Unergatives and Split Ergativity in Samoan

Introduction: This paper examines similarities in Samoan between the split Ergative case pattern in non-affecting transitive constructions (also known in Polynesian literature as "middles") and unergative predicates. Building upon Massam's (2012) proposal for Niuean, I claim that Samoan middle (non-affecting transitive) and unergative subjects are base-generated in the same structural position (spec, vP), that position being *lower* than the position for Ergative (affecting transitive) subjects (spec, *Voice*P). This difference is derived from the degree of affect of the subject on its object (if present). In doing so, I also propose that the middle 'Oblique' case marker is better analysed as structural Accusative, and the split Ergative pattern therefore arises due to the structural position of the grammatical *subject*. This contrasts with analyses which derive similar types of case splits from extra structure associated with the *object* (e.g., Coon and Preminger, to appear).

Background: Samoan transitive subjects (A) are marked Ergative (morpheme *e*) (1a), while intransitive subjects (S) (1b,c) and direct objects (P) (1a) are Absolutive (null). All data is from my own fieldnotes unless otherwise indicated.

(1) (a) Sā kiki [**e** le teine]$_A$ [le polo]$_P$
PAST kick **ERG** the girl   the ball-**ABS**
'The girl kicked the ball'

(b) Sā asulu [le teine]$_S$ (c) Sā siva [le teine]$_S$
PAST fall   the girl-**ABS**   PAST dance the girl-**ABS**
'The girl fell' *(unaccusative)*   'The girl danced' *(unergative)*

A number of (so-called 'middle') verbs show a split case pattern, in which the subject is Absolutive and the object Oblique (morpheme *i*); (2). These include verbs of perception, emotion and communication (e.g., *want, love, listen to, call, meet)* and a number of other verbs (e.g., *follow*, *visit*). The common semantic characteristic of middles is that they involve a lower degree of affectedness than regular transitive verbs (Seiter, 1978; Chung, 1978). This mirrors Massam's (2012) position on unergative subjects: they are also associated with a lesser degree of affect than transitive subjects, given that they have no (affected) objects.

(2) (a) Sa fa'afetai [le teine]   [**i** lona tina]   (b) E   mana'o [le tama]   [**i** le masi]
PST thank   the girl-**ABS OBL** her mother   PRES want   the boy-**ABS OBL** the cookie
'The girl thanked her mother' (Chung 1978:217)   'The boy wants the cookie'

Coon and Preminger (to appear) argue that such ERG-ABS/ABS-OBL type splits are due to the structural position of the object in the ABS-OBL constructions, namely that it is not a direct object of the verb but appears in a PP, rendering the subject intransitive; (3).

(3)   [$_{vP}$ **Subject$_{ABS}$** v [$_{VP}$ **V** [$_{PP}$ *i* **Indirect Object$_{OBL}$**]]]

Samoan middle objects however, behave syntactically as direct objects (Chung, 1978; Seiter 1978) with respect to various tests: quantifier float (middle objects, like Absolutive objects, unrestrictedly allow floating quantifiers, unlike Oblique locatives or goal arguments), noun incorporation (while locative and goal arguments cannot undergo incorporation, middle and Absolutive objects can) and clitic placement (all pronominal middle subjects, like Ergative subjects and unlike intransitive subjects, may cliticise without any restrictions). This suggests that the structure in (3) is not the correct structure here. Treating middle objects as direct objects (theme arguments) instead, I analyse the middle 'Oblique' marker *i* as structural Accusative (further support for this comes from the fact that *i* is also the Accusative marker in Polynesian languages with NOM-ACC alignments). I claim that middle subjects are generated in a lower syntactic position (vP) than Ergative subjects, and that this allows Accusative case licensing of the object in middle constructions.

Analysis: Massam (2012) treats Niuean unergative subjects as being of a separate theta type ('doers') to transitive agents, the difference being that while both initiate an action, only agents have a high degree of affect upon another entity (i.e., an object). She proposes a split vP/*Voice*P argument structure, with *Voice*[0] introducing semantics of *affect*; (4).

(4)   [$_{VoiceP}$ **AGENT** *Voice* [$_{vP}$ **DOER** v [$_{VP}$ **V THEME**]]]

I suggest that not only is the structure in (4) true of Samoan, but that spec, vP (and the 'doer' theta-role) is not uniquely reserved for unergative subjects: middle subjects also occupy this position. Crucially, merging an external (doer) argument endows v[0] with an Accusative case feature (cf. Burzio's Generalisation; Burzio, 1986). The doer subject on the other hand, receives default case from T[0], whether a middle (5) or unergative (6) (I follow Koopman 2012, who treats Samoan Absolutive as

default case, assigned by T^0). The difference between middles and unergatives amounts only to whether Accusative case is discharged or not (following Preminger 2011, I also assume that case licensing heads may fail to discharge their features).

(5) [...T_{ABS}...[$_{vP}$ **DOER** v_{ACC} [$_{VP}$ **V THEME**]]]   (6) [...T_{ABS}... [$_{vP}$ **DOER** v_{ACC} [$_{VP}$ **V**]]]

An Ergative agent argument however, is merged higher (in spec *Voice*P), such that *v*P (having *not* introduced an external argument) cannot assign Accusative case, and the theme receives default (Absolutive) case from T^0. Following Collins (2014), I treat Samoan Ergative case as inherent, and claim specifically that it is assigned by *Voice*^{0} to an external agent argument; (7). Unaccusative theme subjects also receive Absolutive case from T^0 in the absence of a doer subject.

(7) [...T_{ABS}...[$_{VoiceP}$ **AGENT Voice$_{ERG}$** [$_{vP}$ *v* [$_{VP}$ **V THEME**]]]]

I provide two further pieces of evidence in support of an analysis in which middle and unergative subjects are given uniform treatment. First, I present novel data showing that, when unergative verbs appear with cognate objects, instead of an ERG-ABS pattern, the middle case pattern is observed; (8).

(8) (a) (i) Sā siva [le teine]   (ii) Sā siva [le teine] [**i** le siva]
        PST dance the girl-**ABS**   PST dance the girl-**ABS ACC** the dance
        'The girl danced'   'The girl danced a dance'

   (b) (i) Sā ata [le teine]   (ii) Sā ata [le teine] [**i** le ata (a le…)]
        PST laugh the girl-**ABS**   PST laugh the girl-**ABS ACC** the laugh (of the)
        'The girl laughed'   'The girl laughed the laugh (of the….)'

This suggests that unergative subjects, like middles, may also trigger Accusative case on an object. Second, the causative prefix *fa'a* may be added to unergative and middle verbs to introduce an additional agent argument, resulting in an Ergative causer, Absolutive causee and Accusative object (if present): no other case pattern is acceptable. *Fa'a* cannot however, be added to a construction with an Ergative subject (9a,b): a biclausal structure must be used instead (9c).

(9)   (a)   Sā sasa [**e** le teine] [le maile]
                PST hit   **ERG** the girl   the dog-**ABS**
                'The girl hit the dog'
       (b)   *Sā **fa'a**sasa [**e** le tamaloa] [le teine]   [**i** le maile]
                PST **CAUS**-hit   **ERG** the man   the girl-**ABS ACC** the dog
                Intended: 'The man made the girl hit the dog'
       (c)   Sā fa'aoso [e le tamaloa] [le teine]   [e sasa le maile]
                PST compel ERG the man   the girl-ABS PRES hit the dog
                'The man made the girl hit the dog'   (Read 2010:13)

Following Massam (2012) for the Niuean causative *faka*, I suggest that *fa'a* is an instantiation of *Voice*^{0}. As such, it may be added to any construction in which *Voice*P (and consequently an agent argument) is not already present (i.e., unaccusative, unergative or middle). In an Ergative construction however, *Voice*P is already present and there is no empty *Voice*^{0} to host *fa'a*. Furthermore, there is no available slot in the theta-grid for the agent causer, since an agent is already present. This evidence suggests that unergative and middle verbs pattern alike, to the exclusion of Ergative subjects, and furthermore that the position of middle/unergative subjects is lower than that of Ergatives.

Conclusion: Using new data, this paper develops parallels between the Samoan split Ergative case pattern and the behaviour of unergative predicates. This calls for an expansion of current theories of Split Ergativity; the analysis presented in this paper proposes that case splits may result from the position of the subject, with no difference between the position of the object on either side of the split.

References: Burzio (1986) *Italian Syntax.* Dordrecht.; **Chung (1978)** *Case Marking and Grammatical Relations in Polynesian.* U. of Texas Press.; **Collins (2014)** The distribution of unmarked cases in Samoan. *Papers from the 12th International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics.*; **Coon & Preminger (to appear)** Split ergativity is not about ergativity. *Oxford Handbook of Ergativity.*; **Koopman (2012)** Samoan ergatives as double passives. *Functional Heads*, OUP. **Massam (2012)** 'The structure of (un)ergatives'. *Proceedings of AFLA 16.*; **Preminger (2011)** *Agreement as a fallible operation*. MIT Thesis.; **Read (2010)** *An Examination of the Causative Fa'a-in Samoan.* MA Thesis, U. of Canterbury.; **Seiter (1978)** On the syntactic character of middle objects in Polynesian. *Proceedings from the 2nd International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics.*