

Cognate object case in Samoan and Niuean

It has recently been argued that external arguments are not structurally homogenous: subjects of unergative verbs are merged *lower* than subjects of transitive verbs in several languages (Massam 2009; Tollan, 2015, 2018; Polinsky, 2016, a.o.), as illustrated in (1). In this structure, subjects of unergative verbs are merged in the specifier of vP , while subjects of transitive verbs are merged in the specifier of a higher VoiceP.

(1) [_{VoiceP} TRANSITIVE SUBJECT Voice [_{vP} UNERGATIVE SUBJECT v [VP]]]

However, we also see cross-linguistic variation with regards to how this interacts with other parts of the syntax. In this paper, we examine a difference between the ergative Polynesian languages Samoan and Niuean as concerns the overt transitivity of unergative predicates. Both languages have ERG-ABS case marking (2), with ergative case absent from subjects of unergative verbs (3).

(2) a. Samoan ERG-ABS (Tollan 2018: 2)

Sā fau e le tamāloa le fale.
 PST build ERG DET man DET house[ABS]
 ‘The man built the house.’

b. Niuean ERG-ABS (fieldnotes)

Ne kai he pusi ia e moa
 PST eat ERG cat that ABS bird.
 ‘That cat ate the chicken’

(3) a. Samoan ABS unergative (Tollan 2018: 2)

Sā siva le teine.
 PST dance DET girl[ABS]
 ‘The girl danced.’

b. Niuean ABS unergative (fieldnotes)

Ne kata a Mele
 PST laugh ABS Mele
 ‘Mele laughed’

When unergatives have an overt cognate object, however, a difference between the two languages emerges. Ergative marking does not appear with Samoan unergatives (4a): the subject of a transitivized unergative retains absolutive case, and the cognate object is marked with ‘middle’ case, argued by Tollan (2018) to be accusative case. In Niuean (4b), however, the transitive unergative *does* exhibit the ergative-absolutive case frame typical of most other types of transitive structures. The goal of this paper is to analyze how this difference arises.

(4) a. Samoan cognate object (Tollan 2018: 2)

Sā siva le teine i le siva
 PST dance DET girl[ABS] ACC DET dance
 ‘The girl danced a dance’

b. Niuean cognate object (fieldnotes)

Ne kata e Mele e kata loa
 PST laugh ERG Mele ABS laugh long
 ‘Mele laughed a long laugh’

Proposal: We argue that the variation between Samoan and Niuean cognate object constructions results from the interaction of three parametric differences between the two languages:

- (i) The locus of absolutive case assignment (v^0 in Niuean, and T^0 in Samoan);
- (ii) The existence of accusative case in Samoan but not in Niuean; and
- (iii) Specific conditions on the assignment of ergative case in Niuean.

In short: in Samoan, absolutive is consistently assigned (by T^0) to subjects of unergatives, and the thematic head which introduces the unergative subject – v^0 – assigns accusative (‘middle’) case to a cognate object (cf. Burzio, 1986; Marantz, 1991; 1997, i.a.). In Niuean, by contrast, no accusative case feature exists. However, absolutive case is assigned by v^0 , and is therefore available to the object. This would leave a low unergative subject without a case licenser. To avoid this, the subject of the cognate object VP merges high, in specifier of Voice. This is in accordance with Niuean mapping rules and constraints on ERG case assignment (which we take to be an inherent case; Wooldford, 1997) which dictate that ERG arguments must be agentive and transitive.

Variation in the locus of ABS case assignment (i): We propose that absolutive case in Samoan and Niuean is assigned by T^0 and v^0 , respectively. Evidence that the two languages differ in their locus of absolutive case comes from contrasts in post-verbal word order possibilities, coupled with the presence vs. absence of syntactic ergativity. First, we consider word order. When the object is

a full DP, Samoan allows both VSO and VOS word order (Mosel & Hovdhaugen, 1992). In Niuean, however, only VSO is possible (Clemens, 2014). Second, Samoan exhibits syntactic ergativity insofar as ERG subjects do not freely extract, but require that the verb must bear the suffix *-(i)a* (this suffix does not appear with extraction of an ABS argument); see Mosel and Hovdhaugen (1992: 458 for examples). Niuean, on the other hand, has no hallmarks of syntactic ergativity: both ERG and ABS arguments are freely extracted (Longenbaugh & Polinsky, 2018). We follow Clemens and Tollan (2019), who propose that these two properties both follow from an analysis in which absolutive case in Polynesian is assigned high, by T^0 , in languages which exhibit both variable post-verbal word order and syntactic ergativity (i.e., Samoan), and low, by v^0 , in languages which do not (i.e., Niuean); space limitations preclude further discussion here.

Accusative case in Samoan but not in Niuean (ii): As noted earlier, cognate objects in Samoan unergatives bear ‘middle’ case; namely, the case assigned to objects of so-called ‘middle’ verbs (which include verbs of perception, emotion, and communication; see 5). We follow Tollan (2018), who presents evidence that middle case is in fact structural accusative case, available on v^0 when a low external argument (i.e., an unergative subject) is merged in Spec, vP (see 1); the *i* case marker also functions as an accusative marker in NOM-ACC Polynesian languages such as Hawaiian and Māori. Niuean, we argue, lacks this structural case feature. Niuean does have an analogous ‘middle’ case frame, however, by contrast, the internal arguments of middle verbs appear with lexical ‘goal’ case, *ke he* and not with accusative *i* (6).

(5) Samoan middle ACC case (fieldnotes) (6) Niuean middle goal case (fieldnotes)

E mana’o le teine i le masi.	Manako au ke he taha fua moli
PRS want DET girl[ABS] ACC DET cookie	want 1SG.ABS GOAL NSP fruit orange
‘The girl wants the cookie.’	‘I want an orange.’

We analyze Niuean *ke he* as inherent (a.k.a. lexical) case, assigned by V^0 and available only for a particular class of verbs (i.e., middle verbs), which does *not* include unergatives. Thus, marked object case is unavailable in unergatives, and the cognate object receives the absolutive case feature from v^0 which would otherwise be designated for the unergative subject (we assume, adapted from Bejar & Rezac, 2009), that structural – but not inherent – case on a head first surveys its c-command domain, but that it can be assigned to its specifier in the absence of a qualifying DP in its c-command domain). This leaves the unergative subject without a case licenser, so, instead of merging in vP , it merges high, in VoiceP, where it can be assigned ergative case by $Voice^0$ (this is in accordance with the looser constraints on ERG case assignment in Niuean as compared with Samoan; see below). The case configurations for Samoan and Niuean cognate object constructions are shown in (7) and (8) (for readability we do not show verb raising).

(7) Samoan: [TP T ABS [vP SUBJECT v ACC [vP V COGNATE OBJECT]]]

(8) Niuean: [TP T [$VoiceP$ SUBJECT $Voice^0_{ERG}$ [vP v ABS [vP V COGNATE OBJECT]]]]

Conditions on the assignment of ergative case in Niuean (iii): We follow Massam (2006) in arguing that Niuean is flexible in allowing *volitional* agents to merge in either specifier of vP or of VoiceP. The key requirement, however, is that Voice must select a saturated vP (i.e., one in which ABS case has been discharged; this requirement is not present in Samoan). Thus, volitional transitive agents merge in Voice, and all other agents (intransitive volitional agents such as unergative subjects, and non- initiators) merge in v . **Selected references:** Bejar & Rezac 2009, *LI* ♦ Burzio 1986, *Italian Syntax*. ♦ Clemens & Tollan 2019, *LSA* ♦ Marantz 1991, *ESCOL* 8 ♦ Massam 2009, *AFLA*. ♦ Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992 *Samoan Reference Grammar* ♦ Polinsky 2016, *Deconstructing ergativity* ♦ Seiter 1978 2nd International Conference of Austronesian Linguistics ♦ Tollan 2018, *Glossa*.