

# When prosody parades as syntax

## Spurious syntactic ergativity in Samoan

Ksenia Ershova

University College London  
(k.ershova@ucl.ac.uk)

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# What is syntactic ergativity?

Defined broadly (Polinsky 2017, p. 3):

“The presence of *syntactic rules* that group S and O (the absolutive) together, to the exclusion of A (the ergative).”

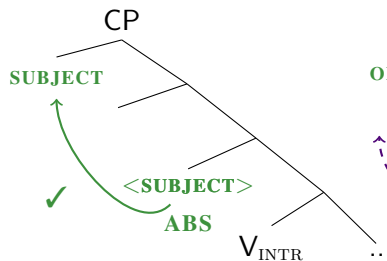
S = subject of intransitive verb	}	<b>ABS</b>
O = object of transitive verb		
A = subject of transitive verb	}	<b>ERG</b>

# The Ergative Extraction Constraint

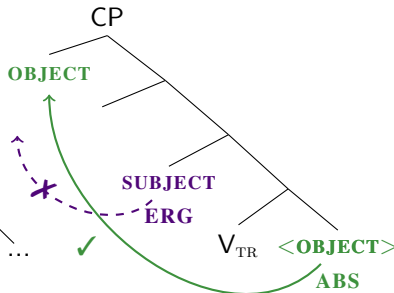
**Trademark syntactic ergativity effect:**  
ban on the displacement of the ergative agent

\* displacement = relativization, question formation, topicalization, clefting,  
focus fronting, etc. =  $\bar{A}$ -movement

*Intransitive clause:*



*Transitive clause:*



Dixon (1994), Manning (1996), Aldridge (2004, 2008), Coon, Mateo Pedro, and Preminger (2014), Deal (2016), Polinsky (2016, 2017), Coon, Baier, and Levin (2021), and Tollan and Clemens (2022), a.o.

# Morphological reflexes of syntactic ergativity

**Samoan** (Polynesian) has been analyzed as syntactically ergative because ergative extraction involves **additional morphology** which is absent with absolutive extraction.

O [ le nofoa ]<sub>ABS</sub> na ave e Talia \_\_.  
FOC the chair PST take ERG Talia

'It is the chair that Talia took.'

**ABS** → **gap**

O [ Natia ]<sub>ERG</sub> na ave-a lo'u nofoa?  
FOC Natia PST take-**INA** my chair

'Is it Natia who took my chair?'

**ERG** → **-ina**

(Hopperdietzel 2020; Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou 2025)

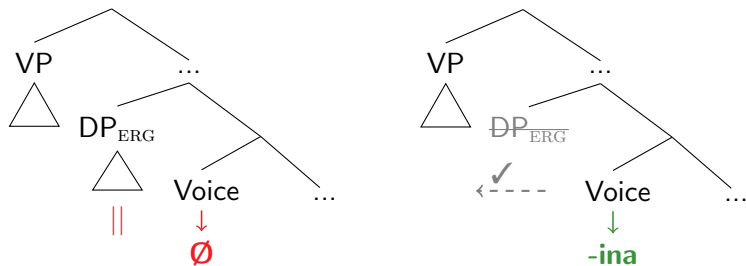
# Morphology is misleading

**Main claim:** Suffix *-ina* is not a reflex of syntactic ergativity.

Samoan is not syntactically ergative.

**Instead:**

- ▶ *-ina* spells out ergative case-assigning Voice<sup>0</sup> **only if** Voice can encliticize to VP.
- ▶ In situ ergative DP disrupts VP+Voice adjacency.



Additional morphology with ergative extraction:

- ▶ is facilitated by ergative extraction
- ▶ but does not diagnose absence of ergative movement.

## Supported by:

- ▶ ERG extraction passes movement diagnostics  
⇒ no ban on ERG movement!
- ▶ *-ina* in configurations without ergative movement  
— explained by morphological/prosodic requirements

Ergativity and extraction in Samoan

Diagnosing ergative movement

A prosodic reanalysis of *-ina*

Conclusion

Ergativity and extraction in Samoan

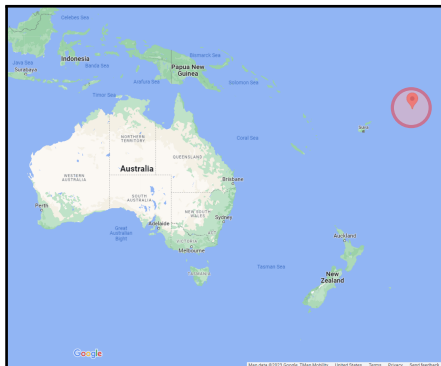
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# Samoa

- ▶ Polynesian < Austronesian
- ▶ ~500000 speakers; ~50% of them in the Samoan Islands
- ▶ **Data** from elicitations with one speaker from Apia, Samoa and published sources.



# Ergative case marking

Na tanu [ **ERG** le maile ] [ **ABS** le pogāivi ] i le oneone.  
PST bury **ERG** the dog the bone OBL the sand

‘The dog buried the bone in the sand.’

*transitive*

E moe [ **ABS** l-a’u maile ] i ī.  
PRS sleep the-my dog OBL here

‘My dog sleeps in here.’

*intransitive*

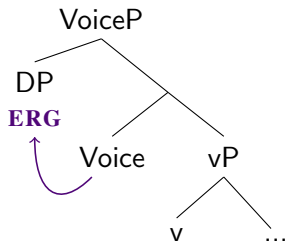
# Ergative agents are introduced by Voice

Two positions for external arguments (Tollan 2018; Tollan and Massam 2022; Ershova 2025b):

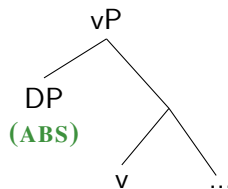
(Also: Massam 2009; Tollan and Oxford 2018; McGinnis 2022; Burukina and Polinsky 2025)

- ▶ Spec, VoiceP = ergative agents
- ▶ Spec, vP = absolutive (unergative) agents

**Transitive verb:**



**Unergative verb:**



# Ergative extraction: $\bar{A}$ -movement

## Focus fronting:

O [ a'u ]<sub>ABS</sub> e alofa  i la'u fānau.  
FOC I PRS love OBL my children

'It's me who loves my children.'

**ABS subject** → **gap**

O [ le nofoa ]<sub>ABS</sub> na ave e Talia .  
FOC the chair PST take ERG Talia

'It's the chair that Talia took.'

**ABS object** → **gap**

O [ Natia ]<sub>ERG</sub> na ave-a lo'u nofoa?  
FOC Natia PST take-INA my chair

'Is it Natia who took my chair?'

**ERG subject** → **-ina**

+ Same pattern with relativization and wh-questions.

# Ergative extraction: A-movement

ABS and ERG subject pronouns can front to preverbal position:

Na **ou** sau  i le vaiaso ua te'a.  
PST **I(ABS)** come OBL the week PERF leave

'I arrived last week.'

**ABS preverbal clitic** → **gap**

Na **e** aumai-a la'u tusi.  
PST **you(ERG)** bring-INA my book

'You brought my book.'

**ERG preverbal clitic** → **-ina**

# Is Samoan syntactically ergative?

Hopperdietzel 2020; Hopperdietzel and Alexiadou 2025:

- ▶ ERG is a PP  $\Rightarrow$  cannot move. (Polinsky 2016)
- ▶ *-ina* is a resumptive pronoun, analogous to OBL extraction.

Sa tausi le teine [ i le maile ]<sub>OBL</sub>.

PST care the girl OBL the dog

'The girl cared for the dog.'

**ABS-OBL verb**

O [ le maile ]<sub>OBL</sub> sa tausi i ai le teine.

FOC the dog PST care **OBL it.OBL** the girl

'It's the dog which the girl took care of.'

**OBL  $\rightarrow$  resumptive**

**My claim:** ERG can move. *-ina* is not a resumptive pronoun.

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Ergative extraction passes movement diagnostics:

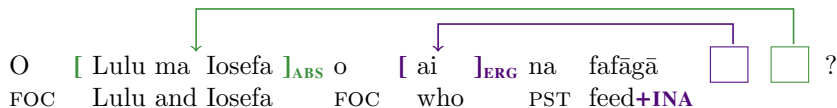
- ▶ intervention effects
- ▶ sensitivity to islands (Ershova 2025a)
- ▶ crossover effects (Ershova 2025a)

*-ina* does not repair illicit movement,

**unlike true resumptives!**

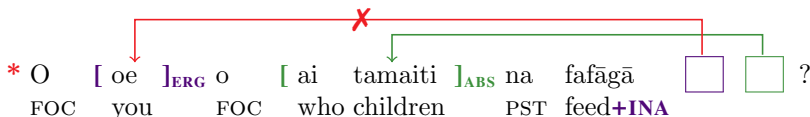
# Intervention with ergative extraction

- ▶ ABS can be focus fronted over ERG wh-phrase.



'Lulu and Iosefa, who fed them?'

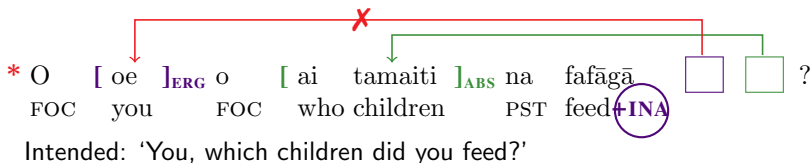
- ▶ ERG cannot be focus fronted over ABS wh-phrase.



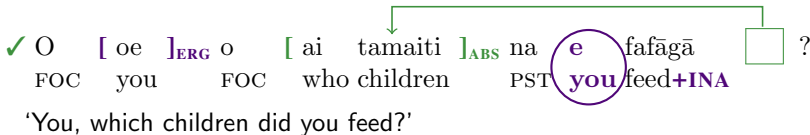
Intended: 'You, which children did you feed?'

# Repair by resumption

- ▶ ERG cannot be focus fronted over ABS wh-phrase.



- ▶ This can be repaired with a resumptive pronoun:



**...but not with -ina!**

## -ina is not a resumptive pronoun

- ▶ The marker *-ina* does not repair illicit movement.  
⇒ not a base-generated resumptive pronoun
- ▶ Surfaces in negative clauses, even with in situ ergative DP.  
⇒ **not a resumptive pronoun at all**.

E    **lē**    loka\***(-ina)** [ e    leoleo ]<sub>ERG</sub> tagata gaoi.  
PRS   **not** lock-**INA**            ERG   police            person steal

‘Policemen do not arrest burglars.’ (Chung 1978, p. 91)

(Chung 1978; Cook 1978; Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992, pp. 741–763)

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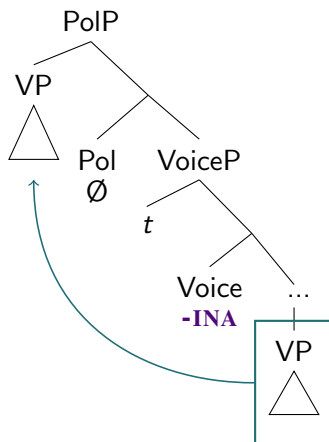
A prosodic reanalysis of *-ina*

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# Reanalysis: -ina is Voice

**The proposal:** *-ina* spells out ergative Voice only if it can encliticize to VP.

- ▶ Only with ERG-ABS verbs:  
no Voice without ERG
- ▶ Verb initiality: (Collins 2017)  
VP fronts to Spec,PolP

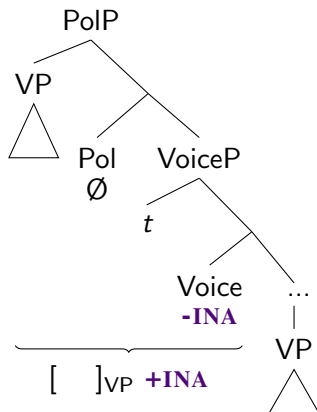


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when it is (prosodically)  
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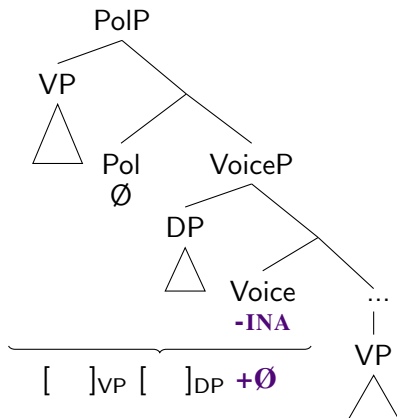
E.g. if ERG DP has moved!



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adjacent to VP.  
E.g. if ERG DP has moved!
- ▶ In situ ERG DP intervenes  
⇒ Voice is unpronounced.



## *-ina* is a phrasal affix

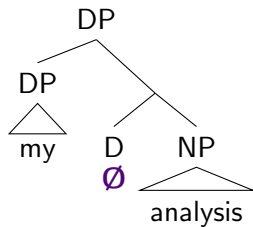
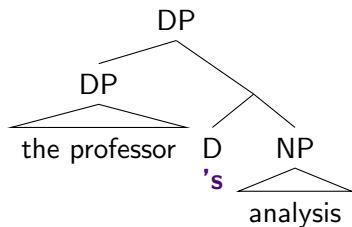
*-ina* is a verbal suffix that modifies the VP  $\approx$  enclitic (Anderson 2005)

O a'u na [ ave atu ] -a le mealofa lea.  
FOC I PST give thither -INA the gift this  
'It was me who gave you this gift.'

Allomorphy similar to Saxon genitive 's:

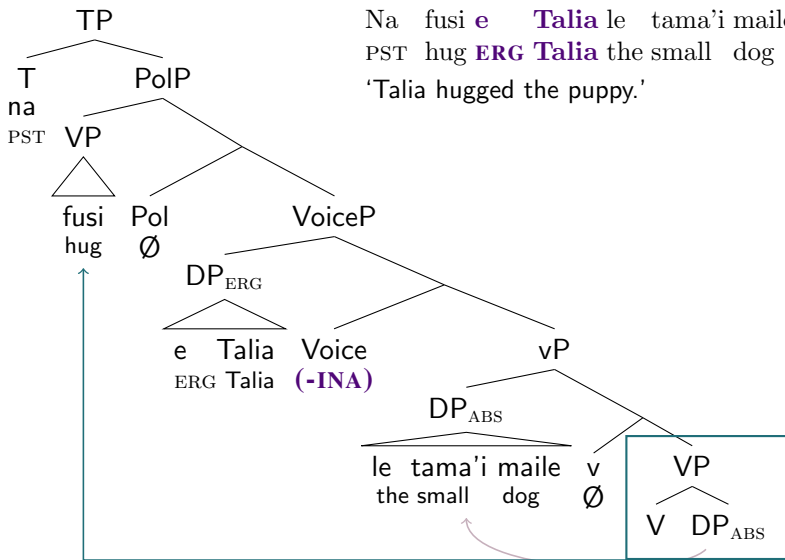
/s/ if encliticized to lexical DP:

$\emptyset$  if encliticized to pronoun:



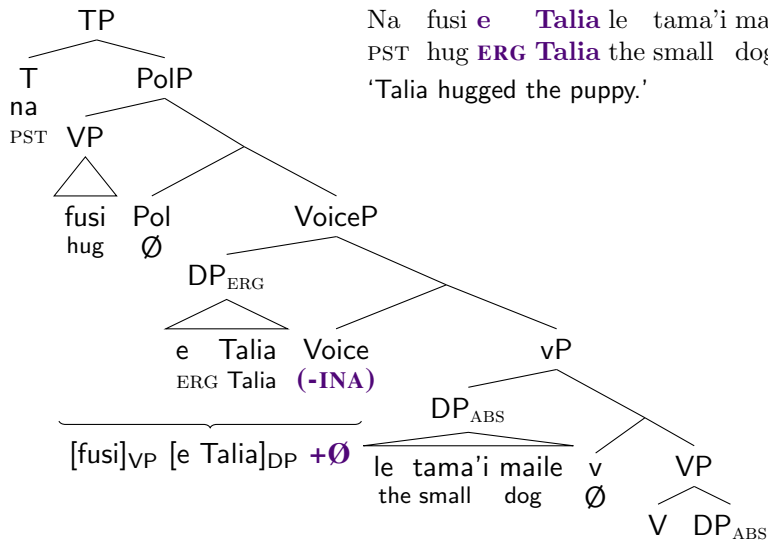
# In situ ERG DP $\Rightarrow$ no *-ina*

Na fusi **e Talia** le tama'i maile.  
 PST hug **ERG Talia** the small dog  
 'Talia hugged the puppy.'

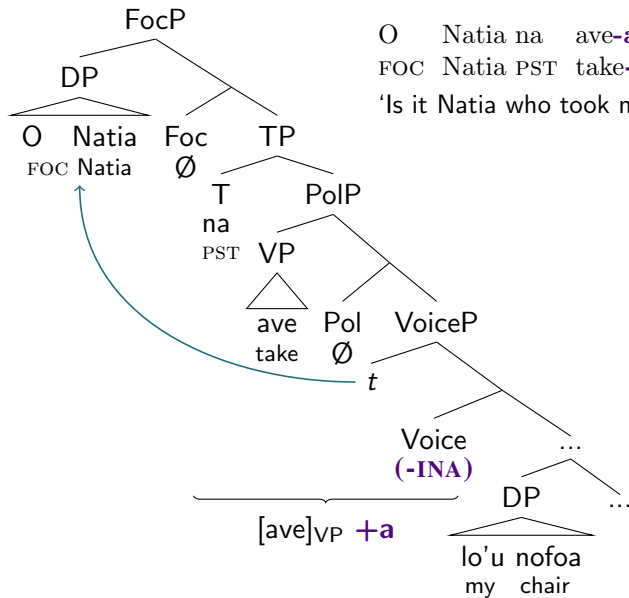


# In situ ERG DP $\Rightarrow$ no *-ina*

Na fusi **e Talia** le tama'i maile.  
 PST hug **ERG Talia** the small dog  
 'Talia hugged the puppy.'



# Moved ERG DP $\Rightarrow$ *-ina*

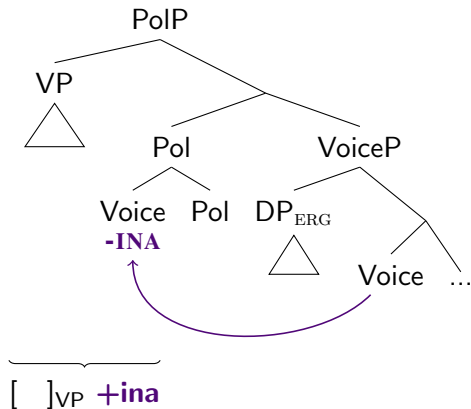


O Natia na ave-**a** lo'u nofoa?  
 FOC Natia PST take-**INA** my chair  
 'Is it Natia who took my chair?'

# Voice moves in negative clauses $\Rightarrow$ *-ina*

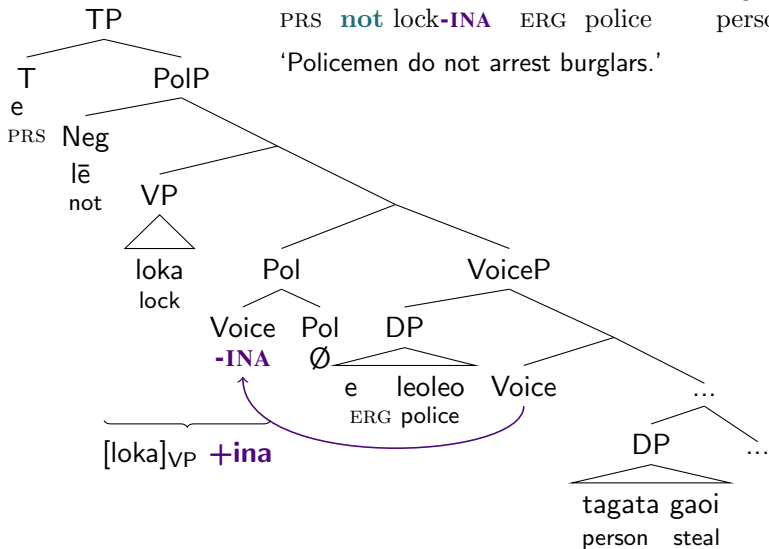
Pol<sub>NEG</sub> triggers head movement of Voice.

$\Rightarrow$  Voice can encliticize to VP, **even with in situ ERG DP.**



# *-ina* with negation and in situ ERG DP

E **lē** loka-**ina** [ e leoleo ]<sub>ERG</sub> tagata gaoi.  
 PRS **not** lock-**INA** ERG police person steal  
 'Policemen do not arrest burglars.'



# Summary: *-ina* is Voice

**The reanalysis:** *-ina* spells out ERG case-assigning Voice when it is adjacent to VP.

## Explains:

- ▶ Correlation with ERG extraction: in situ ERG DP intervenes between VP and Voice.
  - ▶ Correlation with negation: Pol<sub>NEG</sub> triggers head movement of Voice  $\Rightarrow$  VP and Voice are adjacent.
- + Explains other patterns with *-ina*:
- ▶ No *-ina* in positive imperatives.
  - ▶ Required *-ina* in negative imperatives.
  - ▶ Raising of ABS DP to Spec,VoiceP can intervene  $\Rightarrow$  no *-ina*.

\*Details in Ershova 2025a.

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# Conclusion: misleading morphology

Samoan has been analysed as syntactically ergative because of a **morphological contrast** between ERG and ABS extraction:

ERG extraction correlates with the appearance of *-ina*.

## This talk:

The correlation between *-ina* and ERG extraction is partial and indirect.

- ▶ *-ina* spells out ERG case-assigning Voice
- ▶ ... only if it can encliticize to the raised VP
- ▶ ERG extraction is one of the environments where this condition is met
- ▶ ... but not the only one!

# A unified explanation for *-ina*

The proposed analysis provides a uniform analysis for *-ina*.

## Synthesizes:

- ▶ verb initiality + suffixal status of *-ina*
- ▶ *-ina* as a phrasal affix: modifies VP, not just V
- ▶ structural contrast between ERG-ABS verbs and unergatives: VoiceP vs. vP

## Connection between category and exponence:

Voice is spelled out overtly only if it modifies a verbal projection.

Correlates with shared category feature in the verbal extended projection?

## What can morphology tell us about syntax?

Additional morphology with ERG extraction may be misleading:

In Samoan, ERG extraction passes movement diagnostics, but triggers special morphology.

## What is syntactic ergativity?

Not contrasts in the morphology of extraction.

And furthermore, not about ERG extraction at all. (Ershova 2025a)

# Thank you!

- ▶ This talk is partially based on the following manuscript: Ershova 2025a. Thanks to the reviewers and editors for prompting the development of this analysis.
- ▶ Thanks to Rev. Tala Faaleava for Samoan judgements.

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