Optional Case-Marking and Information Structure in Eibela:
A typological perspective

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Overview

- Eibela People and Language
- Grammatical Relations and Case-Marking
- Optional Case-Marking and Information Structure
- Conclusions
Eibela People and Language

- also referred to as Aimele
  (Ethnologue code: AIL)
- Speakers live primarily in Lake Campbell, Western Province
- Widespread multilingualism in Tok Pisin, Kamula, and Kaluli
Eibela People and Language

Syntax/Morphology

- SV/AOV constituent order
- Ergative-Absolutive case-marking system
- Open classes of nouns, verbs, and adverbs
- Closed classes of adjectives, demonstratives, postpositions, verbal particles, and quantifiers
- Complex system of verbal inflection for tense, aspect, mood, and evidentiality
Eibela People and Language

Phonology

- 13 consonant phonemes
- 6 simple vowels with phonemic length contrasts
- 4 diphthongs /ou/, /ɛi/, /ai/, /oi/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonants</th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
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<td>Flap</td>
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<td>Affricate</td>
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<td>Fricative</td>
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<td>Approximate</td>
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Parentheses denote phones that may be realized as an allophone of a phoneme.
Eibela People and Language

Predicates

- Lexical roots of nearly any word class may form a predicate.
- Only verbs may be inflected with tense, aspect, mood, and evidentiality
- Tense marking is quite irregular and may be expressed by suffixation or suppletion
- Complex predicates can be formed by serial verb constructions or auxiliary constructions
Eibela People and Language

(1) [agiri $\phi\varepsilon\phi\varepsilon$-ja]$_s$ [ena]$_x$ [dobosuwe]$_x$ tr a:niri
dog skinny-ABS there underneath go.down go:PAST
‘The skinny dog went down underneath there.’

(2) [sobolo-wa]$_s$ tibr do-wa
plane-ABS land PERF-PAST
‘A plane has landed.’
Grammatical Relations

- Syntactic cues showing how the arguments of a predicate are mapped onto various semantic roles
- Every argument is identified as bearing some semantic relationship to the predicate through various methods of changing the structural expression of the argument, e.g.:
  - Transitivity
  - Case marking
  - Number/Person agreement
  - Constituent order
Grammatical Relations

- Any arguments understood due to common knowledge or previous discourse may be elided.
- Factors governing the expression or elision of a core argument are driven by pragmatic and discourse variables rather than syntactic constraints.
- Case-marking suffixes are often omitted where the semantic roles of the arguments are clear based on previous discourse or constituent order.
- Topic and Absolutive suffixes and Ergative and Locative case suffixes are homophonous.
Grammatical Relations

Transitivity
Defined by number of core arguments:

- Core arguments:
  - Obligatorily identifiable

- Oblique arguments:
  - Optional arguments
Grammatical Relations

Intransitive clause

- only one core argument, abbreviated as S
- SV constituent order
- S can be an animate agent, as seen in (3), a non-animate quasi-agent as in (4), or a patient, as in (5).
- Optional absolutive case suffix

(3) [aːɡɪ]ₐ djɛ-la kɛi
    dog     come-IMPERF EMPH
    ‘A dog is coming.’

(4) [sobolo-wa]ₐ tɪbɪ do-wa
    plane-ABS  land PERF-PAST
    ‘A plane has landed.’

(5) [ɪ-ja]ₐ ma gudu
    3:SG-ABS   NEGdie
    ‘It didn’t die.’
Grammatical Relations

Transitive Clauses

- Require two core arguments, abbreviated A and O
- Prototypically an agent (A) and patient (O)
- Both A and O arguments typically precede the predicate, AOV order
- Optional absolutive and ergative case suffixes

(6) \([nɪ]_A \ [da]_O \ kona\)  
1:SG  sago  cut:PAST

(7) \([nɪ \ do \ bubusuwo-wɛ]_A \ [oga]_O \ gɪla\)  
1:SG  father  NAME-ERG  pandanus  plant

‘I was cutting a sago tree’  ‘My father Bubusuwo planted pandanus.’
Grammatical Relations

A/S Subjecthood Properties

Three syntactic properties qualify as subjecthood indicators:

- Person Agreement
- Co-referential arguments in serial verb constructions
- Switch reference
Grammatical Relations

Person Agreement

- Person agreement in the future tense agrees with the person of the A or S argument

(8) \[\text{[kolu-wa]}_s \text{ tobo } [\text{gi-jɛ}]_x \text{ kudu } \text{mi-ɛI} \text{ kɛI}\]
  \hspace{1cm}\text{man-ABS all 2:SG-LOC follow come-3.FUT EMPH}

‘All of the men will follow you.’

(9) \[\text{[gi} \text{kɛsa:lr-mo]}_x \text{ [a:bo]}_o \text{o-mɛna}\]
  \hspace{1cm}\text{2:SG woman-DAT bird shoot-NON.3:FUT}

‘You will shoot birds for your wife.’
Grammatical Relations

Co-referential arguments in serial verb constructions

In serial verb constructions with one transitive and one intransitive verb, the co-referential argument always corresponds to the S argument of the intransitive verb, and the A argument of the transitive verb.

(10) [kosuwa-ja]_o  di  anị
cassowary-ABS  take  go:PAST

‘(I) took the cassowary and went.’

*‘(I) took the cassowary and it (the cassowary) went.'
Grammatical Relations

Switch reference

When sequential clauses contain a differing S/A argument, a switch reference suffix signals the shift

(11) a. [I]ₘₜ ka la mi-ja
       3:SG FOC TOP come-PST
       ‘That one came.’

b. ɛ-ta-bi-ja [ni-ja]ₐ sugulu hongoja di-ja
    do-RESULT-S/R-TOP 1PL-ABS school big get-PST
    ‘When he did that, we got the big school’
Case-Marking

- Case shown by concatenative suffixation, vowel changes, or suppletion

- Concatenative case suffixes are attached to the final element of the noun phrase

\[(12) \quad [\text{agî} \quad \phi\varepsilon\varepsilon\text{-ja}]_A \quad [\varepsilon\text{na}]_x \quad [\text{dobosuwɛ}]_x \quad \text{ti} \quad \text{ani}\]

dog    skinny-ABS there underneath go.down go:PAST

‘The skinny dog went down underneath there.’
Case-Marking

A sub-class of noun roots change the final vowel to the vowel corresponding to the appropriate case form, in lieu concatenative case suffixation.

(13)  a. *dogo* ‘house’
     b. *doga* ‘house:ABS’  (cf. –ja ‘-ABS’)
     c. *dogɛ* ‘house:ERG/LOC’  (cf. –ɛ ‘-ERG/LOC’)
Case-Marking

• Demonstrative determiner ɛna has two distinct forms for the core cases absolutive and ergative

• Determiners do not co-occur with concatenative case marking

(14) [dɛdanɪ ɛna(*-ja)]o soϕu
prawns that:ABS(*-ABS) cook:PAST
‘We cooked those prawns on the coals.’

ɛna ‘DEM:Absolutive’
ɛmɛ ‘DEM:Ergative’
Case-Marking

Case-Marking in transitive clauses

- Transitive clauses in Eibela rarely show two overt arguments. Instead the more topical argument, typically the A argument, will be elided.

Absolutive

- When both arguments are overt noun phrases, O arguments may bear the absolutive suffix.

(15) \([nɪ]_A\quad tiϕɛ\quad [oga\quad ε-ja]_O\quad ogɛ\quad di\quad anɪ\n
1:SG after pandanus seed-ABS pick.up take go:PAST

‘I went after him, taking the pandanus seeds in a bilum.’
Case-Marking

Ergative

- A arguments may be suffixed by the ergative case.
- It is very rare for both A and O arguments to include case-marking suffixes in the same clause.
- Ergative case-marking of A arguments is frequently found in clauses with OAV word order.

(16) [nɪ]O [sɪgai-jɛ]A sìna ma kɛi
1:SG Sigai-ERG hit NEG EMPH
‘Sigai did NOT hit me.’

(17) [hɛba]O [dulumi-jɛ]A dì sa-lɛ
half:ABS NAME-ERG take pack-IMPERF
‘Dulumi was packing half (of a wallaby).’
Case-Marking

Case-marking for Oblique Arguments

Optional arguments denote roles such as location, source, destination, time, beneficiary, etc.

Instrumental

(18) \[\text{bini-kɛi}_x \ [ɛna \ \phi-ja]_o \ ola \ ka \ la\]

arrow-INST \ that:ABS \ thigh:ABS \ shoot:PAST \ CON \ DEF

‘I had shot it in the thigh with an arrow.’
Case-Marking

The instrumental case may also denote non-animate objects that cause an effect without being controlled by an agent, as in (31) and (32).

(19)  [djɛ  masɪ-kɛɪ]ₓ  [φosu  jabɪ]ₒ  bola
      tree  branch-INST  back  here  hit:PAST
      ‘A tree branch hit me here in the back.’

(20)  [si-ja]ₒ  [jɛto-kɛɪ]ₓ  gada  la
      eye-ABS/TOP  branch.stub-INST  impact:PAST  DEF
      ‘That branch stub hit my eye.’
Case-Marking

Locative and Associative Case

There are two cases which overlap semantically with regard to locative functions, -jɛ and –mi.

- jɛ
  - Locative case
  - Prototypical function of specifying a precise or punctual location
  - Semantic reference includes allative and genetive functions
  - Homophonous with the ergative case suffix

(21) [kisigi-je] sx sugulu-la lɛ-ki
NAME-LOC school-IMPERF be.at-CONT

‘I was still at school in Wawoi Falls/Kesigi.’
Case-Marking

Associative Case -mi

- Extends to more general meanings such as temporal setting or association
- Referred to at the associative case due to varied semantic uses
- Used for diffuse locative reference, denoting a larger and more general area

(22) [nɪ]s [uludija ɪsa-mi la]x wɪ la
1:SG NAME land-ASS DEF here be

‘I am here in the area around Uludija.’
Case-Marking

- Also used for temporal rather than locative settings

\[(23) \quad [\varepsilon n\text{-}m\text{i}]_x \quad [\varepsilon s\text{idi} \quad k\text{onu}]_o \quad s\text{ul}\varepsilon\text{-}l\text{abi}
\]

DEM-ASS  plant.type  shoots  eat-REP

‘Then it (a pig) was pulling up esidi shoots to eat.’
Case-Marking

Dative

The dative case is marked by the suffix –mo, and is used for prototypical dative arguments such as:

Recipients:

(24) [tibesiri mo]soso ko[nimo]x dimi-no

orchid bottom root that 1:SG-DAT give-IMP

‘Give me the bottom of that orchid vine!’

Addressees:

(25) [woko-mo]x se-ja [isa ani]o dimeni-ogu kei e se-ja

NAME-DAT say-TOP bag:ABS two take-NON.3:FUT-INT EMPH do say-PAST

‘(I) told woko, I said, "I will take two bags."
Case-Marking

Dative

Beneficiaries (43):

(26) [gi keːsaː:lɪ-mo]x [aːbo]₀ o-mëna

2:SG woman-DAT bird shoot-NON.3:FUT

‘You will shoot birds for your wife.’
Complex systems of case-marking

A typology of asymmetries in case marking systems.

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<th>Lexically or grammatically conditioned</th>
<th>Not lexically or grammatically conditioned: “free” variation</th>
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<td>Syncretism</td>
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<td>Different case systems</td>
<td>Split Case Marking (SCM)</td>
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<td>Different marking of same grammatical relation</td>
<td>Differential Case Marking (DCM)</td>
<td>Optional Case Marking (OCM)</td>
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**Syncretism**: “...circumstance in which the marking of two separate cases that are normally accorded different markings in a language is the same, and when this is not grammatically conditioned.”

- e.g. lexically determined case restrictions
- neutralization of two or more cases

**Split Case Marking**: “...grammatical roles in a language are marked according to different case systems in different lexico-grammatical environments.”

- Separate case-marking systems conditioned by TAM, Negation, etc.

(Table and quotations from McGregor 2010, p. 1613-1614)
Optional Case-Marking

Differential case marking and Optional case-marking

- two or more case-marking options for a single grammatical relation
  - Either discrete case-markers (DCM) or presence/absence of case-marker (OCM)
- See discussions of differential case marking in Nilo-Saharan (Dimmendaal 2010), Romance (Bossong 1991)
Optional Case-Marking

Three motivations (among others) for optional case marking (McGregor 2010):

- **Discriminative**
  - Additional specification of semantic roles
- **Pragmatic**
  - Specifying topicality/focus/definiteness
- **Semantic**
  - Specifying agentivity, affectedness, individuation
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

- All core case-marking suffixes are optionally expressed
- Two core cases:
  - Ergative -jɛ for transitive subjects
  - Absolutive -ja for intransitive subjects and transitive objects (homophonous with topic clitic)
- Expression of case, argument ellision, and constituent order determined primarily by information structure considerations
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Optional ergative case-marking conditioned by Discriminative and pragmatic functions:

- Non-canonical word order
  - which is in turn governed by definiteness and topicality
- Contrastive Focus
  - Highlighting an argument in opposition to another actor in the narrative
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Non-canonical word order

- Definite, topical arguments fronted
  - Resulting non-canonical constituent order requires overt specification of semantic roles

(27) [bågi $ε$na]$_o$ [kolu-$_wε$]$_A$ ka di-o-la-bi
  
kina.shell that man-ERG CON take-COMP-REP-S/R

‘So the man took that kina shell, so they say.’
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Contrastive Focus

- Unexpected or focused arguments are foregrounded through the use of the ergative suffix

(28) aː sigai-je sina ma ke\i

No! NAME-ERG attack:PST NEG DECL

'No! It wasn't Sigai that hit (me)'

Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Optional absolutive case-marking conditioned by semantic and pragmatic functions:

• Animacy of S arguments
  - Inanimate intransitive subjects most frequently case-marked
  - Animate intransitive subjects often unmarked for case

• Topicality?
  - Overlapping function and form with topic enclitic
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Animacy of S arguments

- Inanimate intransitive subjects nearly always suffixed with case

(28) ći  wi-ja  ugiेi
       1:SG name-ABS  NAME
'My name is Ugei.'

(29) ɸuφɛsi-ja  ja  kɛi
Wind/storm-ABS  come  DECL
'A windstorm is coming.'
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Animacy of S arguments

- Animate intransitive subjects less often unmarked for case

(30)  tuwɛ gudu
      NAME die:PAST

'Tuwe died.'

(31)  kolu naːgla
      man sick:PAST

'The men were sick.'
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Absolutive case and topicality

- On first glance, absolutive case suffixing appears to occur on topical arguments
- However, morphosyntactic and semantic criteria show two distinct sets of properties
  - this suggests that there are two distinct but homophonous morphemes: a case-marking suffix, and a topical enclitic.
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Absolutive case and topicality

Topics form a distinct syntactic role apart from verbal arguments

- Topics precedes the main clause
- Topics may or may not be co-referential with one of the core arguments of the verb
- Topics generally do not show case distinctions

(32)  [do膦a=ja]_{TOP} [kosuwa-ja]_{O} [ami]_{X} saːni di-ja-gɪnɛ
snare=TOP cassowary-ABS ASS kill take-PAST-LINK

‘At the snare, (I) killed the cassowary there.’
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Absolutive case and topicality

However, case may be expressed by the suppletive case forms on of the demonstrative īna

(33) [ēmę-jā]_{TOP/A} [kosuwa əogono  ka]₀ bulu di-ɛli

that:ERG-TOP cassowary crest CONcut do-ITER

‘That (dog) cut off the cassowarys' crests.’

Nouns which express case through a vowel change are not inflected for case in topic positions

(34) a. [usɛ]ₓ [isa]₀ dī hɛ-ja
    middle:LOC bag:ABS take unhook-PAST
    ‘I hung the bag in the middle.’

b. [usu-wa]_{TOP/X} [isa]₀ dī hɛ-ja
    middle-TOP bag:ABS take unhook-PAST
    ‘There in the middle, I hung the bag.’
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Absolutive case and topicality

Semantics of absolutive-marked arguments and topics differ:

- Topics are topical:
  - Definite and given
  - Prominent discourse elements

    NAME-ERG  pandanus  DEF  plant-PAST  that:ABS  come-FUT:NON.3-
    'I was coming near where Wawija had planted pandanus.'

   b. [uʃu=wa] top  [isa] o  wa  dĩ  hė-ja
       middle=TOP  bilum:ABS  thither  take  hang-PST
       'I hung that bag in the middle there.'
Optional Case-Marking in Eibela

Absolutive case and topicality

Semantics of case-marked objects and topics differ:

- Absolutive-suffixed objects often denote new information and may or may not be a prominent discourse element
  - Objects which refer to known referents are often elided
  - Overt, case-marked objects pragmatically unmarked

(36) [gi=ja]TOP ka [suguːlu wi-ja]S daː kɛI

2:PL=TOP FOC school name-ABS be.at DECL

'The name of YOUR school is there.'
Conclusions

- Optional Case marking of A and O arguments is primarily discriminative, with some additional pragmatic function
  - in non-canonical constituent orders, case-marking of A arguments is nearly always present
  - contrastive focus is a semantic feature of many ergative-marked subjects
- Topics form a distinct syntactic argument slot signaled by an enclitic which is homophonous with the absolutive case-marker
  - topic and absolutive morphemes may be historically related
- Case-marking S arguments in intransitive clauses additionally influenced by animacy
References


