Basque primary adpositions from a clausal perspective

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Basque has three simple or primary adpositions, encoding location (inessive), path (allative) and source (ablative) (Trask, 2003). A long standing puzzle in the domain of primary adpositions in Basque is the fact that whereas inessives seem to take DP complements (1a), the complements of allatives and ablatives must be bare, even if the spatial ground is definite:

(1) a. Etxe-a-n                  b. Etxe-(*a)-ra               c. Etxe-(*a)-tik
    House-D-iness            house-D-all                 house-D-abl
    “In the house”           “To the house”               “From the house”

Against a commonly held view, there are good reasons to think that the –a- in (1a) is not the homophonous basque article –a-. In other words, the Basque cases are not the mirror image of English *in the house*. The alleged D status of –a- in inessive phrases faces several problems: first, -a there is compatible with the indefinite determiner bat “one”(2); then, the purported article does not have a plural, for which an independent syncretic form must be used (3a,b,c).

(2) a. Etxe bat-e-a-n
    House a-epenth-D-iness
    “In a house/*the house”

    House-D-pl                house-D-pl-epenth-iness     house-pl(def)-iness
    “The houses”              “In the houses”            “In the houses”

    Earth-epenth-D-iness      earth-epenth-D
    “In the earth”            “The earth”

Jacobsen provides an account of the epenthesis rule that invokes an underlying consonant (C):

Lurr –Ca-n -> Lurr-e-Ca-n. De Rijk (1981, 2008) claims that the unrealized consonant corresponds to the velar consonant of the suffix –ga-, that marks animate grounds, and precedes the inessive (5).

(5) Xabier-en-ga-n bertute handiak ikusi ditut
    Xabier-anim-iness quality big-pl seen I-have
    “I saw many virtues in Xabier”

This consonant is not realized in non-animate grounds by virtue of a historical rule of weakening applying to voiced consonants between vowels. The possessive suffix in (5) prevented this rule to apply to animate grounds. In other words, -a and –ga are historically related allomorphs in the context of inessive phrases. As shown by Lakarra (2005), -ga- is actually the ergative suffix, realized as a voiceless velar -k in final position:

(6) Xabier-e-k egin du  “Xabier did it”
    Xabier-epenth-erg done he-has-it

We may thus conclude that –a in the inessive phrases is actually the ergative. If so, we must ask why the ergative, a marked case which implies the existence of an absolutive nominal (see Uriagereka, 2001), should arise in inessives, but not in allatives and ablatives. Let me start by arguing that basque inessive phrases involve a silent Place noun, as has been proposed by Kayne (2005) for locative phrases (also Terzi, 2010; Leu, 2010). This silent Place checks absolutive case in the locative phrase, and forces the presence of ergative to license the second nominal (the overt Ground). The presence of a silent noun meaning Place should be compared to the pervasive use of locational nouns in more complex adpositional phrases:

(7) a. Etxearen ondo-a-n          b. Zuhaitzaren azpi-a-n
    House-gen next-D-iness       tree-gen low-side-D-iness
    “In the vicinity of the house” “In the space below the tree”
A silent Place noun akin to the bare locational nouns in (7) can be detected in the context of relative clauses. Note the following asymmetry (arising for a subset of the Basque speakers):

(8) a. Hura bizi zen leku-a-n argia zuten, *gu bizi ginen-Ø-a-n ez
   That live aux place-D-iness light had, we live aux-D-iness not
   “In the place that person lived they had light, in the one we lived, we had not”

b. Hura bizi zen leku-a argitsua zen, gu bizi ginen-Ø-a ez
   That live aux place-D luminous was, we live aux-D not
   “The place where he lived was luminous, the one where we lived was not”

If the sequence Noun-D-iness corresponds to a syntactic structure that includes the simpler N-D sequence, it is not clear what prevents nominal ellipsis of the head of the relative in (8b) as opposed to (8a). The relevant structures would be as in (9a,b):

(9) a. [DP [NP [RelP [IP …]-en]-Ø]place]-a
   b. *[PostP [DP [NP [RelP [IP …]-en]-Ø]place]-a] –n

However, if what is elided in (8a) is a silent Place nominal akin to the overt locational nouns in (7), the asymmetry follows straightforwardly: locational nouns cannot be relativized (10).

(10) *Bizi zaren ondo-a-n ez dago gaizki
    “The vicinity where you live is not bad”

If inessive phrases possess a silent Place noun besides an overt Ground nominal, then the ergative arises as a way to case-license the overt ground. Capitalizing on the double duty of the Basque inessive postposition as an aspectual suffix (involved in stative and gerundive aspectual configurations), I propose that the relevant structure of inessive phrases is similar to that of a full clause, with –a/-ga- an ergative case marker (assigned by T in Basque, see Rezac and ali., 2011), and the silent Place licensed by an inner aspect phrase headed by –n:

(11) [TP/ErgP Etxe –a [AspP PLACE –n [Predicate Phrase (etxe)…(PLACE)]]]

This structure connects with recent proposals holding that adpositional phrases have a clausal structure (Koopman, 2000; Den Dikken, 2010). We must now ask why the structure in (11) is not projected with allatives or ablatives. Recent cartography approaches conclude that the internal structure of complex spatial configurations like Paths, which entail a location, actually correspond to a hierarchical arrangement of spatial features (Caha, 2009, Pantcheva, 2009) minimally represented in (12):

(12) [Path [Place [Ground]]]

The issue from the perspective of Basque therefore, is why the allative (and the ablative), exclude the possibility of taking (11) in their scope. As shown recently by Arteax (2011), Mujika (2008), and Etxepare (2006), the allative in Basque has an aspectual function, marking change of state in cases like (13):

(13) Etxera da “S(h)e got home”
    Home-all is

If so, the impossibility of (1b) follows from the fact that aspectual heads do not select for TPs (Wurmbrandt, 2001, a.o). The same reasoning applies to the ablative (Arteax, 2011). The structure in (12), on the other hand, raises two further questions: one concerns the fact that the features in (12) do not have independent exponents, otherwise we would have expected stacked adpositional heads; the other one concerns case-licensing: how do we license the case of the overt nominal when only one adposition seems to be present, as in the case of allatives? The two questions find a coherent answer under the hypothesis that the primary adpositions lexicalize non-terminals (Starke, 2011). Etxepare (2011) shows that topological conditions in the use of the allative indicate that the allative head lexicalizes not only Path, but also Place, and that the ablative does not just lexicalize Source, but Source, Path and Place. The lexical insertion rules for primary adpositions can thus be summarized as follows:

(13) a. Inessive -> {Place} b. Allative -> {Path, Place} c. Ablative -> {Source, Path, Place}

This means that case-licensing occurs before the adpositional structure undergoes lexical insertion. In the allative cases, the silent nominal PLACE is licensed by the Place adposition and the overt ground is licensed by the Path adposition. Only in the absence of adpositional/aspectual structure beyond Place is the insertion of T necessary.