

## **“Optional ergativity” in Grammar and Discourse: the crucial role of annotated corpora**

Patrick McConvell, Felicity Meakins, Eva Schultze-Berndt, Candide Simard  
and Erika Charola

Jaminjungan and Eastern Ngumpin (Victoria River District) Project

“Optional ergativity” describes languages where the presence or absence of ergative case marking on agents in transitive clauses (As) is not conditioned by a straightforward split, e.g. according to tense/aspect or an animacy hierarchy. Some authors argue that ergative marking may highlight expectedness and agency of an agentive participant (e.g. McGregor 1992, 1998), others (e.g. Schmidt 1985) identify change in progress from an ergative to a nominative system as the crucial factor. Social factors (gender, status- Ochs 1988; peer-groups – Schmidt 1985 ) and variation in register/style and genre have also been adduced. The ergative marker may function to mark information structure (e.g. a focus marker) in addition to grammatical function (Pensalfini 1999, McConvell & Meakins 2005).

Documentation data - annotated recorded corpora of natural speech, are crucial in identifying the patterns underlying “optional” ergativity, which differ considerably in three languages: Gurindji, a Ngumpin language, is a strictly ergative language with a nominal split; Gurindji Kriol, a newly emerged mixed language with Gurindji and Kriol as source languages, in contrast, exhibits a striking degree of absence of ergative marking, which may be explained by contact-induced language change influenced by Kriol (where subjects are unmarked) but in addition by pragmatic factors. Jaminjung, a Jaminjungan language spoken in the same area, also has optional ergativity, more strongly correlated with semantic factors.

The nature of our corpus allows us to approach the phenomenon from different angles:

- The inclusion of older recordings (dating back to the 70s) makes it possible to compare the patterns of ergative marking observed in Gurindji – Kriol code-switching with the patterns in the recently emerged mixed language (Gurindji Kriol).
- The availability of the audio recordings enables us to consider the prosody of the crucial examples and hence to make more reliable claims about the role of information structure. For example, prosodic dislocation of agent NPs or focal accenting can be considered as potential factors determining the pattern of ergative marking.
- The size of the corpus makes it possible to compare the frequency of ergative marking with certain verb classes, or even individual verbs, to identify potential semantic factors.
- The inclusion of rich annotation can be crucial in determining if social or genre/register factors are significant.

We will also argue that a corpus of “spontaneous” speech can be fruitfully combined with speech recorded in more controlled settings, i.e. speech elicited by means of stimuli, or experimental tasks. This may either provide confirmation of the similarity in patterns in both contexts, or if there are significant differences, these may help explain the determining factors of the variation. Optional ergativity can thus serve as a test case for the composition of a corpus that allows one to address issues of variation .

## References

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