Editorial

Optional ergative marking and its implications for linguistic theory[☆]

Although linguists have been aware of the existence of ergative case-marking systems for over two centuries, it was not until the 1970s that ergativity became a popular topic of investigation, and its significance to linguistic theory began to be appreciated. Since then it has enjoyed considerable popularity, even notoriety (especially among students): there has been serious progress in our understanding both of ergative case-marking and of ergative patterning in other domains of grammar (see [McGregor, 2009](#) for an overview). One question that has continually raised its head, however, is what exactly counts as ergative patterning or ergativity. For instance, there has been controversy over whether the patterns illustrated by pairs of clauses such as *The beans soaked overnight* and *Mary soaked the beans overnight* should be included under the rubric of ergativity (e.g. [Halliday, 1967](#) pro; [Dixon, 1994:20](#); [Matthews, 2007:126](#) con). Even in the domain of morphological case, there are unclear instances, with differences of opinion concerning the status of some case-marking systems as ergative. One such disputed type is the topic of this special issue, a system known in the literature as “optional ergative marking” (OEM, e.g. [McGregor, 2009:493–497](#) and the references cited therein). What is peculiar about this type of system is that the use of the ergative marker with transitive subjects is not entirely specifiable or predictable in grammatical terms (e.g. all and only non-pronominal subjects of transitive verbs appear in ergative case). Instead, in such systems use of the ergative marker is typically motivated by semantic or information-structural principles, such that, for instance, only inanimate transitive subjects and focussed animate transitive subjects receive ergative marking. Some linguists (e.g. [Dixon, 1994](#); [Coupe, 2007](#)) have argued that such systems cannot be regarded as genuinely ergative, because the conditioning is not fully grammatical. We believe that there are good reasons to regard such systems as genuine ergative case-marking systems, however, and that they may serve as diachronic precursors of the ‘classic’ types of ergativity that have dominated the literature. The primary motivation for this special issue is to present some of the main reasons for considering OEM-type systems as ergative, and to explore the consequences to the theory of case-marking.

This issue presents five papers dealing with the theme of OEM, focussing in particular on the motivations for use vs. non-use of the ergative marker, and on their relation to classic ergative systems. The introductory article by William McGregor sets the scene by providing an overview of the cross-linguistic distribution of OEM, and situating the phenomenon within the context of case-marking asymmetries. It identifies parameters for a usage-based typology of OEM. The remaining four papers are case studies of OEM focussing on one or more languages, all bar one of which is an Australian language. Each study is a detailed examination of the motivations for the use of ergative marking in OEM systems, demonstrating that such systems have a great deal in common. In addition, each study also discusses a number of theoretical issues that are crucial in analysing OEM systems, and determining their relation to classic ergativity. These include the questions: How are the principles behind OEM embedded in the wider grammatical

[☆] All papers in this special issue use the conventions of the Leipzig Glossing Rules, to be consulted at <http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>. Any departure from these conventions is explicitly noted in the individual papers.

system? How does OEM relate diachronically to classic ergativity? And how does OEM fit in with more general theories of transitivity?

The first two case studies are primarily synchronic in orientation, and deal with the question how OEM relates to other components of grammar. The first contribution, by Jean-Christophe Verstraete, deals with OEM in the Pama-Nyungan language Umpithamu. He shows that OEM is distributed according to Silverstein's hierarchy, being available for animate transitive subjects only; for inanimates, ergative marking is obligatory. Verstraete shows that the principle of focus, which motivates the use of the ergative marker for animates, also governs other aspects of the grammar, like the positioning of pronoun complexes. This shows that OEM is deeply embedded in the grammatical system, and not a consequence of language obsolescence (as has been claimed for some languages, e.g. Schmidt, 1985; Pensalfini, 1999). In addition, the importance of a local principle of information structure like focus also shows that the information-structural motivations for OEM are more varied than have been assumed to date. The second paper, by Alan Rumsey, examines OEM in quotative constructions in Bunuba (non-Pama-Nyungan) and Ku Waru (Trans-New Guinea). Rumsey argues that, in general, ergative marking of the subject of a transitive clause shows a strong correlation with object individuation in these languages; this shows that OEM represents an instance of a transitivity correlation, thus adding to the range of types identified by Hopper and Thompson (1980). Rumsey then uses evidence from OEM to examine the classic problem of the transitivity status of framing clauses in reported speech. He shows that there is a correlation with the individuation of the reported clause: more direct types of reporting systematically use the ergative marker, while more indirect types of reporting do not use it.

The second pair of papers address diachronic concerns, while still providing detailed synchronic data. In the first of these, Alice Gaby describes the highly irregular system of ergative case inflections in Kuuk Thaayorre (Pama-Nyungan), and argues that the same diachronic processes that resulted in this complex inflectional system also resulted in the system of OEM that is found synchronically in the language. Intriguingly, she suggests, the discourse marking of prominent agents is both the origin and result of OEM, and her argument shows clearly how OEM can be diachronically related to classic ergative types. The final paper in the issue, by Felicity Meakins and Carmel O'Shannessy, is concerned with OEM in two mixed languages of northern Australia, Light Warlpiri and Gurindji Kriol. They argue that the optionality of the ergative suffix in these languages is the result of contact between two systems of argument encoding, by word order (Kriol) and by ergative case-marking (Warlpiri, Gurindji). The result is a system that combines both, using ergative marking to accord prominence to the agentivity of a transitive subject. This paper thus provides a glimpse at an OEM system in the making: not at the end of the life of a language (see above), but rather at the beginning, as the languages are coming into being.

The papers in this issue are all firmly empirically based. In terms of theoretical orientation they might reasonably be described as usage-based; taken together they indicate some of the potential for such approaches to the understanding of case marking in general, and to optional case-marking in particular. They also demonstrate that OEM is a not intractable topic, and that it is one of considerable theoretical interest, not just to studies of case-marking, but to other domains as well, including information structure, the boundary between semantics and pragmatics, and the grammar of reported speech. Despite the focus on Australian Aboriginal languages, there is good reason to believe that many of the findings, in particular, the motivations for use vs. non-use of the ergative marker will prove to be applicable more generally (e.g. Coupe, 2007; Tournadre, 1991, 1996; Suter, *forthcoming*). The introductory article to this volume provides evidence from a wide range of languages about the cross-linguistic validity of the generalizations about OEM presented in this special issue.

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