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Split-marking in Semelai

Semelai (Austroasiatic: Mon-Khmer: Aslian) is a morphologically ergative language which exhibits a peculiar semantically motivated split in its case marking system. The basis of the split, which gives rise to two marking possibilities for intransitive verbs, is to indicate involuntary compulsion resulting from external causation.

In the prototypical transitive clause in Semelai the core grammatical relation A is marked by a system of pronominal proclitics on the verb, and a proclitic *la=* 'A' on the external post-verbal NP. The grammatical relation O, which is not cross-referenced on the verb, may be optionally encoded by differential marking with the proclitic *hn=* 'O' on the NP. In the prototypical intransitive clause the S, like O, is not cross-referenced on the verb, and nor is the NP coded, except for third person pronominal forms which have special 'S'-forms fused with the enclitic = *hn*, e.g., *kəhn* '3S'.

The split in marking occurs with a subset of intransitive verbs expressing human activity, e.g., *jtɛk* 'to sleep', and verbs of emotion, e.g., *ŋren* 'to be angry', and occurs when the activity or state is instigated by an external source. Curiously, the S of the intransitive clause is encoded as if it were a prototypical A – cross-referenced by an ergative proclitic on the verb, and the external NP host to the proclitic *la=* 'A' – even though the clause is still monovalent and the 'A' displays low agentivity,.

Cross-linguistically, contextually determined split-marking typically exhibits a correlation with the semantics of the situation: the grammatical marking of S as an A will reflect an increase in control or agentivity. The situation described for Semelai is counter to expectation. This paper will examine in detail this previously unattested and highly unusual case of split-marking.