

## **Competing motivations: Animacy, information structure, and other factors influencing differential agent marking in Jaminjung**

In recent work on differential case marking, the notion of “prominence” and a similar notion of “(argument) strength” are employed as rather general notions, variably encompassing a high rank on the animacy hierarchy and discourse topicality, perfectivity of the clause and volitionality of the agent referent (Legendre et al. 1993: 684–688; Aissen 1999; De Hoop and Malchukov 2007). As De Hoop and de Swart (2009: 14) point out, employing such a broad notion of prominence leads to the somewhat unsatisfactory conclusion that – in the case of differential agent marking – in some languages it is highly prominent agents that are case-marked and in others, agents low in prominence.

This paper reports on a discourse study of the factors influencing “optional” ergative marking of agents in Jaminjung/Ngaliwurru, a Western Mirndi language of northern Australia. Overall, overt ergative marking is present in around two thirds of overt agent phrases and absent from the remaining third, but the likelihood of case marking depends on four major factors. Three of these have also been identified for consistently split ergative systems (cf. McGregor 2010: 1616): animacy, tense/aspect, and the degree of impingement of the event on an undergoer. A fourth factor, information structure, also proves to be highly relevant, confirming findings for other “optional ergative” languages (e.g. Tournadre 1991; Malchukov 2008; Hyslop 2010: 13–17; Suter 2010; Verstraete 2010; Fauconnier and Verstraete 2014). Specifically, agents in focus – as established on the basis of independent prosodic and positional criteria (Simard 2010) – are almost categorically case-marked; however, this factor can be overridden by both semantic verb class and animacy. Within the animacy hierarchy, the data support a cut-off point between speech act participants (almost exclusively unmarked), all other animates (mostly marked) and inanimates (almost exclusively unmarked). Information structure and verb class, in turn, can override the constraints based on animacy.

On the one hand, these findings support an analysis in terms of just two major competing constraints, one favouring the identification of an agent as agent by case marking (corresponding to Aissen’s (1999) \*0, De Hoop and Malchukov’s (2007) “Identify” or Malchukov’s (2008) “Indexing”) and the other favouring economy, i.e. the absence of any marking (corresponding to Aissen’s (1999) \*STRUC and Malchukov’s (2008) “Economy”). This can be achieved if one accepts (in line with McGregor 1992) that the common denominator underlying the four factors is unexpectedness of a discourse referent as agent. On the other hand, the four factors need to be assigned very different weights in order to account for the discourse distribution of case marking, which supports a multifactorial approach to differential agent marking as opposed to a generalised notion of “prominence” or “argument strength”. In other words, speech act participant status and animacy in the narrow sense, as well as information structure, have to be considered as major and independent factors. Ultimately, the findings support the view that grammar is closely linked to frequency, and, ultimately, to universal preferences in discourse and cognition.