Syntactic ergativity without inversion
A composite probe analysis of ergative extraction

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Inversion & syntactic ergativity

The standard analysis of ergative extraction restrictions relies on **object inversion:** movement of the object above the subject.

- Object intervenes for further subject Ā-extraction, for a variety of proposed reasons
- Notable recent analyses: Coon et al. 2014, Coon et al. 2021, Clemens & Tollan 2021
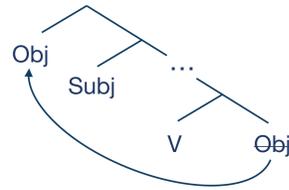
Does syntactic ergativity always involve inversion? No!

▷ Nukuoro (Polynesian Outlier) shows an ergative extraction restriction without inversion of core arguments.

▷ Without inversion, we need an analysis that derives syntactic ergativity based on properties of the *ergative subject*.

Syntactic ergativity in Nukuoro

- Polynesian Outlier language spoken in the Federated States of Micronesia
- SVO/VSO alternating
- Morphologically neutral alignment
- No marked cases except genitive

(1) Absolutive extraction in Nukuoro: ✓

　a. Go ai ne anu naa?
　　FOC who PFV dance MED
　　'Who danced?' (S)

　b. Go ai a Ruth ne doolohi laa?
　　FOC who GEN Ruth PFV chase DIST
　　'Who did Ruth chase?' (O)

(2) Ergative extraction in Nukuoro: ✗

　a. *Go ai ne doolohi Soni?
　　FOC who PFV chase Soni
　　Int: 'Who chased Johnny?' (A)

　b. Go ai ne **dolohia (ina)** Soni?
　　FOC who PFV chase.CIA INA Soni
　　'Who chased Johnny?'

The extraction repair –*Cia/ina* also obligatorily appears in transitive non-finite clauses (3), suggesting a licensing function.

(3) Au ne dugu (bolo) [Mina gi **huudia ina** dahi mamu].
　　1SG PFV allow C Mina INF catch.CIA INA one fish
　　'I allowed Mina to catch a fish.'

Ergative extraction is possible without –*Cia/ina* when the object is an incorporated bare noun (4).

(4) tamaa gauligi laa e [vP **gai gahudi**] i masoaa alodahi
　　DET.child young DIST T/A eat banana P time all
　　'the child who eats bananas all the time'

Composite probing for Case

I analyze the Nukuoro extraction restriction as a composite [Ā] and [ABS] probe.

▷ Draws on existing **case discrimination** analyses (Otsuka 2006, Deal 2017)

▷ Natural extension of recent work on the **articulation of Agree**

- Agreement can target more than one feature (e.g., Coon & Bale 2014)
- Ā-movement can be sensitive to nominal features (e.g., van Urk 2015, Coon et al. 2021)

A syntactically ergative composite probe searches for an [Ā] and [ABS] feature **on the same goal**.

$$[_{CP} C_{[u\bar{A}+ABS]} \ldots [_{vP} DP_{ERG} \ v \ [\ DP_{ABS} \ ]]]$$

- Ergative arguments do not possess both features, and thus cannot be Agreed with.

Repair: Transitive subjects can undergo Ā-movement *only* if they receive absolutive Case.

▷ I propose that –*Cia/ina* realizes an additional absolutive Case licenser (v_{INA}) above vP.

- v_{INA} assigns [ABS] to the transitive subject, creating a bi-absolutive (Gagliardi et al. 2014)

$$[_{CP} C_{[u\bar{A}+ABS]} \ldots v_{INA} [_{vP} DP_{ABS} \ v \ [\ DP_{ABS} \ ]]]$$

- With an [ABS] feature, the transitive subject is eligible for Agree and Ā-extraction.

▷ Object incorporation repairs ergative extraction by preventing [ABS] assignment to the object, resulting in [ABS] for the subject without the use of an additional licensing head.

The analysis of –*Cia/ina* as a licenser explains its presence in transitive non-finite clauses (3, 9b):

▷ v_{INA} Case-licenses the transitive subject when [ERG] is unavailable due to lack of finite Infl.

Prediction: All non-absolutive nominals, including obliques, should fail to undergo extraction. This is borne out in Nukuoro, where oblique Ā-extraction requires resumption (5).

(5) Se aha aana ne tuu ***(ai)** de huaamee?
　　INDEF.SG what 3SG.GEN PFV cut OBL DET coconut
　　'What did s/he cut the coconut with?'

Conclusions and implications

1. Syntactic ergativity can arise independently of object inversion.

▷ Object inversion cannot account for all instances of (syntactic) ergativity.

▷ Composite probing can capture syntactically ergative languages with and without inversion, particularly if inversion is driven by absolutive Case assignment from T/Infl.

2. Case discrimination is an expected mechanism under articulated theories of Agree.

▷ No new machinery is needed to capture syntactic ergativity: it falls out from the existence of composite probing, mixed A/Ā-movement, and abstract Case assignment.

3. Composite probing predicts a wide range of Case restrictions, all of which are attested:

- [Ā + NOM]: only subjects can Ā-move (Māori; Bauer 1997)
- [Ā + ACC]: only objects can Ā-move (Kinande; Schneider-Zioga 2007)
- [Ā + ERG]: only ergatives can Ā-move (Roviana; Collins & Schuelke 2020)
- [Ā + OBL]: only adjuncts can Ā-move (Tagalog; Aldridge 2002)

Aldridge 2002. Nominalization and wh-movement in Seediq and Tagalog. **Clemens & Tollan 2021.** Syntactic ergativity as absolutive movement in Tongic Polynesian. **Collins & Schuelke 2020.** Roviana fronting and the relationship between syntactic and morphological ergativity. **Coon, Baier, & Levin 2021.** Mayan Agent Focus and the Ergative Extraction Constraint. **Coon & Bale 2014.** The interaction of person and number in Mi'gmaq. **Coon, Mateo Pedro, & Preminger 2014.** The role of case in A-bar extraction asymmetries. **Deal 2017.** Syntactic ergativity as case discrimination. **Drummond 2022.** Abstract ergative Case without morphological case. **Gagliardi, Goncalves, Polinsky & Radkevich 2014.** The biabsolutive construction in Lak and Tsez. **Herd, Macdonald, & Massam 2011.** Genitive subjects of relative clauses in Polynesian. **Otsuka 2006.** DP ellipsis in Tongan. **Schneider-Zioga 2007.** Anti-agreement, anti-locality, and minimality. **van Urk 2015.** A uniform syntax for phrasal movement.

Nukuoro lacks object inversion

Nukuoro demonstrably **lacks** object inversion in all clauses.

Word order

1. Nukuoro clauses are either SVO or VSO (6a)—never VOS (6b).

(6) a. Ne llanga **goe** *denga gede*?
　　PFV weave 2SG DET.PL basket
　　'Did you weave the baskets?'

　b. *Ne llanga *denga gede* **goe**?
　　PFV weave DET.PL basket 2SG
　　'Did you weave the baskets?'

2. Pre-verbal subjects are not Ā elements:

▷ No argument can appear pre-verbally besides subjects.

▷ Topical subjects can co-occur with a pre-verbal pronoun (7).

(7) Dogu dinana, **ia** ne gisagisa mai dahi singilidi mo-ogu.
　　1SG.GEN mother 3SG PFV gift DIR one shirt BEN-1SG
　　'(As for) my mother, she gave me a t-shirt.'

Subject-oriented A-dependencies

Genitive marking in relative clauses, which is derived via control, targets subjects to the exclusion of objects (8).

(8) a. de masovaa **aau** ne saabai ai de gede
　　DET time 2SG.GEN PFV carry OBL DET basket
　　'the time that you carried the basket'

　b. *de masovaa **aagu** Soni ne saabai ai
　　DET time 1SG.GEN Soni PFV carry OBL
　　'the time that Johnny carried me'

Evidence for abstract Case

Drummond (2022) argues that Nukuoro assigns **abstract ergative and absolutive Case**, despite lacking exponence of these Cases.

- Both are structural Cases, with ergative assigned by Infl and absolutive assigned by v

When Infl is absent in non-finite clauses, one argument of a transitive fails to be licensed (like Q'anjob'al; Coon et al. 2014).

(9) a. Au e lodo (bolo) [Mina gi hano daiao].
　　1SG T/A want C Mina INF go tomorrow
　　'I want Mina to leave tomorrow.'

　b. Ruth e lodo (bolo) [au gi buuludi ***(ina)** ange Soni].
　　Ruth T/A want C 1SG INF hug INA DIR Soni
　　'Ruth wants me to hug Johnny.'

Nominalizations without TAM show us that it's the **subject** which fails to be licensed in non-finite contexts, not the object.

(10) Gu lava i [de hai ange **a de hine** laa *de hada*].
　　INC finish P DET fix GEN DET woman DIST DET car
　　'The woman finished fixing the car.'