

(Un)ergativity and the Split DP Hypothesis

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I discuss the argument structure of Niuean, a VSO Polynesian language, with a focus on its ergative case system, its radical pro-drop, and its particle-based isolating morpho-syntax. I argue first, that its ergative case system arises trivially because unergative subjects (along with other external arguments with reduced agency) merge lower than transitive subjects, which are peripheral applicative arguments (cf. Kim 2011, vs. Chomsky 1995). Second, through exploring the interaction of case, null and overt arguments, and verbal particles, I argue that Niuean supports a version of the Split DP Hypothesis (e.g. Sportiche 1999, Basilico 1998, et al) in which there are both N-level vP-internal and D-level vP-external argument positions, creating interesting parallels between isolating languages and polysynthetic Pronominal Argument languages (Jelinek 1984, Baker 1995, cf. Bowers 2010, Aranovich 2013).