

Ergativity and control in Timbe

By M. Foster

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the use of -ne, the ergative marker, in Timbe and discusses the anomalous use of this in monologue texts.¹ Timbe is a Papuan (Non-Austronesian) language spoken by about 11,000 people on the north side of Mount Sarawaget in the Huon Peninsula of Papua New Guinea.² From the analysis of clauses elicited in isolation it appears that Timbe follows the usual pattern of morphological ergativity found in Papuan languages.³ However in text material there are some departures from the usual pattern.

1. (say that paper is rewrite of part of previous one and give acknowledgements to Helen Miehle, Ger, Givon?)

2. For a detailed study of how Timbe relates to the other languages of the Huon Peninsula see McElhanon 1970.

3. See Dixon (1979) for a discussion of different types of ergativity, also Li and Lang (1979) for a discussion of ergativity in Papuan languages.

2. THE USUAL USE OF EGATIVE MARKERS IN TIMBE

According to Li and Lang (1979), ergativity in Papuan languages is always coded by case-markings and the absolutive is unmarked. Most Timbe clauses follow this pattern. A transitive subject is marked by the enclitic *-ne* which occurs on the final word of the NP. Intransitive subjects and transitive objects are unmarked. The following examples, taken from text material, illustrate this.⁴

- (1) *luāk sām̃bā kiā-ne dāp-ān penā-netki-m*
man old a-ERG road-on join-us two-SR

‘... and an old man joined us on the road and ...’

In the example above the Agent is indicated by the NP, *luāk sām̃bā kiāne* ‘an old man’, and the Patient by the verb suffix *-netki-* ‘us two’.

- (2) *nā-ne nanan sokoweo dāep*
I-ERG child I must carry he said

‘... he said, “I must carry the child.”’

In this example, *-ne* occurs on a pronoun and the Patient is a noun, *nanan* ‘child’.

- (3) *āmbā sisik ālāwu are bambi*
women young three those left DR

‘... and these three young women left ...’

The clause in this example is intransitive. The NP is terminated by the demonstrative *are* and is not marked by *-ne*. The verb, *bambi* ‘they left’, is intransitive.

4. The following abbreviations are used: ADJ adjective; DR different referent medial verb suffix; ERG ergative marker; POSS possessive; SR same referent medial verb suffix.

The ergative marker also occurs on the Instrument NP. If a clause contains an Agent NP and an Instrument NP, then the marker occurs on both phrases.

(4) (example showing instrument NP with marker)

(5) (example showing agent NP and instrument NP both with markers)

In both transitive and intransitive clauses there is agreement between the subject and the third order verb suffix. In transitive clauses there is agreement between the object and the first order verb suffix. Thus in this respect, a transitive subject and an intransitive subject are treated alike and an object is treated differently. In other words, the subject-verb agreement shows a nominative-accusative pattern. This is typical of ergative Papuan languages ⁵. The following examples illustrate noun-verb agreement in Timbe.

(6) (example showing transitive subject agreeing with verb)

(7) (example showing intransitive subject agreeing with verb)

(8) (example showing transitive subject and object agreeing with verb)

5. See Li and Lang (1979).

3. ANOMALOUS USE OF ERGATIVE MARKERS

Clauses elicited in isolation all follow the pattern described above in Section 2. However anomalies are found in monologue text material. In some intransitive clauses -*ne* occurs on the Actor NP as in the following example.

- (9) *gâ kei-râ kei humoân gât-ne-ne togomenâ*
you basis-Adj basis big POSS-ADJ-ERG come DR

'You have come from an important clan ...'

In this example, -*ne* occurs on the Actor NP even though the verb, *togomenâ* 'come', is normally intransitive. The switch reference suffix on this verb indicates the end of the influence of the participant 'you', so -*ne* cannot be associated with some other clause later in the string. This clause is an important one in the story, from this point on the story changes.

The clause string in the next example also describes important actions in a story. The story tells of a young woman who goes out each day to collect food. Each day is the same as the one before until she sees an insect as it goes down the river. This insect is instrumental in her getting married.

- (10) *pelâk are-ne gam ingon arimbo*
insect that-ERG descending down going DR

'That insect went down there ...'

The NP is terminated by -*ne* but the verbs associated with it are intransitive. The switch reference suffix on the verb *arimbo* 'going' indicates a change of referent so that this -*ne* could not be associated with a transitive verb later on in the string of clauses.

In the next example the narrator makes an important discovery that a bridge is broken, and someone in the party, Meik, mends it.

(11) Timbe tu irawut gewerāmbi nā-ŋe bam
Timbe river eventually they descending DR I-ERG leaving SR

katmā hin dān "O Timbe tirik bāleāp." dān
pausing SR this I said Oh Timbe bridge is broken I said

āmā Meik-ŋe "Ba ekbe." dām
however Meik-ERG leaving I must see saying SR

tālim nāngām bam togom "Tāk un." dāmbo
walking SR knowing SR leaving SR coming SR vine collect he said DR

'While they were taking their time coming down, I left them and discovered that the Timbe bridge was broken, however Meik decided to test it. He went over and came back carefully and called out for vine.'

The occurrence of the ergative marker on nā-ŋe 'I' is unexpected since all the verbs associated with it are normally intransitive (?including dān 'I said'?). In the same way, we would not expect the ergative marker to occur on the man's name, Meik-ŋe, since all the associated verbs are also intransitive. However, from a consideration of the story as a whole, it is apparent that these two participants here control the action of the story. Normally -ŋe indicates control over a Patient in the clause but here it seems to indicate that the referent has control over the action in the discourse.

There are also some Agent NP's that do not have ergative markers.

- (12) ti wan kām nem
tea etc. pouring SR drinking SR

arewa yāk Gungun āmbāle are māni yengimbo (backgrounded
from there he Gungun women those money he gave to them DR clause)
arewa ti om nendenge
from there tea cooking we drank DR

'... while (we) were boiling our tea, he paid the women who came from Gungun, and then we drank our tea.'

The subject NP of the verb yengimbo 'he gave to them' would normally take -ne but in this example yāk is not so marked. The clause is of low import in the story. The fact that he paid them money makes no change to the main events of the story. The switch reference markers indicate that this is background information. When there is an interpolation of background material in a series of clauses describing the action of the main participant in a story, a same referent verb suffix is used preceding the change of referent to a peripheral participant. However a change of referent suffix is used to signal the return to the main participant as subject. This is what happens in the example above. The main participants are 'we' and the peripheral participant is 'he'. The verb, nem 'drinking', which precedes the background clause has a same referent suffix. However a different referent suffix on yengimbo 'he gave to them' signals a return to the main participants.

The following example is similar.

- (13) bau lāuwā kiā ewangi-yelekmā
pigs two a passing them SR

luāk āmbāle yān somotne lokom tatbi (backgrounded clause)
men women nothing grass carrying SR they sitting DR

āgāine
we going up at the same time

'We passed two pigs, and while we climbed passed some people carrying grass, we ...'

The NP luāk āmbāle 'people' does not have an ergative marker even though the verb lokom 'carrying' is transitive. Also, the middle clause, luāk āmbāle yān somotne lokom tatbi, has a different referent from the previous clause and contains background information. As before, the change from the main participants to the peripheral ones is preceded by a verb with a same referent verb suffix but the change back to the main participants is signalled by a different referent verb suffix.

4. QUERY

How can we explain the behaviour of the ergative marker in Timbe? One possibility is to say that it is not really an ergative marker at all. This is the approach taken by Whitehead (1980 p.50). He suggests that a real case marker should be obligatory and that the function of -ne in Timbe is to indicate the controlling entities.

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It certainly does appear to be linked to the concept of control. In examples 9 to 11, -ne occurs on Actor NP's. In all of these NP's the referents were important participants who were controlling the action of the stories. In both examples 12 and 13 an Agent NP occurs which does not have the marker, -ne. In both examples the referents of these Agent NP's are peripheral participants who do not control the action of the stories. Other examples of apparently anomalous occurrences or non-occurrences of -ne in text material can be similarly explained in terms of whether or not the referents were controlling the action of the discourses.

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I do not think that this explanation necessarily precludes calling -ne an ergative marker. Ergativity is also linked to the concept of control. In languages with ergative case marking, ergative is used to mark the controller of the action of a transitive verb. In clauses in isolation -ne behaves like a typical ergative marker, it occurs on Agent NP's but not on Actor or Object NP's. It also occurs on Instrument NP's, and this too could be explained in terms of control. An Instrument is used by an Agent to control a Patient.

The anomalous use of -ne is associated with either highlighting or backgrounding of events in discourse. That is, when these systems do not operate as expected this indicates information in focus or out of focus. I suggest that the function of -ne at the discourse level is an extension of its ergative function at clause level. That is, the ergative marks an initiator of action in the discourse, and indicates that the marked event determines the course of the discourse. The non-occurrence of -ne on an Agent indicates that event is in the background.

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