Split ergativity and voice marking in Ranmo

**INTRODUCTION.** Coon (2013) argues that aspect-conditioned ergative splits do not indicate anything “unstable” or dispreferred about an ergative system, but rather that they can be explained by independent differences between the two patterns in clausal structure and transitivity. This paper brings novel data from Ranmo, a Papuan language of southwest Papua New Guinea, to bear on this issue. I show that split intransitivity in Ranmo, conditioned by lexical aspect, parallels active-middle voice alternation, which obscures the ergative-absolutive alignment of dynamic verbs. This paper also contributes to the typology of middle morphology more generally, which has largely been based on patterns in accusative languages.

**SIMPLE INTRANSITIVE (STATIVE) VS. MIDDLE (DYNAMIC).** Ranmo exhibits the so-called “Split-S” system, in which (roughly) (i) stative intransitives show an ergative-absolutive alignment, marking the S argument with the object agreement series of transitive verbs (“undergoer (U) markers”), as in (2), and (ii) dynamic intransitives show a nominative-accusative alignment whereby the S argument is marked identically with the subjects of transitive clauses (“Actor (A) markers”), as in (3a) and (3b). Dynamic verbs also contain special voice morphology (a middle prefix followed by a derived intransitive (DI) prefix).

(1) Ninta fi y-majuk-e.  
1NSG.ERG 3ABS 3SG.MASC.U-α-wash-1NSG.A  
‘We wash/are washing him.’  
(transitive)

(2) Kom tau y-fundal.  
boat 3SG.MASC.U-α-float  
‘The boat is floating.’  
(statative/simple intransitive)

b. Ndötar t-a-rfunt-ëi.  
1NSG.ABS M.Υ-DI-open-2/3NSG.A  
‘(Two) doors opened.’  
(dynamic/middle)

I argue that despite appearances, verbal agreement in Ranmo is consistently ergative and the morphological differences between the two patterns fall out naturally from independent facts regarding (I) the status of A markers (they are clitics, not agreement markers) and (II) the status of dynamic verbs (they are detransitivized middles whose non-active morphology obscures the ergative-absolutive alignment).

(1) **SUBJECT MARKERS ARE PRONOMINAL CLITICS.** The first indication that dynamic verbs do not constitute a split pattern concerns the status of A markers with which they appear. Nevins (2011) proposes that an agreement affix, but not a clitic, will show allomorphy across tenses. As shown in Table 1, the morphophonological form of A marker is constant across all tense/aspect combinations (i.e., there is only one series), suggesting its clitichood. Thus, there is no “subject agreement” in (3) to constitute a split.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>α</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>γ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1SG</td>
<td>w-</td>
<td>b-</td>
<td>tou-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1NSG/2SG</td>
<td>n-</td>
<td>ngn-</td>
<td>ntn-</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/3NSG</td>
<td>th/-l</td>
<td>th/-l</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3SG.MASC</td>
<td>y-</td>
<td>s-</td>
<td>s-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3SG.FEM</td>
<td>wè-</td>
<td>b-</td>
<td>t-</td>
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</table>

Table 1: Actor (A) clitic series

Second, the dissociation between case assignment and A markers also points toward the pronominal clitic analysis. Under the standard minimalist view, we predict a tight relationship between case and agreement since they result from a single syntactic process (Agree). However, it is possible for the same form of A marker to reference either an absolutive-marked (3) or ergative-marked (1) argument; this is unexpected under the agreement analysis. Even under the configurational approach to case assignment (which takes case and agreement to be unrelated phenomena), the fact remains that A markers show none of the common properties associated with Agree, unlike U markers. That U markers are true morphological manifestations of Agree is evidenced by the following facts: (i) they show allomorphy for tense/aspect, as shown by Table 2 (each Greek letter represents a particular tense/aspect combination), and (ii) in ditransitive or applicative constructions, they reference the highest DP argument in VP (the goal or applied object), thus showing an intervention effect, a property of Agree, as in (4b).

(4) a. Këkk wanaku lë-fitar.  
1SG.ERG clothes 3NSG.U-α-wash  
‘I wash/am washing the clothes.’

b. Këkk mbone wanaku n-a-fitar.  
1SG.ERG 2SG.DAT clothes 2SG.U-α-APPL-wash  
‘I wash/am washing the clothes for you.’

(II) **ALL DYNAMIC VERBS ARE DERIVED INTRANSITIVES (MIDDLES).** The second aspect of the split which obscures the ergative-absolutive alignment of dynamic verbs is related to the fact that they are not...
inherent, but derived, intransitives. Their derived status is indicated by a middle prefix—which, importantly, is realized in the same morphological slot reserved for an U agreement marker in active (transitive or simple intransitive/stative) verbs, i.e., the middle morpheme is the non-active counterpart of the U agreement morpheme. Middle verbs in Ranmo can be classified into two classes according to their situation type (activity vs. achievement) and its associated morphological properties, as in Table 3. One aspect of Ranmo middle verbs which requires some elaboration is that they include unergative verbs, e.g., run and dance, in addition to those classes of verbs that unsurprisingly (i.e., cross-linguistically) bear middle (or non-active) morphology, such as reflexives (3a) and anticausatives (3b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shows telic/atelic stem allomorphy</th>
<th>Activity ([+durative], [-telic])</th>
<th>Achievement ([−durative], [+telic])</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can take γ-prefix series (encoding punctual aspect)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>run, laugh, dance, bathe, learn</td>
<td>open, break, fall, sit on top, start</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Table 3: The correlation between situation type and morphosyntactic properties exhibited by middle verbs

**TWO VOICE HEADS.** The large distribution of middle verbs can be accounted for under the proposal that all verbs project an underlying direct object. Even (semantically) unergative verbs partake in transitive alternation (barring non-oppositional deponents); they are derived in a manner akin to reflexives and anticausatives, albeit with significant semantic shift from the transitive and intransitive counterpart, as shown in (5). This amounts to saying that in effect there are no unergatives per se in Ranmo: all intransitive verbs—statives and both achievement and activity dynamic verbs—are underlyingly unaccusative. (See Hale and Keyser 1993 for the original discussion of the transitive analysis of unergatives.)

(5) a. Ninta fi yi-kan-e.  
1NSG.ERG 3ABS 3SG.MASC. U-carry/run-1NSG.A ‘We carry/are carrying him.’

b. Ni ng-e-kan-e.  
1NSG.ABS M.α-DI-carry/run-1NSG.A ‘We run/are running.’

The “ergative split” between simple intransitives (stative verbs) and middle verbs (dynamic verbs), then, is ultimately reduced to variation in whether the direct object is required to undergo A-movement. This may be formalized as a difference between two Voice heads, active and middle (see Alexiadou and Doron 2012 for the classification of Voice heads). I propose that only middle Voice has an [EPP] feature requiring the movement of the root’s DP complement to its specifier. A middle prefix is the morphological instantiation of this movement. (Active) Voice, on the other hand, lacks [EPP]; thus, the underlying object will remain in situ, triggering U agreement on this head instead. This brings Ranmo into conformity with the cross-linguistic generalization that the possibility of object agreement is lost in many verbs showing non-active morphology, including passives, middles, anticausatives, reflexives, etc. (cf. Baker 2013).

(6) a.  
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{vP} \\
\text{Voice} \\
\text{v} \\
\end{array}
\]

The proposal in (6) accounts for the range of facts already discussed: (i) the middle and U agreement morphemes are in complementary distribution (since they underlie two distinct Voice heads); (ii) both show allomorphy for tense/aspect (assume Voice-to-Asp/T movement); and (iii) in ditransitive/applicative constructions, the argument closer to Voice (indirect/applied object) will trigger agreement on Voice, as in (4b).

**CONCLUSION.** With an unaccusative analysis of all intransitive verbs in Ranmo, the ergative “split” between stative and dynamic verbs is reduced to the fact that middle, but not active, Voice, requires the A-movement of the underlying direct object. Middle morphology is the morphological consequence of this A-movement, which precludes U agreement marking among dynamic verbs. Consequently, agreement in Ranmo is always fundamentally ergative-patterning, in support of Coon (2013)’s argument that languages are either consistently ergative or consistently accusative in the verbal domain. The proposed analysis also points toward a unified account of middle morphology across ergative and accusative languages: in both types of languages, unaccusative syntax is the basic structural factor uniting constructions bearing middle morphology.