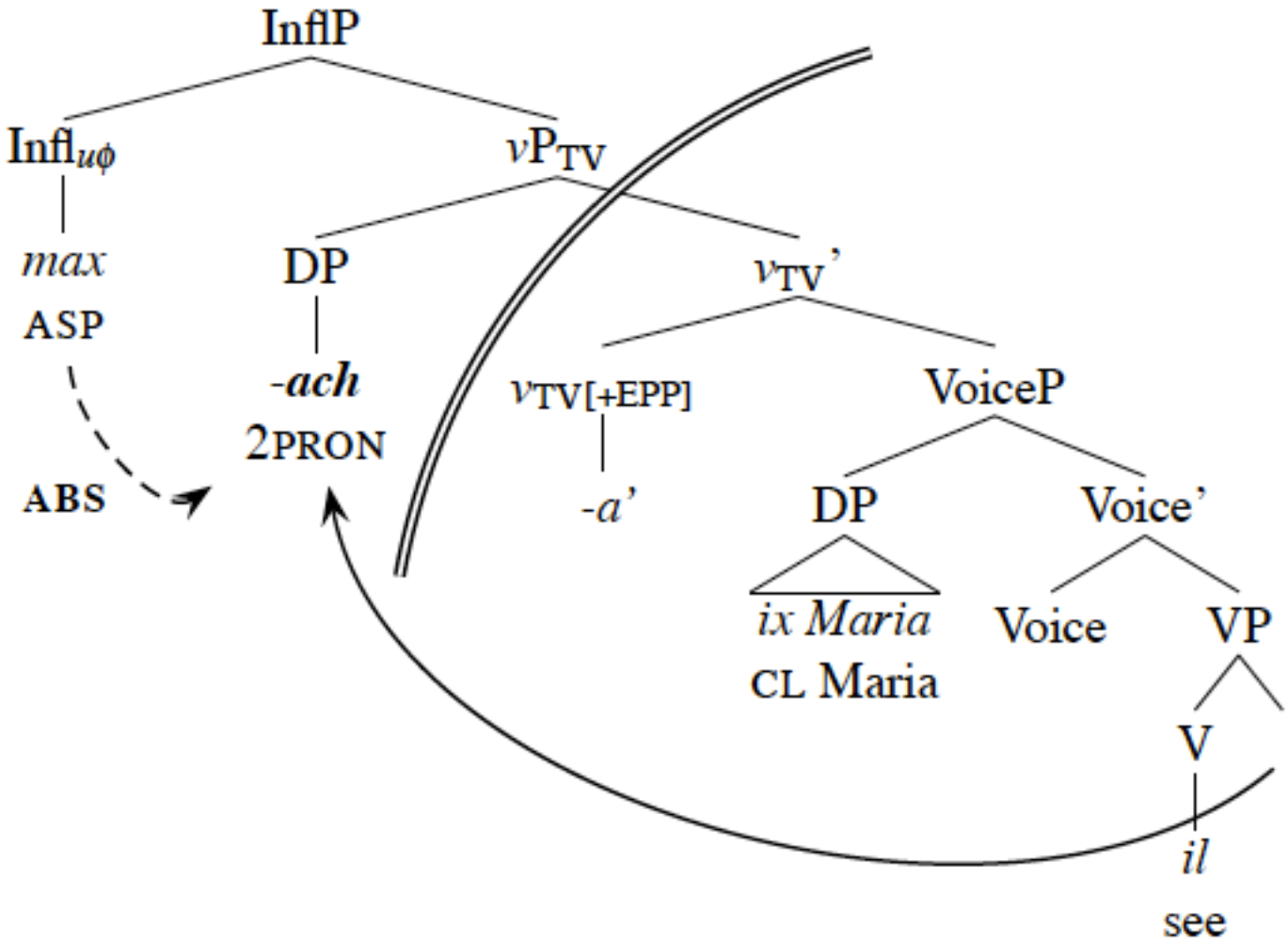
Ingredients:

- In Q'anjob'al, absolutive is assigned by INFL (= Aspect)
- v^0 is instantiated by the status suffixes:
  -*i* = intransitive, -*V'* = transitive
- Transitive v^0—the one which licenses the ergative—is *phasal* (Chomsky 1995)

(11) Max-ach y-il-[a`] ix Malin.
ASP-2ABS 3ERG-see-TV CL Maria
'Maria saw you.'

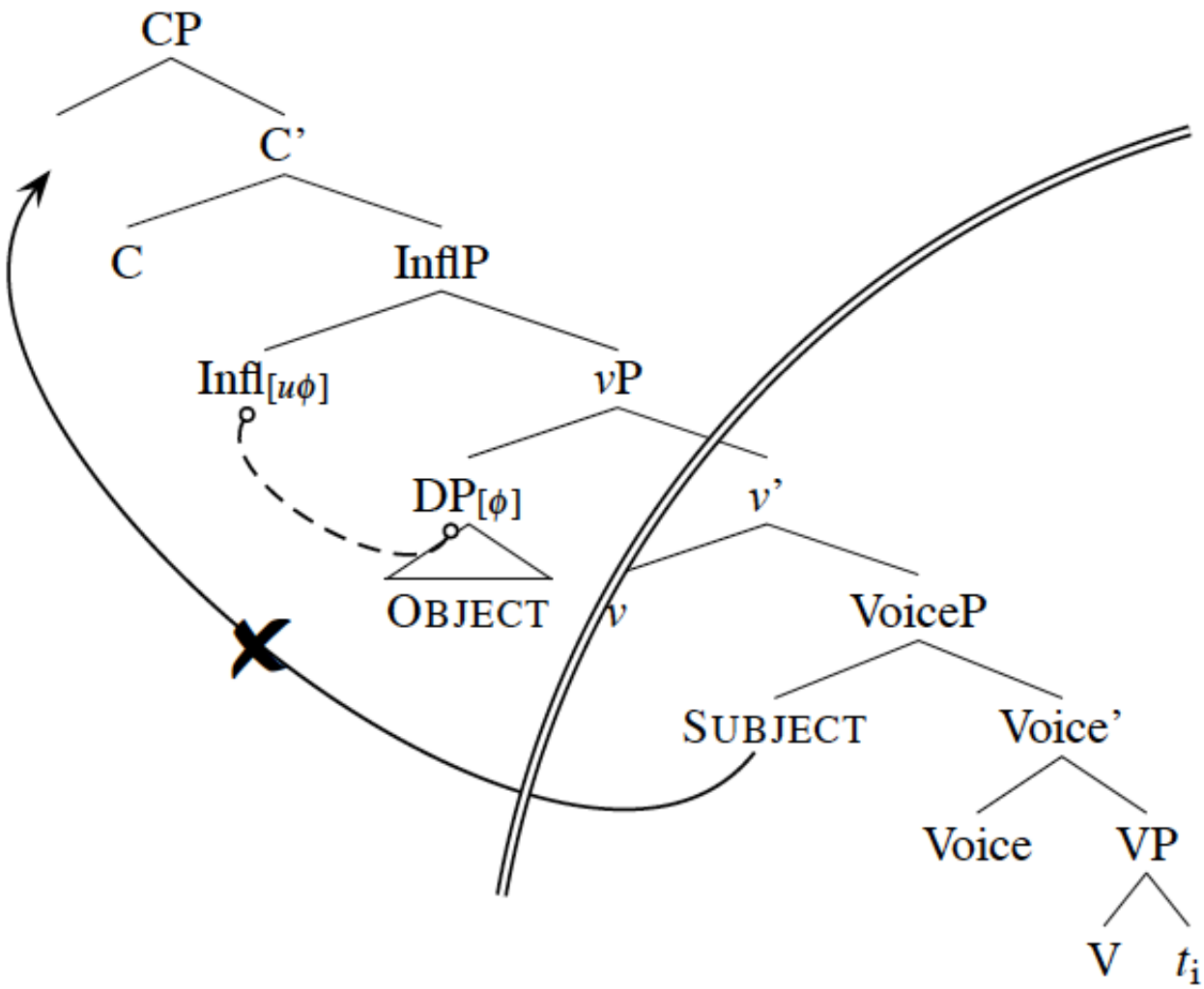
Absolutive raises to be licensed

(12)



Absolutive blocks ergative

(13)



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To extract a transitive subject, the *Agent Focus* must be used

(14) Maktxel max-ach il-**on**-i.
who ASP-2ABS see-AF-ITV
'Who saw you?'

- AF constructions have been described as syntactically transitive, but morphologically intransitive (Aissen 1999)
  - Two full DP arguments; *not an antipassive*
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(15) Max-ach **y**-il-**a`** naq winaq.
ASP-2ABS 3ERG-see-TV CL man
'The man saw you.'

AF

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Proposal: The AF morpheme is a Voice head which *assigns Case to the object*

- The subject is now able to receive Case from Infl^0; ergative is not assigned, resulting in…
  - The absence of ergative agreement morphology
  - An intransitive (non-ergative-assigning) status suffix
- Crucially: the intransitive v^0 is *not* phasal, and the subject is thus free to extract

(16) Maktxel max-ach il-**on**-i.
who ASP-2ABS see-AF-ITV
'Who saw you?'

Predictions

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- Rather, it can be characterized as a need for the object to receive Case from a high functional head
  - The high position of the object in turn blocks the subject from extracting out of the *v*P phase
- Indeed, certain ergative-marked transitive subjects *can* extract…

When ergatives extract

- Ergative arguments can extract from a clause with *reflexive objects*

(17) Q'ANJOB'AL REFLEXIVE
Maktxel max y-il **s-b'a**?
who ASP ERG3-see GEN3-SELF
'Who saw herself?'

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- And—at least in some dialects of K'ichee'—from clauses with bare non-referential objects (Aissen to appear):

(18) K'ICHEE' BARE OBJECT
Jachiin x-u-loq' **uuq**?
who ASP-ERG3-buy cloth
'Who bought cloth?'

No Case

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➥ The ability for ergative to extract in exactly these environments falls out naturally from our account

  - The object does not raise to receive Case from Infl^0—the transitive subject is thus free to extract

Prediction II: Embedded clauses

If the AF morpheme ***-on*** is a last-resort Case assigner, we might expect to find it in other environments where absolutive (=nominative) Case is unavailable…

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  - Most HIGH-ABS languages simply **do not allow** embedded transitives (e.g. England to appear)
  - Q'anjob'alan languages do—but require the suffix *-on*:

(19) Chi uj [hach y-il-**on**-i].
ASP be.able.to ABS2 ERG3-see-**AF**-ITV
'She can see you.'

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This account explains:

✓ The correlation between HIGH-ABS and syntactic ergativity

✓ Ergative extraction is fine, so long as the *object* is Caseless (reflexive or bare NP)

Summary

Ergatives are unable to extract from regular transitive clauses because…

- Absolutives raise above the ergative to be licensed by Infl^0
- Transitive *v*P^0 is phasal; subject is trapped inside the phase

This account explains:

✓ The correlation between HIGH-ABS and syntactic ergativity

✓ Ergative extraction is fine, so long as the *object* is Caseless (reflexive or bare NP)

✓ AF morpheme—is a Case assigner—extended to non-finite embedded transitives since absolutive (=nominative) is otherwise unavailable

Conclusion

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  - Case in point: Mayan Agent Focus

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- Native speaker linguists are good for **endangered languages**

> "When you have [native speaker linguists] doing scientific work on a language, it has the effect of raising the importance of preserving it"
>
> — *Judith Aissen, 2007 interview*

- Native speaker linguists are good for **language communities**—on both a cultural and socio-political levels

> "For Mayas, linguistics and [work in education and language policy] are not separate endeavors, but rather part of a common goal of maintaining and increasing their political and cultural space in society."
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> — *Nora England 2007, 93*

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> — *Nora England 2007, 93*

> "Of supreme significance in relation to linguistic diversity, and to local languages in particular, is the simple truth that language—in the general, multifaceted sense—embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it."
>
> — *Ken Hale 1992, 36*

MIT's role in promoting native speaker linguists

- **Africa:** African Linguistics School (www.als.rutgers.edu/), organizers include Chris Collins ('93) and Enoch Aboh (MIT visitor '08)
  - Claire Halpert ('12) taught classes last summer
- **South America:** South American Summer School in Formal Linguistics (EVELIN), Andrés Salanova ('07), Pranav Anand ('06), Guillaume Thomas ('12)
  - Rafael Nonato ('13) working to train native speakers of Kĩsêdjê
- **Nicaragua:** Elena Benedicto (visitor) and Tom Green ('99), collaborative work with speakers of Misumalpan languages
- **Wômpanâak Reclamation Project:** Jessie Little Doe Baird ('00)
- **Ken Hale Memorial MA Program**, led by Norvin Richards: Mohegan (Fielding 2005), Wampanoag (Hicks 2006), Serrano (Duro in prog)

Wokox awäläl!

- My Chol teachers, Virginia Martínez Vázquez, Doriselma Gutiérrez Gutíerrez, and Matilde Vázquez Vázquez
- Judith Aissen, Nicolás Arcos López, Ava Berinstein, Edith Aldridge, Robert Henderson, David Pesetsky, Maria Polinsky, Clifton Pye, Norvin Richards, Kirill Shklovsky, Lisa Travis, Valentina Vapnarsky, and Juan Vázquez Álvarez
- Audiences at FAMLi, Leipzig, UCSC, and the Harvard Agent Extraction reading group
- Postdoctoral funding from the Polinsky Lab at Harvard University and a SSHRC Banting Postdoctoral Research Fellowship

References

(too many for a slide, please see website and paper on *LingBuzz*: `http://ling.auf.net/lingBuzz/001401`)