

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

The subject of this thesis is the Tongan language. Tongan is a Polynesian language spoken by approximately 100,000 people living in the Tongan archipelago in the South Pacific. One of the most characteristic features of the Tongan language is its ergative case marking: the subject of an intransitive verb appears in the same case (i.e., absolutive) as the one assigned to the object of a transitive verb. This type of ergative case marking is found across the Tongic and Samoic-Outlier languages in the Polynesian group. The rest of the Polynesian shows an accusative case marking. The coexistence of the two types of case marking in the Polynesian languages is often ascribed to a diachronic change: specifically, reanalysis of the Proto-Polynesian passive construction as ergative that took place some time ago in the Tongic and Samoic-Outlier subgroups (Hohepa 1969, Chung 1977, 1978 among others).

Ergative case marking, however, is not a phenomenon idiosyncratic to these Polynesian languages. It is found across a wide range of languages including the Australian, Eskimo, Mayan, Indo-Aryan, and Caucasian. In short, ergative case marking is not a language-specific phenomenon. On the contrary, it should be considered a part of Universal Grammar (UG). A historical approach such as the passive-to-ergative reanalysis in Polynesian seems to explain how a particular instance

of ergative case marking arises in a specific language. However, if we were to generalise this reanalysis, a question arises as to why only a limited number of languages have undergone this reanalysis. Theoretically, any language could go through similar reanalysis. However, languages with ergative case marking are outnumbered by those with accusative case marking such as English. Since it is arguably a rare process, one needs to explain why such reanalysis had to take place in a certain language. What motivates this reanalysis?

In the spirit of the Principles and Parameters approach (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993), it would be better if we could account for the difference between ergative languages and accusative languages in terms of a parametric choice. Since both case systems exist across a wide range of languages, it is natural to assume that a language could have either ergative or accusative case marking. The choice is utterly arbitrary just like a language may select VSO as opposed to SVO as a linear word order. The question is whether it is possible to postulate a single parameter (or possibly combined with some other parameters) that derives the ergative case marking on the one hand and the accusative case marking on the other. Several attempts have been made to postulate such a parameter (Bobaljik 1993, Bittner and Hale 1996a,b, Murasugi 1992 among others). An important observation is that a language may choose which argument to mark in a transitive construction. If a language L1 chooses to mark the direct object, L1 will have an accusative case marking. In contrast, if a language L2 chooses to mark the transitive subject, then, L2 will have an ergative case marking. Thus, the parameter that determines case-marking types is likely to concern the choice of marked case (or alternatively, the unmarked case) in a given language. Informally, it

could be formulated either as “assign the marked case to a) the direct object or b) the transitive subject” or as “the intransitive subject must receive the same case as a) the transitive subject or b) the direct object”.

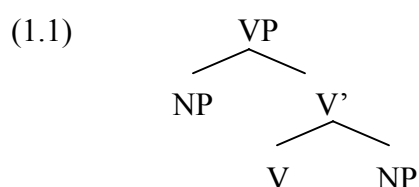
Ergative case marking is interrelated to various syntactic phenomena as well. In Tongan, ergativity is manifested not only in morphology but also in syntax. ERG-marked arguments are treated differently from ABS-marked arguments in some syntactic operations such as coordination and relativisation. On the other hand, it should be noted that the ergative pattern is not consistently observed. For example, pronominal arguments apparently show an accusative pattern: subject pronouns and object pronouns have different forms. Distribution of PRO also shows an accusative pattern: PRO can occur as a subject but not as a direct object. Such inconsistency also needs to be explained.

1.2 Theoretical background

The current study of the Tongan syntax is based on the Principles and Parameters approach (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993). It is assumed that UG consists of a set of universal principles and the associated parameters. Some of the essential principles include the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), the Case Filter, and the Theta Criterion. The EPP requires that a sentence have a subject; the Case Filter and the Theta Criterion require that an argument must bear a (abstract) case and a theta-role (Chomsky 1981). Any derivation that fails to meet these requirements yields an

ungrammatical sequence.

With regard to the phrase structure, we assume the X-bar theory (Chomsky 1981). Following Pollock (1989) and Chomsky (1991, 1993), we assume that Inflection phrase consists of T(ense) and Agr(eement) phrases. We also take the VP-internal subject hypothesis (Koopman and Sportiche 1991 and others). Specifically, we assume that the subject is generated in [Spec, VP]. In a transitive construction, the direct object is generated as a sister of V. In short, we assume the phrase structure (1.1) below.



Another essential notion is that of the Predication theory (Williams 1980, 1981). We assume that a transitive verb bears two theta-roles, an external theta-role and an internal theta-role. The latter is assigned to a NP in [V, NP]. Hence, this argument is called internal argument. The external theta-role is assigned to a NP in [Spec, VP] by V' through the predication rule. The head V and the internal argument form a predicate and take a NP to enter a subject-predicate relation (also see Marantz 1981). Thus, the argument generated in [Spec, VP] is referred to as an external argument. Note that when we use the terms external theta-role and internal theta-role, we do not refer to a specific semantic role such as Agent, Patient and Goal. External/internal theta-role is a more general term referring to a theta-role assigned to a particular structural position. An intransitive verb has only one theta-role, which can be either an external theta-role or an internal theta-role.

In addition to the above, we assume the feature-checking theory proposed by Chomsky (1991, 1993). In the feature-checking theory, it is assumed that a syntactic object may move only if it is necessary in order to check its feature. Syntactic objects are assumed to have a set of features. For example, a NP bears a case feature and phi-features. The latter includes person, number and gender. In principle, features are checked in Agr phrases. It is also assumed that these features must be checked off for a derivation to converge. The process of feature checking is constrained by the economy principle: redundant movement is not permitted. The economy principle is formulated in the following constraints: a) Shortest Move, b) Procrastinate, and c) Greed. Due to the Shortest Move condition, a syntactic object α cannot move from one position to another, skipping a position that is closer to α and is available for feature checking. Procrastinate forbids movement in the overt syntax if the relevant movement can take place at a later stage, i.e., LF. Greed requires that a syntactic object α is allowed to move only if the relevant movement is necessary for the checking of its own feature. In other words, α cannot move to a certain position so that another element β in that position would be able to check off its case feature. These economy principles derive from a fundamental assumption that computation should be kept minimal. In this sense, the current study takes a minimalist approach. However, it should be noted that Chomsky (1995) proposes a drastic modification of the minimalist program sketched above. As we will see shortly (cf. Chapter 4), the modification proposed by Chomsky (1995) brings about some unwelcome consequences with regard to ergative case marking. Therefore, the current study does not support the modified minimalist program. Thus, when we refer to the standard

theory, it means a theory in which all of the above principles and constraints are assumed.

1.3 Objectives

Assuming that ergative case marking is part of UG, there are two questions to be addressed.

- A. Why does UG have two types of case marking and how are they derived?
- B. Why is the accusative pattern relatively more stable than the ergative pattern?

The latter question concerns the phenomena of split and the distribution of PRO. With regard to these phenomena, arguments are cross-linguistically distinguished on an accusative basis: subjects on the one hand and direct objects on the other. The current study ultimately aims to answer these questions. Consequently, objectives of the current study are as follows:

- A. To provide a parametric account of ergative case marking;
- B. To show that our alternative analysis accounts for various syntactic phenomena in which ergativity is manifested, in particular those found in Tongan;
- C. To account for the relative stability of accusative pattern.

With regard to C, we will attempt to show why such an accusative pattern arises in an ergative language while languages with accusative case marking never exhibit an ergative pattern either in morphology or at the level of syntax.

1.4 Data

The Tongan data studied in this thesis were collected during my own field research undertaken on two separate occasions, one from November 1998 to January 1999 and the other in April 2000. The data were collected through individual interviews conducted in Tongan. An intermediary language (e.g., English) was not used in order to avoid interference from a second language in their judgement. There are seventeen informants, seven males and ten females, ranging between eighteen and late sixties in age. Nine out of seventeen live in the capital Nuku'alofa. The rest are residents of Vava'u island.

1.5 Organisation of the thesis

The following six issues in the Tongan syntax will be discussed in this thesis: syntactic ergativity, morphological split, raising, passive, antipassive, and control. In Chapters 2-4, we will present some more background notions on which our discussions are based. In Chapter 2, we will consider various phenomena in which ergativity is manifested both in terms of morphology and syntax. It will be shown that there is always an instance or another that demonstrates an accusative pattern, which is conventionally referred to as *split*. Basic characteristics of the Tongan syntax will be outlined in Chapter 3. Some topics of particular importance are *pro*-drop, pronouns, and *ke*-clauses. Tongan permits *pro* only in case it is third person singular in its feature

specification.¹ As for the overt pronouns, there are two sets of pronouns: one is used exclusively for subjects and the other, mainly for (direct) objects. This apparent accusative pattern could be regarded as an instance of split. *Ke*-clauses are used as complements of certain verbs. On the one hand, they exhibit properties of infinitives: a) they do not contain an overt tense marker and b) PRO may occur in the subject position. On the other hand, *ke*-clauses demonstrate a property characteristic of finite clauses: arguments are able to receive case inside *ke*-clauses. These contradictory properties of *ke*-clauses raise problems particularly with regard to the distribution of PRO in Tongan. We will propose that *ke*-clauses are on a par with what Raposo (1987) calls inflected infinitives in European Portuguese (see Chapter 7 for details). We will put forth a hypothesis in Chapter 4 with these problems in mind. We will introduce fundamental assumptions of the standard case theory and argue why it fails to account for ergative case marking. Various approaches hitherto proposed in the literature are also reviewed. These include the unaccusative approach (Levin 1983, Laka 1993), the inherent case approach (Woolford 1996, Johns 1992), the dependent case approach (Mahajan 1997, to appear), the KP approach (Bittner and Hale 1996a,b) and the active Agr approach (Bobaljik 1993). Our analysis supports the active Agr approach, assuming that only one Agr can be active in intransitive constructions and the choice of the active Agr is parameterised. It should be noted also that ergative case is considered a structural case. Crucially, our approach differs from the standard analysis in that case features, e.g., [NOM/ERG] and [ACC/ABS] are considered to be intrinsic to Agr(s), and not T and V. It is also assumed that Null case feature is intrinsic to [-tense] T and that the feature [Null] is checked in [Spec, TP]. These assumptions are

¹ There is also a null expletive *pro*. See Chapter 3 for discussion.

crucial when we consider distribution of PRO in ergative languages. We will also discuss why our analysis is preferred to the revised minimalist program proposed by Chomsky (1995).

Chapters 5-10 will cover each of the aforementioned topics. First, in Chapter 5, we will show that syntactic rules such as relativisation and coordination in Tongan consistently distinguish ERG-marked arguments from ABS-marked arguments. This observation leads us to conclude that ERG is associated with a structural position [Spec, Agrs], for such syntactic rules are in general sensitive to structural positions. Put differently, our hypothesis that ERG is a structural case is supported by empirical evidence. Thus, the following discussions are crucially based on this assumption.

Chapter 6 contains a study on the morphological split found in Tongan: namely, an apparent accusative pattern demonstrated by pronouns. We will argue that this accusative pattern arises due to two factors: a) Tongan has a set of clitic pronouns and a set of independent pronouns and b) clitics are arguments generated in [Spec, VP] and must receive an external theta-role. The latter condition ensures that only subjects can be realised as clitics. In short, our argument is that a split arises when a syntactic rule is sensitive to theta-roles rather than case. Therefore, the apparent accusative pattern does not mean that case marking on these pronouns is accusative.

Chapter 7 deals with a peculiar construction analogous to what has been called raising in Niuean (Chung 1978, Seiter 1980). This construction is problematic in the following respects: a) it involves movement from a case position to another case

position (hence, violating the Chain Condition (Chomsky 1981)); b) raising of object is permitted; c) on the other hand, raising of the transitive subject is forbidden; and d) raising does not apply to pronominal arguments. We argue that the raising analysis fails to account for these peculiar properties and propose that the construction in question involves operator-movement, and not raising. The operator-movement analysis accounts for the aforementioned peculiar facts in accordance with the other principles of the Tongan syntax. First, relativisation is restricted to ABS-marked arguments. Second, clitics must bear an external theta-role. The former explains why the transitive subject cannot appear in the relevant construction. The latter explains why pronouns cannot appear in the matrix subject position; the matrix subject position is not a theta-position.

Chapters 8 and 9 consider two syntactic operations, passive and antipassive. Generally, it is assumed that passive exists in accusative languages and antipassive, in ergative languages. The major function of these two operations is to alter the underlying transitive construction into a superficial intransitive construction.² We will propose that according to the current approach, syntactic passive and ergative case marking are expected to be mutually exclusive. Our Tongan data show that this hypothesis is borne out. What is referred to as passive in ergative languages is not a syntactic passive. Rather, those verbs with a passive meaning are derived by affixation in the lexicon, which involves theta-role absorption. As for the antipassive, we argue that an antipassive construction exists purely out of syntactic necessity: specifically, in

² As we will argue, a passive construction is not technically intransitive in that it involves two arguments if we consider the passive morpheme an argument. Thus, an essential criterion is that the internal argument is the sole overt argument and appears in NOM.

order to overcome the restrictions imposed by syntactic ergativity. Put differently, antipassive need not be an indispensable part of the syntax of a language L if L has some other device to escape from such a constraint. Given that Tongan allows relativisation of ERG-marked arguments by virtue of the resumptive pronoun strategy, we do not expect that antipassive exist in Tongan. There is, however, a construction whose form resembles that of an antipassive construction: the middle construction has an ABS-marked subject and a direct object in oblique case. We will consider whether the middle can be taken as antipassive. It will be shown that the middle construction in Tongan does not meet the criteria of antipassive. Crucially, the middle arises not for syntactic reasons but because of semantic reasons.

Finally, in Chapter 10, we will consider the issue of control. It is observed that occurrence of PRO is universally restricted to the subject position of infinitival clauses. One question to be addressed is why the distribution of PRO cross-linguistically shows an accusative pattern. In the standard theory, it is explained in terms of Null case (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993). PRO must bear Null case and [Null] is a feature intrinsic to the minimal I which lacks T and Agrs and is checked in [Spec, IP] of this minimal I. More specifically, Bobaljik (1993) argues that Agrs is defective in the [-T] environment and cannot license NOM/ERG case and subject agreement. In this view, non-finite clauses lack T but contain Agrs. In other words, [Null] is checked in [Spec, Agrs] of T-less clauses. This analysis, however, faces a problem as to how PRO can be licensed in intransitive constructions in an ergative language. If we take the active Agr hypothesis, PRO would fail to check its case feature in intransitive constructions, for Agrs is not available. The fact that PRO can appear not only in

transitive constructions, but also in intransitive constructions supports our hypothesis that [Null] is checked in [Spec, TP].

To summarise, some of the significant findings regarding Tongan are as follows: a) *ke*-clauses contain [-tense] T and Agrs, unlike English *to*-infinitives which contain [-tense] T but lack Agrs; b) clitics are arguments and need be assigned an external theta-role; and c) *pro*-drop is limited to a third person singular pronoun.³ Overall, it will be shown that the revised active Agr analysis accounts for case assignment in ergative languages as well as accusative languages.

³ This restriction applies only to [+human] arguments. [-human] arguments are consistently realised as *pro* regardless of number. This is because the personal pronouns cannot be used to refer to [-human] arguments. Let us assume that this *pro* is [-human, third person] in its feature specification. However, note that we will not include this [-human] *pro* in our discussion, which mainly concerns personal pronouns.