On Dependent Case and the Independence of Ergativity and Differential Object Marking

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Dependent Case Theory (DCT) is built around the idea that ergative or accusative case is assigned to an NP if and only if that NP c-commands or is c-commanded by another NP in the same local domain.  Since the two cases are converses of each other, it would seem to follow that if a language has both cases, the subject will be ergative if and only if the object is accusative.  While this is true for canonical tripartite languages like Nez Perce (Baker 2015), it is clearly not true for Hindi and certain Iranian languages.  In these languages, ergative case is conditioned by perfective aspect/past tense, whereas accusative case is conditioned by the specificity/definiteness of the object.  These factors are logically independent, so ergative assignment to the subject seems to be independent of accusative assignment to the object. This seems to show that DCT cannot account for both phenomena in these languages.

                I argue that there is both necessary and possible to reconcile these two accounts after all. First, a DCT account is warranted for ergative in Hindi, because ergative is conditioned by transitivity as well as by aspect and agentivity.  Second, a DCT account is warranted for accusative in Hindi, because accusative is conditioned by transitivity and word order as well as by specificity.  The tension between these two accounts can be reconciled if one assumes that there are three heads that can be phase heads in the Hindi clause, rather than two: Aspect as well as the usual v and C. DCT allows different dependent cases to be assigned in different spell out domains (e.g. ergative when C’s complement is spelled out, dative when v’s complement is spelled out, genitive when D’s complement is spelled out, etc.).  A consistent solution to the Hindi paradox can be given once one says that ergative case is assigned when Aspect’s complement is spelled out, whereas accusative case is assigned when C’s complement is spelled out.  This makes the two cases different enough that the Hindi patterns can be accounted for.  The study vindicates the DCT analysis for both ergativity, including split ergativity, and for (one type of) differential object marking, and it may give additional insight into the details of how cyclicity/derivation by phase works.