

Split ergativity isn't always epiphenomenal*

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1. Introduction

Many Mayan languages display split ergativity: ergative-absolutive (ERG-ABS) alignment is observed in some environments, whereas nominative-accusative (NOM-ACC) alignment is observed in others. Most splits in the family are aspect-based (Zavala Maldonado 2017), with the exception of Mocho', which displays a person-based split (Pérez González 2021). The *Standard Analysis* treats splits as *epiphenomenal*: specifically, aspect-based splits are the result of an aspectual predicate selecting an embedded possessed nominalization whose person marker invariably indexes the possessor (Larsen and Norman 1979; see Coon 2013 and references). Such an analysis derives splits via independently supported grammatical means and no specific machinery is needed to explain alignment alternations, which are thus merely surface-apparent (Coon and Preminger 2017).

Here, we establish that the San Sebastián Coatán (SSC) dialect of Chuj displays a specific split conditioned by two factors: aspect *and* person. We argue that this unique pattern within Mayan cannot be derived via the Standard Analysis. We propose thus that an aspectual head bearing two probes relativized to [PARTICIPANT: __] underlies the observed split. As a consequence, split ergativity can't *always* be epiphenomenal (contra Coon and Preminger 2017).

Section 2 provides background on Chuj. Section 3 lays out an alignment split in the language that is solely aspect-governed, detailing how it can be derived via the Standard Analysis (Coon and Royer 2020). Section 4 offers new data on a split in SSC that is specific to the prospective aspect and is person-sensitive. We highlight why such an alignment alternation cannot be derived via the Standard Analysis. We lay out our analysis in section 5 and discuss several predictions, which are borne out. Section 6 concludes.

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We follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules, with Mayan specific additions: A: Set A; AF: agent focus; B: Set B; IV: intransitive status suffix; PROSP: prospective aspect; SUB: subordinate; TV: transitive status suffix.

2. Background on Chuj

Chuj belongs to the Q'anjob'alan sub-branch of Mayan languages. It is primarily spoken in Guatemala and Mexico. According to recent censuses, there are approximately 95,000 people of Chuj ethnicity in those countries (Royer et al. 2025). Chuj is subdivided into two main dialects—San Mateo Ixtatán (SMI) and San Sebastián Coatán (SSC)—with differences in phonology and morphosyntax (Maxwell 1982, Royer et al. 2025). As we focus on SSC, we exclusively present data from that dialect. Our empirical generalizations stem from elicitation data, using a hypothesis-driven methodology (e.g., Matthewson 2004).

SSC, like all Mayan languages, displays ergative-absolutive (ERG-ABS) alignment, detectable via the morphemes used to index arguments on the verb. We adopt Mayanist terminology: “Set A” morphemes tend to index ergative arguments on the verb stem, whereas “Set B” morphemes index absolutive arguments. Set A and Set B paradigms are in (1). Note that /a/ on second person Set A morphemes coalesces as /e/ before roots starting with /i/, and as /u/ before those starting with /o/ (see (16a) and Royer et al. 2025, §3.1.1.).

(1) *SSC: Set A and Set B morphemes in San Sebastián Coatán Chuj*

		1SG	2SG	3SG	1PL	2PL	3PL
Set A	___C	(h)in-	(h)a-	s-	ki-	(h)e-	s-
	___V	w-	h-	y-	k-	(h)ey-	y-
Set B		(h)in-	(h)ach	Ø	(h)onh	(h)ex	Ø

The language's ERG-ABS alignment is illustrated in (2-3), with verbs in the perfective and imperfective aspects. Using Dixon's (1979) terms, Set A indexes the “A” argument (transitive subject), while Set B indexes “S” (intransitive subject) and “O” (direct object). Though not illustrated here due to space limitations, this alignment holds across all persons.

(2) ERG-ABS in perfective clauses

- a. X-Ø-k-il-a'.
PFV-B3-A1PL-see-TV
'We saw it.' A=A1PL
- b. X-onh-ok'-i.
PFV-B1PL-cry-IV
'We cried.' S=B1PL
- c. X-onh-y-il-a'.
PFV-B1PL-A3-see-TV
'She/he saw us.' O=B1PL

(3) ERG-ABS in imperfective clauses

- a. Tz-Ø-k-il-a'.
IPFV-B3-A1PL-see-TV
'We see it.' A=A1PL
- b. Tz-onh-ok'-i.
IPFV-B1PL-cry-IV
'We cry.' S=B1PL
- c. Tz-onh-y-il-a'.
IPFV-B1PL-A3-see-TV
'She/he sees us.' O=B1PL

There exists a syncretism that will be crucial for our discussion. As shown in (4-5), Set A morphemes also index a possessor (i.e., Set A indexes genitive arguments).

(4) no ki-tz'i'

CLF A1PL-dog
'our dog' GEN=A1PL

(5) no s-tz'i' win Xapin

CLF A3-dog CLF Xapin
'Xapin's dog' GEN=A3

3. The progressive “split” in Chuj and the Standard Analysis

SSC displays an aspect-based split in the progressive aspect (just like SMI; Coon and Carolan 2017; Coon and Royer 2020). This split is insensitive to ϕ -feature specification:

(6) *The progressive split in Chuj (SMI and SSC)*

In the progressive aspect, A and S arguments are indexed with Set A.

Relevant examples are observed below, which should be contrasted with (2-3). Notice how the intransitive subject (S) is indexed here with Set A, instead of Set B. SSC clauses in the progressive aspect thus show nominative-accusative (NOM-ACC) alignment: A and S are indexed identically, to the exclusion of O.

(7) NOM-ACC in progressive clauses	(8) NOM-ACC in progressive clauses
a. Wan Ø-k-il-n-i. PROG B3-A1PL-see-SUB-IV 'We're seeing it.' A=A1PL	a. Wan w-ok'-i. PROG A1SG-cry-IV 'I'm crying.' S=A1SG
b. Wan k-ok'-i. PROG A1PL-cry-IV 'We're crying.' S=A1PL	b. Wan h-ok'-i. PROG A1SG-cry-IV 'You're crying' S=A2SG
c. Wan honh-y-il-n-i. PROG B1PL-A3-see-SUB-IV 'He/she is seeing us.' O=B1PL	c. Wan y-ok'-i. PROG A3-cry-IV 'He/she is crying.' S=A3

As discussed by Zavala Maldonado (2017), work on different Mayan languages agrees broadly that the kind of “split” pattern exemplified via (7-8) is only surface-apparent. In a nutshell, the Standard Analysis proposes that the aspect marker—here, the progressive morpheme *wan*—is a nonverbal predicate that takes a subordinated possessed nominalization as its internal argument. This analysis is schematized in (9), for the example in (7b).

(9) [PredP wan _{PROG} [PossP k-Set A-crying pro _{1PL}]	(structure for (7b))
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In other words, (7b) literally translates as ‘Our crying is happening’: (i) the progressive morpheme is a nonverbal predicate, (ii) the verb is part of a nominalized, subordinate clause (notice the morpheme *-n* “-SUB” on transitive verbs in (7); see Coon and Royer 2020), and (iii) Set A indexes the possessor of the nominalized clause. Since genitive and ergative indexing morphemes are syncretic (recall (4-5)), the “split” is an epiphenomenon: a possessor is involved in (7-8), so Set A (qua genitive) is expected. The NOM-ACC alignment is thus derived. As emphasized by Coon and Preminger (2017), this kind of analysis is empirically supported and desirable on a theoretical level, since no specific machinery is needed to derive the apparent change in alignment from baseline ERG-ABS to NOM-ACC.

Before we move on to a second split found only in SSC, we highlight one piece of evidence related to negation which favors the Standard Analysis for (6). Consider first how

verbal predicates in the perfective (10) and imperfective aspects (11) are negated—a single morpheme *ma* must precede the verb stem:

- (10) **Ma** x-onh-ok'-i.
NEG PFV-B1PL-cry-IV
'We did not cry.'

- (11) **Ma** tz-onh-ok'-i.
NEG IPFV-B1PL-cry-IV
'We do not cry.'

A different exponence for negation arises with nonverbal predicates. To exemplify using the nonverbal predicate *kuywjum* 'teacher' in (12), observe how two morphemes frame the predicate here: *manh* must appear to the left of the predicate and the irrealis clitic *=ok* must appear to its right. Crucially, Coon and Carolan (2017) and Coon and Royer (2020) show that negated progressive clauses in SMI expone negation in the same way. This is true for SSC as well (13):

- (12) **Manh** kuywjum=**ok** ix.
NEG teacher=IRR she
'She is not a teacher.'

- (13) **Manh** wan=**ok** k-ok'-i.
NEG PROG=IRR A1PL-cry-IV
'We're not crying.'

To be specific, (13) shows that the negative morphemes framing nonverbal predicates also frame *wan*. This supports the Standard Analysis: in contrast with the other aspect morphemes in (10-11), *wan* patterns morphosyntactically as a nonverbal predicate.¹

4. A unique split in SSC Chuj conditioned by aspect and person

We now turn to a second alignment split in SSC, which to our knowledge is unique within the Mayan language family. The split arises in the prospective aspect only and is crucially sensitive to the ϕ -feature specification of the arguments controlling agreement:²

- (14) *The prospective split in Chuj (SSC only)*
- First and second persons (i.e., bearers of [PART]) show NOM-ACC alignment: A and S are indexed with Set A, whereas O is indexed with Set B.
 - Third person shows ERG-ABS alignment: A is indexed with Set A, whereas S and O are indexed with Set B.

We begin with examples illustrating the split with participant arguments (14a). As shown in (15), a [PART]-bearing subject (either A or S) gets indexed with Set A in a clause inflected with prospective aspect. On the other hand, a [PART]-bearing O is indexed with Set B. This is thus NOM-ACC alignment—A and S pattern alike to the exclusion of O:

¹One might wonder if the CVC shape of the progressive aspect morpheme could be to blame for the negation strategy that is used. We do not believe that this hypothesis is viable. As discussed in section 4, while the prospective morpheme *oj* (pronounced [ʔoχ]) is also CVC in shape, the single-morpheme negation strategy is employed in prospective clauses (patterning thus with perfective and imperfective clauses).

²We follow Carolan (2015) in using the label "prospective", whereas others use "future" (e.g., Maxwell 1982). The SSC pattern we describe is detectable in prior works (García Pablo and Domingo Pascual 2007: 97-98; Maxwell 1982: 129; Royer et al. 2025), but had not been foregrounded. This paper is the first to signal explicitly the pattern's relevance to any theory of how alignment splits should be derived.

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- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>(15) NOM-ACC <i>in prospective with 1PL</i></p> <p>a. Oj-Ø-k-il-a'.
PROSP-B3-A1PL-see-TV
'We'll see him/her.' A=A1PL</p> <p>b. Oj-k-ok'-i.
PROSP-A1PL-cry-IV
'We'll cry.' S=A1PL</p> <p>c. Oj-onh-y-il-a'.
PROSP-B1PL-A3-see-TV
'She/he'll see us.' O=B1PL</p> | <p>(16) NOM-ACC <i>in prospective with 2SG</i></p> <p>a. Oj-Ø-el-a'.
PROSP-B3-A2SG-see-TV
'You'll see him/her.' A=A2SG</p> <p>b. Oj-h-ok'-i.
PROSP-A2SG-cry-IV
'You'll cry.' S=A2SG</p> <p>c. Oj-ach-y-il-a'.
PROSP-B2SG-A3-see-TV
'She/he'll see you.' O=B2SG</p> |
|---|--|

The above prospective clauses show NOM-ACC alignment and should be contrasted with perfective (2) and imperfective (3) clauses (which show ERG-ABS alignment). Thus, prospective clauses pattern alike with progressive clauses (7) in displaying NOM-ACC alignment.

However, there is more to this split. In contrast to (6), alignment in the prospective is *sensitive to person specification* (14b). Set A indexes intransitive subjects that bear [PART] (17a,b), but Set B indexes third person intransitive subjects (17c). The data below are the only well-formed versions and should be contrasted with (8). Moreover, observe crucially that S and O pattern alike regarding third person (17c, 15a), to the exclusion of A (15c).

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| (17) PERSON-based split in the prospective aspect in SSC | | | |
| <p>a. Oj-w-ok'-i.
PROSP-A1SG-cry-IV
'I'll cry.' S=A1SG</p> <p>b. Oj-h-ok'-i.
PROSP-A2SG-cry-IV
'You'll cry.' S=A2SG</p> | <p>c. Oj-Ø-ok'=ok.
PROSP-B3-cry=IRR
'She/he'll cry.' S=B3</p> | | |

Before moving on, we highlight two other differences between progressive and prospective clauses that will be critical for our analysis. First, transitive sentences in the prospective lack the subordination morpheme *-n* found in progressive clauses in (7-8). This suggests that prospective clauses do not involve subordination. Second, verbs bearing prospective aspect get negated like verbal predicates (10-11). Again, this is unlike progressive clauses (13) and suggests that the prospective morpheme cannot be treated as a nonverbal predicate:

- (18) **Ma** oj-k-ok'-i.
NEG PROSP-A1PL-cry-IV
'We will not cry.'

In sum, SSC displays a unique alignment split that is governed by aspect and person. While the Standard Analysis derives the SSC progressive split discussed in section 3, it cannot be extended to the novel split in the prospective. Attempting such an extension would require several unwarranted stipulations. First, given the absence of subordinating *-n* on transitive verbs in the prospective, we would need to stipulate that embedded nominalizations ex-

ceptionally lack this morpheme only when the embedding predicate is *oj*. One could also stipulate that the prospective morpheme *oj* is a nonverbal predicate only when the S bears [PART], but is otherwise an aspectual morpheme. However, this is an unjustified proposal that would moreover be difficult to encode. Finally, negation in prospective clauses patterns with verbal predicates (10-11). We conclude that the prospective split cannot be an epiphenomenon of subordination.

Before turning to our analysis in section 5, let us discuss how the SSC split in the prospective should encourage a reconsideration of how alignment splits from ERG-ABS to NOM-ACC tend to pattern cross-linguistically. Coon (2013: Ch. 5) discusses a robust implicational hierarchy regarding aspect-based splits: progressive aspect displays a split most frequently, followed by imperfective aspect. Perfective, however, never displays a split. What is interesting about the SSC data is that (i) *prospective* aspect currently falls outside the scope of any implicational hierarchy and (ii) *person-sensitivity* is also implicated. We leave for the future how prospective aspect fits within cross-linguistic generalizations. Also, while we cannot do an exhaustive survey to determine how rare a split like (14) is outside of Mayan, one observation suffices to trigger further work. Spreng (2019) surveys the factors conditioning split alignment in North American languages and notices the following: if splits are conditioned by more than one parameter, these parameters are of similar nature—e.g., a split conditioned by person (a *nominal* feature) may also be sensitive to definiteness or full DP status. However, Spreng does not mention any split such as SSC's, where two parameters that are orthogonal to each other (aspect and person) come into play.

5. Analysis

Since extending the Standard Analysis is untenable, we are left with no other option than to blame the prospective split on the featural make-up of the probes associated with that specific aspect. In this way, our proposal revives analyses such as Ura's (2006), which took aspectual splits to be underpinned by differences in the featural make-up of heads associated with different aspects (for Ura, encoded in *v*; see Coon 2013: 223 for commentary). We assume an Agree-based framework to derive the relation between arguments and the morphemes indexing them on the verb. Building on previous work, we assume that ERG-ABS alignment is derived in perfective and imperfective clauses via the baseline assumptions in (19). Assuming that probes can be relativized (Béjar 2003), we propose (20) as well:

- (19) *Analytical assumptions (see Coon 2019 and references)*
- a. SSC is “high-ABS”: O raises above A
 - b. There is a Set A-generating probe on transitive *v* that is not relativized [*u*φ:___]
 - c. Set B is generated by an aspectual head above *v*P
- (20) *Analytical proposal*
- a. Probes on Set B-generating aspectual heads are relativized for [*u*PART:___]
 - b. If probing by a Set B-generating head fails, then no morpheme is expounded, leading to a “Set B” Ø morpheme. *f*you'

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The trees for transitive (21) and intransitive (22) perfective clauses illustrate. In (21), the Set A ϕ -probe on v_{TV} Agrees with the subject in its specifier, generating the Set A morpheme. The PART-probe on the perfective aspect head then Agrees with the raised object, generating Set B. Example (22) shows an intransitive verb. Here, the probe attempts to find a goal. Since the subject is third person, Agree fails and no morpheme is exponed.

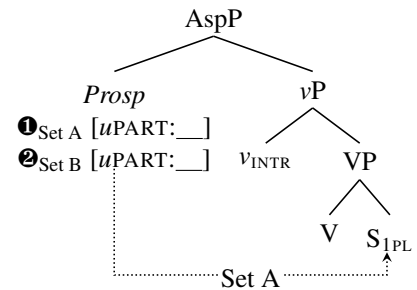
- (21) a. X-onh-y-il-a'.
PFV-B 1PL-A 3-see-TV
'He/she saw us.'
- b.
-
- (22) a. X-Ø-ok'-i.
PFV-B 3-cry-IV
'He/she cried.'
- b.
-

With this in mind, we turn to our proposed source for the aspect/person-based split:

- (23) *The source of the aspect/person split in the prospective*
Prosp bears an additional Set-A generating probe relativized for [uPART: __], which probes before the Set-B probe found on all aspect heads.

We thus derive the appearance of Set A indexing S: the probe on the prospective head will find the S and generate a Set A morpheme. Moreover, since the probe on *Prosp* is relativized to [PART], we rule out third person intransitive subjects from being indexed with Set A.³

- (24) Oj-k-ok'-i.
PROSP-A 1PL-cry-IV
'We'll cry.'



³The appearance of null Set B on the relevant example (17c) is again explained by the failure of the Set B probe. Notice as well that (17c) is the only configuration in the prospective where “irrealis” = *ok* surfaces, instead of the intransitive status suffix *-i* (see 17a-b). We propose that the exponence of =*ok* in that configuration alone derives from failed probing by the *Set A* probe on *Prosp*: i.e., this is the single structural context in which that particular probe fails to find a goal. We leave for future work an explanation into why the intransitive status suffix does not surface as well.

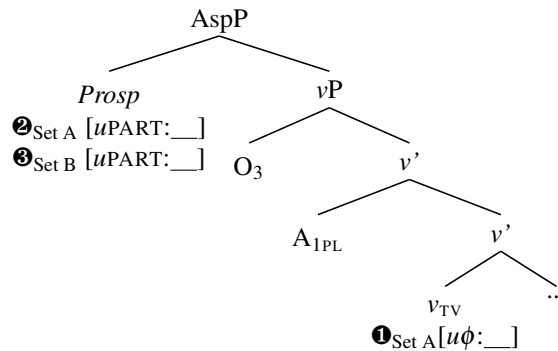
Given this setup, several ill-formed patterns in the prospective must be addressed. We start with intransitives. First, if there are two probes on *Prosp*, one Set A probe and one Set B probe, the analysis might predict that there could be two morphemes on the verb stem indexing the *same* subject. As (25b) shows, however, this type of data is ill-formed. Notice, though, that the ban on configurations like the one in (25b) can be recast as an independently attested ban on co-occurring Set A/B forms with identical (π) marking (regardless of number). Indeed, as shown in (25c), such combinations of Set A and Set B markers are ill-formed irrespective of aspect. A general ban such as (25a) is thus observed in SSC.

- (25) a. *Ban on double π marking in SSC*
 Set A and Set B cannot index identical π -features
- b. * *Oj-onh-k-ok'-i.*
 PROSP-B1PL-A1PL-cry-IV
Intended: 'We'll cry.'
- c. * *X-onh-w-il ha k'en nen.*
 PFV-B1PL-A1SG-see in CLF mirror
Intended: 'I saw us in the mirror.' (even with plausible context provided)

Another issue is why there is no version of (24) **Oj-onh-ok'-i*, where Set B surfaces instead of Set A. This follows from our proposal: the Set A probe searches first (23) and we assume that the insertion of a Set A morpheme preempts the insertion of a Set B one.

Let us now turn to transitive verbs. Given that the *Prosp* head will always bear a Set A probe, regardless of the verb's transitivity (see tree below), our analysis might predict that two Set A morphemes could occur on the same stem, with one Set A morpheme indexing the transitive subject and another Set A morpheme indexing the object. This is not possible, as shown by (26), which should be compared with the well-formed (15a).

- (26) * *Oj-Ø-s-k-il-a'.*
 PROSP-B3-A3-A1PL-see-TV
Intended: 'We'll see him/her.'



We suggest that a surface filter on two Set-A morphemes on the same stem could be at play in SSC (i.e., *A-A-V). This seems to be backed by the fact that other Mayan languages do not have this filter and exhibit so-called *super-extended* ergativity (see Elkins et al. 2025, though their analysis attributes the source of double Set A marking to other factors).

Finally, we conclude with a prediction. If the aspectual field in a prospective configuration underlies the split (23), we predict that indexing on the verb should be insensitive

to voice specification. As shown below, this is borne out. Both an antipassive S bearing [PART] (27) and a passive S bearing [PART] (28) are indexed via Set A. Furthermore, Set A arises in the *agent focus* configuration when an argument bears [PART] in a prospective clause (29); compare with a perfective clause (30), where Set B arises:⁴

- | | |
|---|--|
| (27) Oj- a -man- wj -i.
PROSP-A 2 SG-buy-ANTIP-IV
'You will go buying.' | (28) Oj- w -il- chj yuj ix.
PROSP-A 1 SG-see-PASS by her
'I'll be seen by her.' |
| (29) Mach oj- w -il- n -i?
who PROSP-A 1 SG-see-AF-IV
'Who will see me?' | (30) Mach x- in -il- n -i?
who PFV-B 1 SG-see-AF-IV
'Who saw me?' |

6. Conclusion

SSC demonstrates that alignment splits can have multiple sources, even within one grammar: whereas the language's progressive split (6) can be derived straightforwardly as an epiphenomenon of subordination (the Standard Analysis), its prospective split—conditioned by both aspect and person (14)—necessitates a different analysis. Thus, not all splits where aspect plays a role are epiphenomenal (contra Coon and Preminger 2017).⁵ We proposed that an aspect-specific configuration of probes underlies the prospective split (23), discussing predictions that are borne out, as well as challenges that can nevertheless be addressed.⁶ We hope that our work prompts a reconsideration of cross-linguistic tendencies regarding the factors that may simultaneously condition an alignment split.

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⁴See Coon et al. 2021 and references for agent focus across Mayan. We believe that SSC is the only dialect of any Mayan language where Set A arises in an agent focus clause, an issue worthy of further analysis.

⁵We note that Poqom (K'ichean) exhibits a person-*insensitive* split in its “potential” (i.e., prospective) aspect (Santos Nicolás and Benito Pérez 1998: 93)—this pattern thus seems amenable to the Standard Analysis. We leave for the future exploring how prospective aspect patterns in the entire Mayan family.

⁶If one assumed a strict one-probe per head framework, an alternative implementation of our analysis could posit two aspectual layers in the prospective configuration only, each bearing one probe. The lower head would probe first and generate Set A; the higher head would probe second and generate Set B.

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