Split ergativity in Nêlêmwa

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SPLIT ERGATIVITY IN THE NÊLÊMWÂ LANGUAGE

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Nêlêmwâ is one of the 30 kanak languages of New Caledonia; it is an Austronesian language of the Oceanic branch spoken by about 600 people of the Nenema group in the far north of New Caledonia.

1 An overview of ergativity in Nêlêmwâ

The terminology used will be S (sole argument of an intransitive verb), A (prime argument of a transitive verb), O (second argument of a transitive verb).

Morphologically, two agent morphemes *ea* (+human) and *ru* (+non-human) mark postverbal nouns or pronouns in a neutral two argument clause (the order is indifferently VOA or VAO). Several conditions are required for these agent morphemes to appear: argument position, transitivity, asymmetry of the two arguments (i.e. non-co-referentiality) and definiteness of the second argument (O). Absolutive is zero marked.

Syntactically, coordination, subordination, relatives, imperative equi-NP deletion do not treat A and S differently. The syntactic structure is accusative. Nêlêmwâ does not have a passive, but it does have a sort of anti-passive diathesis (with an oblique object and absolutive prime argument) expressing reduced agentivity. This anti-passive construction does not have the syntactic functions generally associated with it in syntactically ergative languages such as Dyirbal. It merely intransitivises the verb, with an oblique object, generic in meaning, and a demoted absolutive prime argument.

1.1 Origin and distribution of agent morphemes *ea* and *ru*

Ru is the result of the grammaticalisation of the verb *thu* 'do'; cognates of this morpheme appear in other languages of the north (Nemi, Fwâi, Pije *lu*, Pwapwâ *du*, Pwaamei *thu*). The origin of *(e)a*[1] is not clear. It is probably nominal since it can be determined by possessive suffixes like nouns possessed inherently as in (1):

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[1] *ea-* after final consonant; *a-* after final vowel. In the neighbouring language of Nyêlayu, the cognate form is *(w)a*.

(1)   *na*   *u*   *ogi-hla*   *ea-ny*
       I   ACC   leave-them   AGT-my
       'I left them, I did'(= my doing)

Ea- and possessive suffixes exclusively mark HUMAN agent. These ergative pronouns are now emphatic and only appear in formal speech; *(e)a* marks all nominal or pronominal human agents (proper/common nouns, deictic, anaphoric, interrogative pronouns); *ru* marks nouns referring to indefinite, neutral or collective humans (such as 'child', 'people', 'foreigners', 'clan', 'Europeans') and nouns or pronouns referring to non-humans.

1.2 Split ergativity and verbal categories

Transitivity is a prerequisite for agentive marking. The sole nominal argument of intransitive verbs is always absolutive. Transitive verbs are generally marked by a transitive flexion or suffix and they have direct objects (in VOA or VAO position).

     Medio-active verbs (active verbs of movement, feeling, perception, as well as cognitive and discursive verbs) stand apart in that they may occur in either as ergative or absolutive constructions (transitively or intransitively). When constructed transitively, their object is oblique and may have various case functions (locative, causal). This split is subject to the position of the oblique object /Oi/ (whether peripherised as an adjunct — VSOi — or integrated as an object — VOiA —). Semantically such split correlates with degrees of activity, agentivity, control or intentionality and is closely related to diathetic considerations.

1.3 Split between nouns and bound pronouns

Bound pronouns are accusative with sVo pattern: subject pronouns (s) are preverbal, object pronouns (o) are postverbal. Inanimates are marked /zero/. Subject pronouns may co-occur with postverbal nominal or pronominal S or A prime arguments (and agree in number with them). The pattern is thus (s)VS, (s)VOA or (s)VAO (see examples 2, 3, 4). Inanimate nominal agents are usually not co-referenced by subject pronouns, unless some emphatic agency or humanisation is meant (see 4, 5). Inanimate (S) arguments are never co-referenced by subject pronouns (see 6). As for object pronouns, they are anaphoric, and never co-occur with nominal objects.

(2)   *hla*   *yhalap*   *hlaabai*   *kibu-va*
       they.PL   fish   those.ANAPH   ancestors-our
       'our ancestors used to fish' (**sVS**)

(3)   *i*   *tûûlî*   *pwaxi*   *eli*   *a*   *Kaavo*
       she   dry   child   that.ANAPH   **AGT**   Kaavo
       'Kaavo is drying the child' (**sVOA**)

(4)   *doi-na*   *ru*   *cacia*
       sting.TR-me   AGT   acacia
       'the acacia stung me' (**VOA**)

(5)   *(i)*   *thâlî*   *daan*   *ru*   *ciiy-ena*
       (it)   close.TR   road   **AGT**   tree-this.DEICT
       'this tree has cut off the road' ((s)**VOA**)

(6)   *kuut*   *mwêna*   *hooli*   *mwâ*
       stand   place.DEICT   that.ANAPH   house
       'this house used to be there' (**VS**)

Accusative bound pronouns are thus part of the verbal group; agent morphemes are nominal marks. The split between accusative bound pronouns and nominal agent markers stands as evidence that ergativity is superficial: it is the morphological trace of a semantic specification.

1.4 Constraints on ergative morphemes

Transitivity is the syntactic prerequisite for ergative case marking. The case of split ergativity with medio-active verbs will be analysed in 1.5.

1.4.1 Diversity of object type

The object argument may be a bound or independent personal pronoun, a (proper or definite common) noun, a deictic or anaphoric pronoun. It may be direct or oblique (see 7) or it may be a propositional complement (in 8, 9).

(7)   *i*   *xam*   *fuk-vi*   *ye*   *a*   *hooli*   *mââlic*
       it   ASS   fly-COMIT   her   AGT   that.ANAPH   bird
       'the bird flew with her' (a woman)

With active verbs, an oblique argument is a full core argument. This is shown in (7) where the comitative argument is marked by vi, (which results from the grammaticalisation of a serialised verb construction *fuk fhe* (fly+take); the first stage is the phonological change from *fhe* to *ve* ([F] > [v]), *ve* is then grammaticalised, and associated to inanimates, *vi* to humans. It seems that in

Nêlêmwâ an object may be any kind of patient role (direct or indirect), provided it fills the slot or is in the position of the canonical object (VOA order), thus becoming a core argument. The constructions of medio-active verbs further support this view (see 1.5). Thus, it may not be necessary to advocate a case of capture of a derived/grammaticalised case marking preposition by an intransitive verb resulting in the creation of a transitivising suffix. It seems that the syntactic structure of Nêlêmwâ provides for this type. of facts. With transitive cognition verbs such as 'say', 'think', 'remember', the object complement may be propositional (as in 8, 9).

(8) *i   shêlâ   a   Pwâ-Kebö   khabwe   i   u   â*
     she know   AGT   P.K.   COMP(say)   she   ACC   leave
     'Pwâ-Kebö knows she will go' (VAO)

(9) *i   nanami   a   Pwayili   khabwe   hângi   kebuk*
     he   think   **AGT** Pwayili   COMP(say)   maybe   be.true
     'Pwayili thinks it may be true' (VAO)

1.4.2 Object definiteness and valence reduction

Transitive constructions require definite, specific objects. When generic, the object is incorporated and the verb intransitivised. It is a case of valence reduction: the verb has either indeterminate transitive flexion or intransitive form, and the prime argument is demoted to absolute S function (as in 10).

(10) *o   i   tuula   dube   Pwayili   xe   i   tho*
      VIRT   he   find   deer   Pwayili   IDT   he   call
      'if Pwayili (S) finds deer, he'll call'

When this indefinite, generic or collective object is non-human and anaphoric, it is saturated by *wo* which also has partitive value:

(11) *o   i   tuula   wo²   Pwayili   xe   i   tho*
      VIRT   he   find   IND.OBJ   Pwayili   IDT   he   call
      'if Pwayili (S) finds some, he'll call'

The verb *tuula* has indefinite flexion, the prime argument is absolutive (S). The common 'anti-passive'-like construction marked by *wo* and an oblique object is another case of valence reduction. It has aoristic and generic value

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² The agent morpheme *(a)* is possible with emphatic and contrastive value. Its presence is not required syntactically, it has emphatic agentive diathetic function.

like object incorporation. The prime argument is absolutive (S) in both cases (as in 12, 13).

(12) *hla   hôbwaxe   wo   o   vaayi   âgu   Pum*
      they.PL watch   **IND.OBJ** **REL** cattle   people   Poum
      'people of Poum (S) do some cattle herding'

(13) *hla   taaja   wo   o   pwaxi-an*
      they.PL   dug   **IND.OBJ** **REL** child-tortoise
      'they do some tortoise egg digging'

Compare with an incorporated object (as in 14), which is the preferred construction:

(14) *hla   taaja   pwaxi-an   thaamwa   mahleeli*
      they.PL   dug   child-tortoise   woman   those.ANAPH
      'those women (S) do some tortoise egg digging'

1.4.3 Argument co-reference and valence reduction

Arguments must be asymmetric. Cases of co-reference (loop) of the prime and second argument intransitivise the verb, causing valence reduction and agent demotion. Reflexive, reciprocal constructions and cases of co-reference between the prime argument and the possessive determiner of the object will be analysed in turn.

(a) REFLEXIVES

The verb is transitive with definite flexion (contrary to cases of object incorporation), but the prime argument remains absolutive, as in intransitive structures.

(15) *i   aa   bwagi   Pwayili*
      he   ITER   return   Pwayili
      'Pwayili retraces his steps'

Reflexivity is thus controlled by S in Nêlêmwâ (by A, in Enga, Li & Lang 1979:315).

(b) RECIPROCALS AND *PE-*

It is an intransitive construction as in many languages, due to agent/patient co-reference. The postverbal nominal argument is absolutive (S) and co-referenced by a dual or plural subject pronoun.

(16)   *hli*   *pe-yage-i*   *hliili*   *meewu*
      they.DU   RECIP-help-R   those.2.ANAPH   brothers
      'the two brothers help each other'(*ea)

Reciprocal and reflexive constructions are intransitivised, only in presence of a non-co-referent argument may such structures become transitive (as in 17).

(17)   *hli*   *u*   *pe-wêêng-i*
      they.DU   ACC   RECIP-agree-R

      le   *a*   *axamaliili*
      there.ANAPH   **AGT**   those.2.men.ANAPH
      'those two men agreed on that'
      (the inanimate anaphoric object is marked by *-le*)

What is stressed is agency, the activity of the prime argument involved in a transitive relation directed onto an external and specific object, whatever the outcome.

(c) CO-REFERENCE BETWEEN THE POSSESSOR OF THE OBJECT AND THE PRIME ARGUMENT

(18)   *i*   *u*   *hnawe*   *yada*   *axaleny*   *Têâ Pwayili*
      he   ACC   leave.TR   object.of   this.DEICT   Têâ Pwayili
      'Têâ Pwayili leaves his object' or 'he leaves Têâ Pwayili's object'

There are two possible interpretations to such a clause:
— one is by co-reference of the subject pronoun (*i*) and the possessive determiner (*Têâ Pwayili*) of the object (*yada*) with the meaning: 'Têâ Pwayili leaves his object',
— the other bars co-reference between pronoun and possessive determiner with the meaning: 'he leaves Têâ Pwayili's object', *Têâ Pwayili* being the possessor of the object (*yada*).

In both cases, *Têâ Pwayili* is a determiner, not a prime argument.
    For the prime argument to be marked ergatively, a non-co-referential possessive determiner of the object is required, as in (19) where the object is determined by the possessive suffix (*-n*). Co-reference of possessor and prime argument is then barred.

(19)   *i*   *u*   *hnawe*   *yada-n*   *a*   *axaleny*   *Têâ Pwayili*
      he   ACC   leave   object-**his**   **AGT**   this.DEICT   Têâ Pwayili
      'Têâ Pwayili leaves his object' (someone else's, non-co-referent)

1.4.4. Discursive organisation: left dislocation and marked vs. unmarked orientation

Agent morphemes appear in neutral clauses and mark postverbal nominal agent ((s)VOA or (s)VAO). The neutral order is the preferred order of tales and direct discourse (whether affirmative as in (21), interrogative (20) or negative).

(20)   *i*   *wa*   *a*   *ti*   *holeny*   *mwêêng*   *paan?*
      she   weave   **AGT**   who?   this.DEICT   hat   pandanus
      'who wove this pandanus hat?' (VAO)

(21)   *i*   *wa*   *a*   *gee*
      she   weave   **AGT**   grand-ma
      'grandmother wove it' (VOA)

(22)   *doi*   *âlô*   *hleny*   *ru*   *da?*
      sting.TR   child   this.DEICT   **AGT**   what?
      'what stung the child?' (VOA)

In case of left dislocation of A, the agent morpheme disappears and does not leave any trace in situ and the dislocation marker (*xe* /IDT) appears (S *xe* VO pattern). As a rule in Nêlêmwâ, left-dislocated nominals never carry any anteposed case specification, but some functions (locative, causative, instrumental) do leave traces in situ.

Summary of constraints bearing on agent morphemes

1. VERBS must be active and transitive;
2. OBJECTS must be definite and non-co-referent with the prime argument;
3. the choice of *ea* or *ru* is subject to notional +/-HUMAN features of the third person nominal or pronominal PRIME ARGUMENT;
4. WORD ORDER should be neutral, agent morphemes mark postverbal prime arguments in neutral utterances and are thus subject to discursive constraints. The relative position of postverbal A to O nominals is

indifferent in a canonical transitive structure: VOA or VAO just connote a difference in stress, which is not the case with medio-active verbs.

1.5 Ergative split with medio-active verbs

Medio-active verbs can be used transitively without any flexion, their object is an oblique (Oi) argument expressing cause, source or localisation. The split is conditioned by the peripheral or integrated position of Oi, relative to the prime argument which can then be marked as either absolutive (VSOi) or ergative (VOiA); this correlates with degrees of activity, agentivity or intentionality and is evidence that the canonical order of a transitive clause is VOA, rather than VAO.

This category includes verbs of affect, perception, sensation, verbs of movement and position, verbs of cognition, discourse, information, and some aspectual verbs such as *toven*[3] 'end' and *thaaxa* 'begin', *alu* 'watch', *khalaya* 'love', *hnac* 'wonder', *jaat* 'rejoice', *taabwa* 'sit', *ôôme* 'come', *pe-pwa-wo* 'interrupt', *vhaajamâ* 'discuss', *havava* 'hesitate', *peeva* 'argue'. There are also semantically non-predictable verbs such as *thea* 'play', *theeva* 'joke', *piîlâ* 'play, stroll', and *yang* 'be busy'.

These verbs do not constitute homogeneous semantic categories. Other verbs, which are semantically similar, are transitive (*gi* 'cry', *haxaxa* 'fear', *khabwe* 'say', *axe, axi* 'see', *tâlâ* 'hear, listen', *nanam(i)* 'think', *shêlâ* 'know'). Semantism is a correlate, not a determining feature of this verb category. The basic fact that rules agentive marking is syntactic: i.e. transitivity. In a Nêlêmwâ sentence such as *Jean sees the woman*, the verb *axe* 'see' is transitive, so Jean will be ergative (A) though he is more of an experiencer than an agent.

1.5.1 Peripherisation (VSOi) vs. integration (VOiA) of the oblique object and valence change

Such split in ergative marking is related to the peripheral or integrated position of the oblique object Oi.

— Verbs of affect ('be sad', 'be ashamed', 'rejoice', 'wonder', etc.)

(23) *i   jaat   thaamwa   hleny   o   âlô   eli*
      she   be happy woman   this.DEICT REL child   that.ANAPH
      'this woman is happy with that child' (VSOi)

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[3] The verb *kûûlî* ('end'), however, is a transitive verb with direct object and prime argument marked A, whatever its position.

(24) *i   jaat   o   âlô   eli   a   thaamwa   hleny*
      she   rejoice   REL child that.ANAPH   AGT woman   this.DEICT
      'this woman rejoices with that child' (VOiA)

— Verbs of sensation or perception

(25) *i   u   khôê   Pwayili   o   shaya eli*
      he   ACC be.tired   Pwayili   REL work that.ANAPH
      'Pwayili is tired of this work' (VSOi)

(26) *i   u   khôê   o   shaya eli   a   Pwayili*
      he   ACC got.tired REL work that.ANAPH   AGT Pwayili
      'Pwayili got tired of this work' (VOiA)

A peripherised adjunct (VSOi) results in an intransitive structure with constative value. An 'integrated' Oi is a full core argument in a transitive, active construction (VOiA). It saturates a core argument position and the prime argument is an agent. This supports Foley's distinction between 'core argument' and 'direct objects' in the case of promotion of constituents to core argument position:

> what we have here are valence increased verbs in which the added argument is a core argument, but not a direct object. (Foley 1993:157)

In Nêlêmwâ, the choice of either pattern correlates with agent saliency; there are also aspectual correlations expressing process vs. constative aspect.

— Verbs of position

(27) *i   taabwa Pwayili   bwa   hooc*
      he   sit   Pwayili   on   horse
      'Pwayili is sitting/seated on the horse' (VSOi)

(28) *i   taabwa bwa   hooc   a   Pwayili*
      he   mount   on   horse AGT Pwayili
      'Pwayili is mounting the horse' (VOiA)

An incorporated object with a deleted localiser results in an intransitive structure:

(29) *i   taabwa hooc   Pwayili*
      he   sit   horse   Pwayili
      'Pwayili can ride a horse'

These various constructions correlate with aspect and active vs. stative semantism.

— VERBS OF MOVEMENT

With such verbs, the split expresses similar volitional and intentional contrast.

(30) i   tuume   Pwayili   bwa   ôn
      he   go.down   Pwayili   on   beach
      'Pwayili is coming along the beach' (VSOi)

(31) i   tuume   bwa · ôn   a   thaamwa   hleny
      he   go.down   on   beach AGT   woman   this.DEICT
      'this woman comes by the beach' (VOiA)
      (Contrastive agency is implied, she should not do so)

(32) i   ôôme   Pwâ-Hivic   jeux-o   waja-n
      she   come   Pwâ-Hivic   near-REL   boat-his
      'Pwâ Hivic gets near his boat' (VSOi)

(33) i   ôôme   jeux-i   na   a   Pwâ-Hivic ·
      she   come   near-REL   me   AGT   Pwâ-Hivic
      'Pwâ Hivic is approaching towards me' (VOiA)

As previously, such split expresses degrees in intentionality, control and activity of the prime argument with potential contrastive value. Those facts are evidenced by (34) which is intransitive with an absolutive prime argument (S) in spite of the integrated position of Oi, due to the unintentional semantism of *kaaluk* 'fall'. This supports Foley's (1993) view that semantic notions are required to account for ergative languages.

(34) i   kaaluk   du   bwa   ôn   ava-ny
      he   fall   down   on   sand   brother-my
      'my brother fell down on the sand'
      (*bwa ôn* is an adjunct without any argument function)

Such split requires that verbs be semantically active (stative verbs are excluded from such split patterns), besides agents must be HUMAN (contrary to canonical transitive verbs which allow +/-HUMAN, +/-ANIMATE agents). This contributes to making medio-active verbs stand apart from canonical transitive verbs that generally have transitive flexions, whose object is DIRECT, whose prime argument can be +/-HUMAN, and for which agentive marking of the prime argument is not subject to position relative to the object.

1.6 Typological features

1.6.1 An ergative, active or agentive language?

Nêlêmwâ is not a language with general active/inactive opposition. The ergative/absolutive split only occurs with medio-active verbs: it is a case of restricted agentive split. But it does share some features with languages that have active/inactive opposition.
— One is the coincidence of active and stative meaning for the same lexeme:

> these meanings are usually lexically distinct in ergative· and nominative languages. (Klimov 1979:329)

In Nêlêmwâ, such coincidence is, restricted to medio-active verbs whose construction stresses either stative or active aspect. But active and stative meanings are also frequently expressed by different verbs, such as transitive/active *thuxa* 'untie' and intransitive/stative *holo* 'be loose'.
— Another common feature is that, as Klimov notes,

> [...] the differentiation of direct and indirect objects in ergative and nominative languages is replaced in active languages by a distinction of 'nearest and distant' complements [...] The nearest complement means an object to which an action expressed by an active verb is directed: 'a man is breaking a tree, a man is walking along the road', 'a man is running to the river.' (Klimov 1979:329-330)

This non-distinction between direct and indirect objects occurs in Nêlêmwâ, but it is limited to medio-active verbs and subject to position constraints which reduce its scope: the indirect object must be integrated within the verbal group (as opposed to a peripherised adjunct). Thus, peripherisation or integration of the indirect object correlates with the agency of the prime argument (his control, volition, intention).

> In active systems, [...] the opposition of centrifugal and non-centrifugal version of active verbs is obligatory. The centrifugal version denotes an action directed outside the subject and the non-centrifugal version an action limited to the subject. (Klimov 1979:330)

Such variations also occur in direct or prepositional constructions in French: *il longe la rivière* vs. *il marche le long de la rivière*.

Nêlêmwâ has neither ergative syntax, nor general active/inactive opposition, it expresses contrastive agency in relation to diathetic constructions. It is a three-level system: patient/actor/agent with actor as an intermediate term, marked absolutive or ergative with medio-active verbs.

Besides, as has already been mentioned, agent morphemes may be contrastive or emphatic when not required syntactically (compare examples 11 and 35):

(35)   *o*   *i*   *tuula*   *wo*   *a*   *Pwayili*
      VIRT he   find   IND.OBJ **AGT** Pwayili
      'if Pwayili finds some' (in contrast with others, compare with 11)

1.6.2 Split and aspect

Aspect is NOT a relevant feature of split ergativity in Nêlêmwâ. There is no such opposition as process vs. perfective aspect, as occurs in Drehu (Lifu, Loyalty Islands, Moyse-Faurie 1983). Verbal telicity is NOT a case in point either. The only relevant fact is the definiteness of O. Yet, with medio-active verbs, there may be aspectual implications:
— with verbs of position, the ergative or absolutive construction may express process vs. stative or perfective aspect as in 'he sits down' and 'he is seated' (see examples 27, 28);
— with active verbs of movement, or motion (*ôda, tuume*), the two patterns correlate with a contrast in agency and intentionality rather than aspect, (see examples 30 to 33). In other languages, this is expressed by different prepositions such as:

(a) *he walked in the park* (activity: S);
(b) *he walked to the park* (accomplishment: A) (van Valin 1990:225).

1.6.3 Oblique (anti-passive) construction (wo + Oi)

There is no passive voice in Nêlêmwâ, agent demotion is expressed by other valence reduction constructions such as object incorporation and construction with *wo* and an oblique object, similar to anti-passive structures. Yet in the latter case, its functions are just diathetic and semantic. They are not evidence of 'pivots', but ways of defocusing agent and patient. Here is a comparison with anti-passive functions as described for Samoan (by Hopper & Thompson 1980:268-269):

	Samoan		Nêlêmwâ (wo + Oi)
ERGATIVE		ANTI-PASSIVE	ANTI-PASSIVE
1. perfective		imperfective	aoristic
2. total involvement of O		partitive O (idem in Tongan)	partitive value of *wo*
3. definite O		indefinite O	genericity of O
4. kinetic/volitional		stative/involuntary	neutral
5. active participation of A		passive participation of A	neutral/non-agentive

In Nêlêmwâ, such structure expresses object genericity and also aoristic process (or general truth) with no temporal or aspectual boundaries. Agency is then reduced. There may be aspectual implications to this construction, but the basic fact is object genericity (see examples 12, 13).

In some Australian languages, 'anti-passive has semantic function expressing non-impingement of the object, unfulfilled process in independent clauses and syntactic function in dependent subordinate, relative clauses' (Blake 1979:295). This may also correlate with the atelic aspect of the verb. In Nêlêmwâ, the degree of affectedness, object transformation or verbal telicity is not relevant (see 36). What is relevant is syntactic transitivity and object definiteness:

(36)   *i*   *palaiy-i*   *mââlîîc*   *a*   *kââma-n*
      he   miss-REL bird   **AGT** father-his
      'his father missed the bird'

1.6.4 Agent marking and negative or irrealis modality

Blake (1977:16) notes that 'in a number of Australian languages, the ergative construction is not used if the verb is in the future tense, imperative mood, imperfect, potential or irrealis[4] aspect.'

In Nêlêmwâ, future, irrealis and negative are irrelevant (as in 37 and 38):

(37)   *me*   *io*   *tâlâ* *ru*   *îda*   *âgu*
      AIM FUT hear **AGT** line people
      'so that the (coming) generation of people hear that'

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[4] In Yukulta, Queensland, ergative is not used for irrealis but for past and future.

(38) *kio   i   khuxi   a   Pwayili*
      NEG   he   eat.TR **AGT** Pwayili
      'Pwayili did not eat it'

1.6.5 Causativity and agency

Causative or factitive derivations are evidence of the relevance of agency in this language. The causer is an **A** agent, and the choice of causative *pa-* or factitive *fa-* prefixes is selected by the patient or agent case of the causee (i.e. his amount of control).

(39) *i   fa-kûxû   i   na   o   wi*
      he   FACT-drink REL me   REL water
      'he made me drink water' (he helped me)

(40) *puxet   da   me   co   pa-xûxû   i   Yul?*
      reason what? AIM you CAUS-drink REL Jules
      'why did you make Jules drink?' (against his will)

2 Comparison with other kanak languages and conclusions on agentive construction in Nêlêmwâ

Other cases of agent markers have been described in other kanak languages.
— In Drehu (Moyse-Faurie & Ozanne-Rivierre 1983) the agent marker is *hnen, hnei*. Its origin is nominal: *hnen* (means 'place of'). As a noun, it can be possessed by first person possessive suffixes (in the singular, dual or plural); it also marks the instrumental.

There is a tense-aspect split in Drehu: the agent marker appears for progressive or perfective aspect and in the past, not in the present/aorist or future. There is one further split: progressive or perfective aspects are ergative, past is rather of the active type. The agent marker is compulsory whether the verb is transitive or intransitive and whether the subject is animate or inanimate.

— In Nemi (Moyse-Faurie & Ozanne-Rivierre 1983) the agent marker is *ru*. It is a case of split between animates or inanimates. *Ru* marks ANIMATE or INANIMATE agents of transitive verbs, but only ANIMATE agents of intransitive verbs.

In Nêlêmwâ, it is difficult to account for the split between accusative bound pronouns and ergative/absolutive nouns. Is it the result of an evolution from an accusative to ergative system or the reverse? It could be hypothesised that the move was from ergative, case markers being often more conservative than verbal and pronominal morphology. Traces of ergative pronouns for

humans (*ea-* + possessive suffix) are evidence of an older system. Nominal agents marked by *ea-* are in a similar possessive relationship as possessive suffixes. The notion of argument is thus ambiguous, what is now interpreted as a nominal human agent is a possessive determiner. Thus, in Nêlêmwâ, an ergative clause is a mix of verbal and nominal determination structures. In the case of inanimate agents, the marker being derived from a verb (*thu*), the agent nominal is interpretable as an argument.

Haudricourt has claimed that agent morphemes might be cognates with morphemes marking equative utterances in Austronesian languages:

> The syntax of Austronesian languages at the further end of the area, Polynesian and Melanesian languages of New Caledonia, with their so-called sentence final subject or agent, points out to the very ancient nominal sentence in this family [...] (Haudricourt 1979)

The initial structure centring on the relation between a predicate and agent theme/topic (marked by *(e)a* and a possessive determination for humans, and *ru* for inanimates) might then have evolved towards a verb/argument structure, together with a pronominal agreement system. The unmarked patient theme might correspond to the sole nominal argument of the present verbal system and the *ea/ru* marked agent theme to the two nominal arguments pattern.

As for accusative personal bound pronouns, they might result from the generalisation of pronouns marking the sole arguments of intransitive verbs to the prime arguments of transitive verbs (together with gradual decay of agent pronouns marked by *ea-* + possessive suffix, *ea-ny, ea-m*). Originally, subject and object bound pronouns might have constituted a sole unmarked paradigm (as they are identical in form and only differentiated by their PRESENT position) with agent pronouns expressed by *ea-* + possessive suffix (traces of an ergative pronominal system?).

The evolution towards an accusative pronominal system could also have occurred through left dislocation, since case function of the dislocated noun is not marked. Thus, one unique set of bound pronouns would have been generalised for both absolutive or ergative nominal case. Accusative personal pronouns are characteristic of Oceanic languages:

> The obligatory use of pronominal determiners in POC (and the emergence of a surface constituent VP containing S and direct O pronouns) presumably developed from an earlier situation in which pronominal determiners were optional or obligatory only in certain contexts. The syntactic context in which many (AN) languages require a pronoun along with a coreferential nominal is when a basically post-verbal NP is moved into preverbal position, as in relative clauses, secondary topicalisation and WH- questions. A pronominal 'trace' must be left behind. In POC this pronoun came to be present even in basic constructions, becoming a determiner marking definiteness, person and number of the associated NP. (Pawley & Reid 1976:61-62)

As it is now, due to reanalysis and syntactic change that has mixed two diachronically different systems, these morphemes are now interpreted as agent markers. Nêlêmwâ is thus an agentive case marking language with splits between nouns and bound pronouns. Expression of agency hinges on transitivity and a three-tier case system, agent/actor/non-agent or patient, with actor as the intermediate term marked either ergatively or absolutively. These agent morphemes have diathetic functions that appear clearly in contexts where they are not required syntactically.

Abbreviations

ACC	accomplished	LOC	localiser
AGT	agent	NC	common noun
ANAPH	anaphoric	NEG	negation
ASS	assertive	NP	proper noun
COMIT	comitative	Oi	oblique object
DEICT	deictic	PP	personal pronoun
DIR	directional	-R	reciproeal suffix
DU	dual	RECIP	reciprocal
FUT	future	REL	relator
IDT	identifier	TR	transitive
IND.OBJ	indefinite object	VIRT	virtual
ITER	iterative		

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