

Of micro- and macroparameters: Ergativity, Austronesian, and Bahasa Indonesia

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The question has been raised whether macroparameters are still needed once the need for microparameters has been established (Kayne 2005). Baker (2008) argues that, in spite of the descriptive power of microparameters, one can still find evidence for macroparameters. In this paper, I investigate the role and the nature of the ergativity macroparameter. The question is whether, when there appears to be an ergativity continuum, the notion of ergativity is best described by a cluster of microparameters rather than a macroparameter. The Austronesian language family provides a good testing ground for this question as one finds languages representing every part of the continuum. More specifically, Bahasa Indonesia provides an interesting data point in this debate as it contains some ergative properties and some nominative/accusative properties. I will argue that, if one characterizes the parameter appropriately, the problems that arise from the apparent continuum disappear. More specifically, I explore the possibility that what is descriptively known as ergativity actually falls out from a different macroparameter – one that determines whether a feature triggers head or phrasal movement. Chomsky (1995) creates a system where an uninterpretable D feature triggers DP movement and an uninterpretable V feature triggers head movement. In Travis (2005, 2006), I argue that in Malagasy (Irish and Zapotec), the opposite holds. The V feature targets a phrase and the D feature targets a head. In this paper I explore ways in which this parameter setting makes a language look ergative, the role of this parameter in creating an ergativity continuum, and the nature of the parameter itself.

References

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