

# On split-absolutive

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## Abstract

Ergative languages have been claimed to fall into one of the following two classes. Those where absolutive case on the direct object and on the intransitive subject is assigned by the same functional head. And those where absolutive case on the direct object and absolutive case on the intransitive subject have different sources (called split-absolutive in Legate 2006). In this article, I defend the position that the arguments put forward in the literature for the existence of split-absolutive are inconclusive, with the exception of the analysis proposed by Goddard (1982) for certain Pama-Nyungan languages. Outside of Pama-Nyungan, I contend, a uniform analysis of absolutive case assignment remains tenable.

## 1. Background and goal

Legate (2006, 2008) claims that the class of languages that show ergative alignment on the surface divides into two syntactically different subclasses. Languages that are genuinely ergative (absolutive case for intransitive subjects and direct objects, and ergative case for transitive subjects). And languages that are syntactically tripartite (nominative case for intransitive subjects, ergative for transitive subjects, and accusative for direct objects) where nominative and accusative are realized syncretically in the morphology, thus giving the illusionary impression of an ergative alignment involving absolutive case.<sup>1,2</sup> The very same idea can already be found in Goddard (1982). Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup>While Legate (2006) calls this split-absolutive (“absolutive” case being split between T and v), Legate (2008) refers to it as ABS=DEF (DEF stands for default), in contrast to genuinely ergative systems, which are ABS=NOM in Legate’s (2008) terms.

<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, Müller & Thomas (2017) argue that, syntactically, tripartite systems are an illusion created by morphology on the basis of genuinely ergative (or accusative) systems.

similar proposals have been made by Aldridge (2004, 2006, 2008) and by Coon et al. (2014), with slightly different assumptions.<sup>3,4</sup>

A consequence of the split-absolutive hypothesis is that languages with superficially ergative alignment can show significant syntactic differences that go back to different syntactic case systems. This raises the question in how far generalizations that pertain to (morphological) ergativity in general (see Trask 1979: 385) can be accounted for.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, a theory where absolutive case is assigned by the same head across (morphologically) ergative languages (e.g., Campana 1992, Murasugi 1992, Jelinek 1993, Bittner & Hale 1996a,b, Ura 2000, Müller 2009) may have better chances to comply with this task.

In this article, I review arguments that have been put forward in the literature for the existence of split-absolutive. The upshot will be that they are all inconclusive, with the notable exception of the analysis proposed in Goddard (1982) for certain Pama-Nyungan languages.<sup>6</sup> I conclude that for ergative languages outside of Pama-Nyungan (and at least for Warlpiri, also a member of the Pama-Nyungan family), a uniform analysis of absolutive assignment remains possible, and, for reasons of simplicity, is to be preferred.

## 2. Legate's (2006, 2008) arguments

### 2.1. The default nature of absolutive

The first argument (which can be found in Legate 2006, 2008) comprises two subarguments, both pertaining to the idea that absolutive case behaves as the default case in various environments of the grammar. Legate (2008) formulates this idea in the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993), where morphological realization applies in a post-syntactic fashion ("vocabulary insertion") allowing for a radically underspecified exponent to realize a syntactic node with complex featural content (making use of the Elsewhere Condition, Kiparsky 1973). The absolutive case exponent is then

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<sup>3</sup>Unfortunately, Aldridge (2004) was not accessible to me. My information about this work is based on what I found in Aldridge (2006, 2008) and in other references.

<sup>4</sup>In contrast to Legate (2006, 2008), Aldridge (2004, 2006, 2008) assumes that the direct object is assigned abstract absolutive case by *v*. Coon et al. (2014) remain mostly uncommitted as to whether *v* assigns absolutive or accusative to the direct object.

<sup>5</sup>Note that Trask (1979) puts forward a dichotomy of ergative languages, too; see Polinsky (2016) for yet another proposal.

<sup>6</sup>Goddard's (1982) arguments are taken up by Legate (2008: §3).

assumed to be such a radically underspecified item, which can be inserted in any syntactic node bearing case features if no other case exponent fits.

One subargument may be summarized by the following quote (Legate 2008: 59): “My approach to ABS=DEF [split-absolutive, F.H.] languages is that the intransitive subject and the transitive object bear the same morphological case only because the languages lack nominative case morphology and accusative case morphology. Here, I present the case paradigms from Warlpiri, Niuean, Enga, and Hindi illustrating these lacunae.” While it is true that a split-absolutive analysis is compatible with the paradigms given by Legate (2008: 59–60) because it postulates syncretism, an analysis in terms of genuinely ergative alignment (without split-absolutive) of these languages is equally compatible with the absence of nominative and accusative case markers in each of these languages, simply because these cases are not assumed to be present in the syntax in the first place. Hence, this can hardly be an argument in favor of split-absolutive (as opposed to genuinely ergative alignment).

The other subargument makes reference to the observation that in the hypothesized split-absolutive languages nominals that occupy case-less positions in the syntax surface with absolutive case (the contexts discussed in Legate 2008 involve hanging topics). The observation is supposed to indicate the default nature of the absolutive, which the analysis postulates. While this makes sense, it is also true that nothing, in principle, prevents assuming a radically underspecified absolutive case exponent in a theory that employs genuinely ergative alignment, i.e., a theory that maintains that absolutive, as an abstract syntactic case, is assigned by T to intransitive subjects and objects alike. Thus, the argument is inconclusive.

## 2.2. Multiple absolutives

First person pronouns in Warlpiri that are transitive subjects optionally bear absolutive (instead of ergative) even if there is a third person object, also bearing absolutive. As Legate (2006) points out, this looks as if an analysis that provides two different sources for absolutive is required for independent reasons. More precisely, Legate’s (2006) proposal is that ergative case is not assigned by *v* if the subject bears first person. Consequently, absolutive case on T may be assigned to the subject. Absolutive on the direct object (more precisely: accusative, morphologically realized as absolutive) is assigned by *v*.

A possible re-interpretation is that ergative is always assigned by a transitive *v*, but in the context of a first person subject an impoverishment rule (as they are common in Distributed Morphology) applies to the syntactic ergative case. As a consequence, the exponent for ergative cannot be inserted in the morphology, and the default absolutive case exponent takes over instead (cf. Keine 2007 on Hindi). As mentioned in section 2.1, there is nothing that prevents a theory of genuinely ergative alignment without split-absolutive from making use of such morphological technology. In a sense, this puts Legate's analysis on its head: ergative alignment is faithful to the syntax of abstract case while person-based splits involve morphological syncretism.

Legate (2008: 67-70) generalizes the above argument from Legate (2006) to Enga, Niuean, and Hindi. As far as I can tell, this does not pose any substantial problem for a theory without split-absolutive.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.3. Dative objects and agreement

The following argument is, again, due to Legate (2006). It is based on the observation that dative-marked objects in Warlpiri show the same agreement behavior as direct objects. According to Legate (2006), this follows if both receive case from the same head, as under the split-absolutive analysis, where absolutive on the object is assigned by *v* (as is dative, by assumption). It does not follow under a theory where case on the direct object and the dative-marked object is assigned by different heads (e.g. if absolutive comes from *T*).

Note, however, that agreement in Warlpiri involves accusative-alignment (e.g., Legate 2003, 2006) and therefore does not seem to be intimately tied to case assignment.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is not unexpected that co-arguments that get assigned case by different heads (*T* and *v*, respectively) do not necessarily differ in their agreement behavior (as long as they agree with the same head).

### 2.4. Case-agreement interaction

Here, Legate (2008: 70-74) discusses the interaction of case and agreement against the background of her theory. There are two main observations. In

<sup>7</sup>Some cases may involve the lack of an appropriate case exponent for lexical reasons, thus leading to the insertion of the default absolutive exponent without impoverishment.

<sup>8</sup>Agreement in Warlpiri is often assumed to involve bound pronouns, i.e., clitics (e.g., Goddard 1982: 179, Jelinek 1984: 43-45). Legate (2008: 71) treats it on a par with canonical agreement. I abstract away from this here.

Niuean, an ergative subject may not trigger agreement, only an absolutive subject may. This can be straightforwardly accounted for by assuming that agreement is sensitive to (syntactic) case: only some languages allow for agreement with ergative marked nominals (Bobaljik 2008; cf. Moravcsik 1974). Moreover, Legate (2008: 73) claims that an absolutive marked object may not trigger agreement in Niuean.<sup>9</sup> She assumes that the ergative subject in Niuean counts as a defective intervener, preventing probing beyond it. This assumption also works for an analysis without split-absolutive.<sup>10,11</sup>

Then again, as Legate (2008) notes as well, agreement in Hindi poses a complication for an analysis in terms of split-absolutive. Namely, in this language, agreement with an absolutive object is possible (under particular circumstances), just as with an absolutive marked subject. Under a genuinely ergative analysis, not much more has to be said. Under an analysis in terms of split-absolutive, one must assume that Hindi allows for agreement with accusative marked nominals, too (presupposing that there is no defective intervention of Hindi ergative subjects).<sup>12</sup>

## 2.5. Non-finite clauses

I turn to an argument that is based on the idea that languages with split-absolutive should show a behavior different from genuinely ergative languages

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<sup>9</sup>See also the number agreement facts in Tagalog discussed in Aldridge (2006).

<sup>10</sup>An alternative explanation under the split-absolutive analysis could be that agreement in Niuean does not target accusative case-marked nominals either (recall that direct objects in split-absolutive languages are assumed to bear abstract accusative case).

<sup>11</sup>In fact, there is a potential complication for an analysis of Niuean agreement assuming genuinely ergative alignment (which Legate 2008 does not mention). Namely, given that absolutive case marking of the direct object by T across an ergative subject must be possible in such a theory, the question arises why agreement with an absolutive object across an ergative subject is not possible. Technical solutions to this problem are conceivable. Here, I merely note that object agreement in Niuean appears not to be entirely impossible. As Legate (2008: 71, footnote 30) mentions: “The agreement facts in Niuean are complicated by the existence of lexical exceptions; Seiter (1980:61-65) reports [...] a small class of verbs that allow agreement with O”. Number agreement in Tagalog, as discussed in Aldridge (2006), may be more problematic in this context, though.

<sup>12</sup>Another complication, not addressed by Legate (2008), is why the absolutive elsewhere exponent in Hindi may show up on syntactically accusative-marked direct objects given that Hindi possesses the exponent *-ko*, which is sometimes analyzed as a (more specific) accusative case marker (e.g., Mohanan 1994, Butt & King 2004). All things equal, *-ko* should block the absolutive marker on direct objects in those contexts where *-ko* can show up in principle.

when it comes to non-finite constructions (Legate 2008: 62-67).<sup>13</sup> The underlying assumption is that non-finite T is not a case assigner. This allows to run the following test. In a split-absolutive language the object of a non-finite transitive verb should be able to show up in the absolutive while the subject of a non-finite intransitive verb should not. In contrast, in a genuinely ergative language, absolutive arguments should be unavailable altogether in infinitives.

The following examples from Warlpiri illustrate this logic (Legate 2008: 62-63). While it is possible to realize the object (*miyi* ‘food’) of an embedded non-finite transitive clause in the absolutive (1b), it is impossible to have an overt absolutive subject (*kurdu* ‘child’) in a non-finite intransitive clause (1a). (The overt subject of a non-finite transitive clause may bear ergative or dative, as shown in (1b).)<sup>14</sup>

- (1) a. \*Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku  
 man-PAUC-ERG PRES.IMP-3PL.SUBJ-3PL.OBJ bullock.ABS  
 turnu-ma-ni [ kurdu parnka-nja-rlarni ].  
 group-CAUSE-NPST child.ABS run-INF-OBV.C  
 ‘The men are mustering cattle while the children are running.’
- b. Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku  
 man-PAUC-ERG PRES.IMP-3PL.SUBJ-3PL.OBJ bullock.ABS  
 turnu-ma-ni [ karnta-patu-rlu /-ku miyi  
 group-CAUSE-NPST woman-PAUC-ERG -DAT food.ABS  
 purra-nja-puru ].  
 cook-INF-TEMP.C  
 ‘The men are mustering cattle while the women are cooking the food.’

Therefore, Warlpiri is a split-absolutive language. According to Legate (2008: 66), this contrasts with a genuinely ergative language such as Georgian. There, the direct object of a transitive non-finite verb cannot show up in the absolutive (but bears genitive, just as the subject of a non-finite intransitive verb).

In sections §2.5.1 and §2.5.2, I will first point out some weaknesses in the way that this test is applied in Legate (2006, 2008). I will then reapply the test

<sup>13</sup>This argument is particularly important as it also figures prominently in Aldridge (2004, 2006, 2008) and Coon et al. (2014); cf. also Bobaljik (1993), and the assessments in Deal (2015), Müller & Thomas (2017).

<sup>14</sup>Note that the examples in (1) involve different complementizer affixes, namely *-rlarni* and *-puru*, respectively. This is an important detail, glossed over by Legate (2008); see section 2.5.3 for some discussion.

under more appropriate conditions (section §2.5.3), showing that it gives at best inconclusive results.

### 2.5.1. *Overt absolutes, nominalization, and PRO*

According to Legate (2008: 64), the test cannot be applied to Niuean as it is unclear whether there are non-finite clauses in Niuean to begin with. Potentially relevant here are subjunctive clauses (e.g., Seiter 1980).<sup>15</sup> In fact, the subject of an intransitive subjunctive clause in Niuean can be realized overtly as absolute. Legate (2008: 64) takes this as a reason to exclude Niuean from the test: “Regardless of how this issue [i.e. the question whether subjunctive clauses in Niuean are non-finite clauses in the relevant sense, F.H.] is resolved, the clauses cannot be used to test the prediction in Niuean, since all cases are available.” This conclusion is surprising. After all, presupposing that subjunctives in Niuean count as non-finite in the relevant sense, the overt realization of a subject as absolute in an intransitive subjunctive suggests that the precondition of the test, namely the assumption that non-finite T cannot assign case, must be wrong.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, subjunctives in Niuean, if they are relevant, indicate that an analysis of Niuean as split-absolute is not warranted (although, theoretically still possible).

In two further case study languages discussed by Legate (2008), namely Warlpiri and Hindi, the non-finite structures discussed involve nominalization. Now, there is an additional factor that may influence case marking on the arguments of a nominalization, namely the capacity of the nominalizer (or another functional head associated with the nominalization) to assign case.

Thus, Legate (2008: 62) points out that subjects of noun phrases in Warlpiri are assigned dative case. Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that the subject of the non-finite (transitive) nominalized clause in (1b) may also bear dative case (Legate 2008: 63). Similarly, Legate (2008: 65) notes for Hindi that subjects of noun phrases bear genitive case. Accordingly, genitive also shows up on subjects of non-finite nominalized clauses in Hindi.<sup>17</sup>

However, to conclude from this that there is no absolute case available in the syntax of nominalized clauses in Warlpiri and Hindi would be premature.

<sup>15</sup>This points to a general methodological weakness of the test. Namely, it is a priori unclear which constructions are supposed to count as non-finite in the sense of the test and which not.

<sup>16</sup>A conclusion also reached on more general considerations in §2.5.3 below.

<sup>17</sup>Probably, something similar can be said for objects of nominalized verbs in Georgian.

One may imagine different resolution scenarios in which both absolutive and dative/genitive are assigned within the nominalized clause (by T and the nominalizer, respectively) but only the dative/genitive gets realized on the surface. For instance, one may assume that the dative/genitive wins out because the absolutive has a null realization (Baker & Vinokurova 2010: 639), that only the case that is highest on a given case hierarchy is realized (McCreight 1988: chapter 3, citing Babby 1984), or that the case that is assigned last is realized (Béjar & Massam 1999: 72).

An environment in which the interference of a case assigning nominalizer is neutralized, and which therefore would serve as a better environment in which to apply the test, are non-finite non-nominalized structures with a controlled PRO in subject position (or nominalizations where the nominalizing head does not enforce the realization of a certain case). Legate (2008), however, addresses such environments in a rather eclectic way. In fact, they only play a role in her discussion of Enga. Consider (2), from Legate (2008: 64):

- (2) akáli; dokó-mé [ PRO<sub>i</sub> dokosáa dokó kánj-a-nya ]  
 man DET-ERG doctor DET.ABS see-INF-DESID  
 más-í-á.  
 think-PAST-3SG  
 ‘The man wanted to see the doctor.’

Indeed, (2) looks like a good candidate for a control-infinitive with non-overtly realized PRO-subject.<sup>18</sup> In this context, Legate (2008: 64) writes: “Like Warlpiri, Enga exhibits a distinction between the licensing of absolutive on S and the licensing of absolutive on O in nonfinite clauses. Absolutive is available for O in nonfinite clauses [...] To express an overt S, a finite complement clause must be used in place of the infinitival.” Apparently, the mere fact that the subject of an intransitive infinitive may not be overtly realized is taken by Legate (2008) as an argument that there is no absolutive case assigned in the syntax.<sup>19</sup> The possibility that PRO may bear case is simply not taken into account.

<sup>18</sup>Li & Lang (1979: 317), the source of Legate (2008) for Enga, use the former notion of Equi-NP-deletion for the construction. There is no evidence for nominalization.

<sup>19</sup>In contrast, with respect to non-finite conjunctive participles in Hindi, Legate (2008: 65) notes: “Unfortunately, they exhibit obligatory subject control and so cannot be tested”. It remains unclear why (non-nominalized) control structures should be able to serve as a testing ground for the hypothesis of split-absolutive in Enga but not in Hindi.

Legate (2008) does not discuss why the presence of obligatorily controlled empty PRO in subject position of non-finite clauses should count as evidence for the idea that absolutive cannot be assigned to this position. One can only guess that the conclusion is based on the assumption that PRO is incompatible with case (Chomsky 1981).<sup>20</sup> At least, this is the logic explicitly applied by Aldridge (2008: 977, 987), who argues for an analysis of ergativity in some Austronesian languages that is very similar to the split-absolutive hypothesis. If PRO is incompatible with case, so the idea, then it can (and must) show up in positions without case, where overt subjects cannot be realized as they would violate the case filter (Vergnaud 1977). By assumption, this holds for the subject position of an intransitive non-finite clause, in particular.

### 2.5.2. *The case of PRO*

However, there is strong evidence that PRO does bear case. In particular, Landau (2004, 2006) argues at length that the idea that PRO is incompatible with case is hardly empirically tenable (see also McFadden 2004). The main argument takes the following shape. Nominal modifiers (adjectives, reflexives, floating quantifiers, classifiers, etc.) that show case agreement with the modified noun also show case agreement with PRO. This also holds if the controller of PRO bears a case different from the case with respect to which the modifier agrees.<sup>21</sup> The conclusion is that PRO itself must bear case.

The first pertinent observations were made by Andrews (1971, 1976). Since then, the pattern has been shown to exist in other languages, too (see Fanselow 1991, Sigurðsson 1991, 2008, Landau 2004, 2006, and references therein; see also Müller 2024 for relevant discussion). (3) and (4), from Icelandic (Sigurðsson 1991: 331) and German (Fanselow 1991: 114), illustrate.

- (3) Strákarnir<sub>i</sub> vonast til [ að PRO<sub>i</sub> vanta ekki alla í  
 the boys.NOM hope for to PRO.ACC lack not all.ACC in  
 skólann ].  
 the school  
 ‘The boys hope not to be all absent from school.’

<sup>20</sup>This does not seem to fit the fact that Legate (2008: 86) mentions in another context that there is evidence from Icelandic that PRO bears case (cf. section 2.5.2).

<sup>21</sup>This additional observation is important as it rules out an alternative analysis according to which the modifier shows long-distance case agreement with the controller of PRO.

- (4) Wir baten die Männer<sub>i</sub> [ PRO<sub>i</sub> einer nach dem anderen  
 we asked the.ACC men.ACC PRO.NOM one.NOM after the other  
 durch die Sperre zu gehen.  
 through the gate to go  
 ‘We asked the men to pass the gate one after the other.’

In (3), the floating quantifier *alla* bears accusative. As the modifier cannot case agree with the matrix subject (*strákarnir* ‘the boys’ bears nominative), case agreement must be with the PRO-subject of the infinitive, which receives quirky accusative case by the embedded predicate. In (4), the modifier *einer* bears nominative while the controlling object (*die Männer* ‘the men’) bears accusative. The same logic applies, nominative agreement must be with PRO.

Obviously, if one assumes that PRO does not bear case, then it becomes very difficult to account for case agreement facts of the type in (3) and (4). Moreover, as Landau (2004) points out, a case-by-case distinction (in one language PRO bears case, in another it does not) is not satisfying either.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, the mere assumption that the subject of an intransitive infinitive in Enga that involves obligatory control is PRO cannot be taken to provide an argument for the claim that the T-head of this infinitive cannot assign absolutive. In order to maintain this claim, one would have to show that PRO does not bear absolutive. As long as this has not been done, the argument from Enga for split-absolutive remains inconclusive.

### 2.5.3. Consequences for split-absolutive

While I am not able to present an argument here that the PRO-subject of an intransitive infinitive in Enga bears absolutive, thus showing that non-finite T must be able to assign case, there is evidence that this is what happens in various other ergative languages, among them two of the other case study languages discussed by Legate (2006, 2008), namely Warlpiri and Hindi.

Beginning with Warlpiri, recall the examples in (1) (repeated in (5)) that are supposed to show that non-finite intransitive nominalized clauses (“infinitives”) in Warlpiri cannot have absolutive marked subjects.

<sup>22</sup>“It would seem rather odd to suggest that PRO and its governing Infl in these languages are different from their counterparts in other languages in their ability (or necessity) to bear/assign normal case. Rather, the null hypothesis should be that PRO is always case marked, and it is simply the relative rarity of case concord that prevents us from gleaning parallel evidence in other languages.” (Landau 2004: 865)

- (5) a. \*Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku  
 man-PAUC-ERG PRES.IMP-3PL.SUBJ-3PL.OBJ bullock.ABS  
 turnu-ma-ni [ kurdu parnka-nja-rlarni ].  
 group-CAUSE-NPST child.ABS run-INF-OBV.C  
 ‘The men are mustering cattle while the children are running.’
- b. Ngarrka-patu-rlu ka-lu-jana puluku  
 man-PAUC-ERG PRES.IMP-3PL.SUBJ-3PL.OBJ bullock.ABS  
 turnu-ma-ni [ karnta-patu-rlu /-ku miyi  
 group-CAUSE-NPST woman-PAUC-ERG -DAT food.ABS  
 purra-nja-puru ].  
 cook-INF-TEMP.C  
 ‘The men are mustering cattle while the women are cooking the food.’

Both infinitives in (5) involve non-finite complementizer suffixes. Warlpiri exhibits a whole range of such suffixes (see Simpson 1983: 478-519 for an overview), comprising the obviation complementizer suffixes *-karra*, *-kurra*, and *-rlarni*. These three signal, among other things, control of the PRO-subject of the infinitive by the subject, the object, or an adjunct of the matrix clause, respectively (Hale 1982; also Hale 1983, Simpson & Bresnan 1983). (1a) involves the complementizer *-rlarni*, which means that the embedded subject-position in (1a) may be filled by a PRO-subject. In addition to this, *-rlani* (exceptionally, i.e., in contrast to the other two suffixes) allows to realize the subject of the infinitive overtly with dative case.<sup>23</sup>

Against this background, an important question not addressed by Legate (2008) is this: What would the case of PRO be if it showed up as the subject of the infinitive in (1a)? Here, Simpson’s (1983: 434-437) observation is relevant that Warlpiri shows the kind of case agreement between PRO-subjects and nominal modifiers (e.g., locatives, instrumentals, manner adverbials, and body parts) mentioned in §2.5.2 in the context of other languages. As Simpson (1983: 434) makes clear, such case agreement applies to ergative and absolutive PRO-subjects alike (also Simpson & Bresnan 1983: 56-57).

To illustrate, (6a,b) each show a locative modifier (*ngurra* ‘camp’ and *rdaku* ‘hole’, respectively) that agrees in case with the PRO-subject of the infinitive

<sup>23</sup>Simpson (1983: 481, footnote 24) claims that this option is mainly used by older Warlpiri speakers (also Simpson & Bresnan 1983: 62). According to Legate (2008), ergative case is also possible. The possibility of *-rlani* to co-occur with overt subjects leads Legate (2003: 19-20) to treat it as a default complementizer.

(Simpson 1983: 435, 438). In both cases, the complementizer is *-kurra* since the controller of PRO is the object *ngarrka* ‘man’ of the matrix clause. While case agreement on the locative in (6a) is ergative (the infinitive is transitive), it is absolutive (unmarked) in (6b). Since there is case agreement with PRO, PRO must bear case in (6a,b), namely ergative and absolutive, respectively.

- (6) a. Karnta ka-rla wangka-mi ngarrka<sub>i</sub>-ku [ PRO<sub>i</sub>  
 woman.ABS PRES-DAT speak-NPST man-DAT  
 ngurra-ngka-rlu jarnti-rinja-kurra-(ku) ].  
 camp-LOC-ERG trim-INF-OBV.C-(DAT)  
 ‘The woman is speaking to the man while he is trimming it in camp.’
- b. Kurdu ka-rla karri-mi wirl ngarrka<sub>i</sub>-ku [ PRO<sub>i</sub>  
 child.ABS PRES-DAT sit-NPST big.ABS man-DAT  
 rdaku-ngka nyina-nja-kurra-ku ].  
 hole-LOC sit-INF-OBV.C-DAT  
 ‘The child is bigger than the man when he is sitting in the hole.’

What this suggests is that the T-head of the intransitive infinitive in (6b) is able to assign absolutive case, thus undermining the very assumption that the test for split-absolutive under discussion is based on.

To make the point even stronger, one may add that some complementizer suffixes (such as the admonitive *-kujaku* in (7)) allow for *overt* subjects in their infinitival complements, comprising subjects of intransitive predicates, i.e., absolutives (Simpson 1983: 493):

- (7) Wurdungu-jarri-yarla -lpa-rlipa [ kurdu-kurdu  
 silent.INCH-IRR -PAST-1INC child-child.ABS  
 yakarra-pardi-nja-kujaku ].  
 awake-rise-INF-ADMON.C  
 ‘Let’s be silent so the children don’t wake up.’

The same holds for infinitives employing the complementizer *-puru* (Simpson 1983: 496-497), which shows up in Legate’s example given in (1b).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Note that there is also the non-finite complementizer *-karra*, which never allows for overt subjects to show up in the infinitive, be they ergative or absolutive (Simpson 1983: 467). This suggests that it is not case that regulates the overtness of arguments in infinitives but something else (cf. Aldridge 2008).

To repeat, if a non-finite T-head is able to assign absolutive case to (intransitive) subjects, then the fact that absolutive also shows up on direct objects in Warlpiri infinitives cannot serve as an argument for absolutive being split (between T and v). A uniform analysis where absolutive is always assigned by T is possible (and actually to be preferred, for reasons of simplicity).

Besides Warlpiri, there are other ergative languages that allow for the overt realization of absolutive subjects in non-finite clauses. For instance, Aldridge (2006, 2008) notes that the subjects of apparent ECM-infinitives in Tagalog may be realized overtly. Notably, in contrast to ECMs in English, the subject of an ECM in Tagalog does not bear the case associated with the embedding verb but the case that would be expected to appear on the embedded subject if the non-finite predicate were finite (which, under Aldridge's assumptions, are ergative or absolutive, respectively). Aldridge (2008: 989) suggests (referring to Sigurðsson 1991) that absolutive is present even in non-finite clauses in Tagalog. But it is only overtly realized if an appropriate higher head is present to license it in some sense to be made precise (cf. the remark at the end of §2.5.3).

The phenomenon of “backward control” allows for another way to test whether non-finite T may assign absolutive case. Polinsky & Potsdam (2002) argue that particular predicates in Tsez allow for overt realization of the lower, “controlled” subject of a control-infinitive. In contrast, the higher, “controlling” argument remains phonetically empty (see also Polinsky 2016: 318-324). This is the opposite pattern of what is found with classical control, hence the notion of backward control. Crucially, the overtly realized subject inside the infinitive may be the absolutive marked argument of an intransitive predicate, thus suggesting that non-finite T may assign absolutive case.<sup>25</sup>

It has been claimed that there are also accusative-aligning languages that allow for backward control in non-finite clauses (with the controlled subject being overtly realized as nominative). The Dravidian languages Telugu and Kannada are cases in point. In the following examples (Subbarao 2012b: 83-84), the non-finite subordinated clause is a conjunctive participle (headed by *-i* and *-u* in Telugu and Kannada, respectively). Conjunctive participle

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<sup>25</sup>Since non-finite clauses with absolutive subjects that are embedded under predicates allowing for backward control are ambiguous between a control and a raising analysis, Polinsky & Potsdam (2002) only give examples with ergative subjects. However, it becomes clear from the description that backward control should also be possible with absolutive subjects (see Polinsky & Potsdam 2002: 249, footnote 5, Polinsky 2000: 27, footnote 10).

clauses are often analyzed as control-structures (e.g., Davison 2008: 32-33, Subbarao 2012a). The empty controller in (8a,b) is indicated by  $\Delta$ .<sup>26</sup>

- (8) a. [ kamala<sub>i</sub>        dhillī vacc-i        ]  $\Delta_i$  padi ēḷḷu ayyindi  
           Kamala.NOM Delhi come-CPM    ten years happened(s)  
           ‘It is ten years since Kamala came to Delhi.’
- b. [ kamala<sub>i</sub>        dillī band-u        ]  $\Delta_i$  hattu warṣa ayittu  
           Kamala.NOM Delhi come-CPM    ten years happened(s)  
           ‘It is ten years since Kamala came to Delhi.’

With this in mind, I turn to Hindi, the last case study language of Legate (2008). Hindi does not allow for backward control (Subbarao 2012a, Subbarao & Arora 2009).<sup>27</sup> But it exhibits canonical forward control in various constructions, among them non-finite subordinate conjunctive participle clauses (Davison 2008: 32). Moreover, it allows for some rare cases of conjunctive participle clauses where the matrix subject is non-identical with the subject of the conjunctive participle clause (Davison 1981: 106, 122, footnote 5, Davison 2008: 32, footnote 2, Subbarao 2012b: 279). In such a case, exceptionally, the subject of the conjunctive participle clause is overtly realized, and it may be realized as absolutive, see (9).<sup>28,29</sup>

- (9) a. [ diwaar    gir-kar    ] patthar gir gae  
           wall.ABS fall-CPM    stones fall go.PERF.PL  
           ‘The wall having fallen, stones fell.’

<sup>26</sup>Note that *kamala* in (8) cannot be the subject of the matrix clause as it would have to be marked with dative then (Subbarao 2012b: 84). Note also that while Subbarao & Arora (2009) claim that the conjunctive particle *-i* in Telugu is expected to assign nominative as it derives historically from a past-tense marker, they concede that this is not the case for the conjunctive participle in Dakkhini (an Indo-Aryan language heavily influenced by Telugu). Nevertheless, backward control is possible in Dakkhini, too.

<sup>27</sup>I do not know whether Hindi shows case agreement with PRO.

<sup>28</sup>Legate (2008: 65) notes that the conjunctive participle clause bears perfective aspect in Hindi, hence, it should involve ergative alignment.

<sup>29</sup>Languages with accusative-alignment and overt (non-identical) subjects in infinitives also exist, see, e.g., Mensching (2000) on Romance. Mensching (2000: 23) notes that in most Romance languages the subject of the infinitive bears nominative case (which, in Mensching’s 2000 analysis, is assigned by non-finite T); see also Szabolcsi (2005) on overt nominative subjects in infinitives in Hungarian, and Szabolcsi (2009) for a crosslinguistic overview.

- b. [ āth baj-kar ] das minaṭ hue  
 eight.ABS strike-CPM ten minutes happened  
 ‘It is ten minutes after eight.’  
 lit. ‘Eight having struck, ten minutes occurred.’

To summarize, none of the four case studies discussed in Legate (2008) provides a conclusive argument based on the hypothesis that non-finite T is unable to assign absolutive case.<sup>30</sup> The facts from Niuean are either irrelevant or speak against the hypothesis (depending on the status of subjunctive clauses in Niuean). Legate’s (2008) argument from Enga is based on the arguably wrong assumption that PRO does not bear case. And both Hindi and Warlpiri even show evidence in favor of non-finite T being able to assign absolutive case in form of overtly realized absolutive subjects in intransitive infinitives and/or absolutive case agreement with PRO. This means that an analysis of these languages in terms of split-absolutive is not enforced. A more traditional treatment, according to which T assigns absolutive to both intransitive subjects and direct objects is tenable, and to be preferred for reasons of simplicity.<sup>31</sup>

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the idea of split-absolutive opens up the possibility of there being “split-nominative” languages (see footnote 37), i.e., languages with tripartite alignment where nominative and ergative are syncretic. Assuming that non-finite T cannot assign case, one would expect such languages to allow for nominative subjects in transitive infinitives but not in intransitive infinitives.

Finally note that if non-finite T is able to assign case, then the difference between overt and non-overt realization of the subject of a non-finite clause must be conditioned by factors other than case (cf. footnote 24). Although I cannot discuss here what exactly these conditions are, they possibly relate to the presence of a sufficiently “strong” head in the vicinity of the overtly realized argument (cf. also the proposals presented in McFadden 2004 and Landau 2004, 2006). This may open up another possible avenue to investigate the concept of strength in syntax (see Müller 2019).

<sup>30</sup>As far as I can tell, Aldridge (2004, 2006, 2008) does not offer any substantially new perspective on this discussion (but recall the caveat in footnote 3).

<sup>31</sup>To be clear, all this is not to say that a split-absolutive analysis of these languages has been shown to be impossible; the claim here is merely that the arguments for split-absolutive brought forward by Legate (2006, 2008) are not decisive.

### 3. Coon et al.'s (2014) argument

In their discussion of Mayan, Coon et al. (2014) adopt the idea of split-absolutive. In particular, they hypothesize that some Mayan languages are genuinely ergative (“high absolutive”) while others are split-absolutive (“low absolutive”). Coon et al. (2014: 194) call this the “absolutive parameter”.

Mayan languages are strictly head-marking. Transitive subjects of finite clauses trigger ergative agreement on the verb while intransitive subjects and direct objects of finite transitive verbs trigger absolutive agreement. Therefore, the following discussion requires a slight change in perspective. In particular, case enters the picture in a more indirect way by the assumption that agreement in Mayan is intimately connected to case (the assumption in Coon et al. 2014).

#### 3.1. Non-finite clauses

The argument for split absolutive in Mayan put forward by Coon et al. (2014) is, in essence, the same as the one discussed in §2.5 above. On the assumption that non-finite clauses (nominalizations in Mayan) do not have a T head with case-assigning capacity, the split-absolutive hypothesis predicts that objects of low-absolutive languages should be able to participate in absolutive agreement in non-finite clauses (because they receive structural case from *v*) while objects of high-absolutive languages should not (as they depend on T for case). Subjects of intransitive non-finite clauses should not be able show absolutive agreement in either high-absolutive or low-absolutive languages (again, because they receive their case from T).

These predictions are borne out.<sup>32</sup> (10a,b) illustrate the contrast between absolutive agreement with a direct object in finite clauses vs. the unavailability of such agreement in embedded non-finite clauses (under progressive aspect) in the high-absolutive language Q’anjob’al (Coon et al. 2014: 197).

- (10) a. Max hin-laq’ naq winaq.  
 ASP 1ERG-hug CLF man  
 ‘I hugged the man.’

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<sup>32</sup>The high-absolutive language Kaqchikel shows a exceptional pattern in non-finite clauses; see Imanishi (2020) for discussion.

- b. \*Lanan [ hin-laq' naq winaq ].  
 PROG 1ERG-hug CLF man  
 'I am hugging the man.'
- c. Lanan [ ha-way-i ].  
 PROG 2ERG-sleep-ITV  
 'You are sleeping.'
- (11) a. Max-ach y-il-a'.  
 ASP-2ABS 3ERG-see-TV  
 'She saw you.'
- b. Max-ach oq'-i.  
 ASP-2ABS cry-ITV  
 'You cried.'

Note that in high absolutive languages, absolutive agreement shows up on T, marked by aspect (hence the notion “high”). As absolutive agreement with third person is null in Mayan, it is not perceivable in (10a,b) (cf. (11a,b), Coon et al. 2014: 190). (10c) shows that the subject of a non-finite intransitive predicate exceptionally triggers ergative agreement. Here, absolutive agreement is impossible. The analysis is that ergative case is assigned to the subject by the nominalizer that is assumed to be present in non-finite clauses in Mayan.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, as (12a) shows, absolutive agreement with the direct object of a non-finite transitive clause is possible in Chol, a low-absolutive language (Coon et al. 2014: 203). In low-absolutive languages, absolutive agreement shows up on the verbal root (hence the notion “low”). Finally, subjects of non-finite intransitive clauses again resort to ergative agreement (12b), as in high-absolutive languages.

- (12) a. Choñkol [ k-mek'-ety ].  
 PROG 1ERG-hug-2ABS  
 'I am hugging you.'
- b. Choñkol [ k-ts'äm-el ].  
 PROG 1ERG-bathe-NML  
 'I am bathing.'

<sup>33</sup>Often, the nominalizer is not overtly realized in these languages. Note that ergative and genitive, the typical case assigned by nouns, are syncretic in Mayan.

Taking the arguments for non-finite T as a case assigner from section 2.5.3 serious, the question arises how the above observations may be interpreted. One possibility is that non-finite clauses in Mayan lack T entirely, which is what Coon et al. (2014: 195) seem to assume.

Alternatively, one may challenge the view that low-absolutive languages involve split-absolutive. Under this view, finite and non-finite clauses contain a T-head that may assign absolutive case in high-absolutive and low-absolutive languages. What requires an explanation, then, is a) the absence of absolutive agreement in non-finite intransitive clauses in Mayan generally, and b) the contrast between absolutive agreement with direct objects in non-finite transitive clauses in low-absolutive languages on the one hand and the impossibility thereof in high-absolutive languages on the other hand. In what follows, I argue that such an explanation is available. The upshot is that a split-absolutive analysis of low-absolutive languages in Mayan is not enforced.

### 3.2. Reconstructing split-absolutive in Mayan

The idea is based on the observation that in high-absolutive languages absolutive agreement must show up on T. Coon et al. (2014: 188) assume that in this case the agreement morpheme is a clitic. Suppose now that absolutive case assignment implies agreement with T (i.e., cliticization in a high-absolutive language). If T is null, as in non-finite structures, cliticization, which needs an overt host, is then impossible. Consequently, although non-finite T, in principle, has the capacity to assign case, effective case assignment leads to a crash of the derivation in non-finite clauses, for direct objects and intransitive subjects alike (due to failure of cliticization). On the other hand, if T does not assign absolutive, and if case is not assigned by another head, then the case filter will rule out these structures in high-absolutive languages. In particular, while a subject may get ergative from the nominalizer instead, an object may not, presumably due to locality.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>The present proposal was anticipated by a reviewer of Coon et al. (2014). As a reaction, Coon et al. (2014: 196-197) point out that (10b) is ungrammatical although “there are no 3rd person absolutive morphemes in Mayan”. And if there is no absolutive agreement clitic for third person, then there cannot be any problem for cliticization, so their argument. However, the assumption that there is no exponent for third person absolutive agreement cannot be granted. Quite on the contrary, realizational morphological theories usually assume that there always is an elsewhere exponent, typically null, which is inserted if no other exponent is available. And

In contrast, low-absolutive languages do not require cliticization on T. There, the absolutive exponent shows up low, on the verbal root. Since absolutive agreement, and thus absolutive case assignment, do not depend on the overtness of T, they may both apply in non-finite clauses, too.<sup>35</sup>

Summarizing, the analysis is quite simple. The two types of Mayan languages (high-absolutive and low-absolutive) have the same underlying system of case assignment. They merely differ on the surface with respect to a requirement on the realization of absolutive agreement. This leads to a difference in behavior in non-finite clauses, where T is null. Therefore, in order to derive the agreement patterns of Mayan non-finite clauses no reference to split-absolutive is necessary.

#### 4. Goddard's (1982) argument

I now turn to what, in my view, is the only decisive argument in the literature for split-absolutive (see Legate 2008: 74-81; again, cf. also Müller 2024). Goddard (1982), who deals with various Pama-Nyungan languages, distinguishes systems with (overt) tripartite case marking and systems without. The former show a tripartite system at least for some subclass of nominals. In Diyari, for instance, derived duals, plural common nouns, and singular first and second pronouns, among others, form such subclasses, but not underived duals or singular common nouns (Goddard 1982: 170).

To illustrate, the non-derived dual *yula* in (13) is unmarked (nominative) although it shows up as the subject of a transitive verb. That abstract ergative is assigned to this position becomes obvious when a second person singular pronoun shows up there.<sup>36</sup> In other words, nominative and ergative are syncretic for non-derived duals.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, nominative and accusative are syncretic for the singular common noun *kiṅtala* 'dog' in (13). The abstract

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the elsewhere exponent, if it stands for a clitic, imposes the same requirements on cliticization as any other clitic.

<sup>35</sup>The lack of absolutive agreement with intransitive subjects of non-finite clauses in low-absolutive languages is a consequence of the capacity of the nominalizer to assign ergative, combined with some assumption about case resolution in a situation where more than one case is assigned, see section 2.5.1.

<sup>36</sup>As the subject of an intransitive verb, the latter pronoun would surface as *yini* '2SG.NOM'.

<sup>37</sup>Accordingly, one might say that Diyari exhibits split-nominative.

accusative emerges morphologically when a derived dual shows up in direct object position.

- (13) *yula /yundu*    *kiṅtala /kiṅtala-wula-ṅa*    *ṅanda-ṅa*    *wara-yi*  
 2DU 2SG.ERG dog    dog-DU-ACC    hit-PART AUX-PRES  
 ‘You two/you (sg) hit the dog/two dogs.’

Moreover, Goddard (1982: 172-175) observes that assuming a tripartite system allows to formulate the rule of case agreement in Diyari in a maximally general manner. Diyari shows, for instance, case agreement between a (pronominal) determiner and the noun associated with it. Nevertheless, the common noun *putu* ‘thing’ in object position in (14) does not exhibit accusative case marking although the determiner *ṅiṅa* ‘3SG.NF.ACC’ does. The assumption that the noun bears abstract accusative, syncretic with unmarked nominative, allows to maintain the agreement rule in full generality.

- (14) *ṅulu*            *pulaṅa*    [ *ṅiṅa*            *putu* ]    *yiṅki-ṅa*    *wara-yi*  
 3SG.NF.ERG 3DU.ACC 3SG.NF.ACC thing    give-PART AUX-PRES  
 ‘He gave them that thing.’

Goddard (1982: 178-181) also discusses a language without overtly tripartite system, Yankunytjatjara. At first sight Yankunytjatjara exhibits a person based split ergative system: ergative alignment with common nouns vs. accusative alignment with pronouns. But again, facts from case agreement suggest an underlyingly tripartite system. For instance, phrases with inalienable possession, a construction that typically shows case agreement in the language, may involve an unmarked possessed common noun with an accusative marked pronominal possessor. Instead of analyzing the common noun as bearing absolutive, an analysis that takes it to bear accusative (syncretic with nominative) allows a uniform treatment of case agreement.<sup>38</sup>

In face of these arguments, it seems to me that one can hardly deny that a tripartite analysis (involving split-absolutive and split nominative) for Pama-Nyungan languages (at least those discussed in detail by Goddard 1982 and Legate 2008: 74-81) is well motivated.

<sup>38</sup>Goddard (1982: 179) also suggests that “it may be possible to adapt” this type of argument to Warlpiri agreement clitics (cf. footnote 8 above). However, he does not specify the details of this adaption. Neither does Legate (2008: 75, footnote 33), who takes up Goddard’s (1982) suggestion.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the arguments put forward in the literature in favor of a split-absolutive analysis for various ergative languages (Warlpiri, Enga, Hindi, Niuean, and low-absolutive Mayan languages such as Chol) are not conclusive, the arguments for the Pama-Nyungan languages provided in Goddard (1982) and Legate (2008) being the exception. While I have not shown that an analysis of these languages in terms of split-absolutive is incompatible with the facts, I would like to contend that the burden of proof lies with those who claim that the split-absolutive analysis is correct. Denying this would mean that one should also be ready to accept the claim that, e.g., German is split-nominative, which has never been made to my knowledge, and for good reason. Thus, in the meanwhile I take it that a uniform analysis of ergative languages (with absolutive being assigned by T to both intransitive subjects and direct objects) is to be preferred. As Chomsky (2001: 2) puts it: “In the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, assume languages to be uniform, with variety restricted to easily detectable properties of utterances.”

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