

Variable ergativity in Pamosu

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1. Introduction

In recent years, variable case marking (sometimes called “optional case marking”) has become a focus of interest (Barðdal and Chelliah 2009; DeLancey 2011; McGregor 2007; Fauconnier 2011).

- Variable case marking involves case markers which are not present in all situations in which they might be expected.
- Now seen to involve paradigmatic, semantic and pragmatic factors to different degrees in different languages.

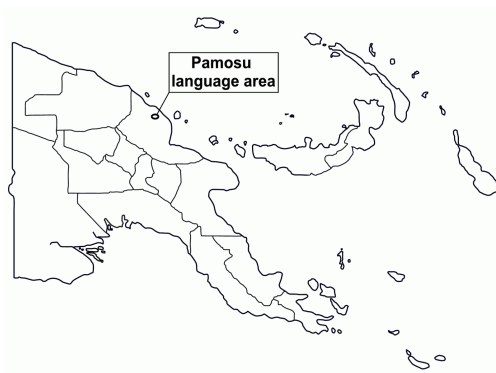
Many recent papers have focused on Tibeto-Burman languages. This paper describes case marking in Pamosu, a Papuan language of Papua New Guinea.

- Pamosu has a case marker (*ene*) which may be called “ergative”.
- Distribution involves syntactic and pragmatic, but apparently not semantic, factors.

The remainder of the talk will be structured as follows:

- Brief background on the Pamosu language
- Discussion of the patterns of case marking observed for *ene*.
- The question of terminology.

2. Pamosu



- Spoken in the Adelbert Range, Madang Province, Papua New Guinea

- Papuan (i.e. non-Austronesian)
- Trans New Guinea (TNG) family, Madang, North Adelbert
- 1700 ~ 1800 speakers in 5 villages

Typological features:

- Agglutinative, with core arguments obligatorily indexed on verb and optionally by NPs
- Default AOV (= SOV) constituent order, variable for pragmatic reasons

- (1) *Alumbang weivel wa-k.*
 Brahminy.kite bandicoot hit-3.HOD
 ‘The Brahminy kite killed the bandicoot.’ [Elicited.]¹

- In verbal morphology, Pamosu has strict nominative-accusative alignment, as is characteristic of the TNG family. S and A arguments consistently group together in a “subject” relation.
- Subjects are indexed by portmanteau verbal suffixes, which also indicate tense / mood. In the two examples below, the suffix *-om* encodes first person singular past reference for both S (2) and A (3):

- (2) *Aha-m embe om-om.*
 go.out-1SG.PST SS weep-1SG.PST
 ‘I went and cried.’ [L08NI01N: 7]

- (3) *ye mimba ka-wal-om, munga,*
 1SG game.mammal REM-hit-1SG.PST bird
 ‘I killed game mammals and birds,’ [T09HK01A: 7]

- Nominative / accusative alignment is unaffected by changes in person or TAM. The following two examples have 3rd person subjects and hodiernal (today’s tense) time reference. The suffix *-ok* is used for both (4) and (5).

- (4) *mande tuku eye itiv-ok*
 person one DEM3 go-3.HOD
 ‘that one person ran away,’ [T10NG02N: 42]

- (5) *pokom ina-wa-k,*
 forest.spirit 1SG.OBJ-hit-3.HOD
 ‘the forest spirits have struck me,’ [T09NT01N: 16]

¹ Glossing generally follows Leipzig glossing rules. Exceptions: DEM3 distal demonstrative, DE:N demonstrative of new information, HOD hodiernal (today’s) tense, REM remote, SCN scene (outer locative), SEL selective, SEQ sequential, SS same subject.

- Objects are indexed by prefixes. 1st and 2nd person objects have overt prefixes, which are obligatory (5). Absence of an overt prefix on a transitive verb obligatorily indicates a 3rd person object.

3. Case marking of A arguments

Case marking of nominal arguments is on an apparently ergative pattern.

- A arguments (NPs and free pronouns) may be followed by the case postposition *ene*.
- S and O arguments are never case marked.

Similar combinations of accusative syntax and “ergative” case marking are widespread amongst Papuan languages, especially those in the TNG family (Foley 1986). Examples include Kewa (Franklin 1971), Kaugel (Head 1976), Enga (Li and Lang 1979), Dani (Bromley 1981), Fore (Scott 1986), Tauya (MacDonald 1990), Yéli Dnye (Henderson 1995), Korafe (Farr 1999) and Kâte (Suter 2010).

The case marker *ene* is isomorphic between three readings:

- ergative (marks A arguments)
- instrumental
- outer locative (glossed SCN “scene”)

- (6) *Fua mande ongol ene elehe ene ume sepa ene wa-k.*
 Fua CLF:HUMAN enemy ERG road SCN knife big INS hit-3.HOD

‘An enemy attacked Fua with a machete on the way.’ [Elicited.]

- (7) *Fua mande ongol ene ume sepa ene elehe oho wak.*
 Fua CLF:HUMAN enemy ERG knife big INS road LOC hit-3.HOD

‘An enemy attacked Fua with a machete on the road.’ [Elicited.]

3.1 Restriction of ergative *ene* to marking A arguments

- As a marker of core arguments, *ene* appears only with transitive subjects (A arguments). It appears in transitive predicates describing a variety of events, including physical impact (8), eating (9), perception (30), physical transfer (11), childbearing (12) and “impersonal” bodily processes (13).

- (8) *ye mamu ene k-ual-ot.*
 1SG uncle ERG REM-hit-3.PST

‘my maternal uncle shot (the enemy).’ [T09NA02N: 28]

- (9) *munga evela en = ike onum-ong*
 bird fierce ERG = FOC eat-3.HOD

‘...a bird of prey has eaten (the chicken)’ [T09NA07N: 38]

(10) *umbe ene ina-veka-t,*
 mother ERG 1SG.OBJ-see-3.PST
 ‘(my) mother saw me,’ [L08NI01N: 21]

(11) *pokom tual ene ya-ov-ot,*
 spirit house ERG 1PL.OBJ-take-3.PST
 ‘the car took us,’ [T09HM01A: 11]

(12) *umbe ene ya-nd-op ka-waha-t o,*
 mother ERG 1PL.OBJ-bear.child-SEQ REM-put-3.PST DE:N
 ‘When our mother bore us,’ [T09HY01U: 5]

(13) *fā peka ene ina-mboh-ok*
 weather cold.air ERG 1SG.OBJ-hold-3.HOD
 ‘The cold wind is getting to me.’ [Elicited.]

- Ergative *ene* occurs with complex predicates which are lexicalised as transitive.

(14) *Bal ne = ne maha fuv-a*
 ball 2SG=ERG send come-IMP
 ‘You, throw the ball back to me.’ [Elicited.]

- Ergative *ene* occurs with a nominal subject which is shared by a series of predicates, as long as at least one of the predicates is transitive.

(15) *Mande ei-n ene fu-op ya-fuluk os-op ke-ikuam-ond.*
 person DEM3-SEL ERG come-SEQ 1PL.OBJ-hear / smell open-SEQ REM-be-3.PST
 ‘That man came and was listening to us’ [T09NA08U: v.15]

In a number of other languages, “ergative” case marking systematically occurs with S arguments of “unergative” events, i.e. those which involve volition or control. Typical unergative events are motion, changes of posture and defecation (Foley 2007: 380-382). Alternatively, some languages utilise ergative case marking in intransitive predicates to indicate control or deliberate action which is out of the ordinary (Anderson and Wade 1988; Coupe 2011).

- However, Pamosu does not allow *ene* with the S arguments of intransitive predicates, including “unergative” events.

(16) * *Mande amun ene itiv-ok.*
 CLF:HUMAN man ERG go-3.HOD
 (Attempted:) ‘The man has gone.’ [Elicited.]

- (17) * *Mande epiov ene mehi av-u-ek.*
 CLF:HUMAN woman ERG garden go.out-PROG-3.HOD

(Attempted:) ‘The woman is going to the garden.’ [Elicited.]

- (18) * *Ye ene tual ilup-o-hom.*
 1SG ERG house come.up-EP-1SG.HOD

(Attempted:) ‘I entered the house.’ [Elicited.]

- (19) * *Mande epiov ene omum-ong.*
 CLF:HUMAN woman ERG weep-3.HOD

(Attempted:) ‘The woman cried.’ [Elicited.]

- (20) * *Mande amun ene ipu pisa-k.*
 CLF:HUMAN man ERG faeces fart-3.HOD

(Attempted:) ‘The man (deliberately) farted.’ [Elicited.]

3.2 *Environments in which ene is required*

Nominal A arguments must be case-marked with *ene* when there is variation from AOV ordering.

- When more than one core argument is present in the clause, the first one is considered topical and must be considered the A argument unless contradicted by case marking. This principle overrides semantic considerations, such as real world knowledge (cf Dani (Bromley 1981)).

- (21) *Weivel alumbang wa-k.*
 bandicoot Brahminy.kite hit-3.HOD

‘The bandicoot killed the Brahminy kite.’ / * ‘The Brahminy kite killed the bandicoot.’ [Elicited.]

- Ordering of A and O arguments is often varied for pragmatic reasons, e.g. if the O argument is more topical. If the A argument does not precede the O argument, it must be case-marked with *ene*.

- (22) *Weivel alumbang ene wa-k.*
 bandicoot Brahminy.kite ERG hit-3.HOD

‘The Brahminy kite killed the bandicoot.’ [Elicited.]

- When only one nominal is present, it is assumed to be more the focal argument and therefore the O argument, unless this interpretation is overruled by *ene*.

- (23) *Ye mamu ei-n ene sikom = ike ka-eka-t*
 1SG uncle DEM3-SEL ERG silent = FOC REM-see-3.PST

‘That maternal uncle of mine secretly watched (the forest spirits),’ [T09NA05N: 10]

- In the absence of the case marker *ene*, a single NP / free pronoun is interpreted as the O argument.

(24) *On ene wa-k.*
 3 AGT hit-3.HOD
 ‘He beat him.’ [Elicited.]

(25) *On wa-k.*
 3 hit-3.HOD
 ‘Somebody beat him. / He was beaten.’ [Elicited.]

- However, *ene* is not required when the verb has an overt object prefix.

(26) *eye ina-veka-p itivot,*
 DEM3 1SG.OBJ-see-SEQ go-3.PST
 ‘that one (the pig) saw me and ran away,’ [T09NH01N: 6]

In a ditransitive clause, there are three core arguments.

- If all three are represented by NPs, clause-initial subject arguments do not require case marking.

(27) *Mande amun mande epiov epa us-ot.*
 CLF:HUMAN man CLF:HUMAN woman netbag give-3.PST
 ‘The man gave the woman a netbag.’ [Elicited.]

- If there are fewer than three NPs in a ditransitive clause, the subject NP must be case-marked.

(28) *umbe =kene ene sapil ko-us-ot*
 mother=PL ERG plate REM-give-3.PST
 ‘the mothers gave (them) plates (of food)’ [T09NV03N: 50]

3.3 Environments in which *ene* is optional

In all other situations, the presence of *ene* is conditioned by pragmatic factors. Semantic factors such as animacy are not relevant.

- Example (29) is equally acceptable, regardless of whether *ene* is present.

(29) *Eman (ene) mande wa-k.*
 dog ERG person hit-3.HOD
 ‘The dog bit the man.’ [Elicited.]

- Note the contrast with Fore, where the animacy hierarchy is crucial (Scott 1986).

(30) *yaga wá aegúye.*
 pig man 3SG.OBJ:hit:3SG
 (Fore) ‘The man killed the pig.’ / * ‘The pig attacked the man.’ [Scott 1986: 169.]

- In Pamosu, even inanimate A arguments do not require case-marking if they appear in the topic slot.

(31) *Opinom (ene) tual wal-ot.*
 wind ERG house hit-3.PST

‘The wind struck the house.’ [Elicited]

Suter (2010) finds that in Kâte the occurrence of ergative case marking in “optional” contexts is associated with pragmatic focus.

- This is also the case in Pamosu. In (32), marking the A argument with *ene* gives it contrastive focus.

(32) *Mande amun ene mande epiov epa us-ot.*
 CLF:HUMAN man ERG CLF:HUMAN woman netbag give-3.PST

‘THE MAN gave the woman a netbag.’ [Elicited.]

- The case marker is more likely to occur in embedded clauses, such as adverbial clauses or speech reports, which are often focal elements. In (33), the case marking draws attention to the contrast between the inner and outer speech reports.

(33) ‘“*Akineng,*” *ye ene esehe-m, ikua-k he-m,*’ *ese-k,*
 rat 1SG ERG say-1SG.HOD stay-3.HOD say-1SG.HOD say-3.HOD

‘He said, “I said, ‘(A) rat’, (and) I thought it remained (there),” ’ [T10NG01N: 11]

This area needs more detailed discourse analysis to determine which pragmatic factors are most likely to trigger ergative case marking in optional contexts.

4. Terminology

Much of the terminology has been governed by the assumption that true case marking is paradigmatic.

- Dixon (1994): a sharp distinction between true ergative languages, in which case marking is fully paradigmatic, and languages in which other semantic and pragmatic factors are seen to be relevant; the term “ergative” is only really appropriate for the first type.
- LaPolla (1995): suggests the term “agentive” for case marking which is non-paradigmatic and often motivated by disambiguation. He notes there is a continuum between more semantic and more paradigmatic systems.
- In Pamosu, we have a system which is clearly more paradigmatic but not fully so. The variable nature of ergative case marking means it is not possible to speak of an “absolute” case.

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