

# Pragmatically case-marked

## Non-syntactic functions of the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative suffix

Alice Gaby

University of California, Berkeley

In Kuuk Thaayorre, ergative marking is of both syntactic and pragmatic import. Syntactically, ergative inflection marks a noun phrase as the subject of a transitive clause. Though this may be considered definitional of an ergative morpheme, Kuuk Thaayorre joins a growing number of languages in which ergative marking is documented to be “optional”; not obligatorily present in all transitive clauses. Conversely – and more unusually – the subject of a Kuuk Thaayorre intransitive clause may in some cases be ergative-marked. This chapter proposes that as well as signifying the ergative case relation, the ergative morpheme’s presence in an intransitive clause signals that the subject referent is “unexpected”, and its absence from a transitive clause signals that the subject referent is “expected”.

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Researchers have long recognised that both syntactic context and morphological form must be taken into account when identifying the case array of any language. This paper examines cases of mismatch between the syntactic licensing of ergative case and the distribution of the formal markers of ergativity in one Australian

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1. This paper was produced with the collaboration of Gilbert Jack, who worked with me tirelessly in transcribing and translating many hours of videos of conversation and stories told by Alfred Charlie, Molly Edwards, Esther Foote, Myrtle Foote, Albert Jack, Gilbert Jack and Donald William. All of my research on Kuuk Thaayorre has been generously supported by the Pormpuraaw Community Council and other members of the Pormpuraaw Community. The research reported here was funded by the University of Melbourne and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. Bill McGregor made numerous pertinent and very helpful comments on earlier drafts, but also led by example with his excellent treatments of optional Ergativity in Warrwa and Gooniyandi. Jean-Christophe Verstraete, Brett Baker, Ilana Mushin, Nick Evans and Rachel Nordlinger also gave extremely useful feedback and helped to refine the argument presented here. Remaining errors are of course my own.

language, Kuuk Thaayorre. It argues that this discord between syntactic case assignment and morphological case-marking can only be explained if we allow that discourse context and pragmatics also play a role in determining the distribution of case markers.

At first glance, Kuuk Thaayorre appears to be a straightforwardly morphologically ergative language, possessing a set of morphs that attach to the subject of a transitive clause. However, these same morphs are sometimes found on the subjects of intransitive clauses, and may in other cases be omitted from the subjects of transitive clauses. This chapter argues that in such contexts Kuuk Thaayorre speakers employ ergative case morphology for pragmatic rather than syntactic ends. Specifically, the ergative morpheme may be affixed to any subject that is pragmatically marked, and omitted where the subject is pragmatically unmarked, regardless of clausal transitivity. For the purposes of this paper, a subject can be considered pragmatically (and consequently morphologically) unmarked if the addressee can be expected to correctly map the referent of an unmarked NP to the subject function purely on the basis of the preceding discourse and/or world knowledge. Where the identification of the subject participant is less straightforward, the subject is pragmatically marked. This question of pragmatic markedness crucially revolves around the mapping of referents to grammatical function, and not the retrievability of referents per se. A NP whose reference is “given” in the particular context will typically be elided, rendering moot the question of ergative marking.

Following a brief discussion of the distinction between (syntactic) case and case form in section 2, sections 3–4 outline the respective contributions of discourse context and world knowledge in determining the case marking of the subject. I argue that without reference to these two pragmatic factors, it is impossible to accurately predict the distribution of ergative case-marking. The fact that pragmatic context plays a role in determining ergative case-marking begs the question of whether the “ergative” morpheme can rightly be considered a case in the first place. This question is explored in section 5. Pragmatic functions of case morphology have been documented in a growing number of Australian languages (Pensalfini 1999; McGregor 1998; McGregor 2006; Meakins & O’Shannessy 2004 – see section 7), and the data reported here contribute to the understanding of case as a multi-stratal phenomenon.

### 1.1 Language background

Kuuk Thaayorre is a Paman language spoken on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, Australia. Predominantly dependent-marking, Kuuk Thaayorre is located at the non-configurational end of the spectrum (Austin & Bresnan 1996), with

extremely flexible ordering of constituents and common ellipsis of arguments (and other constituents). Word order within the noun phrase is more fixed, but permutations motivated by focus or speech style are common in natural speech. An argument (if not elided entirely) may take the form of one or more noun phrases apposed in the same case, as in (1).<sup>2</sup> Case is realised on the last constituent of the NP (or rather N, – cf. Gaby 2006: 290). Each NP constituent of a (complex) conjoined NP or inclusory construction inflects for case independently. The repetition of pronouns is common, in both full and reduced (encliticised) forms:<sup>3</sup>

- (1) *ngali*            *I. C.*            *ngali*            *yat*            *kuthirr*  
 1DU:EXCL(NOM)I. C.(NOM) 1DU:EXCL(NOM) go:P.PFV    two(NOM)  
 ‘I. C. and I went, the two of us.’

Note that (1) contains an inclusory construction, in which a non-singular pronoun is apposed to a noun phrase denoting a subset of the participants represented by the pronoun.<sup>4</sup>

Syntactically, Kuuk Thaayorre possesses a tripartite case system, distinguishing nominative, ergative and accusative arguments. Morphologically, however, there is a split between the pronominal paradigm (in which the syncretism of nominative and ergative case forms results in a nominative-accusative marking pattern) and full noun phrases (in which nominative/accusative syncretism gives rise to an ergative-absolutive marking pattern). Following Goddard (1982), the syntactic case of unmarked nominals and pronouns is glossed in brackets. As this paper is concerned with the ergative case marker, our focus will be on the case marking of nouns and not pronouns.<sup>5</sup>

2. Note that apposed NPs are frequently not contiguous.

3. The following abbreviations are used: 1 – 1st person, 2 – second person, 3 – third person, ABL – ablative, ACC – accusative, DAT – dative, DU – dual, ERG – ergative, ERG<sup>^</sup> – ergative inflection of an “unexpected” intransitive subject, #ERG – omission of ergative inflection of an “expected” transitive subject, EXCL – exclusive of addressee, FOC – focus, IMP – imperative, NOM – nominative, NPST – non-past tense, P.IPFV – past imperfective tense/aspect, P.PFV – past perfective tense/aspect, PERM – permissive, PL – plural number, RDP – reduplication, SG – singular number, VBR – verbaliser, THE – addressee-proximal demonstrative, THAT – distal demonstrative.

4. In this case, there is also an additional apposed noun phrase (*kuthirr* “two”) which refers to the superset (i.e., the speaker and I. C.) denoted by the pronoun. See Gaby (2005, 2006) for a definition of the noun phrase in Kuuk Thaayorre.

5. Note that there is no parallel “optional accusativity” in the Thaayorre pronominal paradigm, such as that found in Dyirbal (Dixon 1972). This may be attributable to the fact that though Thaayorre pronouns inflect for case, they are not marked by easily segmentable case affixes (my thanks to Bill MacGregor, p.c., who pointed this out).

Case is marked on the phrase-final element of the noun phrase only, as is fairly common across the Australian continent (cf., for example, Diyari (Austin 1981), Yankunytjatjara (Goddard 1985), Ngarinyin (Rumsey 1982) and Wik Mungkan (Dench & Evans 1988: 5)). Such phrasal marking might be taken to suggest that the case morphs are postpositional enclitics, yet their formal irregularity is more characteristic of inflectional affixes. Compare, for example, the forms of the following ergative morphs:

**Table 1.** Comparison of nominative and ergative forms of ten Kuuk Thaayorre nouns

	Nominative	Ergative
“meat”	<i>minh</i>	<i>minhal</i>
“good”	<i>min</i>	<i>minthurr</i>
“tooth”	<i>kiin</i>	<i>kiina</i>
“dog”	<i>kuta</i>	<i>kutaku</i>
“woman”	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthu</i>
“eye”	<i>meer</i>	<i>mere</i>
“cat”	<i>thok</i>	<i>thokun</i>
“saltwater croc.”	<i>pinc</i>	<i>pinci</i>
“child”	<i>parr_r</i>	<i>parran</i>
“boomerang”	<i>werngr</i>	<i>werngarr</i>

Neither phonological environment nor semantics (i.e., noun classes) can fully predict the form of the ergative morph.<sup>6</sup> As such lexically-determined allomorphy cannot be reconciled with an analysis of the ergative morpheme as an independent grammatical unit, I will continue to refer to the ergative markers as (inflectional) case suffixes.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that it is these same lexeme-specific morphs that are used pragmatically to mark an “unexpected subject”, as described in section 3.

In addition to the three core cases, Kuuk Thaayorre nouns and pronouns inflect for the genitive, dative and ablative cases. Instrumental adjuncts take ergative case. Comitative, proprietive and privative “cases” are encoded by enclitics. It is important to note for later discussion that the ergative and comitative cases are formally distinguished.

6. See Gaby (2006) for a fuller description of case allomorphy in Kuuk Thaayorre and Gaby (under review) for a discussion of the likely historical processes that gave rise to the present situation.

7. That is to say, although the noun on which ergative case is realised is determined by its position in the noun phrase, this ergative marking must be analysed as an inflectional affix rather than a postpositional enclitic. See Anderson, Brown, Gaby and Lecarme (2006) for a fuller justification of viewing the Thaayorre ergative morpheme as a phrasal suffix.

Table 2. Case forms of nouns and pronouns

Case	Noun form “woman”	Pronoun form “3 <sub>SG</sub> ”
Ergative	<i>paanth-u</i>	<i>nhul</i>
Nominative	<i>paanth</i>	<i>nhul</i>
Accusative	<i>paanth</i>	<i>nhunh</i>
Genitive	<i>paanthak</i>	<i>nhangan</i>
Dative	<i>paanthun</i>	<i>nhangun</i>
Ablative	<i>paanthum</i>	<i>nhanganma</i>
Comitative	<i>paanth=kak</i>	<i>(nhangun)</i> <sup>8</sup>
Propriative	<i>paanth=(k)<sup>9</sup>aak</i>	–
Privative	<i>paanth=(k)aar</i>	–

## 1.2 Data

The data presented in this paper were collected during three visits made by the author to the community of Pormpuraaw (home to the majority of Kuuk Thaayorre speakers) over seven months in total. The contexts in which they were elicited may be roughly classified as either: (a) elicited narrative; or (b) prompted natural speech. Elicited narratives in this corpus were gathered by negotiating a particular topic upon which the consultants would expound without further interference. Prompted natural speech arose from presenting consultants with a visual (usually video) stimuli to describe. Alternatively, a pair or group of consultants might be asked to play a game or attend to a task requiring verbal interchange. The responses of the consultant(s) in these cases are usually lengthy and fluent. However, the fact that the subject matter has been manipulated by the linguist may affect language use. Unmonitored natural speech might be assumed to represent a language most accurately (being language as it is really used), but it is also prone to speech errors. Decontextualised elicited data, on the other hand, may suffer from a particular form of “judgement hypercorrection”; with consultants rejecting sentences as ungrammatical because they are not provided with the discourse context in which they might be uttered. For these reasons, I have decided to focus upon elicited narratives and prompted natural speech, which are sufficiently fluent and lengthy

8. The dative form of the pronoun is used in many comitative contexts.

9. Kuuk Thaayorre distinguishes the adnominal and relational functions of both the propriative and privative case enclitics; the relational function is signaled by the inclusion of /k/ clitic-initially, while the adnominal function is signaled by its omission (cf. Gaby 2006: 196-199 for fuller discussion).

(as well as being contextually anchored) to be pragmatically rich, while also being controlled enough to allow for error detection.

The data set analysed here is in places supplemented by that reported in Hall (1972) and Foote & Hall (1992).

## 2. Case vs case-form

It is widely recognised that the formal manifestation of case must be distinguished from syntactic case categories (e.g., Mel'čuk 1979; Goddard 1982; Blake 1994 and Spencer 2006). Clearly, though, there must be some alignment between the distribution of case morphs and the syntactic function of the arguments to which they attach if these morphs are to be labelled case-markers in the first place. In Kuuk Thaayorre, for instance, the ergative morpheme is labelled such because of the regularity with which it attaches to the subjects of transitive clauses but not the subjects of intransitive clauses. This can be seen in the elicited – and thus decontextualised – examples (2)–(4):

- (2) *pam ith Cairns-na yat*  
 man(NOM) that Cairns-DAT go:P.PFV  
 'That man went to Cairns.'
- (3) *pam minhal patha-rr*  
 man(ACC) animal:ERG bite-P.PFV  
 'The animal bit the man.'
- (4) *pam-al minh patha-rr*  
 man-ERG animal(ACC) bite-P.PFV  
 'The man bit the meat.'

As we would expect of a morphologically ergative language, the unmarked form *pam* 'man' occurs as both the subject of an intransitive verb (*yan* 'go' in (2)) and the object of a transitive verb (*path* 'bite' in (3)), while the marked form *pamal* occurs with the function of transitive subject in (4). The distribution of marked and unmarked pronominal forms differs, however:

- (5) *ngay Cairns-na yat*  
 1SG(NOM) Cairns-DAT go:P.PFV  
 'I went to Cairns.'
- (6) *ngay nhunh patha-rr*  
 1SG(ERG) 3SGACC bite-P.PFV  
 'I bit him.'

- (7) *nhul nganh patha-rr*  
 3SG(NOM) 1SGACC bite-P.PFV  
 ‘He bit me.’

In the pronominal paradigm, the direct object function is distinguished by the accusative case form (e.g., *nganh* in (7)) which stands in opposition to a single subject pronoun (e.g., *ngay* in (5) and (6)). Since each of these three core cases (nominative, ergative and accusative) is morphologically distinguished in at least a subpart of the nominal system,<sup>10</sup> they are analysed as syntactically distinct across the board.

However, a syntax-based account of ergative case-marking in Kuuk Thaayorre is challenged by examples such as (8). Here we find an ergative-marked subject of an intransitive clause. For clarity, the gloss “ERG<sup>^</sup>” will be employed where the morph occurs in such syntactically non-ergative contexts. In (9) the transitive subject is unmarked (where ergative marking would be expected – this absence of ergative marking in syntactically ergative contexts will be signalled by the gloss “#ERG”).

- (8) *Parr-an pul kuta-ku ngok-eln wontr*  
 child-ERG<sup>^</sup> 3DU(NOM) dog-ERG<sup>^</sup> water-DAT fall:NPST  
 ‘The child and the dog fall into the water [together].’
- (9) *minh patp piinth.kat waawath*  
 animal hawk(#ERG) scrap(ACC) RDP:search:NPST  
 ‘Hawks fossick for scraps.’

In examples such as these, the morphological case forms found in the clause are out of alignment with the syntactic case of the arguments they mark. Following from this, it can be seen that the syntactic case of arguments does not solely determine morphological marking. Instead, I contend, pragmatic considerations contribute to the inclusion or omission of the ergative morpheme. In §3, I outline the range of pragmatic factors that shape whether a subject is “marked” or “unmarked”.

### 3. Pragmatic case

#### 3.1 Marked intransitive subject

It has already been suggested that the ergative suffix may (occasionally) be attached to the subject of an intransitive verb to mark an “unexpected” subject; one for which the

10. This is further demonstrated by referring to Table 1 above.

referent is ambiguous or potentially difficult to retrieve. Most commonly, the subject is marked as unexpected because of a change in protagonist, or topic chain.<sup>11</sup> This fits with McGregor's (1998: 516) "Expected Actor Principle",<sup>12</sup> which states that:

*The episode protagonist is – once it has been established – the expected (and unmarked) Actor of each foregrounded narrative clause of the episode; any other Actor is unexpected.*

The use of ergative marking where the membership of the protagonist group is in flux is illustrated by (10). The key protagonists throughout the text from which (10) is excerpted are the speaker and his siblings, denoted by *ngancin* "we (plural, exclusive)". However, in the second and third lines, the set of referents denoted by *ngancin* expands to include the parents of the original protagonists. In line 2, the enlarged referent group is signalled by an inclusory construction, composed of the unchanged pronoun *ngancin* "we (plural, exclusive)" apposed to noun phrases singling out each of the parents. Crucially, each of these noun phrases is ergative-marked, despite the intransitivity of the clause as a whole:

- (10) a. *ngancin kanangkarr parr\_r mant*  
 3PL:EXCL(NOM) long.ago child small(NOM)  
 'When we used to be small kids,'
- b. *ngul ngancin nganip-i ngancin, mami*  
 then 1PL:EXCL(NOM) father-ERG^ 1PL:EXCL(NOM) mum  
*ngathan-man ngancin ... ngancin irrkaw yat*  
 1SGPOS-ERG^ 1PL:EXCL(NOM) 1PL:EXCL(NOM)to:West go:P.PFV  
 'we, including Dad and Mum, went out bush.'
- c. *ngul ngancin parr\_r mant ngancin yuk-un*  
 then 1PL:EXCL(NOM) child small 1PL:EXCL(NOM) tree-DAT  
*thaangkm ngancin*  
 climb:P.IPFV 1PL:EXCL(NOM)  
 'Then we small children were climbing a tree.'
- d. *thowolnam ngancin parr\_r mant*  
 play:P.IPFV 1PL:EXCL(NOM) child small  
 'We small children were playing.'

11. For the remainder of this paper, the term "topic" will be avoided due to its inconsistent usage in the literature. Instead, I refer to the "protagonist" of a story, by which I mean the participant who the story is about, who is the primary actor across multiple clauses (and thus tending to be in transitive or intransitive subject function throughout the text).

12. Note, though, that McGregor's (1998) Expected Actor Principle (applicable only to narratives) only deals with one component of what I argue makes a subject-participant alignment "expected" in Kuuk Thaayorre, namely the discourse context.

- e. *ngul ngancin ... nganip-I ngancan thakarr*  
 then 1PL:EXCL(NOM) father-ERG 1PL:EXCL:ACC leave:P.PFV  
*pul nganam-u*  
 3DU(NOM) mother-ERG

‘Then we ... father and mother left us [to go fishing].’

The fact that the form of the subject pronoun (*ngancin* “we”) does not change – despite the variation in the set of individuals denoted by it across clauses – makes the tracking of discourse participants particularly problematic. I argue that it is for this reason that the speaker marks the unexpected protagonists (*nganip* “father” and *mami* “mum” in (10b)) with ergative case, despite their function as subject of a strictly intransitive verb (*yan* “go”). In addition to this emphatic case marking, the frequent repetition of the subject pronoun (*ngancin* “we”) – four times in the single clause in line two – no doubt serves to reinforce the fact that these unexpected actors are now included within the reference of this subject pronoun, where they had previously been (and would be again) excluded from it. This is also made clear in subsequent clauses ((10c) and (10d)), where the reference of *ngancin* reverts back to the children alone. In both of these clauses, the full noun phrase *parr\_r mant* “small children” is included in addition to the pronoun, in order to ensure that the (once again) reduced reference set of the subject is understood. This repetition of a full noun phrase for an established discourse participant is marked (though not unusual) in Kuuk Thaayorre discourse, and can be considered alongside ergative marking as a complementary strategy for signalling a problematic subject-to-referent mapping.

Note also that although the ergative-marked noun phrases (*nganipi* and *mami ngathanman* in (10b) and *nganipi* and *nganamu* in (10e)) are apposed to unmarked subject pronouns (glossed as “nominative”), this does not necessarily signal case disagreement. Because the nominative and ergative cases are not formally distinguished in the pronominal paradigm, *ngancin* (in (10b)) and *pul* (in (10e)) could alternatively be glossed “ERG^” (i.e., syntactically nominative but formally ergative).

Turning now to example (11), the ergative case is again employed where two participants, who had been acting independently in the preceding text, now come to act as a unit (i.e., a single protagonist group). This excerpt is taken from a description of the Frog Story,<sup>13</sup> at the point at where the boy and the dog (who had

13. The “Frog Story” is a widely used elicitation tool, in which a picture story book (with no words) is shown to a consultant who then tells the story depicted. The narrative analysed in this paper was supplied by a consultant in her sixties, with the purpose of creating a Thaayorre text that could be placed in the school library. The narrative was transcribed by me, and this transcription checked both with the original consultant and a younger Thaayorre speaker.

been having independent adventures in the preceding text) both end up falling into the same pool:

- (11) a. *Minh-al thunpirr parr\_r ngotonci-ntam*  
 animal-ERG propel:P.PFV child(ACC) hill-ABL  
 ‘The bull throws the boy from the hill.’
- b. *Kuta yokun.manorrp wontr*  
 dog(NOM) same.way fall:NPST  
 ‘The dog also falls.’
- c. *Parr-an pul kuta-ku ngok-eln wontr*  
 child-ERG^ 3DU(NOM) dog-ERG^ water-DAT fall:NPST  
 ‘The child and the dog fall into the water [together].’

That the ergative morpheme in (11c) is not marking syntactic function is clear from its absence in (11b), where the unmarked NP *kuta* ‘dog’ functions as subject of the intransitive verb *wontr* ‘fall’ just as do the marked NPS *kutaku* ‘dog’ and *parran* in (11c)

Example (12) similarly includes ergative marking on a noun phrase functioning as intransitive subject:

- (12) *G. Y. nhul driver Ngali mit rirk E.-nthurr*  
 G.Y. 3SG(NOM) driver 2DU:EXCL work DO<sup>14</sup>:NPST E.-ERG^  
 ‘G. Y. is the driver. We two work, [me and] E.’

This level of scrutiny might be expected to produce “hyper-correct” speech, however, there remained several instances of ergative marking on intransitive subjects and unmarked transitive subjects. In this case, the higher level of editorial care by native speakers was particularly useful in ruling out speech error. The structure of the narrative (i.e., as a series of multi-clausal descriptions of pictures to be written down and placed in a library, rather than a flowing interpersonal dialogue), also prompted the speaker to include many full noun phrases in place of the ubiquitous argument ellipsis that characterises Thaayorre speech. So, while not necessarily representative of natural speech, it is an extremely valuable resource for investigating the case marking of introduced, repeated, expected and unexpected arguments.

14. The verb *rirk* (which, in its basic sense, means “arise”), commonly combines with Thaayorre nouns or loan verbs to produce a complex predicate. The transitivity of this predicate is determined by the first element, thus: *fly-m rirk* ‘fly (intrans)’, *love-m rirk* ‘love (trans)’, *pancr rirk* ‘be shame (intrans)’ (nb. *pancr* is a noun meaning “body hair”) and *mit rirk* ‘work (intrans)’ (*mit* being a noun meaning “work” or “job”). In this construction, *mit* “work” does in some respects resemble a direct object, for example in that it can be modified:

- (i) *mit pork rirk ngancin*  
 work big DO:NPST 1pl:excl(NOM)  
 ‘we work hard’

The referent of the ergative-marked NP (E.) is a perfectly plausible subject according to world knowledge (i.e., highly animate, and likely to be engaged in the activity of working), but is “unexpected” (in McGregor’s sense) due to his not having been mentioned previously. Accordingly, he is introduced by a NP placed within an inclusory construction in order to clarify that the speaker is not referring (by means of the second person dual exclusive pronoun, *ngali*) to himself and the protagonist of the preceding clause (G. Y.). The ergative case morph can therefore be viewed as emphatically marking the noun phrase as part of the subject, in contradistinction to the subject of the preceding clause.

As noted above, the ergative morpheme is not used to express the comitative case (as found in some other Australian languages, e.g., Wambaya (Nordlinger 1998)). The comitative relation that obtains between the speaker and “E.” in (12) is expressed by the inclusory construction (i.e., the apposition of the non-singular pronoun *ngali* “we two, exclusive” and a noun phrase denoting a subset thereof, i.e., E.). If the speaker wished to highlight the comitative relation, this could be done by attaching “comitative” *-kak* to E., in place of the ergative morpheme. The ergative suffix on the subset noun phrase is unrelated to (and uncalled for by) the inclusory construction in this context.

### 3.2 Unmarked transitive subject

Just as the ergative morph may be affixed to the subject of an intransitive clause, ergative marking may be omitted from transitive clauses in certain pragmatic contexts. Once again, the key to predicting where the ergative morpheme may be omitted lies with the degree to which the identity of the subject corresponds to the addressee’s expectations; expectations built by the interaction of discourse context and world knowledge. Turning first to the role of world knowledge in constructing and decoding argument structure, a subject is more likely to be “expected” where it is: (a) high in animacy (and significantly higher in animacy than its object); and (b) engaged in an activity with which an entity of its type is likely to be engaged. These two criteria are illustrated by (9’) and (13):

- (9’) *minh patp piinth.kat waawath*  
 animal hawk scrap<sub>(ACC)</sub> RDP:search  
 ‘Hawks fossick for scraps.’

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However, in an elicitation context the subject of *mit rirk* is always nominative in form, suggesting the predicate as a whole is intransitive:

- (ii) *Sitika mit rirk-m*  
 Sitika work DO-P.IPFV  
 ‘Sitika was working’

- (13) *pam peln mong werngr ulp thunpm*  
 man(#ERG) 3PL(ERG) many boomerang(ACC) THE throw:p.IPFV  
 ‘Many men threw the boomerang.’

It is clear that hawks are more animate than scraps and men are more animate than boomerangs. It is also entirely consistent with our knowledge of the world for hawks to be engaged in foraging and men to be engaged in throwing boomerangs (particularly in contrast with scraps foraging or boomerangs throwing). Additionally, the hawks and men respectively appear as actors in the preceding discourse. Accordingly, the association of *minh patp* ‘hawk’ (in (9)) and *pam mong* ‘many men’ (in (13)) with the grammatical function of subject is straightforward even in the absence of overt case marking. The SOV constituent order in both of these examples may also be significant. Further investigation (and the course of time) may reveal an increasing reliance on word order for the interpretation of grammatical functions in the absence of obligatory case-marking. It should be noted, however, that examples (9) and (13) were uttered by an elder of seventy-four, whose first language is (a conservative variety of) Kuuk Thaayorre, and whose speech generally exhibits flexible constituent order.

The omission of ergative marking due to discourse context is further exemplified by the narrative excerpt (14). The speaker here is describing his trip to Darwin shortly after cyclone Tracy. He tells of a taxi driver he met who had been injured in the cyclone while trying to lead a group of tourists to safety:

- (14) a. *glass-n keè-rr=unh.*  
 glass-ERG spear-P.PFV=3SGACC  
 ‘He was cut by glass.’
- b. *Taxi driver, pam ngotn.*  
 taxi driver man black  
 ‘The taxi driver, a black man.’
- c. *Taxi driver glass-n keè-rr.*  
 Taxi driver(ACC) glass-ERG spear-P.PFV  
 ‘the taxi driver got cut by glass.’
- d. *glass-n ulp aka keè-rr*  
 glass-ERG THE here spear-P.PFV  
 ‘That glass cut [him] here.’ [points to arm]
- e. *nhul taxi driver pam guide-m rirk-m*  
 3SG(ERG) taxi driver(#ERG) man(ACC) guide-VBRDO-P.IPFV  
 ‘That taxi driver was guiding people.’

If the clause in (14e) were considered in isolation, it would be impossible to justify the omission of the ergative case marker from the subject NP. There is no

difference in animacy between the subject (“taxi driver”) and object (“people”) of the clause, and since number is not marked on nouns, either of the NPS *taxi driver* and *pam* “man”/“people” could be in syntactic apposition to the subject pronoun *nhul* “3SG”.<sup>15</sup> However, given discourse context, it is straightforward to associate the enduring protagonist of the previous clauses (*taxi driver*) with the subject function.

In example (15), the same participant group is represented as subject in each clause, but the ergative marking present in the first two clauses is omitted in the third:

- (15) a. *paanth-u wanhwanhrrul yak ii*  
 woman-ERG how.many.people:ERG snake there  
*theerngarr=unh*  
 kill:P.PFV=3SGACC  
 ‘How many women killed that snake?’
- b. *paanth pinalam-thurr theerngarr yak ulp*  
 woman three-ERG kill:P.PFV snake(ACC) THE  
 ‘Three women killed the snake ...’
- c. *paanth ii peln pinalam=unh*  
 woman(#ERG) there 3PL(ERG) three=3SGACC  
*theerngarr yak ulp*  
 kill:P.PFV snake(ACC) THE  
 ‘[Those] three women there killed that snake.’

Here, as in examples (9) and (13), several pragmatic and semantic factors conspire to unambiguously identify each of the unmarked arguments with the relevant syntactic function. Firstly, women are higher in animacy than snakes, making it more congruent with world knowledge for the women to act upon the snake than the reverse. This factor is not particularly strong, however, as it is just as plausible for a snake to kill a woman as a woman to kill a snake (particularly in the taipan-infested territory of the Thaayorre). More critical, in this case, are the discourse context and verbal semantics. Taking first of all the discourse context, it is clear that the preceding discourse (in which the women do receive ergative marking) establishes the respective roles of the participants sufficiently clearly for case marking to be omitted in the final clause (which may be regarded as a summary of the preceding clauses) without any resultant ambiguity. Additionally, the verb employed – *theerng* “kill” – more precisely describes the act of killing by

15. In pragmatically unmarked clauses, however, coreferential pronouns and NPS would typically be adjacent.

striking, and as such would not be used with a limbless creature (such as a snake<sup>16</sup>) as subject. Thus verbal semantics further disambiguates the mapping of participants to syntactic functions.

Finally, excerpt (16) from the Frog Story demonstrates the interplay of world knowledge and discourse context over a series of clauses:

- (16) a. *parr\_r nhul thamr puut nhaanham*  
 child(#ERG) 3SG(ERG) foot boot(ACC) look:RDP:NPST  
 ‘The boy looks in the boot.’
- b. ‘*Thatr wanthan yat?*’  
 frog(NOM) to.where go:P.PFV  
 ‘[He thinks:] ‘Where has the frog gone?’
- c. *nhul thatr ngaathirr waawath-r*  
 3SG(ERG) frog(ACC) still search:RDP-NPST  
 ‘He’s still looking for the frog.’
- d. *Kuta-ku nhul glass nhaanham*  
 dog-ERG 3SG(ERG) glass(ACC) look:RDP:NPST  
 ‘[Now] the dog looks in the jar.’

In (16a), the human subject (already introduced in the preceding text) acts upon an inanimate object. Here world knowledge (strengthened by the inter-clausal topicality of the boy) is more than ample to establish the syntactic function of arguments. In clauses (16b) (which implicitly reports thought) and (16c), the boy remains the (implied or articulated) topic. In (16d), though, attention shifts to the dog. This protagonist shift (possibly combined with the lower animacy of the dog) renders it an “unexpected” subject, triggering ergative marking.

#### 4. Analysis

The influence of pragmatics on the employment of the Thaayore ergative morpheme is significant in several respects. To begin with, it shows the much discussed “animacy hierarchy” (attributed to, and emergent from the ideas of, Silverstein 1976<sup>17</sup>) to be played out not in Kuuk Thaayorre morphosyntax, but rather in pragmatics. In Kuuk Thaayorre morphosyntax (as described in 1.2), there is a split between pronouns (which are marked on a nominative-accusative pattern) and

16. The verb *path* “bite” is used to describe a snake killing a person or animal.

17. See also Heath (1976).

nouns (which follow the ergative-absolutive pattern). Within the nominal category, however, there is no division with respect to which semantic categories of noun may receive ergative marking in the appropriate syntactic context. As shown in §3, though, there is a difference in the level of markedness of subjects (which filters through to optional ergative marking), according to their level of animacy. This is exemplified by comparing (16a') (which has an unmarked human subject) with (16d') (in which the ergative-marked subject is a dog):

- (16) a'. *parr\_r nhul thamr puut*  
 child(#ERG) 3SG(ERG) foot boot(ACC)  
*nhaanham*  
 look:RDP:NPST  
 'The boy looks in the boot.'

- (16) d'. *Kuta-ku nhul glass nhaanham*  
 dog-ERG 3SG(ERG) glass(ACC) look:RDP:NPST  
 '[Now] the dog looks in the jar.'

The relative animacy of subject and object also plays a role as the comparison of (17) with (18) shows:

- (17) *nhul parr-an kuta mi'irr*  
 3SG(ERG) child-ERG dog(ACC) pick.UP:NPST  
 'The boy picks up the dog.'
- (18) *parr\_r nhul thatr mi'irr yuur-un*  
 child(#ERG) 3SG(ERG) frog(ACC) pick.UP:NPST hand-DAT  
 'The boy holds the frog in his hand.'

While the subject of both clauses is human, in (17) *parran* "child" receives the ergative marking its syntactic function warrants, while in (18) the marker is omitted. This can be attributed to the fact that in (18) the highly animate subject participant is acting upon a significantly less animate entity (the frog), which has not, throughout the preceding text, been accorded much in the way of personality. In (17), by contrast, the boy is acting upon an only slightly less animate being (the dog), who has been a major protagonist (alongside the boy) throughout the text.<sup>18</sup> The pragmatic employment of ergative marking thus reveals a cline of animate – inanimate nouns. This cline is also manifest in existential and ascriptive constructions, as described in Gaby (2006). In that case, too, dogs and "social animals" form an intermediate category between humans, animate non-humans and inanimate entities, in terms of

18. There is thus greater potential for ambiguity where the Undergoer is higher in animacy, despite world knowledge suggesting that a dog is unlikely to pick up a boy.

the posture and movement verbs with which they can combine. Silverstein (1976)<sup>19</sup> similarly proposes a “global” case-marking system for Dalabon, in which the suffixation of *-yi* to a transitive subject NP purportedly depends on “the Agent being below or at the same feature-level as the Patient” (Silverstein 1976: 129).

The distribution of ergative marking cannot be attributed to animacy alone (as per semantically-based case marking), however. Example (19) (taken from the very beginning of the Frog Story), for instance, shows the expected ergative marking of the subject of a transitive clause with exactly the same configuration of participants as in (18) (i.e., a boy acting upon a frog):

- (19) a. *That nhul glass-ak nhiinhin*  
 frog(NOM) 3SG(NOM) glass-DAT sit:RDP:NPST  
 ‘A frog is sitting in a jar.’
- b. *Parr-an pul kuta-ku nhaanham nhunh thatr*  
 boy-ERG 3DU(ERG) dog-ERG see:p.IPFV 3SGACC frog(ACC)  
 ‘A boy and a dog are looking at the frog.’

The opening clause introduces the frog, suggesting to the addressee that this will be the main protagonist. The enduring protagonists of the story (i.e., the boy and the dog) are at this point a truly “unexpected” subject of the second clause, this being their first mention. It is hardly surprising, then, that they each receive syntactically appropriate ergative marking, highlighting their role as agents of the event. The fact that the presence or absence of the ergative morph cannot be predicted by the relative animacy of participants alone, reinforces the argument that ergative marking is (partially) pragmatically conditioned, rather than simply based on semantics.

The tendency for the ergative morpheme to be omitted where the subject is highly animate runs counter to what we might predict from Hopper and Thompson’s (1980) theory of transitivity. According to their parameters of volitionality and agency, we would expect that clauses with human subjects would rate more highly on the transitivity scale (and therefore be more likely to include ergative marking) than those in which the subject is lower in animacy. Instead, we find the reverse. This can be accounted for in two ways. Firstly, it has often been suggested that the primary function of ergative markers is to distinguish the two arguments of a transitive clause (cf. Comrie 1989; Heath 1976; Wierzbicka 1981). The use of Kuuk Thaayorre ergative marking in intransitive clauses (discussed in 3.1) can be seen as distinguishing the subject not from an object (as there is none), but from other potential subjects. As such, the ergative morpheme could be analysed as marking the syntactic function of subject rather than the syntactic case of transitive subject

19. Cf. also Heath (1976: 177).

(making the label “ergative” somewhat misapplied). This possibility is explored further in section 5.

DuBois’s (1987, 2003) account of “preferred argument structure” offers a second, alternative analysis of how ergative case morphemes could come to be associated with marked subjects more generally. DuBois finds that speakers tend to avoid representing agents lexically, and tend not to introduce new participants as agents. Accordingly, where an agent is overtly realised, it must be pragmatically marked for some reason (and hence likely to be morphologically marked). This explains how the majority of lexical agents (i.e., transitive subjects) could come to be ergative-marked for pragmatic reasons, rather than purely because of their grammatical function.

## 5. Theoretical implications

As raised in section 4, several alternative analyses of the function(s) of the ergative morpheme suggest themselves. First of all, it would be possible to propose two homophonous (sets of) morphs, one of which is a straightforward ergative case marker, the other being a discourse marker of “unexpected subjects”. This analysis is attractive because it allows us to retain a tripartite case system, while also allowing the distribution of the “unexpected subject” marker to be conditioned wholly by pragmatics. The downfall of this analysis, though, is the fact that the ergative morph may be omitted from transitive subjects. If there is a fully grammaticised ergative case morpheme, this should be present in all syntactically ergative contexts. If the “unexpected subject” marker is an entirely separate morpheme, we would be required to independently explain the deletion of the ergative morpheme in contexts where a transitive subject is expected. Such an analysis is clearly not parsimonious. Also problematic for this analysis, is the extreme formal irregularity of the morphs in question, shared exactly by both putative functions. We would not normally expect such complete isomorphism between distinct morphemes in the context of such irregularity.

Alternatively, the (hitherto labelled) “ergative” morpheme could be analysed as monosemous, encoding simply “unexpected subject”. This “unexpected subject” function could be framed as a marked nominative case (versus the unmarked nominative form used in pragmatically neutral or expected contexts).<sup>20</sup> Under such an analysis, the morpheme has some characteristics of a case marker (in that

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20. This is somewhat similar to the Warrwa “focal ergative marker” (McGregor 2006), in that a single core syntactic case may be expressed by two alternative (pragmatically-conditioned) forms.

it marks a dependent noun for the relationship it bears to the head – cf. Blake 1994<sup>21</sup>). However, it is unlike case marking in that it is only applied where there is a need to clarify or emphasise the syntactic function of the subject argument, rather than being obligatory in particular syntactic contexts. The statistical correlation between ergative marking and being the subject of a transitive clause (rather than an intransitive subject) can be attributed to the fact that there tends to be greater potential for ambiguity in clauses with multiple arguments.

To analyse this morpheme as a “marked nominative” case does not, however, capture the strong association between this morpheme and the subject of a decontextualised transitive clause (as opposed to a decontextualised intransitive clause). This is borne out by the near-complete correlation between transitive subjects and ergative-marking (and conversely intransitive subjects and absence of the ergative) in decontextualized elicitation. Moreover, all consultants rejected as ungrammatical out-of-context intransitive clauses with ergative-marked subjects proposed by the author. The vast majority of proposed transitive clauses with unmarked subject nps were also corrected to contain the ergative marker. A final problem with the “marked nominative” analysis is the fact that the distribution of, and motivating factors for, ergative marking differs significantly between transitive and intransitive clauses.

I therefore conclude that the ergative morpheme is indeed associated with the syntactic ergative case, in spite of its distribution being influenced by pragmatics. As already stated, its function of marking a dependent np for its relation to the head predicate establishes the morpheme’s status within the case system. The question becomes, then, how exactly to characterise the function of this case morpheme in light of its distribution. In order to tackle this question, let us return to the arguments put forward by Melčuk (1979), Goddard (1982) and Blake (1994) in distinguishing (morphological) case form from (syntactic) case function. Applying their analysis to Kuuk Thaayorre (ignoring, for the moment, the pragmatically-conditioned distribution of the ergative morpheme), we can see how three core syntactic cases (ergative, nominative and accusative) emerge from the comparison of pronouns and nouns, each of which display only two case forms:

**Table 3.** Comparison of syntactic case function and morphological case form

	Pronoun (“3SG”)	Noun (“man”)
Ergative	<i>nhul</i>	<i>pamal</i>
Nominative	<i>nhul</i>	<i>pam</i>
Accusative	<i>nhunh</i>	<i>pam</i>

21. Note, though, that this does not apply to the emphatic function of one ergative morph (-*thurr*), as described in §6.

Despite the syncretism of ergative and nominative pronominal forms, and nominative and accusative noun forms, the distinction between each of the three syntactic cases is morphologically encoded by at least some subpart of the system and is therefore analytically maintained for the case system as a whole.

If we then extend this analysis to differentiate between the three relevant pragmatic contexts (expected subject, pragmatically neutral, unexpected subject) in which subject arguments are verbalised, it remains equally clear that the ergative, nominative and accusative cases are a syntactic reality in Kuuk Thaayorre. Note that we are now concerned only with noun forms:

**Table 4.** The interaction between syntactic case and pragmatics in determining case form

	Expected subject	Pragmatically neutral	Unexpected subject
Ergative	<i>pam</i>	<i>pamal</i>	<i>pamal</i>
Nominative	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam</i>	<i>pamal</i>
Accusative	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam</i>

This time, however, there is syncretism between all three core cases where the subject is expected (i.e., where the syntactic function of a NP is predictable it is formally unmarked, regardless of case), between nominative and accusative cases in neutral contexts, and between the nominative and ergative cases where the subject is unexpected. Again, each of the three core syntactic cases is somewhere differentiated from the other two. The distribution of morphological forms, however, is conditioned by the interaction between syntactically-assigned case (varied in table 4 by row) and pragmatics (varied by column). This should not be a particularly shocking proposition, as Australianist linguists have long accepted that semantic and/or pragmatic features of animacy can condition the distribution of case morphs (since Silverstein 1976 and Heath 1976). We are familiar, too, with languages in which case markers simultaneously encode non-case information (e.g., number in Latin, or modal information in Kayardild (Evans 1995)<sup>22</sup>). Analogously, then, the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative case morpheme explicitly encodes syntactic case, while its (non-)employment signals the degree of pragmatic markedness.<sup>23</sup>

22. This analogy was drawn by Bill McGregor (p.c.).

23. The reader is reminded that “pragmatic markedness” here refers to the obviousness of the subject – participant **mapping**, rather than to the ease with which the subject’s **identity** can be retrieved from context. So “expected subject” is shorthand for “NP referent is expected to have the grammatical function of subject”, not that the referent of the NP is expected in itself. If we

The homophony of core case forms in Kuuk Thaayorre (as presented in table 4) does not increase the potential for mis-mapping grammatical relations to argument NPS for two reasons. Firstly, because a NP in nominative case – isomorphic with the accusative case in neutral and expected contexts and with the ergative case in unexpected contexts – is never copresent with a transitive subject or direct object in the same clause. Secondly, the presence of two unmarked NPS (in nominative and accusative case respectively) in transitive clauses with an expected subject does not give rise to ambiguity since the pragmatically expected context is, by definition, one in which the mapping of grammatical relations to argument NPS should be obvious.

In summary, then, I argue that Kuuk Thaayorre has a tripartite core syntactic case system (distinguishing ergative, nominative and accusative cases). The morphological expression of these cases is determined jointly by: (a) the underlying syntactic case of the argument; (b) the word class of the nominal form (i.e., whether it is a pronoun or a noun); and (c), if it is a noun, the pragmatic status of the argument (i.e., how easily the addressee is expected to match it to the relevant syntactic function).

## 6. Pragmatic case marking in other languages

There are a growing number of languages in which pragmatic factors have been demonstrated to co-condition ergative inflection. This section surveys the most detailed recent analyses of such systems, highlighting both similarities and differences between the distribution, functions and inferred diachronic development of optional ergativity cross-linguistically.

From his detailed analysis of a large corpus of Gooniyandi texts, McGregor (1998) identifies several etic characteristics of clauses in which the agent is

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are to add into equation whether or not the addressee is expected to know the subject's identity, table 4 should be modified to include the ellipsis of arguments, as follows:

**Table 4b.** The interaction between syntactic case and pragmatics in determining argument form

	Referentiality in question			Referentially given
	Expected subject	Pragmatically neutral	Unexpected subject	
Ergative	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam-al</i>	<i>pam-al</i>	–
Nominative	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam-al</i>	–
Accusative	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam</i>	<i>pam</i>	–

ergatively marked. Of particular relevance to the data described in §3, he finds that ergative marking may be prompted by an “unforeseen Agent given narrative context” or when the “Agent contrasts with other (potential) Agents” (1998: 503). McGregor also finds that the level of agentivity of the subject participant in large part determines the presence or omission of ergative marking, though his definition of agentivity as “goal-directed” does not seem to be a relevant parameter for Kuuk Thaayorre pragmatic case.

Warrwa also permits the omission of the ergative postposition in transitive clauses where the subject is “both expected and low in agentivity” (McGregor 2006: 393). It possesses two “ordinary ergative markers” as well as a “focal ergative marker” that signals an unexpected subject (in transitive, intransitive, verbless and other clauses). There is thus a pragmatic contrast between case morphemes with the same syntactic function. McGregor argues that both the syntactic “ergative” case and pragmatic “focus” are inherent to the meaning of the Warrwa focal ergative postposition, an assertion that might also be made of the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative morpheme. The Warrwa situation is especially complex, however, as there is the contrast between an elided subject NP, an unmarked subject NP, a subject NP marked with an ordinary ergative morph as well as a subject marked by the focal ergative morph. Nevertheless, there are many commonalities in the conditions under which ergative marking may be employed or omitted in Warrwa and Kuuk Thaayorre, particularly with respect to the marked status of subjects that are “unexpected” due to their not being the main protagonist of the relevant episode. In Warrwa, though, McGregor (2006: 410) finds that “potent” agents are more likely to receive focal ergative marking (with human agents being more potent than lower animate or inanimate agents), while in Kuuk Thaayorre (and Gurindji Kriol, see below) a subject participant that rates lowly on the animacy scale is more likely to be ergative-marked.

The Jingulu focus markers (a subset of which are homophonous with, and most likely derived from, the ergative case markers) can be attached to oblique as well as core arguments (rather than just the subject, as in Kuuk Thaayorre) and may be suffixed to noun stems already inflected for case (Pensalfini 1999: 6). Significantly, the Jingulu focus markers operate in parallel to the case system, with ergative case marking remaining obligatory for transitive subjects. This is very different to the Kuuk Thaayorre case, in which pragmatic considerations are embedded in the core case-marking system itself. The focal function of Jingulu case-markers is analysed as a recent innovation, occurring as part of the process of language obsolescence. Pensalfini (1999: 26–27) argues that, in pro-drop languages such as Jingulu, the presence of noun phrases is pragmatically marked and “overt nominal arguments are therefore generally associated with focus”. He proposes that more recent learners of Jingulu might have initially reanalysed the case system as nominative-accusative (by analogy with English), and ascribed a focus-marking function to the ergative

morpheme. This phase of acquisition would then leave an imprint on the fully proficient speakers' variety of Jingulu.

Like Kuuk Thaayorre, Warrwa and Gooniyandi, the emergent mixed languages Gurindji Kriol and Light Warlpiri allow the optional omission of ergative-marking in transitive clauses (Meakins & O'Shannessy 2004). In Gurindji Kriol, ergative morphology is also found in some intransitive clauses, and is associated with the pragmatic functions of contrastive focus and topic marking. The rigidification of word order in Gurindji Kriol seems to have contributed to the reanalysis of the ergative morpheme (Meakins & O'Shannessy 2004) since the semiotic burden of the ergative morpheme is lessened by the coding of grammatical relations in the ordering of constituents. Such an explanation is not available for Kuuk Thaayorre, as the ergative morpheme is used pragmatically even in the conservative speech of elders, for whom constituent order remains flexible. A final point of interest is the increased tendency in both Gurindji Kriol and light Warlpiri (as in Kuuk Thaayorre) for less animate participants to receive ergative marking (Meakins & O'Shannessy 2004).

While Pensalfini (1999) and Meakins & O'Shannessy (2004) attribute the association of syntactic case markers with discourse function to the forces of language contact, this is not so clearly the case with Kuuk Thaayorre. Pormpuraaw (home to the vast majority of Kuuk Thaayorre speakers) was established as an Anglican mission in 1938. Prior to this, almost all of the Thaayorre led a traditional life with little or no contact with English speakers. The pragmatic usage of the ergative morpheme, however, is found in old texts and throughout the speech of Thaayorre people of all ages, many of whom were raised monolingual. Moreover, Gaby (Ms) proposes that the function of marking pragmatic focus preceded the syntactic function of marking a transitive subject for at least some of the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative allomorphs.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has shown that if the preceding discourse and/or interlocutors' world knowledge do not lead the addressee to expect a particular participant to be represented as subject, then the speaker is likely to mark this subject argument as "unexpected" by affixing the ergative morpheme. As shown in §3.1, this may lead to the ergative marking of subjects in intransitive clauses. Conversely, where the previous discourse and/or world knowledge leave the addressee in no doubt as to the assignation of grammatical relations to arguments, ergative marking may be omitted. In both instances, it is clear that the employment of case morphology is motivated not by syntax, but by pragmatics. §5 considered the theoretical implications

of the data presented herein, concluding that Kuuk Thaayorre should be analysed as a language with a syntactic ergative case (alongside the nominative and accusative syntactic cases), but in which the distribution of case morphology is co-conditioned by pragmatics.

It has been suggested by Pensalfini (1999) and Meakins & O'Shannessy (2004) that discourse functions of case markers arise from situations of language obsolescence in the context of contact with a dominant language. The pragmatic use of the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative morpheme, however, appears to have originated at a stage of the language's relative fortitude. The fate of this morpheme, under the pressure of enduring contact with English, remains to be seen.

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