

Agents in focus: “Optional” ergativity in Jaminjung and information structure

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The influence of information structure on differential agent marking has received a fair amount of attention in recent years. Notions that have been invoked to account for the presence of ergative marking include “focus” and “new information” (Fauconnier & Verstraete 2014; Hyslop 2010: 13-17; Malchukov 2008; Suter 2010; e.g. Tournadre 1991), “contrast” (Chelliah 2009; Jacques 2010; Tournadre 1991), “topic/actor switch” (Bond et al. 2013; Lidz 2011), and “prominence” or “(contrastive) emphasis” (LaPolla & Huang 2008; Meakins 2009: 78; 2011: 228–236; Tournadre 1991, 1995). The notion of “prominence” and a similar notion of “(argument) strength” is given an even wider interpretation – variably encompassing a high rank on the animacy hierarchy and discourse topicality as well as perfectivity of the clause and volitionality of the agent referent – in some recent works addressing differential argument marking from an optimality-theoretic perspective (Aissen 1999; De Hoop & Malchukov 2007; Legendre et al. 1993: 684–688). As De Hoop and de Swart (2009: 14) point out, employing such a broad notion of prominence leads to the somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion that some languages appear to have a preference for agents high in prominence but others for agents low in prominence to be case-marked. The use of contradictory or overly general notions of information structure is of course partly related to the difficulty of identifying information structure categories in spoken corpora of lesser studied languages.

This paper reports on a discourse study of the factors influencing overt case marking of agents in Jaminjung, a Western Mirndi language of northern Australia, based on prosodic and positional criteria for the identification of topical constituents and elements in broad and narrow focus (Simard 2010, 2014). This reveals a strong tendency for focal agents to be case-marked, which intriguingly also manifests itself in the existence of an infrequent second, “focal” ergative marker (taking the form of the Ablative case) which mainly occurs in the context of argument focus.

However, information structure interacts with additional factors, corresponding to those relevant for consistently split ergative systems (cf. McGregor 2010: 1616): speech act participant status and animacy of the agent, tense/aspect, and the degree of effectiveness of the event on an undergoer. It will be argued (building on McGregor 1992) that at a more general level, all of these factors conspire to ensure that less expected agents are marked whereas – by the principle of economy – expected agents can remain unmarked. For example, the expectation for agents to be topics will result in a near-categorical agent-marking in focus position. However, the expectation for speech act participants to be agents makes ergative-marking redundant even for focused agents, while the expectation for inanimates to be non-agents result in categorical ergative marking of inanimates. Economy can also override focal agent marking in the case of an event that is low in effectiveness, and in parenthetical speech framing constructions. The findings demonstrate the usefulness of more fine-grained information structure categories, as opposed to a generalised notion of “argument strength”, in research on differential agent marking.

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