

When prosody parades as syntax: Spurious syntactic ergativity in Samoan

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Some morphologically ergative languages display a syntactically ergative constraint on \bar{A} -movement: while the absolutive argument may be extracted, the ergative argument may not (Aldridge 2008; Coon et al. 2014, 2021; Deal 2016; Polinsky 2016, 2017, a.o.). Samoan (Polynesian) has been classified as this type of language based on a morphological contrast between constructions involving ergative extraction and those involving extraction of other arguments (Hopperdietzel 2020; Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou 2025). This has led to an analysis of the ergative argument as a PP, following Polinsky’s (2016) classification. This paper argues for a reassessment of the evidence for syntactic ergativity: the observed contrast in morphological exponence is a consequence of prosodically conditioned allomorphy and is only superficially related to ergative extraction.

The morphology of ergative extraction. Samoan displays ergative alignment in case marking: *e* is used to mark the transitive subject, whereas the object and subject of intransitive verbs appear without a case particle (1-3; unless otherwise indicated, all examples are elicited). \bar{A} -movement of the ergative argument triggers the appearance of the suffix *-ina* (which freely alternates with the allomorph *-a*) (3a), in contrast to extraction of the absolutive argument with a simple gap (3b-3c).

- (1) Na fusi [e Talia]_{ERG} [le tama’i maile]_{ABS}. (2) E aliali [ma’a]_{ABS} pe-’a pē le tai.
 PST hug **ERG** Talia the small dog PRES appear rock Q-FUT low the tide
 ‘Talia hugged the puppy.’ ‘The rocks show when the tide goes down.’
- (3) a. O [Natia]_{ERG} na ave-**a** l-o-’u nofoa?
 FOC Natia PST take-**INA** the-GEN.INAL-1SG chair
 ‘Is it Natia who took my chair?’ (ERG subject → *-ina*)
- b. O [le nofoa]_{ABS} na ave e Talia __.
 FOC the chair PST take **ERG** Talia
 ‘It’s the chair that Talia took.’ (ABS object → gap)
- c. O [l-a-na maile]_{ABS} e moe __ i ī.
 FOC the-GEN.AL-3SG dog PRES sleep OBL here
 ‘It is his/her dog that sleeps here.’ (ABS subject → gap)

Hopperdietzel (2020); Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou (2025) follow Polinsky (2016) in analyzing this as a pattern of syntactic ergativity which results from the ergative argument being contained in a PP: while the absolutive argument may successfully undergo \bar{A} -movement, the ergative argument may not, resulting in a base-generated \bar{A} -dependency between the sentence initial focused constituent and a base-generated resumptive pronoun, which is realized as *-ina* (4).

- (4) \uparrow DP_{FOC} ... [VoiceP [PP P \uparrow pro_{ERG}] Voice [VP ...

 ← X

Samoan is not syntactically ergative. The main challenge for the resumption-based analysis is that \bar{A} -constructions involving an ergative argument display properties which are typical of \bar{A} -movement dependencies: they are island-sensitive (5) and display crossover effects (to be shown in talk). Furthermore, *-ina* also surfaces in the absence of an \bar{A} -dependency: when the ergative argument is expressed as a preverbal clitic (6) and in negated clauses, where it may co-occur with an in situ ergative argument (7; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992:741-763; Chung 1978; Cook 1988).

- (5) * O a’u_i na ave atu e Talia le mealofa [ona sā ta’u-**a** __i iā te ia o
 FOC I PST give thither **ERG** Talia the gift COMP PST give-**INA** OBL s/he PRED

l-o-u aso fānau lenei].
 the-GEN.INAL-2SG day born today

lit. ‘It is me_i, Talia gave the present to you because _i told her that it’s your birthday today.’

- (6) Na e aumai-a l-a’u tusi. (7) E lē loka*(-ina) [e leoleo] [tagata gaoi].
 PST 2SG bring-INA the-my book PRES not lock-INA ERG police person steal
 ‘You brought my book.’ ‘Policemen do not arrest burglars.’ (Chung 1978:91)

Put together, these observations suggest that (i) there is no ban on ergative movement and (ii) *-ina* is not a base-generated resumptive pronoun.

A reassessment: *-ina* is Voice. I propose an alternative explanation which only incidentally correlates with ergative extraction: *-ina* is the spellout of Voice⁰, i.e. the head which introduces the ergative DP (and assigns ergative case—this explains why it never surfaces with non-ergative case assigning predicates). Verb initiality in Samoan is derived through VP fronting to a projection right above VoiceP (Collins 2017), which I label as Pol⁰ for polarity (shown in 9 for 8). Voice⁰ is spelled out in situ, which explains its status as a phrasal affix: it encliticizes to the VP, rather than forming a morphological word with the lexical verb (8; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992:201). The overt allomorph of Voice⁰ (*-ina*) correspondingly surfaces only if Voice⁰ is able to form a prosodic constituent with the fronted VP—if there is no phrasal constituent or prosodic boundary between VP and Voice⁰.

- (8) Na ou [VP ave atu] -a le meata’alo iā te oe.
 PST 1SG give thither -INA the toy OBL you
 ‘I gave the toy to you.’

- (9)
$$\begin{array}{c} \text{pro}_{\text{ERG}} [\text{PolP} [\text{vp ave atu}] \text{Pol} [\text{VoiceP} \text{pro}_{\text{ERG}} \text{-Voice} <\text{VP}>] \longrightarrow [\phi \text{ ave atu -a}] \\ \text{clitic fronting} \qquad \qquad \qquad \text{VP fronting} \end{array}$$

This derives the connection between ergative extraction and *-ina*: an in situ ergative DP disrupts the prosodic adjacency between VP and Voice⁰, resulting in the absence of *-ina* (shown in 10 for 1), whereas if the ergative DP is displaced, Voice⁰ and VP may form a prosodic constituent (9). This analysis also explains why *-ina* is required with negation: the head which attracts the VP (Pol⁰) triggers head movement of Voice⁰ when it is negative (but not when it is positive). This places Voice⁰ above the ergative DP, allowing for Voice⁰ to encliticize to VP (11 for 7). The talk will discuss how this prosody-based analysis can explain other scenarios where the distribution of *-ina* is not conditioned by properties of the ergative DP: imperatives and constructions where an unpronounced ergative argument is interpreted as co-referent with the possessor of the absolutive theme.

- (10) [PolP [vp fusi] Pol [VoiceP [DP e Talia] -Voice <VP>] → [_φ fusi] [_φ e Talia] -∅

- (11) [PolP lē [vp loka] -Voice+Pol [VoiceP [DP e leoleo] Voice <VP>] → [_φ lē loka -ina]
↑
head movement

Implications. The ergative argument in Samoan need not be analyzed as a PP—a desirable outcome since it displays subjecthood properties such as Condition C effects (Ershova 2023) and the ability to be controlled PRO (Chung 1978:124-132). Morphology can be misleading: Samoan is not syntactically ergative in any meaningful sense. Instead, a special suffix surfaces in extraction contexts due to prosodically conditioned allomorphy. The analysis has implications for argument licensing and ergativity: Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou (2025) connect the PP status of the ergative argument with its availability in nominalizations, a generalization which cannot be maintained if the present analysis is correct.

Select references. •Collins 2017. *NLLT* 35. •Ershova 2023. LSA presentation. •Hopperdietzel & Alexiadou 2025. *NLLT* 43. •Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992. *Samoan reference grammar*.