Towards a Unified Account of Person Splits

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1. Overview

Different phenomena are known to exhibit sensitivity to the person/animacy (P/A) features of clausal arguments. One example is P/A-based split-ergativity. While individual languages exhibiting such patterns differ in where along Silverstein's (1976) animacy hierarchy the split occurs, there is a universal trend for DPs lower on the hierarchy to trigger the ergative pattern, and ones that are higher to trigger the nominative pattern. Another, less well-known, example of grammatical sensitivity to P/A features is auxiliary selection in Romance. In certain Romance dialects, auxiliary alternations are constrained by P/A features of the subject (D'Alessandro & Roberts 2010, henceforth D&R). D&R show that in Abruzzese, 1st/2nd-person subjects trigger *be*, while 3rd-person subjects trigger *have*.

Building on Coon's (2010) account of aspect-based split ergativity, we argue that person splits arise when structural factors conspire to place the subject and object in separate case/agreement domains. In this scenario, ergative case is not assigned because the subject is the only DP in its domain. For person-based split-ergativity, we assume that higher-ranked arguments on the person hierarchy must be licensed by an appropriate projection (Béjar & Rezac's (2003) PLC); and that the phasehood of this projection causes the the aforementioned bifurcation of the clause into two case/agreement domains. In the domain of aspect and P/A-split ergativity, the splits are not the result of special rules of case assignment, but rather the effect of bifurcating a transitive clause into two case domains with a single argument in each. Finally, with respect to auxiliary selection, this same phase boundary blocks incorporation into *be* (Freeze 1992; Kayne 1993) in the presence of 1st/2nd person, preventing *have* from arising.

We thus offer a unified account of aspect-based and P/A-based split ergativity, which also extends to person-conditioned auxiliary selection.

2. Splits

In this section we present a short overview of the phenomena under consideration. Ergativity and two types of split ergativity are discussed in section 2.1. In section 2.2 we turn to person-conditioned auxiliary selection.

2.1. Ergativity and split ergativity

We adopt the following abbreviations (Dixon 1979): *S* – single argument of intransitive; *A* – transitive subject ("Agent"); *P* – transitive object ("Patient"). In an ergative system *S* and *P* pattern together (*absolutive*) to the exclusion of *A* (*ergative*). This differs from more familiar nominative-accusative systems in which *S* and *P* pattern alike (*nominative*), to the exclusion of *P* (*accusative*). In this paper, we use labels like "nominative" or "ergative" to refer to the form of a DP in opposition to other DPs as part of a larger system, independently of a specific theory of how case is assigned.

It is often observed that it does not make sense to characterize an entire language as "ergative" or "not ergative" (Comrie 1978; Moravcsik 1978; Tsunoda 1981, *a.o.*). Rather, a single language often shows an ergative pattern in one portion of the grammar, and a non-ergative pattern in another. Languages which show both ergative and non-ergative patterns within some significant portion of the verbal domain

can be said to exhibit "split ergativity". Ergative splits are typically triggered by one of two types of factors: **(i)** aspect[1] and **(ii)** nominal features such as person and animacy.[2] It has been noted that these splits not only occur in consistent parts of the grammar, but also follow the same *directionality* (DeLancey 1981; Tsunoda 1981). We discuss each type in turn below.

2.1.1. Aspect-based splits

If a language exhibits *aspect*-based split ergativity, the ergative pattern will always be found to the left of the scale in (1), and the non-ergative pattern to the right.

(1)   ASPECT-BASED SPLIT ERGATIVITY: UNIVERSAL ALIGNMENT

$$\Longleftarrow \quad \text{ERG/ABS} \quad \| \quad \text{NON-ERG} \quad \Longrightarrow$$

perfective ≫ *imperfective* ≫ *progressive*   [*Dixon 1979*]

This kind of split can be observed in Basque (Laka 1996), which exhibits an ergative alignment in its case-marking system—in particular, in the forms of the article/determiner: transitive objects and intransitive subjects take the same set of forms, while transitive subjects take a different set of forms.

In (2a), the singular transitive object takes "-*a*" (*absolutive*), while the singular transitive subject takes "-*ak*" (*ergative*); crucially, the singular intransitive subject in (2b) patterns with the transitive object of (2a), taking "-*a*" (*absolutive*). This general pattern is followed in both the perfective and imperfective.

(2)   THE BASQUE PERFECTIVE (ERGATIVE PATTERN)
   a. [$_A$ Ehiztari-**ak**   ] [$_P$ otso-**a**   ] harrapatu du.
      hunter-ART$_{sg}$.ERG   wolf-ART$_{sg}$(ABS) caught   AUX(have)
      'The hunter has caught a/the wolf.'

   b. [$_S$ Otso-**a**   ] etorri   da.
      wolf-ART$_{sg}$(ABS)   arrived AUX(be)
      'The wolf has arrived.'   [*Laka 1996*]

The progressive aspect has been described as showing a "split", where the language shifts out of its normal ergative alignment and into a non-ergative alignment—here all core arguments take the same form of the determiner, as shown in (3).

(3)   THE BASQUE PROGRESSIVE (NON-ERGATIVE PATTERN)
   a. [$_A$ emakume-**a**   ] [$_P$ ogi-**a**   ] ja-te-n   ari   da.
      woman-ART$_{sg}$(ABS)   bread-ART$_{sg}$(ABS)   eat-NMZ-LOC PROG AUX(be)
      'The woman is eating the bread.'

   b. [$_S$ emakume-**a**   ] dantza-n   ari   da.
      woman-ART$_{sg}$(ABS)   dance-LOC PROG AUX(be)
      'The woman is dancing.'   [*Laka 2006*]

A similar pattern is found in Nakh-Dagestanian languages (see e.g. Forker 2010, and references therein). These languages show a split *within* the imperfective aspect, in a construction known as the "bi-absolutive". In regular transitives, as exemplified by (4a), the subject is marked with a special suffix (*ergative*)—but this suffix is absent from transitive objects and intransitive subjects (*absolutive*). However, in the "bi-absolutive" construction, as exemplified by (4b), even transitive subjects are unmarked (*absolutive*).

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[1]These are also frequently referred to as *tense/aspect/mood* or *TAM* splits. While some languages clearly split along aspectual lines, to the exclusion of tense, to our knowledge there is no clear evidence of a language that splits only along tense lines, though further work is needed to state this conclusively.

[2]Semantics of the predicate can also factor into splits in case and agreement marking; see Tsunoda 1981 for a discussion, and Coon 2010a for a proposal which unifies this type of split with aspectual splits in Chol (Mayan).

(4)   TSEZ (NAKH-DAGESTANIAN)

   a. REGULAR TRANSITIVE
   už-**ā**   čorpa_i   b-iš-xo_i
   boy(I)-**ERG** soup(III) III-eat-PRES
   'The boy is eating soup.'

   b. BI-ABSOLUTIVE
   uži_i   čorpa   b-iš-xosi   Ø-ič-āsi_i   yoł
   boy(I) soup(III) III-eat-PTCP I-stay-PTCP be.PRES
   'The boy is eating soup.'   [*Maria Polinsky, p.c.*]

In both Basque and Nakh-Dagestanian, the *ergative* pattern—special marking for the transitive subject—is found on the **perfective** side of the scale in (1) and the "split" is found somewhere in the **non-perfective** side.

   Notice that we have been referring to the split forms as "non-ergative", rather than as "nominative-accusative"; though these constructions share with nominative-accusative systems the property that transitive and intransitive subjects are treated alike, there are crucially no new markers in the "split" forms (3) or (4b) which could be characterized as *nominative* or *accusative* (a point to which we return, below). Rather, these forms are characterized by the **absence** of ergative marking, perhaps best described as a "neutral" alignment.

2.1.2. *Person/Animacy-based splits*

   If a language exhibits *person/animacy*-based split ergativity, the ergative pattern will always be found to the left of the scale in (5), and the non-ergative pattern to the right:

(5)   PERSON/ANIMACY-BASED SPLIT ERGATIVITY UNIVERSAL ALIGNMENT (SILVERSTEIN 1976)

   $\Longleftarrow$ ERG/ABS   ‖   NOM/ACC $\Longrightarrow$

   inanimates ≫ natural ≫ animates ≫ humans ≫ proper ≫ 3pl ≫ 3sg ≫ 1/2
                forces   *names*

   In the Tibeto-Burman language Kham, for example, *3rd-person* transitive subjects are marked with "*-e*" (*ergative*), while *1st/2nd-person* transitive subjects receive no marking:

(6)   KHAM (TIBETO-BURMAN)

   a. no-**e**   nən-lay poh-na-ke-o.
      he-ERG you-OBJ hit-2P-PERF-3A
      'He hit you.'

   b. nga: nən-lay   nga-poh-ni-ke.
      I   you-OBJ 1A-hit-2P-PERF
      'I hit you.'

   c. nən nga-lay nə-poh-na-ke.
      you I-OBJ   2A-hit-1P-PERF
      'You hit me.'   (Watters 1973, via DeLancey 1981)

   Another example of a person split is found in Halkomelem (Salish), where the split is seen in the forms of the agreement markers on the predicate rather than the forms of the noun-phrases themselves. In Halkomelem, *3rd-person* arguments follow an ergative pattern: transitive subjects trigger the agreement marker "*-es*" (*ergative*), but transitive objects and intransitive subjects do not, as seen in (7).

(7)   HALKOMELEM (SALISH) – ERGATIVE PATTERN

   a. q'ó:y-t-**es**   te Strang te   sqelá:w
      kill-TRANS-3S DET Strang DET beaver
      'Strang killed the beaver.'

b. í:mex   te   Strang
   walking DET Strang
   'Strang is walking.'   (Wiltschko 2006:197–199)

In contrast, *1st/2nd-person* subjects follow a non-ergative pattern: transitive subjects and intransitive subjects trigger the agreement marker "*-tsel*", while transitive objects still trigger no overt agreement marker.

(8)   HALKOMELEM (SALISH) – NON-ERGATIVE PATTERN
   a. máy-t-**tsel**
      help-TRANS-1SG.S
      'I help him.'
   b. yó:ys-**tsel**
      work-1SG.S
      'I work.'   (*idem*)

2.2. Person-conditioned auxiliary-selection

Outside of the domain of ergativity, there is another type of split which tracks a portion of the Silverstein hierarchy in (5). In certain Italo-Romance dialects, we find auxiliary-splits in which *have* is used with NPs to the left of the scale (*3rd-person*), and *be* with those to the right (*1st/2nd person*), as shown for Abruzzese below (D'Alessandro & Roberts 2010:54–55).

(9)   ABRUZZESE
   a. Ji **so'** magnate.   b. Esse **a** magnate.
      I am eaten-SG   he/she has eaten
      'I have eaten.'   'He/she has eaten.'

Our goal is to offer a unified account of the different split phenomena examined to this point.[3]

3. Proposal: Added structure and the disruption of Case

We aim to address the following questions: **(i)** Why should both *non-perfective aspects* and *nominals higher in animacy* result in the suspension of ergative argument-alignment? and **(ii)** What can this tell us about why nominals higher in animacy trigger the auxiliary *be*?[4] Previous authors have proposed functional motivations for the directionality of splits in *split ergativity* systems (e.g. DeLancey 1981; Silverstein 1976; Tsunoda 1981). As far as we can tell, none of these accounts naturally extends to cover the auxiliary-selection splits described above.

One exception is Merchant (2006), whose proposal involves a series of functional projections essentially replicating the Silverstein hierarchy within the functional spine of the (finite) clause. While the syntactic reality of the relevant projections can then serve as the basis for a unified account of both ergativity and auxiliary selection splits (not unlike what we pursue, below), what this approach loses—it seems to us—is the ability to account for the *directionality* of these splits (as discussed in §2.1.1–§2.1.2). Absent the functional motivation, there seems to be no reason why the order of these projections would not be the reverse, predicting splits with the opposite directionality than what is actually observed. It is also not completely clear how this approach would extend to the cases of *aspect*-based split ergativity discussed by Coon (2010b) (whose account we adopt and extend, below).

We propose that non-perfective aspects and nominals higher in animacy, in languages with the relevant splits, involve the **bifurcation of a clause into two distinct Case-assignment domains**. In the domain of ergativity, the ergative pattern is disrupted after such bifurcation, because—in a sense—

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[3]We are by no means the first to attempt to unify these empirical domains; see, for example, D'Alessandro & Roberts 2010:47–58. Space limitations prevent a detailed comparison between the different approaches here.

[4]Note that though we aren't equating *have*-selection with ergativity, we do aim to understand why the same substantive features which trigger an ergative system also trigger *have*.

there is no longer any *transitive subject*; the subject and object in (11) are in two separate case domains (see section 3.3 for a discussion of the actual case-markings that arise when the ergative pattern has been disrupted, as in (11)).

(10) ERGATIVE ALIGNMENT
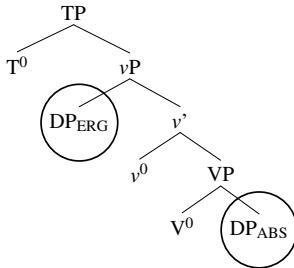
(11) "SPLIT" ALIGNMENT
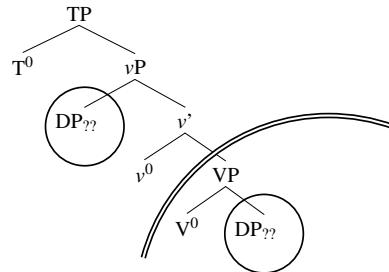
Coon 2010a, building on Laka 2006, proposes an account along the lines of (10–11) as a general account of *aspect*-based split ergativity. The strong form of the hypothesis is that all languages that exhibit so-called "split ergativity" are really ergative throughout, and any "shift" into a non-ergative pattern is epiphenomenal. Here, we extend this proposal to account for *person*-based split-ergativity. Note, however, that we will by no means have demonstrated, by the end of the paper, that all ergative splits (based on *aspect*, *person*, or otherwise) can be accounted for under this approach; rather, we hope to sketch a line of research, which will ultimately require careful investigation into quite a large number of languages.

What we will show is that this approach to *person*-based split ergativity extends naturally to *person*-conditioned auxiliary selection (introduced in §2.2). Given the well-known analysis by Freeze (1992) and Kayne (1993) (*a.o.*), where *have* is the result of incorporation of a particle into an auxiliary that would otherwise surface as *be*, the same kind of clausal bifurcation illustrated above would place the relevant particle in a separate locality domain from *be*—preventing incorporation, and resulting in an invariant *be* form.

3.1. Deriving aspect-based splits

Coon (2010a) argues that the *imperfective* and *progressive* aspects involve added structure, which is absent in the *perfective* (for reasons of space, we cannot reproduce the argument here; the reader is referred to Coon 2010a). A general schema for the *imperfective/progressive* aspects would therefore be as in (12), where "EC" can be either a trace of SUBJDP (if *AspMarker* is a RAISING predicate), or PRO (if *AspMarker* is a CONTROL predicate).

(12)   [SUBJDP$_i$ *AspMarker* [$_\alpha$ EC$_i$ *PredVerb* (OBJDP)]]

Now suppose that the brackets in (12) are boundaries for the calculus of *case*. In Marantz's (1991) system, this amounts to saying that SUBJDP cannot see OBJDP for the purposes of case-competition—the same logic that applies to two DPs separated by a finite clause boundary, for example. In a Probe-Goal case assignment system (Chomsky 2000, 2001), we could simply view *AspMarker* as an embedding predicate, unto itself; if so, the "transitivity" of *AspMarker* will depend only on the category of its complement (α, in (12)), not on the valence of *PredVerb*. In other words, if α is a nominal category, *PredVerb* will be transitive; otherwise, it will be intransitive.

Under either of these approaches, the result is that the case-marking of SUBJDP will not alternate based on the valence of *PredVerb*. This will result in the same marking for the subject when *PredVerb* is transitive as when *PredVerb* is intransitive—which in an otherwise ergative language, is what we would descriptively characterize as "shifting out of the language's 'normal' ergative alignment".

We return to Basque to illustrate more concretely how this system works. Compare once more the Basque transitive forms in the *perfective* (ergative alignment) in (2a) and the *progressive* (non-ergative alignment) in (3a). As noted in §2.1.1, while the pattern in (3) has been described as "Basque switching from an ERG-ABS alignment to a NOM-ACC one", this is not really the case; the argument alignment

exhibited by (3) is what is sometimes called a "neutral" alignment—all three core arguments (S, A, P) receive the same marking.

To account for this pattern, Laka (2006) proposes that the subject in (3a) ("*emakume-a*" 'woman-ART$_{sg}$(ABS)') is an argument of the aspectual predicate "*ari*" (glossed 'PROG'). The stem "*ja-te*" ('eating'), which we might think of as the main "semantic" predicate, or the predicate that brings in the open-class/encyclopedic event predication, is *not* the **syntactic** (i.e. case-assigning) predicate. Laka provides additional arguments, which we do not review here, that the progressive "*ari*" behaves as a main verb, rather than an auxiliary in these split constructions.

As for "*ari*" itself, note that it is not *transitive*: it has a subject, but its complement is not a DP; rather, it is an oblique phrase, headed by the locative adposition "-*n*". Under this analysis, the sentences in (3a) and (3b) would be bracketed as "*emakume-a [ogi-a ja-te-n] ari da*" and "*emakume-a [dantza-n] ari da*", respectively.

Under a *case-competition* approach, the complement of the aspectual predicate "*ari*" is its own separate *case domain*. This means that a DP in the embedded domain is not a viable *case-competitor* for the SUBJDP, and thus no ergative case is assigned. Under a Probe-Goal case approach, just like other [SUBJ [V PP]] verbs in Basque, the aspectual predicate "*ari*" is not transitive. Thus it does not take the transitive, ERG-assigning variant of v^0, and ergative case is again absent.

Regardless of the specific theory of case-assignment adopted, then, the case-marking on SUBJDP is **expected** to be ABS. The locative adposition ("-*n*") has effectively bifurcated the clause into two separate *case-domains*:

(13)
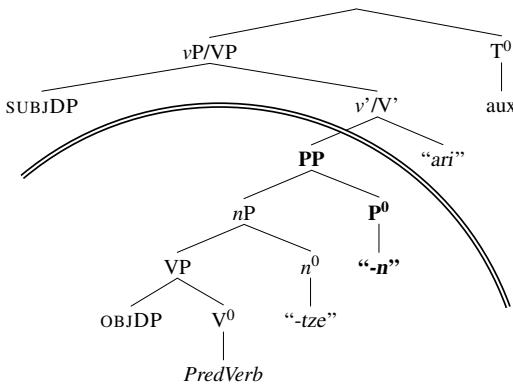
3.2. Deriving person-based splits

As discussed in §2.1.2, *aspect*-based splits are not the only kind of "split ergativity" that one finds. Languages like Halkomelem Salish show a split based on person features of the clausal arguments. What we see with *person*-based split ergativity mirrors what we saw with *aspect*-based split ergativity: we observe a seemingly fixed hierarchy, with a variable point of split (see (5), above). Crucially, just as in the aspectual splits above, *ergative* and *non-ergative* are each aligned to one side of the hierarchy, in a way that is cross-linguistically stable.

Our proposal is that these similarities arise because the mechanism underlying both kinds of splits (*aspect*-based and *person*-based) is the same—in particular, the added structure associated with one end of the hierarchy disrupts the case calculus. Recall from earlier in this section, that it is the seemingly "non-ergative" alignment that correlates with (comes from, actually) additional structure. We must then ask the following: What is it about *1st/2nd-person* arguments that would entail additional structure?

Here we draw on converging work from several domains arguing that the appearance of a *1st/2nd-person* argument must be licensed by an appropriate functional projection in the clause. Consider, for example, the *Person Case Constraint* (*PCC*). As a first approximation, the PCC is a prohibition against a *1st/2nd-person* direct object in the presence of an indirect object (roughly, "direct objects of ditransitives must be *3rd-person*"). But if one looks at accounts of the PCC, one finds that what they really rule out is *1st/2nd-person* **object agreement** or *1st/2nd-person* **object clitics**. Left as is, this would (falsely) predict

that a *1st/2nd-person* strong pronoun in direct object position of a ditransitive would be fine, if coupled with a *3rd-person* direct-object clitic/agreement-morpheme.

As a result, accounts of the PCC are typically supplemented with a stipulation requiring *1st/2nd-person* pronouns to be *licensed*; as an example: "The system as it stands will automatically derive PCC effects with the addition of the following *Person Licensing Condition* (PLC) axiom: An interpretable 1st/2nd person feature must be licensed by entering into an Agree relation with a functional category" (Béjar & Rezac 2003:53, emphasis original).[5]

The presence of a *1st/2nd-person* pronoun in the clause thus necessitates the presence of a corresponding functional projection along the clausal spine. Suppose this functional projection—call it *ParticipantP*—disrupts the case calculus, in a manner similar to the additional structure involved in the Basque progressive (§3.1). The result would be that in a language that was normally ergative, the presence of a *1st/2nd-person* pronoun would result in a "shift" out of the normal ergative pattern in exactly the same way outlined above for *aspect*-based splits. As before, this clausal bifurcation would result in the absence of ergative marking, regardless of whether a *case-competition* or Probe-Goal system is adopted.
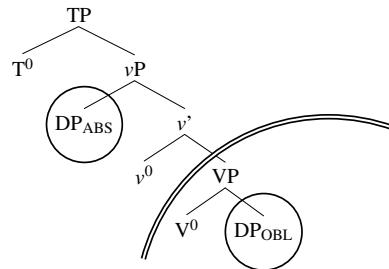
(14)
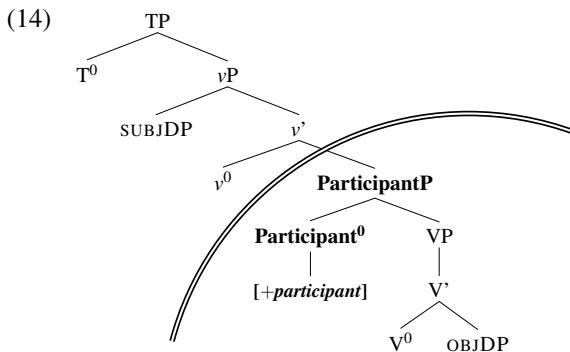
3.3. A note on ABS=DEF and ABS=NOM, and emergent "accusative"

So far, we have argued that the added structure associated with certain *aspects* (§3.1) or certain *persons* (§3.2) can result in a disruption of the regular (ergative) pattern of the language. There are at least two possible outcomes of this disruption—illustrated in (15) and (16):

(15) "SPLIT" ALIGNMENT I
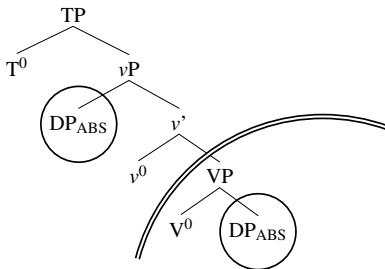
(16) "SPLIT" ALIGNMENT II

The tree in (15) is what we expect in a language where absolutive is the default case (Legate's 2008 "ABS=DEF" languages). We have observed this pattern—all core arguments are marked *absolutive* (a "neutral" alignment)—in Basque and in Nakh-Dagestanian in §2.1.1. We also find splits which neutralize the marking of core arguments in Hindi, Tongan, Avar, and Yukulta (Tsunoda 1981). The research question thus becomes: Can these languages be shown to be ABS=DEF? Though further work is required here, initial surveys seem promising.

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[5]See Nichols 2001 for an argument that person/animacy hierarchy effects arise as the result of entering into agreement relations with a functional projection, rather than direct comparison among the relevant argument DPs.

In a language where absolute Case is assigned by T^0 (Legate's 2008 "ABS=NOM" languages), on the other hand, we expect objects to require a different mechanism for case assignment if the clause is bifurcated—since T^0 is no longer in the same case domain as the object. While in effect this mechanism could be an oblique case, or some form of "generalized *of*-insertion", it would not be surprising if it were descriptively labeled *accusative* (since it would be restricted to the Patients of transitives). We find such patterns (ABS subject, OBL object) in split-ergative languages like Warrungu, Djaru, Kalkalungu, Eskimo, Kurmanji, and Adyghe (Tsunoda 1981:422). Can these languages be shown to be ABS=NOM? We leave this as a question for future work.

Finally, note that there is no reason why clausal *bifurcation*—of the sort examined in this section—would be restricted to ergative languages. Crucially, however, in a NOM-ACC language, such bifurcation would not alter the argument alignment—since both transitive and intransitive subjects receive the same marking in the first place (*nominative*). Such bifurcation would thus go unnoticed, at least as far as case-marking is concerned.

3.4. Deriving person-conditioned auxiliary selection

Perhaps the most well-known approach to the *have/be* alternation is that "*have*" comes about as the result of *synthesis* or *incorporation* of another particle in the clause into "*be*" (Benveniste 1966, 1971; Freeze 1992; Kayne 1993). It is well-established that processes such as *incorporation* are disrupted by the presence of a functional projection in between the source and target position. Thus, N can incorporate into V in a [V [NP N]] configuration; but not in a [V [DP D [NP N]]] configuration (e.g. Baker 1988).

We propose that the presence of a boundary-inducing ParticipantP projection in the clause will (at least given certain assumptions regarding the relevant clause structure) disrupt incorporation of the relevant element into "*be*":

(17)
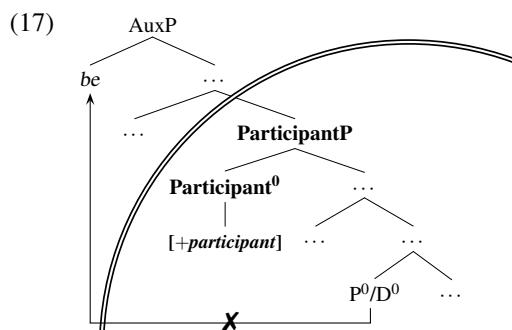
On this approach, *person*-conditioned auxiliary alternation involves a "disruption", of the kind shown in (17). This idea receives support from the existence of Central/Southern-Italian dialects where—unlike in Abruzzese—*3rd-person* subjects trigger the familiar transitivity-based *have/be* alternation, but *1st/2nd-person* subjects still give rise to invariant *be*: Colledimacine, Torricella Peligna, Borgorose-Spedigno, Amandola, Ortezzano, and Tufillo (D'Alessandro & Roberts 2010, and references therein). Given our proposal, it is possible that when ParticipantP is absent (or projects no locality boundary)—i.e., in the absence of *1st/2nd-person*—incorporation into *be* will still be subject to other conditions, e.g. the transitivity-based alternation, familiar from Standard Italian. Crucially, however, the presence of a boundary-inducing ParticipantP—i.e., in the presence of *1st/2nd-person*—will disrupt any such alternation, resulting in a non-alternating auxiliary form in the presence of *1st/2nd-person*, exactly as attested in these dialects.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that (at least some) so-called *split ergative* languages are, in fact, ergative throughout. What seems like a "shift" out of ergative alignment is the result of added structure, which *bifurcates* the clause into two separate case-assignment domains. Such added structure can come from: **(i)** a particular *aspectual* configuration, where the locative structure involved in realizing *progressive* and/or *imperfective* aspects can introduce a locality boundary (following Coon 2010a); or

(ii) from a particular *person* configuration, where the functional structure needed to license *1st/2nd-person* DPs (following Béjar & Rezac 2003, 2009, *a.o.*) can introduce a locality boundary.

Finally, given the Freeze-Kayne approach to the *have/be* alternation, a locality boundary of this sort would also disrupt incorporation of the relevant clausal particle into *be*, resulting in the neutralization of the *have/be* alternation in the presence of *1st/2nd-person*. We have thus adapted Coon's (2010a) account of *aspect*-based split ergativity in a way that not only accounts for *person*-based split ergativity, but also extends naturally to the seemingly distinct empirical domain of *person*-conditioned auxiliary selection.

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