

## ERGATIVITY AND CONTROL IN FOLOPA

Neil Anderson, *Summer Institute of Linguistics*  
and  
Martha Wade, *Pioneer Bible Translators*

### 1.0 Introduction

Linguistic interest in ergative languages has intensified recently (Dixon 1979, Plank 1979). An ergative language is generally described as one in which the subject of the intransitive and the object of the transitive are treated similarly grammatically. This phenomenon is illustrated by the case markings on the nouns in the Folopa<sup>1</sup> clauses below.

Subject of transitive

- (1) *Heto ali -né ama naale-ma d -ale -pó.*  
Heather father-erg his son -kin hit-past-ind  
'Heather's father hit his son'.

Object of transitive

- (2) *Me whi-né Heto ali d -ale -pó.*  
Another man-erg Heather father hit-past-ind  
'Another man hit Heather's father'.

Subject of intransitive

- (3) *Heto ali f -ele -pó.*  
Heather father go-past-ind  
'Heather's father went'.

As can be seen above, the subject of the intransitive and the object of the transitive are both morphologically unmarked (absolute case) while the subject of the transitive has the ergative marking *-né* 'ergative case'.

In Dixon's (1979) comprehensive article on ergativity, many generalizations were made based on the sampling of ergative languages available to him at that time. In this paper, it is the authors' intentions to show that Folopa, an SOV ergative language of Papua New Guinea, exhibits characteristics that are counter examples to Dixon's generalizations. In Folopa it is possible to choose either ergative or absolutive case for the subject of the intransitive, a phenomenon recognized by Dixon. However, it is also possible to choose either ergative or absolutive case for the subject of the transitive, an option disallowed in Dixon's generalizations on ergative systems.

In Section Two, we first demonstrate that Folopa is ergative according to Dixon's criteria. We show in Section Three that Folopa does not fit Dixon's generalizations because it does allow the choice of either ergative or absolutive case for the subject of transitive or intransitive. Finally in Section Four we examine the factor of control that regulates the choice of case for the subject.

## **2.0 Evidence of ergativity in Folopa**

Dixon identifies ergativity in two major areas, morphology and syntax. Briefly, ergativity in morphology and syntax may be differentiated from accusativity as follows. Morphologically, a language is accusative if the case marking for the subject of intransitive is the same as the subject of the transitive, and ergative if the case marking of the subject of the intransitive is the same as the object of the transitive.<sup>2</sup> Syntactically, a language is accusative if a transitive clause and an intransitive clause with identical subjects can be coordinated deleting the subject of the second clause. A language is syntactically ergative if a transitive clause and an intransitive clause with identical object of transitive and subject of intransitive, can be coordinated deleting the subject of the second (intransitive) clause. The differences between accusativity and ergativity are much more complex, but this will assist the reader in the following sections.

Dixon states that "there are no languages that are FULLY ergative,...." (1979:63). Folopa is no exception to this. Ergativity in Folopa is evidenced in the morphology, but the syntax is accusative. Languages like Folopa which have a combination of ergative and accusative characteristics are referred to as having split-ergative systems.

## 2.1 Ergative case markings

Ergative case markings can be found on proper nouns, common nouns and pronouns. On proper and common nouns the marking is the suffix /-né/ while the pronouns form two complete sets, Set I (ergative) which is marked with the /-né/ suffix on the dual and plural forms and Set II (absolutive) which is unmarked.<sup>3</sup>

Set I	Singular	Dual	Plural	Plural Specific
1st	<i>yalo</i>	<i>dqmoné</i>	<i>dqné</i>	
2nd	<i>naaq</i>	<i>diqamoné</i>	<i>diqné</i>	<i>diaaq</i>
3rd	<i>ama</i>	<i>atimaamoné</i>	<i>atimané</i>	
Set II	Singular	Dual	Plural	Plural Specific
1st	<i>ɛ</i>	<i>dqmo</i>	<i>dq</i>	
2nd	<i>yq</i>	<i>diqamo</i>	<i>diq</i>	
3rd	<i>q</i>	<i>atimaamo</i>	<i>atima</i>	

The primary usage of these cases follows the ergative language pattern. The ergative case is used for the subject of the transitive clause while the absolutive case is used for the object of the transitive clause and the subject of the intransitive clause.

### Noun

- (4) *Yuwi-né hupu d -ale -pó.*  
 dog -erg pig kill/hit-past-ind  
 'The dog killed the pig'.
- (5) *Hupu-né yuwi d -ale -pó.*  
 pig -erg dog kill/hit-past-ind  
 'The pig killed the dog'.
- (6) *Yuwi f -ele -pó.*  
 dog go-past-ind  
 'The dog went'.

## Pronoun

- (7) *Yqlo*    *q*                    *d*            *-ale -pó.*  
**I (Set I)** he.(Set II) kill/hit-past-ind  
 'I hit him'.
- (8) *Ama*    *ε*                    *d*            *-ale -pó.*  
 he.(Set I) **I.(Set II)** kill/hit-past-ind  
 'He hit me'.
- (9) *Ē*                    *f-ele-pó.*  
**I.(Set II)** went  
 'I went'.

Dixon's thesis is that the ergative case is always the marked case and the absolutive is the unmarked case. In addition, the absolutive form will be the one used as the topic in an equative clause and as the citation form (1979:72). The above data support these characteristics of ergative/absolutive case markings set forth by Dixon. The ergative case in Folopa is the marked case being indicated by /-*né*/. The absolutive case, the unmarked case, is also used as the citation form and as topic in equative clauses, as can be seen below.

- (10) *Ai yuwi wə yuwi-pó.*  
 that dog male dog -equat  
 'That dog is a male dog'.
- (11) *Ē topo hwı-pó.*  
**I.(Set II)** head man-equat  
 'I am a head man'.

## 2.2 Accusative syntax

The syntax of Folopa, however, is clearly accusative. Like many other Papuan languages, Folopa has a switch reference system. In this system, suffixes on the medial verbs indicate whether the subject of the next verb is the same referent as the subject of the verb or a different referent. Examples of Folopa switch reference follow:

- (12) *Heto ali sók-ó wa-pa d -ale -pó.*  
 Heather father come.out.SS DR hit-past-ind  
 ‘Heather’s father arrived and he (not father) hit him’.
- (13) *Heto ali w-ódó ama naale-ma d -ale -pó.*  
 Heather father come.SS his son -kin hit-past-ind.  
 ‘Heather’s father came and hit his son’.
- (14) *Heto ali -né ama naale-ma da-pa f -ele -pó.*  
 Heather father-erg his son -kin hit.DS go-past-ind  
 ‘Heather’s father hit his son and he (not the father) went’.
- (15) *Heto ali -né ama naale-ma d-óló f -ele -pó.*  
 Heather father-erg his son -kin hit.SS go-past-ind  
 ‘Heather’s father hit his son and he (the father) went’.

This switch reference system treats the subject of the transitive and the subject of the intransitive in an identical manner and does not cross-reference the object of the transitive. For this reason, Folopa is described as having an accusative syntax.

### 3.0 Variation in the choice of case

From the above evidence Folopa appears to be similar to many split-ergative languages with ergative case markings and accusative syntax. The usages of the cases as described above, are the primary usages. They are recognized as the primary usages because they are the most frequent in texts and the secondary (extended) usages when taken out of context are sometimes declared to be wrong.

Folopa does not, however, follow the primary usage pattern all of the time. Depending on the situation and the verb used, the ergative case can be used for the subject of an intransitive clause and the absolutive case as the subject of a transitive clause.

#### 3.1 Ergative case as subject of intransitive

Folopa allows the usage of the ergative case for the subjects of some intransitive verbs. Because of this, Folopa would be classified by Dixon as having a “fluid S [subject of intransitive]- marking system” which is similar to Bats, a Northeast Caucasian language and Eastern Pomo, a Hokan language of Northern California (1979:81-3).<sup>4</sup> In this kind

of system there are certain intransitive verbs which can occur with either the ergative or absolutive case as subject.

Unlike Bats and Eastern Pomo, however, no intransitive verbs have been found which must always occur with the ergative case (Dixon 1979:80-2). Instead most intransitive verbs occur with the subject in the absolutive case. In the sets of verbs below, Set A has only been observed with the absolutive case while Set B has been observed to occur with either ergative or absolutive case.

<u>Set A</u>		<u>Set B</u>	
<i>suku-tapó</i>	'die'	<i>doꝯ nuku-la-pó</i>	'laugh'
<i>doa-rapó</i>	'grow'	<i>fopaa-ra-pó</i>	'get mad'
<i>daa-la-pó</i>	'stand'	<i>wa-la-pó</i>	'come'
<i>fi-ra-pó</i>	'sleep'	<i>fu-la-pó</i>	'go'

### 3.2 Absolutive case as subject of transitive

This flexibility in choosing either ergative or absolutive case markings is not, however, limited to the subjects of intransitive verbs. There is also flexibility in the choice of ergative or absolutive case for the subject of a transitive clause.

The usage of the ergative and absolutive case for the subject of the transitive clause is not simply a matter of the optionality of the ergative case. In Motu, the ergative case is described as optional and is only used when a transitive clause could be ambiguous (Dixon 1979:72-3). In Folopa, the ergative is normally used to indicate the subject of all transitive clauses even when there is no possible ambiguity.

- (16) *U so -né ama wa teo doko -ta -pó.*  
 that woman-erg her string.bag unfinished weave-pres-ind  
 'That woman is weaving her unfinished string bag.'

The above clause could not be ambiguous because string bags do not have the ability to weave women, but the ergative case is still used for the subject.

Also, when a sentence could be ambiguous, the absolutive case may be used for the subject.

- (17) *Kale na -rape betq q su bet-ódó f -ele -pó.*  
 the small animal-plural one he.(Set II) get sit-SS go-past-ind  
 ‘He took only the small animals and left’.

In this clause the animals could have been the ones the ones doing the activity since animals have that ability and are frequently the subject of the verb “get”. But, the subject is in the absolutive case which could allow ambiguity in the clause.<sup>5</sup>

Further evidence that the ergative case is not simply optional is seen in the use of the ergative and absolutive cases for the subject in the two almost identical sentences below.

- (18) *No -ó kale naaq o make q di -ale -pó*  
 Brother-voc the your sago young I.(Set II) cut down-past-ind

- (19) *No-ó naaq o make yalo di -ale -pó.*  
 Brother your sago young I.(Set I) cut down-past-ind

However, these two sentences are not identical in meaning. The first sentence means, “Brother, I (mistakenly) cut down your young sago tree,” while the second means, “Brother, I (intentionally) cut down your young sago tree.” More will be said about this meaning difference later.

Having dispensed with the notion of optionality, we will now examine Dixon’s statements about the characteristics of the transitive clause in ergative languages that have a “fluid S [subject of intransitive]-marking system”.

In verb-conditioned splits of these types, there is consistent treatment of A [subject of transitive] and O [object of transitive] NP’s within a transitive sentence. The split focuses on how the S [subject of intransitive] NP is treated, in terms of the transitive marking possibilities.

In one instance, semantic nuances in intransitive sentences are, as it were calibrated against a constant transitive schema; in the other, the semantic orientation within transitive sentences is brought out against an invariable intransitive matrix. If both were allowed to vary simultaneously — useful as this would be, to bring out all the relevant, semantic niceties — there would be no constant element, and surely a likelihood of confusion and ambiguity. Grammatical structures and rules, as abstractions from and idealizations of semantic relations, must organize the material of a language in order to

facilitate effective communication. Dual conditioning of the case-marking 'splits', of the type just suggested, might lead to irresolvable anarchy, i.e. to semantically sponsored variation that would go beyond the limits allowable by a grammar. (1979:85)

Dixon seems to state that there will not be variation in the marking of items in a transitive clause if there is variation in the marking of the subject of the intransitive clause. Folopa is an exception to this generalization. While there is flexibility to a certain degree in marking of the subject of intransitive verbs, there is an increased flexibility with the marking of the subject of transitive verbs instead of the consistent treatment that Dixon mentions above. The only consistent item is that the object of the transitive verb is always in the absolutive case.

The transitive verbs seem to be divisible into three sets. Set A has only been observed with the subject in the ergative case. Set B has been observed with the subject in either ergative or absolutive case. Set C has only been observed with the subject in the absolutive case. Set A and C are limited in number.

Set A	Set B	Set C
<i>dilapō</i> 'hit/ kill'	<i>dapō</i> 'do/say'	<i>h'rapō</i> 'dislike'
	<i>sirapō</i> 'get'	<i>h'keserapō</i> 'like'
<i>yó faratapō</i> 'send a message'	<i>taratapō</i> 'evaluate'	
	<i>nukurapō</i> 'eat'	
	<i>biditapō</i> 'cook'	
	<i>matapō</i> 'give'	

In this section we have seen that the ergative and absolutive cases in Folopa are not restricted to their primary usage of ergative for subject of transitive and absolutive for subject of intransitive and object of transitive. Under certain conditions it is possible to use the case that is the opposite from the normal for the subject. This is true both for transitive and intransitive verbs. The ergative case marking is not simply optional for the purpose of disambiguating as has been suggested is the case in Motu. The choice of case in Folopa affects the message conveyed.



#### **4.0 Factors involved in choice of case**

The ergative case marker in Fologa is not restricted to indicating a grammatical function within the clause. Historically, its original usage may have been just a grammatical marker as its most frequent usage is still the subject of the transitive clause. If this historical development is true, then this grammatical function is decreasing and the ergative marker is increasingly being used semantically to mark the agent who is viewed as controlling the action. This seems plausible since the ergative case as a grammatical marker is still used normally for the subject of the transitive verb which is usually the one controlling the action. In the same way, the absolutive case which formerly may have been used grammatically to indicate the subject of the intransitive and the object of the transitive is now being used semantically to indicate a participant without control (patient).

This is just one possible way that the ergative and absolutive cases could have come to have their functions extended beyond their grammatical functions. Regardless of its derivation, it is obvious that this usage does not fit Dixon's generalizations about ergative languages. In the remainder of this paper we will attempt to describe the factors involved in this extended use of the ergative system and any limitations that have been observed on it.

#### **4.1 Extended usages of the ergative system**

The major factors that affect whether the subject is in the ergative or absolutive case is the actual control that the agent is viewed as having and whether or not that control is being emphasized or de-emphasized. When a speaker chooses to emphasize or de-emphasize control, it is due to the social situation of the event and how the speaker wants the hearer to react.

Control in this sense, then, is not always actual physical control. Instead it frequently involves the agent's or speaker's prerogative or right to control the activity and whether he is asserting this prerogative or not. Throughout the remainder of this paper, the term control will be used in a neutral sense which can refer either to physical control or prerogative.

Below are a few of the kinds of verbs and situations in which extended usages have been noted.

#### 4.1.1 Controllable intransitive verbs

Some intransitive verbs are controllable. Thus when the subject is viewed as initiating and controlling the action and not simply experiencing it, the subject is in the ergative case. This has been especially noticed with verbs such as worry, get angry, and laugh. In the situation below the speaker evidently believes that the person who laughed could have controlled it.

- (20) *na daa -pa siri -aalo-pó -ló f -ele -mó*  
 animal stand-DS shoot-fut -ind-SS go-past-loc  
*ama dou nokode-mó f -ele -pó.*  
 he.(Set I) laugh -loc go-past-ind  
 ‘When there is a small animal and you are going to shoot  
 it and someone laughs, the result is it leaves’.

#### 4.1.2 Non-controllable transitive verbs

In contrast to this, some transitive verbs whose nature is not controllable or viewed as controllable by that society, have subjects that can only occur in the absolutive case. So far in Folopa only two transitive verbs have been noted which can not have the subject in the ergative case. Eastern Pomo has the same phenomena with verbs similar to the Folopa ones below (McLendon 1978:3).

- (21) *ai so ε h<sub>i</sub>’ -ra -pó*  
 that woman I.(Set II) dislike-pres-ind  
 ‘That woman dislikes me OR I dislike that woman.’
- (22) *ai so ε hikese-ra -pó*  
 that woman I.(Set II) desire-pres-ind  
 ‘That woman likes me OR I like that woman.’

#### 4.1.3. Socially controlled transitive verbs

Most transitive verbs in Folopa seem to fall into this category. The choice of case for the subject seems to be controlled by the social situation, the participants, and what the speaker intends to communicate.

#### 4.1.3.1 Food

Any activity involving food, i.e. cooking, preparing, eating, breaking open a bamboo with sago, is likely to have a subject in the absolutive case. Food and the eating of food is controlled by many social obligations and hence the subject who would normally be controlling an action is viewed as without control. In many situations the use of the ergative case for the subject of a transitive verb dealing with food would be unacceptable due to the social connotations. A person in this society is obliged to share food and thus he has no control if he wishes to be socially accepted. If a person uses the ergative and thus states his control, he will be considered stingy.

The below situation is especially interesting because the food belongs to the second speaker.

(23) (First Speaker) *Me tiki-paae d̩a tuk̩-óló*  
 another place-dir we.(Set II) open-SS

*n -aalo-pó y -ale -tei taa -óló*  
 eat-fut -ind say-past-contrast desist-tr-SS

*y̩a w -ópóló kaae taw-óló i betere ape.*  
 you.(Set II) come-purpose wait -SS we.are.here informative mood

(Second Speaker) *Ti wusi -ra -pa ɛ o*  
 OK good-pres-coord I.(Set II) sago

*faa -ta -pa ai wópu wuti tuk̩ -ae*  
 break.open-pres-coord that greens bamboo open-imp

'We were going to open and eat part but we gave that up and waited for you to come. (Second Speaker) OK, that's good now, I am breaking this sago, so you open up that greens bamboo'.

The first speaker uses the absolutive for subject because the food did not belong to him and he did not want to anger the owner. The second speaker, though owning the food, was obliged to share so he also used the absolutive for the subject.

An exception to the use of absolutive with food is when there is a question as to whether the speaker is able to completely control the activity. If a person is asked, "Can you eat this large amount of food?" A person may use the ergative case for subject and response "I can eat it all." In this case the ergative is stating that that person is in control

of the activity (eating) and is capable of completing it (eating all of the food). It would not be interpreted as being stingy.

#### 4.1.3.2 Ownership

Activities involving items that belong to another person seem frequently to use a subject in the absolutive case. The items do not belong to the person doing the activity. Hence, he does not have the right to control or use them and acknowledges this by using the absolutive case for the subject. In the situation below the cloth does not belong to the person and so he uses the absolutive case.

- (24) *No yqlo yuwi naapa-r-aai-raalu*  
 Brother I.(Set I) dog tie.up.dog's.front.foot.-tr  
 under.chin  
 inceptive-simultaneous
- i kuti haki-kó ɛ mɔle bisaq -ta -pó.*  
 this cloth old -indef I.(Set II) diminutive tear -pres-ind

‘Brother, I want to tie my dog’s foot under his chin,  
 so can I tear off a piece of this cloth’.

This particular situation involves asking for permission from the owner, but a similar use of the absolutive case is found even when the owner is absent and the subject simply uses the object without asking for permission.

If, however, the speaker asserts his control and refuses to acknowledge the rights of the owner, he will use the ergative case which is meant to make the hearer angry as Hweade a speaker of the language noted. This was the situation in sentence (19) about the cutting down of the sago tree.

#### 4.1.3.3 Directives – commands/requests

If a directive (command/request) is given with a transitive verb, the ergative case seems to be used if the person is speaking to someone he has a right to give direction to. He is thus asserting that the person to whom he is speaking will do the activity and thus be the controlling agent of that activity. If, however, he does not have the right to command or does not want to assert his right and aggravate the listener, then he will use the absolutive

case. The person spoken to with the absolutive case may or may not be the controlling agent. It is his choice.

#### 4.1.4 Focus and controllable transitive verbs

Another factor that sometimes affects the choice of case for the subject of a transitive verb is focus. For instance, when a person is asked what he or another person is doing, the person will probably respond using an absolutive case as the subject of the transitive. The focus here is on the activity and no emphasis is put on *who* is controlling the activity. The person controlling the activity, if any does control it, is insignificant and is thus de-emphasized. In many cases, the person will just respond with the verb for the activity without any stated subject.

These are just a few of the situations that have been identified in the extended usage of the ergative and absolutive cases. But, this should sufficiently illustrate the factor of control involved in the choice of case.

#### 4.2 Restriction of choice

The choice of absolutive or ergative case is basically dependent on the presence or absence of control or rather the desire of the speaker to “state” his control or prerogative in any particular situation. Some restrictions due to the nature of the verbs have been noted in sections 3.1 and 3.2. Other restrictions with verbs allowing the extended use of cases are due to the nature of the participants and accompaniment.

In transitive clauses which allow extended usage of cases, the choice of case for the subject seems to be regulated by the hierarchy set forth below.

human	Most likely to be agent
↑	
animal	
↑	
inanimate	

Thus, for a transitive clause, if the rank of the subject is equal to or lower than the rank of the stated object, the subject is limited to the ergative case. If the subject is higher ranking than the object, the subject may be in either case depending on the amount of

control attributed to the subject. This restriction along with context provides for the disambiguating of clauses.

The subject of the transitive is limited to the absolutive case when accompanied by the phrase *de -tamo* ‘with whom’. In this structure, the focus is not on the stated subject who-acc

and the speaker doubts that the stated subject was the one who actually did the activity as can be seen below.

- (25) *Yɑ*            *doa ai na de-tamo*  
 you.(Set II) big that animal whom.acc  
*d -ale -é?*  
 kill/hit-past-interrogative  
 ‘With whom did you kill that big animal?’

These restrictions have not as of yet been thoroughly investigated. The stated restrictions are simply based on what has not been seen in the texts. Further work will need to be done in this area.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Folopa is an ergative language. Its ergativity is evidenced in case markings while the syntax is accusative. Folopa does not, however, fit all of Dixon’s generalizations about ergative languages. Folopa allows the choice of either ergative or absolutive case for the subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs. This choice is dependent on the amount of control attributed to the subject. In most situations this control seems to be dependent on the social situation, with some restrictions due to the verb, participants, and accompaniment. Ergativity in Folopa is closely connected with the concept of control and can not be restricted to a grammatical case marker.

## NOTES

- 1 Folopa, a member of the Eastern-Central Trans-New Guinea Phylum, Teberan-Pawaian Sub-Phylum-Level Super-Stock, Teberan Family (Wurm 1975:502), is spoken in the Baimuru Sub-Province of the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea

by approximately 2,500 people. Neil and Carol Anderson, under the auspices of SIL have been working in the language from 1972 to the present.

The other member of the Teberan Family is Dadibi which has some of the same characteristics as Folopa. For an analysis of Dadibi see Mac Donald, (1976).

In this paper, Anderson has provided the Folopa data and the original observations of ergativity and control. Wade has written the bulk of the paper adding the theoretical insights. The authors are indebted to Bob Litteral for encouragement and suggested revisions.

- 2 Other areas of morphology which can show ergativity are separate particles that function essentially like case markings and verbs or verbal auxiliaries that cross-reference other information in the clause such as subject and object (Dixon 1979:65-6). These are not discussed here due to their absence in Folopa.
- 3 Before the verb *d-uraalu* 'do/say - same subject simultaneous' an alternate ergative case marking is */-ko/*. The use of these two markings before this verb have not been thoroughly studied. At this point, there seems to be no difference in meaning.
- 4 Though Dixon does list fluid S [subject of intransitive]- marking systems in his article, he does this without necessarily approving of them as can be seen by the following comment. "I have followed other writers in using 'ergative' and 'absolutive' case labels in the last few paragraphs. But on distributional grounds, these are by no means the uniquely appropriate designations." He would accept the use of the label ergative only under the following condition. "The use of 'ergative' would have to be justified in terms of markedness; it may well be that this can be done for Bats, or for any other case-marking language of this type." He still regards these systems as having "grammatical untidiness." (1979:82)
- 5 See section 4.2 for restrictions.

## ABBREVIATIONS

acc	accusative	ind	indicative
dir	direction	indef	indefinite
DR	Different Referent	loc	locative
equat	equational	pre	present
erg	ergative	SS	Same Subject
fut	future	tr	transitive
imp	imperative	voc	vocative

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