

### Roviana fronting and the relationship between syntactic and morphological ergativity

How do ergative-absolutive patterns in morphological case marking systems relate to ergative-absolutive patterns in the syntax proper? Previous work (e.g., Dixon 1972, Bittner 1994, Deal 2016) claims that ergativity in the morphological system is a necessary condition for ergativity in the syntax. Thus, a challenge for any adequate theory of syntactic ergativity is to explain this implicational relationship.

We evaluate some competing theories of ergativity in the morphosyntax with reference to a case study from Roviana (W. Oceanic, Solomon Islands). Roviana demonstrates morphological ergativity in its case-marking system, and in its extraction patterns. However, in both cases, the Roviana pattern seems to be the reverse of the more typologically expected pattern: (i) The absolutive m-case, but not the ergative m-case, is overt, and (ii) ergatives, but not absolutes, are able to undergo a certain type of extraction.

We claim that property (ii) in Roviana provides a counterexample to Deal's theory of syntactic ergativity based on the configurational case hierarchy from Marantz 1991. We propose an adjustment of Deal's theory, whereby both syntactically and morphologically ergative phenomena reference more basic underlying 'linking features', adopting the notion from Kiparsky 1997.

**Basic morphosyntax:** Roviana demonstrates VS order in intransitive clauses, and VAP order in transitive clauses. A pronominal clitic on the verb references the  $\phi$ -features of the P-argument. S and P are marked with an identical series of case-markers, listed in the first two columns of (1). The A argument, on the other hand, is always  $\emptyset$ -marked. The marker *koa sa/koa* is for recipients in ditransitives or a general purpose marker for locative/directional obliques.

	S	P	$A_{PostV}$	R/Obl
(1) Common nouns	<i>sa</i>	<i>sa</i>	$\emptyset$	<i>koa sa</i>
Pronouns	<i>si</i>	<i>si</i>	$\emptyset$	<i>koa</i>
Proper names	<i>se</i>	<i>se</i>	$\emptyset$	<i>koe</i>

The A argument may be fronted to a pre-verbal position, as in (2), while S and P may only be fronted with an insertion of the absolutive marker *si*, in a structure resembling a cleft, as in (2-b). We refer to the fronting in (2-a) as 'null-fronting' and the fronting in (2-b) as '*si*-fronting'.

(2) a.	<i>esei (*si) hena=ia sa rereke</i>	b.	<i>esei *(si) {taloa   taka=ia Bili}</i>
	who ABS eat=3SG.OBJ ART mango		who ABS left kick=3SG.OBJ Bill
	'Who ate the mango?'		'Who left?/did Bill kick?'

Both *si*- and null-fronting are instances of long-distance extraction. They can both cross clause boundaries, and they both trigger island effects. These effects are shown below for null-fronted As.

- (3) *esei balabala=n=ia agoi hena=ia [GAP] sa rereke?*  
 who think=APPL=3SG you eat=3SG.OBJ ART mango  
 Who do you think ate the mango?
- (4) *\*esei ele kamo si goi mudina ngaza=au [GAP]?*  
 who ASP arrive ABS you after hugged=1SG  
 \*Who did you arrive after hugged me?

We argue for the following informal characterization of null-fronting: *only non-absolutive core arguments may be null-fronted*. The motivation for framing the restriction as 'anti-absolutive' comes from the observation that ditransitive recipients (R arguments) can be null-fronted.

- (5) *koe Pita ele vala=ia Zone sa heta*  
 DAT Peter PERF give=3SG John ART betelnut  
 John gave *Peter* the betelnut.

**Approaches to extraction restrictions:** Ideally, ergative-aligned extraction patterns such as Roviana null-fronting should fall out of a cohesive theory of syntactic ergativity. 'Inversion-based' approaches (e.g., Aldridge 2004) argue that ergativity in extraction patterns falls out of a clause-structure whereby the P

argument raises to a position higher than the A argument (e.g., for Case-licensing), as in (6-a). P occupies a position which A must access in order to successfully extract (e.g., a phase-edge in Coon et al. 2015), thus the extraction of A is blocked.

- (6) a. [ P<sub>i</sub> [ A [ <sub>VP</sub> V t<sub>i</sub> ] ] ]                      b. [ S<sub>i</sub> [ <sub>VP</sub> V (t<sub>i</sub>) ] ]

This account does not capture the anti-absolutive effect of Roviana null-fronting. Even if we assume that the configuration of P and A in (6-a) are reversed in Roviana, we are left to explain why S is blocked from extracting even when there is no higher argument blocking it. The ‘inversion-based’ theory ties extraction to transitivity and thus must stipulate additional conditions for extraction restrictions on intransitives.

Alternative approaches assume syntactically ergative phenomena are sensitive to case and/or licensing features. According to Otsuka (2006, 2010), these phenomena target nominals based on features assigned by their licensing head. This approach can handle the Roviana null-fronting pattern, so long as the null-fronting operation targets either the [ERG] or [DAT] features. While empirically adequate, this theory would stipulate a inelegant disjunction of features: the grouping of [ERG]/[DAT] as distinct from [ABS] requires motivation.

Under Deal’s (2016) approach, m-case is assigned according to configurational rules as in Marantz 1991. M-cases are grouped according to the hierarchy (7) proposed in Bobaljik 2008. Operations (e.g., agreement, extraction) applying to one group must also apply to preceding groups.

- (7) *unmarked case* (ABS, NOM) < *dependent case* (ERG, ACC) < *lexical/oblique case* (DAT)

Syntactically ergative patterns emerge when extraction operators target only XPs bearing *unmarked case*. However, Roviana null-fronting provides a counterexample to the approach employing this hierarchy. Null-fronting target *dependent* (or even *lexical*) marked XPs, but does not target unmarked XPs (absolutives).

**Roviana Revision:** We propose a revision to Deal’s approach. Like Marantz, we assume features are configurationally assigned to nominals. However, these feature do not determine m-case directly. Rather, these ‘licensing features’ serve as the input to the m-case system, as well as to other morphosyntactic phenomena.

- (8) a. Assign to any NP which {does | does not} c-command another NP { [-LR] | [+LR] }  
 b. Assign to any NP which {is | is not} c-commanded by another NP { [-HR] | [+HR] }  
 c.                      A                      R                      P                      S  
                          [NP<sub>1</sub>    v    [NP<sub>2</sub>    [V    NP<sub>3</sub>    ]]]                      d. [NP<sub>1</sub>    v    [ V ]]]  
                          [+HR]                      [-HR]                      [-HR]                      [+HR]  
                          [-LR]                      [-LR]                      [+LR]                      [+LR]

While more typical ergative-extraction patterns target the [+LR] feature (targeting S and P), Roviana null-fronting targets [-LR], thus picking out A (the transitive agent) and R (the ditransitive recipient). As the fronting operation targets licensing features, it is insensitive to the case of A/R. The licensing features end up determining the case pattern for Roviana via the ordered rules in (9). These rules don’t specify an output for m-case marking on A, which therefore receives ‘null’ case, rather than ergative.

- (9) a. [+LR] ⇒ [ABS]                      b. [-HR] ⇒ [DAT]

**What’s the ergative parameter?:** Previous work explains why only morphologically ergative languages show ergative extraction restrictions: extraction targets morphological case features such as [ABS]. As it stands, our approach in (8) *is compatible* with the appearance of syntactic ergativity in *any* language. To curb this, we suggest a new perspective on the “ergative parameter”: ergative languages have feature assignment rules as in (8). Non-ergative language replace (8-a) with (10), i.e., the [+LR] feature is not assigned.

- (10) Assign to any NP which c-commands another NP [-LR].

Without the the [+LR] feature, all of A, S, P, and R, are uniquely identifiable, but there is no cohesive featural grouping of S ([-HR] only) and P ([+HR] only) to the exclusion of A or R. Thus no syntactic rule can reference [+LR] for S+P-only extraction, and no rule can assign a S+P-only m-case. This reproduces the implication that ergativity in the morphological system is a necessary condition for ergativity in the syntax.