The Morphosyntax of Ergativity in Samoan

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1 Introduction

• How have contemporary theories of case and ergativity contributed to our understanding of ergative-absolutive alignment systems cross-linguistically?

(1) Conventional Understanding of Ergative-Absolutive Alignment Systems

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• I will introduce a proposal from Legate (2008), which states that at least a subset of ergative-absolutive languages are covertly tripartite, demonstrating ergative, nominative and accusative case.

• In this system, the grammar does not make reference to a notion of absolutive case.

• Samoan, a Polynesian language, has been cited as a canonical example of an ergative-absolutive aligned language (Bittner and Hale 1996, Koopman 2012).

• Central Goal: I argue that Samoan falls into Legate’s category of covertly tripartite languages.

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I show that Legate’s proposal gives us a new understanding of some mysterious facts about Samoan morphosyntax:

(a) The distribution of case in nominalised clauses.
(b) The conditioning factors on the “dropping” of ergative case.

Roadmap

1. Introduce basic facts about Samoan morphosyntax and its ergative properties.
2. Illustrate the distribution and licensing conditions of unmarked cases in Samoan.
3. Show how Legate’s proposed system accounts for these findings.
4. Illustrate some complexities for the Legate system arising out of the Samoan data.

2 Introducing Samoan

• Spoken in Western Samoan, the U.S. unincorporated territory of American Samoa, and by significant immigrant populations in New Zealand, Australia, the U.S. and elsewhere.

• Polynesian sub-branch of the Austronesian family.

• Approximately 370,000 speakers (Ethnologue).

• Extent of dialect variation between American Samoa and Western Samoa is unclear.

2.1 Introducing Samoan Morphosyntax

• Verb-initial word ordering (usually VSOX, but VOSX also common).

• Frequent pro-drop of both subjects and objects.

• Head-initial, with morphological case marking via prepositions, and TAM marking via a morphologically free-standing auxiliary.

• A basic case marking paradigm follows below:

(2) (a) ‘olo’o fafao [e le tama]A [le pusafa’i]P
       PROG pack ERG the boy the banana-case
       “The boy is packing his banana-case.” (Milner 1976; 59)

\[2\]

I use the following abbreviations in this handout: 1 = 1st person, 2 = 2nd person, 3 = 3rd person, sg = singular, pl = plural, EXCL = exclusive, INCL = inclusive, PRES = present tense, PERF = perfect tense, PROG = progressive tense, TOP = topic marker, CAUS = causative prefix, ANTAGUS = anticausative prefix, LOC = locative, DAT = dative, COMP = complementiser, REF = reflexive, GEN = genitive, AL = alienable, INAL = inalienable, DIR = directional particle
Throughout the talk I refer to transitive subjects as A, transitive objects as P, and intransitive subjects as S.

– Ergative case marking on A by the case marker e.

– ‘Absolutive’ on S and P marked by the absence of a case marker.

• Ochs (1982) observes that ergative case marking can be dropped, ergative marking being less frequent in casual speech.

3 The Distribution of Morphologically Unmarked Case

• Two viewpoints emerge within the generative literature handling the assignment of absolutive case to S and P.
(a) **Unified Absolutive Approach**

*The morphologically unmarked case is one case, absolutive, assigned by a unified mechanism to both S and P*

(e.g., for Bittner and Hale (1996), absolutive in Samoan is assigned by the functional head T to S and P via government. Massam (2001): absolutive in Niuean is assigned by a dedicated functional head Abs.)

(b) **Split Absolutive Approach**

*What is taken to be absolutive is actually nominative on S and accusative on P*

(Legate (2008) for languages like Warlpiri, nominative is assigned to S by its entering an Agree relation with finite T, accusative is assigned to P by its entering an Agree relation with transitive v)

- The **Split Absolutive Approach** as characterised by Legate makes a clear prediction about case on S and the finiteness of the clause
  - As the morphologically unmarked case on S is actually nominative, it should only be licensed in finite contexts.
  - As the morphologically unmarked case on P is actually accusative, it should be insensitive to the finiteness of the clause.

- The **Unified Absolutive Approach** asserts that absolutive case on S and P are assigned by the same process, and therefore should have the same distribution.

### 3.1 Case in Nominalised Clauses

- Samoan nominalised clauses provide support for the **Split Absolutive Approach**.

- These occur frequently in Samoan discourse.

- They are characterised by embedding a verb and its arguments within a DP, without any tense marking.

(5) *le (*sā) kī o le leitio*

> the PAST turn.on GEN the radio

> “The turning on of the radio.”

- In a nominalised clause, P may take the morphologically unmarked case, but S must take genitive case.
  - This is predicted by Legate’s **Split Absolutive Approach**: S’s ability to take the morphologically unmarked case is sensitive to the finiteness of the clause, while P is insensitive.

- The following examples show P taking the unmarked case in a nominalised clause.
(6) ‘ole‘ă lē fa‘atauina le masini e [la‘u ‘ai le vaomago] f ut neg sell-ina the machine erg my grip the straw
“The machine won’t get sold by my gripping the straw.”

(7) so‘o se taitai e tāua [lona iloa le Upu a le Atua] any a leader pres tell-ina his know.cia the word gen the God.
“Any leader who shares his knowledge of the word of God.

(8) e matamata le tamaitiiti ‘i [le si‘i ane e lona tama le pres watch the child dat the lift up erg his father the
matatao/
spear
“The child watches his father lifting up the spear.” (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992: 546)

(9) Sā alu ane loa Pa‘upa‘u [‘i le fau le pa] past go away then Pa‘ups‘u dat the build the hook
“Then Pa‘ups‘u went away to fix the fence” (Tapasā 19)

(10) ‘Ua tiga manava i [le ‘ai na‘o pota] perf hurt stomachs loc the eat only starch
“Their stomachs hurt because of eating only starch” (Tapasā 6)

• Under nominalisation, P is also able to take genitive.

(11) le fafaga o le pepe i le fagu susu the feed gen the baby instr the bottle milk
“The feeding of the baby with the milk bottle.” (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992: 546)

(12) ‘o le ala lena ‘o [le fau o ni potu] cop the reason that cop the build gen some rooms
“It is for this reason some rooms are built.” (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992: 546)

• Under nominalisation, S must take genitive case. S never takes a morphologically null case in a nominalised clause.

• NB: the choice between alienable genitive a or inalienable genitive o depends on independent lexical semantic factors which I won’t discuss.

(13) ‘ua i‘i vale [le fetagisi *(a) namu] perf squeak stupid the cry.pl gen mosquito.pl
“The cry of the mosquitoes was a stupid squeak.” (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992: 542)
na vave ‘uma /le tagi *(a) Susana/
PAST quick finished the cry of Susana
“The crying of Susana was quickly over.”
(Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992: 540)

‘ua maualo ai /le lele *(o) le va’alele/
PERF low there the fly GEN the plane
“The flying of the plane became low there.”

• This pattern is expected if the assignment of case to S assigned by T (absent in nominalised clauses), and the assignment of case to P is independent of T.

3.2 Case on P and Agentivity

• Legate proposes that the morphologically unmarked case on P is assigned by v.

• **Prediction**: unmarked case on P co-occurs with the assignment of an agentive theta role to a clause-mate argument.

• **Evidence**: We can test this by embedding verbs which demonstrate a (word) alternation in a nominalised clause.

• Removing the agentive argument from the verb (e.g. by anti-causativisation with ma-) removes the patients ability to take accusative case.

sā matamata le teine ‘i /la’u goto le va’a/
PAST watch the girl DAT my sink the boat
“The girl watched me sink the boat.”

e gata ai /le magoto *(o) se va’a/
PRES complete there the ANTICAUS.sink GEN a boat
“A boat has sunk there.”

• Giving the verb an agentive argument (e.g. with the causative prefix fa’a-) gives the patient the ability to appear in the morphologically unmarked case case.

fa’afetai ‘i /le tupu *(o) le atunu’u Sāmoa/
thanks DAT the grow GEN the country Samoa
“Thanks for the growth of the country of Samoa.”
(www.youtube.com/all comments?v=1NMOtvY-dQ)

le fa’atupu le taofiofi o tagata
the CAUS.grow the restraint GEN person.PL
“The raising the restraint of the people.”
(http://42976.activeboard.com/t47860333/)

• Emotional states and verbs of perception generally assign dative case to their internal argument.
• The addition of the suffix -Cia adds an entailment that the experiencer is agentive.
• The addition of the suffix also allows the stimulus to appear unmarked.

(20) aua 'ua ia iloaina /le alofa tele a Vesi 'iate ia/
because PERT 3SG know-CIA-INA the love big GEN Vesi DAT him
"Because he knew Vesi’s love for him.” (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992: 540)

(21) e 'ese fo'i [le alofagia le maliu a si tama]
pres extraordinary still the love.CIA the funeral GEN the.poor boy
“The handling (lit. treating-well) of the poor boy’s funeral was extraordinary.”
(www.myspace.com/bestofthebestiest/comments)

• When a verb is able to realise an agentive argument, it is also able to co-occur with an unmarked patientive argument in a nominalised clause.
• This is expected under Legate’s system, in which the unmarked case on P is accusative case, assigned by transitive v.

Interim Summary

– Evidence from nominalised clauses supports the Split Absolutive Approach.
– By hypothesis, putative absolutive on S is actually nominative case assigned by T, while putative absolutive on P is actually accusative.
– The case system of Samoan is therefore tripartite, although nominative and accusative are both realised by the same (lack of) morphology.

4 Case Assignment Mechanism

• Legate’s system makes use of the operation Agree (as defined in Chomsky 2001).
• In the narrow syntax, abstract case features are assigned to DPs by functional heads.

(22) Intransitive Clause
The sole argument of an intransitive gets nominative case from entering an Agree relation with T.

(a) Unaccusative Verb

TP
  T [NOM]
    (vP)
      (v) VP
        V DP [NOM]

(b) Unergative

TP
  T [NOM]
    vP
      DP [NOM] v VP
        V
(23) Transitive Clause

The agent and patient of a transitive verb get ergative and accusative (respectively) from transitive $v$ (notated as $v_{Tr}$).

\[
\text{TP} \\
\text{T} \\
\text{[NOM]} \\
\text{vP} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{[ERG]} \\
\text{v_{Tr}} \\
\text{[ACC]} \\
\text{VP} \\
\text{V} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{[ACC]}
\]

Key Points

- In a transitive clause, the [NOM] feature on T is left unassigned. Following Preminger (2011), we are forced to assume case assignors can fail to discharge their features.
- Both [ACC] and [ERG] are dependent on $v_{Tr}$, however only [ACC] is assigned via Agree.
- Legate assumes [ERG] is an inherent value of the DP merged into the specifier of transitive vP.
- As unergative subjects in (22b) are merged into the specifier vP, we need a distinction between intransitive v and transitive v.

5 Applying the Analysis to Samoan

- What features of Samoan morphosyntax does Legate’s theory of case help us understand?
- How do the specific features of Samoan morphosyntax help us refine this theory?

Mini Roadmap

1. Lay out the specifics of Samoan clause structure, adapting a proposal from Massam (2001).
2. Show further evidence for Legate’s proposal that the v category should split into intransitive and transitive versions.
3. Show how Legate’s theory allows us to understand the mysterious ergative drop phenomenon observed by Ochs (1982).
5.1 Deriving Verb-Initial Word Ordering

- Samoan clauses are predicate initial. Verbs and verbal modifiers (including adverbs, incorporated objects, directional particles) precede the arguments of the verb.

- Also proposed for Fijian (Potsdam 2009), Malagasy (Pearson 2005), Seediq (Aldridge 2004), Toba Batak (Cole and Hermon 2008) etc.

- Massam (2001) analyses Niuean (also Polynesian) by positing that the entire VP moves to a projection below T, which I tentatively assume is Asp.

\[(24)\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
TP \\
\downarrow \\
T \quad \text{AspP} \\
\downarrow \\
VP_j \quad \text{vP} \\
\downarrow \\
V \quad t_i \quad \text{Asp} \\
\downarrow \\
KP \quad \text{vP} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{NP} \\
\end{array}
\]

- The analysis is intended to account for Niuean’s “pseudo-incorporation” phenomenon. If a transitive object NP remains in-situ, it raises along with the verb.

- Massam’s Niuean data is replicated in Samoan.

\[(25)\]  
\[e \quad \text{su’e} \quad \text{pea} \quad e \quad \text{le} \quad \text{teine} \quad \text{le} \quad \text{ta’ifau} \quad \text{ula} \]

PRES/search continually/ERG/the/girl/the/dog/HON  
“The girl continuously searches for the mischievous dog.”

\[(26)\]  
\[e \quad [\text{su’e} \quad \text{ta’ifau} \quad \text{ula}] \quad \text{pea} \quad \text{le} \quad \text{teine} \]

PRES/search/dog/HON/mischievous/continuously/the/girl  
“The girl continuously searches for mischievous dogs.”

\[(27)\]  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
TP \\
\downarrow \\
T \quad \text{AspP} \\
\downarrow \\
VP_j \quad \text{vP} \\
\downarrow \\
V \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{Asp} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{su’e} \quad \text{ta’ifau} \quad \text{ula} \quad \text{e} \\
\end{array}
\]
• Further evidence from Samoan for this idea comes from the placement of resultative-like secondary predicates.

• Carrier and Randall (1992), Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) and others use the position of resultative XPs as a diagnostics for the merged position of their predicated argument.

• For example, the English examples are cited as evidence for a VP-internal underlying position for unaccusative subjects.

(28) (a) [The lake] froze t₁ solid.
(b) [The bottle] broke t₁ open.
(c) *[The lake] solid froze t₁.

• In Samoan, resultative predicates are verb-adjacent, suggesting the merged position of the internal argument is also verb-adjacent.

(29) (a) le aso sā ‘ou [vali mumu] ai le fale
the day PAST 1.SG paint red LOC.CL the house
“The day that I painted the house red.”
(b) *le aso sā ‘ou [vali] ai le fale mumu
the day PAST 1.SG paint LOC.CL the house red
“The day that I painted the house red.”
(c) ‘ua ‘ou va’ai atu ‘ua [tatipi faʻalaiti] ‘uma o’u ofu
PERF 1.SG see DIR PERF cut.PL small all my.PL dresses
aoga
school
“I saw that all my school dresses where cut into small pieces.” (Mosel 1992; 398)
(d) le failele lea e [tau faʻasusu faʻamoemoe] lana pepe
the mother that PRES try CAUS.suck CAUS.sleep her baby
“The mother that tries to suckle her baby to sleep.” (Mosel 1992; 402)

• Modelling the movement of the internal argument out of the VP: we can posit an [epp] feature on v, which attracts the internal argument into the specifier of vP.

(30) vP
   /\                       \\
  KP₁ /  \ v                \\
     /   \                \\
    /     \ VP
       /    \\ [epp]
      /      \\
     /       \\
  t₁

• Then an [epp] on Asp attracts the VP to the specifier of AspP.
In a transitive clause, v also needs to introduce an external argument (following Kratzer 1996, Chomsky 2001, et seq.), as well as attracting the internal argument.

We therefore require two [EPP] features (one for each task).

Tucking-in (Richards 2002): each movement to a specifier lands in a position below any other specifier.

The external argument is externally merged in the first specifier position, then the internal argument raises to the inner specifier position.

No violation of Merge Over Move, external merge takes place before internal merge.

With data from clause structure, the VP-raising proposal has derived the same conclusion as Legate (2008) has with data from case: we need an intransitive v and a transitive v (see also Coon 2010, Aldridge 2012).
(33) My proposal is itemised below with the following feature structures on functional items.

(a) The order of functional items in a clause: \( C > T > \text{Asp} > v > V \).
(b) Nominalisation of a clause involves embedding an AspP as the complement of D.
(c) A feature \([\text{NOM}]\) on T, to be assigned by Agree to a KP.
(d) An \([\text{EPP}]\) feature on a clause medial head (tentatively Asp), attracting the VP.
(e) An \([\text{EPP}]\) feature on \( v \), attracting the internal argument if present.
(f) A feature \([\text{ACC}]\) on transitive \( v \), assigned by Agree to a KP.

• In this system, noun phrases are KPs. The functional category K bears an abstract case feature.

• The K may have an inherent value (e.g., comitative, locative, ablative), or it may obtain a value by entering an Agree relation with a functional category (e.g., nominative, accusative).

• The feature feeds a morphological rule, determining the phonological form of the case marking preposition.

(34) 
\[
\begin{align*}
[\text{NOMINATIVE}] & \leftrightarrow \emptyset \\
[\text{ACCUSATIVE}] & \leftrightarrow \emptyset \\
[\text{ERGATIVE}] & \leftrightarrow e \\
[\text{ALIENABLE.GENITIVE}] & \leftrightarrow a \\
[\text{INALIENABLE.GENITIVE}] & \leftrightarrow o \\
[\text{DATIVE}] & \leftrightarrow 'i \\
[\text{LOCATIVE}] & \leftrightarrow i \\
[\text{INSTRUMENTAL}] & \leftrightarrow i \\
[\text{COMITATIVE}] & \leftrightarrow ma
\end{align*}
\]

• Yu (2009) proposes that “absolutive” case in Samoan is marked by a high boundary tone at the left edge of “absolutive” arguments.

• We can incorporate her findings by stating that both \([\text{NOMINATIVE}]\) and \([\text{ACCUSATIVE}]\) map to a high boundary tone.

6 Final Puzzle: Optional Ergativity

• To close the talk, I’ll show how Legate’s proposal gives us a new understanding of two puzzles of Samoan morphosyntax.

• Earlier I introduced Ochs’ (1982) observation that Samoan speakers may drop ergative case marking.
(35) (a) Sau loa. Ia ‘ai loa Ko’oko’o fala‘oa
Come now. Ok, eat now Ko’oko’o bread
“Come now, ok, Ko’oko’o is going to eat your bread.” (Ochs 1982: (8))

(b) ‘Ua ‘ai oe le pusi? ‘Ua fela’u oe le pusi?
PERT eat 2SG the cat? PERT scratch 2SG the cat
“The cat has just bitten you? The cat has just scratched you?” (Ochs 1982: (9))

• Ochs observes this is a stylistic variable, ergative case marking associated with a more formal register.

• Samoan has a very distinguishable casual register (used among friends and colleagues) in which the alveolar-velar phonemic distinction disappears.

• Wherever /k/ shows up, ergative marking sounds marked or unusual (though not ungrammatical).

(36) (a) sā talaga (?e) le fafīne le tupe i le fale‘oa
PAST change ERG the woman the money at the store
“The woman was changing the money at the store.”

(b) sā kalaga (?e) le fafīge le kupe i le fale‘oa
PAST change ERG the woman the money at the store
“The woman was changing the money at the store.”

(37) (a) ‘ua tata‘a (?e) le teine le fai‘ataoa
PERT close ERG the girl the door
“The girl closed the door.”

(b) ‘ua kakala (?e) le keige le faikakoa
PERT close ERG the girl the door
“The girl closed the door.”

• ‘Optional ergative’ or ‘bi-absolutive constructions’ have been observed in Literary Central Tibetan (Tournadre 1995), Gooniyandi (MacGregor 1998), Nakh-Dagestanian languages (Forker 2012).

• Does not appear to be any kind of (pseduo-)incorporation: the P argument is a full DP with a determiner.

• Does not seem to be derived an alternate phonological realisation of ergative as null. Seems syntactically conditioned.
Within a nominalised clause, ergative is always obligatory, even in casual registers.

Given the proposed analysis in this talk, we can understand this alternation as variation between ergative and nominative.

In the absence of T, the A argument can no longer “drop” its ergative case marking, as nominative case is not available.

The absolutive-as-nominative idea gives a clear insight into the pattern of ergative drop and how its conditioned by finiteness.

However, it suggests that that Legate’s characterisation of ergative as a value inherent to whatever merges into the specifier of transitive vP is too strong.

A Suggestion

- The inventory of K heads includes the ergative preposition e (with an inherent value [erg]), as well as an unvalued K head (with an inherent value [uCase]).
• An ergative KP headed by $e$ is only able to merge in the specifier of transitive $vP$.
• A KP headed by the unvalued K is able to merge into any argument position.
• This gives speakers a choice in how to realise the A argument (ergative K or unvalued K) and deriving either (39a) or (39b). Thus a stylistic variable is born.

7 Conclusion

• This paper introduced a novel set of data from the Polynesian language Samoan and proposed a formalisation using a small set of stipulated features on functional heads.
• The data appear to support an analysis which posits that transitive objects and intransitive subjects receive two distinct cases, nominative and accusative.
• The analysis allows us to understand a complex set of facts about Samoan morphosyntax, including the distribution of unmarked case in nominalised clauses, and the licensing conditions on dropping ergative case.

References


