

## The sound of ergativity: morphosyntax-prosody mapping in Samoan

Cross-linguistically, absolutive case is considered to be the unmarked case. Indeed, in Samoan, an ergative case-marking Polynesian language, ergative-absolutive (1-a) and absolutive-oblique (1-b) case-marking patterns exhibit ergative and oblique (*e* and *i*, respectively) but not absolutive case markers (Chung, 1978; Mosel and Hovdhaugen, 1992). However, we propose that the absolutive case is in fact marked, but tonally rather than segmentally.

Previous work on Samoan prosody has proposed that its intonational system is based on stress-driven post-lexical pitch accents (Mosel and Hovdhaugen, 1992; Zuraw et al., 2008). In the formal register, pitch accents typically occur on all content words and are consistently realized as a rising pitch associated with the mora receiving primary stress. We elicited intonational data from a native Samoan speaker in a soundbooth over the past year and studied the distribution of intonational boundary tones. We found that the presence of high boundary tones (H-) within a sentence was robustly and systematically correlated with case-marking patterns, i.e. ergative-absolutive or absolutive-oblique, and word order, i.e. VSO or VOS, as shown in Table 1 and the intonational contours in Fig. 1.

An H- appears between arguments for ergative-absolutive case-marking in VSO order (Fig. 1a), but not for VOS order (Fig. 1b), and a H- does not appear between arguments for absolutive-oblique case-marking in VSO order (Fig. 1c) but does for VOS order (Fig. 1d). These facts are highlighted in the intonational contours of long sentences shown in Fig. 1. In Fig. 1a (ERG-ABS, VSO) and Fig. 1d (ABS-OBL, VOS), the presence of the H- induced a pitch reset so that the downtrend in pitch prior to the H- was broken. While the particular sentences in Fig. 1 were not designed to highlight the distribution of H- between the verb/predicate and first argument in the sentence also described in Table 1, other sentences we elicited (not shown here) provided evidence that the H- occurred in sentences between the predicate and following argument for ergative-absolutive case-marking with VOS order and for absolutive-oblique case-marking with VSO order.

The distributional patterns in Table 1 were also consistent with data from: (i) verbs that can have either ergative-absolutive or absolutive-oblique case-marking patterns, e.g. *va'ai* ‘to take care of, visit’ (ERG-ABS) and ‘to see, spot’ (ABS-OBL) (Mosel and Hovdhaugen, 1992), and (ii) transitive verbs that can have incorporated objects, e.g. *moe* ‘sleep’ and *moe-moega* ‘bed-sleep’ (Chung, 1978). Data from subject and object extraction in relative clauses was also consistent with the distributional patterns; for instance, an H- is present in an embedded clause between a verb with ERG-ABS case-marking and an absolutive argument (subject extraction), but there is no H- present in an embedded clause between the same verb and an ergative argument (object extraction).

A straightforward account of the distributional data for H- is that the H- is a tone that occurs at the left edge of an absolutive argument. Whether it is a lexically assigned tonal case marker, a postlexically assigned tone at the left edge of a prosodic unit in the prosodic hierarchy, or a postlexically assigned tone in a direct syntax-prosody mapping is unclear, but evidence thus far best supports that the H- is lexically assigned: the H- is not present if the absolutive argument is extracted or absent due to *pro*-drop, and there is no conclusive evidence of hallmarks of prosodic phrasing such as final lengthening before the absolutive argument.

(1) a. **ergative-absolutive case-marking for *lagona*, (e ERG) ABS**

na lagona e le malini le manu-lele  
 past hear erg det marine det animal-fly  
 ‘The marine heard the bird.’

b. **absolutive-oblique case-marking for *manogi*, ABS (i OBL)**

na manogi le malini i le manu-lele  
 past smell det marine obl det animal-fly  
 ‘The marine smelled to the bird.’

Case-marking	VSO order	VOS order
ERG-ABS	V/Pred ERG <b>H-</b> ABS	V/Pred <b>H-</b> ABS ERG
ABS-OBL	V/Pred <b>H-</b> ABS OBL	V/Pred OBL <b>H-</b> ABS

Table 1: Distribution of H- across case-markings and word orders

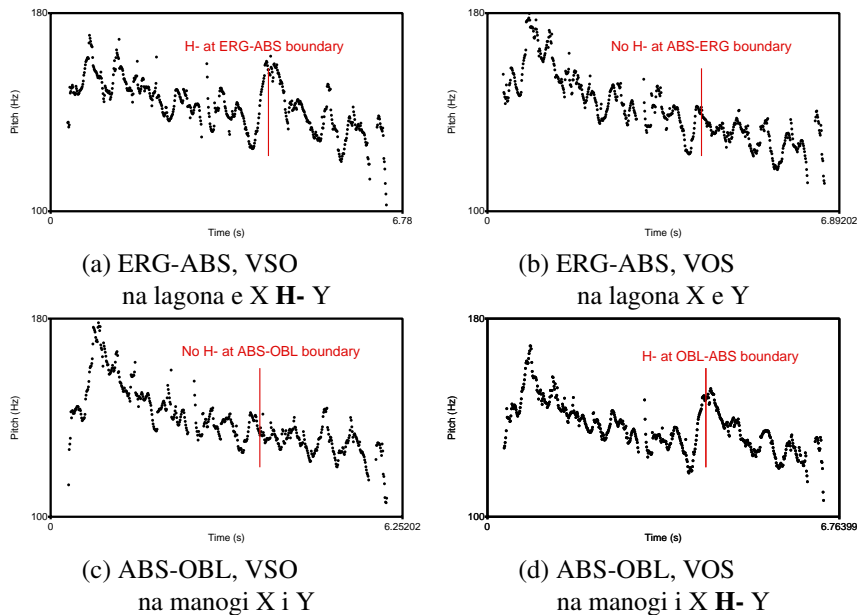


Figure 1: Presence of H- is conditioned by case marking, X and Y defined in (2) below

- (2) X = le maile a le milionea leaga mai Jerusalema i luga o le mauga  
 det dog poss det millionaire bad prep Jerusalem obl on poss det mountain  
 ‘the dog of the bad millionaire from Jerusalem on the mountain’  
 Y = le manu-lele a le malini mamalu mai Apia  
 det animal-fly poss det marine glorified prep Apia  
 ‘the bird of the glorified marine from Apia’

Chung, S. 1978. *Case Marking and Grammatical Relations in Polynesian*. U. of Texas Press.  
 Mosel, U. and E. Hovdhaugen. 1992. *Samoan Reference Grammar*. Scandinavian U. Press.  
 Zuraw, K., R. Orfitelli, and K. Yu. 2008. Word-level prosody of Samoan. Presented at Austronesian Formal Linguistics Association XV, University of Sydney.