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From discourse to syntax and back: The lifecycle of Kuuk Thaayorre ergative morphology

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Abstract

The ergative inflection of Kuuk Thaayorre nouns is remarkably irregular. More than 15 distinct ergative forms are attested, none of which is phonologically predictable. This ergative inflection is also remarkable for its optional use. In spite of its primarily syntactic function, it may also be used to mark pragmatically ‘unexpected’ intransitive subjects, or be omitted where the referent of a transitive subject is easily retrieved from the discourse context or world knowledge. This article proposes that both the formal irregularity of the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative morpheme and its optionality have their origins in a language-wide historical process of phonological erosion. The suite of diachronic processes this erosion triggered a bidirectional grammaticalisation pathway, whereby grammatical (ergative) morphs were imbued with pragmatic functions even as originally pragmatic (focal) morphs were reanalysed as grammatical.

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1. Introduction

The ergative-inflected forms of Kuuk Thaayorre nouns¹ cannot be predicted from the absolutive² form. For example, the near-homophones *pam* ‘man’, *kam* ‘blood’, *pukam* ‘young’ and *pu’am* ‘wounded’ have ergative forms *pamal*, *kamu*, *pukama* and *pu’aman* respectively. To analyse the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative morpheme as a suffix attached to an unmarked (absolutive) noun root would require us to posit over 15 distinct ergative allomorphs. This number is dramatically reduced by the analysis detailed in this paper, which divides nouns into four declensional classes. For the first of these classes, the ergative suffix *-thurr* is attached to the absolutive noun root. For the second of these classes the ergative form is identical to the uninflected noun root and the absolutive is formed through subtractive

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¹ Reference made to ‘nouns’ throughout this article should be understood to apply equally to all subtypes of ‘nomen’ (i.e. generic nouns, specific nouns, adjectives, numerals, kin terms, proper names – cf. Gaby, 2006 for discussion of this word class).

² Gaby (2006) distinguishes nominative and accusative case functions for Kuuk Thaayorre (following Goddard, 1982) although the two are formally unmarked. Whilst I maintain that nominative and accusative cases are analytically distinct throughout the Thaayorre case system, this distinction is irrelevant to the concerns of this paper. Hence the term ‘absolutive’ will be used here to reflect the formal syncretism of the two.

morphology. For nouns of the third declensional class the ergative is marked by a dedicated and regular suffix (-l), though this is attached to the (unmarked) dative form rather than the absolutive. The remaining nouns (grouped together as a fourth declension) are formally irregular and take a range of lexically specified ergative suffixes.

The question of how such an irregular system of case-marking might have evolved is interesting in itself. What makes it even more interesting – and relevant to a volume about optional ergative marking – is the hypothesis put forward here; that the formal irregularity of today’s ergative case-marking is tied to the discourse pragmatic functions associated with these morphs. In the case of first and second declension nouns, for instance, there is good evidence that the pragmatic function of marking focus predates the syntactic function of marking the subject of a transitive clause (section 3.1). For other nouns, I suggest here that the pragmatic functions of ergative marking are new, and may well have been born out of the same historical processes of phonological erosion as gave rise to the irregular case-marking found in the language today (section 3.2).

Both the grammaticalisation of *-thurr* ‘ergative’ from focus-marker to ergative and the functional broadening of the other ergative forms to include the marking of pragmatic focus were completed long before contact with English. Thus the phenomenon of ‘optional ergativity’, henceforth OEM (optional ergative marking), cannot be attributed to obsolescence, as is suggested for Jingulu (Pensalfini, 1999), Gurindji Kriol and Light Warlpiri (Meakins and O’Shannessy, 2004, this volume). The Kuuk Thaayorre case further diverges from these languages in that the syntactic function of *-thurr* ‘ergative, focus’ appears to be the output of the grammaticalisation of a pragmatic morpheme³ rather than the focal function emerging from the reanalysis of an originally syntactic morpheme (as per Pensalfini’s (1999) analysis of Jingulu). However, the reverse directionality of ‘grammaticalisation’ best explains the development of the pragmatic focal function of other Kuuk Thaayorre ergative morphs from an earlier system of syntactic case-marking. Kuuk Thaayorre, I propose, thus provides evidence of bidirectional grammatical change; the synchronic phenomenon of OEM being arrived at through two quite distinct, though mutually reinforcing, processes.

2. Background

2.1. The language and its speakers

Kuuk Thaayorre is a Southwest Paman language (Alpher, 1972) spoken in and around the community of Pormpuraaw, located on the west coast of Australia’s Cape York Peninsula. Although approximately 300 people use some variety of Kuuk Thaayorre in their daily interactions, English is increasingly used as community lingua franca, particularly in the business, educational and administrative arenas. This has had a significant impact on the variety of Kuuk Thaayorre transmitted from one generation to the next and on the fluency of younger speakers.

Kuuk Thaayorre is a predominantly dependent-marking language (cf. Nichols, 1986), with grammatical relations signalled by the case-marking of arguments. The Kuuk Thaayorre case system distinguishes the grammatical functions of intransitive subject, transitive subject and transitive object. In terms of morphological form, 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 other nominals (in which nominative/accusative syncretism gives rise to a so-called ergative-absolutive marking pattern).

There is an incipient system of pronominal enclitics to the verb, but these are optional and functionally equivalent to the free pronouns from which they are in the process of grammaticalising. Because this system is still in its infancy, the enclitic forms are analysed here as essentially pronominal (rather than verbal cross-referencing), and hence are described as bearing case; this analysis is favoured by the characterisation of Kuuk Thaayorre as a dependent-marking language.

- (1) ngay ii-rr-kuw Darwin-ak yat=ay
 1SG there-towards-west Darwin-DAT go:P.PFV=1SG
 ‘I went to Darwin’

Kuuk Thaayorre approaches the prototype of a non-configurational language (Hale, 1983; Austin and Bresnan, 1996), with extremely flexible ordering of constituents and the free ellipsis of arguments (and other constituents). Word order

³ Compare McGregor’s (2008) suggestion that the Nyulnyulan ergative morpheme may have originated in a determiner or a pronominal.

Table 1
Major noun declension classes.

Declension	Gloss	Ergative	Absolutive	Genitive	Dative	Ablative
Declension 1		-(n)thurr	∅	-(th)ak	-(th)ak	-(n)tam
	'black'	<i>ngotnthurr</i> (~ <i>ngotnthn</i>)	<i>ngotn</i>	<i>ngotnak</i>	<i>ngotnak</i>	<i>ngotntam</i>
	'many'	<i>mongthurr</i>	<i>mong</i>	<i>mongak</i>	<i>mongak</i>	<i>mongtam</i>
Declension 2		-V	∅	-ak	-Vn	-Vm
	'woman'	<i>paanthu</i>	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthak</i>	<i>paanthun</i>	<i>paanthum</i>
	'snake'	<i>yaka</i>	<i>yak</i>	<i>yakak</i>	<i>yakan</i>	<i>yakam</i>
	'hole'	<i>ranthi</i>	<i>ranth</i>	<i>ranthak</i>	<i>ranthin</i>	<i>ranthim</i>
Declension 3		-Vl	∅	-ak	-V	-Vm
	'man'	<i>pamal</i>	<i>pam</i>	<i>pamak</i>	<i>pama</i> (~ <i>paman</i>) (~ <i>pamak</i>)	<i>pamam</i> (~ <i>pamntam</i>)
	'FISH'	<i>ngatal</i>	<i>ngat</i>	<i>ngatak</i>	<i>ngata</i>	<i>ngatam</i>
	'WORD'	<i>kuukul</i>	<i>kuuk</i>	–	<i>kuuku</i>	<i>kuukum</i>
	'water'	<i>ngokel</i>	<i>ngok</i>	–	<i>ngoke</i> (~ <i>ngokak</i>) (~ <i>ngokeln</i>)	<i>ngokem</i>

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within the noun phrase is more fixed, although permutations motivated by pragmatic focus or speech style are common in natural speech. In general, the head noun is followed by all modifiers. Hence we find the orders: Noun–Adjective, Noun–Numeral, Noun–Genitive, and Noun–Demonstrative.⁴ There are three degree adverbs; two precede the Adjective and the third follows.

If overtly present, an argument may take the form of one or more noun phrases apposed in the same case, as in (2). The repetition of pronouns is common, in both full and reduced (encliticised) forms:

- (2) ngali I. C. ngali yat kuthirr
 1DU:EXCL I. C. 1DU:EXCL go:p.pfv two
 'I. C. and I went, the two of us'

2.2. Case: overview

In Kuuk Thaayorre, case inflection is the repository of all information about grammatical relations, and also encodes various adjunct roles. The case-marking of nouns distinguishes ergative, absolutive, dative, genitive, ablative, comitative, proprietive and privative cases. Of these, only the last three are fully regular (with each morpheme realised by only a single morph⁵). The forms taken by the other case morphemes are determined jointly by the declension class and phonotactic structure of the stem. There are three major declension classes (illustrated in Table 1), while a fourth class (seen in Table 2) comprises irregular nouns for which the form of some or all case morphology is lexically-determined. The origins and synchronic bases for the declension classes fall outside the scope of this paper.⁶ As discussed below, the first declension appears to be expanding at the expense of the other declensions, yet newly coined and borrowed nouns may still follow a second, third or even fourth declension pattern.

Where my corpus includes no tokens of the exemplar noun in a particular case form, this is indicated by a hyphen '-' in the relevant cell. Where the exemplar nouns used to illustrate the classes may combine with alternate case allomorphs these are presented in brackets, and should not be taken to apply to the declensional class as a whole. The issue of alternate inflected forms is revisited below.

⁴ Gaby (2006) analyses the demonstrative as external to the NP, projecting a Determiner Phrase within which the NP is complement.

⁵ The comitative morpheme always has the form *-kak*. The proprietive distinguishes adnominal and relational case functions (encoded by *-aak* and *-kaak* respectively), as does the privative (*-aar* and *-kaar* respectively).

⁶ The original conditioning of at least third declension ergative marking (argued here to descend from proto-Pama-Nyungan ergative allomorph *-lu*) has already been the subject of some debate. On the basis of data from Pama-Nyungan languages, Dixon (1980) proposes that a proto-Australian ergative allomorph **-lu* would have been conditioned by vowel-final noun roots of more than two syllables, while Sands (1996) eschews phonological conditioning of this allomorph in favour of a morphological conditioning environment of non-common nouns (proper nouns and classifiers, in the case of Cape York languages). Certainly many Kuuk Thaayorre classifiers (or, 'generic nouns') do fall into the third declension class. However, others fall into the second (e.g. *yak-a* 'snake-ERG', *may-i* 'vegetable-ERG', *yuk-u* 'tree-ERG') and fourth (e.g. *warrath-an* 'grass-ERG') declension classes. We also find common nouns in the third declension class (e.g. *puuy-il* 'crab-ERG', *kuthal-ul* 'wedgetail eagle', *puun-il* 'breeze'). Neither of these proposed conditioning environments still hold for present-day Kuuk Thaayorre, then.

Table 2
Fourth declension: sample of irregular nouns.

Declension	Gloss	Ergative	Absolutive	Genitive	Dative	Ablative
Irregular	'dog'	<i>kutaku ~kutan</i>	<i>kuta</i>	<i>kutathak</i>	<i>kutan ~kutathak</i>	<i>kutakum</i>
	'thigh'	<i>kumunthurr</i>	<i>kumun</i>	<i>kumunak</i>	<i>kuman</i>	<i>kumunmam ~kumuntam</i>
	'old lady'	<i>ngumpurran</i>	<i>ngumpurr</i>	<i>ngumpurrak</i>	<i>ngumpurrak</i>	-
	'raffia'	<i>yencnthurr</i>	<i>yencr</i>	<i>yencrak</i>	<i>yencer</i>	<i>yencntam</i>
	'child'	<i>parran</i>	<i>parr:r^a</i>	<i>parr:rak</i>	<i>parr:rak</i>	<i>parrntam</i>
	'foot'	<i>thamarr</i>	<i>thamr</i>	<i>thamrak</i>	<i>thamrak</i>	<i>thamrntam</i>

^a Nb. A full stop (".") is used to indicate the boundary between a sequence of rhotics, since the practical orthography is ill-equipped to distinguish a tap-retroflex sequence from a retroflex-tap sequence (both of which could be represented *rrr*).

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Because a single noun may combine with a number of allomorphs of a particular case, knowing one case-inflected form of a noun is insufficient to predict all of the other case-inflected forms of that noun. For instance, although *pam* 'man', *minh* 'MEAT' and *ngat* 'FISH' share the same ergative inflection (producing *pamal* 'man:ERG', *minhal* 'MEAT:ERG' and *ngatal* 'FISH:ERG'), *pam* 'man' has three alternate dative forms *paman*, *pamak* and *pama*, while *minh* 'MEAT' and *ngat* 'FISH' have only one (*minha* and *ngata* respectively, other candidate forms such as *ngatak* and *ngatan* were explicitly rejected by consultants). Likewise, the similarity of the dative forms *pamak* 'man:DAT', *mongak* 'many:DAT' and *ngumpurrak* 'old lady:DAT' belies their divergent ergative forms (*pamal*, *mongthurr* and *ngumpurran* respectively). Nevertheless, it is possible to predict from the ergative form of a noun that it will be able to combine with a particular dative and ablative allomorph, even if it may additionally combine with alternate (unpredictable) dative, ablative and ergative allomorphs. Any noun with an ergative-inflected form ending in *-Vl*, for instance, will have a dative form ending in *-V* (though this may alternate with other dative forms, as for *pam* 'man').

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Fourth declension, irregular nouns may combine with suffixes not found in the major declensional classes (as seen in the ergative form of *kuta* 'dog', *kutaku*), or they may combine with the regular suffixes seen in Table 1 but have dative and/or ablative forms that are unexpected given their ergative form (e.g. *kumun* 'thigh', which has the ergative form *kumunthurr*, but dative *kuman* rather than the expected *kumunak*).

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The overwhelming majority of nouns fall into one of the first two declension classes; the third declension class is distinguished from the fourth for historical reasons and not because it necessarily possesses more exponents than are found with 'irregular' case inflection (and thus allocated to the fourth declension). For example, a random sample of 100 nouns, generated by an electronic search of the Kuuk Thaayorre – English dictionary (Foote and Hall, 1992), contained 38 first declension nouns, 43 second declension nouns, 2 third declension nouns, and 17 fourth declension (irregular) nouns (including 10 distinct inflections). This is graphically represented in Fig. 1.

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Although the number of third declension noun roots is very small, the nouns in this class are extremely high frequency (e.g. *pam* 'person, man', *minh* 'meat, animal', *ngat* 'fish', *ngok* 'liquid, water'). There are, therefore, a relatively large number of third declension tokens in natural discourse, albeit a small number of 'types'.

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Case-marking is realised only on the final eligible constituent of the noun phrase, which is not unusual across the Australian continent.⁷ Accordingly, in (3) it is the quantifier *mong* 'many' that inflects for ergative case since it follows the head noun *kuta* 'dog' within the phrase:

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- (3) *nganh* [kuta mong]-thurr patha-rr
1SG:ACC [dog many]-ERG bite-P.PFV
'many dogs have bitten me'

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Some theoreticians have argued such phrasal marking indicates that the case morphs are postpositional enclitics (e.g. Anderson, 2005, though Anderson et al., 2006 explicitly reject this claim). The formal irregularity of the Kuuk

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⁷ Phrase-final case marking is also found in numerous other Australian languages (cf. Dench and Evans, 1988), e.g. Diyari (Austin, 1981), Yankunytjatjara (Goddard, 1985) and Wik Mungkan (Sayers, 1976). Note that Kuuk Thaayorre determiners, which under my analysis fall outside the NP as the head of a DP with NP complement, may not host case markers.

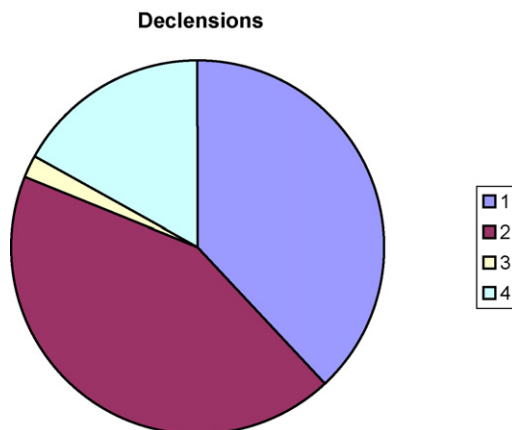


Fig. 1. Percentage of nouns belonging to each declension in a 100-word sample.

Table 3
Range of Kuuk Thaayorre ergative-inflected forms.

	Nominative	Ergative
'tooth'	<i>kiin</i>	<i>kiina</i>
'sand'	<i>nhan</i>	<i>nhani</i>
'dry'	<i>pot</i>	<i>pote</i>
'smoke'	<i>thomp</i>	<i>thompo</i>
'woman'	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthu</i>
'child'	<i>parr_r</i>	<i>parran</i>
'cat'	<i>thok</i>	<i>thokun</i>
'two'	<i>kuthirr</i>	<i>kuthirrman</i>
'black'	<i>ngotn</i>	<i>ngotnthn</i>
'elder sister's'	<i>yapn</i>	<i>yaparr</i>
'boomerang'	<i>werngr</i>	<i>werngarr</i>
'dog'	<i>kuta</i>	<i>kutaku</i>
'breeze'	<i>puun</i>	<i>puunil</i>
'water'	<i>ngok</i>	<i>ngokel</i>
'word'	<i>kuuk</i>	<i>kuukul</i>
'bum'	<i>kun</i>	<i>kunal</i>
'meat'	<i>minh</i>	<i>minhal</i>
'good'	<i>min</i>	<i>minthurr</i>
'large'	<i>ngamal</i>	<i>ngamalthurr</i>
'big'	<i>pork</i>	<i>porknthurr</i>

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141 Thaayorre ergative morpheme is hard to reconcile with such an analysis.⁸ As Table 3 clearly demonstrates, neither
142 phonological conditioning nor lexical semantics allows us to predict the pairing of noun root with ergative allomorph. I
143 therefore analyse all Kuuk Thaayorre case inflection as edge-marked inflection.

2.3. Functions of the ergative morpheme

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145 All transitive, semiditransitive and ditransitive verbs assign ergative case to their subjects. Ergative case-marking is
thus indicative of the syntactic function of transitive subject, as seen in (4):

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147 (4) *pamal ith yuk ra~a~th-r*
148 *man:ERG dem:dist stick chop~RDP-NPST*
149 'the man's chopping a stick'
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151 ⁸ But as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, this context-dependency of ergative form is more easily reconciled with an enclitic analysis if we assume the late lexical insertion of Distributed Morphology (e.g. Halle and Marantz, 1993).

To offer a semantic characterisation of ergative case-marking in such contexts (e.g. ‘ergative = Agent’) would be somewhat misleading since the ergative case is also used to encode non-agentive transitive subjects (e.g. experiencers, as in [5]), while being omitted from the marking of significantly more agentive subjects of semitransitive verbs (e.g. the teacher in [6]):

- (5) kutaku nhul glass nhaa~nha~m
dog:ERG 3SG glass look.at~RDP:NPST
‘the dog is looking at the jar’
- (6) ngul nhul ngathun yariy yik-r teacher...
then 3SG 1SG:DAT thus say-P.PFV teacher
‘then the teacher said to me...’

Ergative case morphology is also employed to mark instruments. Thus *coconut* receives identical (ergative) case-marking whether it functions as instrumental adjunct (7) or transitive subject (8):

- (7) ngay theernga-rr=unh coconutnhurr
1SG kill-P.PFV=3SG:ACC coconut:ERG
‘I killed him with a coconut [by throwing it at him]’
- (8) pam coconutnhurr theernga-rr
man coconut:ERG kill-P.PFV
‘the coconut [fell and] killed the man’

Examples such as (9) and (10), however, challenge both syntactic and semantic accounts of ergative case-marking in Kuuk Thaayorre.

- (9) minh patp piinth.kat waa~wa~th-ø
MEAT hawk scrap search~RDP-NPST
‘hawks fossick for scraps’
- (10) parran pul kutaku ngokeln wont-r
child:ERG 3DU dog:ERG water:DAT fall-NPST
‘the child and the dog fall into the water [together]’

In (9) the transitive subject – ‘hawks’ – is morphologically unmarked where ergative marking would be expected. In (10), the subject of an intransitive clause is unexpectedly ergative-marked. In both instances, the morphological case forms exhibited are out of alignment with the grammatical function of the arguments they mark. Instead, as I argue in Gaby (2008), the distribution of ergative case-marking in such clauses is determined by pragmatic factors. Specifically, where the preceding discourse and/or interlocutors’ world knowledge converge upon one participant being the obvious and unambiguous Actor of the event – and this is reflected in that participant’s being encoded as subject – this Actor/subject need not be ergative-marked. The semantic cline of ‘animacy’ is subsumed under ‘world knowledge’ for present purposes. So where a transitive clause contains both a highly animate and an inanimate NP (as in *The woman built the house*) it is natural to assume – given our prior experience of the world – that the woman built the house and not the reverse. The optionality of ergative marking in such cases is attributed to the fact that the mapping of the Actor participant to the subject grammatical function is “expected” by the addressee. There is thus no need to specify in (9) that it is the hawks that fossick for scraps and not the reverse. In the converse case, where the addressee may expect an alternative participant to have the grammatical function of subject, ergative case-marking is obligatory. (Cf. McGregor’s (this volume: section 4.1) discussion of how the discriminability of Agent and Undergoer is prerequisite to the omission of ergative case-marking cross-linguistically.)

In intransitive clauses (in which the single argument must necessarily map to subject function), ergative case-marking may optionally be used to signal that the participant encoded as subject may confound the addressee’s expectations. This is particularly likely where the preceding discourse has built up a topic chain or otherwise founded the expectation that an alternative participant will be the protagonist of the event in question (cf. McGregor (this volume: section 4.2) on the association between ergative-marked intransitive subjects and topic discontinuity). In (9), (10) and other similar cases (cf. Gaby, 2008), it is clear that the employment of case morphology is motivated not by syntax, but by pragmatics.

Table 4
Selection of first declension nouns.

Absolutive	Ergative	Gloss
<i>maawa</i>	<i>maawanthurr</i>	'fig tree'
<i>kacar</i>	<i>kacarnthurr</i>	'yellowwood tree' (Foote and Hall, 1992:211)
<i>saw</i> [so:]	<i>sawnthurr</i>	'saw'
<i>koop</i>	<i>koopnthurr</i> ~ <i>koopthurr</i>	'everything'
<i>thair</i>	<i>thairnthurr</i> ~ <i>thairthurr</i>	'frog'
<i>thok</i>	<i>thoknthurr</i> ~ <i>thokthurr</i>	'cat'
<i>keynayp</i>	<i>keynaypthurr</i>	'cane knife'
<i>ngamal</i>	<i>ngamalthurr</i>	'large'
<i>muul</i>	<i>muulthurr</i>	'ochre'
<i>government</i> [gabment]	<i>governmentthurr</i>	'government'
<i>min</i>	<i>minthurr</i>	'good'
<i>mong</i>	<i>mongthurr</i>	'many'
<i>mantam</i>	<i>mantamthurr</i>	'small'
<i>pung</i>	<i>pungthurr</i>	'sun'
<i>thono</i>	<i>thonthurr</i>	'one'

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203 Similar principles seemingly underlie the distribution of ergative case-marking in Gooniyandi, leading McGregor (1998,
204 2006) to propose an 'expected actor principle' that largely applies to Kuuk Thaayorre.

3. The origins of ergative forms

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206 The central thesis of this article is that both the pragmatic functions of OEM and the irregular form this marking
207 takes arise from the same set of diachronic processes. The following four subsections consider – for each declension
208 class individually – what processes of grammaticalisation and/or historical phonology might have given rise to the
209 present day ergative forms. They further examine the interactions between these historical processes and the pragmatic
210 functions of focus and contrast associated with ergative morphology today.

3.1. First declension nouns

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212 Ergative case is marked by the suffixation of *-(n)thurr* to first conjugation nouns. The two allomorphs *-nthurr*
213 and *-thurr* are treated here as a single suffix (in contradistinction to the ergative suffixes of other declensions) since
214 their respective distributions are for the most part phonologically predictable.⁹ The *-thurr* allomorph occurs following
non-rhotic apical-final and nasal-final noun stems, while *-nthurr* occurs after vowels (as schematised in [11]).

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216 (11) $-nthurr \rightarrow -thurr / \left\{ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} +\text{apical} \\ -\text{rhotic} \end{array} \right\} \text{---} \right\} \\ \left. \begin{array}{l} \text{N} \text{---} \\ \text{V} \text{---} \end{array} \right\}$

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217 In other phonological contexts (i.e. following rhotics and non-apical stops) the two allomorphs are apparently in free
219 variation. There are a number of exceptions even to the generalisation in (11), however, such as *coconutnthurr* above
220 and *thiiyathurr* (Table 4).

221 The allomorph *-thurr* is homophonous with the 'FOCUS' morpheme which attaches to stems of any word class
(e.g. the permissive particle in [12]) to add prominence.

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224 ⁹ In Bauer's (2003:116) terminology, the allomorphs *-thurr* ~ *-nthurr* would correspond to a single morpheme, which in turn belongs to a higher-
225 level morpheme along with the other ergative allomorphs. That is to say, the phonologically-conditioned allomorphs of the morpheme *-(n)thurr* are
226 united at a higher level with synonymous (but formally unrelated) morphemes such as *-(a)n*, *-l*, etc.

- 229
230 (12) koo kirri=*thurr* yarr
231 oh PERM=FOC go:IMP
232 ‘get going!’ (Foote and Hall, 1992:17)
233

234 The primary function of *=thurr* ‘focus’ is to accord pragmatic prominence to the clausal element or constituent to which it is attached. Frequently found in contrastive contexts, the encliticisation of *=thurr* attracts attention to one
235 element of a (noun) phrase at the expense of the phrase as a whole. So in (13), it is not the fact that the participants in
236 question have a father that is newsworthy, but rather the singularity of this father (i.e. the fact that they share one father,
despite having two different mothers). Accordingly, *=thurr* is attached to the lexeme *thono* ‘one’:

- 237
238 (13) nhangnam yirr-ntam. nganip thon=*thurr*
239 mother different-ABL father one=FOC
240 ‘they’re from different mothers [but] one father’
241

242 Similarly, the newsworthy information in (14) is the fact that the man’s face is nice, not that he has a (nice) face:

- 243 (14) pam ith koow.miing min=*thurr*
244 man DEM:DIST face good=FOC
‘that man has a nice face’
245

246 Despite their sharing the same form, the focal morpheme can be differentiated from the case morpheme on formal as
247 well as functional grounds. Firstly, the focal enclitic is formally invariant while the ergative suffix is in paradigmatic
248 opposition to numerous other ergative morphs (including the phonetically similar *-nthurr*¹⁰). The combinatorics of the
249 two morphemes also differ; the ergative suffix appears only in the inflection of noun stems while the focal enclitic may
take a much wider range of hosts. For instance, focal *-thurr* may attach to nouns already inflected for case (e.g. dative-
250 marked *thiyya* ‘for a pee’ in [15]), although Kuuk Thaayorre nouns possess only a single inflectional slot.¹¹

- 251 (15) ngay thiiy-a=*thurr* yan
252 1SG URINE-DAT=FOC go:npst
253 ‘I’m going for a pee’
254

255 As well as attaching to already-inflected nomen stems, *=thurr* may also be encliticised to non-nominal clausal
256 elements which are ineligible for case inflection (supporting its analysis as a clitic). In (12), for example, *=thurr* is
attached to the permissive particle (PERM, which cannot take any inflection) while in (16) it is attached to a verb.

- 257 (12’) koo kirri=*thurr* yarr
258 oh PERM=FOC go:IMP
259 ‘get going!’ (Foote and Hall, 1992:17)
260 (16) ngay ya~a~n=*thurr*!
261 1sg go~RDP~NPST=FOC
262 ‘I’ll go right now!’ (Hall, 1972:140)
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264 Q1 This discourse function of *=thurr* is likely to have preceded its ergative case function. DuBois’s (1987) finding that
265 speakers tend to avoid representing agents lexically suggests that lexical agents are most often pragmatically marked.
266 Accordingly, it is likely that there was frequent coincidence of *=thurr* focal marking on these pragmatically marked
267 lexical agents at some stage of Kuuk Thaayorre’s history. It is not difficult to imagine that such focal marking could
268 have been reanalysed by language learners as coding the grammatical function of transitive subject, given the
269 frequency with which nouns encoding transitive subjects would have been marked by *=thurr*. The final stage of
270 development would then see this association between *=thurr* and the transitive subject function being solidified in the
analysis of *-thurr* as an ergative case-marker, which would therefore be used also for instruments, etc. The ergative

¹⁰ It is curious that the ergative *-thurr* displays greater allomorphic variation than the focal *=thurr*, which might indicate that the ergative is in fact the older morpheme. I assume here that the allomorphy of ergative *-thurr* developed after its emergence as a separate morpheme.

¹¹ Kuuk Thaayorre differs in this regard to many other Australian languages which allow multiple case marking (cf. Dench and Evans, 1988, Dench, 1995).

Table 5
Putative diachrony of first declension ergative marking.

Stage I (monosemy):	= <i>thurr</i> ‘focal’ (frequently encliticised to pragmatically-marked agents)
Stage II (polysemy):	= <i>thurr</i> ‘focal’, ‘lexical agent’
Stage III (homophony):	= <i>thurr</i> ‘focal’; <i>-thurr</i> ‘ergative case’

271

272 allomorph *-nthurr* would have emerged after this stage (the origins of this allomorphy are not presently known). This
273 diachronic development can be summarised as follows (Table 5).

274 Such a diachronic development is in keeping with the cross-linguistic tendency noted by Traugott and Heine (1991)
275 for pragmatic elements to grammaticalise into grammatical units.

276 Perhaps because *-thurr* appears to be a relatively recent addition to the Kuuk Thaayorre case-marking arsenal, it is
277 today the most productive ergative allomorph. It is commonly used with loan words, and many younger speakers use it
278 in place of the conservative ergative forms of less common vocabulary items. As the forces of language obsolescence
279 favour regularisation, it seems likely that *-thurr* may become the standard ergative suffix with only high-frequency
280 nouns retaining irregular inflection.

3.2. Second declension nouns

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282 The ergative case form of second declension nouns is distinguished by a lexically specified final vowel. As seen in
283 Table 3 above, the quality of the vowel cannot be predicted by the phonotactics of the (rest of the) noun root. Hence
284 *nhan* ‘sand’, *man* ‘throat’, and *panh* ‘bait’ have the respective ergative forms *nhani*, *manu*, and *panha*. Likewise, the
285 ergative form of *pot* ‘dry’ is *pote*, while *yot* ‘stripe’ has ergative *yoto*. The fact that the final vowel of the ergative-
286 inflected form must be specified in the lexical entry for each second declension noun root suggests that the ergative-
287 inflected form might itself be taken as the underlying representation for these nouns. Such an analysis is supported by
288 the fact that the same vowel is found in other inflected forms of these nouns (notably: the dative and the ablative).¹² The
289 final vowel /i/, found in the ergative form *nhani* ‘sand’, for example, is also seen in the dative form *nhanin* and ablative
290 *nhanim*. Similarly, the vowel /u/ is found in the ergative, dative and ablative forms of *raak* ‘PLACE’ (*raaku*, *raakun* and
291 *raakum* respectively). Taking the ergative form as the lexical entry for second declension nouns requires that the
292 absolutive form be produced through subtractive morphology. Hence the Kuuk Thaayorre lexeme for ‘name’ would be
293 listed as *nhampu* ‘name(ERG)’, with the absolutive form *nhamp* ‘name:ABS’ formed by the deletion of the root-final
294 vowel, /u/. The dative inflection of second declension nouns is then produced by suffixing *-n* to the root (e.g. *nhampu-n*
295 ‘name-DAT’) and the ablative by suffixing *-m* (e.g. *nhampu-m* ‘name-ABL’). If we were to take the absolutive form as
296 lexical entry the dative and absolutive suffixes would need to contain a lexically conditioned vowel; a clearly less
297 parsimonious solution. Also supporting the ergative form as lexical entry is the optional retention of the root-final
298 vowel in certain fixed phrases (e.g. 17) in which ergative marking is semantically and syntactically anomalous.

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299 (17) *nhamp(u)*¹³ ngay Alfred Charlie
300 name 1SG Alfred Charlie
301 ‘my name is Alfred Charlie’
302
303

¹² In the data set under analysis here, speakers consistently use the same vowel in ergative, dative and ablative-inflected forms, allowing the analysis of this vowel as root-final rather than suffix-initial. In other languages, perhaps most famously Maori (Hale, 1973), analogous segments found at the stem-suffix juncture have been demonstrated to be best analysed as suffix-initial, despite the fact that the particular segment involved must be specified for each root (cf. Anderson, 1985:239 ff.). It may likewise prove that the vowels analysed here as root-final in Kuuk Thaayorre have been (or are in the process of being) reanalysed as suffix-initial. Thus the second declension noun cited here as *nhani* would instead have the root form *nhan*, for which the lexical entry would specify that it inflects with the *i*-initial second declension suffix forms, viz. *-i* ‘ERG’, *-in* ‘DAT’ and *-im* ‘ABL’. An expanded corpus may reveal nouns for which the vowels in the three case-inflected forms differ, or other forms of evidence that these Kuuk Thaayorre vowels are best analysed synchronically as part of the suffix. Should this occur, however, I would argue that the diachronic developments proposed here still hold, with the modification that the current synchronic analysis (i.e. Stage III of the developments put forward in Table 7, Stage II of the developments in Tables 8, 9 and 10) would become an intermediate stage of development, followed by a final stage in which the root-final vowel is reanalysed as part of the suffix. Pending further evidence, I remain uncommitted as to which representation is the more correct.

¹³ The final vowel of *nhamp(u)* ‘name’ in [17] is bracketed to indicate its optionality. When asked to pronounce this clause slowly and carefully for transcription, most consultants were clear that the final vowel should be omitted.

Table 6
Cognates of some second declension nouns.

Absolutive	Ergative	Reconstructed and cognate forms
<i>kam</i> ‘blood’	<i>kamu</i>	proto-Paman (pP) * <i>kamu</i> ‘water’ (Alpher, ms.), Kaanytyu <i>kamu</i> ‘blood’ (Rigsby, personal communication); Yidiŋ <i>gamu</i> ‘blood’ (Dixon, 1991).
<i>pork</i> ‘big’	<i>porka</i>	proto-Pama-Nyungan * <i>purlka</i> ‘big’ (Alpher, ms.), Dyirbal <i>pulkan</i> (Dixon, 1972), Walmatjarri <i>purlka</i> ‘big’ (Hudson, 1978).
<i>pungk</i> ‘knee’	<i>pungku</i>	pP * <i>pungku</i> ‘knee’ (Alpher, ms.), Pakanh <i>pungku</i> (Rigsby, personal communication), Kugu Muminh <i>pungku</i> ‘knee’ (Gaby, field notes), Yidiŋ <i>bunggu</i> ‘knee’ (Dixon, 1977).
<i>ranth</i> ‘hole’	<i>ranthi</i>	Umpithamu <i>anthi</i> (Verstraete, personal communication).
<i>thip</i> ‘liver’	<i>thipa</i>	Pakanh <i>thipa</i> ‘liver’ (Rigsby, personal communication), Umpithamu <i>yipa</i> ‘liver’ (Verstraete, personal communication).
<i>yuk</i> ‘tree’	<i>yuku</i>	pP * <i>yuku</i> ‘tree’ (Alpher, ms.), Pakanh <i>yuku</i> ‘tree’ (Rigsby, personal communication).

Table 7
Putative diachrony of second declension ergative marking.

	Absolutive	Ergative
Stage I:	<i>paanthu</i> ‘woman’	<i>paanthu-CV</i>
Stage II:	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthu-C</i>
Stage III:	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthu</i>

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The optional retention of the ergative vowel in such formulaic phrases and the fact that the ergative form of second declension nouns is taken to be the lexical entry are best understood in diachronic context. To begin with, witness the resemblance between the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative-inflected nouns presented in the second column of Table 6 and the reconstructed/cognate absolutive forms presented in the third column.

As Table 6 shows, the ergative forms of many Kuuk Thaayorre second declension nouns (e.g. *kamu* ‘blood:ERG’) are either formally identical to the corresponding absolutive forms reconstructed for proto-Paman, or are cognate with the absolutive forms of other Paman languages. The comparative evidence thus points strongly towards these vowel-final noun roots having been the unmarked absolutive form at some point in Kuuk Thaayorre’s history. How, then, did the final vowel come to signify ergative case? It is clear that a historical phonological process of word-final vowel deletion – also evident elsewhere in the Kuuk Thaayorre lexicon¹⁴ – is responsible for the loss of the root-final vowels in the absolutive noun forms. There are at least two candidate explanations for the preservation of the root-final vowel in ergative contexts.

Firstly, there may have been some ergative suffix that shielded the root-final vowel from deletion. Then, at some stage following the process of word-final vowel deletion, the remaining consonant of the ergative suffix was lost,¹⁵ leaving the formerly root-final vowel as the sole indicator of ergativity. This process is summarised in Table 7, in which an imagined early ergative suffix is represented as CV.

Stage II of this analysis parallels the inferred development of the dative and ablative case-marking patterns. In the latter cases, the root-final vowel was preserved preceding the consonant-initial dative and ablative suffixes, the consonants of which were retained even after their (putative) following vowel was lost. These two diachronic processes are represented in Tables 8 and 9 respectively.

For this account to be fully convincing, however, one would require some independent evidence motivating the loss of the final consonant of the putative ergative suffix, as per Stage III of Table 7. Such specific final consonant reduction is not unprecedented in the Cape York context, but to propose such erosion here would be purely speculative. Alternatively we might appeal to information structure to explain the retention of the root-final vowel. Here, the phonological process of

¹⁴ Independent evidence of word-final vowel deletion across the Thaayorre lexicon is provided by verb stem allomorphy discussed by Gaby (2006). Like nouns, the underlying representation for Thaayorre verbs includes a root-final vowel that is deleted in many inflected forms but preserved in others. This deletion is not phonologically conditioned synchronically. Further support for the plausibility of this account, pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, is the fact that the underlying forms of Lardil noun roots are similarly often found in ‘inflected’ forms, rather than the expected nominative/absolutive case forms.

¹⁵ This loss might have been due to another sound change in operation at that time.

Table 8
Putative development of dative case-marking for second declension nouns.

	Absolutive	Dative
Stage I:	<i>paanthu</i> ‘woman’	<i>paanthu-nV</i>
Stage II:	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthu-n</i>

Table 9
Putative development of dative case-marking for second declension nouns.

	Absolutive	Ablative
Stage I:	<i>paanthu</i> ‘woman’	<i>paanthu-mV</i>
Stage II:	<i>paanth</i>	<i>paanthu-m</i>

Table 10
Alternative diachrony of ergative case-marking for second declension nouns.

Stage I:	<i>kaalu</i> ‘ear(ABS)’
Stage II:	<i>kaalu</i> ~ <i>kaal</i> ‘ear(ABS)’ (free variation, latter typically found in fast speech)
Stage III:	<i>kaalu</i> ‘ear(ABS)’ (emphatic) vs. <i>kaal</i> ‘ear(ABS)’ (backgrounded)
Stage IV:	<i>kaalu</i> ‘ear(ABS:FOC)’ vs. <i>kaal</i> ‘ear:ABS’
Stage V:	<i>kaalu</i> ‘ear:ERG’ vs. <i>kaalu</i> ‘ear:ABS:FOC’ vs. <i>kaal</i> ‘ear:ABS’

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word-final vowel deletion would have initially affected only unstressed, defocalised words.¹⁶ Accordingly, at some stage there would have been a vowel-final (hereafter, “full”) form and a consonant-final (hereafter, “reduced”) form for each noun, represented as Stage II in Table 10. This would have fostered an association between the latter reduced form and defocalised pragmatic contexts, and between the former full form and clearly enunciated, focalised contexts (Stage III). This association could then have rigidified, with the vowel-final full form being interpreted as explicitly focus-marked (Stage IV). The naturalness of an association between prominent, pragmatically marked arguments and the grammatical function of transitive subjects has already been discussed in section 3.1. We might surmise, then, that the focus-marked, full forms were employed as the lexical exponents of transitive subjects. From here it is a small leap for the focus-marked, phonologically full forms to have been reanalysed as bearing ergative case (Stage V).

Under this analysis, then, the retention of the root-final vowel is attributed to focal prominence blocking phonological reduction, with the association between focal prominence and lexical agents leading to the reanalysis of the phonologically full form as ergative-marked. This must have occurred despite there being an alternative, historically prior ergative-marked form for each of the nouns in question. Ergative case has been reconstructed well beyond the time depth under consideration here (see below). The replacement of existing ergative morphology with new forms originating from the domain of discourse pragmatics is a recurrent theme in Kuuk Thaayorre. This was seen in the above discussion of the *-thurr* ergative allomorph, which often exists in free variation with other more conservative ergative forms. Thus the nominally second declension noun *muul* ‘white ochre’ has two alternate ergative forms, *muuli* and *muulthurr*, as does the third declension noun *puunh* ‘hornet’, with *puunhil* and *puunhthurr*. For the majority of second declension nouns, the vowel-final forms eventually superseded the prior ergative forms. Nevertheless, there remain a few nouns for which there is either inter-speaker or intra-speaker variation between the two. The noun *pinc* ‘saltwater crocodile’, for instance, is attested with a third declension ergative form (*pincil*, which retains the relic of a proto-Paman ergative suffix *-lu*, discussed further below), as well as a more recent second declension ergative form (*pinci*), as well as an even more recent first declension ergative form (*pincnthurr*). It appears, then, that the cycle from pragmatic focus-marking to syntactic ergative-marking to obsolescence has undergone a number of iterations in Kuuk Thaayorre. The implications of this iteration for the present-day Kuuk Thaayorre case system are revisited in section 4.

In the case of both the first declension and second declension ergative allomorphs, the pragmatic functions associated with OEM in Kuuk Thaayorre today can reasonably be viewed as the conservation of their erstwhile

¹⁶ A present-day analogue exists in the erosion of word-initial consonants in defocalised or fast-speech contexts, labelled by Hall (1968:64) as “telescoping”.

Table 11
Comparison of third declension nouns with cognate and reconstructed forms.

Absolutive	Ergative	Cognate and reconstructed forms
<i>pam</i> ‘man’	<i>pamal</i>	pP * <i>pama</i> ‘man’ (Hale, 1966), Kugu Muminh <i>pama</i> ‘man’ (Gaby, field notes), Guugu Yimidhirr <i>bama</i> (Haviland, 1979).
<i>minh</i> ‘MEAT’	<i>minhal</i>	pP * <i>minya</i> ‘meat’ (Hale, 1966), Kugu Muminh <i>minha</i> ‘meat’ (Gaby, field notes), Wik-Ngathan <i>minh</i> ‘meat’ (Sutton, 1995).
<i>ngat</i> ‘FISH’ <i>kun</i> ‘shit’	<i>ngatal</i> <i>kunal</i>	pP * <i>ngata</i> (Alpher, ms.), Kugu Muminh <i>nga’a</i> ‘fish’ (Gaby, field notes), Yir Yorong <i>ngart</i> (Alpher, 1991). pP * <i>kuna</i> ‘shit’ (Hale, 1966), Kugu Muminh <i>kuna</i> ‘shit’ (Gaby, field notes), Wik-Ngathan <i>kun</i> ‘shit’ (Sutton, 1995).
<i>pinc</i> ‘saltwater crocodile’ <i>kuuk</i> ‘LANGUAGE’	<i>pincil</i> <i>kuukul</i>	Kugu Muminh <i>pinci</i> ‘saltwater crocodile’ (Gaby, field notes). Kugu Muminh <i>kugu</i> ‘language’ (Gaby, field notes), Guugu Yimidhirr <i>guugu</i> ‘language’ (Haviland, 1979), YidiJ <i>gugu</i> ‘language’ (Dixon, 1977).
<i>puunh</i> ‘hornet’	<i>puunhil</i>	pP * <i>puunyi</i> (Alpher, ms., citing Hale, personal communication), Pakanh <i>puunyi</i> (Hamilton, 1997), Umpila <i>puunyi</i> (GNOG), Uw Olkola <i>ujnyi</i> (Hamilton, 1997).

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discourse function. In neither case is there evidence that the pragmatic function is a recent innovation associated with the processes of language obsolescence. Instead, the Kuuk Thaayorre data appear to conform to the traditional model of grammaticalisation, with discourse morphemes acquiring syntactic functions.

3.3. Third declension nouns

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The ergative form of a third declension noun consists of the absolutive form followed by a lexically specified vowel plus the segment /l/. Like the final vowel of ergative-inflected second declension nouns, the lexically specified vowel of third declension ergative forms must be – or at least must at some stage have been – analysed as part of the noun root (cf. fn. 14). Specifically, the vowel that precedes /l/ in the ergative inflection (e.g. /a/ in *pamal* ‘man:ERG’) is identical to the root-final vowel of the cognate absolutive forms of other Paman languages, as shown in Table 11.

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Though the lexically specified vowel found in third declension ergative inflections is absent from the corresponding synchronic absolutive forms, this is good evidence that it would once have been part of the (unmarked) absolutive stem. As with second conjugation nouns, this vowel is also found in the dative and ablative inflected forms. The absolutive form noun *minh* ‘MEAT’, for instance, has ergative, dative and ablative forms containing the vowel /a/ (*minhal*, *minha* and *minham* respectively). But whilst the ergative form was taken as the synchronic lexical entry for second conjugation nouns, to do so with nouns of the third conjugation would require the subtraction of the ergative-final /l/ from the dative and ablative forms as well as the absolutive. It is more parsimonious, then, to take the dative form *pama* ‘man(DAT)’ as the lexical entry. From this, the absolutive can be formed through the subtraction of the final vowel (as with second conjugation nouns), the ergative formed through the suffixation of *-l*, and the ablative formed through suffixation of *-m*. This analysis is supported by the fact that the synchronic vowel-final dative forms of Kuuk Thaayorre nouns are frequently cognate with or reflexes of the absolutive forms of other Paman languages.¹⁷

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As I have already suggested, the lateral that follows the root-final vowel in third declension ergative forms can be reconstructed to a proto-Paman ergative suffix **-lu* (Hale, 1966). The reduction of this suffix to a single segment can be explained by the same historical process of vowel-final deletion described above. As Table 12 shows, the presence of the suffix **-lu* would have acted as a buffer to preserve the root-final vowel in the ergative context, whilst both the suffix-final vowel /u/ in the ergative context and the root-final vowel (here, /a/) in the absolutive context were lost. The ergative morpheme would thus have shielded the root from truncation in fast speech.

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Presumably, there was a phase during which the vowel-final absolutive form (uttered in emphatic or pragmatically focused contexts) alternated with a defocalised, reduced form as discussed above. For most third declension nouns, however, this focused, phonologically full form was not endowed with the function of ergative case.¹⁸ Moreover, the

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¹⁶ As discussed in fn. 17, however, the possibility remains that these final vowels in the dative case forms have been reanalyzed as dative suffixes, in this context, and as part of the ergative and ablative suffixes.

¹⁸ For some nouns, however, the /l/-final ergative form survived alongside the new, reanalysed vowel-final ergative form. As discussed above, this is evidently the case with *pinc* ‘saltwater crocodile’, for which both *pinci* and *pincil* are now acceptable ergative inflections. For other third declension nouns the vowel-final form is occasionally attested in contexts of especial prominence where case-marking would be inappropriate (e.g. in the classifier phrase *minha kothon* ‘MEAT wallaby(ABS)’, where the generic noun ‘MEAT’ has the absolutive form *minh* and the ergative form *minhal*).

Table 12
Putative diachrony of third declension ergative marking.

	Absolutive	Ergative
Stage I:	<i>pama</i> ‘man’	<i>pama-lu</i>
Stage II:	<i>pam</i>	<i>pama-l</i>

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388 fact that the syntactic function of the fourth declension ergative suffix can be traced back to proto-Paman makes clear that
 389 the case function of this morph predates its pragmatic use. How, then, did the ergative forms of third declension nouns
 390 come to be associated with pragmatic focus? I suggest that this must have emerged out of the comparison with second
 391 declension ergative morphs. Though speakers tolerated formal irregularity in the nominal paradigm, it appears they were
 392 less ready to tolerate functional asymmetry. Hence the fact that the ergative-inflected forms of second declension nouns
 393 carried the additional semiotic load of pragmatic focus led to the ergative-inflected forms of third declension nouns being
 394 likewise imbued with this function. This proposed diachronic development, though speculative, is supported by the
 395 alternate case-marking patterns of some third declension nouns, e.g. *ngok* ‘water’. The ergative-inflected form of *ngok*,
 396 *ngokel*, conforms to that expected of a third declension noun. But in addition to the expected dative form, *ngoke*, the more
 397 frequently used dative inflection of this noun is *ngokeln*. This latter dative form takes the ergative as its base, suggesting
 398 that this has been reanalysed as the stem to which the dative inflection is attached. This is particularly interesting because
 399 the dative suffix *-n* is attached to the ergative form of second declension nouns, whereas for third declension nouns it
 400 should be the dative inflection that is identical to the root form and to which the ergative morph *-l* is suffixed. The irregular
 401 inflection of *ngok*, then, suggests that speakers are inflecting this third declension noun according to the second
 402 declension paradigmatic model. If the forms of third declension nouns are being influenced by those of the second
 403 declension, it makes sense that functional analogy might also play a part in diachronic change.

404 In summary, then, I argue that third declension nouns adopted the pragmatic function of marking focus as a late
 405 addendum to a fully developed case function. This represents the opposite directionality of change to that proposed for
 406 first and second declension nouns, which likely served as a model for this development. We might therefore assume
 407 that the optionality of ergative case-marking for third declension nouns is a relatively recent occurrence.

3.4. ‘Fourth declension’ nouns

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409 In addition to the three major declension classes there are a number of nouns which have irregular ergative forms
 410 though they otherwise conform to the inflectional patterns of first declension nouns. The most common of these irregular
 411 ergative forms are: *-(a)n* (Table 13), *-thn* (Table 14) and *-arr* (which replaces the root-final segment, as shown in
 Table 15).

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413 Table 13
Sample of nouns that take ergative *-(a)n*.

Absolutive	Ergative	Gloss
<i>meerkole</i>	<i>meerkolen</i>	‘taipan’
<i>kuta</i>	<i>kutan</i>	‘dog’
<i>waarr</i>	<i>waarran</i>	‘bad’
<i>parr:r^a</i>	<i>parran</i>	‘child’
<i>yiirram</i>	<i>yiirraman</i>	‘other’
<i>ngumpurr</i>	<i>ngumpurran</i>	‘old lady’

^a The root-final retroflex rhotic of the absolutive form is deleted before the suffixation of ergative *-an*.

Table 14
Sample of nouns that take ergative *-thn*.

Absolutive	Ergative	Gloss
<i>ngotn</i>	<i>ngotnthn</i>	‘black’
<i>thok</i>	<i>thokthn</i>	‘cat’
<i>workrr</i>	<i>workrrthn</i>	‘string’

Table 15
Sample of nouns that take ergative *-arr*.

Absolutive	Ergative	Gloss
<i>werngr</i>	<i>werngarr</i>	'boomerang'
<i>thamr</i>	<i>thamarr</i>	'foot'
<i>yapn</i>	<i>yaparr</i>	'elder sister's'

- 415
416 (18) $-(a)n \rightarrow -n / V _$
417
418 $\rightarrow -an / \text{elsewhere}$

417 There are additionally a handful of unique ergative inflections, such as *kuta-ku* 'dog-ERG' (which alternates with *kuta-n*
419 'dog-ERG') and *kuthirr-man* 'two-ERG'.

420 All case forms of fourth declension nouns must be specified in the lexicon. At this stage we can only speculate as to
421 the origins of OEM in irregular nouns, but a couple of brief observations are worth noting here. Firstly, there is the
422 possibly coincidental formal similarity between the ergative suffix *-thn* and pragmatic enclitic *=th*, on the one hand,
423 and between ergative *-arr* and the pragmatic enclitic *-rr* on the other.¹⁹ Secondly, there is evidence that the ergative-
424 inflected forms of some irregular nouns have been reanalysed as the stem to which other case markers are attached (as
425 was argued for *ngok* 'water' above). Thus the ablative inflection of *kuta* 'dog' (*kutakum* 'dog:ABL') apparently takes the
426 ergative form *kutaku* as base.²⁰ This supports the above analysis of third declension nouns inasmuch as the
427 conservative ergative-marked forms may well have been reanalysed as having the same functional range as second
428 declension forms, effectively adding the function of marking pragmatic focus to the originally syntactic morphemes.

4. Implications

429
430 The phenomenon of OEM is being reported for a steadily growing number of languages. As the articles in this issue
431 demonstrate, ergative case-marking does not always simply reflect a noun phrase's grammatical function – occurring
432 always and only where assigned by a predicate – but it can also be sensitive to discourse pragmatic factors (such as
433 topicality) and semantic factors (such as animacy) (cf. McGregor, this volume: section 4). This article focuses on why
434 and how these dual syntactic and pragmatic functions came to be associated with the Kuuk Thaayorre ergative
435 morpheme. It proposes a series of diachronic developments whereby the syntactic function of marking a transitive
436 subject might have been attributed to originally focus-marking morphs, even as the pragmatic function of focus-
437 marking was adopted by originally ergative morphs. The syntactic/pragmatic functions were thus paired for the full
438 range of forms now analysed as allomorphs of a single ergative morpheme. How, then, were the various allomorphs
439 allocated to noun roots? Or, to put it another way, why did the diachronic processes described in section 3.2 (reanalysis
440 of full/reduced forms as marking both focus and ergative case) apply only to the nouns now classed as 'second
441 declension', while the processes described in section 3.3 (i.e. phonological erosion of an old ergative suffix, to which
442 the focus-marking function is added) applied only to 'third declension' nouns, and the grammaticalised focus-marker
443 *-thurr* extended to mark ergative case for only first declension nouns (section 3.1)?

444 Though the above sections link each diachronic process to a particular declension class (in which the relevant ergative
445 inflection is synchronically attested), this should not be taken to imply that those diachronic processes were limited to just
446 the noun roots of that declension class. Instead, it seems most likely that each one of the diachronic processes described in
447 section 3 would have applied to all noun roots. That these processes ultimately produced different ergative inflections
448 indicates only that some nouns were more resistant to change than others. Specifically, I propose that higher-frequency
449 nouns have been able to retain their original, less common ergative forms for longer than their low-frequency
450 counterparts, even in the face of the pressures of regularisation, reanalysis and phonological erosion.²¹ This allows for a

¹⁹ The pragmatic enclitics *=th* (possibly a contraction of the distal demonstrative *ith* or focal *=thurr*) and *=rr* accord some kind of prominence to the word they attach to, though their more precise functions are not presently well understood (cf. Gaby, 2006).

²⁰ Here again, the current ergative form may once have been the unmarked, absolutive form, cf. Sands (1997:17) who reconstructs Cape York **kutaku* 'dog'.

²¹ That high-frequency lexemes are more tolerant of paradigmatic irregularity is well-known; one local example of this is Lardil, in which young speakers have retained irregular verbal inflections only in the case of high-frequency verbs (Richards, 2001).

certain fluidity; as nouns gradually succumb to these pressures they adopt the newer inflectional forms. For this reason, it is more helpful (and, I believe, accurate) to understand the declensions as patterns of inflection rather than discrete classes to which each noun has an inherent and permanent membership.

To clarify, consider the example of *pinc* ‘saltwater crocodile’. Assuming that it had the original ergative form **pincil-lu*, the initial process of word-final vowel deletion would have resulted in third declension pattern ergative marking, producing *pincil* (a synchronically common form of this noun). There is also evidence, however, that the suite of processes described in section 3.2 (i.e. the reanalysis of focused, phonologically-full absolutive forms as ergative-marked) also applied to this noun, producing the ergative form *pinci* (also well-attested synchronically). That is to say, *pinc* ‘saltwater crocodile’ may inflect according to the second or third conjugation patterns. Furthermore, the encroachment of the originally focus-marking morph *-thurr* has most recently affected *pinc*, with *pinc(n)thurr* providing a third valid ergative form, this time according to the first declension pattern. Few nouns display this range of alternative inflections, though it was noted above that it is not uncommon for nouns to possess two ergative allomorphs, and that many younger Kuuk Thaayorre speakers are overextending the *-thurr* suffix at the expense of more conservative ergative forms. What this shows, then, is that the expansion of the more recent first and second declension ergative markers is continuing even today. If this hypothesis proves accurate, we should expect to see a decrease in the third and fourth declension patterns of inflection, which are most likely relics of the case-marking system that predates the diachronic developments described here.²²

The synchronic functions and distribution of Kuuk Thaayorre ergative case-marking are at once typical and exceptional. On the one hand, the association between ergative case and the marking of ‘unexpected Actors’ has been well described for a handful of other languages, as has been the omission of ergative marking where a transitive subject is unremarkable for and predictable from the discourse/pragmatic context (cf. McGregor, 1992, 1998, 2006, in this volume; Pensalfini, 1999; Meakins and O’Shannessy, 2004). On the other hand, Kuuk Thaayorre may be the first language for which the discourse function of marking in-focus Actors has been analysed as both the product and the origin of the syntactic function of ergative case-marking. Furthermore, Kuuk Thaayorre may be the first language for which OEM is proposed to have developed through at least three independent diachronic processes. If the analysis put forward here proves to be correct, it is evidence that – even within a single language – there is no single grammaticalisation pathway between the marking of pragmatic focus and the encoding of ergative case. Instead, Kuuk Thaayorre may evidence the potential for bidirectional functional expansion.

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²² It is uncontroversial to presume that Kuuk Thaayorre would have distinguished multiple declension classes prior to these diachronic processes. Hale (1976), Dixon (1980) and Blake (1988), inter alia, reconstruct two allomorphs for the Proto-Pama-Nyungan; **lu* and **ngku*. It is likely that these would have developed a number of additional allomorphs by the time word-final vowels were deleted in Kuuk Thaayorre. I assume these original ergative allomorphs (or relics thereof) are still evident in the ergative inflections of third and fourth declension (irregular) nouns. The third declension ergative suffix *-l* is transparently related to **lu*, and it may be possible to link some fourth declension suffixes (e.g. *-ku*) to **ngku*, though this is less straightforward.

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