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Dissertation Information

Title: Ergativity and Word Order in Austronesian Languages

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Linguistic Subfield(s): Syntax; Typology;

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Taroko

Language: Austronesian

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Abstract: This thesis proposes a Minimalist analysis of ergativity and word order in the Austronesian languages Tagalog and Seediq. Based on broad typological comparison, I propose that there are two types of syntactically ergative language and that Tagalog and Seediq are each representative of one type. In ergative languages like Tagalog, T checks absolutive case in intransitive clauses, but v checks case in transitive clauses. I label these ‘v-type’ ergative languages. In the class of ergative language which Seediq belongs to, T checks absolutive case in both transitive and intransitive clauses. These are ‘T-type’ ergative languages. Empirically, the main distinction between the two types is that more subject properties are afforded to the absolutive nominal in T-type languages, while absolutes in v-type languages are more object-like in their behavior.

This thesis also proposes an account of the absolutive restriction on A’-extraction. In syntactically ergative languages of both the v- and T-type, only the absolutive DP is eligible to undergo A’-movement out of the clause. For both types of language, I propose that v carries an EPP feature only when it is transitive. The consequence of this in the theory of Multiple Spell-Out is that a VP-internal DP will be attracted to a specifier of v only in transitive clauses, when this DP has absolutive status. From the vP phase edge, the absolutive is then able to undergo further movement to [Spec, C]. In antipassives, however, which are intransitive, v will not have an EPP feature, and the oblique direct object will not be able to move out of VP without violating the Phase Impenetrability Condition.

Both Tagalog and Seediq have verb-initial word order. I propose a verb-movement analysis of VSO order in Tagalog. For Seediq VOS word order, I propose a predicate-fronting account in which the absolutive is treated as a topic and moves obligatorily to the C domain. Subsequently, the remnant TP fronts further to its left. I show that TP-fronting is not triggered by morphological features but rather is an indirect consequence of a PF constraint which prohibits spelling out a DP in the left edge of a phase.