

## Verbal case and the nature of polysynthetic inflection

Colin Phillips  
MIT

### *Abstract*

This paper tries to resolve a conflict in the literature on the connection between ‘rich’ agreement and argument-drop. Jelinek (1984) claims that inflectional affixes in polysynthetic languages are theta-role bearing *arguments*; Baker (1991) argues that such affixes are *agreement*, bearing Case but no theta-role. Evidence from Yimas shows that both of these views can be correct, within a single language. Explanation of what kind of inflection is used where also provides us with an account of the unusual split ergative agreement system of Yimas, and suggests a novel explanation for the ban on subject incorporation, and some exceptions to the ban.

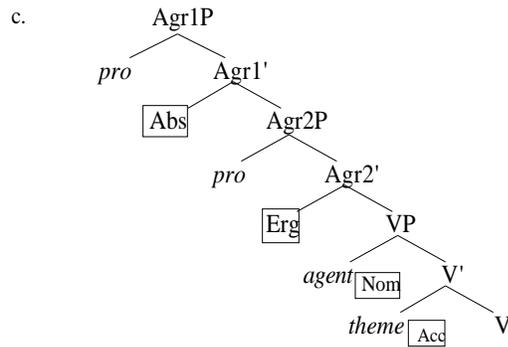
### *1. Two types of inflection*

My main aim in this paper is to demonstrate that inflectional affixes can be very different kinds of syntactic objects, even within a single language. I illustrate this point with evidence from Yimas, a Papuan language of New Guinea (Foley 1991). Understanding of the nature of the different inflectional affixes of Yimas provides an explanation for its remarkably elaborate agreement system, which follows a basic split-ergative scheme, but with a number of added complications.

Anticipating my conclusions, the structure in (1c) shows what I assume the four principal case affixes on a Yimas verb to be. What I refer to as Nominative and Accusative affixes are pronominal arguments: these inflections, which are restricted to 1st and 2nd person arguments in Yimas, begin as specifiers and complements of the verb, and incorporate into the verb by S-structure.

On the other hand, what I refer to as Ergative and Absolutive inflection are genuine *agreement* - they are the spell-out of functional heads, above VP, which agree with an argument in their specifier.

1. a. Nominative & Accusative are *Arguments*, result of incorporation.  
b. Ergative & Absolutive are *Agreement*, product of Spec-Head relation.



This conclusion has conciliatory implications for a controversy in the literature about the nature of inflectional affixes, and why they tend to allow argument drop. In analyzing Warlpiri, Jelinek (1984) suggested that languages may choose to assign theta-roles directly to inflectional affixes. This prevents independent phrases from occupying 'canonical' argument positions, since no theta-role is available to them there. Based on evidence from Mohawk, Baker (1991) has claimed that inflectional affixes do not bear theta-roles, but they can absorb Case, which is still sufficient to keep most independent phrases out of argument positions, because no Case is available to them there<sup>1</sup>. The picture that emerges from Yimas is that both Jelinek and Baker are right, even for a single language.

In addition, an understanding of how the two types of inflectional affix behave with respect to case assignment and constraints on movement provides us with an account of the generally observed ban on subject incorporation, and why it can be violated in certain environments in Yimas, and we reach an account of the ergative-accusative contrast which does not depend on an *Ergative Parameter*.

## 2. Verbal Case

Yimas shows typical characteristics of polysynthetic languages. All arguments of the verb are marked by affixes attached to the verb stem. Independent nominal expressions are both freely ordered and liberally omitted. The examples in (2-3) illustrate the split ergative pattern of inflection found in Yimas. (2) shows the nominative-accusative pattern of inflection for 1st and 2nd person arguments. These prefixes are what I claim to be incorporated pronouns.

2. a.     ant-     ka-           tmuk -t     *1st person intransitive subject*  
           POSS    1SG-NOM   fall   PERF  
           'I almost fell down.'

<sup>1</sup>The exceptions to this generalization are independent phrases which do not require Case licensing at S-structure: clausal arguments and null arguments (null pronominals or traces). See section 3 below for further discussion.

- b. pu- ka- tay 1st person transitive subject  
 3PL-ABS 1SG-NOM see  
 'I saw them.'
- c. pu- Na- tay 1st person object  
 3PL-ABS 1SG-ACC see  
 'They saw me.'

3rd person arguments follow an ergative-absolutive pattern, as in (3). The transitive subject (3a) is marked by an ergative prefix, whereas both the intransitive subject (3b) and the transitive object (3c) are marked by absolutive prefixes. These are the prefixes I claim to be genuine agreement. Notice that nominative-accusative affixes can freely combine with ergative-absolutive affixes (3a, 3c).

3. a. ka- mpu- Na- tput-n 3rd person transitive subject  
 LIKE 3PL-ERG 1SG-ACC hit PRES  
 'They are going to hit me.'
- b. a- pu- tmuk -r -um 3rd person intransitive subject  
 POSS 3PL-ABS fall PERF PL  
 'They almost fell down.'
- c. ta- pu- n- tpul-c -um 3rd person object  
 NEG 3PL-ABS 2SG-NOM hit PERF PL  
 'You didn't hit them.'

The relative ordering of affixes in combination reflects the hierarchical structure in (1). The ordering of affixes is summarized schematically in (4).

4. ABS > ERG > {NOM, ACC}

### 2.1 Shifts between Case Systems

One of the most interesting features of inflection in Yimas is that the two Case systems do not separate 3rd person arguments from 1st and 2nd person arguments, contrary to the rigid separation of persons which we normally expect to find in a person-based split-ergative system.

1st and 2nd person arguments come to be marked ergative-absolutive for one of two reasons: either to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), or as a result of competition between two 1st and 2nd person arguments.

#### *Extended Projection Principle*

In general, a Yimas verb is ill-formed if it does not contain absolutive agreement. This need for an absolutive overrides the split-ergative agreement paradigm in (2-3), so that the inflection for an argument may be 'promoted' from ergative or nominative to absolutive. The examples in (5) show arguments being marked absolutive which we expect to be marked ergative or nominative given the patterns in (2-3). In (5a), a 3rd person transitive subject, which we expect to be marked by *ergative* inflection, is promoted to absolutive.

In (5b), a 2nd person subject, which we expect to be marked by *nominative* inflection, is also promoted to absolutive.

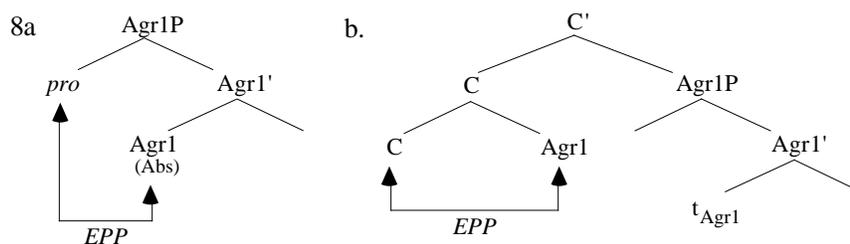
5. a. *pu-* *nan-* *tay* *3rd person transitive subject*  
       3PL-ABS 2SG-ACC see  
       ‘They saw you.’
- b. *kapwa-* *Nkra-* *tay* *2nd person transitive subject*  
       2DL-ABS 1DL-ACC see  
       ‘You two saw us two.’

There are exceptions to this need for an absolutive agreement marker on every verb. When one of the class of word-initial prefixes in (6c), which I assume to all be complementizers, appears, the ‘promotions’ we saw in (5) are ‘undone’. In (6a) the 3rd person transitive subject is restored to ergative, and in (6b) the 2nd person subject is restored to nominative.

6. a. *ka-* *mpu-* *Na-* *tput-n*  
       LIKE 3PL-ERG 1SG-ACC hit PRES  
       ‘They are going to hit me.’
- b. *NarN* *ka-* *n-* *wa-kia* *-k*  
       1-day-removed LIKE 2SG-NOM go NRFUT IRR  
       ‘It is likely that you will go tomorrow.’
- c. *m-* Relative clause complementizer  
       *ta-* Negation  
       *ka-* Likely modality  
       *ant-* Potential modality

I suggest that the cause for the ‘promotion-to-absolutive’ effect seen in (5), and for the avoidance of this effect in (6a-b), is the Extended Projection Principle (Chomsky 1982, 10). I assume that the EPP requires that the Absolutive assigning head Agr1<sup>0</sup> be governed at S-structure. When formulated in this way, the EPP can be satisfied in one of two ways: first, by moving an argument to the specifier of the absolutive head, triggering Absolutive agreement (8a); second, by the presence of a higher governing head in C<sup>0</sup>. Since the complementizers in (6c) are all affixes, Agr1<sup>0</sup> raises to adjoin to C<sup>0</sup> at S-structure (8b).

7. *Extended Projection Principle*  
       Agr1 must be governed (S-structure)



The explanation for the promotion-to-absolutive effect is now fairly easy to see. For example, the second person subject in (5b) ‘prefers’ to incorporate into the verb, but when the EPP is not independently satisfied, the subject has to disregard its own preferences and move to [Spec,Agr1], triggering absolutive agreement.

### Competition

The second situation in which a 2nd person argument is forced into the ergative-absolutive system is when there are more than one 1st or 2nd person arguments in a clause. In this situation, only one of the arguments can be marked by a nominative-accusative affix, and the other is forced to be marked by ergative or absolutive inflection. In this conflict situation priority for realization as the sole nominative-accusative affix goes to the patient, and the agent is forced to be marked by absolutive agreement (9).

9. kapwa- Nkra- tay  
 2DL-ABS 1DL-ACC see  
 ‘You two saw us two.’

## 2.2 Case Motivated Incorporation

In order to account for the effect shown in (10), where the presence of an accusative marked argument forces the 2nd person subject into the ergative-absolutive system, we need to answer the following questions:

10. a. Why do 1st and 2nd person arguments incorporate into the verb?  
 b. Why do *only* 1st and 2nd person arguments incorporate?  
 c. Why can only one argument incorporate?  
 d. Why do patients win over agents?

a.

I assume that 1st and 2nd person arguments incorporate into the verb, because it satisfies their Case requirement. Baker (1988, 105ff) argues that incorporation *exempts* a noun from the Case Filter. The Yimas facts motivate the assumption that Case licensing actually takes place between a verb and an incorporated noun<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>This conclusion was reached on independent grounds by Ferguson (1993).



derivations are computed *cyclically*, in the sense of Chomsky (1993), the requirements of lower elements in the tree can satisfy their requirements first: if there is a 1st or 2nd person object, it has priority for the sole nominative-accusative slot (12). Therefore, a 1st or 2nd person *subject* can only be marked nominative if it is either (i) the lowest argument in the tree, as in the intransitive sentence in (13a), or (i) if lower arguments in the tree have gender features, which make themselves ineligible for Verbal Case, as in (13b).

12. \* ipa- n- tay  
IPL-ABS 2SG-NOM see
13. a. ta- ka- wa -t  
NEG 1SG-NOM go PERF  
'I didn't go.'
- b. pu- ka- tay  
3PL-ABS 1SG-NOM see  
'I saw them.'

So we have now seen why 1st and 2nd person arguments incorporate into the verb - they are just satisfying their Case requirement - and why only 1st and 2nd person arguments have this option open to them - it is because the verb is an extremely selective Case licenser.

### 2.3 Relativized Economy

We have seen that for 1st and 2nd person arguments there are two ways of being Case licensed: incorporation into the verb, or raising to the specifier of a functional head. We still need to account for why there is no optionality in which manner of Case licensing is chosen: (14a-b) shows that incorporation is always preferred.

14. a. ka- n- wa-kia -k  
likely 2SG-NOM go NRFUT IRR  
'You will probably go.'
- b. \* ka- ma- wa-kia -k  
likely 2SG-ABS go NRFUT IRR

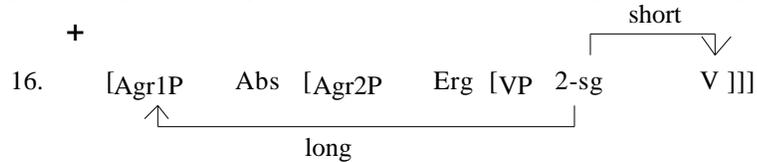
I assume that the preference for incorporation is due to the the economy condition in (15).

15. *Relativized Economy*  
Satisfy requirements using the shortest available movement.  
i. Requirement of *source*: move source to closest appropriate target.  
ii. Requirement of *target*: move closest appropriate source to target.

This economy condition is free of the *Greed* principle of Chomsky (1993). In evaluating the most economical step in a derivation, it takes account of whether the move is required to satisfy a requirement on the source (eg. Case), or on the

target (eg. EPP).

So, if an argument needs to move to satisfy its *own* Case requirement, it moves to the closest available case licensing position. This is why the 2nd person subject in (16) prefers incorporation over raising to a higher specifier.



If, however, it is a requirement on a *target* position which needs satisfying, then the closest available argument will be moved to the target position. Let us see how this applies to the satisfaction of the EPP. Later we will show how it derives the effects of an ergative-accusative parameter.

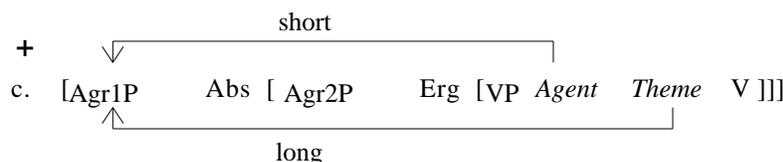
When a clause has two 3rd person arguments, both needing structural Case, i.e. ergative or absolutive, the EPP is satisfied automatically, since both [Spec,Agr1] and [Spec,Agr2] are independently required for case licensing. In this instance it is the *object* that is marked by absolutive agreement, as you can see in (17).

17. pu- n- tay  
 3PL-ABS 3SG-ERG see  
 'He saw them.'

Now consider what happens when a clause has a 3rd person subject and a 1st or 2nd person object. Neither argument *needs* to move to the absolutive position for its own purposes: the object can incorporate, and the 3rd person subject need move no farther than [Spec,Agr2P] to satisfy its own Case requirement<sup>4</sup>. This can be seen from (18a), in which the complementizer prefix *ka-* satisfies the EPP. But if no complementizer prefix is available to satisfy the EPP, one of the arguments has to undergo promotion-to-absolutive to rescue the derivation. The question here is, which argument sacrifices itself? In this case it is not the *object* that satisfies the EPP, as was the case in the normal transitive clause in (17). Instead, it is the argument closest to Agr1<sup>0</sup> which is promoted-to-absolutive, as you can see in (18b-c), because of the shorter movement involved.

18. a. ka- mpu- Na- tput-n  
 likely 3PL-ERG 1SG-ACC hit PRES  
 'They are going to hit me.'
- b. pu- Na- tay  
 3PL-ABS 1SG-ACC see  
 'They saw me.'

<sup>4</sup>See Phillips (to appear) for detailed evidence for this point.



The derivation in (18c) illustrates the claim of *Relativized Economy* that when movement is forced by the requirements of a target position, it is the closest appropriate element to the target that moves.

#### 2.4 Why Subjects Can't Incorporate, Usually

By assuming that subjects incorporate into the verb, I appear to be ignoring a robust generalization in the literature, namely that agents cannot incorporate into their own verb. (19) illustrates the agent-theme asymmetry for incorporation in the Oceanic language Niuean. However, the facts about verbal case in Yimas suggest a new approach to this generalization.

19. a.    Volu niu    nakai    e tau fanau?  
          grate-coconut Q    ABS-PL-children  
          'Are the children grating coconut?'  
       b. \* Fa totou faiaoga    e tau tohi  
               HAB-read-teacher ABS-PL-book  
               'Teachers often read books.' (Seiter 1980)

Given the assumption that noun incorporation (NI) satisfies the Case Filter, the contrast between (19a) and (19b) is straightforwardly explained. Verbs in NI languages are indiscriminate Case licensers, and therefore objects can always incorporate for Case, preventing the subject from doing so. This gives the appearance that agents are flatly prohibited from incorporation. What Yimas, with its more selective verbal case, shows us, is that subjects are allowed to incorporate, if only the competing object can somehow be prevented from incorporating first.

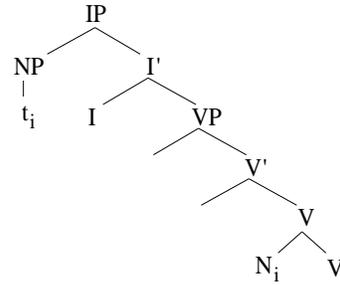
The standard account of paradigms like (19) relies on a greater structural asymmetry between subjects and objects than I assume here. In Baker (1988), for example, agents are assumed to start life in [Spec,IP], from which position lowering into V obviously creates an ECP violation (20a). However, once we assume that subjects and objects are both generated inside VP, and that the specifier-head relation is a basic *symmetrical* relation (as in the symmetrical Case-agreement relation), it becomes less clear why incorporation from [Spec,VP] (20b) should be an inherently bad movement<sup>5</sup>. The account given

<sup>5</sup>It is not sufficient to just point to the commonly assumed ban on 'lowering' operations to rule out incorporation from [Spec,VP], since the absence of lowering has always been assumed to derive from basic structural relations (eg. c-command).

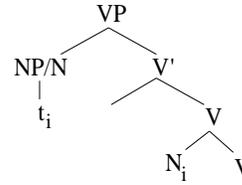
I am assuming that pronominal arguments in Yimas have no internal structure, and therefore that [Spec,VP] can be both an X<sup>0</sup> and an X<sup>max</sup> category (cf. Chomsky 1994). If, on the other hand, [Spec,VP] has internal structure, there is no privileged structural relationship between V<sup>0</sup> and the head of the subject XP, so incorporation of the head should be ruled out as an impossible movement.

here avoids introducing this assumption<sup>6</sup>.

20a.



b.



### 3. Structural Case

Thus far I have explained the special behaviour of 1st and 2nd person arguments in Yimas and the effects of the EPP: but it remains to be shown why the split between persons yields a split between different Case pattern, i.e. a nominative-accusative system for some arguments and an ergative-absolutive system for others. In order to explain this, we need to look more closely at how Case licensing takes place in the functional projections.

a.

First, inflectional affixes can receive Case in polysynthetic languages, extending a proposal of Baker (1991) for Mohawk.

b.

Second, different kinds of elements require Case licensing at different stages in the derivation. Following Shlonsky (1987) and Baker (1991) elements with phonetic content require licensing by the syntactic level that feeds phonetic interpretation, i.e. S-structure. On the other hand, elements bearing theta-roles require licensing at LF, which is where the theta-criterion must be satisfied. This is the Generalized Visibility Condition in (21).

21.

#### *Generalized Visibility*

X can be interpreted at level  $\alpha$  only if X receives Case at level  $\beta$ .

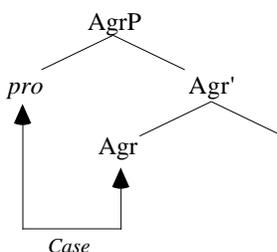
c.

(22) illustrates a canonical case-licensing configuration - the Spec-Head configuration. It is standardly assumed that appropriate heads license specifiers in this configuration. Given assumption (a) above, however, the reverse also holds: the specifier can allow the Case licensing requirement of the head to be

<sup>6</sup>An apparent difficulty for this account is the fact that subjects of unergative verbs are generally disallowed from incorporating cross-linguistically (cf. Baker 1988). If we assume, following Hale & Keyser's (1993) arguments, that all unergative verbs are in fact underlyingly transitive, then the competition account also predicts that subjects of unergatives are prevented from incorporating, in the same way as subjects of transitive verbs.

satisfied.

22.



Now notice that if we follow the standard assumption that a Case licensing configuration can only license Case on a single element, a problem emerges. If *both* elements require Case licensing, there appears to be a conflict.

This problem can only be resolved if the head and the specifier require licensing at different states in the derivation, as required by *Generalized Visibility*. Therefore, in a configuration like (22), the head must have phonetic content but no theta role, so that it requires licensing at S-structure only; and the specifier must receive a theta role but lack phonetic content, so that it requires licensing at LF only. In this way no conflict arises.

### 3.1 Deriving the Ergative-Accusative ‘Parameter’

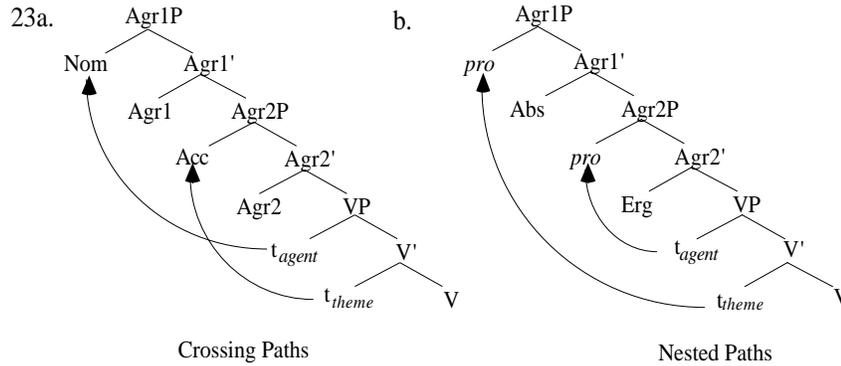
Now consider how *Generalized Visibility* (GV) is satisfied in a system in which *Relativized Economy* also applies.

In a language in which agreement heads do not require Case NP arguments are free to be spelled-out overtly, because they can satisfy GV at S-structure. Movement satisfies the requirements of arguments, and therefore economy of movement is calculated from their perspective. Given cyclicity of derivation, an object gets the first opportunity to move to a Case position - it moves to the specifier of the lowest agreement projection, leaving the higher slot for the subject to get Case - this derives the stereotypical accusative pattern of Case marking in (23a).

When agreement heads *do* require Case licensing, matters unfold rather differently. In order to satisfy GV, nominal arguments cannot be overt, and therefore do not require Case at S-structure. Therefore, the lowest element in a transitive clause requiring Case is the lower agreement head, which satisfies its Case requirement by ‘pulling’ the closest available NP to its specifier position; the only available NP for licensing the higher, absolute head is the object. This derives the ‘nested paths’ derivation of an ergative system (23b)<sup>7</sup>.

In this way, the contrast between ergative and accusative systems follows without introducing an *ergativeparameter* or *obligatory case parameter* (Bobaljik 1993; see Phillips (to appear) for further discussion).

<sup>7</sup>This account of the ergative-accusative contrast builds on ideas in Murasugi (1992). Assuming that the EPP always applies, intransitive subjects will always be nominative/absolute.



4. Converging Evidence

This section provides further evidence for two of my key assumptions in deriving the split-ergative inflectional system of Yimas.

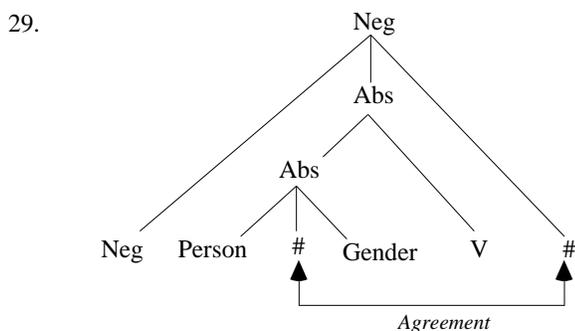
- 24. a. Inflectional affixes are either agreement or incorporated arguments - the contrast determines how movement theory applies.
- b. In the ergative part of the system, the absolutive assigning head is higher than the ergative assigning head.

4.1 Agreement/Argument distinction:

We have already seen that complementizer prefixes satisfy the EPP, creating exceptions to the requirement that every verb contain absolutive agreement (see section 2.1 above). So far these prefixes have been treated as a homogeneous class, but there are important differences among them. Some of the complementizer prefixes always appear with a suffix, which marks number agreement and appears at the opposite end of the verbal complex. I assume that in these cases the prefix and the suffix just spell-out different features of a single C head, which circumfixes the verb and other inflections. Examples are shown in (25-28).

- 25. a. na-            mpi-            tpul  
      3SG-ABS    3DL-ERG    hit  
      ‘Those two hit him.’
- b. ta-        Ø            mpi-            tpul    -c    -ak  
      NEG    Ø<sub>3SG-ABS</sub>    3DL-ERG    hit    PERF    SING  
      ‘Those two didn’t hit him.’
- 26. a. ka-            mpu-            Na-            tput    -n  
      likely    3PL-ERG    1SG-ACC    hit    PRES  
      ‘They are going to hit me.’

- b. ta- Ø Na- tay -c -um  
 NEG Ø<sub>3PL-ERG</sub> 1SG-ACC see PERF PLUR  
 ‘They didn’t see me.’
27. a. ka- nan- wa -kia -k  
 likely 2PL-NOM go NRFUT IRR  
 ‘You all will probably go.’  
 b. ta- nan- wa -r -um  
 NEG 2PL-NOM go PERF PLUR  
 ‘You all didn’t go.’
28. a. ipa kampan -tay  
 1PL 1/2SG-ACC see  
 ‘We saw you.’  
 b. ipa ta- mpan- tpul -Ø  
 1PL NEG 1/2SG-ACC hit SG  
 ‘We didn’t hit you all.’



The pairs of sentences in (25-28) show that these number agreement morphemes always agree with the argument in the highest case position. Recall from section 2 that absolutive is higher than ergative which is higher than nominative or accusative. In other words, the complementizer suffix agrees with the number features of its *sister* at S-structure.

The most important thing to notice about this complementizer agreement is that it differentially affects the realization of what it agrees with. Agreement with an absolutive or ergative head entails that the absolutive or ergative head itself is not overtly realized (25-26), whereas agreement with a nominative or accusative head does not entail that those prefixes are not realized overtly (27-28)

I suggest that this differential blocking effect is the effect of a condition which is sensitive to the argument/agreement contrast, and blocks the double spell-out of a single feature in a single word. This principle is stated tentatively in (30). Complementizer agreement in number blocks ergative or absolutive agreement in person number and gender, because the ergative and absolutive affixes are spelled-out by suppletive items. Therefore, blocking one feature forces all features to disappear<sup>8</sup>. Nominative and accusative inflection is not

<sup>8</sup>There is one number-neutral 3rd person agreement prefix in Yimas *pu-*, which can cooccur with

blocked, because features of an argument and features of agreement are different objects, and so constraint (30) does not apply.

30. *No Multiple Spell-Out*  
 In the domain of a word, do not insert items which realize the same feature more than once.

To the extent that this account of the blocking effect is justified, it lends strong support to the claim that there are two types of inflection in Yimas, consisting of different kinds of objects.

We can verify that the differential blocking effect cares about the distinction between ergative-absolutive agreement and nominative-accusative arguments, rather than the distinction between 3rd person and other persons. When 2nd person arguments are forced into the ergative-absolutive system, they too are suppressed by complementizer agreement (31).

31. a. ipwa- kra- tay  
 2PL-ABS 1PL-ACC see  
 ‘You all saw us.’  
 b. ta- Ø- kra- tpul-c -um  
 NEG Ø<sub>2PL-ABS</sub> 1PL-ACC hit PERF PL  
 ‘You all didn’t hit us.’

#### 4.2 Position of Arguments

Yimas provides a new argument for the claim that the absolutive assigning projection is structurally higher than the ergative assigning projection in ergative languages. The evidence comes from the effects of extraction on agreement marking.

Wh-questions in Yimas normally display an anti-agreement effect, i.e. agreement with an extracted argument is not marked. Anti-agreement applies to both subject and object extraction in Yimas (32).

32. a. nawm m- Ø- kul- cpul -um? *subject question*  
 who-PL COMP Ø<sub>3PL-ERG</sub> 2PL-ACC hit PLUR  
 ‘Who hit you all?’  
 b. nawn impa- Ø tpul? *object question*  
 who-SG 3DL-ABS Ø hit  
 ‘Who did those two hit?’

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complementizer agreement for number, supporting the claim that the blocking rule in operation just refers to identical features. For reasons unknown to me, this number-neutral inflection has a very restricted distribution: it is only used when preceded by the negative prefix *ta-* and followed by an ambiguous affix. See Foley (1991) for details.

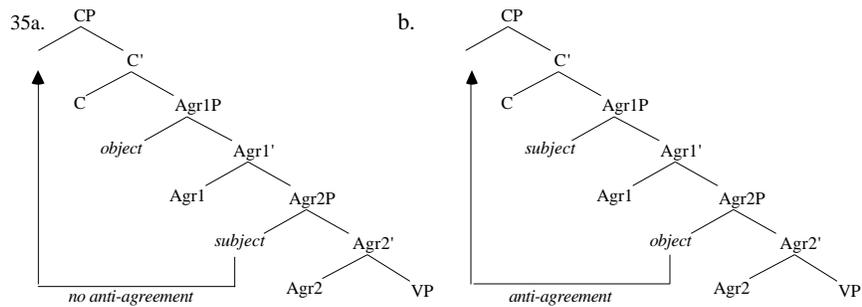
The anti-agreement effect is widespread cross-linguistically. It has received most discussion in the context of null-subject languages, such as various varieties of Romance, Arabic or Celtic. Ouhalla (1993) points out an extremely important fact about anti-agreement effects. If negation intervenes between CP and the trace of subject extraction in IP, the anti-agreement effect disappears (cf. (33a-b) from Breton), i.e. the verb is marked for normal subject agreement. Ouhalla attributes this effect to the A-bar status of [Spec,NegP], which intervenes between the source and the target of subject extraction. He assumes that anti-agreement, and ‘anti-anti-agreement’ are due to the fact that ‘rich’ agreement can license *pro* only when *pro* is not locally A-bar bound. The details of his account are not crucial here, but I assume that anti-anti-agreement can be used as a diagnostic for positions which (i) intervene in an A-bar chain, and (ii) have A-bar status themselves.

33. a. Petore paotred a lenne (\*lennent) al levrioù  
 which boys comp read read:3PL the books  
 ‘Which boys read the books?’  
 b. Ar vugale ne (\*lenne) lennent ket al levriou  
 the children NEG read read-3PL NEG the books  
 ‘The children who did not read the books.’ (Breton: Hendrick 1988)

It is hard to draw conclusions from agreement in negative questions in Yimas, since negative declaratives have an anti-agreement effect of their own, as we have seen in the section 4.1. However, 3rd person *objects* in Yimas produce the same anti-anti-agreement effect as negation in Breton. In (34), diagrammed in (35a), the object is marked by absolutive agreement, and presumably occupies the specifier of the absolutive projection. Normal ergative agreement marks the subject. If we assume that this object is occupying an A-bar position, then parallels the effect of negation on questions in Breton, accounting for the undoing of the anti-agreement effect in (34).

34. nawrm na- mpi- tpul?  
 who-DL 3SG-ABS 3DL-ERG hit  
 ‘Who hit him?’

Importantly, this effect does not generalize to other combinations of arguments. When the interfering 3rd person object is replaced by a 2nd person accusative object, which is Case licensed *below* the ergative projection, anti-agreement persists (cf. (32a) above). In addition, when it is the third person *object* that is extracted, an exceptional state of affairs arises, shown in (35b): the subject is absolutive, presumably in order to satisfy the EPP. We may therefore assume that the object is extracted from [Spec,Agr2]. This looks just like the configuration that led to anti-anti-agreement in (34,35a), but in this instance anti-agreement persists.



The contrast between extraction across a subject (35b), which allows anti-agreement, and extraction across an object (35a), which prevents anti-agreement, is explained if we assume that Yimas is just like Yiddish, for which Diesing (1990) has claimed a similarly ‘mixed’ [Spec,IP] position. Subjects reach [Spec,IP] by A-movement; objects must A-bar move to reach the same position.

The anti-agreement facts lend strong support to the claim that the absolutive projection is higher than the ergative projection. As far as I can tell, they would be a complete mystery under an approach in which absolutive is assigned below ergative. One of the arguments Bobaljik (1993) and Chomsky (1993) give in favour of this alternative analysis is the claim that no sequence of A-movements could place the object in a higher case position than the subject. I am effectively agreeing with their argument here, insofar as I have argued that the absolutive position must be an A-bar position when filled by an object. Where I disagree with Bobaljik and Chomsky is in the conclusion from this that impossible A-movement entails impossible Case-movement<sup>9</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paper has offered explanations for a number of properties of the complex agreement system of Yimas. A greed-free approach to economy of movement explains why a language in which verbs can only case-license person and number features has a split-ergative agreement system, and deviations from the basic split-ergative pattern. An important consequence of this analysis is that inflectional affixes in polysynthetic languages can be of two types, confirming the apparently conflicting theories of Jelinek (1984) and Baker (1991).

<sup>9</sup> If objects can only reach [Spec,Agr1] by A-bar movement, we have an account of the fact that subjects asymmetrically bind objects in ergative languages, just as in English, as pointed out by Anderson (1976). The binding facts are one of Bobaljik’s arguments for assuming that ergative is assigned above absolutive. See Phillips (to appear) for further discussion.

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